

Race Mixture in the Sacramento Area, 1839-1850

by Jack D. Forbes

There is little doubt but what intermixture between whites and Indians in the Sacramento Valley commenced with the coming of fur trappers in the 1820s, as is demonstrated by the presence of several red-headed Indians, reportedly the sons of a Scotsman, found above Knight's Landing in the 1840s. The establishment of Sutter's Fort at Sacramento de los Ochecumnes in 1839, however, marks the real beginning of extreme race mixture.

The party which founded "Nueva Helvecia" in that year consisted of four white men, eight Hawaiian men, two Hawaiian women and one Oregon Indian boy. One of the Hawaiian ladies, Manawitte, was John Sutter's special companion, "by whom he is reported to have had several children and who appears to have lived many years with him as his wife." As Sutter grew older he "seemed to prefer young Indian girls and finally gave Manawitte to Harry [a Hawaiian] who was employed by Sutter as major-domo at Hock Farm."

Sutter, indeed, appears to have set an example of "fraternization" with the local native females.

In the anteroom adjoining his office, a group of Indian women were invariably waiting. According to rumor, they belonged to Sutter's harem. One of them was his favorite; I was told she was kept there all the time. At first it seemed odd to meet young Indian girls of ten or twelve who had once belonged to this harem.... I have never forgotten two pretty little girls of eleven or twelve whom I first saw in Sutter's anteroom. Soon the most attractive of the two failed to come and play with the other.... the poor girl died suddenly.... An influential squaw who lived in Sutter's anteroom at that time had a sister who had married a native of Tahiti, called John. John, who spoke English quite fluently, was a close friend of Charley Burch, and told the latter what the favorite had told her sister about the sudden death of the young girl; the child had been criminally attacked, and the person who could give the most information about the identity of the culprit was Sutter himself.

According to an honest Swiss who worked for Sutter for several years, everyone knew Sutter was a typical Don Juan with women. In addition to the large number of young Indian girls who were

constantly at his beck and call, there were also in the fort many young Indian loafers who rarely worked, but were fed and nicely clothed because their wives received special consideration from the master of the fort. Also among Sutter's employees was an Indian vaquero [cowboy] whose wife has a white child.... One day I asked the woman if Sutter was the father of the boy; and she laughed with delight. If the captain had many half-breed children, I do not know of any who survived, and the native woman's white baby died not long after.

Later, during the early part of the Gold Rush, Sutter's favorite of the moment was an Indian called Mary, who had been the mistress of Perry McCoon, but who was now married to an Indian workman.... Sutter told me his son [who had arrived in 1848] had hinted that it would be just as well if he refrained from being so familiar with Indian women in the future, but that he was very fond of Mary. From reliable sources I learned that he had given his squaw a fine American mare equipped with a handsome lady's saddle, enough silk material to make a French dress, and a large number of silver dollars even though she had broken off relations with him.

Another European attracted to Indian women was John Yates, an English sea captain who settled north of Sacramento. Yates married a young white girl but soon upset his white in-laws because "he wanted to keep his Indian women, as well as his white wife." Finally, the in-laws moved out, leaving Yates with his native wives.

Theodore Cordua, a German who settled near Marysville, married an Indian woman. His "neighbor," Michael C. Nye, married a white girl. Nye reported that the jealous Indian wife

gave him so much trouble that he had to get rid of her. [But] one day soon after Nye had married [the white woman] and was away from home on business, I saw Cordua's and Nye's two Indian squaws, accompanied by Nye's two children and an Indian vaquero, pass my house and start toward the mountains. Soon Cordua's squaw came back without Nye's Indian who had left because she resented the new white wife.... When Nye returned, he found that his children too had

vanished. He was deeply distressed; he did not want to be separated from them.... Nye remarked that while he did not care about losing his Indian squaw, he would not allow her to keep the children; they belonged to him, he said, and he would not give them up.

Nye recovered the oldest child, a boy, and eventually was reconciled to allowing the woman to keep her baby girl since she would be living nearby with one of Cordua's Indian cowboys.

In 1847 Heinrich Lienhard (from whom the above quotes come) became manager of Sutter's Mimal farm, below Marysville. There he met Mary Murphy who had married William Johnson of Bear River, only to divorce the latter in favor of Charles Covillaud. Johnson was "left alone with his Indian squaws." (See Heinrich Lienhard, *A Pioneer at Sutter's Fort, 1846-1850*, for the source of much of the above information.)

Late in 1841 Sutter's Fort was visited by Duflot de Mofras, a French traveler, who reported that thirty white employees were there. "All these men live with Indian or Californian [Mexican] women, and the colony contains not less than two hundred souls." Generally speaking, it would seem clear that the vast majority of Europeans in the Sacramento Valley had Indian wives or companions prior to the great invasion of 1849. A few, such as William Knight of Knight's Landing, had Mexican wives. Most of the Hawaiians who entered the valley also married Indian women and many California Indians are even today aware of Hawaiian ancestry.

It is quite obvious that many white men, such as Sutter, were often guilty of simply exploiting Indian girls, later to cast them aside. Sutter derived a large part of his income from the sale of forced Indian labor and apparently had developed a system of forcing certain chiefs to supply him with unwilling workers. It is to be suspected that many of the girls in his "anteroom" were there because otherwise their villages would be subjected to retaliation. In any event, it is clear that the normal lives of local Indian people were thoroughly disrupted by the intrusion of significant numbers of Europeans who appropriated their women, willingly or otherwise, and who fathered a large number of mestizos (mixed-bloods).

The evils of men like Sutter cannot be overlooked, but we should bear in mind that the years after 1849 brought much greater disaster for the California Indian people. From the diaries of the period it seems clear that the white men who had Indian wives, Indian in-laws and mestizo children were often

less inclined to simply liquidate the Indian people than were those who brought white wives with them after 1849. It is quite possible that California's population would have become predominantly of mixed race if it had not been for the mass invasion caused by the Gold Rush.

Now, in the 1990s, the conditions of pre-1849 are being restored, in that California is again becoming a land of "rainbow people," a majority of whom will soon be of part-Native American ancestry derived from all parts of the Americas. [Dec.8, 1995]