

The Boomtown Chronicles: Reflections On a Changing California

Coast Ridge Productions™
415 Emerald Forest Lane,
Bonny Doon, CA 95060

Phone (831) 457-8098

Transcript: Interview with J.S. Holliday, Author 2004

J.S. HOLLIDAY: Let me say as a preparatory remark that I'm not probably as informed and current as I should be for such a purpose. I don't feel that I am myself in any way an authority or source for valid opinions on a subject as complex as this. As far as the background is concerned the general overall themes that have shaped California history and I think most importantly shaped the image of California I could speak to that certainly.

RACHEL GOODMAN: Yes, that would be nice. Let's back up and have you introduce yourself and what your interest in California History is. How to you kind of come to be fascinated by it?

J.S. HOLLIDAY: My name is J.S. Holliday, but I go by Jim. I just used J.S. for various reasons. I have been in California since 1952, although I came here first in 1945 when I was in the Navy, and waiting for an assignment on a carrier that was due in San Francisco, so I waited here for some length of time in 1945, and then was in the Navy for some time, and then came back at the end of the war. I became serious in a more serious way when I decided to leave our family business in Indiana to peruse the goal of a PHD in American history at the University of California, Berkeley. The reason I selected Berkeley was because of the Bancroft Library, and the reason the Bancroft was that I in 1950, signed a contract with Hotenmiften Company, a great publishing house in Boston, to publish a book that I was working on or thought I'd then finished with dealt with California Gold Rush, and Cutting through all the details of the enterprise led to my going to graduate school and I got my PhD at Berkeley in 1957, and then I was at the Huntington Library as a research fellow, continuing my work in California History, and became the Assistant Director of the Bancroft Library in 1958, which introduced traveling around the state seeking and acquiring collections, manuscripts, newspapers, photographs, records, documents, the fundamental resources that tell a story of California in this case the 19th century primarily. There I became the assistant professor of History at San Francisco State University and taught graduate students and undergraduate students in the field of California History. And then I was offered the position on director of the Oakland Museum, the museum of California what was then just getting started. That's 1967. I was executive director there and then I became director of the California Historical Society with Offices in San Francisco, and Los Angeles, and along the way published a book called "The World Rushed In" which dealt with the attraction of California during the gold Rush years, and the journey to California, now people got here and the impact of their arrival and what experience they had in California. They've returned home. And so the Gold Rush as a cycle of people leaving their homes and returning, but coming back as new people, in the sense of men who grew up, and certainly as a consequence of seeing California, which has changed their values going on for a 155 years since. And that book and another book in 1999 if that, I would say that I have developed a set of ideas and themes, interpretations, perspectives which I feel are valuable in helping the public. I do a lot of lecturing and writing, and therefore continuing teachers by bringing these perspectives in the public, which perspectives are and Californians have become, beginning in the 19th century, a risk taking culture! A culture, which nurtures, encourages innovation, adaptation, risk taking, entrepreneurial spirit invention and daring schemes. All the time accepting failure. I think that is exactly what nail must be hit on the head. Accepting failure, meaning that failure is part of the

process of success, you have to be willing to fail, accept the concept of reality, the suffering, the blow of failure, if you are going to love to be successful. More in California than Boston, Albany, or Chicago because in California in the 19th century and today, and the 21st century there is a feeling of escape by coming to California, where leaving behind the rules of Indianapolis Indiana, leaving behind the traditions of Alabama, avoiding the solidifying rules that dominated grandfather, or one's father. I think that's key. In California you can fail and not be beseeched by that failure. It's not a black mark, failure is the process of succeeding, and the Silicon Valley is here, not Boston because failure is recognized as a process not a finality. Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple Corporation said years ago, "We hire people who have failed. The purpose being, to learn what they had learned. So we won't make the same kind of failure, failure is a teacher. So that's the idea.

RACHEL GOODMAN: Okay, so let us sort of start from there. This idea that people come here to escape. How does that play into this idea that California also sort of tries to shut them off? That you have to pay a pretty high price to be here that part of the failure is that it is really hard economically to find a foot hold that you have to do something pretty extraordinary to be in here, and people are willing to make huge sacrifices here, and people are willing to make it work for them. They might go somewhere else and there aren't these steep hurdles that seems like this state has set up for people, especially the cost of living here.

J.S. HOLLIDAY: I think that the risk taking is the filter that determines who will come here. You have to be a risk taker, economically; socially when you leave home, that may be Indiana or may be Vietnam, you know that you are cutting yourself free from free or maybe it's quite like diminishing yourself from cutting off your family or traditions, or language, or your values. So it's always been a risk. In California they're of a different kind. Today you're suggesting it's an economic risk in terms of housing in terms of the expense of just daily living. The other risks that were always here were of course disease, and dangers that were inherent in a wild and robust society, in a place that might be one that ended even your very life; your very well being. I think we should connect the past by saying there are risks today. There are burdens, there are demands, but those had different forms, different anticipations, and different realities in the 19th and early 20th century.

RACHEL GOODMAN: Maybe you can characterize for us historically what has been the texture of the American dream. The image that draws people here, besides the shuffling off of previous staginess and rules. What other things have drawn them toward California? It's not just the weather obviously.

J.S. HOLLIDAY: Yes, I agree, it's certainly not the sunshine. There's sunshine in Florida and then Arizona and New Mexico. There are good climates in many places across the world as much as California through Hollywood and through all the other visual wonders in Television now and the Rose Bowl parade on January 1st, by the way I think that's of great significance. People in Minneapolis and Buffalo and Indianapolis, and New York and Maine, and all over the Northern States look at that and mornings on

new years with people in their Bikinis and T-shirts who spent the night on lawns in Pasadena sitting in the sunshine looking at flowers and aromas and breezes and a brilliant toasty day and the impact of that is significantly underestimated. People shivering frigid in their cold, in every sense of the word cold, and cold in every sense of the ways lives back east saying, my god I want to go out there. Now that's what's going on, people began to come out to California after the second world war by the millions in both the arms services and the jobs by hundreds of thousands of war related jobs where you could work in an air craft factory building ships and get a draft deferment. This is the place we were needed in the arsenal of democracy, and that was a time when 10's of millions of people came to California with military and the jobs related to defense and they were here for that purpose, but when they went home, they thought, "My God," they remembered California, they remembered the climate. Climate is everything; social climate, economic climate. Climate is so different here so they were attracted by that. People in the east, or who wrote letters during the Gold Rush wrote right on through letters back home about life in California. And this, like a germ, spread people in the east that say "My God look what George is doing. Look what Mary's doing. Look what's happening there in San Luis Obispo. Look what's happening in Los Angeles. I want to go out there." California has projected through so many different media, letters by the millions; don't underestimate the 19th, 18th, 20th centuries letters written back from California to families. Those letters were like Germs that infected people with the idea to come to California. And the images in those letters, were going to talk about in a minute, so then Hollywood, beginning in the 1920's millions of people saw movies. Those movies were overwhelmingly filmed in Los Angeles in the hills, in the countryside, palm trees, the lawns, the swimming pools, the ocean, and the beaches. The sunshine, the orange trees, and the setting of life in California was seen in hundreds of movies, and people again got this sense of a place apart, and separate. The railroad the Southern Pacific Railroad, the real estate developers, the cities themselves, the chambers of commercial the books, the articles, and magazines, television of choice, all these means by which to visualize our imagination or the actuality of a photograph of what's going on in California. These are powerful attractions. The economics of California is risky, it's dangerous because it's more expensive. Wells, so what. Many, many people are attracted to the romance and testosterone of risk taking. Louis, we are going to leave Bismarck North Dakota and go to Los Angeles, I mean, come on. It gives them a sense of daring in the 20th century. The risk of California has the same appeal as coming to California in the 1850's. It's daring, it's brave, it's American, and that's what this country is all about. That's sort of a quite phrase, so people are here in Salinas. I don't think they come to Carmel. It's a pretty different type of place. Some people say it's good waiting room. But it's a place not at all typical, but Salinas is more typical, Berkeley, and many, many cities around California. People are coming here. Yes the real estate is high, and yes you've got to get a bank and loan in California is hot like a loan anywhere else. Everyone has been sold and it is certainly true the finest investment you can make in America and the world is owning a house in California. A number of people who bought homes 20 years ago, 30 years ago, and now have more value and the equity have grown. They have made a wise investment, it's challenging, it's risky, but all of those are like kisses and hugs they've a way of bringing you here, who would invest and risk in North Dakota, who wants to invest and risk in Mississippi. But you say invest and risk in

California. Yes it costs more and yes there is a risk, but there is a subjective quality because that risk and costing more is incurred in the environment of California. That environment has about it a positive force. You can get a loan far more easily on a home in California than you can get a loan for a home in North Dakota. Even if you are going into debt more deeply than we would back in the Midwest. These are complexities, syntactical forces sweeping, swirling, but they combined to create a juice, a drink, a vitamin, and a hormonal force that is undisputedly California. The golden State that very framing is the gold rush, the oil, the black gold of oil in southern California. You look at the beaches in Florida, you look for someone who's kind of big and flabby. But Los Angeles and S.D. there is a sense of bosom, and beauty, and sexuality, and vigor and hormones. These are powerful images that bring people here, and yes, it costs, more, yes it's risky but that's a part of the undisputable power attracting. A beautiful woman who may have been divorced. There's something about there that more attractive than the shy lonely virgin. I think California is a divorced woman. That's pretty sexy, exciting compared to the sweet virgin of Mississippi.

RACHEL GOODMAN: She's been around for a while?

J.S. HOLLIDAY: Of course California has been around for a hundred and 55 years or whatever our mathematics are since 1849. This state has had a routed, compulsively attractive San Francisco California. California is San Francisco. Let's put that in the past tense. In the 19th century California and San Francisco were synonymous. One brought the other. San Francisco was singularly like any other city in the world it started unlike any other place. It started in the gold rush. We are overwhelmingly masculine. We are so forgetful of the absence of women the moral authority of all society since the beginning of time. The moral authority of all societies. California began even before the gold rush. Have not there was shortages of women in California and California was at a Spanish Mexican period. Come the gold rush, California was an overwhelmingly masculine society. The men came over in 49-50 and said to their wives, their mothers, their sisters, their fiancés, "You stay here in Indiana, Maryland, Michigan, in Ireland, in Germany. I'll come back, we'll have money to pay off the mortgage, and have a better life in Michigan and Maryland. You don't have to come to California, I'll go to California and I'll bring the means for a better life back home. Therefore it was a masculine society. San Francisco began as a masculine society. That means it was rambunctious, it was sinful from the very beginning. The image of a Golgotha, a place of sin, a place of danger, a place of misbehavior of drinking and wearing and whoring and drunkenness. Who knows what else. Now that image of California continued throughout the 19th century. San Francisco became a place of risk taking, of daring inventiveness of the mining industry of California. San Francisco became the center of an empire that reached out and nurtured mining in Idaho, New Mexico, Colorado, Alas. California was San Francisco, and San Francisco reached to the whole of the American West. To Hawaii, to Panama, to Alaska. That's San Francisco, and to Panama, to Alaska, that's San Francisco. And then in the 20th century, Los Angeles came along. In the 1920's and the Second World War, Los Angeles projected another image. Not masculine anymore because the people coming were coming on trains. They came with their wives, their bibles, their uncles, their aunts, they brought everything and they brought Illinois to California, they brought New York

to California, they brought their lives their cultures. That's why Orange County is not at all like San Francisco County. Los Angeles begins as a different place, a family place. A place. A place of orchards, or stability, of religious order, religious values and religious beliefs. The role of mother, the role of wives is powerful in Los Angeles, than San Francisco. These two great cities became contestants for the image of California. The image of San Francisco projected California in the 19th century. The image of Los Angeles projected California from the 1920's right on through to today. It's Los Angeles that projects the world. Los Angeles is the Ellis Island of today, because people are poring in from all over the world. So this is a place that has open to America through the images of these two great metropolitan areas, and they say to people in China, not so much Europe anyone but Mexico, Asia. But here is a place where you can find your own kind. People from China have been coming here since 1852. 20,000 Chinese from Canton came here in 1852. People have been coming from Mexico since the 18th century. This is a place of multicultural diversity. It has always been so. It's not something new. We brought the gold rush and the world rushed in. The world has been here, this is globalization, multiculturalism, and diversity. It's not new. It's inherent, it a past of, it's their very muscle and marrow of California. California is America, only more so. That's a great image. If I'm going to come to America, I might as well come to the epitome of America. If I can coming to America form Italy, people came to California because they saw what Italy was like. People from Vietnam, well I guess the Mong people from the Vietnam Hill country, go all sorts of places by that I mean Indianapolis, and Indiana, but I think many more cultures, many geographic areas if they were to choose they'd choose California. It's better and was about a probability you will find someone of your own kind.

RACHEL GOODMAN: You raised two interesting themes. One is that people from other counties see California as a black state, which they project what feels familiar about this place to home. They can start over again in a smaller way, with their own kind in their own place. Those are two different points. They said, "Ireland liked Virginia because the vast green tracts of grass." That felt like where they came from.

J.S. HOLLIDAY: Is that true, a lot of Irish went to Virginia?

RACHEL GOODMAN: A lot of them went to the mountains of Kentucky and Virginia. Scottish and Irish.

J.S. HOLLIDAY: Oh, so that would have been early and probably in the 18th century, ok.

RACHEL GOODMAN: Let's talk about Mexico here for a minute and its impact, because Salinas is one of the biggest growing Hispanic cities and it is a majority now. I was interested to have you talk about how groups become the majority. I know in some cities, again Americans have become the majority now. Not the minority. How does that change what draws people to California? How do changes make people see a miniature Mexico in Salinas because it feels familiar because all their imported cultural artifacts are starting to be imposed now for example, most of the signs in Watsonville are in Spanish

now. You call someone's office and it's in Spanish, you can choose to hear that message in English. There's almost an insular effect of the some of these communities who are coming here, and this is their California and their California is actually a transposed version of what they came from. They are trying to create some of it, by making the best of what is here. Which I found returning, I wanted to know if you had any comments of that kind of large influx where people want to be comfortable so they create some of what they had and they also adopt all that's good about Walmart and having their kids good schools, and the modern American lifestyle.

J.S. HOLLIDAY: Yes, I hear what you said, and I understand it, and I agree that these are interpretations and judgments that are largely true, however, one should say that that's always been true. The Polish people moved to Chicago and setup areas of Chicago that were Polish. Blacks moved from the south to areas... that's been going on the whole idea of globalization. Jews in Newark, and Italians and Irish in Boston. Everywhere it has always been true that we are a nation of nations, that we're a nation and those immigrants necessarily, for religious reasons, or cultural reasons, for social peculiar compulsivity's to seek their own, so California is different than every other part of America in that fact. As far as the Mexicans are concerned. Yes Korea, there is little Korea in Los Angeles. It's a place isolated and is totally identified as Korean culture. The degree to which they bring Mexico with them, as all immigrants have brought, their national social customs with them. That degree of California of course more obvious and rooted. It's easy to get back and forth, the umbilical cord hasn't been cut. You can travel. Secondly, we are always identified as once Mexican, although I think it may not be politically correct for me to say, but I would bet pretty confidently, that there are not Mexicans who don't wish California was part of Mexico. One of the reasons people come here is to get away from Mexico and if these states had always been Mexican the influx wouldn't be what it is today. The influx is because these states are American, and the American economy. These states blossomed so much. Yes, so people coming here I think indeed they do find themselves in their Mexican cultural setting, but as has happened in other cultures: to get away and become more American and less Polish, more American and less Mexican is the process, the gain, the ambition, less easy in California for Mexicans because fit is so deeply rooted and contiguous to the homeland. Salinas a great growing, Mexican city, my indeed it's true all over, but I think that the future should be in favor of seeking disconnectedness. I am much reminded to believe that we need to Americanize as much as we can to have less of the evidence of Mexico and more evidence of America. Now that's hard to say because America is more Mexican than ever before. America is barely Latinized, but we better be careful to protect the distinction. If we become too much like Mexico. That's not going to be a real advantage, be that as it may. Maybe that's not a subject pursuit.

RACHEL GOODMAN: What I'm interested in is, California is such a large place. Do you think people themselves as Americans first, and maybe Californians second? What do you think, especially first generation? Second generation might have a different view, but I'm wondering, besides just the economic opportunity for their kids. They still identify heavily as with being from their home village. At what point do you think people say I'm Californian and what do you think that means and I know it means different

things to different people, but you don't always get people saying I'm Californian unless they were born here. And there's not that heavy identification with the state as a state because maybe it's so big. People would rather say I'm from Salinas rather than I'm a Californian unless you were born here and I think there's some pride in it.

J.S. HOLLIDAY: Well yes. Those are abstractions, that's a powerfully correct statement you've made and I understand it. I believe there has been always a sense of home. I know that in the 19th century people that came to California and lived here for months or even years would say at Christmas time and say I'm going to go home. That's going back to Omaha Nebraska, that's going back to Kansas, that's going back to home. Even though they lived in California for decades. I had students at the University of California Berkeley where time after time I would say, "What are you going to do?" And they would say, "I'm going to go home." They vote in California they have a driver license in California. So home coming here from someplace else. Brings with those immigrants the identity of their origins. It's true of people from Alabama as well it is true with people from Vietnam. If you have a language problem of course you can't escape your origin; it's much more difficult. It's clear that when people say, they don't think of themselves as Californians yet because they say they weren't born here. So what does that say. It says California is not yet in their bloodstream. Not yet their instinctive awareness of themselves. It takes a long time to wash away all the accumulations of one's identity in one's own country. It's probably given the number of people that move around; people move around all the time. The people move from here to Oregon. They move from here to Nevada. There's a mobility, a trenchancy about life in Nevada about life in California, and that too interferes with getting rooted with getting an identity. The Trenchancy of life defers identity.

RACHEL GOODMAN: This is a theme I'm very interested in and I was just talking about this with author James Houston and he had a lot to say about "This is my," what did he say, "this is my home habitat between San Luis Obispo and San Francisco, that's where I belong, where I was born. And he has a very clear identity although he's first generation Californian, unlike the fifth generation people who have no problem saying I'm Californian, even though they came from Italy over five generations ago. I think it affects the fabric of your commitment to a place and maybe how you view your long-term future there. If you are super identified from a place then you probably will try to help your children stay there if at all possible and you see a long-term kind of a stake in that place. Then you're willing to vote that way instead of I'm here and I'm a visitor and all these people are old, but I'm new. I mean the majority of this state is new, I mean that is what I have read.

J.S. HOLLIDAY: That's a good point. I know Jim Houston. I am a very great admirer of him as a person, as a historian, as a writer. He's a very perceiving wise man. Yes that's a very good point because the south has that. the people who's grandparents... My grandpapi owned this land. I'm going to be here and my grandchildren. That sense of rooted ness of commitment and identity and you don't want to give up your identity. But if you have been moving around and you have only been here for a short time. Your roots your identity your stripes your camolage is not yet so committed to this environment, to

this grassland, to this type of place. You're willing to try something else and move on. California by its very nature being a society of newly arrived people, is a society of people more likely to move. I think the moving industry was known some years ago to be more successful and more active in the volumes of business and the beacons and the atlas and all the different moving companies in California were bigger per capita than any other place else maybe in the world. That's part of the nature in California and that's some as the weakness as well. We're not as committed and we're not as sure where is home. I am always amused by people who tell me when I am public speaking, "I was born in California," or, "I'm a native Californian." I want to say so what. No one in Indiana says I'm a native hooser, what else would you be. We've got a big badge on our bosom if we cut through a native Californian. That's because so many people are not. And we want to distinguish ourselves from all these new comers and new comers aren't native Californian. Or someone will say that they are 5th generation Californian. We have put a lot of stock on that because we are a nation of nations; a nation of immigrants.

RACHEL GOODMAN: It's fascinating because when you go back east and you look at the gravestones from the sixteen hundreds you realize old here doesn't wash with old there.

J.S. HOLLIDAY: Of course not; exactly. That's one of the reasons we put a lot of emphasis on the mission period because California entered the union in 1850, and California wanted a history. What is our history. Virginia and Massachusetts have a glorious past. What is our past. So California needed a past. So it developed and it expanded upon the role of the padres, the missionaries the Hispanos, the rancho, the past life of those gold rush years. We have made that a story because we wanted a past. And that's part of the youthful ness and the self-consciousness of California.

RACHEL GOODMAN: Let's go back to those two more things. I would like to expand them a little bit more. The idea if you buy into a place and make it home. Let's go back to making your claim. Yes people buy homes and they sell them and they move back to another part of the state or out of the state. They're all very transient. What are some of the advantages for our community for people buying in and staying for awhile versus the advantages of this shuffling off of any role you might have in the community and taking and finding a new one. What are some of those pros and cons in communities for those kind of transients versus I want to stake my claim, buy a house and stay here.

J.S. HOLLIDAY: I don't know. I don't know what to say to that. Let's turn that off for a minute and let me think for a moment. Levittown, 1946 was a potato field literally. Then they built 100's and 100's of homes, everyone exactly the same. It was the first suburban sprawl. And now it's falling apart and it's no longer very attractive. But Levittown became an centre, a stepping-stone for thousands of young people. Most of them were not foreign but rather were young Americans whose parents grew up in NY City or Albany or whatever. This sense of Levittown as a community, it's loosing a lot of that. I guess the point being this has been the process across America. And everything is accelerated, and compounded in California. So when you make more of it in California we emphasize and dramatize California's problems, eccentricities and similarities more than anywhere

else. So what is the significance of a community having as in Sacramento. I have friends who live there who live in a part of Sacramento; beautiful old trees and lovely lawns and big homes set back, and those families have been there for generations, literally generations. And a few miles away is a tract area with all new comers. I don't think there's any significance about that. I think that's the very nature of change and expansion and growth. You can't move into a lovely old home with a driveway and garage in the back. When I came to Berkeley in 1952 I had one room above a garage. Then when I was married we bought a funny little dump. It had a kitchen, living room, and master bedroom. I build on a funny little room; practically a shed for our first child and it was a little dumpy house. It seemed perfectly normal. I was thrilled with a little garden. I was delighted. That whole sense of progress is compounded if you buy a house on a street where there are 42 other houses. I am amazed by how many houses; cities all over California, and you drive by and you see a big fence and on the other side of the fence the tops of houses, and there they are. They're 10 feet apart. There's not a tree anywhere. Not a tree but there is hundreds of houses, and they've all got the same structure and their flags flying. And they're 250,000 dollars. Well it's like a garden. You have seeded the seeds have gone out and the blossoms have come up and the housing tracts are the great evidence of fertility and the fertility of the image of California is evidence by housing tracts. Those say to the world people are coming here, they're starting a life here, they can rent, borrow the money to get the house. This is the image of California's success. These hundreds of thousands of homes and hundreds of tracts across California are the examples of farming. Farming the life of California is growing and prospering. I think that is a good metaphor. It testifies to the fertility, to the optimism. The economic prosperity of California. They're not beautiful they're too close together. They don't have any shade in the summer time, but they're cheap and the mortgage company is right there for you to sign on the line and that's the business of California.