

They Called it a Boom: Nation Building in Coronado, California in 1888

By
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On January 9, 1888, the *Coronado Evening Mercury* ran on its front page an announcement of the Coronado Beach Company's (CBC) successful land auction that sold 609 lots in less than eight hours.² With profits totaling \$181,550 and new lot listings promised, "in a very few days" all appeared as if Coronado would be the boomtown that would never bust.³ These auctions were the brainchild of Elisha Babcock, a Midwestern businessman intent on capitalizing on the Southern California land boom of the 1880s. Legend surrounding his successful endeavor claimed he had envisioned the resort island of Coronado while hunting rabbits with his business partner H.L. Story.⁴ The success of Babcock's endeavor rested on publicity reaching the East through the mass circulated press on the very rail lines that made the boom possible — perpetuating an image of Coronado as a sophisticated, growing metropolis that was both a safe return on investment and a genteel environment for elite tourists.⁵ Land speculators, known as boosters, and their urban publicity campaigns understood the West's integration into the nation as dependent on the development and success of Western cities.⁶ Coronado was to become an essential component in the nineteenth-century project of nation building, with Eastern civilization permeating and eventually eliminating the frontier.

¹ The author, being also an editor, recused himself from the editing process regarding this article. It received no special treatment and was required to conform to all standard requirements.

² *Coronado Evening Mercury*, January 9, 1888, 1.

³ *Coronado Evening Mercury*, January 9, 1888, 1.

⁴ Larry Booth, Roger Olmsted, and Richard F. Pourade, "Portrait of a Boom Town: San Diego in the 1880's," *California Historical Quarterly*, 50, no. 4 (December 1971): 373.

⁵ Gloria Rick Lothrop, "The Boom of the '80's Revisited," *Southern California Quarterly* 75, no. 3/4 (Fall/Winter 1993): 292.

⁶ William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991) 34-35.

Facilitating this publicity campaign were the local publishers of the *Coronado Evening Mercury*. Its articles and advertisements echoed the desires of Anglo men across the nation determined to establish themselves through the economic opportunities of the West in what historian Susan Lee Johnson calls “becoming white.”⁷ For these Anglo men, participating in cultural, social, and economic practices that followed the structures of dominant heteronormative, Anglo-American constructions of race, class, and gender would lead to their social elevation to whiteness.⁸ These each had a dominant component that constructed whiteness. The racial hierarchy placed Anglo men above all others, with ethnic Others relegated to undesirable jobs and exclusion from white society. The class hierarchy privileged those in control of capital, known as the bourgeoisie. The middle-class internalized bourgeois values and practices to the point that they became a natural way of life, expressing itself in bourgeois hegemony. The gender hierarchy placed heteronormative masculinity at the top, meaning the expectation was masculine men and feminine women, with white society deeming this arrangement as normal. Through discourse that supported these ideas, the CBC and the *Coronado Evening Mercury* were active participants in the growing project of nation building in America, furthering the ideology of Anglo, middle-class male dominance in the West as an extension of the growing race, class, and gender hierarchies of the East. Their use of middle-class hegemony, heteronormative masculinity, and exclusion of those deemed ethnic undesirables provided the social scaffolding for the continuation of the great American project.

For Babcock and the paper, the first priority was to assure readers of the existence of economic opportunity leading to the middle-class and a safe investment for Eastern capitalists.

⁷ Susan Lee Johnson, *Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000) 275-276.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 275-276.

For this, the paper used a common tactic among the mass circulated press surrounding the boom: strategically disguising advertisements for the real estate in the town as news articles.⁹ These covert advertisements in Coronado utilize several angles, including direct reports of the success of auctions, indirect reports of town growth through the building of infrastructure, and local sightings of prominent visitors from back East.¹⁰ These “reports” spoke to two audiences Babcock needed for his campaign: the Eastern elite who could invest heavily and stimulate the local economy through tourism, and the Midwestern everyman who sought the middle-class. Announcements for daily shows at Leach’s Opera house abound, as well as a report of Mrs. H. L. Story’s masquerade ball for the local cotillion, which assured the former audience to a continuity of Eastern society.¹¹ On January 14, 1888, several covert advertisements assuaged the elite’s anxieties concerning profit, claiming that “all hotels are full” and “every store-keeper...has more business then [sic] he can attend to.”¹² The image of Coronado as a haven of middle-class recreation would not be lost on the latter audience, but rather act as incentive. Those willing to abide by the maxims extolling the Protestant Ethic placed in the paper’s “Pungent Paragraphs” were free to participate in the improving society of visiting tourists. Announcements for local unions and fraternity meetings throughout the paper could assuage anxieties about powerlessness in the face of capital.¹³ Speaking to both audiences about the economic growth and possibilities in the town reinforced the existing ideology that the West could be incorporated into the nation through bourgeois hegemony, binding classes of Americans together in their whiteness.

⁹ Lothrop, “The Boom of the ‘80’s Revisited,” 292.

¹⁰ *Coronado Evening Mercury*, January 9-14, 16, &17, 1888, 1-4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1-4.

¹² *Coronado Evening Mercury*, January 14, 1888, 3.

¹³ *Coronado Evening Mercury*, January 17, 1888, 1.

“Becoming white” cannot be accomplished through economic practices alone, however, and the cultural practices surrounding heteronormative masculinity are an essential component. Historian Peter Boag argues that the end of the nineteenth-century produced the “‘modern’ sexual and gender system” predicated on the two-sex/two-gender binary of masculine males and feminine females performing their gendered identity.¹⁴ This expectation of how biological sex would manifest in expressed gender became collectively understood in America as normal. Within the Gilded Age, historian Dana Elder argues that normative masculinity required the visible distinction between oneself and undesirables through proper deportment, appearance, and manners, which became the responsibility of any man who gained social and economic mobility.¹⁵ For those who intended to achieve their middle-class whiteness, performing genteel masculinity would be a major concern, which was reflected in the *Coronado Evening Mercury* through instructive pieces meant to guide middle-class newcomers.

One of these instructive pieces, published on January 13, 1888, described a courtship game during an Apple Bee, a typical harvest festival that was also a community party. The article explained that a young man’s struggle for kisses from young women during the courtship ritual had far greater significance than a simple kissing game. While a young woman may “writhe from within his arms,” this struggle would decide “his reputation for manliness and gallantry,” bestowing on him either “victory or eternal disgrace,” dependent solely on his ability to steal a kiss.¹⁶ Instructions on masculinity continued with the January 16th issue in 1888, which ran a cautionary tale of J.S. Williams. Williams, a recent emigre from the Midwest who had come to make his fortune, spent everything he had to get drunk nightly until his reforming mother-in-law

¹⁴ Peter Boag, *Re-Dressing America’s Frontier Past*, (Berkeley, University of California Press: 2011), 4-5.

¹⁵ Dana C. Elder, “A Rhetoric of Etiquette for the “True Man” of the Gilded Age,” *Rhetoric Review* 21, no. 2 (2002): 150-169.

¹⁶ Franc Wilkie, “Country Olia-Podrida,” *Coronado Evening Mercury*, January 13, 1888, 1.

arrived.¹⁷ In the article, “Courage and Suicide,” which ran on January 11, 1888 following several town suicides, the example of a man facing severe financial ruin by facing his “grim fate” and continuing to live until “Dame Fortune” came to rescue him as recompense for not taking the cowardly way out, was used to demonstrate definitive masculine heroism.¹⁸ Taken together, the image of a dominant, restrained, stalwart masculinity emerged as supreme when compared to feminized males who were cowardly, subordinated, and intemperate. The *Coronado Evening Mercury* demonstrated this to the two audiences of nation building: those who pay for the nation and those who manage the builders. Those who manage understand their responsibility to perform middle-class values in exchange for their economic mobility, while the capitalists were reassured of Coronado’s reliable masculinity free from the undesirable element, at least among white folks. Thus, this mutual understanding transforms heteronormative masculinity into a tool of white hegemony.

With economic opportunity and middle-class masculinity secure, Coronado and its paper turned to the last obstacle to their local manifestation of the great American project. Historian Stacey Smith argues that the fervor in California instigated by white free soiler anxieties about their own subjugation by capital led to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. By clearly associating the bound labor of Chinese coolies with Southern chattel slavery, free soilers were able to extend this association to all Chinese immigrants.¹⁹ Diplomatic historian Yucheng Qin takes this argument further, claiming that Chinese native place associations (called huiguan but named the Six Companies in the American press) were entangled into the net of white anxiety by incorrect associations between the companies, coolie contracts, and fighting tongs and highbinders who

¹⁷ “He Got Drunk,” *Coronado Evening Mercury*, January 16, 1888, 2.

¹⁸ “Courage and Suicide,” *Coronado Evening Mercury*, January 11, 1888, 2.

¹⁹ Stacey L. Smith, *Freedom’s Frontier: California and the Struggle over Unfree Labor, Emancipation, and Reconstruction*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

were seen as protectors of bound labor.²⁰ A similar preoccupation develops in the *Coronado Evening Mercury*, with several anonymous opinion pieces calling for the removal of all Chinese labor. In these articles, the authors expressed concerns over the influence of the Chinese Six Companies, who seemingly controlled with impunity large amounts of immigrant Chinese workers who only bring disease, opium, and highbinders.²¹ However, Chinese labor could not simply be eliminated because of their essential participation in nation building through their construction of infrastructure, the capital infused into the state from taxation, and the capital brought into the economy by Chinese merchants.²² Therefore, an important distinction between the noble immigrant and the corrupting influence is made in articles about the Chinese, both racializing through vilification and feminization. On January 9, 1888 a report of the public beating of On Hay, “a respectable citizen for a coolie,” by highbinder Jim Lee demonstrates this in its description of both Lee and Hay.²³ Lee was described as a “fiendish,” “Chinese tough” who felt justified in his beating of a fellow countryman for blackmail, filling the role of villain. Hay, despite his respectability, needed protection from onlookers and white police to stop the attack and had to be persuaded to swear out a complaint against his attacker, thus displaying feminized weakness.²⁴ The former encompasses the worst manifestations of humanity, while the latter needs the paternal protection and guidance of white men. The discourse of the paper socially sanctions the existing racial hierarchy privileging whiteness, while at the same time subverting the economic and cultural contributions Chinese immigrants could make to Coronado

²⁰ Youcheng Qin, *The Diplomacy of Nationalism: The Six Companies and China's Policy toward Exclusion*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009).

²¹ *Coronado Evening Mercury*, January 10, 1888, 2.

²² Qin, *The Diplomacy of Nationalism*, 37.

²³ “Murderous Highbinder,” *Coronado Evening Mercury*, January 9, 1888 3.

²⁴ “Murderous Highbinder,” *Coronado Evening Mercury*, January 9, 1888 3.

as a town and America as a nation.²⁵ For the publishers, and ultimately Babcock, using narratives vilifying highbinders, gamblers, and other vice ridden immigrants while feminizing the industrious immigrant who requires the care of Anglo protection is a local interpretation of Chinese exclusion that preserves the nation building project.

The promises of the West as a transformative place for Anglo males were essential components of nation building, and thus were internalized into the collective American memory. The myths and memories of the West were used to construct meaning during the period of nation building, just as they are used to construct national meaning in the present, making the revision of this memory necessary if a realistic present-day understanding of the elusive American Dream is to be had. Rereading Coronado's image cultivated by Babcock and the paper with the context of its purpose in mind is key. Ultimately, this was an entrepreneurial endeavor tinged with nationalism, meant to make a profit. To do so effectively—to make possible his profits—Babcock and his associates actively fostered power dynamics at the local level in ways harmonious with national dynamics regarding race, class, and gender. Viewing Coronado this way could lead to a reordering of the collective memory of the American West, and ultimately a reorientation away from the American Dream as the genii that will never come.

On January 14, 1888, the *Coronado Evening Mercury* ran an opinion piece discussing the merits of calling Coronado a boom town. The piece claimed that a boom was neither an irresistible force or the work of fate, but rather a community-based project resting on the individual, where a “neighbor imitates the good example, thus setting a pattern to another,” until, “great and mighty cities will rise and expand as if some good genii had breathed upon the

²⁵ For more on Booster discourse, see Paul J. P. Sandul, *California Dreaming: Boosterism, Memory, and Rural Suburbs in the Golden State*, (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2014).

land.”²⁶ Those back East may have called it a boom, but Babcock and the paper understood that organizing their society according to established Eastern gendered, middle- and upper-class whiteness would make Coronado one of those good neighbors, doing its part toward building “great and mighty cities.”²⁷ There were critiques in the paper about the inefficiency of the post office, substandard sidewalk grading, and an overcrowded jail, but the narrative never diverged from Coronado as a transformative place, both for those willing to abide by the social, cultural, and economic practices of whiteness, and for the frontier in need of a nation.

²⁶ *Coronado Evening Mercury*, January 14, 1888, 2.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

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