Issue Brief: Latino and Asian Americans in the California Gold Rush

Key Words
Latino, Asian, California Gold Rush, Immigration, Coolies, Foreign Miner Tax, Forty-Niners

Description
This issue brief will focus on the treatment of Latino and Asian Americans during the California Gold Rush. Both minority groups immigrated to United States during the 1800s in search for a better life. During this time the search for Gold was at an all time high, providing jobs to many immigrants.

Key Points
- A Gold rush is a period of time where workers migrate into areas where large discovery’s of commercial quantities of gold have been found
  - The Gold Rush in the United States took place in North Carolina, Georgia, and California.
- In 1850 just over 1,000 Asian American immigrants entered the United States. They formed the largest minority mining group.
- Many Mexican miners were from the Mexican town Sonora formed another major minority group
- Both Mexican and Chinese immigrants were despised and categorized as the ultimate foreigners by Native Americans.
- The two groups were banned from many of the digging locations and were forced to mine in areas that were deemed unprofitable by white miners.
- In 1850 the Legislature passed the first law taxing foreign miners, requiring them to pay $20 dollars a month for a license to work in the gold fields.

Images
2 http://www.calgoldrush.com/lb_sets/03mexicans.html
On January 24, 1848, James W. Marshall discovered pieces of shiny metal in the water wheel of the lumber mill he was building for Sacramento pioneer John Sutter. The two privately tested the pieces and discovered that they were pieces of gold. Although they tried to keep their findings private, rumors began to fly and soon the word was out. Heavily publicized in the local newspapers, many Americans flocked to the mining fields of California in pursuit of gold. They were joined by immigrants who had heard the news of gold and wanted a piece of the dream. Two of the larger immigrant miner groups were from Asians and Latinos. Although, some of these immigrant miners had previous experience in mining fields, many were prohibited from digging in most locations.

During the late 1840s, many Chinese citizens heard about the “riches” to be made in different countries. At the time, the Chinese government had made it a crime to emigrate out of china hoping to stop western influence on the Chinese people. Many Chinese people didn’t take heed to this law and left to pursue a better life. Some left willingly while others were tricked into labor contracts to work in mines and plantations in South America and South Africa, where there was a great need for workers. Many Chinese men who went to work in the mines and plantations were farmers who did not have any skills in the mining field. These unskilled laborers were called “coolies” which originates from a Chinese word meaning worker muscle for hire. Many coolies found died en route to the mines and plantations because of the deplorable conditions on the ships. Those that survived didn’t have it any better and worked in unsafe and dangerous locations.

Other Chinese coolies came to California by clipper ships, raising the population of Chinese people from 100 in 1848 to over 25,000 by 1852. Despite being the largest ethnic minority group of miners, they were despised and treated poorly by Native Americans, who saw the Chinese as the ultimate foreigner. Even though they were banned from most of the current digging sites, the
Chinese didn’t let this obstacle stand in their way. Many set about working sites that had become deemed unprofitable by white miners, carefully searching for whatever gold remained.

Mexicans also formed another major minority mining groups. Numerous Mexicans came from the mining state of Sonora to the area east of Stockton with hopes of finding jobs in the mines. In the beginning they staked their claims and mined in peace with the different miners who arrived daily in California. Their “dry digging” technique that they had learned in their native land was admired by the other miners. Since they already had experience mining from home they were very successful in mining gold in California. Their success created animosity by Anglo miners who soon begun to intimidate the Hispanic miners out of their camps with threats of violence or committing violent acts against some of them. The Anglo miners and politicians launched a campaign to force the Mexicans out of the mines permanently by creating exclusionary standards similar to Jim Crow laws. Some Hispanic miners didn’t let this stop them and continued to work in the fields despite the dangers.

The minority miner’s determination angered the Anglo miners who called for something to done about the foreign immigrants. In 1850 the California legislature passed the first law taxing foreign miners, requiring them to pay a twenty dollar a month fee for a license to work the gold fields. This fee was claimed to reimburse the state for the costs of protecting them and keeping order. Foreign miners were not making such a large profit due to being forced to work in less profitable sites. In 1851 the legislature retracted the twenty dollar tax but later on introduced a three dollar a month tax in 1852. By this time the damage was already done and many of the minority groups were pursuing other job opportunities. Mexican miners who had protested the new law in the beginning simply left the area and went to find work in other cities. The Chinese miners were able to find jobs as cooks, cigar makers, restaurateurs, vegetable farmers, merchants and some were able to open their own business.

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