

After the Gold Rush: Tarnished Dreams in the Sacramento Valley. By David Vaught. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007. xiv + 310 pp. Photographs, illustrations, maps, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$55.00. ISBN: 0-801-88497-7.

Reviewed by Ryan J. Carey

In recent years, a number of scholarly studies on the California gold rush of interest to business historians have appeared on the shelves. Though not specifically aimed at historians of American business, H. W. Brands's *Age of Gold*, and Malcolm J. Rohrbough's *Days of Gold* both argue that the gold rush was a pivotal chapter in the history of American capitalism, propelling the nation further toward a world dominated by the market and the dreams of wealth and prosperity that it inspired. In *After the Gold Rush: Tarnished Dreams in the Sacramento Valley*, David Vaught asks readers to look past the rough-and-tumble days of '49 to what men and women—midwestern farmers who came to California to mine, only to find themselves farming once again—did once their dreams of instant wealth did not pan out. Focusing on the community that settled Putah Creek outside Sacramento, in what would become Davis, Vaught tells a riveting story of two generations of farmers who “committed themselves not only to the market but to community life as well” (p. 220). Vaught argues that these twin commitments, born of their failures in the gold fields, were an essential part of the culture of American capitalism that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Vaught's story of the will to succeed in California farming allows him to narrate histories of market expansion, mechanization of agriculture, banking and credit, and entrepreneurial activity in the newly Americanized West in twelve compact chapters spread out across four sections. Beginning in the Midwest with the dreams of miners-to-be, Vaught quickly pushes past the gold fields to take his readers to the golden fields that the first generation of farmers planted but a few years later. The first section, “Making a Settlement,” traces the initial years of settlement and the difficulties that California land law presented to these new settlers. The second section, “Disaster and Persistence,” chronicles the vagaries of nature and the ways in which settlers tried to deal with repeated

droughts and floods along Putah Creek. The next section, “The Second Gold Rush,” on the rise of wheat farming covers the growth of systems of credit, investments in farm machinery, and a fascinating story of the marketing and trade in wheat centered in San Francisco. This section and the previous one form the central story of the book: farmers fearful of failure, consistently ignoring the limiting role that nature played in their lives, nonetheless never believed that overproduction would affect prices. The final section, “The New Generation Emerges,” compares the second generation in Putah Creek with the pioneer farmers, showing that the factors that motivated settlers—fear of failure and a belief in the golden dream of California—drove their children as well.

Vaught’s story is an intimate and sympathetic social history of market penetration in rural California and the increased capitalization and mechanization of first-generation farmers whose lives were constantly undermined by swings in the international grain market, property disputes that stemmed from the Mexican land grants, and environmental factors that threatened crops on a regular basis. Yet this is not the simple story of the monopolization of land by a few successful and oppressive large landowners that has dominated much of California agricultural history. What Vaught shows is that while many Putah Creek farmers might not have struck it rich (some did), they lived as many farmers do, with the constant threats of debts, droughts, floods, and the inability to control prices in international markets. In the end, some of the pioneering farmers died in debt, but just as many died with something in their bank account to show for their efforts, and some, capitalizing on their neighbors’ misfortune, rose to prominence and stayed there for the rest of their lives. More important, Vaught maintains, was what they left behind in the region—a relatively stable community of persistent settlers who, by all accounts, could just as easily have left the fickle climate of the Sacramento valley and the fickle nature of the agrarian market they found there.

The most compelling element of *After the Gold Rush* is its environmental dimension: nature is one of the major agents in the story, and Vaught does an excellent job of linking the environment to the farmers’ entrepreneurial activities. He shows that while the environment of the Sacramento river valley could produce optimal conditions for agriculture, drought and floods were almost as commonplace as ideal growing weather. The repeated flooding of Putah Creek drove settlers to attempt novel ways to

engineer these floods out of existence. While never successful, the experience taught the farmers something else, Vaught argues. Nature, just as much as dreams of wealth, compelled farmers to operate on a greater scale to deal with losses in bad weather. Knowing that “natural disasters . . . could destroy a crop at any time,” farmers along Putah Creek believed that the path to stability “was to produce enough in good years to offset the bad” (p. 88). As a result, farmers strove to increase the size of their holdings and to sink small fortunes into mechanization in order to farm more with less labor. In order to do this, they needed to borrow ever larger sums of money, often so overextending themselves that emerging debt free became increasingly difficult.

This environmental story is continued in the discussion of property rights along Putah Creek. Just before the Mexican-American war, the California government deeded three “ranchos,” land grants in the tens of thousands of acres, along Putah Creek. After the war was over, these grants, like many others in California, became the site of repeated contests and negotiations between settler-buyers, squatters, and the original consignees of the grant, as well as the locus of conflict between the federal government and California. At issue, Vaught explains, was not just the contested legal status of the property whose ownership predated American control, but also the ways in which the grants themselves confounded typical American notions of property in the West. These grants were simply too large to conform to the Jeffersonian vision of property that had dominated American land law ever since the Northwest ordinances. California, Vaught shows, challenged those perceptions.

In the end, *After the Gold Rush* suggests that historians of American business would do well to pay greater attention to matters of geography and the environment. Though midwestern in origin, the settlers along Putah Creek, by virtue of their experience in the gold rush, their isolation in newly American California, and their experience with the western environment created a different kind of community and a different kind of capitalism than the type they left behind before the days of '49.

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1905,” which analyzes the role cartographic discourse played between industrial corporations and the U.S. government in integrating the markets, resources, and subjects of the Pacific Northwest into the nation's economic and political core.