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Lost Laborers in Colonial California: Native Americans and the Archaeology of Rancho Petaluma

Stephen W. Silliman. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2004; 253 pages, 4 maps, 24 figures, 12 tables, \$39.95 (cloth).

Reviewed by

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Two worthy volumes are presently calling out to both archaeologists and historians to reconsider – or even consider for the first time – the life of Native Americans within the context of rancho and mission settings. Silliman applies data from Rancho Petaluma, while Lightfoot (2005) focuses on a comparison between interaction at the missions and at Fort Ross. Both address the questions of culture contact within the different systems called colonialism.

The vast Rancho Petaluma, comprising some 270 square km., was owned by Mariano G. Vallejo from 1834 to 1857; although it was reduced in size and productivity after 1848, it was one of the largest ranchos in Alta California, employed hundreds if not thousands of Coast Miwok, Southern Patwin, Southern Pomo, and Wappo language speakers, and produced livestock, agricultural products, and manufactured goods for both its own needs and for trade. Vallejo was one of the most powerful men in the economic and political life of northern California during the Mexican period. His operation produced wheat for British ships in San Francisco Bay and the nearby Russian colony, and manufactured blankets, shoes, candles, and other goods for trade above the rancho's own needs.

In his introductory chapter (p. 3), Silliman defines colonial worlds as “rife with power and inequality, and they can structure and control participants within them. This is the realm of domination, oppression, and subjugation....” The author's frequent use of words such as slaves, peons, oppressed, feudal, violence, social control and the like suggests that the analysis may be preconditioned by this conviction, although he acknowledges that individuals can and often did work the system, and resist or subvert the structures of

colonialism. He recognizes the divergence in contemporary historical accounts, but seems to denigrate those that did say a kind word about a rancho or about Native American conditions (e.g., that Vallejo treated his employees kindly, paid them in silver, and did not interfere with traditional religious observances).

After the introductory chapter, Silliman presents an overview of California ranchos and Indian life and labor drawn from historical records and from a sample of excavated sites; almost all are in southern California, are small in size, and functioned at the economic level of self-sufficiency. Since I am more than slightly acquainted with most of those he names, I fully agree that archaeology suffers when an investigation is arbitrarily divided between historical and prehistoric teams, and when CRM studies are limited to an area of direct impact.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on Rancho Petaluma, the former drawing from archival sources, and the latter reviewing the archaeology. It is relevant that the rancho was greatly reduced in 1848, when Mexico relinquished California in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. After renting out the property between 1850 and 1854, Vallejo at first sold half of what remained, and then sold the balance in 1857. The last archival reference to Native Americans on the rancho was in 1847, but at least some would have remained on or nearby. To supplement history and ethnography, and weigh the contradictory accounts of observers, Silliman turns to archaeology as the primary source for the particulars of daily life and the link between material culture and identity.

Discounting the early efforts of Treganza in 1958, Clemmer in 1961, and Gebhardt in 1962 because their work was outside of the main adobe complex, and his own 1999 study inside the adobe because it yielded little information about the structure's use or Native workers, Silliman used geophysical, aerial, and shovel-test methods to locate an area he thought likely to yield evidence of Native American habitation. Two areas were selected. Area A, on the eastern bank of Adobe Creek, contained a dense habitation deposit and was the site of Feature A, a pit filled with animal bones, charcoal, and metal. Area B was only several meters to the east, lacked the same abundance of surface artifacts, but yielded several remote sensing targets. These anomalies proved to be significant features. They included Feature B, a small pit with burned wood, rock and animal bone, ground stone, roof tile, and stone tool debris; Feature C,

a large shallow pit with burned and unburned animal bone, some articulated within a baked clay perimeter; Feature D, a large concentration of fire-cracked rock, faunal remains, and charcoal; Feature E, an extensive, amorphous, and diverse deposit of artifacts including stone tools, glass beads, other glass and metal objects, wild and domestic animal remains, and charred wood; and Feature F, a shallow basin with charcoal, fire-cracked rock, and few artifacts, lying partly under Feature E. The area sampled was about 80 m. from the nearest wall of the adobe. In all, 79.75 m² were excavated; the total volume amounted to 34.45 m³. There are detailed descriptions of the methods used and observations with tabulations of the artifacts and ecofacts by area.

Chapter 5 describes each of the artifact categories, and draws conclusions about how each class (such as ceramics, glass bottles, firearms, clothing parts, glass beads, etc.) would have been acquired and used by Native Americans. Rather than attributing the purported associations to resistance and/or accommodation, Silliman views the mixture of "traditional" and "introduced" items as reflecting complex choices not readily quantifiable into any measure of acculturation (p. 152). Food remains and subsistence practices are addressed similarly in Chapter 6.

Chapter 7 summarizes the author's views about how the archaeological record reflects the daily life of the Indian people "entangled" on the rancho, and argues against some of the historical accounts. Silliman asserts that the Native Americans trapped in a new context attempted to uphold cultural practices while forging new ones, and believes that it was the labor relationship that conditioned the complexities of mixed food ways and the inventories of glass, ceramic, stone, and metal artifacts. The argument goes that provisioned foods (i.e., domestic animals and cultivated plants) dominated the subsistence items, and that these and the historically manufactured goods came to the Indians as either recompense for labor or as salvaged discards. The lack of agricultural or stock-raising tools in the recovery is explained by location: the discards came from those who were employed in chores related to the nearby adobe, rather than in herding or farming. There are implications about status and gender, in that those working at the adobe would have greater access to the ceramics, glass bottles, and tableware, and that workers at the adobe opted to use such goods to demonstrate their rank and

newly forged identity. The sewing-related artifacts were thus the tools of women working for or at the adobe, while men chose to express their identity through hunting and flint knapping away from the presumed habitation site, or by acquiring agricultural or livestock diet items.

In Chapter 8, Silliman reflects on the approach taken, the contributions of Rancho Petaluma archaeology, and their implications for future studies about culture contact and colonialism. One unanswered issue pertains to the integrity of his assemblages for the uses to which they have been put; some of the collection is superficial sheet trash, most is highly fractured, stratigraphy is not discussed other than through frequent references to disturbance, Vallejo was no longer operating the rancho after 1850, and of the few datable artifacts, the Prosser buttons, round wire nails, certain cartridge casings, and other items almost certainly postdate the period being discussed. The only datable British earthenware fragment (1845-1851) was a surface find; this and the Chinese, shell edged, and other early ceramics could well be discards from during the rancho's transitions. Without evidence either documentary or archaeological, it is not beyond question that the site represents an intact Native American habitation.

The book does us all a service in reminding us to consider the life of Native Americans at the so-called "historical sites" such as ranchos. I would add the missions, farmsteads, the goldfields, forts, early cities, and wherever else indigenous cultures met with different cultural or social groups to this list. In so doing, one must acknowledge and evaluate the degree and directions of change that were already evolving in the native cultures, even before the missions brought about their own influences, and which in turn were further modified by life at the ranchos.

REFERENCE

- Lightfoot, Kent G.
2005 *Indians, Missionaries, and Merchants: The Legacy of Colonial Encounters on the California Frontiers*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

