

In 2010 Mark Oliver was scouring the early census records and maps in the special collection at the College of the Siskiyous in Northern California for his documentary film, *From the Quarters to Lincoln Heights*. The film sheds light on the thousands of African-Americans who migrated from the Southern States to towns like Weed and McCloud to work in the expanding logging industry of the 1920s. What he found as he went further back in the census records was that there were many “Black and Mulatto” persons listed in the census in Shasta and Siskiyou Counties.

(Siskiyou was not yet a county in the 1850 census.) On early maps of the 1930s he found mine sites like Negro Boy Mine outside of Yreka and other mines named with the pejorative N word in their title. Rudolph M. Lapp, in his 1977 book *Blacks in the Gold Rush*, wrote that if a mine site had a name attributed to an African-American then most likely some African-American miner (s) had worked there and probably had a good claim. Why else would that name be applied?



DAG 0103. Photo courtesy of the California History Room, California State Library, Sacramento, Ca.

One possible reason may be that, during that period of influx and immigration to the far northern gold fields, 30-40% of the miners from the United States were Southerners who brought with them their racist views of people of color. Students of California history know that California barely became a free state as politicians fought over how California would handle the slavery issue. California became a free state but during the 1850s migrating white Southerners were allowed to bring their slaves to work within the state. Also African-Americans who had successfully escaped slavery and made their way to California could be kidnapped or arrested and returned to the Southern United States under the Fugitive Slave Act adopted by California in 1852.

A practicing artist and filmmaker, Oliver is also a historian in his own right; many of his films and artworks evolve from representations of historical characters or events. As he studied the presence of African-Americans in early California through Lapp's book Oliver realized the Northern California area of Old Shasta and the Siskiyou Mountains were never mentioned in the research. Lapp and others had only covered the area of the Sierra Mountains. Aside from the few documentations of African-American immigrants like Alvin Coffey and Phoebe Coulbourn, not much is available that records the lives of the miners and workers who populated these northern mines and settlements.

After examining the sparse records, Oliver knew he wanted to use some artistic format to

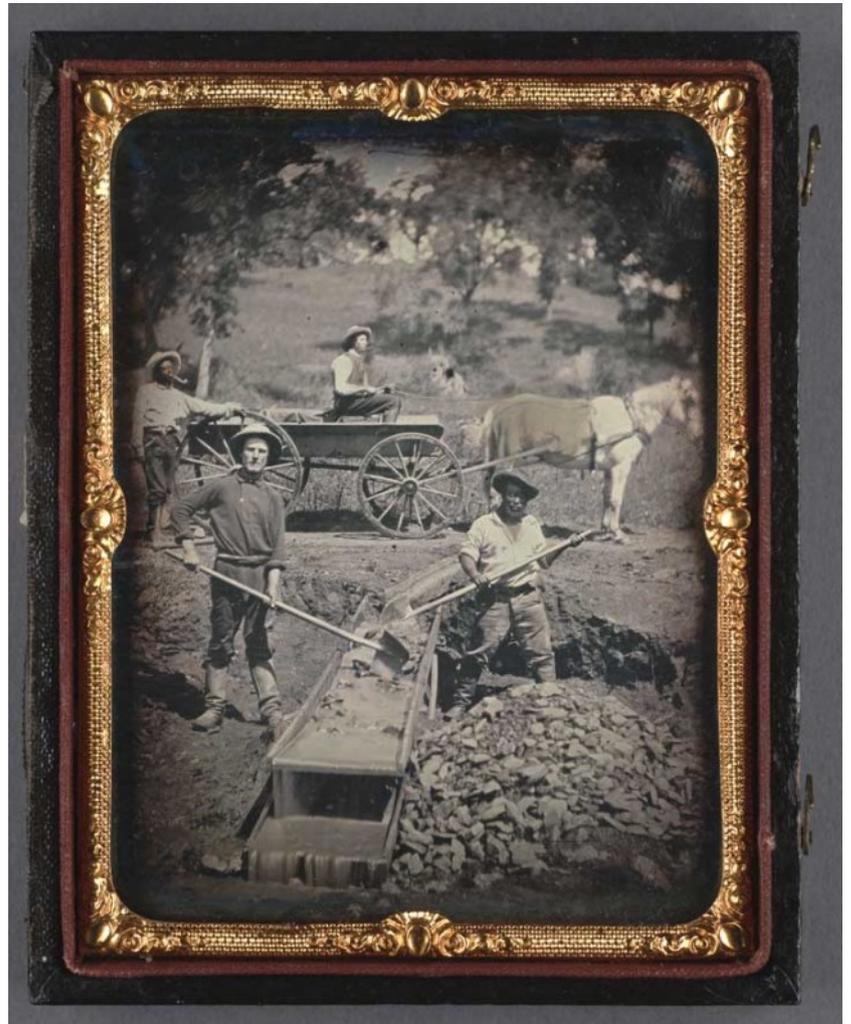
draw public attention to this paucity of history of African-Americans in the gold rush, the unjust treatment of other minorities present during the gold rush, and fact that California did allow slavery. Speaking with Gary Lewis from the Shasta Historical Society, Oliver learned of a play, titled *The Fight*, in which Fred Magee, in his first appearance on stage, portrayed Alvin Coffey, an enslaved man who came to Old Shasta with his master and mined enough gold to buy his freedom. (<https://blackpast.org/aaw/coffey-alvin-aaron-1822-1902>). After watching Magee's performance, Oliver was convinced that this would be the way to tell this story: have local African-Americans of Redding and the Mt Shasta areas act out various scenarios that African-Americans experienced in this tumultuous period of the 1850s.

Oliver teamed with the Society and received a \$20,000 grant from California Humanities to pursue the project, which he titled *Voices of the Golden Ghosts*. Collaborating with community organizers, historians, and archeologists, Oliver put his years of research into a dramatic form. He directs a cast of local actors, with the help of some very experienced

talent, who will present short vignettes of life in the gold fields from an African-American perspective. The production will include presentations by Rick Moss, former curator of the African-American Museum and Library of Oakland, California, and authors Sharon McGriff Payne, *John Grider's Century*, and Sylvia Roberts, *Mining for Freedom*. The public is invited to attend the first staging of *Voices of the Golden Ghosts* at the Shasta College Theater on April 6, 2019. If all goes well this project will develop into a short film.

By offering *Voices of the Golden Ghosts*, Oliver hopes to expand awareness of the participation by thousands of African-Americans who came to California in search of bettering their lives in the Gold Rush here in Shasta and Siskiyou Counties. If you have further information you could share on this topic, contact the Shasta Historical Society.

Authors Notes: To view research for *Voices of the Golden Ghosts* visit Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/pages/category/Performance-Art-Theatre/Voices-from-the-Golden-Ghosts-1683467948388433/>. If you would like to view the documentary film *From the Quarters to Lincoln Heights*, please visit YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4EHvyQ83nK8>.



DAG 0100 c.1852. Courtesy of the California History Room, California State Library, Sacramento, Ca.