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OAK of the GOLDEN DREAM

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## OAK OF THE GOLDEN DREAM

A giant oak tree in Placeritas Canyon, Los Angeles County, known as the Oak of the Golden Dream, commemorates the location of the first authenticated discovery of gold in California, by Francisco Lopez y Arballo in 1842. Antedating James Wilson Marshall's discovery of gold at Sutter's mill-race in 1848, the earlier find, by Lopez, foretold the fulfillment of countless golden dreams wrought during the gold rush of 1849. Fortune hunters from every section of the world traveled over desert, mountain, and ocean to California's mines, lured by fanciful dreams of sudden wealth and happiness. Some of these dreams came true over night and brought permanent prosperity. Some as suddenly were shattered again, while others never matured into reality, and remained only dreams. Lopez's discovery of the coveted metal in 1842 has been overshadowed by the momentous happenings of 1849. Now, obscure and often forgotten, that event is still important as the first notable gold discovery in California, and the name of Francisco Lopez belongs, instead of that of Marshall, in the place of discoverer of gold in California. It also provides an interesting episode in the story of those days.

Many tales and rumors of the existence of gold in

California prior to the discovery of 1842 have been prevalent. Most of those allusions have been proved hazy and indefinite. It has been thought strange that the Indians knew nothing of the metal. According to one of the rumors which has persisted, the Indians did know of the existence of gold and had told the Spanish mission padres of it; the friars attributed mysterious qualities to the metal to conceal its true worth from the natives. James Miller Guinn in his "Historical Sketch of California" says that most traditions of that sort grew up after gold was actually discovered. He continues with a quotation from Colonel J. J. Warner, a pioneer of 1831, which conclusively denies the importance of the stories of previous gold discoveries:<sup>1</sup>

While statements respecting the existence of gold in the earth of California and its procurement therefrom have been made and published as historical facts, carrying back the date of the auriferous character of this state as far as the visit of Sir Francis Drake to this coast, there is no evidence to be found in the written or oral history of the missions, the acts and correspondence of the civil or military officers, or in the written and traditional history of California that the existence of gold, either with ores, or in its virgin state was ever suspected by any inhabitant of California previous to 1841, and, furthermore, there is conclusive testimony that the first known

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1. J. M. Guinn, A history of California, 155.

grain of native gold dust was found upon or near the San Francisco ranch, about forty five miles north-westerly from Los Angeles, in the month of June, 1841. This discovery consisted of grain gold fields (known as placer mines), and the auriferous fields discovered in that year embraced the greater part of the country drained by the Santa Clara river from a point some fifteen or twenty miles from its mouth to its source, and easterly beyond Mount San Bernardino.

Contradictory dates have been given for the discovery of gold in Placeritas Canyon. Colonel Warner gives the date as June, 1841. Hubert Howe Bancroft says that the discovery occurred in March, 1842.<sup>2</sup> Abel Stearns and Charles Anthony Engelhardt also give 1842 as the year of the event. Engelhardt obtained his information from direct descendants of Francisco Lopez, still living in San Fernando, who recall the event itself.<sup>3</sup> Thus, March 9, 1842, is generally conceded to be the correct date of the gold discovery by Lopez.

Francisco Lopez, more frequently called "Cuzco" a native of San Gabriel, worked as a herdsman and lived on the Piru rancho near San Fernando Mission. For many years he had been mayer dono of the mission property. He stumbled onto the San Fernando placers quite accidentally in March,

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2. H. H. Bancroft, History of California, IV, 297.

3. C.A. Engelhardt, San Fernando Rey Mission, 143.

1842. On the ninth of that month, Lopez and a companion went in search of some livestock which had strayed onto the San Francisquito Rancho, formerly owned by the Mission San Fernando, and at the time of the gold discovery the property of Antonio del Valle. Toward noon, the two arrived at Placeritas Canyon located on the ranch. A large oak tree, shading the banks of a small creek, offered a pleasant stopping place. The two men tethered their horses, leaving them to graze in the luxuriant new grass, and sought the cool shade of the oak for a short siesta. While they rested there, Lopez noticed wild onion plants growing profusely nearby. He dug a few from the ground. As he loosened the earth from one of them, he noticed some shining yellow particles dangling on the roots. He thought they looked like gold, and called his companion.

Very much excited, the two collected a quantity of the sandy soil in which bits of the metal glistened. They rushed to the pueblo with some of the brightly speckled dirt, and their suspicion that the metal they had collected was gold was confirmed. The discovery created considerable of a furor in the pueblo of Los Angeles, and in other localities, as the news spread to Santa Barbara and San Diego. Colonel Warner remarks that "within a few weeks hundreds of people were engaged in washing and winnowing the

sands and earth of these gold fields".<sup>4</sup>

According to Bancroft, by May the gold region had been found to cover an area of more than two leagues. Although the water supply was not very plentiful, and the prospecting difficult, each miner secured about two dollars a day from the placers. Few of the would-be prospectors except those experienced in placer mining remained long at the mines. The placers were worked, chiefly by Sonorans, continuously until 1846.<sup>5</sup>

Francisco Lopez and Carlos Marie, a native of Bordeaux, France, formed a partnership to work the mines. They made an application to Governor Alvarado for a permit to work them. From Sonora, Mexico, they hired experienced placer miners for twenty-five cents a day. At that time, the mines yielded about an ounce a day. The water supply was so scanty that the Cora method of mining was adopted. By that process, the sand was put into Indian baskets, thrown up and out of the baskets, and blown away by the wind. The gold dust salvaged in that slow and arduous manner was sold in goose and vulture quills in Los Angeles. The profit from that enterprise has been estimated at between six and eight thousand dollars.<sup>6</sup>

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4. J. M. Quinn, History of California, 156.

5. Bancroft, History of California, IV, 297.

6. P. Bekeart, "Previous gold discoveries", in Society of Southern California Pioneers, Quarterly, I, 91.

The Mexican government took little notice of the mines aside from a public manifesto in 1842 acknowledging their discovery. Don Ignacio del Valle, owner of the property on which the placers were located, was appointed by the government, a short time after the discovery, to preserve order in the mining district.<sup>7</sup>

The first gold dust ever sent to the United States from California came from the San Fernando mines. It was sent by Don Abel Stearns to the mint at Philadelphia with Alfred Robinson in a merchant ship around Cape Horn. A letter in the Archives of the Society of Pioneers of San Francisco, written by Abel Stearns concerning the shipment, says in part:<sup>8</sup>

I find by referring to my old account book that November 22nd, 1842, I sent by Alfred Robinson, Esqr., twenty ounces California weight of placer gold to be forwarded by him to the United States mint for assay. The placer mines from which this gold was taken were first discovered by Francisco Lopez, a native of California, in the month of March, 1842.

A reply from Robinson gives the mint receipt and the amount of assay:<sup>9</sup>

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7. J. H. Guinn, "Early gold discoveries in California", in Historical society of southern California, publications, III, 12.  
 8. H. R. P. Forbes, Oak of the golden dream, 2.  
 9. Ibid.

Memorandum of gold bullion deposited  
on 8th day of July, 1843, at the Mint  
of the United States at Philadelphia.  
Before melting 18 34/100 oz., after  
melting, 18 1/100 oz., fineness 928/100  
[?]; value \$244.75; deduct expenses  
sending to Philadelphia and agency there,  
\$4.02; \$240.73.

The San Fernando mines were worked continuously until 1848 and at intervals until 1849. In January, 1848, when news of Marshall's discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill was received, most of the miners abandoned the Southern California placers for the richer northern mines. Between 1848 and 1854, little or no work was done at the San Fernando mines. In 1855, Francisco Garcia resumed operations there. He employed a gang of Indian workers, and is said to have taken out \$65,000 worth of metal. The gold supply of the placers was not exhausted at that time, but lack of water made the work impractical. The gold gradually began to peter out, and as the mines paid less and less, active prospecting ceased in 1857. The actual amount of money taken from the mines has never been known.<sup>10</sup>

On March 9, 1843, the first anniversary of the discovery of the San Fernando mines, a high mass was held to celebrate it. A chapel was erected on the site where the first gold was found. The Lopes family and their

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10. J. M. Quinn, History of California, 156.



friends, with great numbers of people from Los Angeles, gathered at the spot to commemorate the anniversary of the event. Three priests, two from the Misión San Fernando, and one from Los Angeles, officiated, assisted by the entire mission choir and eight musicians. Mrs. Catalina Lopez, niece of the discoverer, Francisco Lopez, was present at the celebration. She was eleven years old at the time, and still resides in San Fernando.<sup>11</sup>

The ground on which the historic oak is located is owned by Frank E. Walker, who gave supervisory care of the tree to Ramona Parlor N. D. G. W. and La Mesa Club. La Mesa Club erected a bronze tablet bearing the inscription:

Encino de Los Ensueños Dorados de Francisco Lopez  
Oak of the Golden Dream  
Placed by La Mesa Club  
March 9th, 1930.

The gnarled old oak has thus been given its rightful recognition with Gutter's Will as one of the important sites of the first discoveries of gold in California. Its magnificent spreading branches make a pleasant shade where visitors may pause and dream of a far-away day in 1542. On that day the first episode in the drama of California's golden legend was unfolded. The tiny golden flakes clinging to a wild onion's roots revealed their secret, and it was to be coveted by men the world over.

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<sup>11</sup>. Engelhardt, San Fernando, 144.

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