



From Yesterday's California by Russell Leadabrand et al. Courtesy of E. A. Seemann Publishing, Inc.

This 1656 French map, like others of the period, depicted California as an island separated from the North American mainland by a "Red Sea."

# California

Writing in 1889, Britain's James Bryce found California to be "the most striking state in the Union . . . capable of standing alone in the world." Lord Bryce was neither the first nor last commentator to accept the state on its own mythic terms. Indeed, scholars have lately begun to study California as if it *were* a separate country, one on which the neighboring United States has come to rely for sophisticated technology, specialty agriculture, political innovation, television programming, and the latest lifestyles. Just as Canadians self-consciously resist "cultural imperialism" from the south, so many Eastern Americans now profess alarm over creeping "Californianization" from the West. Here, historian James Rawls surveys the ups and downs of the California Dream in the popular imagination; sociologist Ted Bradshaw considers—and qualifies—the concept of California as the world's premier "postindustrial" society; and critic Sally Woodbridge traces the nationwide diffusion of California's unique residential architecture.



## VISIONS AND REVISIONS

*by James J. Rawls*

One morning in 1962, commuters crossing San Francisco's Bay Bridge were greeted by a billboard emblazoned with the number 17,341,416, the projected population of New York State on January 1, 1963. Alongside this number was a running electronic tally of the estimated increase in California's population, then growing at a rate of one person every 54 seconds.

By New Year's Day, 1963, California had surged ahead to become, by official estimate, the most populous state in the

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Union. Governor Edmund G. Brown, Sr., the father of the present governor, proclaimed a four-day celebration—"California First Days"—and called for "the biggest party the state has ever seen." In Truckee, an official delegation ceremoniously welcomed the latest carload of newcomers as they crossed the state line from Nevada. Jubilant pundits predicted a rosy future. The state's population, it was widely believed, would reach 22 million by 1970, 30 million by 1980, and by the turn of the century would be nearly equal to that of France.

### The Best of Everything

California's population trends had been clear since the early 1950s. Indeed, in each decade of the 20th century, the state's population had grown at a rate three or four times that of the nation as a whole. Even before the territory was acquired by the United States, California had been highly regarded as a place to live, even if its Hispanic and Indian inhabitants, in the view of covetous visitors from the East, left something to be desired. A French traveler in the late 1830s, for example, found California, with its fertile valleys and Mediterranean climate, "ideally suited for raising animals, grains, and vines." But he lamented that it was "inhabited by a people for whom life's supreme happiness consists of horseback riding and sleeping."

In searching for the origins of what has come to be called the California Dream, one encounters the California Imperative: An extraordinary land deserved an extraordinary people. The corollary followed logically: Unworthy occupants could rightfully be expelled or barred. Both British and French visitors voiced the argument, but it was the Americans who adopted it, justifying their 1846-48 war with Mexico on the grounds that the United States had a "manifest destiny" to seize and develop California (and any other real estate north of the Rio Grande).

The Americans who began arriving soon after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which sealed the conquest, were confident that they could create in California a civilization on the shores of the Pacific that at last would equal the beauty and richness of the land itself. From the beginning, California was somehow

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*A German caricature of a California gold miner, 1850. Few prospectors amassed fortunes; the entrepreneurs who provided the Forty-Niners with such staples as meat (Philip Armour) and blue jeans (Levi Strauss) fared better.*

*Courtesy of the Bancroft Library.*

special, somehow more attractive than other “virgin” territories. There were fewer Indians than in the prairie states, and they were relatively docile. The farmland in Iowa was perhaps a bit richer than in California’s Central Valley, but Iowa had harsh winters. The climate in the Deep South was as warm as California’s, but it was also humid and fever-ridden. Unlike the Corn Belt states, California had a coastline and, in San Francisco, one of the world’s great harbors.

For a century and a quarter, this new California civilization grew and prospered. From around the country and the world, millions of would-be Californians arrived seeking something they had not been able to find at home. It was not, of course, always the same “something,” and whatever it was, the newcomers didn’t always find it. Yet, from the beginning, the *idea* of California among Americans has been even more alluring than the reality. If Texas was great, California was grand, and the few voices dissenting from this view of the state sounded, until the past decade, distinctly minor chords.

The *major* chords are familiar.

First, California has long been painted as America’s own New World, a land where almost anyone can realize his particu-

lar dream of economic success. One sees something of this in the early European and American views of the state, but it was the Gold Rush, beginning in 1848, that made the word "California" nearly synonymous with "opportunity"—to Europeans and Asians as well as Americans. Ironically, even at the height of the Gold Rush, the odds of a California miner making a big strike were slim. Yet people kept on coming, enticed by the railroad huckstering of the 1870s and '80s, the undeniable fertility of the vast Central Valley, the discovery of oil near Los Angeles in 1892, the glitter of Hollywood during the 1920s.

During the Great Depression, when 1.2 million Californians were out of work, California still beckoned to hundreds of thousands of migrants. Ma Joad, in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), tells us that she had "seen the han'bills fellas pass out, an' how much work they is, an' high wages an' all." In fact, the Joads and other Dust Bowl refugees from Oklahoma and Arkansas found neither enough jobs nor high pay. Yet, the "han'bills"—in the form of newspaper ads and Chamber of Commerce brochures—continued to work their magic as a real economic boom began during the 1940s and '50s.

### **Tall, Dark, and Lissome**

Climate is a second item. As early as 1840, author Richard Henry Dana had flatly asserted that "California is blessed with a climate of which there can be no better in the world." Kevin Starr, in his *Americans and the California Dream* (1973), called the state "an American Mediterranean." This image of the state as a land of perpetual sunshine—"It Never Rains in Southern California," as the song goes—obviously appeals to many Midwesterners and Easterners. One suspects that the annual New Year's Day telecast of the Rose Bowl Parade in Pasadena—with its views of enviable men and women sauntering in shirt sleeves under palm trees and blue skies—accounts for a large part of the yearly migration to California.

California's benign climate, it is said, also makes the state a particularly healthy place in which to live. During the 1870s, southern California welcomed thousands of invalids who believed, erroneously, that the region's warm, clean air would cure tuberculosis. For years, older Americans have flocked to California to soak their arthritic limbs in the soothing ultraviolet. So healthy was the state, declared Stanford University President David Starr Jordan around the turn of the century, that California college girls were more robust than college girls in Massachusetts. "They are taller," he said, "broader-shouldered,

thicker-chested (with 10 cubic inches more lung capacity), have larger biceps and calves, and a superiority of tested strength."

The imposing stature of California women suggests a fourth element of the California Dream: Romance. The association is even older than the territory. In Garci Rodríguez Ordóñez de Montalvo's romance, *Las Sergas de Esplandián*, published in Spain in 1510, the mythical island of California, which gave its name to the region discovered some two decades later, was peopled with passionate dark-skinned Amazons. Romantic California is the theme of numerous plays (e.g., William Saroyan's *Hello Out There*) and countless Hollywood films, from *San Francisco* to the *Bikini Beach* series where bronzed and nubile youths frolic to the music of Frankie Avalon. As a 1979 article in the *Los Angeles Times* put it: "Sex and California. The two seem to go together."

Finally, California has always been regarded as a tolerant state, a place where unconventional political movements, personal eccentricities, or unusual fads and fashions could bloom unmolested.\* During the late 19th century, California nurtured an impressive variety of short-lived utopian communities—Altruria, Fountain Grove, Kaweah, Pisgah Grande—all intended to chart the putative future course of humanity. The idea of California as the harbinger of the American future—from campus turmoil and tax revolts to group therapy, community colleges, freeways, and shopping malls—has become a cliché. "What we want the whole country to be," Governor Edmund Brown proudly proclaimed in 1963, "California already is."

### Nothing Left?

It is clear, in retrospect, that 1963 was the high-water mark of mythical California, a fact understandably lost upon most observers at the time. Yet, as New York State slipped away into the doldrums of second place, former governor (and then U.S. Chief Justice) Earl Warren warned his fellow Californians: "I would not celebrate with fireworks or dancing in the streets. Mere numbers do not mean happiness." Few paid any attention.

As Warren predicted, the remarkable economic expansion and population growth of the 1950s and '60s have not been an unalloyed boon. Smog hangs over scenic Yosemite Valley (not to mention Los Angeles), and California's alcoholism rate is second only to Nevada's. One-third of all U.S. heroin deaths occur in-

\*The state's record of ethnic strife (with the Anglos pitted, seriatim, against Mexicans, Indians, Chinese, and Japanese) indicates that, when it came to rivalry for land, jobs, or status, tolerance tended to ebb.

### CALIFORNIA: A CHRONOLOGY

- 1533 Fortún Jiménez of Spain discovers Baja (Lower) California.
- 1535 Conquistador Hernando Cortés visits Baja California in search of the mythical seven cities of gold.
- 1542 Looking for the Northwest Passage, Spanish navigator Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo is the first European to set foot in what is now the state of California. His expedition reaches what would later be the Oregon-California border.
- 1579 England's Sir Francis Drake anchors north of San Francisco Bay and claims the land for Queen Elizabeth.
- 1769 Father Junípero Serra establishes the mission of San Diego, the first of nine Spanish outposts he sets up in California.
- 1780 Non-Indian population: 600.
- 1781 Spanish governor Felipe de Neve founds Los Angeles.
- 1821 Mexico wins independence from Spain.
- 1846 On June 10, Americans in Sonoma, California, establish the "Bear Flag Republic." It lasts until July 9, when they hear news of war with Mexico and enlist in the U.S. Army.
- 1848 Gold is discovered at Sutter's Mill, northeast of Sacramento. Nine days later, Mexico signs the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, ceding to the United States all of present-day California.
- 1850 California becomes the 31st state.
- 1852 State population: 255,000.
- 1869 Central Pacific Railroad meets Union Pacific tracks at Promontory Point, Utah.
- 1871 Nativist mob murders 15 Chinese in Los Angeles.

side the state. In great rings around the state's cities, the geometry of tract housing has replaced that of green cropland and orchards. Increasingly, California is perceived elsewhere in America as offering less than expected, a victim of its own successes.

The mid-1960s in California were ushered in by the smoke of a burning Los Angeles. The six-day 1965 Watts riots—a field day for social critics and photojournalists—were undeniable proof that California had not fulfilled the expectations of all who had come. That Watts was only the first of the nation's black riots of the 1960s—Detroit, Newark, Washington soon followed—did

- 1906 San Francisco earthquake kills 452. Los Angeles's first motion picture studio is established.
- 1921 "California, Here I Come" is introduced by Al Jolson.
- 1940 State population: 6,907,387.
- 1942 Three months after Pearl Harbor, 93,000 Japanese Californians (two-thirds of them American citizens) are interned. They are released three years later, at the end of World War II.
- 1948 California becomes the nation's largest agricultural producer, surpassing Iowa.
- 1950 State population: 10,586,223.
- 1952 State law discouraging ownership of land by Orientals is ruled unconstitutional.
- 1964 Free Speech Movement disrupts Berkeley campus.
- 1965 Watts (Los Angeles) riots. 34 killed, over 1,000 injured.
- 1966 Black Panther Party is founded in Oakland by Bobby Seale and Huey Newton. Cesar Chavez forms United Farm Workers Organizing Committee.
- 1974 Los Angeles County experiences its first population drop in 123 years. 1974 population: 7,003,000.
- 1976 State legislature enacts a moratorium on the construction of nuclear power plants in California.
- 1978 Californians overwhelmingly approve Proposition 13, a constitutional amendment cutting property taxes by an average of 56 percent.
- 1979 State population: 22,694,000.
- 1980 Proposition 9, a proposal to halve the state income tax, is defeated by a 3 to 2 margin on June 3.

not seem to matter. One Watts rioter told a reporter: "Everywhere they say 'Go to California! California's the great pot o'gold at the end of the rainbow.' Well, now we're here in California, and there ain't no place else to go, and the only pot I seen's the kind they peddle at Sixtieth and Avalon."

The following year, novelist-essayist Joan Didion, writing in the *Saturday Evening Post*, described the desperate quest for the good life among the faded bungalows and tacky motels of the sun-drenched San Bernardino Valley. "Here is where . . . the divorce rate is double the national average and where one person in every 38 lives in a trailer. Here is the last stop for all those



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who came from somewhere else, for all those who have drifted away from the cold and the past and the old ways."

Didion's portrayal of California (her essay was entitled "How Can I Tell Them There's Nothing Left?") was part of a new genre of critical literature—the minor chords now in concert—that emerged during the late 1960s and early '70s.\* The national market for such books was just about saturated when the 1978 mass murder-suicide of the (California-based) People's Temple in Guyana—and the assassinations of San Francisco mayor George Moscone and councilman Harvey Milk a few weeks later—revived interest in California's alleged dementia.

In the latest outpouring of pop commentary, one finds all the old themes: opportunity, climate, health, romance, freedom. But they have been turned inside out, frisked for clues as to what went wrong.

The image of California as the land of opportunity, for example, has been cited by several observers as a *cause* of California's recent tragedies. The Gold Rush syndrome—high hopes, soon dashed—makes Californians especially susceptible, the argument goes, to the appeal of self-proclaimed messiahs.

### Too Much Sun

Historian Henry Steele Commager, a New Englander, implicates the climate. California, he contends, has become "a society that worships open air and play rather than work." Television producer Norman Lear, a resident of the state, suggests that California's weather attracts "emotionally unwrapped people." And a 1979 article in the *New York Times* blames the sun for the "tradition of failure" among California's professional football teams: The sunshine, intoned the *Times*, makes life too easy and "restrains the competitive fury" necessary for victory on the gridiron.†

In these sour analyses, California is no longer seen as a land of health, but as a dark precinct of social pathology. One 1978 article in the *Sacramento Bee* reported that New Yorkers (oddly enough) commonly perceive Californians as having "a love affair with death." San Franciscans speak of the next earthquake even as they build more skyscrapers. But the allure of death is

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\*See, for example, Raymond Dasmann's *The Destruction of California* (1965), Richard Lillard's *Eden in Jeopardy* (1966), William Bronson's *How to Kill a Golden State* (1968), Curt Gentry's *The Last Days of the Late, Great State of California* (1968), Kenneth Lamott's *Anti-California* (1971), Michael Davie's *California: The Vanishing Dream* (1972), and Peter Schrag's *How the West was Lost* (1973).

†This generalization does not seem to apply to the Miami Dolphins, Super Bowl Champions in 1972 and 1973.

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not limited to the northern part of the state. Witness the nonchalant remark of one writer in coastal southern California, where dry-season brush fires are a chronic hazard: "We live, of course, with the fear of fire any day. . . . This has a good deal to do with what attracts people here, that vicarious thrill of living in a place that may at any moment be destroyed."

California's image as a land of romance has been transformed into one of frolicking immorality. The television and newspaper coverage given to the all-embracing sexual proclivities of People's Temple leader Jim Jones and to Harvey Milk's self-proclaimed homosexuality spurred sizeable verbal barages. The arch-conservative *Manchester* (New Hampshire) *Union Leader*, for example, denounced San Francisco as "the Sodom of the United States." The *Union Leader's* sentiments may represent an extreme view, but they illustrate a general drift. As regards California's vaunted social freedom, the consensus elsewhere seems to be that the state has far too much of it—and the rest of America should take heed. (For what it's worth, even *Pravda* has chimed in, saying California is "an example of the moral and social bankruptcy of bourgeois society.")

The recurring critique of California—by insiders and outsiders—during the past 15 years has perhaps had a certain corrective effect, though in itself it is no more accurate than the notions it supplanted. The old California Dream and the new California Nightmare are both soaring abstractions, each tethered to Reality, but only to part of it.

In a sense, there is a "California" and there is a California, and neither Pangloss nor Jeremiah would find much of interest in the latter. As in Rhode Island or Indiana, the air may be a little dirtier than it was 15 years ago, the suburbs more crowded, the traffic a lot heavier, the scenery a bit more cluttered; but for most people, life proceeds no more remarkably than it does anywhere else. Perhaps the rest of America needs "California" as both a threat and a promise.