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American History Thesis – Summary

In the spring of my junior year in high school, I wrote a paper about the history of democratic government in Gold-Rush era mining camps in California. It was my contention that early miners established sets of “mining codes” – a remarkably democratic form of government – in the absence of any formal legal authority. In addition, beginning in 1850, a massive influx of corporate-oriented foreign miners unintentionally empowered the rise of formal business and government, caused a gold scarcity, and thus irreversibly damaged the cultural and ideological homogeneity on which the individualistic mining codes relied.

More than anything else, this paper taught me how to research properly. My teacher required that we check actual books out of the Boston Public Library, and I had to comb the Internet for relevant journal articles as well. We had to compile over 250 note-cards worth of research, with one fact or observation on each one. Although it seemed pointless at the time, I think that it really deepened and intensified my research.

The central thesis of the paper taught me a few things about the functioning of democracy and the classic “company vs. individual” conflict. Democracy is a powerful form of government, but it is important to realize that it is also tenuous, often dependent on ideological or demographical unity. Although corporations are an intractable part of American life, I was reminded that they truly are largely detrimental forces. In this particular instance, companies took money from formerly independent miners, destroyed California’s terrain with machine-driven lode mining, and increased animosity between the miners.