ETHNICITY AND COMMUNITY ON THE MINING FRONTIER

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Candelaria was not too different from other towns that spring to lie during the gold and silver rushes that characterized the 19th century American West. Its appearance in 1875 was sudden, but no less sudden that its demise seventeen years later. The population was diverse, drawing individuals of varying backgrounds, experiences and origins. The population was transient, many often staying only until they struck it rich or until their money ran out. Like other mining towns, Candelaria's fortunes were tied to the riches that could be extracted from the surrounding mountains. When the ore played out, so did the towns.

Candelaria had grown up on a gently sloping hajada, an undulating and slight inclined valley that intersects, and provides great contrast, to the craggy and sharp relief of the mineral-rich mountains that distinguish the west-central desert of Nevada. The main road through town, a dusty avenue which stretched a half mile or more, extended beyond the town's limits to serve as a critical link to other towns—Pickhandle Gulch and Columbus to the east, Belleville to the west, and finally to Virginia City, San Francisco, and the world at large. That portion of the road that Candelarians called Main Street was dustier than most and was lined with an eclectic array of building types: canvas-covered boarding houses, clapboard sided saloons, and the impenetrable stone and brick building that housed the Esmeralda Bank. As the sun made its daily arc across the sky and the desert heat began to inch above 100 degrees, the shadows cat by these building may have provided the only shady relief to Candelaria's residents. The nearest trees could be found no less than fifty miles away.

The town was a buzzing center of activity. From Nob Hill west of town, one could survey the day's activities, watching large wagons, often pulled by twenty-mule teams, create dusty silhouettes as they rolled into town to unload supplies. Indeed Nob Hill, with its excellent view over the town, would have been a good place from which a historian or an anthropologist could observe the varied lives of Candelaria's residents. A brief glimpse of that life is offered in the following vignettes.

Vignette 1

At sundown on Sunday, September 5, 1880, several of Candelaria's merchants began to close their businesses for the day. Their actions must have seemed unusual to many of the town's residents, for most businesses usually stayed open well into the evening. But this evening was dif-

ferent. On this night, may of Candelaria's residents were preparing to observe the Jewish New Year *Rosh Hoshanah.* Candelaria's newspaper, the *True Fissure,* announced the event, noting that there were "quite a number of Israelites in and around Candelaria" and printed the names of some of the more important individuals. Two weeks later, the paper recounted the festivities of these Jewish citizens as they celebrated *Yom Kippur,* providing great detail about the historical and religious context of this Jewish holy day (*True Fissure*).

Vignette 2

Of all the occasions to celebrate, accounts of the festivities held for the Fourth of July always seemed to be allotted generous space in the *True Fissure.* For instance, the paper recounts that the 1882 celebration was replete with a brass band, games and prizes, and a parade. The festivities in which most of the town's residents participated were sedate, however, compared to the celebration held by the town's Chinese residents. The newspaper characterized the Chinese celebration of July 4, 1880, as a "riot." The celebration was not just a one-day affair either. The newspaper noted in its July 14, 1880 edition that "The Chinese inhabitants of Candelaria have been indulging in regular Fourth of July l, rows for the past ten days...A city ordinance is needed to suppress such incipient riots."

Vignette 3

Many residents of Candelaria chose to spend their leisure time playing marbles. The newspaper once described the passion for this pastime as a "mania" from which a broad segment of the population was not immune. Not only did marbles captivate the interests of the town's white residents, it also found enthusiastic participants in the town's Native American residents. The *True Fissure* once noted that, "The Paiute boys cannot forego their pastime of marble playing even after nightfall. A party of them was observed at the depot the other evening having a big game by the aid of one of the reflecting lamps."

These vignettes explore—both as academic construct and real phenomena, two concepts—ethnicity and community. In the observances of *Rosh Hoshanah* and *Yom Kippur,* the Chinese celebrations of the Fourth of July, and the marble playing of the Northern Paiute, we are provided expressions of both ethnicity and community. At an abstract level, ethnicity and community can be seen as distinct phenomena. In actuality, their distinction was not always so clear cut. For our purposes, ethnicity may be viewed as affiliation with a group according to a shared origin, language, or culture. In Candelaria, for example, we may talk about the Jewish, Chinese and Native American ethnic groups.

Community, in a real sense, may also embody these elements, but not necessarily so. Community may be at times more exclusive than ethnicity—at others times less so. Community formation and participation is more a function of individual needs, access, and values. Community is hot limited by ethnicity (i.e., the academic community). Equally important, ethnicity does not necessarily equate with community. Within an ethic group, it is possible to find many different communities. Ethnicity and community, therefore, are distinct, but not mutually exclusive, systems.

Studies of ethnicity and community have long been the interest of anthropologist and historians. As a gross generalization, anthropologists have focused more on ethnicity, exploring such problems as the maintenance of cultural boundaries and identity, culture contact, and acculturations. This focus was given urgency at the turn of the century by the perception that modern developments and influences, such as industrialization, urbanization, and capitalism, have somehow severed our link with traditional patterns of community and social life. In this context, the historian's search for community has become a quest for ideals thought lost in a rapidly progressing world. Implicit in this view is a perception that the trajectory of community in history can be characterized in terms of breakdown, decay, and erosions (Bender 1978:8).

Thomas Bender explores this problem in his *Community and Social Change in America* (1978). He concluded that past studies of community lack

a clear understanding and definition of the phenomenon being studied. Bender argued that one problem with these visualizations of community was the portrayal of community as territorially based social organization and social activity. Consequently, the vocabulary of these community studies was geographically and temporally fixed, "confusing a particular manifestation of community [in time] with its essence" (Bender 1978:4). For example, if the measure of community in the past is modeled on a colonial New England town, it is probably only in colonial New England towns that we will find community. Furthermore, such measure are static. Bender cautioned that such approaches ignore the process of history. If colonial New England towns are the measure, he queries, then what are we to make of community today? Realistic measures of community must take into account differences from region to region, if not from town to town. They must also take into account the process of history. Otherwise, he states, the "effect is to preclude the possibility of finding community in other times and places" (Bender 1978:4).

Bender's argument can also be directed at studies of ethnicity. These studies often proceed from the premise that the ethnic group is a temporally fixed and culturally bound and cohesive unit. Such an assumption allows culture trait to be identified and catalogued to arrive at a set of normative characteristics for the study group. Deviations from those traits over time or space can then be used to make statements about culture change, and by extension, the influence of dominant cultures as agents of change in contact situations. This approach also ignores the process of history, treating a list of traits recorded sometime in the past as the unblemished, pre-contact state of a culture. The result is that these studies view change in terms of disintegration and decay. Re-phrasing Bender's observation, this approach confuses a particular manifestation of ethnicity in the past with its essence.

The problem with focusing on ethnicity as an anthropological concern, or community as a historical concern, is that both ignore, or conveniently blur, the distinction between the two. Ethnicity and community become meshed into one entity so that the real object of study is the "ethnic community." In this construct, the ethnic components is overlooked in favor of reconstruction of the community. Ethnicity becomes a fixed, cohesive, bounded, and understandable constant in the search for community (which also is perceived as being fixed, cohesive, and bounded). Ethnicity serves as a framing device that guides the search—in the case of Candelaria, for the Jewish community, the Chinese community, and the Native American community.

One goal of this paper is to suggest that ethnicity and community are distinctive and that the failure to treat them as such masks the complexity of inter-group and intragroup relations. Another goal is to show that neither ethnicity nor community exists as fixed, bounded, or cohesive social entities. In the process, I hope to demonstrate that by focusing on ethnicity and community (as bounded, cohesive units of analysis) we often overlook the important arena of social interaction that takes place in daily life. This interaction often occurs in spheres that transcend the parameters of both ethnicity and community.

Too often, when considering the composition of a place, on the mining frontier and elsewhere, we frame the demographic makeup in terms of "ethnic communities." At Candelaria, for instance, we can talk about the Jewish community, the Chinese community, the Native American community, and the white community. Using these static and all-inclusive labels creates an artificial perception that these groups are founded and cohesive social units. Regardless of the validity of these constructs, it is too easy to phrase research questions in terms of these bounded units. Obviously, such classifications are not totally fabricated and do provide some utility and convenience in approaching problems at a structural level. They often become the object of the search themselves. A focus on these static aspects of ethnicity and community obscures the critical dynamic of social life more than it elucidates it. When a group is isolated and removed from its larger context for study, that static grouping takes on a boundedness, cohesiveness, and sense of group identity that is of our making. Almost by default, we construct that entity in the past, regardless of the basis for it in historical fact. We should recognize that if these constructs have rel-

evance, it must be relevance in terms of how those individuals who made up these groups themselves constructed and utilized these references.

To illustrate this point, let us return to our three major groups living in Candelaria: whites, Chinese, and Native Americans. Are we really sure we know what we mean when we use these referents? Consider the white community of the town. It was composed of Slavonians, Lithuanians, Germans, Irish, Cornish, and English with diverse occupations, background, and experiences. Likewise, the Native American population contained members of the Northern Paiute, Shoshone, Owens Valley Paiute, and Mono Lake Paiute tribes (*Borax Miner,* 11/30/1875: p. 3 col. 1; *Inyo Register,* 8/19/1915: P.1, col. 34; Queen 1987; 103 and 108; Shamberger 1978).

Given the experience from other mining towns, much the same expectations existed for Candelaria's Chinese population and it has recently been noted that the Chinese "cannot be treated as a monolith, in the sense of being a stable or homogeneous population" (Praetzellis, Praetzellis and Brown 1987:40). In fact, the Chinese population at Candelaria was composed of individuals of differing backgrounds and cultural traditions and there were at least two competing and sometimes violently opposed factions in the town. As is evident from these examples, ethnicity does not necessarily imply cohesiveness or solidarity, nor does it effectively help define the parameters of a community within a group. Although cohesiveness and solidarity should not necessarily characterize ethnic or communal social life, neither should the apparent absence of cohesiveness and solidarity preclude the possibility of community, even those based primarily on ethnic status.

In past studies of western mining settlements, however, we have tended to emphasize and elaborate the incomplete, disharmic, non-cohesive nature of mining settlements, characteristics which argue against the formation of community. Community, it has been argued, does not and cannot really exist in the transient, every man for himself, atmosphere of the frontier mining town. Community does not form because these camps and towns are characterized by individualism uprootedness, restlessness, and erratic economic fluctuation. The ultimate objective of individuals in these towns was to make money. The desire for riches overcame whatever forces existed that promoted cooperation and sociality and this greed inhibited the formation of values promoting community (1 line 1980; Mann 1982).

Community is not perceived to have formed until values held by the merchant and professional middle-class population in the towns become the accepted norm. It is the creation of social clubs, political groups, charity balls, churches, and other institutions that we gauge community formation. Curiously, these same institutions epitomize chaos and absence of community if participation breaks down along class, ethnic, or occupational lines.

Although past portrayals of the conditions, activities, and behaviors that characterized these mining towns are generally accurate, we have used a limited set of values to measure community. These are the values held by the middle-class merchant and professional residents of the city. These values are prominent because they were voiced and chronicled through the newspapers and other records of the day. These outlets, of course, were controlled to a large extent by people who held these values. Consequently, behavior or actions that were perceived as anti-social were feared and criticized precisely because they were an affront to those values. In the newspapers of Candelaria, Virginia City, Grass Valley, Belleville, and other mining towns editorials regularly reminded residents of the need for institutions, or commitment to place, and often bemoaned the lack of community. For scholars using these documents it is easy to follow their lead and conceptualize the development of town and community by Chronicling the appearance of institutions such as schools, churches, and political parties. Indeed, these were important measures of community to certain groups in the town. But they were not measures for all groups. By keying on these aspects, we only get part of the story. What we miss are the important arenas of social activity, those domains of behavior, where these groups did come together and interact.

What I am suggesting is that the search for ethnicity, and community, as objective entities, obscures the larger dynamic of social life that

actually existed in these towns. Certainly, ideals of community existed for all individuals in the town, and these guided personal behavior and judgments about the behavior of others for each individual. But by focusing on whether community ideals were ever reached, we separate and reinforce the perception that life in these towns was governed by disharmony, lack of social cohesiveness, isolation, and the segregation of disparate parts. While these characteristics may hold true to some extent, ti si equally important to determine how these obstacles community formation were negotiated.

If we look at Candelaria, despite whether the ideals of community held by certain individuals were achieved, a whole sphere of social interaction was experienced by the individuals and groups living in the town that were normally miss when the focus of inquiry is centered on the "ethnic community." I would like to explore this by looking at social relations between members of two "ethnic communities"—whites and Native Americans.

Although newspaper accounts chronicle the development of Candelaria, insights, into social relations between various groups are difficult to detect. Reliance on newspaper reports for images of town life leaves an incomplete, if not distorted picture. Much of the town's daily activities went unreported. In the case of the Chinese and Native American residents, few references appear. The few that do are primarily pejorative in tone. The views expressed exclusively those of the dominant white population. Chinese and Native Americans had no medium through which to rebut or present their views. As a result, our understanding of life in these towns lacks a full consideration of the range of social experience. Nevertheless, from these images we can get a better vision of the spheres of social interaction that existed.

The earliest images of Native Americans in the district were hostile. The fear of Indian attacks was great enough to limit prospecting activities, even if reports of such hostilities had no basis in fact. This perception predominated among the white population throughout the life of the town. In the early 1890s a resurgence in Ghost Dance activity occurred in the region. White residents in the area believed that these activities revealed that local Indians were planning violence against them. The size of the Ghost Dance gatherings and its "war dance" features alarmed many white residents, forcing some to move into towns for safety (*True Fissure* 11/27/1880 p. 3, col. 4-5; *Chloride Belt*, 12/17/1890: p. 3, col. 2). Not all whites reacted hysterically to the Ghost Dance, and Candelaria's residents were more enlightened than others on this subject. In 1891, local Indians living at Thodes Marsh held a Ghost Dance that lasted for five days. Although it generated some concern, white residents there wrote letters to the newspaper, asserting that there was nothing to fear, since the Indians had no hostile intentions (*Chloride Belt*, 4/25/1891 p. 3, col. 3).

In these reports we also are given a glimpse of Native American activities that were directly supportive of mining operations. Thodes Marsh was located close to Candelaria and was a principal source of salt and borax. Salt was critical to the processing of ore and the extraction of silver. A major source of labor for this industry was Native Americans—the Nevada Salt and Borax Company, for instance, employed about 250 native peoples. The superintendent of the company described them as "industrious and kindly disposed toward whites." Describing their importance to the district's economy, he went on to say that: "The wages they receive is disbursed in this county, the chief towns all deriving more or less support from their trade. As the amount paid them at the Marsh averages $750 per week, it aggregates a considerable sum in the course of a year." (*Chloride Belt*, 4/25/1891: p. 3, col. 3).

So, at least in this area, we have favorable reports of relations between differing groups.

It has generally been reported that Native Americans living in mining towns spent much of their time begging and foraging for materials discarded by the white and Chinese residents. However, as the salt and borax industry example shows, their role and participation in town life should not be minimized. Almost all of the local native groups had easy access to the mining towns in the region. The Northern Paiutes, for instance, had free use of the railroad serving nearly every mining district in Nevada. They negotiated these rights by allowing the railroad to cross

their land. For the Native Americans living near Candelaria the agreement provided for the free transport of people, fish, game and produce. They used the railroad for personal travel and to take these goods to market in the mining towns (Carson and Colorado Railroad Company Papers, University of Nevada Special Collections, April 13, 1880: File 3, Fold 1; Queen 1987: 190-111). While traditional subsistence patterns were maintained, many of these subsistence items were now being procured in surplus in order to sell them to town residents. Not only did this serve as a source of income for the local Native Americans, it also provided fresh food and game to the town residents. The *True Fissure,* for instance, remarked on several occasions that Paiutes were selling ducks, rabbits, fish, and even bouquets of flowers to the town's other residents (*True Fissure,* 4/15/1882: p. 3, col. 2; 9/9/1882: p. 3, col. 2; 1/1/1883: p. 3, col. 2; 1/8/1883: p. 3, col. 2; 2/28/1885: p. 3, col. 2; 3/14/1885: p. 3, col. 2).

Most references to Native Americans, however, emphasized such negative attributes as laziness, drunkenness, and their aptness for scavenging and begging. As we have already seen, such statements present a distorted vision of reality. Native Americans were gainfully employed in the supporting industries of the mines. They also created and used opportunities to cater to the needs of the town's other residents by providing fresh fish, game, and other commodities. Nevertheless, they were excluded from participating in much of the town's economic and social life.

There were exceptions. Jobs in the mines were usually reserved for white miners and laborers. The newspapers did report, however, that Indians had led whites to bodies of ore, and were also mining their own placer claims. In one report, twelve white men were mining for gold near Tule Canyon along with about seventy-five Indians engaged in the same occupation" (*Chloride Belt,* 12/17/1890: p. 3, col. 3).

Native peoples were also employed as domestic help and hired to do odd jobs. Northern Paiute women were hired to wash clothes and do other chores. Before the water line was constructed to Candelaria, the Chinese reportedly paid the local native men to haul buckets of snow from the mountains for fresh water (*True Fissure* 9/9/1882 p. 3, col. 2; 4/5/1884: p. 3, col. 2).

To this extent, were can observe that economic concerns governed much of the social interaction the various residents of the town. Certainly, some experienced more contact than others. For instance, Native American and white child often played together. Games and sports, for example, were shared activities. Marbles was a popular game among the Northern Paiute. Whites also enjoyed the "mania for marble playing," frequently joining int he games. In other reports, the newspaper observed that Indians, old and young, joined in white games occasionally (*True Fissure,* 4/19/18844; p. 3, col; 2/3/1883: p.3, col. 2).

Probably the most intriguing report of Indian-white social interaction appeared in the *True Fissure* on February 5, 1881 (p. 3, col. 3). The article is important for what it tells us about the nature and extent of their social interaction on the mining frontier. The article is written with a certain flair and was obviously satirical in its attempt to mock the tone and style of society columns. But from the account, we get a very lively image of social life on the frontier:

> "The dance lasted every evening for several days. Paiutes [sic] from the surrounding country for miles were assembled and numbered some two hundred. Dancing commenced generally with a grand Indian "all hands round," consisting of a melange of Indian, Chinese, and go as you please figures... As the dance progressed some would drop out and otherwise take their place. Many of the White joined in after paying twenty-five cents and seemed to enjoy the fun... Refreshments were served between times in the shape of pine nuts. The wall flower brigade amused themselves by visiting the different camp fires and pleasantly chatting with the squaws. The evening's entertainments were usually would up by games of poker. I noticed many of Bellevillle's belles present who enjoyed themselves evidently as much as their dusky sisters.

Northern Paiute fandangos were somewhat of an attraction to many people in this locality, including whites and Chinese and both men and women. Many people attended, regardless of their motivation. The motivation for the Paiutes

appears to have been money, since they charged twenty-five cents (mostly to men) for the privilege of dancing with female members of the tribe. Companionship and lovemaking were possible motivations. The evenings were concluded by games of chance. What can we say about both ethnicity and community when we are presented with a vision of Native Americans, Chinese, and whites playing poker by the light of a fire after a long evening of festive relaxation

Such socializing, even with a most conservative interpretation suggests the existence of a very active, perhaps vibrant social atmosphere in these mining towns. It does not necessarily reveal the existence of a permanent community, but perhaps a temporary communalism. But it makes us aware that when our research focuses strictly ethnicity or community—or the ethnic community—we may be missing a whole range of social experience that describes more accurately social life in these towns.

This essay has explored the relationship between ethnicity and community in the western American mining town of Candelaria, Nevada. The primary goal was to demonstrate that ethnicity and community are distinct entities and that the failure to recognize this distinction distorts the complexity of ethnic and communities relations that may exist. Another objective was to show that the search for community in the past often proceeds with a limited set of assumptions that define a community. Most often, community is measured using a standard defined by the value system held by a limited segment of the population. In the case of Candelaria, this segment was the middle-class merchant and professional. Their views became the measure because this segment had access to and control of the newspapers whose articles and editorials survive in the historical record. This essay has argued that the traditional studies of the frontier west, which noted the absence of community in these boom and bust towns, have used a limited standard of middle-class values to measure community. In doing so, these studies have ignored the formation and existence of other communities in the town which may be based on different value systems and membership. Furthermore, these studies have failed to recognize that critical zone of social interaction and social relationships that existed at the boundary where these various individuals, groups, and communities, intersected. This intersection was dynamic and it is important to understand and appreciate how these boundaries were negotiated or utilized by the differing interests in the town.

ENDNOTES

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