

## GOLD RUSHING TO CALIFORNIA

On a quiet day in January 1848, James Marshall was looking for an ideal spot for a sawmill; as he walked down a creek bed, he noticed some yellowish flakes that seemed to glisten. He picked them up and took them to his employer, Johann Sutter. After they found the flakes to be gold, they agreed that it must be kept a secret, for fear that the land would be invaded by gold seekers and the sawmill would not be completed. The workers who built the sawmill



Forty-niners rushed to stake claims in the California hills in hopes of striking it rich.

did their job, but also searched for gold in their spare time. Since some of these were Mormons, the area came to be known as the Mormon Diggings. Secrets like this can't be kept, and more men went out to the diggings. One was Sam Brannan, a San Francisco merchant and Mormon who ran down the streets of San Francisco shouting about gold at Sutter's Mill. Shops, churches, and law offices closed as people headed toward the gold fields. "Gold fever" had seized California's population.

**WHO WENT?** The "gold fever" virus affected far more men than women. An 1850 report indicated that newcomers to San Francisco included 35,000 men and 1,200 women. Fort Laramie figures showed that 30,000 men, 2,400 women, and 600 children had passed through (some going to Oregon and Utah and others to California). Gold seekers came from not only the United States, but from Mexico, Australia, Hawaii, and Europe as well. Carpenters, bricklayers, students, sailors, army deserters, ministers, farmers, lawyers, and physicians quit their jobs and joined the crowds heading for the diggings. A few were experienced miners, but most had never mined in their lives.

Not everyone who went intended to mine; some intended to take the gold from the miners. There were merchants with supplies, ship crews bringing food from all over the world, and Chinese who set up laundries. Gamblers, saloon keepers, and robbers all managed to make a living, as well.

**WHY DID THEY GO?** The most obvious reason was to get rich. Reports of people making great gold strikes caused great interest everywhere; to work hard for a few dollars a week when you could be picking up gold nuggets in California made no sense. Much gold was found: \$23 million in 1849, \$50 million in 1850. Men carried their gold in buckskin bags, and paid for food and supplies with pinches of gold (a pinch was all the gold you could hold between your thumb and index finger; it was worth \$1).

Reports of gold discoveries in eastern newspapers angered miners who worked hard and found nothing. An Iowa newspaper reported that a mountain of gold and a lake of gold had been discovered. One miner said someone would soon announce that all of California was made of gold.

There was more to it than getting rich, though. There was a sense of adventure; many realized this was the most exciting experience they would ever have. Men who had always been looked down upon went to prove everyone wrong. Others went to get away from their problems: lawmen, unhappy romances, or family responsibilities. Others saw it as an opportunity to change careers; they were tired of farming or working in someone else's shop.

**HOW DID THEY GET THERE?** There were three basic ways for easterners to reach California. One was by the long *Cape Route*. It was expensive, boring, and took several months. The second was the *Panama Route* by steamship to the east coast of Panama and a four-day walk through hot, snake-infested jungles to the west coast of Panama. Then came a wait of at least a month for ship transportation to California. The third way was the *overland route* used by earlier pioneers.

**WHAT WAS LIFE LIKE THERE?** Mining camps were centers of activity day and night. They grew quickly after gold was discovered. Suddenly, white tents were everywhere. One week, three or four men are working a creek bed and they find gold. Within a week, 1,000 or more gold seekers come, and tagging along behind them are merchants, doctors, and the dealers in crime and vice. A few log, rock, or even brick buildings might be built if the claim holds out long enough. But if there is little gold, the miners are soon gone, off to new and more promising diggings.

The cost of everything was very high. At Sutter's Fort, two white shirts cost \$40; a comb, \$6; a tin pan, \$9; 200 pounds of flour, \$150. Miners paid outrageous prices for anything they bought and didn't blink. They lived high when they had gold, but didn't whine when they lost it.

Most had to learn to do "women's work" that they had never done before. Cooking was a new experience, but necessity forced them to learn. Washing clothes was beneath the dignity of some, and when local laundry prices rose too high, some shipped their dirty laundry to Hawaii or China to be washed and ironed. Some mined every day, but others took Saturday afternoon or Sunday off to do chores, write letters, or play cards.

**WHAT WERE THE RULES?** After the miners had been in the camp about a week, they met and drew up rules for the camp. The rules dealt with crime, the size of claims, and what was proof that a claim had not been abandoned. Trials for those accused of violating the rules were public, and all members of the camp voted guilt or innocence. Punishment for the guilty was swift and severe: death, flogging, or exile. The first time a person stole, they might get off with 20 or 30 lashes; repeat offenders were executed.

**Activity:**

What good and bad qualities did gold rushing bring out in the people of the 1840s and 1850s?

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## POINTS TO PONDER

1. If there were a major gold discovery today, do you think it would draw the kind of crowd that the California gold rush did? Why or why not?

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2. As a newcomer to a mining camp, what do you think your reaction would be to the people and living conditions?

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3. As a person living in Baltimore, how would you want to go to California? If you lived in St. Louis, how would you probably get there?

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4. Why did they not sentence people to long jail terms or have long trials in the gold camps?

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Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## CHALLENGES

1. Who was the first to discover gold, and for whom did he work?

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2. How many more men than women came to San Francisco in 1850?

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3. How much gold was found in 1849 and 1850 combined?

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4. What was a "pinch" of gold, and how much was it worth?

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5. What were some problems that caused men to go to the gold fields?

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6. What were some problems with the Cape Route?

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7. What were some problems with the Panama Route?

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8. Where did most miners sleep?

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9. What would two shirts and 200 pounds of flour each cost at Sutter's Fort?

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10. What were the usual punishments in mining camps?

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