

## A Short, Short, Story of Nevada's Missing Mexicans

**M**ining is a high-value activity, able to induce tremendous change to a landscape. An oft-seen bumper sticker archly declaims "if it's not grown, it's mined," and in a primer on primary production, that has more than passing truth (Goin and Raymond 2004). Historically, the successful placer miner searching out gold or silver recoverable from stream-beds or relatively accessible ore-veins worked light and fast. Mining was a remarkably portable activity, and its products a perfect form of wealth toted on your person. Unlike the animated hordes of mineral-seekers who spilled from California to Nevada in the 1860s, the Spanish-speaking miners of central and southern Nevada were unobtrusive and went about their business quietly from the late 1700s through the mid-1800s. But in the literature, they don't exist.

That Mexicans have been overlooked as the first non-indigenous citizens of Nevada is unsurprising; the evidence is in hints, hidden in canyons best reached on foot or horseback, and in discrepancies of Census and newspaper records unfamiliar to most researchers. If the annals of the West contain endless legends about Mexican mines, reliable information is rare as thumb-wide gold seams. Any written

records of early Mexican activity that survive languish in as-yet untapped Mexican or Spanish archives.

Working thick deposits of sand and gravel washed from the mountains or taking quartz gold from the twisted strata of the western Great Basin, mining took place in geologically complex country where the Furnace Creek Fault slashes northwest from Death Valley. A few hand-hewn mining timbers, shafts, and ore refining *arrastras*, undated and undocumented, is all the physical evidence of Mexican activity that survives (Figure 1). We do know that the *patio* refining

nized workable ore, and were accustomed to arid land mineralogy and landforms.

Anglos credited Mexican miners with locating claims that could be easily worked without moving much overburden, so old Mexican placer and quartz prospects were dug out, retasked, and any evidence of original miners buried under the rubble of a new shaft or glory hole. Not everything disappeared, though, and in isolated and largely unexplored mountains of Nevada are traces of Mexican mine workings that have undergone little of the detailed scrutiny needed to unearth traces of mining in hidden canyons impossibly

overgrown with willows, aspen groves, and rose bushes.

Not all the Mexican residents mined. Tax assessors' rolls for Esmeralda County, Nevada, in 1868 show four men with tracts of land on the alluvial aprons east of the White Mountains. Most land holdings were small, barely more than a few acres around an adobe or shack (Figure 2), sufficient to provide a miner or subsistence farmer with a modest home. But four tracts of land in Fish Lake

Valley were large, their tax assessments paid by Juan Gutiarras, José María Para, Reneficio Angular (probably Aguilar; all



*Figure 1: This wheel from an arrastra, built in the Spanish-Mexican technique, was turned with water diverted from a creek along the California-Nevada border, and likely hasn't been seen by more than a couple of dozen hearty bikers in the last fifty years. Made from mountain mahogany and bristlecone pine, it survives and raises questions: Who built it, and why don't we know their history?*

process, using quicksilver, salt, and ore ground by a mix of water and animal power, was a Spanish-Mexican adaptation from Arab origins. The terrain of Nevada was promising; Hispanic miners recog-

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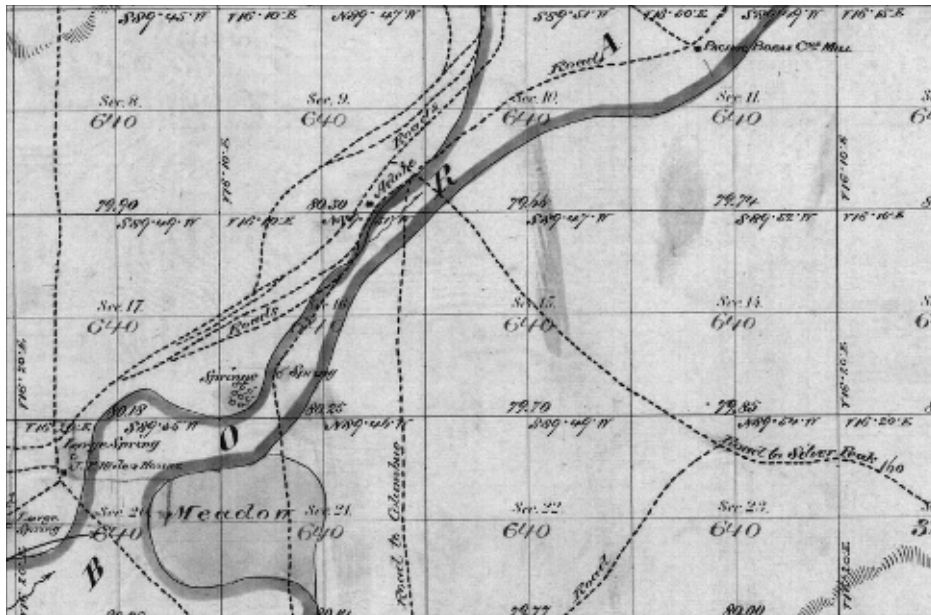


Figure 2: From an 1867 plat map (T1S, R36E, Mt. Diablo Baseline & Meridian) of Fish Lake Valley, Nevada, this excerpt identifies meadows and springs, the Pacific Borax Mill, rigorous section lines, and in the upper-center, one of the adobe buildings that housed early Hispanic residents. They were significant landowners – but disappeared from land titles by 1881.

spelling is straight from the manuscript rolls), and Ignacio Sibrián. Three of them owned 2,120 acres of land, not including the unlisted acreage of Para. Exactly what they were doing is hard to guess, because of a gap in the records; the next surviving tax roll came thirteen years later, and by then not one of those four men is listed as a Fish Lake Valley landowner.

What constitutes a "record" of human presence (Corner & MacLean 1996; Berger 2002; Burtynsky 2007)? Miners were doers, not "writers." If there's a single cloying weakness in historical geography, it's a general acceptance of paper sources as offering the gold standard of historical evidence (Goin & Starrs 2005). In the view of historians whose obeisances are

toward the written word, Mexican mining could be said not to exist; 150 years later, there is still no scholarly account of the earliest Great Basin mining, which made Nevada an Intermountain Mexico decades before Anglo arrivals started harvesting the land's mineralogical fruits. Maybe we should do better, and accept sources on the landscape as definitive, too – or at least as suggestive of a past we could do well to acknowledge. ■

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## Geographic Centers

The Department of Geography at the University of Delaware is now offering a PhD in Geography for the first time in its history, extending Delaware's traditional focus in climatology to encompass all areas of physical geography and geographic methods. Three faculty acquisitions in recent years helped transform the Delaware department into a broader program. Delaware's new PhD in Geography is organized into two concentrations: Climatology and Land-Surface Processes.

Both require mathematics and computational skills and a thesis-based master's degree for entry. More on the program is available at [www.udel.edu/geography](http://www.udel.edu/geography). Information about applying to the University of Delaware is available at <http://admissions.udel.edu>.

Temple University will offer a new PhD in Urban Studies beginning in the fall of 2009, as well as a new master's degree in Geography & Urban Studies. Applications for fall admission must

be received by January 15, 2009. The Department of Geography & Urban Studies at Temple University is now also home to the BA in environmental studies. For more on this growing geographic center, visit [www.temple.edu/gus](http://www.temple.edu/gus). Information about applying to Temple University, including an on-line application, is accessible at the admissions section of the Graduate School website at [www.temple.edu/grad](http://www.temple.edu/grad). ■