

2008 Doyle Library Lecture:

The Men in the Octopus Suit: Corporations and the Creation of California

Presented by Richard White, Professor of History,
Stanford University

Friday, November 7th, 2008 at 7:00pm
Newman Auditorium, Santa Rosa Junior College

On November 14, 1883, the Colton Trial opened in Santa Rosa. It shared headlines in the San Francisco newspapers that day with the capture of Black Bart, “the notorious stage robber,” who had just robbed his last stage. The shared headlines were a nice coincidence because Ellen Colton, the widow of David Colton, one of the Associates, contended that Leland Stanford, Collis P. Huntington,

Charles Crocker, and the estate of the by then deceased Mark Hopkins had betrayed her and left her “in the condition of a man attacked by a highwayman upon the roadside.” As it turned out, David Colton had embezzled from his fellow Associates, and the Associates had responded by taking from his widow securities - stocks and bonds - and leaving her, like the doggerel verses Black Bart left with the victims of his robberies, her dead husband’s worthless note for a million dollars. The Colton Trial revealed the inner workings of the Southern Pacific, and in doing so cast a light on a world where insiders made millions while their corporations lost money and failed to repay debts, where politics were the domain of corporate functionaries, and where powerful, if not particularly efficient institutions, shaped the society around them. It was, in short, a world distant from us but in revealing ways much like ours.

Richard White is the Margaret Byrne Professor of American History at Stanford University. He is widely regarded as one of the nation’s leading scholars in three related fields: the American West, Native American history and environmental history. Professor White is the author of five books, including the acclaimed “Its Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West,” and “The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires and Republic in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815,” which was named a finalist for the 1992 Pulitzer Prize. Among other honors, he is the recipient of a MacArthur Foundation fellowship.

Following the lecture, there will be a reception in the Doyle Library. The presentation is free and is wheel chair accessible. There is a \$3 fee to park on campus. For more information call 527-4391.

