

Primary Source for *Friendly Fire*

**From *Three Years in California*
William Perkins' Journal
*of Life at Sonora, 1849-1852***

by William Perkins

Perkins was a Canadian who reached Sonora in 1849. Mining was not for him. He sought his fortune as a trader. Unlike many writers in English, he had a lively interest in Spanish-language culture and would, ultimately, settle in Argentina. This open-mindedness toward the Latin world, together with a keen eye and a prose style that is both graceful and refreshingly direct, makes Perkins work fun to read and full of details that other writers omit. But when it comes to the Native Californians his attitude changes.

Here is his description of the peoples he encountered in the hills behind Sonora:

The tribes of Indians inhabiting these mountains, are called Root Diggers, and are the most wretched of all North American Indians. They are about four feet high, with very large heads and huge shocks of hair, coarse and black. Their limbs are very small; their legs are no larger than the arm of a moderate size man. Their feet are ridiculously small, and their hands and fingers long and exceedingly thin and slender. They go entirely naked even in the severe region in which they reside, and subsist on roots, acorns, berries and the small edible part of the pine cone, which is found in great abundance in all the mountains of California.

It is impossible to discover how the usually observant Mr. Perkins came up with this description of a people whom, old photographs tell us, had sturdy limbs, powerful shoulders, and strong, compact hands. Moreover we know they were masterful hunters of deer, bear, all small game, and could spear salmon by the hundreds, so his account of their diet is as slanted as his picture of their appearance. (Though it is possible he was describing people who were starving due to the encroachments of white hunters.)

On February 2-4, 1850, Perkins was part of a small ad-hoc army that rode up between the middle and north forks of the Stanislaus River to punish a group of Indians that had reportedly stolen six mules from white miners in Sonora, supposedly killing a Mexican muleteer in the process of the theft. The white

posse finds a village in which slaughtered mules are hanging. They occupy the village, killing an unspecified number of Indians. After eating other meat they find there, Perkins continues his account thus:

We found in the Rancheria a large quantity of stolen clothes; plenty of handsomely made baskets; immense quantities of acorn and pine cones, with bread made from the pounded flour of the two latter. This bread we tried to eat, but found it exceedingly disgusting to the palate; bitter, and with a flavor that was nauseous in the extreme.

Collecting every thing moveable, we piled it all in the ranchos, and set fire to the whole town, in imitation of the warriors of the middle ages.

After the excitement of the fray had subsided, I could not help asking myself the question as to how far we were warranted in destroying life and property to such an extent; for although the value of property destroyed probably did not amount to much, still it was the whole amount of worldly goods possessed by the tribe. The houses, we may readily believe, have as great a value, comparatively speaking, to their owners, as ours in Sonora. Their baskets, and above all their supply of provisions, may certainly be placed on a par with our household goods. And we have invaded and destroyed the lives and property of these poor, miserable people, to chastise what in their eyes is no crime.

To say the truth, I was not entirely satisfied with myself. . . . (N)ot only did the Root-Diggers fall in the conflict, but the women and children suffered from the loss of their homes and necessaries of life.

Stern necessity of pioneer life! We invade a land that is not our own, we arrogate a right through pretense of superior intelligence and the wants of civilization, and if the aborigines dispute our title, we destroy them!

We camped in a meadow some few hundred yards from the burnt Rancheria; and gathering a quantity of dried grass I made a comfortable bed. We had to keep a strict guard, as the Indians surrounded us in great numbers all night, but did not dare attack us. Notwithstanding the dangerous position we were in, after I had stood my guard, I wrapped myself in my blankets and slept like a top.

The next morning the first dawning of day saw us in march. Taking a fresh trail, after four or five hours travelling, we came upon another large Rancheria. The inhabitants had received intelligence during the night of the invasion and had decamped, taking off every thing moveable. We burnt all that remained, that is to say, the houses. . . .

We now turned towards home, and on the way came across another Rancheria, deserted by its owners. This we also burnt. . . .

As an example of white morality, this passage is typical and bears examination:

Let's presume that Perkins is correct that the mules were stolen and that it was the stolen mules that were hanging in the first village. Let us even, for the sake of

argument, grant that the “large quantity” of clothes they find in the village was in fact stolen, though he presents no evidence for this and it might as well have been traded for. According to Perkins the village contained “more than a hundred well-built huts in the shape of beehives.” If the average hut was home for four people this would place the population at four hundred. The thieves were said to be a “small party” so certainly no more than ten or twelve. So, even if the mule theft was a capital crime (and no one has heard a word of the story of the Indians) the guilt or complicity of more than 90% of the village is totally unknown to the whites. Yet the entire group of white avengers, seemingly without any discussion of milder options, or any desire to separate guilty from innocent, descends on the village, shoots whoever poses an obstacle, and destroys the whole settlement, including the winter's supply of food.

Then Mr Perkins indulges his “civilized” conscience. He recognizes that he has destroyed the livelihood of scores of people. He confesses that he “was not entirely satisfied” with himself. He waxes sentimental: “Stern necessity of pioneer life!” (“Necessity” he calls it.) He wallows in a little romantic rhetoric. He refers to his people having a “pretense of superior intelligence” but in fact he doesn't think it's a pretense at all. He feels 99% justified in this wanton destruction.

All he is doing here is massaging the one small muscle of conscience that has been strained. And the massage is wonderfully effective. He sleeps “like a top.”

And the next day, he helps burn two more villages! Two villages that had not even stolen any mules! If his destruction of the first village had left him in a state of self-dissatisfaction, these subsequent fires should have left him permanently doubting his claim to being a moral person. But no such thing happens. We hear no more doubts about the justification of what they have done. Perkins seems to be at peace with his conscience.

The atrocities that Perkins helps commit were monstrous. But I do not think he was a monstrous individual. Quite the opposite. He seems a completely normal man of his time, indeed more tolerant than average. The true monstrosity was taken for granted by the U.S. culture which thought itself justified in overwhelming the owners of the land with vastly superior numbers and technology. While there was sometimes a voice of conscience questioning the atrocious actions that voice was always hemmed in by loud and insistent claims of economic necessity.

Quotations are from: Perkins, William, 1852, *Three Years in California*, William Perkins' *Journal of Life at Sonora, 1849-1852*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964.