

# Slavery of Indians was common in California

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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In 1846, Frances Anne Cooper, who later married Benicia founder Dr. Robert Semple, left Howard County, Mo., with her family for California. The San Francisco Chronicle published her oral history of these years on September 9, 1900 in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of California statehood.

After a rather uneventful plains crossing, the family arrived in Napa, where Mr. Yount, another immigrant from Howard County, received them with open arms.

“He was just as glad to see us as if we had been his own family. He owned seven leagues of land there in the Napa valley, had 600 mares and thousands of horses and cattle. Spanish vaqueros used to be riding all over the country in little groups. They never bothered us or happened in for meals. All they needed was a piece of jerked beef and some roasted corn, and they would carry that with them and ride hundred and hundreds of miles before returning to their homes. There were so many thousands of long-horned Spanish cattle in the country that anybody that liked went out and killed a beef when he needed meat, and no one said anything.”

The sentence that caught my attention when I read Cooper’s reminiscences was that “All the Spanish families had Indian slaves.”

Did Indian slavery exist in California prior to 1850? Yes, it did, although differing from slavery in the South prior to the Civil War. Native Indian populations were bound to their Spanish and Anglo-American masters through a set of laws that culminated in the so-called Act for the Government and Protection of Indians of 1850.

Early Anglo-American settlers struggled with the concept of slavery as witnessed by a proclamation issued by John Montgomery, Commander of the District of San Francisco on September 15, 1846.

“It having come to the knowledge of the Commander in Chief of the district that certain persons have been and still are imprisoning and holding to service Indians against their will, and without any legal contract, and without a due regard to their rights as freeman when not under legal contract for service. It is hereby ordered that all persons so holding or detaining Indians shall release them, and permit them to return to their own homes, unless they can make a contract with them which shall be acknowledged before the nearest Justice, which contract, shall be binding upon both parties.

"The Indian population must not be regarded in the light of slaves, but it is deemed necessary that the Indians within the Settlement shall have employment, with the right of choosing their own master and employers ... "

Fifty years later, Cooper's recollections of encountering Indian slavery still made her uneasy.

"The Spanish vaqueros used to go up to what is now Ukiah and ride in among the Indian rancherias and drive out the boys and girls, leaving the mothers behind and killing the bucks if they offered any resistance. Then they would herd the captives down like so many cattle and sell them to the ranchers. About \$100 was the standard price."

Although she once bought one Indian girl for \$100, she quickly freed her and hired additional Indians as house staff.

"The shameful treatment of the Indians by the Spanish was never equaled by the whites," she stated in her interview.

I will continue this story in my next column.

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