

PRESENTATION ON NEW ALMADEN QUICKSILVER MINES

SOUTHWEST LABOR STUDIES ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE

SAN JOSE STATE UNIVERSITY

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Introduction

In the late 1970's or early 80's I became acquainted with Dr. Antonio Soto when we were actively supporting the United Farm Workers grape boycott campaign. One day I casually mentioned the New Almaden Quicksilver Mine to Dr. Soto. It was then I learned of his long-term, impressive, and pioneering research on the mine.

I had previously read several books on the mine. I had noted that very little attention was given to those who constituted the majority of the work force—the Mexican miners from Sonora. They were skilled hard-rock miners, major contributors to the development and profitable success of the enterprise. Also, there was very little said about the racial discrimination practiced against these workers and their families.

Over the ensuing years, Dr. Soto and I talked on and off about New Almaden and, eventually, he asked if I would like to participate with him in a discussion of the mine at the Southwest Labor Studies Association Conference to be held at San Jose State University in April of 1983. I happily agreed to do so. Dr. Soto's graduate student, Francisco Valencia, had written a 130-page paper thesis on the discriminatory practices by the New Almaden Mine owners, and Dr Soto also invited him to participate in the Conference discussion.

Each of the three of us presented a talk at the conference, with Dr. Soto leading and coordinating the discussion. The main text of this booklet is a transcription of those talks. When we gave the talks we intended them as a solid foundation that would lead to expanded interest and further research. We hoped there would eventually be a comprehensive publication covering the events and significance of the New Almaden Mine.

Due to Dr. Soto's untimely death, my loss of contact with Francisco Valencia, and my own advanced age and ill health, I wanted to put together these materials with the goal that they would encourage researchers and others to build on our work. If you are interested, contact Jeff Paul, Director of the Chicano, Library, San Jose State University, (408) 924-2707.

The remains of the historic New Almaden Quicksilver Mine are located about 15 miles south of downtown San Jose. California. The mine played a far-reaching role in the exploitation of California's natural and human resources following the defeat of Mexico in the 1846-48 US-Mexican War.

In the first half of the 1800's two events took place that significantly contributed to the United States becoming a world industrial, financial and military power. These events were:

1. The discovery of a very large body of quicksilver ore at the site of what became the New Almaden Quicksilver Mine. At that time quicksilver was crucial for the efficient extraction of gold and silver from crushed ore.

2. The 1849 discovery of vast, rich gold fields 1.00 miles north of the New Almaden Mine. Almost overnight, the United States became the world's largest producer of gold and quicksilver.

The wealth developed from these two discoveries not only set the stage for United States industrialization but also opened the door widely for globalization of world affairs in the 20th century – with the United States as the key player.

At the time of these twin discoveries the industrial North in the United States was gaining power, and would eventually achieve full ascendancy after the defeat of the Confederacy in the Civil War. As it turns out, the New Almaden Mine played an unheralded but important role in the defeat of the Confederacy. (For details, see pages 25-27.)

The ascendancy of Capital brought with it the iron fist of arrogant, bloated, greedy industrialists towards their human resource labor. Workers suffered low wages, bad working conditions, poverty, and racial and ethnic discrimination. The most exploited were the recently freed Black slaves in the East and the Southeast, and the Mexicans and Chinese in the West.

Labor's response was unionization and strikes. Many bitter and violent struggles took place for Labor's dignity and well-being. Today the struggle in the global economy goes on.

In the mid-1860's the work force at the New Almaden Mine was composed of a Mexican majority and growing Anglo minority. Under Mexican leadership, miners carried out a series of strikes that won improved working conditions and other benefits. These were probably the first major strike activities at hard rock mines. (For details about the strikes, see pages 16-18, and Francisco Valencia's graduate thesis about the New Almaden Mine. This 130-page document can be found in the San Jose State University Chicano Library Archives. It gives great detail about Mexican labor at the mine.)

I wish to acknowledge the encouragement and help that Jeff Paul, Director of the San Jose State University Chicano Library, has given to our research, especially in accepting our files, papers, books, and other materials into the Library's archives.

I flatly would not have been able to publish this booklet without the encouragement and critical editing provided by my wife, Frieda Graham, the many hours of patient transcription from a difficult cassette tape by my daughter-in-law, Patricia Graham, and the editing, shaping, and legwork by my son, Russell Graham. To my family, thanks.

– Joe Graham

Southwest Labor Studies Association Conference
San Jose, California April 30, 1983

Introduction to talks by Professor Antonio Soto

The picture, before we get into the details of it and the relevance of it, there's many things you can say. First of all, what we're talking about took place only about 12-15 miles from where we are sitting, in the foothills of the Santa Cruz Mountains south of San Jose. Secondly, we're talking about a tremendously important phenomenon, which has been hardly ever written about. There have been a few presentations, but seldom, if ever, do they note that the majority of workers were of Mexican origin. This may be the first accurate presentation on the Mexican workers at the New Almaden Mines.

We're also talking about the world's second largest producer of quicksilver in the 1850's, 19th century, which was extremely important for the refinement of gold and has ramifications worldwide as Joe Graham is going to point out, even back to the House of Rothchild in Europe. It is often called the best kept secret of Santa Clara County. How many people in Santa Clara County ever heard of the story of the New Almaden Mine? Now we're not going to talk simply about the history; that's not what we're here for. We're not primarily even professional historians, although we have done original historical work and we have the techniques that go with history.

We are what Mr. Welkowitz described a little while ago in his talk on film making. Film making is not a detail about what kind of shoes the man wore in the documentary, but an analysis, a conceptual process that went on. What really went on in the New Almaden Mines; that's what we want to know. And we have gone to the trouble of doing as much original research as possible, but it's very possible that in talking we have minor historical inaccuracies which someone – and there are specialists in the New Almaden Mines – might point out wasn't exactly this way or that way and we would be glad to be corrected on minor historical things. But our main thrust is an analysis of what went on in the New Almaden Mines.

So, basically, to situate you, it's in South San Jose. They began around 1845 before the United States took over this territory, were in their heyday in the 1860's and 1870's. And during the 1880's and 90's began to diminish in importance and closed down in 1912, opened up various times until about the 1960's. We're talking about 100 years of mining activity, but the main aspect that we're interested in is the 19th century. It's going to have plenty of ramifications with what is going on today. My impression as I sat listening to that workshop this morning on labor unions and robotics and the new technological displacement of workers, and labor people being very concerned and management people sitting right there on the panel with them saying, "well, wait a minute; it's not as bad as you think; it's gonna be for the benefit of everyone." Here I saw labor again looking at management, such as the Mexican workers did with the managers of the New Almaden Mine, and wondering, "Well what about us?"

With that, we'll go right into the first speaker, who is going to be Francisco Valencia. He's had a varied career. He was here at San Jose State,

got his degree in Mexican-American History, went on to become a lawyer. He's now doing research in various other things. He also went to Berkeley. He's very well studied and has a tremendous humanistic approach to life. The second speaker is Joe Graham, whom labor people know very well as being one of the old-timers of the union movement, and maybe he'll bring in a few things about his organizing experience with miners in early Arizona. And then myself, who teaches here at San Jose State. My main field is sociology, but I've also done historical work, primary original research in history, especially of the Chicano worker.

Southwest Labor Studies Association Conference

San Jose, California April 30, 1983

Talk by Francisco Valencia

New Almaden, or Sierra Azul as the Mexicans of California called it, is a small town located in an arroyo at the base of the Santa Cruz Mountains in the Santa Clara Valley of California. It's approximately 12 miles south of the city of San Jose. The discovery of the New Almaden Quicksilver Mines was paramount to the success of the gold and silver mines in the Americas. Quicksilver for centuries had been the only method of extracting precious metals from ores, up until this century.

Andres Castillero, a captain in the military service of Mejico in the fall of 1845, was the first to successfully test for quicksilver through the process of distillation. It was this very rock that was believed to be possessed of an evil spirit by the Indians of that region. Castillero was the first also to file a claim on the mine in the Republic of Mejico, and he was later to be granted possession of the mine which he named Santa Clara. By the end of 1845 Castillero had formed the partnership which was to own and operate the mine. As the mining project reached the month of August 1846, approximately three thousand pounds of ore had been fired with favorable results. However, lack of finances, equipment, and supplies became an immediate problem. Consequently, Castillero returned to Mexico City where he requested and was granted a government loan to cover the cost of developing the mine. However, when war broke out between Mejico and the United States in 1846 and being unable to collect any money on the loan, Castillero sought capital from Barron, Forbes & Co., an English banking firm doing business in Tepic, Mejico.

From 1846 to 1849 there were various transfers of shares from one owner to another, but by 1850 the Barron, Forbes Group had acquired the entire ownership. The mine, having been formed under the Mexican land laws, was subject after the Mexican American war to scrutiny under Anglo American laws. The very success of the mine triggered a whole series of law suits regarding mine ownership. Litigation dragged on for approximately 12 years. Uncertainty set a brake on production and a final decision in 1863 went against the company in the United States Supreme Court. This was at the same time that a new company, the Quicksilver Mining Company, was being organized in New York to take and eventually did take over its assets. This terminated English financial interests in this part of California.

Under the ownership of the Quicksilver Mining Co., New Almaden developed three settlements: The Hacienda, which was a residence place of those who held managerial positions and those who worked the area of the reduction works, and the Mexican and English settlements which occupied Pine Hill. A.C. Ennis, author of the Ennis Almaden Papers, writes: "It was mutually understood for a great many years that Mexicans or their families would not be permitted to take up residence within the precincts of the English camp. While no ruling had been issued by the authorities on the matter, the understanding nevertheless was religiously observed."

The growth of the settlements in New Almaden began after the United States takeover of California from Mejico. This is when mercury mining, in addition to gold and silver, began to prosper, beginning in the middle of the 19th century. With the gradual exclusion of the Mexican gold and silver mining, a large number of Mexicans turned to mercury mining. Many came to New Almaden where they most often constituted the majority of the population

throughout its mining history. The California census report of 1852 for the New Almaden area shows that the entire working force of New Almaden was Mexican and Sonoran, with the exception of 3 Anglo surname miners. In October 1865, *Harper's New Monthly* magazine reported that in the employ of the company, there was a population of 1943, of which 5/8 were Mexican or native Californians, with the remainder consisting of Anglo Americans, Cornish miners, and various other races, representing altogether 28 nationalities.

In 1890 the census report shows a total population of 1355. This population of miners worked in inadequate facilities and used inefficient methods during the period of administration and ownership under the Barron, Forbes, & Company, and also under the administration of Samuel Butterworth. During this time the population was without benefit of medical services or any facilities for health or personal welfare. Many died from common diseases, accidents, and other contributing factors. The company at this time showed little concern for the need of the workers or the improvement of living conditions. The general environment lacked considerably in any degree of favorable living conditions and, with the crude conditions that prevailed, there was little incentive for improvement. A.C. Ennis, superintendent at New Almaden at the beginning of the century has offered an explanation as to why the local mine authorities would allow such a situation to exist on the hill. He stated, "It was profitable", which was the usual reason for most things of that nature.

Any action taken against the existing situation would have meant a loss of manpower and an additional expense to the mining company, resulting in lower profits. Connie Purham, curator of the New Almaden Museum, reported, "When Butterworth was general manager, he really didn't care about the situation. He was only interested in the money. Most of his time was spent in San Francisco, not at New Almaden."

In 1864, with the dissolution of the mining interests of Barron, Forbes, & Company, and the takeover of mining ownership by the Quicksilver Mining Company, Sierra Azul had produced quicksilver valued at 15 million dollars. In 1870, Samuel Butterworth, the Quicksilver Mining Company's first manager, resigned due to pressure from the mining company to curtail costs by further reducing workers' wages that had, to date, already been cut 20%. James P. Randol, Butterworth's nephew, accepted the managerial position. Shortly after becoming manager, the mines underwent monumental changes with invention of new equipment, improvement on the existing equipment, and the development of new prospecting methods, which, in fact, resulted in increasing the mining profits of the Quicksilver Mining Company. In the 16 years of Randal's administration, 318,000 flasks of quicksilver had been reduced with a total profit yield to the owners of more than 4 million dollars.

These profits were accomplished through the joint efforts of miners and other laborers, including the Mexican. Yet, although the Mexican worker in New Almaden contributed much to the production and economic success of the mine, it can safely be inferred that he benefited little in the way of personal and economic reward. Census reports from 1860 to the closing of the mine report a decrease in Mexican miners and other Spanish surname miners, with an increase in this same occupation for Anglo surname. This decrease was only with reference to miner positions.

In order to justify getting rid of the Mexican in these competitive positions and eventually in the mining company altogether, the Anglo populace in their disregard for mutual respect and cultural uniqueness used the Mexicans as a scapegoat for the lawlessness, immorality, and bad state of affairs which existed at New Almaden before the coming of the Randol administration. Sherman Day, superintendent of the mine in the 1850's, in a letter to his father, the Reverend Day, May 1857, writes, "From their

religious ceremonies they proceed in the afternoon to a bullfight and taper off in the evening with a ball and a theatrical performance. Such is the religion and civilization imposed upon the Mexican people by the Catholic priests. We are gradually getting rid of these Mexican miners and substituting Cornish miners in their stead."

Historical accounts of the social history of New Almaden make reference to the Mexicans as a vicious element, an element which had to be dealt with and done away with. Or, they are portrayed as a carefree, loving people whose only concern was the present gratification of their needs with no emphasis on the future. Their "innate inferiority" to the Anglo counterpart is emphasized with little mention of their important contribution to the development of the New Almaden mines. The *Pioneer* periodical of San Francisco in 1854, in speaking of the Mexican at New Almaden writes, "They number between two and three hundred in all but they are perhaps the most impractical people in the world, going on as their fathers did before them." Mary Halleck Foote, *Scribner's Monthly* magazine, February 1878, depicts the Mexican settlement at New Almaden as follows:

The Mexicans have the gift of harmoniousness. They seem always to fit their surroundings, and their dingy little camp has made itself comfortable on the barren hills over which it is scattered. The Mexican camp has little of that bustling energy which belongs to its neighbors on the floor below. It wakes up slowly in the morning, especially if the morning be cold, and lounges around on moonlight nights.

The discrimination directed against the Mexican permeated almost every aspect of Mexican life in New Almaden: lack of Spanish surname employees in any managerial positions of the mining company, segregated housing, inadequate school facilities, lack of representation in municipal positions as well as school trusteeships and teacher positions, and inaccurate and racist stereotypes. All these were discriminatory practices which the Mexican was subjected to. Yet, contrary to popular historical writings, the Mexicans struggled against the racist and oppressive conditions at New Almaden.

This struggle, in one instance, is evidenced by the numerous strikes and threats of strikes led by the Mexican worker against the Quicksilver Mining Company. It can safely be inferred that this constant struggle aided in eventually bringing out the declining years of mercury mining in New Almaden. It is a well-known fact that worker wages in most working establishments tend to increase through the years, yet in the case of New Almaden there was an obvious decrease after a period of nineteen years. For example, change over from payment according to the quantity produced to flat daily and monthly wages - which was the case with trammers and skipfillers - added to the decrease in overall wages. The Mexican workers were most affected by these changes since the majority of these occupations were held by Mexicans.

The Mexicans first publicly struck out against oppressive working conditions at New Almaden during the administration of Samuel Butterworth. Sierra Azul was witness to four strikes. The first strike occurred on January 21, 1865. The *San Jose Mercury Herald News*, as it was known at that time, in type larger than the *Mercury* customarily employed in its news columns reported, and I quote: "Anticipated Riot at New Almaden Mine. A Company of Troops Sent to Preserve the Peace" Jimmy Snyder, writer for the *Pony Express News*, gives a capsule review of the articles appearing in the *Mercury* pertaining to New Almaden from January 21st through the 24th. He states, "Since the inauguration of the Quicksilver Mining Company under the superintendency of F.S. Butterworth, many radical changes have been made, both in the working of the mine and in the disposition of the company's outside property, all tending to conserve the best interests and right of the owners."

This strike appears to have been carefully planned and organized by the miners, yet this endeavor was short-lived when the mining administration demanded that every head of household sign a lease at once or leave the estate. "Those who refused," wrote N.D. Arnot on January 24th, 1865, "will be known to be bad or turbulent characters." Mining administration spoke of strike leadership. In a letter from Butterworth to the Quicksilver Mining Company head office in New York, February 1865, concerning strike organizer Jose Antonio Gardner, he wrote, "I do not wish to proceed against Gardner until the other combination is thoroughly broken up. I want at present to drive out the vagrants and the gamblers. After that is done, I intend to proceed against the chief conspirators and Gardner as their leader, but until I get the leases signed I do not wish to disturb the conspirators." Gardner, the Mexican leader, was eventually relieved of his duties when some concessions were made to the workers.

In 1864, '65, and '66, New Almaden had the largest yield of quicksilver in its history. In other mines, increased productivity, in most cases, accounted for higher wages. This was not the case at New Almaden. In April 1866, the miners waged another strike in protest. Jimmy Snyder writes, "There was a strike of miners that month and production fell from 3,000 flasks to 1,000 per month."

Following the strikes of 1865 and 1866, another strike occurred in March of 1868. Miners stopped work insisting on better wages, which Butterworth refused. These miners eventually returned to work without any concessions made. Miners then again struck in April of 1868. The superintendent eventually conceded to the main points of what the strikers had asked, but by this time 15 to 20 men were arrested for riot. By this time the mine itself began to fail, and with the end of the 60's the stock which had been issued a few years earlier with a par value of \$100 per share slid in 1869 to 11 cents a share.

These re-occurring events eventually led to the resignation of Butterworth, yet the problems of worker discontent did not end here. James Randol and the New Almaden administration were witness to a threat of a strike. In a letter from Randol to the New York main office, Randol wrote:

To add to the joys and pleasure which the manager here is supposed to enjoy, I am threatened with a strike by the workers on ore, the majority Mexican. On Saturday morning a notice in Spanish and also in English was found posted on a hill, saying that miners were being robbed because of the present manner of weighing ore, and calling for a change or demanding them all to stop work.

I had the poster removed and put another one up in its place, offering \$50 for the name of the writer. I sent for the Cornish captains and told them that if they were not satisfied with my rules they could have their pay and take leave. They said they were without complaint. I then called the Mexican captains, about 50 of them. Together, and one lending courage to another, they were loud in their complaints about what they termed unfair weighing.

Randol told them that the weighing was honest, and he discharged a few, that, as he saw it, were creating the most trouble. The Mexican demands against the oppressive conditions at New Almaden are obvious, yet Mary Halleck Foote, who was resident at New Almaden and a well-known illustrator and writer for *Harper's Monthly*, depicted the character of the Mexican in total contrast to what the miners had already demonstrated. She writes, "They are not self-asserting and full of personality as we are. They slip along in a listless easy way, unambitious, graceful, struggling against nothing, accepting all without question."

In checking with other mines and industries in February of 1876, Snyder notes that Randol was convinced that he was paying the men less than any other place on the Pacific Coast with better results. Because of this Randol was able to wipe out the outstanding debt carried on from the previous administration and at the same time make assurances of ample profit. Yet, in order to continue with the steady stream of profits, Randol was faced with recruiting miners to the mine at low wages. In January of 1874, the mine was advertising for miners on contract and tribute day work in San Jose and San Francisco and later in the Virginia City paper. Many of the Mexican miners left during these days as other mines were discovered. This state of affairs continued on until the 1880's. Randol in a letter to the Quicksilver Mining Company, May 1884, wrote, "No miners due to low wages. Men going to Guadalupe daily, attracted by higher wages. There is no doubt that the best days of New Almaden are over, and there is trouble and misery here."

It safely can be inferred that with the inability to recruit miners at low wages, which resulted in lower production, that this prompted Randol's resignation in 1892. Following his resignation, other successors were appointed, several of whom also resigned. By 1899, ore production was below the tonnage for continuing with any future promise of success. Drastic economic measures were applied with almost a complete reduction of the employees. By the close of 1912, the Cinnabar hills could no longer support further operations and the company closed its books and officially declared the total holdings in a state of bankruptcy.

It can, without doubt, be safely inferred that, contrary to popular opinion, New Almaden was not an ideal camp which had never been subject to much worker discontent (as Lawrence writes). Nor was the mine closure as historically depicted due only to a decrease in quicksilver demand. Contrary to popular opinion, Mexicans of the New Almaden area were not "impracticable" as the *Pioneer Periodical* writes, nor vagrants and troublemakers as management of New Almaden depicted them, nor non-self-asserting, unambitious, struggling against nothing, as Foote writes. And also contrary to popular opinion, they were fighters against worker oppression, demanding better working and living conditions throughout the short history of the mine.

Southwest Labor Studies Association Conference

San Jose, California April 30, 1983

Talk by Joe Graham

The mineral wealth of the West, plus 300 years of unpaid wealth created by black slaves had much to do with the growth of United States capitalism in the mid-19th century. Gold and silver were, of course, minerals of central importance and quicksilver was necessary for the extraction of these precious metals. The mine at New Almaden made the efficient exploitation of Western gold and silver possible. I will discuss this and also how the mine figured in an important Civil War campaign and drew the special attention of President Lincoln. Finally, I will discuss examples of the mine owner's use of power which were forerunners of today's corporate behavior.

The treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed in 1848. This was the culmination of a campaign of subversion and military conquest which successfully brought most of what we now call the Southwest and West under the control of the United States. The human and natural resources of the current states of Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, Arizona and California were thus made more readily available for exploitation by capitalist interests.

Francisco Valencia has already given you a comprehensive history of the New Almaden Quicksilver Mine and its workers. I would like to give you a picture of the national and international scene in which the local mine played a significant part.

In 1848, rich gold placer "diggings" were discovered in California. A short time later came the discoveries of gold ore in California hardrock and the fabulous rich Comstock silver lodes of Nevada. Despite these discoveries, to use the words of Otis E. Young, in his book, *Western Mining*, "American placering might have remained at the level of the antique Colchis had it not been for the providential discovery within California itself of the mercury deposits which the Forty-Miners required for ... amalgamation." Amalgamation was the process in which mercury was used to extract gold and silver from sand or crushed ore.

The California mercury deposits Young speaks of were, of course, those at New Almaden. In addition to greatly helping in the extraction of gold and silver, the development of these deposits broke a world monopoly. The Rothchilds owned the quicksilver mine at Old Almaden in Spain and had been charging the exorbitant price of \$114.50 a flask. New Almaden changed that when it became the second highest producer of mercury in the world.

It wasn't just natural resources that were fortuitously located in the conquered lands of the West. In a book entitled *Three Years in California*, published in 1850, the Rev. Walter Colton wrote astutely for the interests of wealthier Americans who might be surveying their new holdings:

When gold shall begin to fail, or require capital or machinery, you will want these hardy men to quarry rocks and feed your stampers, and when you shall plunge into the Cinnebar (quicksilver) mountains, you will want them to sink your shafts and kindle fires under your quicksilver retorts. They will become the hewers of wood and the drawers of water to American capital and enterprise. But if you want to perform this drudgery yourself, drive out the Sonorians, and upset the cherished system (sic) of political economy founded in a spirit of wisdom and national justice.

In September, 1849, the New Almaden Mine advertised in Spanish in the *Alta California* newspaper for employees among "Hispanic-Americans of good conduct." Those who ran the "cherished system founded in wisdom and national justice" did make use of Sonorians and others, and were able to bring mercury to gold and silver. The tremendous effect of the successful exploitation of human and natural resources is succinctly evaluated by the historian Don F. Fehrenbacher. In his book, *Basic History of California*, he writes:

It lifted the nation from insignificance to leadership in the production of precious metal, supplying badly needed specie for an expanding economy and raising price levels throughout much of the world. It made the United States for the first time a truly transcontinental power, requiring transcontinental communication and transportation.

It was no small matter – the ownership of the mine at New Almaden. And perhaps it might be considered in the natural course of events that a tremendous legal battle for control was waged between competing groups of capitalists following the conquest. The battle went on for 12 years until 1863. It involved the Congress, the Supreme Court, and two presidents in the White House.

In 1845, Captain Andre Castellero, a Mexican officer, filed the original claim to the mine and land. This was based on Mexican land grants. He and the British company of Barron & Forbes joined in partnership to mine the ore and extract the quicksilver under the name of New Almaden Mine.

The 12 years of litigation revolved around claims and counter claims regarding ownership by various parties. The most serious litigant was a group of eastern U.S. capitalists organized in the Quicksilver Mining Co.

In the 1850's, President Buchanan set up a Land Commission settle the numerous California land title disputes. In the case of the New Almaden Mine, it ruled Barron & Forbes had legal title to the mine and lands. But the Quicksilver Mining Co. fought this decision all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. In Washington, by political influence, and by spreading company stocks around, the climate was created for the Supreme Court to reverse the Land Commission decision.

The New Almaden owners refused to evacuate the property. Various public officials and army officers – a few of whom were close friends and associates of President Lincoln – had stock and financial interest in the Quicksilver Mining Co. They prevailed upon Lincoln to sign a Writ in May 1863, ordering the U.S. military to use force to remove the New Almaden operators. Lincoln had not been informed of the intrigue for control of this rich mine. At this point, the whole issue turned from a routine military operation to the danger of losing California to the Confederacy. This development could have been disastrous to the Civil War's outcome.

1863 was a very critical year for the North in the struggle against the slave-owning secessionists. Military payrolls had not been met, the Northern army suffered major defeats at Fredericksburg and Chancellerville. Lincoln was harassed and worried. Lincoln was anxious to keep the mine operating. Mineral wealth was critical to the North. This order to force removal of the New Almaden operators was seized upon by the well-organized California Confederate sympathizers. By rumor and distortion, considerable public opinion was aroused against Lincoln by charges that his order was just a wedge for the government to seize all western mining property.

While 5th column activity was going on in California, the Confederacy dispatched a military column across the southwest headed for California, planning to take advantage of this public furor to seize the mine.

Luckily, Union Intelligence became aware of the military expedition and a column of Union soldiers was sent east to meet the Confederates. The Confederates were met and defeated at a place called Picacho Peak in Arizona, some miles west of Tucson.

Following are a few examples of the fear and frantic efforts of influential Union supporters to get Lincoln to rescind his seizure order:

A wire to President Lincoln: "The mining interests are so large and so sensitive that this proceeding will give the secessionists every advantage ..."

And another wire, to General Halleck, a top military commander: "There is great excitement and unless the mandate is revoked the state is in danger of being lost to the Union ..."

Fortunately, Lincoln realized in time the danger to the Union's struggles against slavery, and withdrew his seizure order. At this point, Barron & Forbes decided to sell their claim to the Quicksilver Mining Co. for \$1,750,000. Lincoln's withdrawal of the seizure order and the defeat of the Confederate military column ended this serious threat to the Union cause.

Those who would like to read more detail of all this intrigue and how close the Union came to losing California, should refer to *The California Historical Society Quarterly*, Vol. XV, Number 1, March 1936.

The New Almaden Mine was profitable and pivotal. It had a role to play in the development of a global economic system and it figured in the fortunes of the United States as a nation. But the mine's part in the larger movements of history would have been much smaller if those who ran it hadn't had some control of local events and hadn't been able to successfully exploit miners' labor.

The company's political weight was shown in a number of situations. During the miner's strike of January 21, 1865, which Francisco has described, civil authorities made a request to General McDowell, U.S. Army Commander at Benicia, for federal troops to "quell the anticipated outbreak." This was accomplished through the sheriff, whom the mine owners controlled. A company of infantry was dispatched to the valley and was camped in readiness near town. (This was the first U.S. military intervention in Western mining history.) Fortunately, the troops never confronted the miners, as things calmed down when the company acceded to most of the miners' demands.

One issue the company would not give in on was the elimination of the company toll gate. This toll gate had been established to keep "undesirables" out. It also forced miners to buy at company stores rather than in San Jose, where prices were lower. The hot issue of a public access road vs. the company toll gate did not end with the settlement of January 1865. On August 7 of that year, a petition with nearly 500 signatures was presented to the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors requesting a public access road be established at New Almaden. The signers were not only Mexican and Anglo miners, but citizens of San Jose and other parts of the Valley who coveted the business of the mines. Despite the substantial percentage of the county's adult population petitioning the Board, company power prevailed and the request was denied. (A copy of the petition is in the Chicano Library files.)

One of the most cold-blooded uses of corporate power was the case of Soto vs. The Quicksilver Mining Co. The *San Jose Mercury* carried the story in its September 19, 1888 issue. I quote:

The suit was based on the allegations that on February 2 of the present year, Soto was in the employ of the Defendant. While engaged in cutting a timber hitch in rock, about 1500 feet below the surface, a heavy charge of giant powder exploded. The shock destroyed the sight of both

of Soto's eyes, broke his right leg, and otherwise bruised and permanently crippled him. The fact of the injury to his eyes was established by the testimony of Dr. Robert Caldwell, and the explosion was testified to by A. Alvarez, Ramon Castro and Alex Castro, also laborers in the mine.

The company lawyer, Mr. Cross, didn't deny the injury, nor that it occurred in the mine. His argument was that supervision at the time of the explosion was by a Mr. Nichols, who was authorized to direct the where and how of work, but not to hire and fire. Therefore, according to lawyer Cross, negligence was the responsibility of Soto himself or a co-worker, Nichols, and not that of the company or one of its agents.

Though Mr. Lamar, Sr., Soto's attorney, opposed the company's resulting motion for a non-suit and argued that Nichols was a company boss, the judge disagreed and ruled, "It would be worse than useless to detain this jury and put the parties to further expense." Showing not only company bias, but also arrogance of power, the judge went on to add that even if there had been a jury and if it had favored the injured miner, he the judge "would be constrained to disregard the verdict should it be returned for the plaintiff upon this state of facts."

It wasn't just courts, boards of supervisors, and sheriffs who had to be managed. The successful control of miners was crucial to the operators of the New Almaden Mine.

Throughout the mid and late 19th Century, a rapid period of industrialization in the United States, there were sharp and violent class confrontations across the country. Militant strikes, company violence and government strike-breaking in the mines of the West were common. But, according to Richard Lingenfelter in his well-researched book, *The Hardrock Miner*, almost every major Western mining camp was unionized, and those with permanent communities nurtured organizations. The lone great exception was the New Almaden Mine.

From the January 1865 strike action to April 1868, there were at least four strikes by New Almaden miners. The outstanding leaders of the miners were Mexicans. They were singled out by the Company to discredit, get rid of, and keep out. We pay respects to those brave men - the unknown militants. There is no doubt either that there were union miners present from Grass Valley, Virginia City and other unionized mining districts. Many were Cornish miners. Before and during the militant actions of the 60's, the mine supervisors, for their part, were as heavy handed as those who had provoked successful, permanent union organization at other mines. With militant miners, a permanent community, and a rough and unfair management, why was no permanent union organization established at New Almaden?

Following the militant demands and strike actions of the miners during the early 1860's, the mine company changed course. This was especially true of the James Randol regime, which ran from 1870-1892.

First, the unity of Mexican and Cornish miners was broken by encouraging racist attitudes on the part of Anglo miners against Mexican co-workers. Francisco has detailed the discriminatory practices against Mexican workers and their families.

Second, slipping the bare fist into silken glove, the permanent community was used to the company's advantage. While stiff work rules were still in order, families, churches, schools and cultural events were encouraged, and a medical plan was established.

But within this general paternalistic system, equality did not exist. The conditions of the Mexican workers and their families were inferior and segregation was encouraged. An example of this was the club house which was

set up in the English-speaking camp where the Anglo miners lived. While no company rule excluding Mexicans was established, exclusion was clearly in effect.

These divisive wedges were the ingredients of a new form of labor control, one meant to exclude unions. This system - racist division of labor and paternalism - has since been polished by many of today's prominent high tech firms, the corporate heirs to the Quicksilver Mining Co. who have turned our area into Silicon Valley.

Today's corporate America has deep roots. While the New Almaden Quicksilver Mine, as such, is long gone, it contributed to shaping monopoly capitalism as we know it today. In this sense, it is still alive. In order to maximize profits, the mask of paternalism was used, as well as racism, division of workers, and political and economic power at the expense of the fundamental rights and well-being of the worker. These strategies continue to characterize corporate America today.

Southwest Labor Studies Association Conference

San Jose, California April 30, 1983

Talk by Professor Antonio Soto

My role here will be to take what Francisco and Joe have said about the historical background and try to ask ourselves what was going on here. How do we understand the role of the Mexican workers, the management, and how all this was allowed to obtain, and then give you some other aspects that might help shed some light on that.

I will start out by simply saying that there is a new methodology being used now in social science and history in particular. That is for non-professional historians, like sociologists and social scientists in general, to not only re-examine what the historians have done, but also to re-research some of the original documents that historians have published before. In the light of what the filmmaker was saying at 11 o'clock, I think it makes a lot of sense. The filmmaker was saying he does not even think a documentary film is more true to reality than a fictional film. A documentary film takes whatever they want to take a picture of, but a fictional film conceptualizes it, takes the stream of thought of what was happening in history and puts it on film. What's important is what was going on. So that's new methodology that we're using here, historical and sociological analysis.

I'd like to point out that the view of what was going on in the mines can be taken from above, looking down from the viewpoint of the dominant society, management, people who wrote for *Scribner's*, *Harper's*, *Atlantic Monthly* from the East, or the view from below. You're not just below in the sense of a worker looking up at management - of course you're 1300 feet below the ground - but a social class view, looking at New Almaden Mines from the viewpoint of the worker. You might ask how's that possible. They didn't write anything down. They were possibly illiterate. They didn't have time. But, I'll try to show you that there are methodologies through which we can see life as they saw it. So, we'll see then that New Almaden was a microcosm of the emerging Capitalism of the 19th century.

Now, in regard to the Mexican worker, that's what we're trying to look at here, let us recognize and incidentally in the title of this workshop we said the Mexican-Chicano worker. In a sense, why do we use those two terms? Mexican refers to Mexico, from Mexico. Chicano refers to from the United States, socialized here in the United States. In this particular case, it comes out very clear that we are talking about a people who were dual; they were foreigners in their native land. They were Mexican because this was Mexico maybe two years before, and suddenly it became the United States, then we talk about Chicanos. So, Mexican-Chicanos, though there appears to be a contradiction in countries, it's all the same thing. But we have to hyphenate because of the conquest. Therefore, we'll use the term Mexican worker from now on, but basically we're talking about Chicano workers because they lived here and many were born here. We're talking about a people who came into American society as a subordinated people. They came in conquered as a result of the United States-Mexican War; they came in as the conquered. That sets the stage; the script is written as to who runs the mines and the society in general.

Secondly, it has all kinds of racial overtones as both speakers have spoken already, even in the society of California. In Mexican society before California became part of the United States there was already a stratification based on skin color. Of course, at the bottom was the Indian.

You had basically a Mexican population, both before 1848 and after, especially after, that consisted of a stratified society. Those who were landed, Mexican people who had been given large grants of lands and considered themselves of a higher social strata, and then the working - there was not an industrial society - they were vaqueros, they were cowboys, they were shepherders, they were the people who did the daily work. Mestizos they were called, mixed race (as if everybody wasn't a mixed race). But they were called the mixed race. In a sense, they were below. They were the progenitors of what the Chicano population is today. Then even before 1848, but especially after, a large number of people coming from Northern Mexico for the gold mines and so on. So, we had three categories of Mexican origin people as I have described.

The third thing that we have, and talking in general terms here, we suddenly have a confrontation between two vastly different cultures and economies. We have Mexico, which was California, Arizona, and the Southwest, a feudal society, that is mostly based on land, great landed estates. Land was not that valuable - you couldn't sell it, you couldn't buy it - money was not used very much. Life was led on a barter basis in a rather stable society. There was no investment, no capital of any kind, so to speak, in pre-American California and so we have a pre-industrial society moving along on a feudal economy and land that is suddenly confronted with an industrial, capitalism society. That was the United States. Coming out of the East were people who had already experienced the industrial revolution. The machine had revolutionized their life. They had already developed financial structures. There was a stock market, the New York Stock Market. The New Almaden stock was traded on the New York Stock Market.

The New York Quicksilver Mining Corporation that took over the mines was able to raise huge amounts of capital through Eastern investors. They had the know-how of how corporations run. There was no way that Mexican workers coming out of a feudal economy or a rural economy in Northern Mexico could think about competing with this highly structured and powerful financial structure that came in and took over the mine. So, when you ask, "Well, how is it that the Mexican workers ended subordinated on the lower rungs of the social ladder" - it's rather easy to understand. Power, knowledge, technology, all the same things that in a sense are still happening today.

The other thing has to do with numbers. Between 1848 and 1900, there was very little immigration from Mexico. There was the resident population that was here when it was Mexico and some people that came for the gold mines, though a lot of them went back, but basically there wasn't a great deal of immigration from Mexico. But the overwhelming numbers of Anglo Americans that did come after 1848 was the overpowering thing. 100,000 Anglo Americans came from the Midwest, from the East, and from the deep South in one year alone. 100,000. The total population of California in 1848 was only about 13,000 Mexican people. Suddenly 100,000 come in, and there's very little coming in from Mexico. So you see the imbalance right away in how the Mexican worker became the subordinated, bottom of the rung - some notches above the Indian - in the society of the 19th century.

It was actually not until the end of this period, 1910, when the Civil War broke out in Mexico, and the tremendous pool of agriculture in the United States and factories and mining and canneries and the need for low-paid labor that great numbers came, geographers tell us, the thing was pretty well frozen. By frozen I mean the corporations had already taken over the great land grants of the San Joaquin Valley and converted them into corporate farms. The canneries had already come in and established their hold on Santa Clara Valley and other parts of California. The land patterns were set. There's almost no way that the new Mexican immigration coming in 1910 could hope to acquire land other than a few small farms. It was all there. All they

could come into in 1900 and following was a highly stratified society, and they were locked in at the bottom. They were locked in before they came in. That was where New Almaden comes in.

During the same period, American business was emerging in the West, and there is no time to give you any details here, but not only were the great mines being established in New Mexico, Arizona, Texas, Nevada, and so on, but also the cattle industry. Huge investments were taking place through investment capital from the East to take over. At one time they drove 40,000 cattle from Texas to Arizona to establish a great cattle industry there. That takes a lot of capital. The railroads were being built. They were finished by 1879, but during those periods of building they were establishing cities and acquiring vast amounts of land under the control of the railroads: Southern Pacific, the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe. These became vast corporate powers that took over the Southwest and again, the Mexican workers were the railroad workers, the track workers, the field hands and so on. And that is the stratification that occurred.

A brief description of the Mexican workers – trying to see it from their viewpoint, how they lived. We have, after 1848 when the United States took over, surveyors immediately came around trying to establish the boundary lines and already talking about railroad lines. There was one who wrote in his diary – John Russell Bartlett, 1850, comes to the New Almaden Mines and he says:

We found laborers emerging every minute from the mine bent under the weight of their loads. The work is wholly performed by native Mexicans or Californians. The overseers and contractors who employ them being their countrymen, though of a better class. These men understand the management of their countrymen better than the American does and the Mexican laborers are better *avieros* (drivers of cattle). The laborers who bring up the ore to the surface are 200 men employed in various operations carried on here.

So we've had other descriptions, from Mary Foote, from *Scribner's Monthly*, and so on. Understand, we're talking about large numbers. 200 men is quite large in the 1850's. In the 1860's the total population of the city of San Jose was 6,000. At the same time on the hills south of the city there were 2,000 workers, 2,000 workers in the New Almaden Mines, most of whom were Mexican workers. That gives you some idea that we're not talking about a mine with just a few workers. The workers who hauled up this ore from 1300 feet below the surface were called *tanateros*. The *tanate* is this basket of ore that they carried up by their shoulders and their muscular power. They were, of course, the most oppressed of all.

What I would like to briefly summarize here is how do you get to the character of these people, how do you see life as they see it. You find out who they were. They were mostly Sonorans, people from Sonora. Who were the people from Sonora? I'm from Northern Sonora when it was still Mexico. My grandmother was born in Tucson, Arizona when it was still Northern Sonora. In a sense we're talking about my people. But I also went to the archives of the state of Sonora to see what they thought of the people who were leaving to work in the mines. I have a long quote here where the governor of Sonora says:

Our people are leaving us. Our farms are not being taken care of. The Americans have taken some of our most beautiful lands from us. We are left abandoned here. We want to get our people back. Those who are coming back are coming back beaten and robbed of their goods.

You know there was a whole band of bandits on the Yuma River, and the Mexican miners from the gold rush coming back with their gold dust would be deprived of whatever they were carrying back, automatically, after maybe a year's toil in the mines. They would be robbed, beaten, and killed. And so

the archives of the state of Sonora are full of laments by the Governor about our people are gone, our young people, our best people, our working people are gone. Also, the Sonorans are very conservative people, very religious people. And yet out of Sonora have come the great revolutions of Mexico. These people, Pancho Villa, all these people were from Sonora. Someone asked me today, "How is it you say that these people are very traditional, very conservative, and yet they are revolutionary?" Because these are the leaders of the strikes. And we should give credit to Francisco Valencia here who was, as far as I know, one of the first ever to discover strikes in 1862, 1865. You know, I've read articles in Chicano history of the railroad strike in LA of 1903, but not about the 1860's, foreign strikes led by Mexican workers. It's part of their character to be traditional, conservative, maybe in religion because they want to hold on to something, at least in their minds, but outside of that they're very political and very resistant to oppression.

We have all kinds of examples here of their self-help organizations. Sociedades Filantropicas, the mutual help organizations that they had formed, the Mexican Club, Club Mejicano, to help each other in mutual aid. All kinds of examples like that. All the photos of the schools here. There's one that shows the Mexican school, one that I got from the Stanford archives - there was, of course, a Mexican and English school - and at the bottom is written on that photo: "This school was established when the Mexican miners protested that their children were not getting the same kind of- schooling as the other children.

They were very political. I have photos of their Cinco de Mayo. Cinco de Mayo, 1862. That was happening right then. And they were already celebrating the 16th of September, Benito Juarez. There's an account of a mock funeral being held for Emperor Maximillian who had taken over Mexico. Highly political people. Far from the descriptions we have heard here of this harmonious, easy going people, who like to have just fandangos and dances and things like that.

As a postscript, when the New Almaden Mines closed down, or began to close down in the 1900's, the Mexican miners, of course, left. Many of them came down the hill to San Jose, and I have this, and here's where I got some oral history that was priceless. I interviewed an old man 5, 10 years age - he's probably dead now ... Espinosa, he was born up there - who said, "We came to San Jose and we were told by the police and the sheriff 'keep moving folks to Milpitas.'" I mean they would even take them to the edge of town. Keep moving. So as a result of that, they settled outside in the muddy, swampy areas east of San Jose, which is what became Sal Si Puedes, Get Out If You Can, which is where a few years later, in the 1930's, Cesar Chavez was born. Right there, just a few miles from where we're sitting. He came out of that Exodus, not that his folks came from up there, but the same people. Cesar Chavez was born out there. So we now have a connection between the Mexican worker in the New Almaden Mines, the urban cannery worker, and the farm worker. And it's a history that's continued to today, on and on. It's not different. Thank you.

We're trying to stick to our time, 20 minutes, no more. I'd like to point your attention to the photos on either side of you. They are extraordinarily valuable photos, most of which were taken in the 19th century, in the 1860's in particular. People often say, "Well, photos in the 1860's?" Yes, there were photos in the 1860's. In this case, there was a photographer who would go up and down California in an old wagon. He carried all of his equipment with him. And he'd come to the camps and so on and for a price offered to take pictures of everybody. And they took them, and a lot of them were preserved. So, they are good history.

Note on mercury poisoning

Mercury poisoning amongst the miners at New Almaden was one of our areas of inquiry as we did our research. It's certain that the miners were affected by the mercury they worked with. Dr. Soto refers in his remarks to the *tanateros*. In the early days of the mine these men brought ore to the surface in leather bags strapped to their backs. They emptied their loads into furnaces that heated the ore. The heat released mercury fumes, which rose in pipes where it was cooled and converted to liquid mercury.

The *tanateros* and furnace tenders worked in mercury fumes, which are extremely toxic. Additionally, all the mine workers – the miners themselves below the surface, the *tantateros*, and the furnace tenders – were exposed to mercury-impregnated dust. Later, the *tanateros* were replaced with lifts, but the problems of mercury fumes and dust persisted.

Dr. Soto explained in the panel discussion at the conference that those with heavy mercury exposure could get a disease called salivation. This is a horrible, torturous disease where the victims actually salivate to death.

When we did our research into mercury poisoning, we went to the office of the County Board of Supervisors to look at medical and statistical records. We were told that all the documents were burned during a fire. The company doctors' records we reviewed were also silent about mercury poisoning. Despite this difficulty, there is considerable information on the causes and effects of mercury poisoning on mine and other workers. I think that it is important to do further research on mercury poisoning amongst the workers at the New Almaden Mine, and I want to encourage anyone interested to follow up.

Research Sources for New Almaden Quicksilver Mines

San Jose State University, Chicano Library.

Archive files of Antonio Soto, Francisco Valencia, and Graham.

Purham New Almaden Quicksilver Mine Museum

In town of New Almaden, south of San Jose

San Jose City Historical Museum

San Jose Main Library, History Room

Library has microfilm of good newspaper articles

Santa Clara County Supervisors Office, Library

Files include some limited materials

Other Sources

- University of California, Berkeley. Bancroft Library
- Stanford University Library
- San Francisco State University Library

Biographical Sketch of Joe Graham

Joe was born in Baltimore in 1907, and was raised in a small, rural community composed primarily of white and black working class families. In his youth, he worked as a grocery clerk.

The 1929 Great Economic Depression affected his entire perspective of reality. He became one of the millions of unemployed in a world of breadlines, poverty and hunger. He became acquainted with dustbowlers and ex-sharecroppers, and participated in survival struggles with them amidst brutal vigilante attacks.

Responding to the suffering and pain, leaders came forward, mobilizing massive numbers of people – men and women of all races, ethnic origins and religions. As a result, the FD Administration and Congress responded with direct food relief, enacted a jobs program (the Works Project Administration – WPA), a program for young people (Civilian Conservation Corps – CCC), and more.

In 1935, Joe moved to Los Angeles, where he heard work was available. During this period, the Congress for Industrial Organizations (CIO) was founded. It launched a national union organizing campaign. Joe participated in this great union upsurge.

Several years later, he met Simon Reyes, an Arizona copper miner, at a CIO Convention. Simon told Joe the CIO Miners' Union was secretly organizing his camp in Clifton-Morenci. He said the union felt strong enough to soon come out openly and call for an NLRB election. He asked if Joe could volunteer his help. Joe left L.A. for C-M. There, he distributed leaflets, talked to the miners about his union experiences and the benefits of unionism. The miners won the election and they negotiated a first-time contract.

Later, married to Frieda, who shared his life's commitments, and with a growing family, Joe became a welder and chief shop steward in a large steel fabricating plant.

Throughout Joe's long life, there were many other struggles (active support for the United Farm Workers, leadership in San Jose's affordable housing movement, and more). His dedication to the principles of the labor movement and well-being of working people has remained a constant.

Biographical Sketch of Anthony (Tony/Antonio) Soto

Anthony Soto was born to a well-established Mexican ranching family in Tucson, Arizona in 1921. Tony was a quiet gentle, soft-spoken man who at the core of his being believed that Christians had the ultimate responsibility of caring about the less fortunate. He never ceased in his unfailing loyalty and dedication to working for the poor and causes against injustice.

Anthony came to East San Jose in the 1960s as a pastor of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. He was the first California director of the Cursillo Movement an intensive program that supported grass roots leadership training and community organizing. His commitment to social justice was manifested through his participation in acts of civil disobedience in the 1960's and the 1970's. The movement sought to get the people into the political arena and change the systems that were oppressing them. Mr. Soto was also critical of the Catholic Church's lack of recognition of Chicano spirituality. Mr. Soto left the Church in 1974 and married a parish activist Phyllis Armas, who became a great partner for him in his new ministry.

Mr. Soto founded San Jose's Center for Employment Training (CET) in 1967. CET has become a national model for job training. He was also involved in La Comunidad de Ministerios Christianos a Spanish-speaking liturgical community group.

Antonio received a doctorate in sociology and was a professor in the College of Social Work at San Jose State University where he taught Sociology and Mexican American Studies.

Dr. Soto is author of *The Chicano and the Church* and has published more than 20 articles on Chicano history and culture. He died in 1996 and is greatly missed by family, friends and members of the community.

Biographical Sketch of Francisco Valencia

Francisco Valencia completed requirements for the Master of Arts in Mexican American Studies at San Jose State University in 1977. His thesis was titled, *New Almaden and the Mexican*. It is the most authoritative work on the subject to date. Mr. Valencia conducted oral histories and interviews with historians and community members. This work investigated many primary sources in specialized libraries and research centers in the Bay Area.