Wes Cowan: Our next story investigates how some unusual drawings might be connected to the great fortunes made during the California Gold Rush. In 1848, the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill changed California forever. In one year, some 90,000 men and women stampeded West, lured by claims of giant gold nuggets lying on top of the ground. Some immigrants struck it rich, but most found a life of backbreaking labor, and the rough and tumble of frontier existence. I. W. Baker’s rare photographs document the often grim truth of the world these early miners found. But did Baker also make sketches of the Gold Rush, and the incredible riches some miners pulled from the earth? Tom Gallegos, from Arvada, Colorado, thinks that might be the case.

Tom Gallegos: I think it might be an actual real bit of the California Gold Rush come to life.

Wes: I’m Wes Cowan, and I’m intrigued to see if this drawing really is by Baker.

Wes: Hey, Tom?

Tom: Hi, Wes.

Wes: Nice to see you.

Tom: Great to meet you. Come on in.

Wes: So, Tom, what do you got here?

Tom: This is a drawing that I happened across at an antique show back in 1997.

Wes: Wow. “The true golden era. Illuminated edition. Published by I. W. Baker at the Daguerreian saloon.” I guess these are the outlines of gold nuggets. And then the artist has made caricatures of these things. Here’s a colt revolver. Here’s a poke bag, or, a gold dust bag. A turtle, and this great face. Boy, these are enormous nuggets. This one from Vallecito, a hundred and thirty ounces.
Tom: To me, it looked like the California Gold Rush in a nutshell.

Wes: So have you done any research on this at all?

Tom: I went online and I found references to an Isaac Baker, who was apparently a well known daguerreotype photographer running around the gold fields.

Wes: But Tom didn’t see any reference to drawings by Baker. What is it that you want me to help you with?

Tom: What I’d like your help with is just trying to find out, is this by the Isaac Baker that I found references to online. And also, could these shapes really be the size of actual gold nuggets.

Wes: Well, those are two great questions, I’d like to spend a couple minutes with it now, studying it if you don’t mind, and then I’m going to have to take it with me.

Tom: That’s fine, just keep the rain off it.

Wes: I’ve never seen anything quite like this. And I’ve appraised and sold a lot of Gold Rush ephemera. I. W. Baker’s photographs are well known records of the California Gold Rush. They stand out for their documentary feeling. They are also incredibly rare – only 10 are known to exist. Any new Baker work – of any kind – would be a real find. It certainly looks to be of the period. In other words from the 1850s. There’s a big crease right down the middle as if it was somehow maybe, folded, for whatever reason. The caricatures made out of these nuggets, you know, what’s that all about? What is so curious about this though, are these enormous gold nuggets. There was an awful lot of exaggeration going on at that time. And in fact, that’s what drove the rush to California. But Baker’s photography is known for its lack of exaggeration. You know you have to make a lot of assumptions about this drawing. If Baker was a photographer, why didn’t he take pictures of these enormous nuggets? It just doesn’t make any sense. You know, one of the first places I want to check is in this great book called Pioneer Photographers of the Far West, 1840 to 1865. Okay, here he is. Isaac Wallace Baker. He’s listed as a daguerreotypist. He reacted to the news of the discovery of gold by joining a mining venture, the Beverly Joint Stock Company. Like thousands of other 49ers, Baker was seduced by newspaper accounts of instant...
riches. But when the treasure seekers arrived, they found that mining camps were dirty. Disease was rampant. And even if a miner found gold, it was usually flakes or dust. Few got rich; most were lucky to break even. This seems to be a lesson Baker took to heart. It says here that he gave up mining to learn the daguerreotype photography trade from a man named Perez Batchelder. Oh, take a look at this. Here is a photograph entitled “Isaac Wallace Baker in the doorway of Batchelder’s Daguerreian Saloon”. Oh, this is great: here’s two journals that are listed in the holdings of the Bancroft Library in Berkeley. And they describe his trip from Boston to California, impressions of California. And listen to this: illustrated with many drawings throughout.

I’ve set up an appointment at the Bancroft Library. In the meantime, let’s see what I can dig up about these gold nuggets. Columbia State Historic Park is located in what was the heart of the mother lode – a mile wide network of gold bearing quartz that extended 120 miles along the edge of the Sierra Nevadas. Columbia is one of the best preserved of California’s Gold Rush towns. Thonni Morikawa is park curator.

Wes: You must be Thonni.

Thonni Morikawa: Yes, I am. Welcome to Columbia, Wes.

Wes: From this area around Columbia, how much money was made during the Gold Rush?

Thonni: Well, in the Columbia area, between 1850 and 1860, over eighty million dollars was pulled out. And that’s in 1860’s money.

Wes: That would be more than $4 billion in today’s dollars taken out in just 10 years. So I read that when Baker first came out here, he tried his hand at panning for gold. I guess he would have gone to a hardware store, bought a pick and shovel, and a pan and would have headed out and said, “I’m gonna strike it rich,” right?

Thonni: That’s what they thought. They thought with that simple purchase they’d go out and be millionaires when they went home. If you’d like to have a chance I can take you up the street and we’ll do a little gold panning.
Wes: Let’s go try it. Thonni introduces me to Robert Young, a real life miner.

Robert Young: What you want to do is, gold is really heavy and it’s going to separate out and go to the bottom of this pan.

Wes: Okay.

Robert: And what you need to do is get this all broken up and give gold a chance to start sinking towards the bottom.

Wes: All right, I’m going to get some water in here. I quickly discover its cold, hard work. So, Thonni, they did this in the winter all day long?

Thonni: A guy would do this from sunrise to sunset, seven days a week, standing in water like this, backbreaking, moving the dirt. For all of this work, all they really made was six dollars a day, maybe six hundred a year.

Wes: Thonni explains that, because of the dreams of instant riches, eager migrants flocked to California throughout the 1850’s. But by then all of the easy gold was gone. The smarter folks became merchants.

Thonni: And as we like to say, they ended up mining the miners.

Wes: She says that Baker probably turned to photography as an easier way to make money. All right. You know what? I’m tired. I’m cold. I’m ready to go inside.

Robert: I agree.

Wes: Let’s go.

Robert: Let’s go in.

Wes: Thonni takes me to the Columbia Museum.
Thonni: Well, Wes, let me show you these. They are on loan from the California State Mining and Mineral Museum. These are casts of original nuggets that were found in the gold country. This one is very special. It came from Columbia. It's a hundred and thirty-three ounces. And if I notice on your drawing, that one's a hundred and thirty ounces.

Wes: This 133 ounce nugget would have been worth roughly $2,500 in 1902, when it was unearthed. And the largest of these five replicas would have weighed in at more than 200 ounces. Well, this answers one of my contributor's questions. Nuggets of the size depicted in Tom's drawing did exist. But is the drawing by I. W. Baker? My next stop is the University of California, Berkeley. The Bancroft Library has some of Baker's original journals. Susan Snyder is Head of Public Services.

Wes: So I understand you have some journals by I. W. Baker.

Susan Snyder: We do. Beautiful ones.

Wes: So what do the journals tell us about Baker?

Susan: He was a real character. He came during the Gold Rush. He was very observant. Every page is full of this wonderful verbal description, but also these just charming sketches.

Wes: I've got something I want to show to you.

Susan: Sure. Come on over here.

Wes: This is a drawing that I think may be by Baker. And you'll see down the middle there's this crease that suggests that maybe at one time was part of some sort of a journal.

Susan: They're a little too big to have come from our journals. But why don't you come on in and take a look at them.

Wes: Terrific. Let's go.
Wes: You know, these are so indescribably rare, to see these journals from the California Gold Rush. The gold miners were interested in making their fortunes, not documenting history. So while there are many news stories from the day trumpeting the Gold Rush, there are not a lot of primary source accounts from actual miners. I just can’t wait to see what’s inside. The first part of journal number one appears to be completely about his sea voyage to California. Baker’s temperament and talent is clearly evident.

Oh, boy, here’s a wonderful shipboard illustration, pencil drawing. Just comparing it with my drawing…it could be. I haven’t seen drawings of any gold nuggets yet though. Oh, and here’s his first view of San Francisco, and you'll get the sense of what the guy is like. “San Francisco. A beautiful country. Romantic scenery. Excellent harbor. A fine climate and plenty of game. This is the place for me in the winter season.” And then, in the next breath, “it is the most degraded, immoral, uncivilized, and dirty place that can be imagined. And the sooner we away from here, the better for us.” As I read, I am taken with his many humorous observations. He has a voice, projected in his words and sketches, that opens a window into this unique time in American history. I guess I’ve sort of struck out here. You know, both of Baker’s journals are filled with dozens of fabulous drawings. But there are no drawings of gold nuggets. And, I’m left wondering whether Tom’s drawing was actually done by Baker. Drew Johnson is Curator of Photography at the Oakland Museum of California. The museum’s art collection documents the history of California and the West from the early 1800’s onward. Baker daguerreotypes are some of the jewels of their collection. Wow.

Drew Johnson: Most photographers of the day only took pictures they were paid to take photographs of. But in the case of Baker, he seems to have had a clear documentary impulse. So, for instance, one of the things that everybody commented on about the Gold Rush was the fact that it was made up of people from all over the world. And we have here his daguerreotype of a Chinese man, which as far as we know is the first photograph ever taken of a Chinese immigrant in the West.

Wes: Really?
Drew: That's right. And like his daguerreotype portrait of the Indian boy, it's done with a great deal of dignity. To have a record of that, again, extremely rare example of a Native Californian from the 1850s.

Wes: You know, I've got to tell you, my eyes were immediately drawn to this great ambrotype of the two card players. Who are these guys?

Drew: That is Ike Baker himself. That's a self-portrait, of him holding a royal flush and trouncing his friend at cards.

Wes: So, that's Baker? That's great! What's this?

Drew: Ah, well, this is a clue to Baker's second life after he left California. People were interested in hearing about the Gold Rush. And like a lot of miners they decided to either write about it or lecture about it. And in his case he gave lectures back in Massachusetts. This is a scrapbook, which contains on the cover one of his broadsides. And then inside is his handwritten text of the talk he would give. Besides the text, there are also illustrations. Not only did he record the towns and the buildings and the miners and the claims, but some of the things the miners pulled out of the ground.

Wes: What Drew shows me next is the missing piece of the puzzle. Wow, Drew, I'm, I'm really kind of speechless here. Tom, this was a great journey for me personally, because I've always been attracted to daguerreotypes from the Gold Rush. I tell Tom how nuggets of the size depicted in his drawing were rare, but actually did exist.

Tom: Wow, that's terrific, that's terrific!

Wes: So, next I showed this drawing to Drew Johnson, the curator at the Oakland Museum of California, and this is what Drew showed me next. Oh, my stars. You're not going to believe what I've got to show you. They're the same nuggets.

Drew: Exactly the same nuggets, aren't they?
Wes: Oh, they absolutely are. Yours are without the caricatures, but I would venture that if you put this on top of that one, they would be identical.

Drew: I would find it extremely hard to believe that this was done by anybody but Isaac Baker. It’s almost unique. I know of only one other example of his work that is not in an institutional collection, either a museum or a library.

Tom: You are kidding me! It’s a draft of the same exact group of nuggets. What is this?

Wes: I explain how Baker had given detailed lectures back home in Massachusetts about his time in the exotic land of California. In drawings such as this, he documented the truth of the Gold Rush with his own personal flair. So there’s absolutely no question that your drawing and this drawing were done by Ike Baker during the California Gold Rush.

Tom: That is fantastic news, Wes. And I can’t thank you enough for finding that out.

Wes: Isaac W. Baker’s life after his lectures on the great California Gold Rush is shrouded in mystery. Some say, that in 1854, news of the discovery of gold in Australia enticed him to once again set sail for a land of potential riches. He is rumored to have died in Sumatra in 1862, at the age of 44, but little is known about the circumstances surrounding his death.