

# Mirror of Our Conscience: Surviving Photographic Images of California Indians Produced Before 1860

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*Cameras began duplicating the world at that moment when the human landscape started to undergo a vertiginous rate of change: while an untold number of forms of biological and social life was being destroyed in a brief span of time . . .*

—Susan Sontag  
*On Photography*

**P**HOTOGRAPHS of the Indians of California taken prior to 1860 are exceedingly rare. They are so rare that as of this writing only one original daguerreotype of a California Indian is known (Plate 1). This surviving example was retrieved from a trash pile in an old house in Los Angeles (Harrington 1954: 195). Tentatively identified as a portrait of a Southern Maidu, this image may have been made as early as 1850 (Kroeber and Heizer 1968:9).

Only a handful of early western photographers appear to have considered California's native inhabitants worthy of their efforts. Thus, tragically, whole tribes of California Indians were vanishing or their cultures were being irretrievably altered without visual representation at the very time that the daguerreotype reached its zenith as the great recorder of social change.

Beyond the single daguerreotype men-

tioned, our knowledge of other pre-1860 photographic images of California Indians is largely limited to drawings, paintings, and engravings supposedly based on original photographs. Some copy reproductions of lost or otherwise misplaced daguerreotypes and ambrotypes are also known. Still other information must be drawn from the photographic literature of the era—brief mentions of the previous existence of early images.

The majority of such documentation centers around the works of daguerreans: Robert H. Vance (catalogue listings), John Wesley Jones (drawings based on daguerreotypes), and William Shew (engravings based on daguerreotypes). Doubtless, other early photographers also pictured the native population of California but their works are unknown at this time.

In a recent book, *Drawn From Life: California Indians in Pen and Brush* (Kroeber, Elsasser, and Heizer 1977), the authors gathered 322 examples of paintings, etchings, lithographs, and drawings which show the California Indians from the time of Sir Francis Drake until about 1880. This important and timely book displays the works of "artists, engravers, . . . engineers, newspaper men and travelers, many of them before the invention of the camera, all of them before the camera took over

as our mirror of 'reality' " (Kroeber, Elsasser, and Heizer 1977:7). A similar publication devoted to showing only actual photographs of California's natives during this same period in time would be slim indeed, with the vast preponderance of these images occurring after 1870.

It is important to remember that many of our early woodcut engravings, drawings, and paintings were based on photographs. This occurred largely because photomechanical reproduction of photographs was not readily available until the close of the nineteenth century. Such photographs could be used directly in the engravers' studio and/or maintained on file for later reference. Camera images also were thought to be more truthful recordings of nature than the more interpretive "drawings from nature." Moreover, the reduced scale of the early photographs aided the engraver because it was often similar in scale to publication needs, especially for newspapers of the period. Characteristically, these renderings retain the subject orientation and perspectives common to photography.

Nationally, the quantity of photographs which show the American Indian at an early period is much greater than those found in California. Overland travelers continually exaggerated the ferocity and savagery of the Plains Indians. Consequently, Easterners were most eager for first-hand accounts and visual representations of these Indians who lurked along the westward trail. In an effort to meet and satisfy this curiosity, many "sketch" artists produced works which were perceptive, even sympathetic in their portrayal of the Indian. Basically, however, their drawings and paintings could not match the reality of the photograph.

It seems likely that a number of daguerreotype portraits and views of American Indians were made even as early as the 1840's. Many of the more successful eastern studios had established branch galleries in the newly developing

towns which blossomed along the great western frontier. John Plumbe, Jr., for example, opened a gallery in Washington in 1841. Within a few years he had established additional galleries in twelve other cities, including Dubuque, Iowa, and St. Louis, Missouri. Both of these latter locations would have provided a golden opportunity to photograph visiting Indians (Watson 1951:5).

The earliest known daguerreotype of an American Indian which can be dated with any degree of accuracy is that of Chief Keokuk of the Sacs, made in 1847 a year before his death. At least eight different images seem to have been made. They are nearly identical except for minor details, such as the position of the hands, a slight turn of the head, etc. These images were made by Thomas M. Easterly, probably somewhere in Iowa, since he did not open his gallery in St. Louis until 1850 (Watson 1951:6). The Smithsonian Institution also credits Easterly with the production of this image, but suggests that the daguerreotype was taken in Liberty, Missouri (Scherer 1970:7).

By the 1850's, it was an established custom to display gallery portraits of important citizens, statesmen, theatrical personages, and other unique subjects, including Indians, in the daguerrean's waiting-room or parlor. In 1853, J.H. Fitzgibbon, another St. Louis photographer, exhibited several Indian portraits at the Exhibition of Works of Industry at the New York Crystal Palace (Watson 1951:6).<sup>1</sup>

Even more interesting were those images of Indians produced by various surveying and exploring expeditions which penetrated deeply into the West. Many of these government-sponsored expeditions employed artists and photographers as significant members of their entourage. A brief account of one such camera artist may prove insightful:

John Mix Stanley, celebrated painter of Indians, was one of the artists who explored the dual use of the camera and the brush. Stanley had become established in

Detroit in 1834 as a portrait painter. Interested in the frontier, he made several excursions into the wilderness at various times from 1838-1848; he travelled to New Mexico, California, Oregon, and the Columbia River. After the advent of the camera, Stanley became active as a daguerreian artist in Washington, D.C., during 1842. In the spring of 1853, following a tradition of artists, he accompanied a survey of a northern route to the Pacific, under the command of I.I. Stevens. Stanley's activity with his camera is mentioned by Stevens: "Mr. Stanley commenced taking daguerreotypes of the Indians with his apparatus. They are delighted and astonished to see their likenesses produced by the direct action of the sun. They worship the sun, and they consider Mr. Stanley was inspired by their divinity and he thus became in their eyes a great medicine man" [Rinhart and Rinhart 1967:71].

In March 1851, an interesting attempt to photograph the Indians of Oregon was thwarted by the theft of Oliver Jennings daguerrean equipment. "If it had not been for the loss of his apparatus, Jennings would have been the first person on record to photograph the Indians of the Pacific Northwest in their native surroundings" (Prior 1951:187-188). Jennings' own journal clearly documents his disappointment in his failure to achieve his goal:

*Wednesday, March 5, 1851* Having made an arrangement with Mr. Robt. Wilson Sutler, by Appointment, to the Military Post at Vancouver, to visit the Cayuse nation of Indians, for the purpose of taking Daguerreotypes, I closed my (daguerreotype) business at Oregon City, and took a final leave of the numerous friends & acquaintances, which I had the pleasure to find there.

*Monday, March 31, 1851* [The party is now prepared to leave] On going to the Quarter Master's storehouse, where I had left my instrument and fixtures when I first

came to Vancouver, I found that the house had been broken open and my Camera and Pictures, stolen . . . In consequence of the loss of my Camera I was obliged to abandon the idea of Taking Pictures of the Indians, and think only of getting home [Jennings 1851].

Meanwhile, the decade between 1849 and 1859 in California gave many photographers their first experience of working outdoors under primitive conditions. Even those studio photographers who had established themselves in San Francisco, found themselves accessible to dynamic outdoor motifs of all kinds. One of these daguerrean artists was Robert H. Vance, a specialist in views of towns, mines, and shipping scenes, as well as portraits. During his first sojourn to California, in the winter of 1850-51, Vance produced an incredible 300 daguerreotype views of the Golden State (Taft 1938:251-255; Rudisill 1971:139-142; Duncan 1971:14-19). Destined for exhibition in New York during the fall of 1851, these daguerreotypes were "of the largest size" and "comprised a complete panorama of the most interesting scenery in California" (*Photographic Art-Journal*, October 1851: 252-253). Of these, eleven images which depict California Indians<sup>2</sup> are annotated in Vance's *Catalogue of Daguerreotype Panoramic Views in California* (Vance 1851:6-7) which accompanied this series. Vance may have been the first person to actively photograph California Indians (Palmquist 1978:113-114).

While these images, *Views in California* by Vance, were subsequently lost (Taft 1938:255; Rudisill 1971:141-142; Duncan 1971:18), they were greatly praised for exhibiting all the realism and acute recording accuracy for which the daguerreotype was prized (*Photographic Art-Journal*, October 1851:253). In reviewing the completed showing, *Humphrey's Daguerreian Journal* marveled: "When we consider the disadvantages of operating in a tent or in the open air, and in a new country, we

are much surprised at such success; as a collection we have never seen its equal . . ." (*Daguerreian Journal*, November 1, 1851:371).

In the preface of his exhibition catalogue, Vance reaffirms the veracity of the daguerreotype: "These Views are no exaggerated and high-colored sketches, got up to produce effect, but are as every daguerreotype must be, the stereotyped impression of the real thing itself" (Vance 1851:4).

Lamentably, the loss of Vance's *Views in California* robs us of an opportunity to participate in the "thing itself." For instance, Vance's titles: "A group of Indian Chiefs on the Feather River," "View of Indians dressed for a dance," or even "Indian cooking" (Vance 1851:6-7), would have provided much valuable insight into the lives and customs of these peoples. Likewise, at that particular time of transition in which there was discord between the Indian and the pioneer White usurpers, an image such as: "View of Indian Commissioners, Dr. Wozencraft, Col. Johnson [sic], Indian Agent, and clerks, in a treaty with the Indians" (Vance 1851:6), would have been an important document of Indian/White interaction.<sup>3</sup>

Vance's *Views* of Indians were taken in a narrow region of the Sierra foothills bound approximately by the Stanislaus River on the south and the Yuba City/Feather River area to the north. Vance spent a period of time photographing the various properties of the renowned John A. Sutter, including pictures of the Indian villages situated near Sutter's home at Hock Farm (Vance 1851:6-8). It is also in the Hock Farm area that we find the work of our second documentarian of the California Indian, J. Wesley Jones.

Even more ambitious a project than Vance's *Views in California* was John Wesley Jones' *Pantoscope of California* (Jones 1927; Taft 1938:257-258; Rudisill 1971:142-149; Hoover 1978:3). Beginning in the summer of 1851, Jones proposed to daguerreotype every important feature along the overland route which

stretched from the Pacific Ocean to the Missouri River.

The Jones party included four daguerreotypists: William and Jacob Shew, S.L. Shaw, and Jones himself (Rudisill 1971:145). Together they are credited with the production of an unbelievable 1500 daguerreotypes, which, like the Vance plates, subsequently disappeared without a trace (Taft 1938:257; Rudisill 1971:148; Hoover 1978:3). Only 24 pencil sketches, held by the California Historical Society, remain from this stupendous undertaking (Hoover 1978:3).

After adding a number of sketch artists to his group, Jones commenced his eastward journey. His efforts while in California seem to have been entirely satisfactory and will be discussed shortly. However, by the time the expedition reached the Steeple Rocks region of present-day Idaho, the party fell victim to an Indian attack. In the resulting skirmish, Jones and a number of his party were severely wounded (Rudisill 1971:145). An account of these events may help us understand the vulnerability of such exploring excursions to the combined vicissitudes of terrain, weather, sickness, and hostile forces:

. . . Indians were lurking behind every rock, and dangers stood thick around. The company were not for stopping a moment . . . Fired with the excitement of the moment, our Artist (Jones) forgot his wounds and debility, and rising from his litter said "Gentlemen I shall daguerreotype this scenery though deserted by every man . . ." [Dix 1854:24].

Only five men remained with Jones and the little party was soon menaced by advancing Indians. *Harper's Monthly* continued the account, possibly fictive:

The artist (Jones) turned toward the advancing party his huge camera, and mystically waved over the instrument, with its apparently death-dealing tube, the black

cloths in which his pictures were wrapped, held his lighted cigar in frightful proximity to the dreadful engine, whose "rude throat" threatened to blow any enemy out of existence! [*Harper's Monthly*, November 1853:851].

While much less dramatic than the foregoing account, Jones spent an interesting and productive time in California. Jones and his party left San Francisco early in July, 1851, and proceeded directly to Sacramento. After visiting Sutter's Fort they traveled to Sutter's Hock Farm where they witnessed "The Annual Festival—or reunion of the Entire 'Hock Tribe' which occurred during our visit with Capt. Sutter in July 1851" (Jones 1927:241). Apparently the Jones party made a number of daguerreotypes of these native Californians, including the one which later served as a model for a drawing entitled, "Indian Rancheria—Hock Farm" (Jones 1927: illus. opposite p. 240). Jones' own lecture notes also appear to directly substantiate the content of this image (Plate 2):

An old chief who has gained sufficient distinction to wear a couple of feathers is setting upon the House top. These Houses are made by excavating a large circular hole in the ground, three to five feet in depth; over this poles, rushes, and earth, are piled several feet in thickness in an oval form. In these houses the Earth floor is kept dug up in soft pulverised beds,—and here in the summer they delight to roll their naked bodies in the Cool and Shade, and damp earth . . . The women are weaving willow baskets . . . [Jones 1927:240].

Likewise, Jones photographed the mouth of the Yuba River: "A faithful transcript from a Daguerreotype shows you the character of the streams, as they wind . . . Hemmed on **Either** side, by dense thickets of Luxurious Foliage vines willows and sycomores" (Jones 1927:242). The accompanying pencil sketch "Mouth of the Yuba River" (Jones 1927: illus. opposite p. 242) shows two natives in a canoe

which is strongly reminiscent of those found in the Great Lakes region of America rather than California. These are most likely best described as "scenery Indians," being a selected figment of the artist's imagination (Plate 3).

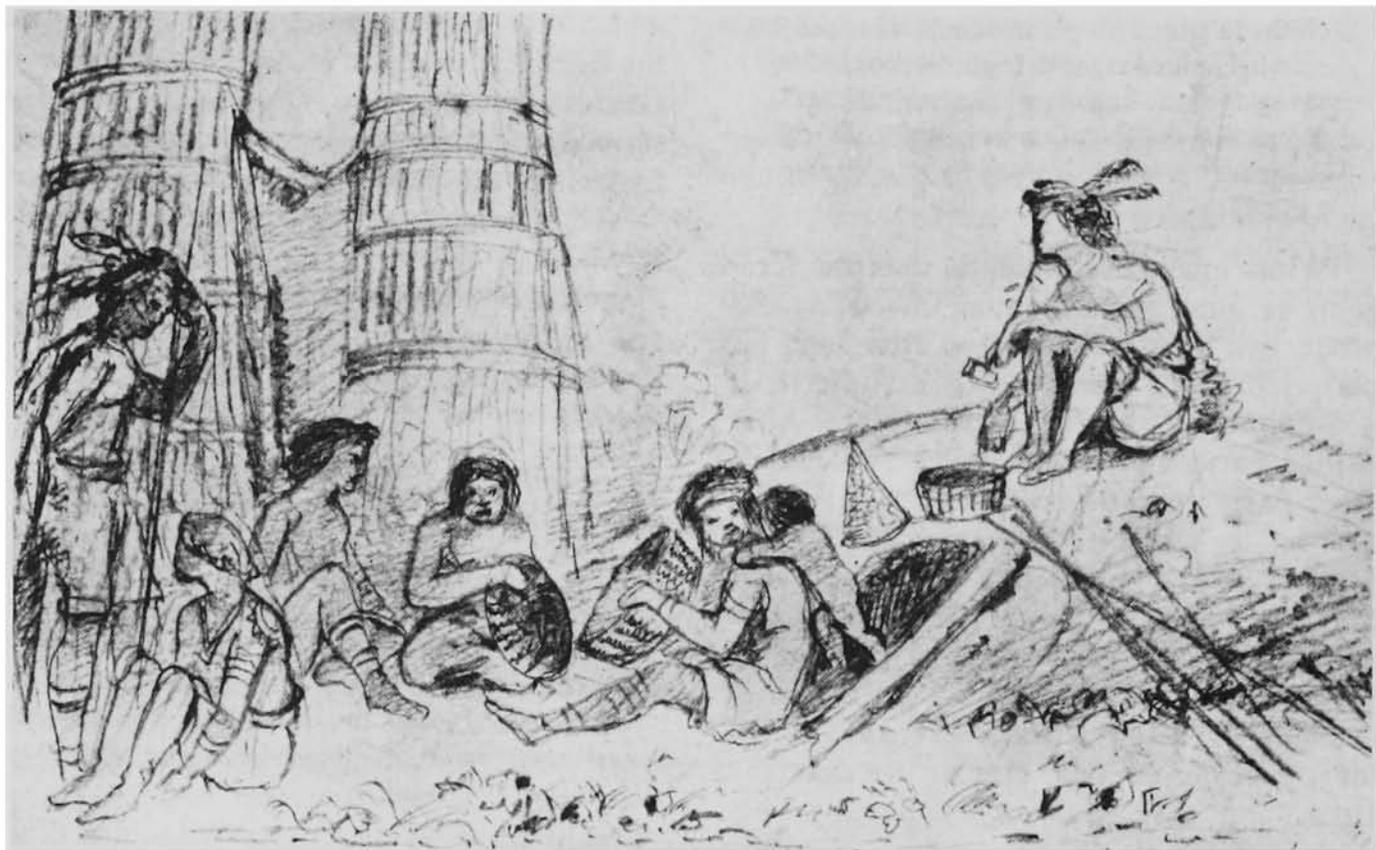
The final Jones' drawing which may picture Indian activity is called "Salmon Falls" (Jones 1927: illus. opposite p. 248). Although this drawing (Plate 4) may also feature a "scenery Indian," Jones' written account would suggest that the setting was an authentic one:

Others of these tribes, gathered around the Salmon Falls, Where the whole body of the American river is precipitated over Successive ledges of Rocks, to a great depth, Salmon fish, the finest in the world, are here intercepted in great quantities, and the Indian has as much as he can do, for several days, to pass them up to the women, who dry them upon the rocks [Jones 1927:248].

The drawings described were probably intended for use in *Harper's* magazine, but they were never used (Hoover 1978:3). However, Jones' ultimate objective for his pictorial efforts was the preparation of a giant, painted panorama based on his assembled daguerreotypes:<sup>4</sup>

. . . artists, working in Melrose, Massachusetts in 1852, transferred the daguerreotype views to huge reels of canvas, probably ten feet in height and literally hundreds of yards long. Jones' "Great Panto-scope of California, the Rocky Mountains, Salt Lake City, Nebraska and Kansas" promised its audiences an exhilarating, vicarious overland journey, "8000 (!) Miles Among Wild Beasts, Savages, Deserts, and Perpetual Snows" [Hoover 1978:3].

The only other photographer known to have photographed the California Indian prior to 1860 was daguerrean William Shew. Shew, a member of Jones' expedition, became one of San Francisco's most respected studio operators (Calmenson 1977:2-19).



INDIAN RANCHERIA—HOCK FARM

Plate 2. "Indian Rancheria—Hock Farm," a pencil drawing based on a daguerreotype by J. Wesley Jones, July, 1851. Courtesy of the California Historical Society.



MOUTH OF THE YUBA RIVER

Plate 3. "Mouth of the Yuba River," an artist's rendering based on a daguerreotype by J. Wesley Jones, July, 1851. The Native Americans shown may have been added by the artist, rather than being part of the original photograph. Courtesy of the California Historical Society.



Plate 4. "Salmon Falls," one of only 24 pencil sketches which were based on J. Wesley Jones' daguerreotype series *Panoscope of California*. Courtesy of the California Historical Society.



1. *Wahla*, chief of the Yuba tribe,—civilized and employed by Mr. S. Brannon. 2. A partly civilized Indian. 3. A wild Indian.—From daguerreotypes by Mr. W. Shew.

Plate 5. An engraving which appeared in Soule's *Annals of San Francisco* (1854). This illustration was based on daguerreotypes by William Shew.

An engraving appearing in the *Annals of San Francisco* (Soule 1854:52) is evidence of Shew's photographic involvement with California's native population. The caption reads: "1. *Wahla*, chief of the Yuba tribe—civilized and employed by Mr. S. Brannon. 2. A partly civilized Indian. 3. A Wild Indian—From daguerreotypes by Mr. W. Shew." This engraving (Plate 5) appears to have been a composite based on three original daguerreo-

types. The illustration was intended as an instructive example of how the native Californian could be "civilized" through a program of indoctrination and conversion. The article which accompanied the engraving is a classic case of a new order (the Anglo-Saxon) damning the previous order (the Spanish and their Missions) for their insufferable treatment of the California Indian. Scathingly, the author (an Anglo-Saxon) chastised the Spanish

**Fathers:**

Men feed the ox and the sheep for their milk and fleece, the hog for his flesh, the ass for the strength of his back . . . so did the Fathers feed their Indian converts, and find abundant profit in their labor . . . the Christian converts left ignorant, superstitious and besotted, having neither thoughts nor passions, strength nor will . . . [Soule 1854:53].

The author then presented his version of the new order:

The "pioneers" (Anglo-Saxon!) of California are our "Pilgrim Fathers" . . . Indians, Spaniards of many provinces, Hawaiians, Japanese, Chinese, Malays, Tartars and Russians, must all give place to the resistless flood of Anglo-Saxon or American progress. These peoples need not, and most of them cannot be swept from the face of the earth; but undoubtedly their national characteristics and opposing qualities and customs must be materially modified, and closely assimilated to those of the civilizing and dominant race [Soule 1854:53-54].

Paradoxically, William Shew's daguerreotype recordings of our native Californians achieved a new and perhaps more forceful meaning because of the manner in which they were published. Whereas, the images produced by Vance and Jones were primarily intended to validate the existence of a culture, Shew's had become an instrument of advocacy for cultural change.

Reproductions of two additional daguerreotypes are known which are thought to picture California natives. The first is a copy negative of a half-plate size daguerreotype previously held by the Society of California Pioneers (Plate 6). This image is especially provocative because it appears to show Indians involved in some type of goldmining activity. In the foreground, a group of seven men (thought to be Indians) are at work, while in

the background a stream is being damned and diverted to a large water wheel.<sup>5</sup> Photo-historian Richard Rudisill considers this scene to be photographically significant: ". . . conveying a developing activity with seeming spontaneity" (Rudisill 1971:159). He also observes that the "blurring of the figures of the men" suggests that the lens of the camera was open and in the process of recording the scene without the knowledge of the subjects (Rudisill 1971:159).

The second image (Plate 7) is a twentieth century paper copy of an early image, possibly a daguerreotype. This print shows "Betsy and Jack, James L. Sperry's 'Tame' Indians, Murphys, Calif., 1854" according to information written on the verso of the copy photograph.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, the daguerreotype was not the sole photographic process available prior to 1860. The collodion wet-plate technique dates from 1851 and was practiced by western photographers such as R.H. Vance as early as 1854. The ambrotype version of the wet-plate appears to have reached California first, soon followed by the leathertype (an ambrotype on leather) and the melainotype (early tintype). Paper prints made from wet-plate negatives were made in San Francisco at least by 1856.

A fine quarter-plate ambrotype by William Shew of "Inigo, an old Mission Indian with a crutch—he having been sexton of Mission San Jose for several years" was observed by Dr. Richard Rudisill during the 1960's (Rudisill, personal communication). This image has apparently disappeared or been misplaced. However, a small copy print located at the Society of California Pioneers confirms its previous existence (Plate 8). This image was probably made after 1854 and before 1858 (Spearman 1964).<sup>7</sup>

The Southwest Museum also holds a tintype reputed to show a California Indian, possibly a young Miwok (Plate 9). This image was found "in an old Indian cabin" in Yosemite during the 1920's. The tintype period of pho-



Plate 6. Half-plate daguerreotype showing mining activities with seven workers thought to be California Indians. Courtesy of the Society of California Pioneers.

tography extended from about 1854 to well past 1900, rendering the dating of such images difficult at best. The apparel worn by the young Indian, however, suggests that the image was made after the Civil War.

In this brief paper, I have discussed three pioneer photographers whose works are linked to the California Indian. In 1853, the *New York Daily Tribune* estimated that three million daguerreotypes were being produced annually in the United States (Taft 1938:63). Moreover, the number of photographers identified by the U.S. Census tripled in the decade between 1850 and 1860 (Taft 1938:61). These statistics suggest that many other photographers must have also contributed to the

documentary record of the native Californian prior to 1860.

A fine example of a new discovery occurred shortly after I had already completed my investigations for this article. At that time I received a letter from a colleague telling me of a “recently acquired ambrotype by the California Historical Society”, and further commenting: “They have little information on it except it was possibly taken in Sierra Country. It shows a group of whites, Chinese, and Indians in front of a frame hotel” (William B. Secrest, personal communication). This previously unknown ambrotype is 5½ x 4¼ inches in size and provides a new and important glimpse of California Indians in the late 1850’s



Plate 7. "Betsy and Jack, James L. Sperry's Tame Indians, Murphys, Calif., 1854." This is a copy print from an early image, possibly a daguerreotype. Courtesy of the University of the Pacific.

(Plate 10).

Photography was born in a culture that wished to see reality as though in a mirror. Historically, each photograph is a unique preservation of a transitory event providing us with much finite information. Our legacy of such photographs which show the California Indian at a time of intense change is unfortunately small, and our longing for such information remains unfulfilled.

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#### NOTES

1. A fine example of a Native American portrait, taken by the daguerreotype process, may be seen in the Life Library of Photography mono-

graph, *Caring For Photographs* (1972:39); another appears in Newhall (1961: Plate 37). For an interesting account of an exploring party's experiences in Indian territory with a camera see Huyda (1975). Additional details of frontier photography in the West during the nineteenth century may be found in Miller (1976). For an overview of American Indian photography, see Watson (1951) and Weinstein (1969). An overview of extant images of American Indians produced during the period 1847-1928 may be seen in Scherer (1970).

2. The following catalogue listings are from Vance (1851):

56. Indian Hut near Yuba City.
57. View of Indians on the Stanislaus River dressed for a War Dance.
62. View of Indian Commissioners, Dr. Wozencraft, Col. Johnson, Indian Agent, and clerks, in a treaty with the Indians.
65. View of Indian Village on Capt. Sutter's Plantation.
66. Indian Village near Yuba City.
67. View of four Indian Chiefs, and Wife and Sister of the celebrated chief Kasuse.
68. A group of Indian Chiefs on the Feather River.
69. Indian Village on the Stanislaus River.
70. Indians, cooking.
71. View of Indians dressed for a Dance.
72. Indian, dancing.

3. See Annie R. Mitchell, "Major James D. Savage and the Tulareños," *California Historical Quarterly* 28(4) (December 1949:328-331) for details relating to this treaty activity. O.M. Wozencraft was appointed Indian Commissioner in October, 1850. Adam Johnston was the Indian sub-agent for the San Joaquin Valley. The treaty negotiations mentioned in Vance's caption were most likely those which took place in mid-March, 1851.

4. See John Francis McDermott, "Gold Rush Movies," *California Historical Quarterly* 33(1) (March 1954:29-38). McDermott likens these early painted panoramas to an early form of the motion picture newsreel.

5. Such water wheels were commonly employed in mining activities on the American River. Examples (artists renderings) may be found in James M. Hutchings's *The Miner's Own Book*:



Plate 8. Quarter-plate size ambrotype of "Ynigo, Sexton at Mission San Jose" by William Shew. Courtesy of the Society of California Pioneers.

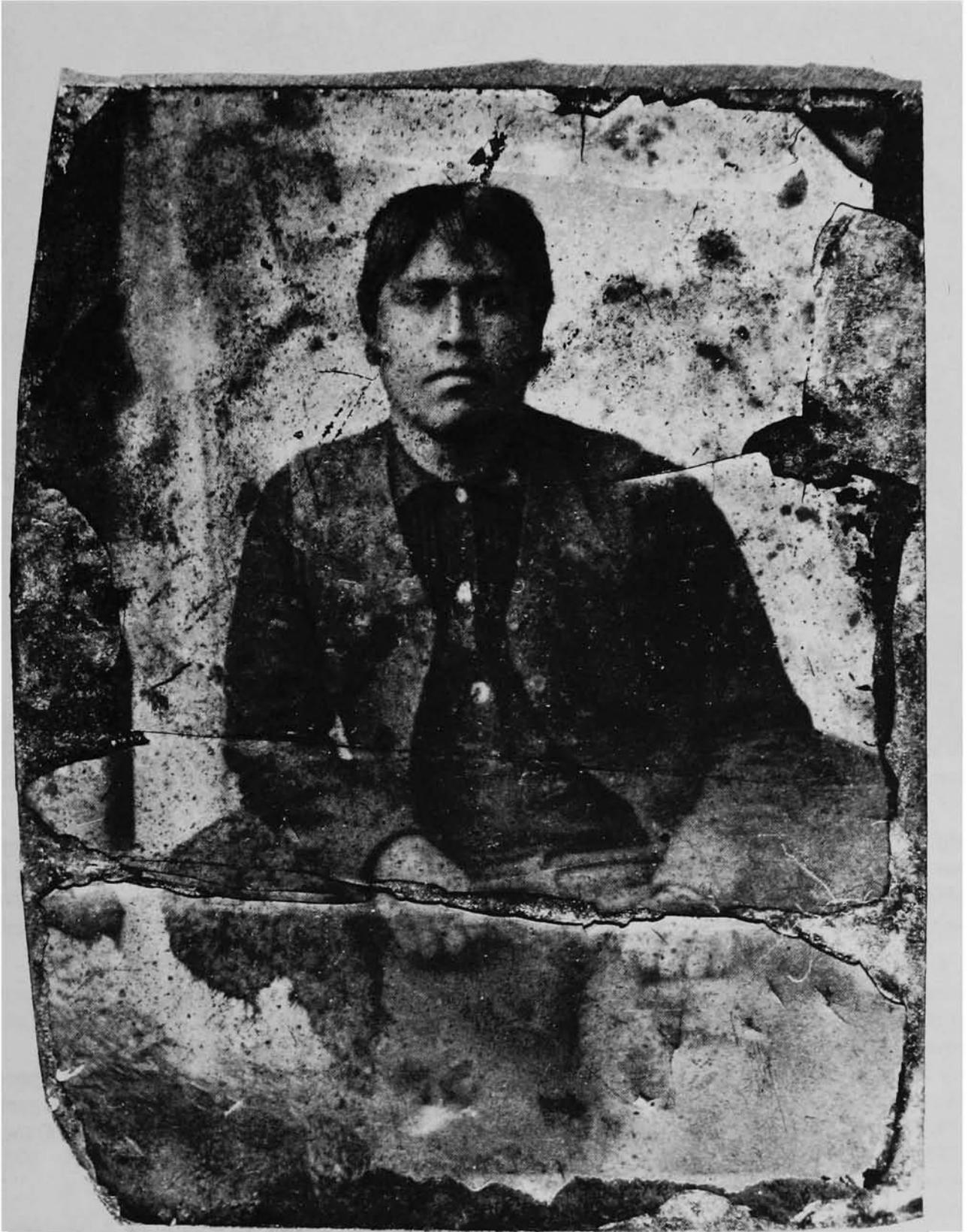


Plate 9. A tintype reputed to picture a California Indian, possibly a young Miwok. This image probably dates after the Civil War. Courtesy of the Southwest Museum.

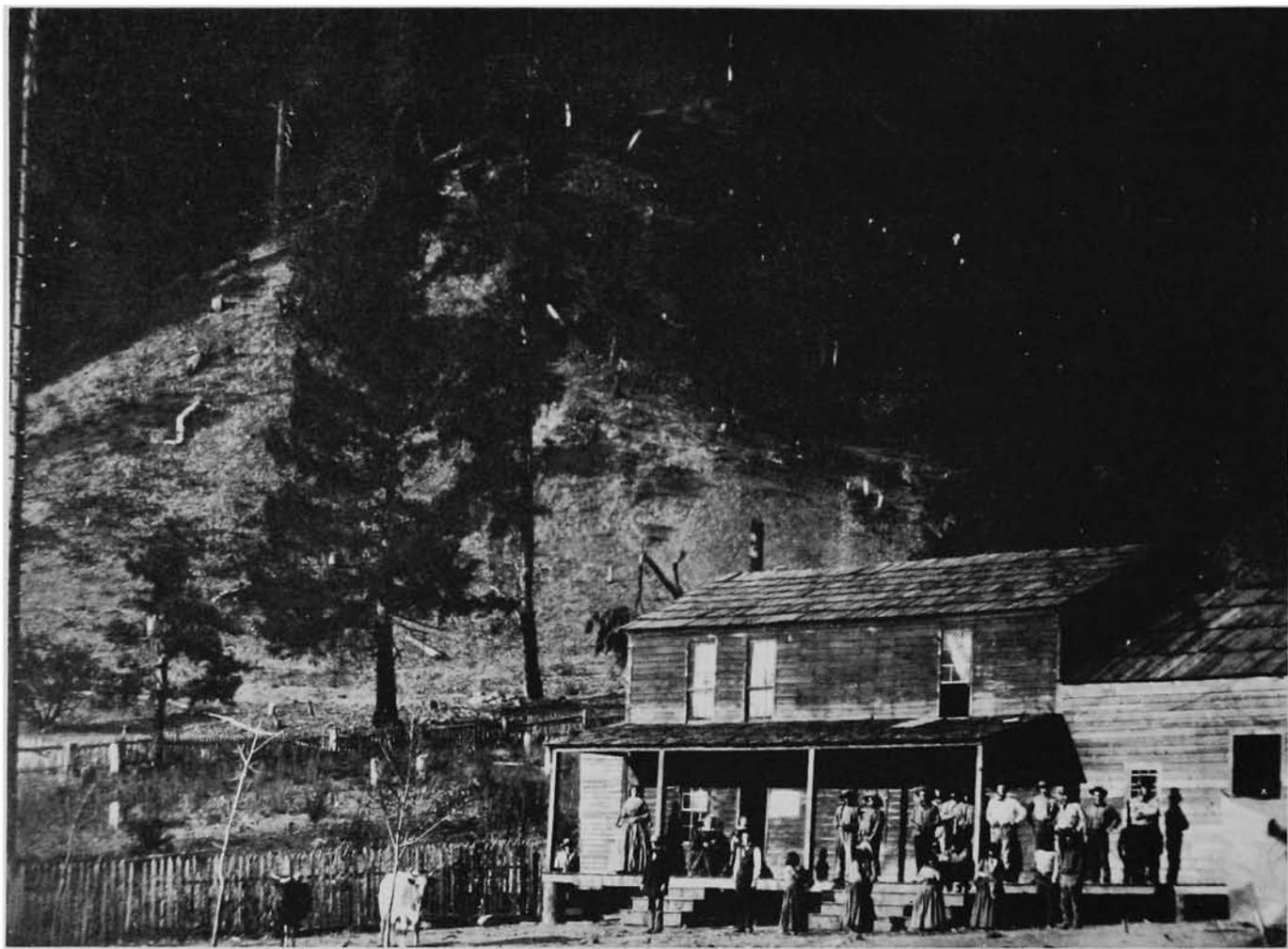


Plate 10. Ambrotype of White men, Chinese, and Indians taken in the 1850's, possibly in Sierra County. Courtesy of the California Historical Society.

*California Mining, Containing Correct Illustrations and Descriptions of the Various Modes of California Mining (1858)*. The photographer who produced the original daguerreotype is unknown.

6. "James L. Sperry, who was in the hotel business at Angel's Camp and Murphy's and afterwards built and ran a hotel at Calaveras Big Trees Grove, (Marginalia)," *California Historical Quarterly* 22(2) (June 1943:192). Likewise, see Richard Coke Wood, *Murphys: Queen of the Sierra* (n.d.), p. 73: "The old Sperry and Perry Hotel . . . was built in 1855-56 by James L. Sperry and John Perry and opened for business August 20, 1856." Also, p. 78, "Sperry came to Murphy's in the early 1850's."

7. This image has been published as: "Old Marcello, venerable Mission Santa Clara Indian, 1789-1875" (Spearman 1963:102). However, be-

cause of age inconsistencies, Spearman concludes that the image is really that of Marcello's close friend, Chief Ynigo (Spearman 1963:101-103). Chief Ynigo died on March 2, 1864, at the reputed age of 104 (Spearman 1963:133).

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Photographic Art-Journal

