International Journal of
History Research
(IJHR)

The Archival Silence of Hill's Ferry, California

Mary Weppler-Van Diver

International Journal of History Research
ISSN: 2959-4499 (Online)
Vol 4, Issue 2, No.6, pp 58 - 76, 2024

www.iprjb.org

The Archival Silence of Hill's Ferry, California

[1*]Mary Weppler-Van Diver
California State University, Stanislaus

Article History

Received 10th October 2024

Received in Revised Form 9th November 2024

Accepted 17th December 2024

How to cite in APA format:

Diver, M. (2024). The Archival Silence of Hill's Ferry, California. *International Journal of History Research*, *4*(2), 58–76. https://doi.org/10.47604/ijhr.3124

Abstract

Purpose: The town of Hill's Ferry was once a thriving Central California town during the mid-to- late 1800s. But this once-vibrant town has all but disappeared from the memory of California history. There is now only a historic marker, covered in weeds, near broken concrete from a torn-down bridge. The marker, installed in 1964 by the Boy Scouts youth organization, reads: "July 18, 1964, historic landmark, Hills Ferry, founded 1849 by Judge O. D. Dickerson, named for Jesse Hill, operator of the ferry boat that landed just upstream under the present bridge." Hill's Ferry is worth remembering. Originating during the California Gold Rush, it was at one time the largest town in its county of Stanislaus and was part of a thriving international wheat industry. Alternately it had a notorious reputation and was known throughout California as "Hell's Fury" due to its reputation for lawlessness and the ferocity of its work life and social life. There were powerful and affluent members of this community whose history has been well documented, and this study does not endeavor to undermine the accomplishments associated with any individual or enterprise related to the development of Hill's Ferry. Instead, I will focus on enclaves whose histories I argue have been silenced and forgotten, everyday people of Hill's Ferry whose history, like the town itself, has been abandoned. This is despite the fact that the numbers of these identified groups comprised a significant percentage of the population of Hill's Ferry. At the center of the identified marginalized groups is a Chinese woman known as Ah Gun (born circa 1850s; died 1928 in the nearby town of Newman), who was trafficked into the United States from China, and eventually brought to Hill's Ferry as a young woman in the early 1870s.

Methodology: This study will discuss marginalized communities and individuals crucial to Hill's Ferry's development and the character of this town, focusing particularly on the individual named Ah Gun, and contextualizing the Hill's Ferry community in which she lived part of her life. This includes the vibrant Chinese enclave, and two other groups categorized by their labor: laborers who harvested the lucrative wheat crops, and the workers who provided entertainment in the saloons and bordellos. I argue that these communities have been ignored or mischaracterized in existing histories, though they do have a strong presence in census data, archival photographs, and newspaper articles from the period. These communities undeniably were part of the fabric of a once vibrant, now disappeared, town. I ground my methodological approach in previous literature on archival silence and how this concept can be related to the historically marginalized subjects described above.

Findings: This approach will both challenge and illuminate aspects of available sources, ultimately uncovering a more contextualized history of the town of Hill's Ferry and its community, and especially one of its former residents known as Ah Gun.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: This approach furthermore can provide a framework for future investigations: Hill's Ferry is not the only ghost town with its origins in the Gold Rush, and Ah Gun was one of thousands of individuals trafficked from China to the United States from the 1850s to 1870s. Thus, the methodological approach is one that may inform future investigations into the histories of marginalized individuals and disappeared towns that comprise the larger history of the American West and especially California during the mid-to-late 19th century.

Keywords: *Archival Silence, Chinese Americans, Prostitution, Human Trafficking, Gold Mines and Mining, Wheat Harvesting*

JEL Codes of Classification: *E26, J15*

International Journal of History Research
ISSN: 2959-4499 (Online)
Vol 4, Issue 2, No.6, pp 58 - 76, 2024

www.iprjb.org

INTRODUCTION

Ask a current resident of Stanislaus County today about Hill's Ferry, and chances are that the individual has never heard of it. Founded in 1849, the town was just short of 40 years old when in 1888, 24 of its structures were moved 3 miles northwest to the nearby community of

Newman. This was so the townspeople could be closer to the new railroad and station. In 1906, Hill's Ferry suffered a devastating fire wiping away most remnants and physical traces of the town's existence. Today most of the town has gone back to nature and the land is privately owned.

Figure 1: Hill's Ferry Historic Landmark, Author's Photo, 2024.

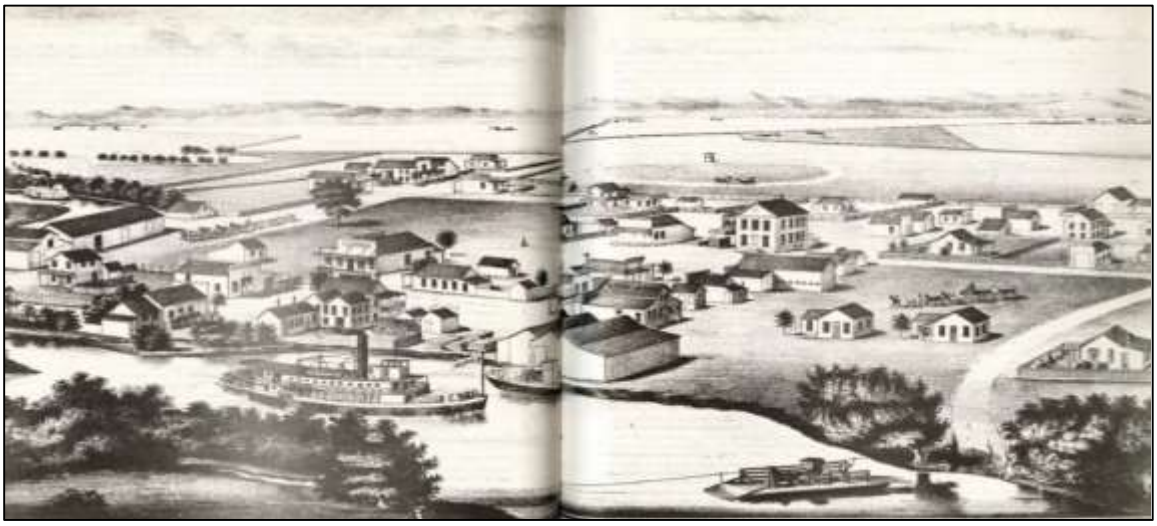


Figure 2: Illustration of Hill's Ferry, History of Stanislaus County, California, with Illustrations, 1881.

What we know of Hill's Ferry is found largely in published local histories, census records, newspaper accounts, and both textual documents, illustrations, and photographs located in a few identified archival collections, including the *Frank Latta Skyfarming collection* located at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California, the Newman Museum's *Charles Huber collection* in Newman, California, and the *Hutchings-Newsom collection* (1813-1912) of

International Journal of History Research
ISSN: 2959-4499 (Online)
Vol 4, Issue 2, No.6, pp 58 - 76, 2024

www.iprjb.org

transcribed letters between family members and friends located at California State University, Stanislaus, in Turlock, California. I reviewed primary-source materials from these collections along with secondary-source local histories. Also consulted were available census records and newspaper accounts. Combined, these sources reveal an incredibly diverse and vibrant town, especially from the 1850s through the 1880s. However, much of the archival record is missing from Hill's Ferry. While the more affluent European-American settlers are well represented in the source materials, other members of the community fall into a category that I argue can be described as archival silence.

But what exactly are archival silences, and where and why do they exist? Archival silences may exist wherever there is any distortion or absence in the archival record which results in gaps and/or misrepresentations of the past. According to archivist and researcher Dominique Luster, archival silences can be divided into three overarching categories: 1. records that were not created, 2. records that were not preserved or collected, and 3. records that are not properly described because of biased description (Archives have the Power to Boost Marginalized Voices, 2018; TEDxPittsburg, 2018)

Perhaps the most widely known image of a resident of Hill's Ferry exists in a photograph of the Chinese woman known as Ah Gun. Imagine that you lead a long life, surviving human trafficking, moved against your will from one continent to another, only to be remembered by a caption describing how you were won in a poker game and brought to Hill's Ferry. As I began my research on Hill's Ferry, this enigmatic and tragically captioned photograph kept reappearing in secondary-source research. Thus, I decided to find any available primary-source material on Ah Gun's life. I located the original framed photograph of Ah Gun at the Newman City Museum, the town to which over 20 structures from Hill's Ferry, and most of its human community, including Ah Gun, moved circa 1888. The framed photograph of Ah Gun is shown below, in situ, at the museum.

Figure 3: Framed Photograph of Ah Gun in situ, Newman City Museum, Newman, California, part of the Charles Huber Collection

This photograph of Ah Gun was donated by a hotel-operator of the Russ House (a boarding house and bar originally located in Hill's Ferry with a later establishment in Newman), Charles Huber (1869-1947). Huber was an avid collector of Hill's Ferry artifacts, though his connection to Ah Gun is unknown. He would have been a toddler at the time she was first

brought to Hill's Ferry, and the photograph is one of many artifacts of unique and varying provenance donated by Huber. Thus, this photograph of Ah Gun rarely has been contextualized in the research. The image often appears in local history publications about Chinese communities of Hill's Ferry and the later town of Newman, or in secondary-source monograph discussions of the numerous bordellos in Hill's Ferry, but without background of who Ah Gun was or what happened to her after her arrival in Hill's Ferry in 1872. For many decades the Newman Museum has exhibited the photograph alongside the following stark caption:

"Ah Gun, 1872. A Chinese woman won in a poker game in Carson City, Nevada, and brought to Hills Ferry in 1872." But how could a person in an era after the Emancipation Proclamation have been trafficked in this way? The reasons likely originate with organized criminal gangs and crooked government workers that operated an illegal slave trade of young women between China and the United States (Gibson, 1877). The photo has been associated with this caption through the years, so much so that the stark text appeared to define Ah Gun. Here the archival silence is the bias in the description, as obviously Ah Gun has not been forgotten. But the crime that was done to her has not been redressed, grossly minimizing her story in this stark caption, when in fact, as shall be discussed, her story also was one of resilience and survival in the face of adversity.

Ah Gun rests at the center of this study on archival silence and the disappeared town of Hill's Ferry. Brought to the town during the height of its growth, during the early 1870s, she would move with the community to Newman in 1888, living in Newman into old age when she died in 1928. It is therefore irrefutable that Ah Gun worked, lived, and co-existed with

groups presented in this study, individuals that made up a significant percentage of the population and vital work force, individuals who were embedded in the fabric of the community, though lacking socio-economic power and thereby running a greater risk of being erased, forgotten, or as in the case of Ah Gun I argue, misrepresented.

The Chinese enclave living in Hill's Ferry during the time under study are poorly represented in primary and secondary sources. Chinese made up almost half of the total family residences, however these residences were separated out from European settlers in published histories of Hill's Ferry, while the census records demonstrate a propensity to capture first names only of Chinese residents. As a result, their many contributions have been minimized or entirely forgotten. Likewise, the town's bordello workers have almost always been grouped into one sensationalized category and their job descriptions cloaked behind other more socially accepted trades such as a milliner or housekeeper, while Hill's Ferry's wheat threshers have been presented in published accounts primarily through violent and drunken outbursts reported in the local newspapers of the day. These three groups, comprising significant numbers in the overall population, are important to Hill's Ferry's history and provide context to the labor and social life of the community, a community through which Ah Gun herself lived and worked.

Following this introduction is a literature review outlining my methodological approach.

I will then provide a summary of highlights of Hill's Ferry's rich history, from its early beginning in the 1850s during the first California Gold Rush onto California's second "gold rush" of the international wheat industry in the 1860s and 1870s, through the zenith of the town's population growth in the 1870s, to its relatively quick demise in the late 1880s. Once the most populous town in its county of Stanislaus, I will introduce some of the dynamic cast of actors, from powerful business owners, to laborers, recent immigrants, and bordello workers. This study ultimately attempts to illuminate the archival silences of those relegated to the periphery of history while simultaneously revealing how power structures have played a role

in determining the histories that are remembered versus those that have been forgotten or misrepresented. At the center of this study is Ah Gun, brought to Hill's Ferry as a young, enslaved woman in 1872.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Archival Silence as a Theoretical Approach

The following literature review discusses previous studies on archival silences. Among the featured studies, Jeanette Bastian has focused on recovering history through alternate and non-traditional archival expressions such as landscapes, a concept that is relevant to this study of Hill's Ferry and the complete transformation of its original location. Another study seeks to contextualize the past through an examination of known power structures and relationships, especially when existing histories of communities and individuals are unknown, incomplete, misrepresented, or unavailable. Yet another study argues for the concerted effort to collect the archives of the marginalized and less powerful in order to achieve social justice. I argue that consideration of these previous studies and the authors' theoretical approaches to archival silence can provide a methodological framework and furthermore a justification towards revealing hidden, misrepresented, and minimized contributions of this forgotten town and its marginalized communities.

The Archival Turn and Alternate Expressions of Archival Evidence

It was during the 19th century, and under the far-reaching influence of German historian Leopold von Ranke, that archival empirical evidence became foundational to historical research and writing (Bastian, 2016, p. 3). During the mid-20th century, however, scholars begin to reevaluate the direct relationship between archival evidence and historical scholarship, and by the late 20th century we see a greater emphasis on academic inquiry and what archival scholar Jeanette A. Bastian describes as the 'archival turn' where the archive may be approached in a variety of ways and perspectives, and through a variety of disciplines (p. 7). In addition to first-hand accounts, narratives, and the work of previous historians, there is inquiry into whether alternate forms of archival evidence may be used in the historical process. In Bastian's reconsideration of what may qualify as archival evidence, supported by work of other scholars like philosopher Jacques Derrida and film theorist Eric Smoodin, she considers the use of non-traditional expressions in addition to the traditional forms of historical sources and empirical research. Examples of non-traditional expressions of research include memory, art, performance, landscapes, and other forms. It is posited that alternate expressions of evidence may result in a more contextualized and illuminated archive, a situation that provides clarity when the narrative account is unavailable or incomplete (p. 7).

Bastian's argument toward using alternate expressions is highly relevant to this study of Hill's Ferry. The site of the erased town, for example, the actual landscape, is a provocative materialist expression, one that is crucial to understanding what has been lost. Knowing that all traces of the town have been retaken by nature, and that the site is also inaccessible due to private ownership, is an aspect of this town's history that must be considered alongside all the other archival and historical evidence. The inaccessibility and complete metamorphosis of land that has gone back to nature is itself a provocative expression and a powerful metaphor for the archival silence of this forgotten town and community (figures 4 and 5).

International Journal of History Research
ISSN: 2959-4499 (Online)
Vol 4, Issue 2, No.6, pp 58 - 76, 2024

www.iprjb.org

Figure 4: Hill's Ferry, Author's Photo, 2024.

Figure 5: Hill's Ferry with View across the San Joaquin River, Author's Photo, 2024.

Countering Silences by Examining Circumstances

Literature on archival silence also stresses the dynamics of relationships and power structures. Author D.A. Hardy discusses the need to investigate power structures when evidence is missing from the archive. She provides the example of a prominent Chicago art educator and institution-builder, Dr. Margaret Burroughs. Hardy was trying to locate details regarding Burrough's experience as a former high school art teacher during her time at DuSable High School, a school serving generations of African American students that has since closed due to lack of funding (2021). The author found inconsistencies in the archival records while attempting to understand what would seem to be a straightforward evidentiary question: during what years did Burroughs teach at the high school? Because of the gaps in the archival record, the author refocused her research from a narrative account instead to an approach focused on relationships and power structures that may have affected the archival record of the teacher and marginalized communities in which she taught. In other words, when the narrative account is unclear or unavailable, Hardy's approach promotes examining the *circumstances* through which research challenges have occurred. What relationships and power structures are present, and what do they say about what is known, but also about what is not known about the subject? This critical analysis of what is missing may ultimately reveal ways in which the archive has been silenced. Such an approach presents a promising strategy for responding to, and at the very least, recognizing those very silences.

To exemplify Hardy's approach, I focus on the former citizen of Hill's Ferry placed at the center of this study, the enslaved, trafficked Chinese woman known as Ah Gun. By all accounts she came to Hill's Ferry as the property of another individual, though she would eventually acquire her freedom and live out her days partly in Hill's Ferry, and later Newman, passing in 1928. Applying Hardy's approach, I ask what power structures and relationships affected Ah Gun? What is known and not known about her life, and what were the circumstances, or the context, through which the research challenges of her life have occurred?

Lastly, what are some of the possible misinterpretations of her life?

Archives and Social Justice

Archival educator and historian, Ralph Jimerson, discusses the ways in which North American archives have supported affluent and socially powerful individuals through biased and narrow recordkeeping practices (2009). Drawing upon archival theory, as well as literary giants such as authors George Orwell, Ralph Ellison, and others, and referencing archivists Terry Cook and Verne Harris, Jimerson argues that archivists should not be passive recordkeepers, that decisions of what is collected and how archives are described can have great impact and can serve social justice objectives. Jimerson directly references the earlier work of historian Howard Zinn, who in 1970 stated that archivists should "compile a whole new world of documentary material about the lives, desires, and needs of ordinary people (2009, p. 219). Similarly, this study explores the lives of Hill's Ferry's marginalized citizens rather than focusing solely on the wealthy and powerful individuals for whom primary and secondary sources are more abundant.

Summary of Literature

The literature above supports an approach that considers alternate expressions of archival evidence, and which furthermore contextualizes the environment through which history occurred while also examining the power structures and institutional influences through which marginalized individuals lived and worked, arguing that these lesser-known histories are

important to collect and acknowledge, to give voice to, even if it's to understand that there was a voice that never had a chance to speak. Lastly, I question, how do these contextual aspects relate to the individual at the center of this study, Ah Gun? I argue that my chosen methodology for this study, based on the referenced literature above, can help to illuminate the past and, at the very least, acknowledge the challenges and ways in which the archive has been silenced.

Hill's Ferry, California: a Brief History

Hill's Ferry is an unincorporated community in California's Central Valley, located in a stunning landscape where the San Joaquin and Merced rivers converge. The geographic location of Hill's Ferry currently cannot even be identified as a ghost town, as most structures were either destroyed or moved from the original location to the nearby town of Newman starting in 1888 shortly after the railroad to Newman was completed in 1887 (figure 6). Furthermore, areas of Hills Ferry have been sold off as private parcels. This includes key features of the original town such as historic overgrown graves that can only be visited by gaining permission from current residents.

Figure 6: House-Moving. The image above shows 52 mules and a 100 horse- steam Holt tractor, circa 1888-1889. Latta (Frank F.) Collection: Skyfarming, box 69, folder 2, Huntington Library Manuscript Collections.

In 1872, the seminal naturalist, John Muir, described the long stretch of valley that bordered Hill's Ferry as an "ocean of flowers…one flower-bed nearly four hundred miles in length by thirty in width," describing the rich variety of wildflowers butting up against the town (1974, p. 769).

International Journal of History Research
ISSN: 2959-4499 (Online)
Vol 4, Issue 2, No.6, pp 58 - 76, 2024

www.iprjb.org

Figure 7: The port of Hill's Ferry, before 1888, preparing to ship wheat kept in warehouses between navigable months when the river was high enough for the riverboats. The San Joaquin: A River Betrayed, by Gene Rose, pg. 62.

Within this scenic location however a bustling port town in which crime was not monitored, and which resided along a popular path from the Pacheco Pass to the gold mines. Criminals and gangs committed many notorious murders in the area. Joaquin Murietta, for example, is documented as having visited the town on many occasions, and the accounts of shootings and stabbings gave Hill's Ferry the reputation as one of the most dangerous towns in California during the mid-to-latter part of the 19th century. Its first documented murders in fact occurred at the very beginning of the town's inception, when two individuals were sent from neighboring Modesto to set up a ferry in 1850. Purportedly both individuals were murdered and a large jar of money stolen. The criminals were never discovered (Elias, 1924).

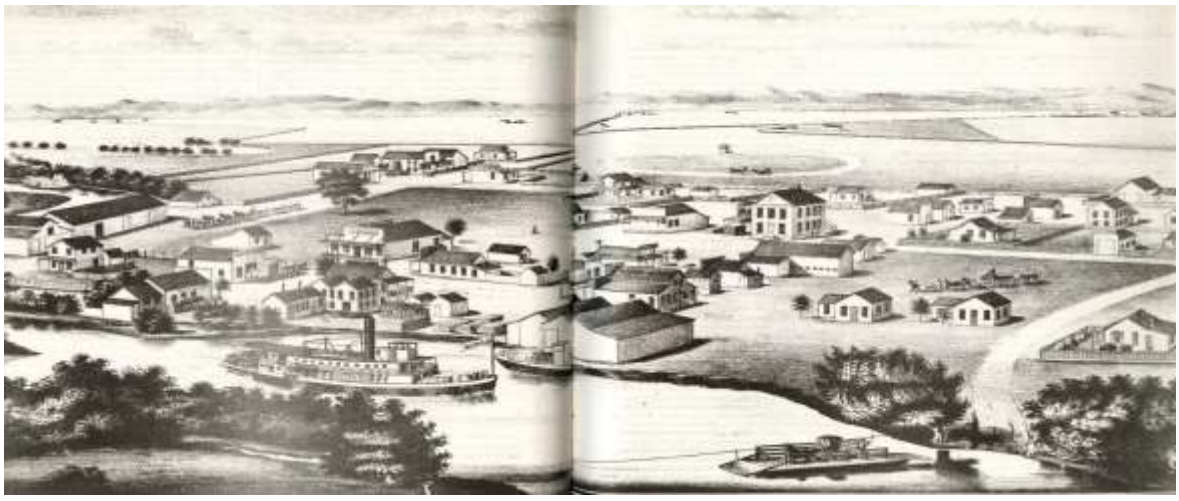


Figure 8: Illustration of Hill's Ferry, History of Stanislaus County, California, with Illustrations, 1881.

The illustration of Hill's Ferry shown above, also featured at the beginning of this paper, appeared in the 1881 *History of Stanislaus County*. A description of the town follows:

"The town consists of two hotels; one restaurant; seven saloons; one tinshop…; two blacksmith shops; one wagon shop; three livery stables; two warehouses; two apothecaries; two Justices

of the Peace, J.W. Newsome and J. P. Allen; one constable; one clock and watchmaker's shop; one lumber yard…; two barber shops; one photograph gallery; one shoemaker…; two notaries; one attorney-at-law…; one good school-house; and Masonic Hall (1974, p. 122)."

This description provides a sense of the lively commerce of the town, and the author goes on to describe the new Miller and Lux canal providing irrigation to the area. Hill's Ferry was a major stop for steamboats along the San Joaquin River. For decades steamboats transported both people, wheat, and other goods along the rivers in California. It's hard to imagine now that there was once a robust riverboat culture in this part of California. Ultimately, it was a combination of irrigation projects like the Miller and Lux canal, along with damming, that led to the reduction of the San Joaquin river's water level. Irrigation and damming would also incidentally negatively impact the river's surrounding ecosystems. Eventually steamer travel, like that illustrated in figures 7-9, became unsustainable. Added to this was the completion of railroad lines and a station in 1887. While Hill's Ferry would have seemed the likely location for the new railroad station, it was instead built over 3 miles away.

The location of the railroad station was strategically orchestrated by successful Hill's Ferry businessman, Simon Newman. He donated a large parcel of his land to the Southern Pacific railroad (Smith, 1980). Illustrating how the wealthy and powerful could change the fate of a town, more than any other factor it was the designation of the railroad station that initiated the sudden abandonment of Hill's Ferry circa 1888.

The following sections will discuss the three marginalized groups noted at the beginning of this study: The Chinese enclaves, wheat laborers, and bordello workers. I will end with a discussion of Ah Gun.

Chinese Enclaves of Hill's Ferry

There are significant gaps in the historical record of Chinese enclaves living in Hill's Ferry. There is evidence in census data and newspaper articles of the important role that Chinese had as farmers, laborers, and for entertainment such as festivals and fireworks.

However, there are no known first-hand accounts by Chinese settlers. Likewise, there are few references to Chinese enclaves in records created by white settlers. For example, I could find no reference throughout hundreds of letters in the *Hutchings-Newsom* collection to Chinese neighbors during the time the family was located in the Hill's Ferry area, roughly 1853-1888.

Though narrative histories may be unavailable or unknown, contributions of Chinese settlers through ingenuity in farming, culinary skills, festivals, fireworks, and overall, as a strong labor force, were significant. The Chinese enclaves of Hill's Ferry are documented as having first settled in the area during the early 1850s. Treatment of Chinese settlers during the California Gold Rush is rife with examples of racism and mistreatment, and anti-Chinese laws added to the difficulties for Chinese settlers. Early local histories of Hill's Ferry reflect this attitude of marginalization. For example, Chinese households were separated out from the general population data as evidenced by historian Solomon Philip Elias's 1880 account of Hill's Ferry. Elias quotes the July 1880 weekly news of the town as reported by John M. Newsom (then justice of the peace, and member of the Hutchings-Newsom family). Newsom reports that the town contains "20 residences, 19 Chinese houses, 2 very large stores…" (1924, p. 291). This segregation of the Chinese, which is also highlighted in the previously mentioned Hutchings-Newsom collection, is consistent throughout the latter part of the 19th century and later, both in Hill's Ferry and later in Newman. This echoes the broader attitudes and injustices that would extend through the long period of Chinese exclusion laws in California and nationally.

Chinese living in Hill's Ferry were forced to live on the periphery of town in two locations, one known as China Island and the other, China Ford. Though China Ford was documented above as having 19 residences in 1880, China Island, literally a small island that existed in the center of the San Joaquin River, remains a mystery regarding the number of individuals or residences that may have existed. Complicating matters has been the lack of any archaeological surveys. Furthermore, the area has experienced countless transformations over the decades due to floods and reengineering of the land.

Chinese settlers often took on the most grueling and difficult labor. For example, members of the Chinese enclave took on the difficult work of moving structures from Hill's Ferry to Newman in the late 1880s (figure 6). Many essential services and resources for the broader community, including laundry, agriculture, and food preparation, were industries in which members of the Chinese community flourished. The first restaurant in Newman was in fact started in 1904 by Chinese resident, Charlie Poy. This restaurant was very successful and would thrive through decades of the 20th century. So much so that one of the current staff at the Newman Museum, Mary Moore, now in her eighties, was given her first job in her teens at the restaurant by a protégé of Charlie Poy's. Interestingly, it was Mary's Chinese boss who taught her how to speak Portuguese. Mary's parents both came from Portugal to California. This example suggests a higher level of integration in Newman, albeit decades later, compared to the stark segregation of late 19th-century Hill's Ferry.

Close to one hundred Chinese citizens were documented in the move from Hill's Ferry to Newman around 1888 (Santos, 2004, p. 1454). Author Donna Crow discusses the integral role of Chinese in the construction of the new railroad prior to the move. As mentioned earlier, Chinese appeared to experience a greater level of integration following the move from Hill's Ferry to Newman. Crow describes the development of Newman's Chinatown, and the integral role of a Chinese New Year celebration, as well as thriving businesses such as the Ju Jug family Chinese laundry (1988, p. 621). There were once at least 6 buildings on the eastern side of town that comprised Newman's Chinatown. Though less marginalized than in Hill's Ferry, Chinese enclaves nonetheless were forced to live in a specific section of town generally away from the center. None of the buildings comprising this original Chinatown were preserved, unlike many of Newman's other structures (some of which were brought from Hill's Ferry), many of which survive to this day. The following example is telling.

In 1912 there was a very destructive fire in Newman's Chinatown which caused much damage, including the destruction of Ah Gun's small home. According to the local newspaper account, Gun was incredibly distraught and had to be carried out of her cottage. Insurance companies refused to provide coverage to this area of town, or quoted rates that were impossibly high, and to compound matters water mains did not extend to this part of town so that fighting a fire had to be done with chemicals ("Another blaze in Chinatown," 1912). This account shows how tenuous the existence of residents like Ah Gun and the broader Chinese community was. According to Gun's obituary in the *West Side Index* newspaper, she would reside in this area of town until 1928 when she was moved to a Modesto hospital close to her death ("Famous citizen passes", 1928). Thus, she was likely able to rebuild her cottage despite the challenges. In the obituary Ah Gun was described as a familiar presence in the community, "always cheerful, greeting everyone with a friendly grin" (1928). One can surmise from this account that there was a certain level of integration and broad community acceptance of Ah Gun. And thus her journey from an enslaved girl to a familiar member of the community indicates a resilience and personal journey that helps to contextualize her history against the stark label accompanying her portrait in the Newman Museum, a label that often accompanies her image in second-hand sources of Hill's Ferry and its Chinese

International Journal of History Research
ISSN: 2959-4499 (Online)
Vol 4, Issue 2, No.6, pp 58 - 76, 2024

www.iprjb.org

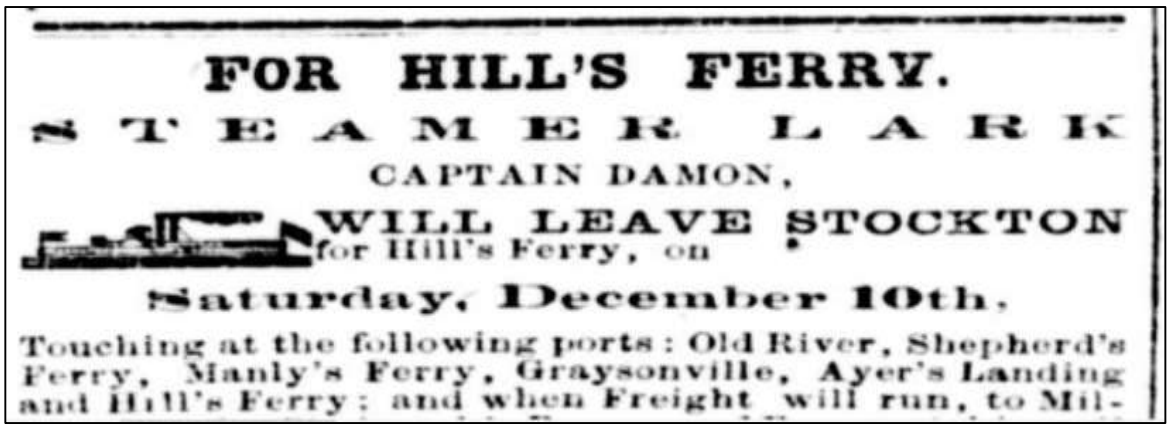
community.

Wheat Laborers and Hill's Ferry Social Life

In contrast to wheat industry laborers, much more is known about the successful farmers living in Hill's Ferry at the time. Among these powerful farmer-businessmen were

C.G. Hubner, who owned much of the land in town, the previously mentioned Simon Newman, namesake of the town to which most residents and many structures would eventually move in 1888, the previously mentioned John Newsom, who was a justice of the peace and would become the first county representative, and the Kahn brothers, owners of multiple wheat warehouses used for storing wheat during non-navigable river steamer months. Individuals like these who had wealth and influence stand out in secondary-source histories of Hill's Ferry (Brotherton, 1982; Elias, 1924; Tinkham, 1921). By contrast, very little is known about the laborers who worked for the landowners. The exception was anyone involved in victimization or perpetration of crime, as this type of sensational content would often make the newspapers including the individual's name and occupation.

Hill's Ferry' wheat farms and its port were crucial to the expansion of the wheat industry in California and internationally. Though the industry's laborers, undeniably its hardest workers, were oftentimes minimized or even caricaturized in historical accounts. With the decline of the Gold Rush in the 1850s followed the second "gold rush" industry of wheat that was grown throughout California and especially in heart of the Central Valley in which Hill's Ferry resided. The industry would also find an international market, as the Franco-Prussian war (1870-1871) impacted a desperate need for wheat in Europe, and it was during the 1870s that California began to export large amounts of wheat to England and Australia (Street, 1988, p. 577). Storage warehouses, a few of which are visible in the 1881 illustration, were built for the vast amount of harvested wheat in Hill's Ferry, as the steamboats could only navigate the San Joaquin River six months of the year during the winter and spring. This shortened season of navigable waters required storage of the grain until it could be transported via the river (Magliari, 1989, p. 456). Steamboats drawing 2 feet of water or less could safely make the journey to Hill's Ferry and other towns along the route (figure 9).


FOR HILL'S FERRY.

STEAMER LARK

CAPTAIN DAMON,

WILL LEAVE STOCKTON for Hill's Ferry, on

Saturday, December 10th.

Touching at the following ports: Old River, Shepherd's Ferry, Manly's Ferry, Graysonville, Ayer's Landing and Hill's Ferry; and when Freight will run, to Mil-

Figure 9: Advertisement for Steamboat between Stockton and Hill's Ferry, Stockton Daily Independent, December 9, 1864.

The industry was enhanced by many innovations in wheat harvesting and processing during this period. Farm machines like the 24-horse, one-man header and thresher known as the "Centennial Harvester" advanced production and harvesting output. Even with these

International Journal of History Research
ISSN: 2959-4499 (Online)
Vol 4, Issue 2, No.6, pp 58 - 76, 2024

www.iprjb.org

advancements, wheat threshing was still grueling, dangerous work. The machinery of the time was unforgiving, and one misstep could result in the loss of a limb or death. Laborers working in this industry were literally putting "life and limb" on the line.

Such physically demanding work necessitated a way to relax during precious free time. Drinking was a favorite pastime in the town. Hill's Ferry even had its own brand of alcoholic beverages locally fermented and bottled, "Hell's Fury Smooth Stuff," and "Sheepherder's

Delight." Sheep herding was another popular line of work in Hill's Ferry and its environs, eventually becoming the dominant occupation as river levels began to decline in the 1870s due to irrigation and damming. Historical accounts note that groups of men would frequent the town's saloons and bordellos on their one day off, usually Saturday. On Sunday morning, carts would purportedly pick up these individuals, many of whom were sleeping off the effects of alcohol, and transport workers back to their respective farms. Historian Frank Latta posed the idea that the home-grown alcohol, created from the river water, might have had some unknown ingredient that led to reported debauchery and violence in the town ("Move from Hill's Ferry," 1977). Latta claims that there was nothing close to the criminal element in the neighboring town of Newman to which many of the Hill's Ferry residents moved to circa 1888. Whether the river water had anything to do with the remarkable number of violent events and deaths is unknown.

The customers of saloons and bordellos were generally younger itinerant men who were part of the vital farm labor in Hill's Ferry. Catherine Holder Spude discusses the typical work and social life of a laborer in the American West, and the strong social community found in both the saloons and bordellos, the latter of which were sometimes referred to as "sporting houses." As Spude points out, the saloons and bordellos provided a sense of community, especially alcohol and conversation, to relatively young, single, laborers who were often working far away from home (2005).

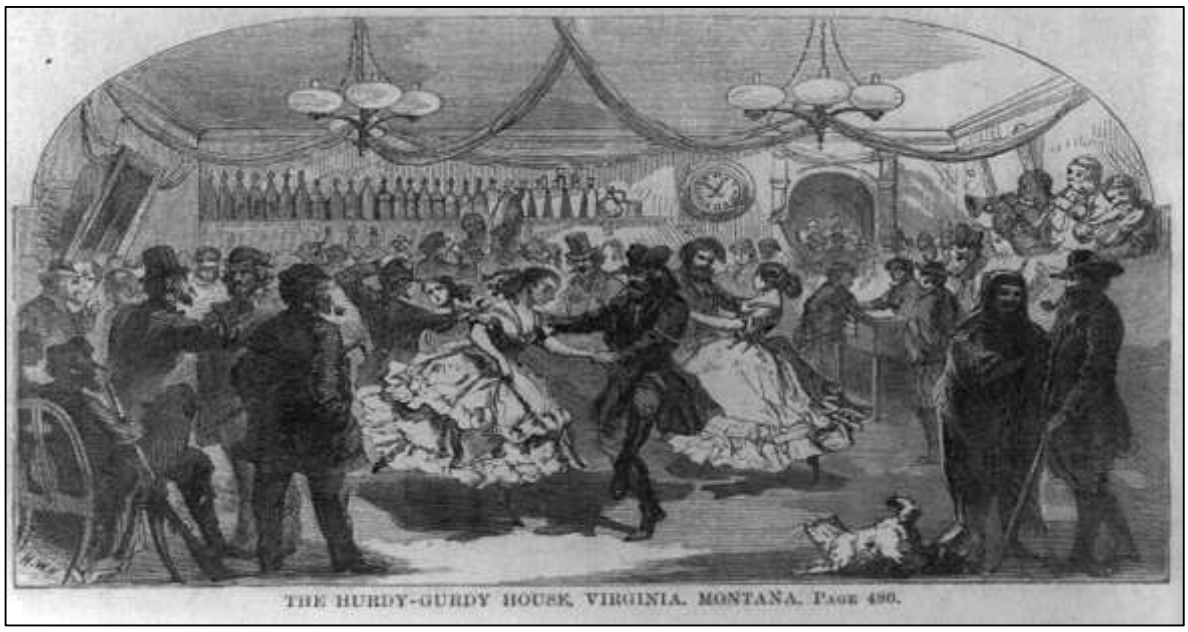


Figure 10: Illustration of Hurdy Gurdy House, Montana, Virginia. Richardson, Albert Deane. Beyond the Mississippi, from the Great River to the Great Ocean: Life and Adventure on the Prairies, Mountains, and Pacific Coast. Hartford, Conn: American Pub. Co., 1867.

A comprehensive history of the wheat industry and the lives of laborers working in this industry throughout the 19th and 20th centuries is covered by Richard Steven Street in his monumental history of California farmworkers, *Beasts of the Field : A Narrative History of California Farm Workers, 1769-1913.* In this history Hill's Ferry is noted for its sordid reputation for criminal behavior, drunken debauchery, and the large number of sex workers in the bordellos and saloons (2004, p. 215). Street points out that the owners of these establishments were sometimes involved in murders but often escaped punishment due to the town's general lawlessness and the owners' powerful place in the community. Drawing upon the research of historian Frank Latta, Street discusses the popularity of saloons and sporting house establishments in Hill's Ferry, including establishments like the Oasis, the Pink Lady, and a purported bordello known as Ah Gun's (p. 215). However, I was unable to find any evidence in the archives consulted that Ah Gun was a prostitute or that she was the proprietor of a bordello.

Sex Work and Human Trafficking in Hill's Ferry

Because of how prostitution may be sensationalized or demonized in histories of the American West, there is an inherent marginalization of sex workers. Recently however more focus has been paid to the individuals working in this industry. Catherine Holder Spude contends that the roles, relationships, and functions of men and women's work during this period must be reevaluated in order to fully understand how these attributes have evolved through time (2005, p. 89). Using both archaeological techniques and an anthropological perspective, the author contends that new light can be shed on working class individuals from the 19th century for whom there is no written record (p. 89).

The lives of sex workers were known to be incredibly harsh, though evidence shows that a number of sex workers entered the profession willingly, sometimes travelling long distances to set up in mining towns. The average career of a sex worker in the American West during the mid-to-late 19th century is estimated to have been about 6 years, and many prostitutes died of disease, alcohol addiction, drug addiction, and sometimes even suicide (Agnew). Though there are accounts of prostitutes who would transition to different work, later marry and/or have families. Very little is known about the sex workers in Hill's Ferry, even though their documented numbers made up a significant percentage of the overall population.

Hill's Ferry's bordellos were well known far and wide outside of the town, especially the previously mentioned Oasis and Pink Lady establishments. The Oasis even had its prominent place in the Hills Ferry illustration of 1881 (figures 7 and 11). The owners and managers of these establishments were well known in the community, especially when either directly or indirectly involved in violence that made it into the newspapers. These establishments were at their busiest during the wheat harvest months, roughly May to September. There were purportedly as many as 5 brothels in Hill's Ferry, and the Oasis was documented to have between 36 and 50 prostitutes. Below is a detail showing the Oasis from the 1881 illustration of Hill's Ferry. On the right of this illustration is a fenced in area in which the silhouettes of numerous revelers are discernable.

International Journal of History Research
ISSN: 2959-4499 (Online)
Vol 4, Issue 2, No.6, pp 58 - 76, 2024

www.iprjb.org

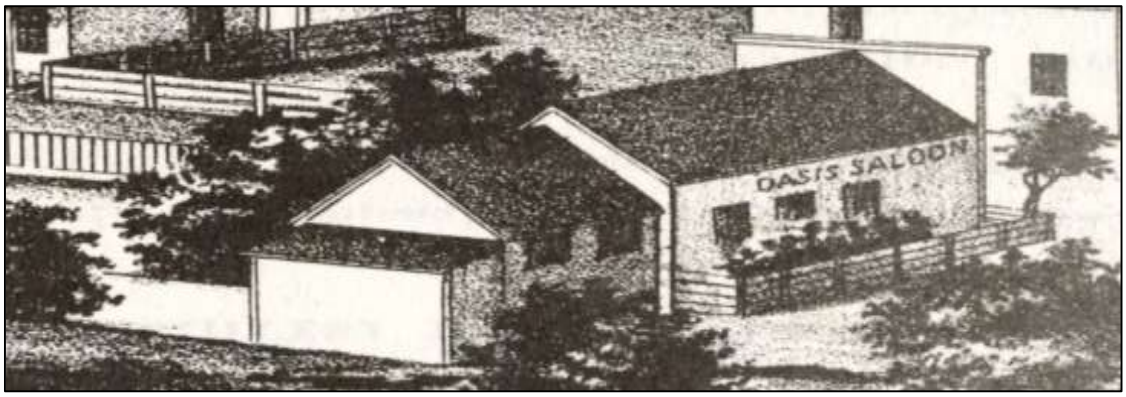


Figure 11: Detail of Hill's Ferry, History of Stanislaus County, California, with Illustrations, 1881.

Following is a 1924 secondary-source account of Hill's Ferry by historian Solomon Philip Elias:

"The saloons were under no control. The Oasis was one of the most disreputable. It was owned by a man named Gardner who was well known as a hard character. It was the favorite dancehall of the town during the harvest from May to September. It contained 50 women during the height of its career" (p. 44). Elias's statistics are remarkable. Hill's Ferry's largest documented population was between 250-500. Thus 50 individuals working at a single establishment during this time is a large number relative to the overall population. The Oasis was not the only bordello in town and thus the number of sex workers was likely much higher.

Ah Gun (Brought to Hill's Ferry in 1872; Died in Newman in 1928)

Oftentimes, prostitution was not a choice, and young women were trafficked into this line of work. Ah Gun is "documented" in the Newman Museum's corresponding photograph caption as having been won in a poker game and brought to Hill's Ferry in 1872. Gun was likely the victim of human trafficking from China to California. The Hip Yee Tong gang in San Francisco was known to traffic young girls sold by, and sometimes stolen from, their families to the gangs. It is an incredibly dark period in history that required complicit criminals who would transport girls and young women to individuals in the United States for a price. Up to 6000 Chinese women were trafficked from China to the United States between 1852 and 1873 (Street, p. 301). One well-known example is found in the life of Lalu Nathoy (1853-1933), better known as Polly Bemis, a Chinese American woman whose family sold her for a bag of seeds during a period of extreme drought and starvation in northern China. Bemis was sold to a saloon manager in the Idaho territory. By some accounts she was a dancehall hostess, and by others she was a concubine. She eventually married Charlie Bemis, a bar owner and musician who was known to have protected her from the abuse of customers and the saloon owner to whom she was sold. Similar to Ah Gun, it was rumored that Polly Bemis was won in a poker game, though she herself disputed this fact.

According to Richard Steven Street, it was rumored that Ah Gun had poisoned her captor in 1893 and then ran a bordello in Hill's Ferry, and later in Newman, that catered to a Chinese clientele (p. 301). Street's research is based on *Frank Latta's Skyfarming collection* at the Huntington Library. Though I reviewed files with Ah Gun's name from the Skyfarming collection, I was unable to verify this information. Local Newman historian, Bill Sherman, rejects the claim that Ah Gun was a bordello owner. Sherman claims that though Ah Gun lived

International Journal of History Research
ISSN: 2959-4499 (Online)
Vol 4, Issue 2, No.6, pp 58 - 76, 2024

www.iprjb.org

in Hill's Ferry, and later in the area of Newman in which prostitution existed (the same area in which Chinese citizens were forced to live), she was likely not associated with prostitution itself ("Museum Records Chinese Efforts in Early Newman," 1976).

Given these conflicting accounts, outside of the 1872 photograph (figure 12), newspaper articles have provided the strongest accounts of Ah Gun's life, but even here her life is sparsely documented up to her death in 1928 in nearby Modesto. By some accounts, she is thought to have lived to 95 years. In her obituary she is described as a friendly individual who for several decades, or "as long as anyone can remember," was a well-known figure in Hill's Ferry and later Newman ("Famous Citizen Passes Quietly," 1928). There is no mention of bordellos or prostitution in her obituary. She is described as having no extended family, no children, spouse, or partner. Much of her life remains a mystery, though her photograph is one of the most widely reproduced artifacts from Hill's Ferry. There is no provenance for her photograph excepting that, as previously noted, it was donated by bartender Charles Huber.

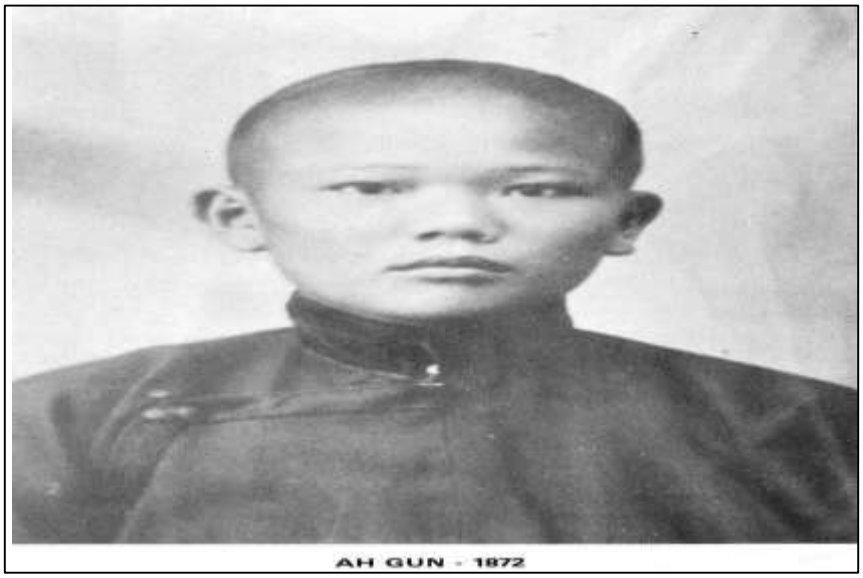


Figure 12: Photograph of Ah Gun, Newman City Museum, Newman, California.

Ah Gun died in a pauper's grave in Modesto in 1928, and though she may have been a fond individual in the community, it's tragic to think that no one could have come forward to assist with payment of her funeral services. Her portrait is still prominently displayed in the Newman Museum alongside the caption of having been won in a poker game.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

The archives of marginalized individuals are often silent. Their records were either never created, never collected and preserved, or are misrepresented in what remains of the archival record. However, the stories of these communities illuminate the vibrancy of lost history, and in this study, a lost town. Furthermore, by discussing existing theories of archival silence combined with known historical evidence of Hill's Ferry, the circumstances through which marginalized communities of this town lived are better understood, recognized, and remembered. These marginalized communities include Chinese enclaves, wheat laborers, and workers in the bordellos and saloons, all of which were communities with which Ah Gun likely lived her life.

It's as though the town that disappeared because of redirected water and the birth of the railroad set forth ghosts that linger on the periphery, ghosts that long to tell their stories in order to redress the past.

What can Ah Gun's enigmatic and tragically captioned photograph from the 1870s tell us about the past, about the subject's life and the communities in which she resided? I believe that this photograph whispers to us that there are bridges that have yet to be built between available historical evidence and poetic justice.

Recommendations for Further Research

This paper has presented evidence that both challenges and illuminates aspects of available sources in an effort to reveal a more contextualized history of Hill's Ferry, identified marginalized groups within the community, and one of its former residents known as Ah Gun.

This approach furthermore provides a framework for future investigations. Hill's Ferry is not the only ghost town with its origins in the Gold Rush, and Ah Gun was tragically one of many individuals trafficked from China to the United States from the 1850s to 1870s. Likewise Chinese communities, wheat laborers, and bordello workers are among some of the most marginalized in this period of California's history. Thus, the methodological approach is one that may inform future investigations into the histories of marginalized individuals and disappeared towns that comprise the larger history of the American West and especially California during the mid-to-late 19th century. By looking at alternate expressions of history, by examining the circumstances through which archival silences have occurred, and by making a concerted effort to collect the archives of everyday people, a more true and complete historical record may be uncovered.

REFERENCES

Agnew, J. (2008). *Brides of the Multitude : Prostitution in the Old West / by Jeremy Agnew.* (1st ed.). Western Reflections Pub. Co.

Another Blaze in Chinatown. (1912, December 17).*West Side Index*.

Bastian, J. A. (2016). Moving the margins to the middle: reconciling 'the archive' with the archives. In F. Foscarini, H. MacNeil, B. Mak, & G. Oliver (Eds.), *Engaging with records and archives: Histories and theories* (1st ed.). Facet Publishing.

Brotherton, I.N. (1982). *Annals of Stanislaus County.Volume 1, River towns and ferries/ by I.N. "Jack Brotherton*. Western Tanager Press.

Crow, D. (1988). West side Chinatown generated excitement and variety. *Stanislaus Stepping Stones*, 12(2), 621.

Elias, S.P. (1924). *Stories of Stanislaus; a Collection of Stories on the History and Achievements of Stanislaus County, by Sol. P. Elias.*

Famous Citizen Passes Quietly. (1928, October 26).*West Side Index*.

Hardy, D. A. (2021). Archival silence as a learning opportunity. *Curriculum and Teaching Dialogue* 23(1–2), 241–244.

Gibson, O. (1877). *Chinese in America.* Hitchcock & Walden.

Jimerson, R. C. (2009). *Archives Power: Memory, Accountability, and Social Justice.* Society of American Archivists.

Latta details move from Hills Ferry. (1977, September 1). *West Side Index*.

Latta, F. (1802-1982). Skyfarming collection. Five decades of research and history regarding the development of California's San Joaquin Valley and Miller & Lux, in particular dry farming known as skyfarming. Huntington Library, Manuscript Collections.

Magliari, M. (1989). Populism, Steamboats, and the Octopus: Transportation Rates and

Monopoly in California's Wheat Regions, 1890-1896. *Pacific Historical Review*, 58(4), 449–469.

Museum Records Chinese Efforts in Early Newman. (1976, April 22). *West Side Index.*

Muir, J. (1974). *Rambles of a Botanist among the Plants and Climates of California / John Muir; introduction by William F. Kimes.* Dawson's Book Shop.

Rose, G. (1992). *San Joaquin : A River Betrayed / by Gene Rose.* Linrose Pub. Company.

Santos, B. (2004). Chinese in Stanislaus County. *Stanislaus Stepping Stones*, 28(4), 1454.

Smith, B (1980, July 24). Raucous wide-open atmosphere earmarked Hill's Ferry's early days. *West Side Index*.

Spude, C.H. (2005). Brothels and Saloons: An Archaeology of Gender in the American West. *Historical Archaeology*, 39(1), 89–106.

Street, R.S. (2004). *Beasts of the Field : A Narrative History of California Farm Workers, 1769-1913 / Richard Steven Street.* Stanford University Press.

Street, R.S. (1998). Tattered Shirts and Ragged Pants: Accommodation, Protest, and the Coarse Culture of California Wheat Harvesters and Threshers, 1866-1900. *Pacific Historical Review*, 67(4), 573–608.

Tinkham, G. H. (1921). *History of Stanislaus County California with Biographical Sketches*. Historic Record Company.