
Book Reviews

Cynthia Ackley Nunn. *Abandoned California: King Solomon Mine*. Mount Pleasant, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2019; 96 pp., 92 color and 47 b&w photos, paper, \$23.99. ISBN: 9781634991322

Cynthia Nunn's *Abandoned California: King Solomon Mine* is one of the "America through Time" series of more than a hundred photograph-based community biographies produced during the past decade by Arcadia Publishing. The King Solomon Mine was one of the intermediate producers in the Rand gold-mining district organized in the 1890s in Kern County, California, about one hundred miles north-northeast of Los Angeles in the Mojave Desert.

The text consists of a two-page introduction with photographs of the Paiutes native to the area, a three-page history of the King Solomon Mine, a one-page introduction to a section of photographs of relics in the nearby town of Randsburg, and a one-page concluding note.

The book is abundantly, perhaps superabundantly, illustrated with 139 photographs, 92 of them in color, mostly taken by the author. These photos are sometimes of piles of debris or of an abandoned piece of mining equipment, automobile or television set. In other instances, and to better effect, Nunn presents appealing illustrations of structures or creates comparative shots of historical photographs of surface features. The eight historical photos of underground mining, however, are of generic mining scenes drawn from the collections of the University of Southern California and the Library of Congress.

Presenting these photographs is the purpose of the book. The minimal text offers but a brief history, few production figures, and does not con-

nect the story of the Solomon Mine or the district to mining history or issues beyond that locale. The book contains no citations, bibliography or index. Text on the back cover asserts that "some of the richest gold strikes in California history were found in the areas of Randsburg and Johannesburg, located in the Mojave Desert section of Kern County," but no evidence is offered within to support this assertion.

Given the above, *Abandoned California: King Solomon Mine* mainly should appeal to those specifically interested in this mine or district.

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Richard V. Francaviglia. *Imagining the Atacama Desert: A Five-Hundred-Year Journey of Discovery*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2018; 453 pp., 58 color and 23 b&w illus., 50 maps, notes, bib., ind., cloth, \$29.95. ISBN: 9781607813316

With stunning photographs and detailed maps, Richard Francaviglia narrates the five-hundred-year history of one of the world's driest places, the Atacama Desert in Chile, through cartography and geography. Tracing the desert from the early colonial era to the present, the author argues that the region changed over the course of four phases, each of which receives a corresponding chapter.

In the first phase, Europeans speculated that the Atacama lay empty, an unpopulated desert with increasing strategic importance. The early cartographic record reflects the naming of the desert not for its location, but rather its lack of settlements.

In the second phase, the Atacama fed the curiosity of early scientific expeditions, which relied heavily on cartography. Mapmakers depicted the desert to conform to their political leanings before drawing physical or scientific maps. Furthermore, naturalists began to study the resources and natural history of the region, which led to mining towns as well as further scientific studies.

Nationalists in nineteenth-century Chile embraced the Atacama Desert for its economic potential in the third transformation. In the aftermath of independence movements, investors in mining and port-building saw the desert as a gateway to resource extraction.

Lastly, the Atacama emerged as “exceptional,” a term the author uses to note how tourists and scientists alike have emphasized the unique character of the desert. Whereas Europeans once portrayed the desert as barren, the Atacama of the twentieth century included bustling mining, agrarian, and tourism centers.

Among the strengths of this book are its images, which leap off the glossy pages. In particular, the author demonstrates his cartographic background with a careful analysis of each map, noting not only place names but also topographical features and political significance. He includes cultural artifacts, such as poems, to note how the desert changed in meaning and significance to different groups of people over time. Photographs taken by himself or his son, Damien, offer a personal touch, bringing the desert closer to the reader.

Despite these strengths, there are two areas that the book could have developed more. While the introduction does lay out the book’s understanding of the term “imagining,” a more thorough discussion would have raised questions, such as: Whose imagination is it? Is it a product of European eyes? Do the indigenous play a role? These questions are parsed in the chapters, but an analysis at the beginning would have situated the concept further. Likewise, the book discusses

scientists and naturalists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries but alludes all too briefly to their modern-day parallels—astronomers.

The greatest strength of this book is its appeal to many audiences. It is a volume that is both academic and accessible. Inquisitive readers will delight in the discussion of mining and geology while enjoying the poetry and art inspired by the desert. Students and a diverse group of readers will find interest in this book as it traces the desert through maps and the stories they tell.

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James L. Fairchild and David T. Robinson. *John W. Searles: California Mining Pioneer*. Tona, CA: Searles Valley Historical Society, 2018; 206 pp., 36 color and 50 b&w illus., 13 color and 6 b&w maps, 4 tables, chapter ref., paper, \$29.95. ISBN: 9781729695029

This detailed biography is scrupulously researched, rigorously referenced, and well-written, shedding light on an under-appreciated subchapter of California mining history. The authors are a uniquely qualified pair: Robinson is a Searles family descendant with access to unpublished family documents, while Fairchild has lived and worked at Searles Lake for over half a century.

Many MHA members will identify the name “Searles” with the briny treasure house of saline minerals in the California desert formerly known as Slate Range Playa or Borax Lake, but now known as Searles Salt Marsh, or more commonly, “Searles Lake.” This is one of those cases where the person is important because of the place.

William Manley—who, with his companion John Rogers, was the savior of the Bennett-Arcane party stranded in Death Valley in late 1849—was one of several early travelers who passed by this brine body, tortured by thirst in the nearly waterless region. Manley recorded of their epic trek to