

Literature and Visual Arts of the Delta, 1849-1975

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A Narrative of Delta Narratives

Stories matter. Contemporary neuroscience fairly certainly supports our basic intuition that individual human beings construct their identities out of stories,¹ and what is true for individuals is also true, though usually in a more complex way, for cultures. To make the point through an unusually straightforward example, the story of Manifest Destiny had an interesting variant, which can be summed up in the slogan, “rain follows the plow.” The slogan captures an interesting story, one that sees the yeoman farmer heading into the “Great American Desert,” breaking up the sod, planting “civilized” crops, and finding that God shed his grace in rain on the newly opened fields. This variant of a story of God providing for his chosen people did not account for the fact that the western prairies were semi-arid, and, while a series of wet years might support farms, the long term climactic patterns could not sustain the kinds of agriculture known in the much moister east. Still, when those settlers who took advantage of the Enlarged Homestead Act of 1909 to settle in the drier uplands of Oklahoma found that they were able to thrive for several years, they believed their story. What was there to disbelieve? A long drought that began in 1930 put most of these farmers on the road not only to destitution, but also to other states.² California’s Delta towns would have a different population if this story of providential rainfall hadn’t first moved so many people to Oklahoma. This brief story of a story merely exemplifies a much larger pattern not just of how human beings selectively interpret their lives by way of narrative arcs, but how these narratives shape human action. We try to make sense of the past by telling its story; in the process, we shape our present and our future.

The task of telling the other stories in our collection presents a great challenge, not just because the time scale, cultural variety, and economic variability of the region make it difficult to assemble the

¹ The scholarly literature on the subject is substantial. For an accessible account, see Oliver Sacks, “The Lost Mariner,” in *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat, and Other Clinical Tales* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1985).

² Henry Nash Smith, Chapter XVI, “The Garden and the Desert,” in *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960).

material into coherent narratives, but also because the material is so voluminous as to require radical excision. It is much simpler to tell the story of stories, here, in part because most of the human stories of the time when the Delta was home to human cultures are lost, and also because those we have fit remarkably neatly into a pattern that has dominated much of the English language literature of the United States.

First, a word on what is lost: while we now have print records of many of the stories of the native peoples of the North American continent, these stories were not meant for print. Oral narratives are fundamentally different from print narratives in two ways. For one, insofar as oral stories are meant as cultural records, they are structured around verse and music. Not only are verse and music the oldest and among the most powerful mnemonic devices known to human beings, they also manifest cultural ritual and practice—they are sacred. Stories in this sense are not an epiphenomenon on top of the medium, to be translated at will. Oral narrative is embedded in performance and faith. Any merely literary translation privileges a modern ideal of narrative structure. I can think of no better accounting for this difference than Barre Toelken's introduction to Barry Lopez's *Giving Birth to Thunder, Sleeping with his Daughter: Coyote Builds North America*:

Lopez has approached the job [of conveying Coyote stories in print] in the only way I can see as defensible: it does *not* pretend to be an "Indian book." It does *not* provide the original language, the ritual detail, the full context; in short, it does not give away or betray the magic of the actual storytelling event. Instead, the stories are retold in a way that is both faithful to native concepts of Coyote and how his stories should go, and phrased for an audience that reads

without listening, for whom literature is studied and reflected upon, for whom Coyote is an imaginary but interesting protagonist.³

Were we to follow Toelken's advice, we would have to discount pretty much every account of Native stories on record, though I think he overstates the case, in part because translation is a kind of transmission, and as such it alters the available range of stories available to the recipient culture, even if this is an act of appropriation and is only partial. Oral literature from many traditions has had an impact on written literature. Indeed, it is likely that Native traditions made their way into printed literature in English as early as the 18th century, especially in humor. But with one exception, that of George Derby's comic works, none of this influence is even speculatively identifiable in the extant literature of the Delta.

Second, much oral literature—especially that which is not connected to sacred rituals—is situational. Any folkloric narrative can serve multiple purposes depending on context. The same story can be used as amusement in one context, as a didactic instrument in another, as social commentary in a third, and so forth. Print freezes narrative, and while that permanence does not also freeze meaning, it does cut down the number of social cues by which a reader can discern authorial purposes. In this respect, print narrative depends much more fully on traditions not just of performance, but also of interpretation. The current practice of literary interpretation in the West is based on Biblical exegesis, supplemented profoundly by the study and interpretation of “the classics” of Rome and Greece. These exegetical practices tend to be structured around a few dominant patterns. A widely shared understanding of those patterns enables readers to pigeon-hole stories, to “read without listening.” Yet those patterns also allow gifted writers to expand meaning over time and space, to use variations on themes and patterns to deepen meaning. It is not really, as Toelken suggests, that one kind of story is

³ Barre Toelken, “Foreword,” in Barry Lopez, *Giving Birth to Thunder, Sleeping with his Daughter: Coyote Builds North America* (New York: Avon Books, 1977), xiii.

better than another, just that they are fundamentally different, and as such, it is beyond difficult to capture oral narratives from the deep human history of the Delta in any but the most superficial way.

Thus, this study will focus on the printed literature that deals with the Delta, and that means the English language literature that blossomed in the U.S. as a primary medium by which the world tried to understand and shape “American” culture. As this overall project accounts for the Delta’s history, this particular piece of the study ends with 1971, with the publication of *Barrio Boy*. Any study of history that approaches the present has to justify the marker between the historical and the contemporary. Indeed, it is not obvious why I draw the line in 1971 when three of my writers—Joan Didion, Leonard Gardner, and Maxine Hong Kingston—are alive as I write. The youngest of these was born before the U.S. entered World War II, and as such, each came of age at the end of a remarkable era in which print literature was at the center of American culture. A long, steady history of broadened literacy in the English speaking world made a number of advances in print technology economically viable over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, from the development of inexpensive paper, steam presses, “stereotyping” and then typesetting machines, and inexpensive transit to get books, newspapers and magazines to market. Each of these made print cheaper and more accessible, in turn broadening incentives to expand literacy. By 1850, print was still the first and only mass medium, with emphasis on *mass*, reaching into every corner of the U.S. By 1890, publishing had grown into the United States’ third largest industry, behind steel and transportation, and popular authors, such as Mark Twain, defined the very idea of celebrity. Yet as early as the 1930s with the development of the “talky,” the motion picture industry began shifting popular culture away from print, and the development of radio and then television moved narrative from print to more traditional modes that combine visual and aural

components. By the 1970s, readership in the U.S. was dropping significantly,⁴ and print culture once again became a marker of the educational and economic elites. So Galarza's memoir of an active political and academic life, built as much on education as on politics, provides a fitting end point for this discussion.

The Delta in Literature v. the Literature of the Delta

The most obvious feature of the English-language literature of the Sacramento/San Joaquin Delta region is how little there is. The river system of Central California has occupied a practical centrality to the development of California, serving as a major transportation corridor, as a conduit for fresh water both for agricultural and urban use, and as an incredibly fertile agricultural region. Many similar areas in the U.S. and around the world are cultural and literary centers. By analogy, one could expect the development of literature reflecting the area, instead of the area nearly disappearing in the cultural shadow of San Francisco.

William T. Sherman suggests that San Francisco become the anchor city of the west over Benicia merely because the city fathers of Yerba Buena were better at marketing:

Foreseeing, as he thought, the growth of a great city somewhere on the Bay of San Francisco, he [Dr. Semple] selected Carquinez Straits as its location, and obtained from General Vallejo a title to a league of land, on condition of building up a city thereon to bear the name of Vallejo's wife. This was Francisca Benicia; accordingly, the new city was named "Francisca." At this time, the town near the mouth of the bay was known universally as Yerba Buena; but that name was not known abroad, although San Francisco was familiar to the whole civilized world. Now, some of the chief men of Yerba Buena, Folsom, Howard, Leidesdorf, and others, knowing the

⁴ See the National Endowment for the Arts' report *Reading at Risk* (<http://arts.gov/publications/reading-risk-survey-literary-reading-america-0>, 2012) which captures the increasingly rapid decline of literary reading in the U.S. over the past fifty years.

importance of a name, saw their danger, and, by some action of the ayuntamiento, or town council, changed the name of Yerba Buena to "San Francisco." Dr. Semple was outraged at their changing the name to one so like his of Francisca, and he in turn changed his town to the other name of Mrs. Vallejo, viz., "Benicia;" and Benicia it has remained to this day. I am convinced that this little circumstance was big with consequences. That Benicia has the best natural site for a commercial city, I am, satisfied; and had half the money and half the labor since bestowed upon San Francisco been expended at Benicia, we should have at this day a city of palaces on the Carquinez Straits. The name of "San Francisco," however, fixed the city where it now is; for every ship in 1848-'49, which cleared from any part of the world, knew the name of San Francisco, but not Yerba Buena or Benicia; and, accordingly, ships consigned to California came pouring in with their contents, and were anchored in front of Yerba Buena, the first town.⁵

Can such a simple explanation hold water?

Probably not, but it is not worth dismissing out of hand, at least insofar as stories often shape action and the earliest well-known English language publications that deal with the Delta, a few of the sketches of George Horatio Derby (1823-1861), promote San Francisco. Derby, a West Point graduate who served in the Army's topographical corps, was stationed in California in the immediate aftermath of the Mexican-American War through the 1850s. As a topographical engineer, he toured much of the state, mapping in particular the greater San Francisco Bay area and portions of the central valley as well as the harbor of San Diego. In his spare time, of which he apparently had much, he wrote humorous sketches for many California newspapers, and these sketches, republished in New York, made him far more celebrated as a humorist than as a geographer. His best known sketches softly satirize the

⁵ Volume I, Chapter II, "Early Recollections of California," *Memoirs of William T. Sherman*, second ed. (1889; republication, Project Gutenberg, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/5850/5850-h/5850-h.htm>, 2004).

technological sublime, that quasi-religious progressivism that has been one of the persistent cultural forces in the U.S. from the time of Benjamin Franklin.

Like most comic journalists of his day, he embedded sketches of wider interest in correspondence that addressed intensely local concerns, among them, the rivalries of California towns that were vying for commercial and political power. Derby was a partisan of San Francisco over San Jose, Sonoma, Sacramento, and Benicia. His sketches, under the pen name “Squibob,” describe the travels of a wide-eyed innocent, whose enthusiasm ironically conveys comic criticism of San Francisco’s rivals. “Squibob in Benicia,” and “Squibob in Sonoma,” (October 1850), convey Derby’s false praise of Benicia in the civic campaign for San Francisco supremacy:

As I shouldered my carpet bag, and stepped upon the wharf among the dense crowd of four individuals that were there assembled, and gazing upon the mighty city whose glimmering lights, feebly discernible through the Benician darkness, extended over an area of five acres, an overpowering sense of the grandeur and majesty of the great rival of San Francisco affected me.⁶

The next morning, surveying the town from his hotel window, he describes

No less than forty-two wooden houses, many of them two stories in height . . . But there isn’t a tree in all Benicia. “There was one,” said the guide, “last year—only four miles from here, but they chopped it down for firewood for the ‘post.’ Alas, why didn’t the woodman spare that tree?” The dwelling of one individual pleased me indescribably—he had painted it a vivid green! Imaginative being. He evidently tried to fancy it a tree, and in the enjoyment of this sweet

⁶ “Squibob in Benicia, October 1850, reprinted in *Poenixiana: or Sketches and Burlesques* (New York, D. Appleton, 1855), p. 79.

illusion, had reclined beneath its grateful shade, secured from the rays of the burning sun, and in the full enjoyment of rural felicity even among the crowded streets of this great metropolis.⁷

Five years later, under his new pen name of “John Phoenix,” Derby shifts to direct criticism in the sketch “Phoenix at Benicia” (10 June, 1855):

Benicia is not a Paradise. Indeed, I am inclined to think that had Adam and Eve been originally placed here, the human race would never have been propagated. It is my impression that the heat, and the wind, and some other little Benician accidents, would have been too much for them. It would have puzzled them, moreover, to disobey their instructions; for there is no Tree of Knowledge, or any other kind in Benicia; but if they had managed this, what in the absence of fig-leaves, would they have done for clothing? Maybe tule would have answered the purpose—there’s plenty of that.

Who would wish to move to Benicia after hearing a pun like that?

For whatever reasons, despite early promotion of Benicia, Sacramento, and Stockton, and despite the fact that Sacramento became the state’s capital, San Francisco became the state’s cultural center. This is not to say, then, that there is no literature about the Delta region. The Delta does figure in a fairly large number of works, though it rarely figures centrally. More often, the Delta figures episodically in works that treat broader California themes. I will not treat these exhaustively. The number of travelers’ accounts of time in California is extensive, and Delta locations often figure briefly in these narratives. One can find a good online collection through the Library of Congress website, in a digital collection titled “California As I Saw It: First-Person Narratives of California’s Early Years, 1849-

⁷ *Ibid*, p 81.

1900.”⁸ Instead, I will confine my discussion to those few texts that connected broadly to a contemporary audience, to posterity, or to both.

In my study of the literature of the Delta—or of California as a whole for that matter—I find it surprising that one of the first influential writers in English, George Derby, wrote almost wholly out of the neo-Classical tradition of satire. Derby’s playful inversions reveal a happy skepticism of religion, of science and technology, of politics, of economics—in short, of most of the elements of the “American Dream” as a providential narrative. My survey ends with my other neo-classical writer, Ernesto Galarza. The middle is dominated by the prophetic mode, derived from the Judeo-Christian tradition. While a preponderance of U.S. literature follows in a Judeo-Christian prophetic mode, California literature is even more relentlessly prophetic than that of the eastern U.S.⁹ That does not mean that this literature is all singing the same tune, only that the patterns are derived substantially from one tradition. That tradition, however, has common narrative arcs, common tropes, common images, common characters, that seem on the surface to be diametrically opposed. On one hand is the literature of promise, the passage of a chosen people through difficulty in order to make a better life in a land of milk and honey. On the other, is the literature of the Jeremiad, a castigation of the chosen people for falling away from law, duty, and grace. What is common to both is the idea of a chosen people. At the beginning of the period under discussion, the idea of a chosen people had come to compound a religious community with a racial community. By the end, this kind of racialized promise is under explicit challenge. The long arc of the Delta story, parallels a similarly long arc in California and U.S. literature. The story of our stories, then, tries to answer a question asked by J. Hector St. Jean de Crevecoeur in 1782, “What is an

⁸ <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/cbhtml/cbednote.html>.

⁹ Wallace Stegner, in “Coming of Age: The End of the Beginning,” (1990) disagrees, asserting that the distance between California and the East enabled Californians to shed the influence of Europe on California literature. I find little evidence of such a radical break, in part because, by 1850, print enabled culture to spread beyond physical boundaries at a rate much faster than ever before in human history. The first truly well-known California writer, Bret Harte, is basically Dickens manqué.

American?”¹⁰ Better, how does an American act in a dialectic between being chosen as and choosing to be American, between a fatalistic and an active version of the American dream.

Bayard Taylor’s *Eldorado: Adventures in the Path of Empire* (1850) begins the entire tradition of the literature of California as promised—or at least golden—land. Dispatched in June of 1849 by Horace Greeley to write correspondence from the California gold fields for the New York *Tribune*, Bayard Taylor (1825-1878) spent about four months from late August in San Francisco, crossing the Delta several times to get to the gold fields, in the gold fields, and reporting from the Constitutional Convention in Monterrey. Taylor was already a noted man of letters when Greeley sent him West. He had published a volume of poetry and a very popular narrative of travels in Europe. (As one of Greeley’s most celebrated writers, Taylor was quite central to American letters, writing poetry, fiction, literary criticism, and travel narratives.) As journalist, Taylor was engaged almost immediately in the typical journalistic task of “boosterism,” reporting for his Eastern audience on the prospects for the growth of American commerce to the west. But he also had a more capacious interest in the events, seeing the settling of California in imperial terms, not just as “Eldorado,” a fabled city of wealth in the Spanish tradition, but as “Adventures in the Path of Empire,” seeing California as the next step in a providential Anglo-American empire straddling the continent, if not the hemisphere, or, indeed, the world.

The Delta and Delta towns occupy a very small portion of Taylor’s overall output, but he does specifically celebrate this area’s economic and cultural potential. Regarding Stockton, for example, he writes of his second visit:

I found Stockton more bustling and prosperous than ever. The limits of its canvas streets had greatly enlarged during my week of absence, and the crowd on the levee would not disgrace a much larger place at home. Launches were arriving and departing daily for and from San

¹⁰ The title of the most influential chapter from *Letters from an American Farmer*, 1782. Widely available in print and electronic form.

Francisco, and the number of mule-trains, wagons, etc., on their way to the various mines with freight and supplies kept up a life of activity truly amazing. Stockton was first laid out by Mr. Weaver [*sic.*], who emigrated to the country seven years before, and obtained a grant of eleven square leagues for the Government, on condition that he would obtain settlers for the whole of it within a specified time. In planning the town of Stockton, he displayed a great deal of shrewd business tact, the sale of lots having brought him upwards of \$500,000. A great disadvantage of the location is the sloughs by which it is surrounded, which, in the wet season, render the roads next to impassable. There seems, however, to be no other central point so well adapted for supplying the rich district between the Mokelumne and the Tuolumne, and Stockton will evidently continue to grow with a sure and gradual growth. (81) ¹¹

This description of his second visit to Stockton includes a substantial discussion of law and order as it was evolving in the dynamic growth of the gold rush. Taylor's discussion builds very much on a nationalist idea of "American" superiority, suggesting that the influx of U.S. born immigrants turned anarchy into incipient law. Implicit is the mythology of a providential order arising from the influx of a chosen people.

Both times Taylor passed through Stockton he was on mule-back; his trip through Sacramento, hurried in order to be able to tour the "northern" mines before the rainy season prevented easy travel, began by boat. His description, then of the Delta per se is included in his chapter "Sacramento River and City," in which he describes the quick development and improvement of river navigation, speaking explicitly of the difficulties of travel on the Bay, which he describes as having "waves . . . little less violent than in the Pacific" (175). He discusses briefly the relative commercial and military value of various cities and towns from San Francisco through the Delta. Describing the efforts of some speculators to

¹¹ Page numbers are from the 2000 Heyday Press edition. The text is readily available in both print and electronically.

create a major city—ponderously named New York of the Pacific—east of Benicia on the south shore of the Suisun Bay, Taylor accurately estimates the early growth of the most important cities of the Delta:

There will never be a large town there, for the simple reason that there is no possible cause why there *should* be one. Stockton and Sacramento City supply the mines; San Francisco takes the commerce; Benicia the agricultural produce, with a fair share of the inland trade; and this Gotham-of-the-West, I fear, must continue to belie its title.

Indeed, New York of the Pacific did fail, though it was resurrected with the discovery of coal on Mount Diablo. The current city of Pittsburg arose on the site to supply the Black Diamond mine.

On the whole, the rivers and the Delta towns do not figure prominently in Taylor's book, with its focus more broadly on long term agricultural, commercial, and mining prospects of the entire state, with his primary focus being on San Francisco. That said, the story he tells is substantially a celebration of the Americanization of California, a tale told very much in keeping with a providential mythology. Not dismissing the excesses of California "society," he finally judges it as governed by an "energy [that] did not run at random; it was in the end directed by an enlightened experience, and that instinct of Right which is the strength and security of a self-governed people" (249).

Bret Harte (1836-1902), who built his career as a local colorist primarily of the California gold fields (where, incidentally, he spent very little time), certainly played on a kind of sacred mythology of California, though his chronic irony makes it difficult to know if he even remotely believed in this mythology. I can think of none of his stories that treat the Delta centrally, but one of his slipperier tales, "The Legend of Monte Diablo" (*Atlantic Monthly*, 1863) casts a glance from the crest of Mount Diablo, over the Delta, to the Sierra Nevada.¹² Copying tone and thematics from Washington Irving's *Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon*, with an allusive gesture to Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown,"

¹² Readily available online. See http://www.gutenberg.org/files/6373/6373-h/6373-h.htm#2H_4_0145.

Harte's tale presents a prophetic vision of a racial succession, from Native American, to Spanish, to Anglo-Saxon, through the eyes of a Spanish priest. The complex ironies, given Harte's own vexed relationship to American culture, are difficult to read, but I suspect that Harte's contemporaries read the tale through a single turn of irony, seeing it as a validation of a triumphant Protestant, Anglo-Saxon empire.

Much deeper and more direct in its moral vision, though once again only tangentially touching on the Delta, is Josiah Royce's novel, *The Feud of Oakfield Creek: A Tale of California* (1887).¹³ Royce moved the Mussel Slough Tragedy to the alluvial plain on the south side of Suisun Bay, and postulated the battle not merely as one between competing visions of land rights, but between competing ideologies about America's destiny. Royce was a philosophical Idealist, who began his career as a philosopher with the 1885 publication of *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy* and whose second book, *California : A Study of American Character : From the Conquest in 1846 to the Second Vigilance Committee in San Francisco* (1886) demonstrated his deep interest in the meaning of history, very much in tune with his interest in Hegel. In part because his work as a historian was not well received in California, and in part because he believed that fiction was an excellent medium by which to examine ethical questions, Royce turned his hand to writing historical fiction, very much in the tradition of social realism that was advocated and developed by William Dean Howells.

Disputes over land titles began immediately after the founding of the California Republic, and the competition between those who saw squatting as part of the mythology of American conquest and those who held legal title to land, played out nearly to the end of the century. One of the most politically vexed of these competitions was over the way railroads were built, with the federal government granting a checkerboard of land titles along railroad routes as a way to subsidize the construction of fundamental infrastructure for settlement without having to lay out any funds. Into

¹³ Josiah Royce, *The Feud of Oakfield creek: A Novel of California Life* (Boston, Riverside Press, 1887).

these lands settlers flowed, often lured by the railroad companies' vague promises of favorable terms for the sale of the land in the future. When that future arrived, prices were often bones of contention, and in the case of the Mussel Slough affair, the contention reached a pitch of violence in which six men were killed and five were sent to jail, though given light sentences.

Royce's version of the affair compresses stories of individual moral shortcomings into a much larger historical frame, personalizing history in order to insist on the fundamentally ethical challenge each person still must consider even as larger historical forces shape lives. Specifically, it's the story of two families, that of Alonzo Eldon and his son Tom and of Alf Escott and his children. The Escotts are educated idealists; the elder Eldon is a stereotypical Yankee pragmatist, excellent at business, respectful of education as a useful ornament but unwilling to put time into it. These are, in Royce's vision, flip sides of the same American coin, playing in their creative opposition into the tragic dynamism of American culture. Putting American history into the struggle between these two families is part of Royce's extension of, or rather argument with, Hegelian metaphysics to incorporate more traditionally Christian ideas of personal freedom consonant with divine order. As such, Royce's narrative engages the deeper Calvinist narratives that often framed American literature, even as he engaged late nineteenth-century ideas of racial change. He challenged the progressivist narrative with hints of a traditional narrative of declension, as, for example, when he describes one of the main characters, Tom Eldon, as physically and morally weaker than his pioneering father, Alonzo Eldon:

As the two stood together one saw a living example of the quick physical degeneration that has marred so many California pioneer families. This fine rugged form of the father, still so full of many vigor in its every movement, was in the sharpest contrast to the son's weak and almost serpentine body, with its indolence and its indecision of bearing. (211)

Royce sets up parallel ethical challenges between the two generations, with each Eldon committing a moral wrong against one of the Escotts, though neither is technically breaking any law. Both Eldons represent a laissez-faire individualism; all of the Escotts represent a literate idealism. All are blinded by absolutism even as they find themselves trapped in ignorance framed by prejudice. In this respect, Royce is forwarding his rather complex justification of the existence of God through the inadequacy of our understanding. His proof is rather philosophically complex, and his skills as a novelist make the argument more than a bit difficult to discern. Not surprisingly, Royce committed himself to philosophy after the publication of this novel. Not that important in its own right, Royce's novel and his history of California significantly influenced Joan Didion, who is likely to be considered finally as the most important Delta writer of the twentieth century.

It is worth comparing Royce's novel to a better known fictionalization of the Mussel Slough affair, *The Octopus: A Story of California* (1901), by Frank Norris (1870-1902).¹⁴ The Delta makes its cameo appearance at the end, when the wheat grown in the southern San Joaquin Valley is embarked on ships at Port Costa, bound for India. Norris's novel disagrees with Royce's version of personal ethics, favoring an impersonal version of historical destiny. That is, the impersonal force of nature in Norris's fatalistic naturalism is the atheist's version of the impersonal predestination of Calvinism; in both, human beings are subject to great power that has the future planned. In this respect, even ostensibly "scientific" writers of the turn of the century follow the deep patterns of the prophetic tradition.

Jack London (1876-1916), who so often wrote out of his personal experiences, treats the Delta in which he spent much time in two books: *Tales of the Fish Patrol* (1906), a book of adventure stories for the juvenile market, and *The Valley of the Moon* (1913), his visionary novel of California's agricultural

¹⁴ New York: Doubleday, 1901. Republications are readily available in print or online. See <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/268>.

reclamation.¹⁵ Both are inconsistent, difficult to interpret books in that they manifest London's puzzling mixture of utopian ideology, Spencerian "social-Darwinism," socialism, and a pure love of money. *Tales* fictionalizes some of London's own youthful experiences, both as a poacher and as a member of the "fish patrol," i.e., as a maritime game warden enforcing fishing laws. The tales are all told from the point of view of a well-connected and thoroughly respectable youth who is out for summertime adventures, getting a glimpse of the extra-legal activities of the multi-cultural world of the lower Delta and the upper Bay. His boat is ostensibly based out of Benicia, and some of the adventures take an easterly tack into the Delta. Granting that the market required a veneer of respectability so that it would not have served London well to have made his hero one of the poachers, these stories are profoundly at odds with London's ostensible socialism, demonstrating remarkably little sympathy for the working men whose livelihoods depended on the catch. The adventures are more about humans catching humans, and in that respect they show a worship of power. In particular, these stories insist on the superiority of Anglo-Americans over the numerous recent immigrants, and especially over the Chinese. What almost redeems these stories is London's obvious love of sailing and of the water itself. There are hints, here, of a Romantic sensibility, a proto-environmentalism that is of a piece with his late-life pose as an agricultural reformer.

In *Valley*, both the racist Spencerian and the agricultural reformer merge in a tale of proletarian redemption. A sprawling, episodic novel, it traces the peregrinations of Billy Roberts and Saxon Brown from their working-class jobs in Oakland through a tour of California from Carmel in the South to Sonoma in the north. They have turned their back on a proletarian urban existence in search of an agrarian alternative, wanting "land of their own" to homestead. During their travels, they run into "Jack Hastings," presumably a figure for the author, who takes them aboard his yacht for a tour of the Delta.

¹⁵ *Tales of the Fish Patrol* (New York: Macmillan, 1905; available online at <http://www.jacklondons.net/talesFishpatrol.html>). *Valley of the Moon* (New York: Macmillan, 1913; readily available online).

This section is dominated by London's sermons on sustainable agriculture, with pointed references to the ways in which the Delta farms are extremely lucrative. While much of this section is set up as a contrast to what London intended to do on his own Glen Ellen farm, he grudgingly praises the work ethic and business savvy of the non-Anglo-Saxon farmers who have turned a swamp into a number of booming businesses. Yet the fact that his protagonists are both "pure" Anglo-Saxon is their greatest claim to importance. Oddly, the fact that they are out-competed by "immigrants" doesn't seem to bother London, who somehow seems to believe in the ultimate triumph of his preferred race. In a sense, London's racialism, while of a piece with turn of the century beliefs, harkens back to an idea of Anglo-Saxons as a chosen people. While as an atheist London disclaimed any belief in a providence, his racial ideas coded a providential narrative. Moreover, his socialism connected him to the working-class millennialism common to the movement (See Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, 1888, which Mark Twain mockingly called "the last and best of all the bibles"). Toward the end of his career when he abandoned active work as a socialist, London turned instead to a utopian agrarianism. In both respects, London's work is basically in the tradition of the Jeremiad.

From before World War I to the nineteen sixties, the only significant literary figure I have found who treats the Delta is William Everson, the Sacramento-born poet whose nature writings are very much in a sacramental tradition. After that, we jump to a truly minor literature, three books by Earle Stanley Gardner (1889-1970) in which he describes house boating in the Delta. Paradoxically celebrating the technology of his new houseboats and his pleasant retreat into nature, he does capture a modern high-tech idea of camping, turning nature into a television set to be watched with enjoyment from a comfortable chair.

The dearth of literature from the 1930s through 1950s frankly surprises me. The area was growing in importance and population, and this was a period in which American literature bloomed, both commercially and artistically. The 1960s and 1970s mark a turn in literature that treats the Delta

in four ways. First, there is more of it. Second, while still mostly in the prophetic tradition, it is mostly skeptical of millennial promises. Third, it challenges the fundamental racism of so much of the early work. Fourth, some of it is truly focused on the region, not merely with a tangential glance, but considering the communities of the area as worthy of treatment in their own rights.

Joan Didion (1934-) is, so far, the most significant chronicler of Delta life. The pattern of her treatment of the Delta fits the pattern described above, in that she is concerned primarily to understand California as an extreme example of an American frame of mind, but unlike the other writers I've discussed, she often sets entire works—several essays and one novel—in the Delta. She does not treat the Delta merely as a place to pass through or as a backwater that is of interest only in contrast to something else. She sees it as essentially Californian, and can use it to exemplify large questions of cultural identity, heritage, and prospects. I can think of no writers who are more self-consciously and explicitly aware of the two sides of the prophetic tradition, playing the mythos of heroic sacrifice against what she finally sees as tawdry and self-deluding ends. While the tenor of her work is decidedly skeptical of any providential value in the American experience, she definitely captures the power of the mythos, and responds emotionally to the Jeremiad strain, albeit without the implicit promise that suffering has redemptive meaning.

Didion's best writing, I think, is in the familiar essay, either in the shorter form published in magazines, or in the book-length form of memoir. In the essay "Notes of a Native Daughter," Didion's title refers to one of the most influential essays of the 1950s, James Baldwin's "Notes of a Native Son," in which Baldwin calls attention to the essential Americanness of African-Americans at the same time he reveals the profound personal and cultural damage done by racial bigotry. Didion's reference, in an essay written in 1965, speaks of the cultural ferment of the Civil Rights movement, the anti-war movement, and the sense of both change and doom of the 60s.

It is characteristic of Californians to speak grandly of the past as if it had simultaneously begun, tabula rasa, and reached a happy ending on the day the wagons started west. . . Such a view of history casts a certain melancholia over those who participate in it; my own childhood was suffused with the conviction that we had long outlived our finest hour. In fact, that is what I want to tell you about: what it is like to come from a place like Sacramento. If I could make you understand that, I could make you understand California and perhaps something else besides, for Sacramento is California, and California is a place in which a boom mentality and a sense of Chekhovian loss meet in uneasy suspension.¹⁶

While this melancholia is perhaps the dominant mood of Didion's oeuvre, she is capable of enthusiasm, too, most notably over the movie industry, but also over the technological wonder of the state and federal water projects, to which her famous essay "Holy Water," (from 1979 just outside of my historical cutoff) attests. Again, the Delta is central, not merely tangential, to understanding California.

Didion's first novel, *Run River* (1963), captures her dominant motifs.¹⁷ Structurally and thematically, it is an answer to Royce's *The Feud of Oakfield Creek*. Both build against a mythology of a heroic frontier past, but while Royce gives a complicated version of this heroism, Didion gives a compromised version, focusing on the cannibalism of the Donner Party. In Royce's novel, the Delta is peripheral to a San Francisco story; Didion makes San Francisco the periphery to Sacramento. Royce builds his plot around a loveless marriage that is challenged when Tom Eldon's wife meets a man whom she can truly love, but the love is never consummated. Didion creates a loveless marriage that is betrayed in consummation so frequently as to be numbing. Both end in a gunfight precipitated by jealousy but complicated by the feelings generated over land ownership and speculation. Royce

¹⁶ Collected in *Slouching Toward Bethlehem*, (1968; reprint, New York: Noonday Press), p. 172. Few of Didion's works are available in electronic form.

¹⁷ As a new writer, she published the first edition in New York through an obscure publisher, I. Oblensky, in 1963. The readily available reprint is published by Vintage, 1994.

challenges a simple providential narrative in order to invest daily affairs with the dignity of moral choice. Didion challenges a simple providential narrative by suggesting such a myth in fact evacuates life of any morality or meaning whatsoever. It is easy to see why she titled her first collection of essays “Slouching Towards Bethlehem;” to her, things fall apart. I think the energy of her negative viewpoint, the gusto of her Jeremiad sans hope, stems from the degree to which she once invested in the optimistic side of the prophetic promise. She could only see the “dead end” of the “golden dream” because she understood the compelling beauty of that dream in the first place.

Fat City (1969), by Leonard Gardner, makes a fitting companion piece to Didion’s novel.¹⁸ While Didion’s story treats the lives of wealthy landowners, Gardner looks at the lives of the itinerant laborers who work the land and at the working class city dwellers whose lives are nonetheless shaped by the agricultural community that surrounds Stockton. While these two writers cover the social class spectrum, they both show people who are remarkably incapable of self-reflection. While Didion blames the lapse on a large-scale cultural mythos that derails effective introspection, Gardner looks at dreams that are more narrowly defined. In particular, his main characters struggle with immediate material needs. Gardner creates characters who have a sense of longing, but their horizons are limited to fantasies of escape having to do with alcohol, sex, money, and—to the extent that they see boxing as their way “out” of menial work—fame. Gardner’s plot is really quite simple. He follows two boxers on different trajectories: one is trying to make a comeback, the other is trying simply to make it. The first fails, finding his life slipping further from his control, barely holding his life together by doing daily field work, and finally surrendering to alcoholism. The other, younger fighter, is clearly never going to become rich and famous, and his desire for sexual congress leads him into marriage far before he is ready. In his case, boxing serves as an outlet that is unlikely ever to take him far, but at least seems to

¹⁸ New York: Vintage.

give him some basic balance. Yet the parallel structure suggests that the younger man's dreams are unlikely to serve him for very long.

Gardner's book was both extremely well received by critics and reached a very wide public, though most know the story through the film, rather than through the book. Published just a year later, *The Woman Warrior: Memoir of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1970), the breakthrough book for Maxine Hong Kingston (1940-), has been even more successful among critics, becoming widely taught in colleges, but is not as well known in the broader public.¹⁹ Here we see the cultural shift away from literature toward other media, even though Kingston, like Didion before her, is a practitioner of a creative non-fiction, a literary mode that has maintained cachet relatively well. While memoirs have never been held to journalistic standards of accuracy, Kingston's are particularly literary, enriched both by techniques developed in the so-called "New Journalism" of the 1960s and by literary traditions taken from Chinese folk culture. It could also be characterized as an example of a *Sturm und Drang* story of adolescence. In one sense, the pressure Kingston describes derives substantially from the conflicting demands and attractions of Chinese and "American" culture. While the tension between old and new countries is a thematic long since developed by ethnic writers of America's eastern cities (especially by Irish- and Jewish-American writers), Kingston complicates it with a feminist overlay that arises both from second-wave feminism and from the conflicting gender expectations developed in the two cultures. Insofar as the book is a product of the 1960s and follows in the grooves of ethnic literature, it fits the patterns of the Jeremiad, even though the cultural *mélange* that is the book's subject is at least half outside of the prophetic tradition. That Kingston's book can be described in these terms shows, in part, how powerful these patterns are in shaping publishers', as well as writers', expectations.

¹⁹ New York: Knopf.

After so long in the Slough of Despond, I'm glad to turn to the work of Ernesto Galarza (1905-1984), whose *Barrio Boy* (1971) provides a refreshing counterpoint.²⁰ Galarza is best known for his practical work as a labor organizer and civil rights activist. In literary circles, he is known for his memoir, which primarily describes his childhood, first in Mexico, then, after his family fled Mexico during the Revolution, in Sacramento. Coming from a man who had dedicated his life to fighting exploitation and racism, Galarza's memoirs are unexpectedly humorous, optimistic, and supportive of ideals of citizenship that derive more from Enlightenment neo-classicism than from the prophetic tradition. I say unexpectedly because most 20th-century American literature that addresses racial discrimination does so in the prophetic strain and usually focuses on moral and civic lapses. *Barrio Boy* certainly does chronicle the complexities of racial identity in the Sacramento of Galarza's childhood. But he emphasizes the capacity of the public school he attended to build a multi-cultural democracy. He describes a school system—or at least a few teachers—who saw an American future not in a racial or religious idea of having been chosen, but rather as a deliberate act of civic engagement, an exercise designed to make from many a national union, but one that respects differences. Through a persistent and playful optimism, he not only advocates, he also celebrates cultural pluralism.

Graphic Art

I cast my net fairly wide in seeking graphic art, considering one-of-a-kind art works, mass produced art (such as lithographs), and commercial art. The challenge of combing collections was beyond the time I had, so I think of this survey as preliminary (Native American art, particularly Delta basketry, is worthy of serious attention, but is beyond the scope of this essay. See, however, the attached bibliography which could serve as a beginning point such attention)

²⁰ Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press.

Lithographs, wood cuts, and engravings are by far the most common art of the Delta, at least by the standard that it is widely available and accessible (many are available through the Online Archive of California). I begin with a print taken from one of Bayard Taylor's sketches, which he made to accompany his written report of his time in California, which was lithographed by Sarony & Major, and published by George Putnam

(<http://oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/tf6290108k/?layout=metadata&brand=oac4>):



The metadata for this print is a bit confusing; it is unclear if this was included in the first edition of *Eldorado*, in an 1857 edition, or published separately. If included, it would have been tipped in separately and sold only in a limited number of volumes.

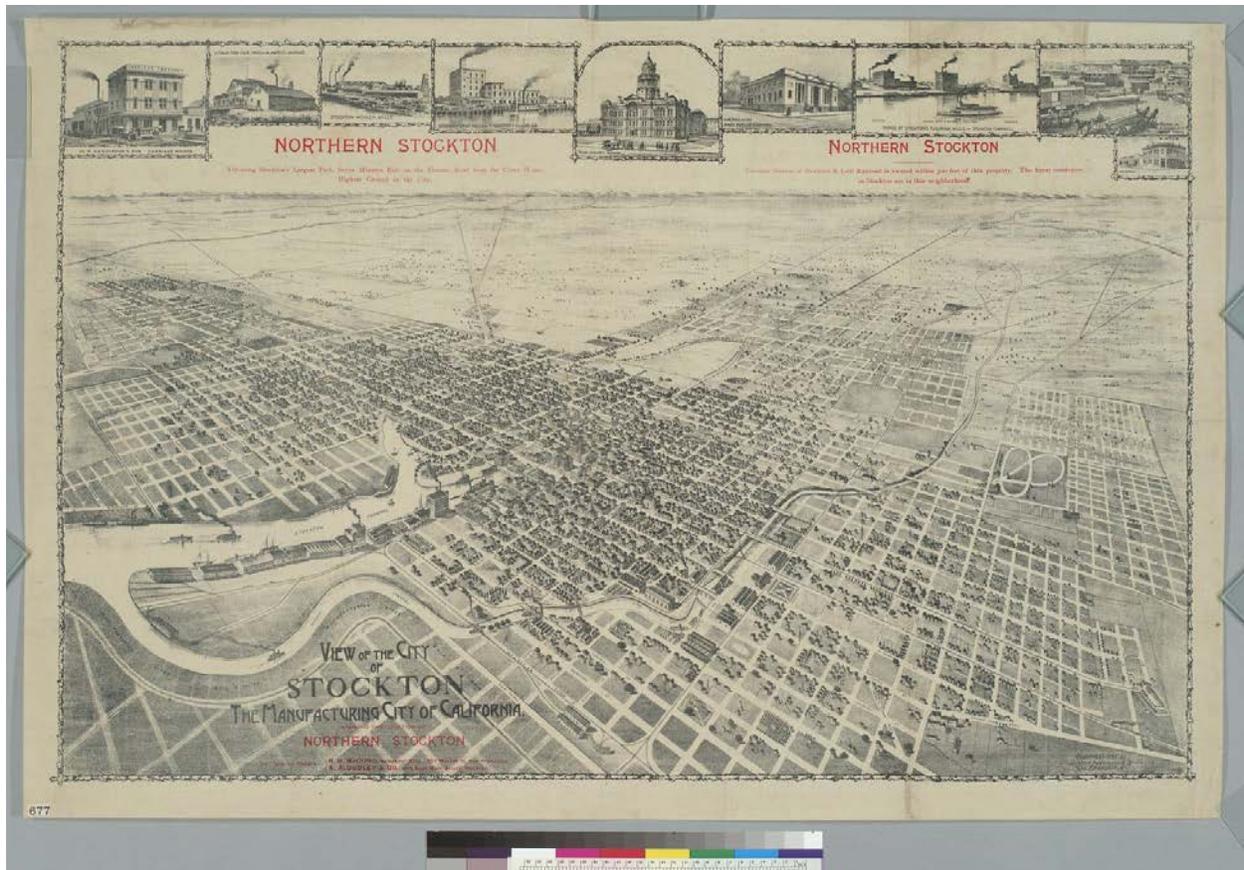
For some of the earliest of Delta prints, archives have remarkably little information, as with this illustration of the Carquinez Straights, held by the Bancroft Library (available at

<http://oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/tf4199p1gf/?brand=oac4>), and engraved by Lessing-Barett sometime in the nineteenth century:



Prints like this one were meant to be ornamental; many others served more complex purposes, such as the numerous birds-eye or waterfront views of various Delta towns and cities, each of which was meant as much to promote these towns as to depict them. Consider this one of Stockton, ca. 1895

(<http://oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/tf0r29n9j7/?brand=oac4>):



This was published by the Dakin Publishing Company about 1895. Dakin of San Francisco ultimately was known for publishing fire insurance maps well into the 1960s. This early work is more promotional than functional.

A similar, though earlier, map of Sacramento was published Britton & Rey, lithographers, about 1857, from the drawing by George Holbrook Baker (1827-1906) (again, Bancroft Library, <http://oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/tf98701257/?brand=oac4>). As best I can discover, Britton and Rey were 49ers who retired from prospecting to return to their trade in San Francisco (<http://www.edanhughes.com/biography.cfm?ArtistID=92>). Baker was another 49er who relocated to San Francisco, where he worked successfully in journalism, especially as an illustrator (<http://art.famsf.org/george-holbrook-baker>):



I also found a large number of waterfront images of various Delta towns. While they give a more intimate sense of a city, when one sees a number of them, they blur. The bird's eye views do a better job of capturing what is unique about a city or town.

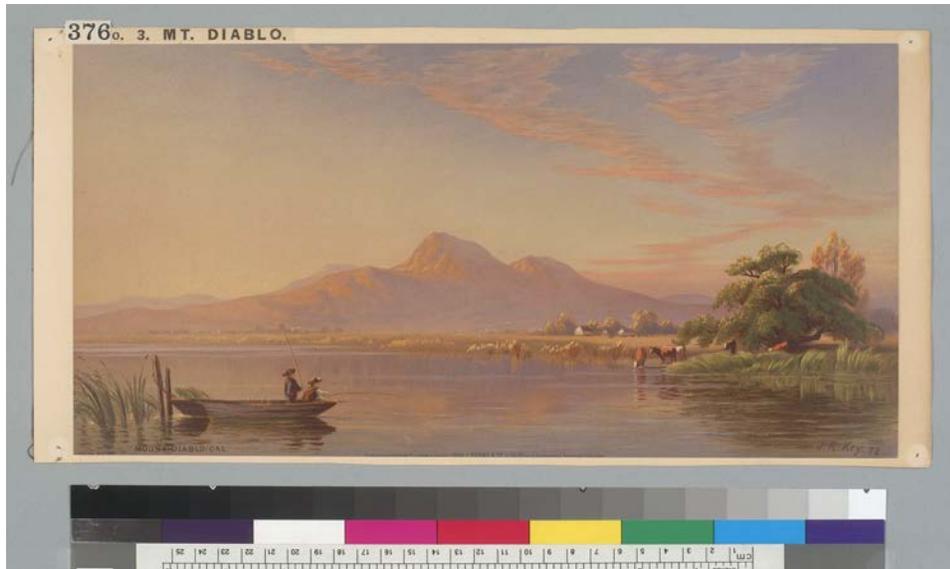
The next image is a composite of six prints of the Bay and River area. Only one of these is a conventional landscape. The others were narrow horizontal sketches of particular points on the waterway. Were these intended as navigation aids? It's hard to believe they would be purchased as

ornaments or as efforts to boost commerce. This URL,

<http://oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/tf9870126r/?layout=metadata&brand=oac4>, has the metadata of the entire group as one illustration, even though it is a collage of six distinct prints . (I saw two of them as separate prints in the Bancroft.)



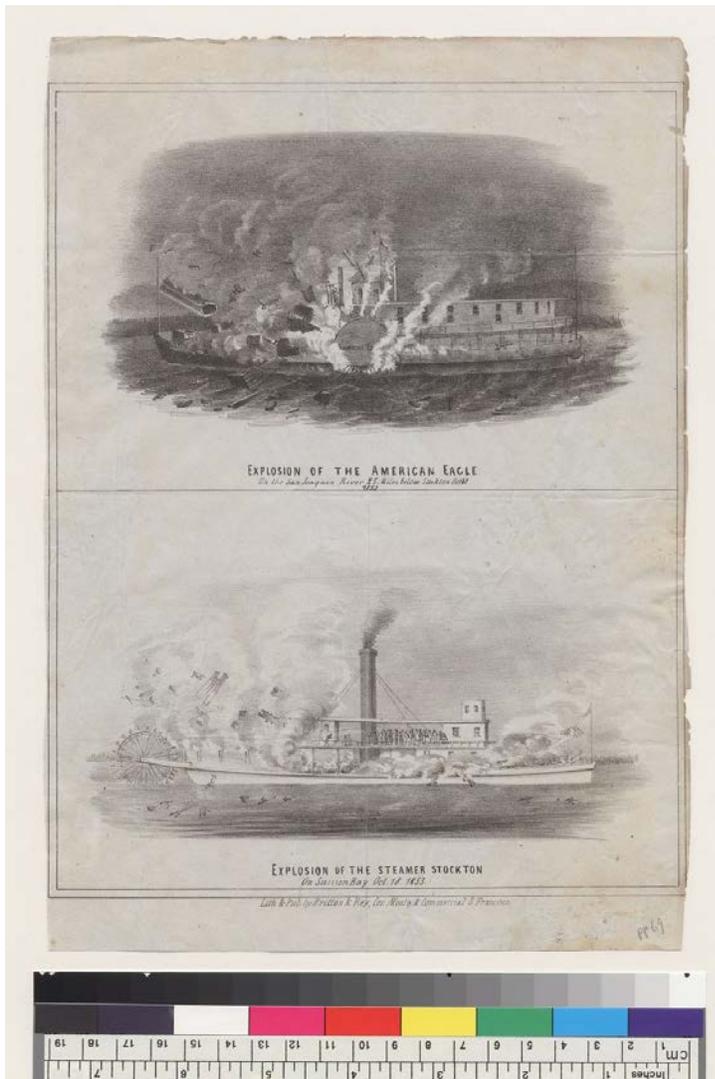
The following chromolithograph of Mount Diablo, by John Ross Key (1832-1920) and published by L. Prang & Co. (active 1868-ca. 1873), on the other hand, obviously was intended to be ornamental (<http://oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/tf9q2nb8pc/?brand=oac4>).



Chromolithographs, like art prints today, were essential to the development of artistic interests in American culture. They were printed as copies of canonical works of European art and also taken from contemporary works. As such they both educated Americans in the artistic traditions of Europe and provided livelihoods for American artists.

Not all lithographs sold and purchased as art were chromos, nor were they all worthy of the exalted title of fine art. Among the ones I found that are nonetheless interesting is one of explosions of two ships in the Delta, “Explosion of the American Eagle/on the San Joaquin River, 25 Miles below Stockton Oct 8/1853 “Explosion of the Steamer Stockton/on Suisson Bay, Oct 18, 1853,” published by Britton and Rey, 1853 (<http://oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/tf0m3nb3bb/?layout=metadata&brand=oac4>). Shipwrecks were a favorite subject of all the arts in nineteenth-century America, allowing for moralizing

on the transitory nature of human life, human weakness in the face of greater powers, the sinfulness of relying on our human skills and knowledge, and all of that kind of thing, all while taking pleasure in death and destruction (while writing this, I'm hearing in my mind the Henry Clay Work Song, "When The 'Evening Star' Went Down"). Shipwrecks were the nineteenth-century equivalent of television news:



One-of-a-kind works:

I've found relatively few of these that are readily accessible, and even fewer that are very good. This oil painting, for example, is fairly typical of an American genre of ship paintings, but it is not particularly distinguished (<http://oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/tf7489p4q3/?layout=metadata&brand=oac4>):

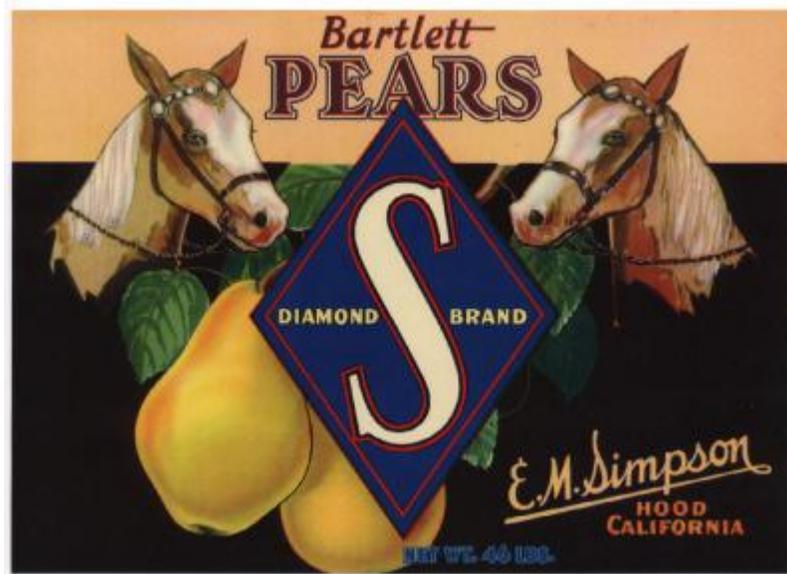


Housed in the Bancroft as part of the Honeywell Collection, there is no information available about the artist. The painting is of the "Chrysopolis," and is dated ca 1860.

I was able to find some amateur art in the Bancroft collected with the papers of C.E. Grunsky (1855-19-34), a civil engineer, born in San Joaquin County, employed for much of his life by the City of San Francisco. He toured the Delta in 1878 to survey possible water supplies for the city. During that survey, he made a number of lovely pencil sketches of the Delta, one in colored pencil, and one ghastly oil painting on canvas. In each, the artist includes his surveying team's houseboat in the foreground. These are not available on line, but are, I think, worth considering for Delta exhibits as they show a trained engineer's drafting abilities in depicting a land and waterscape rarely captured.

Commercial Art:

Growers probably would have been astonished that the art they commissioned to grace fruit and vegetable packing crates would be considered valuable as history, no less as art. To my eye, they are worthy of both. As art, they occupy a lovely liminal space between branding (as in stock branding),



caricature,



and still-life



I took all three of these images from this commercial web-site:

http://www.thelabelman.com/product_info.php?products_id=144&osCsid=084204475de27d15612fbb004d4050fa

The existence of such a site speaks to the popularity of crate labels as a collectable art form. There is nothing uniquely Delta about such labels, though all three of these are taken from Delta farming companies.

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Bibliography of Northern CA Indian Basket Literature
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Possible Delta Indian Basket Repositories in Northern California

Bancroft Library, University of California Berkley

C. Hart Merriam collection, University of California Davis

CA State Parks Statewide Museum Collection Center

Native America - Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University

Sate Indian Museum