

Chapter 13: Gold Rush

1. Discovery

Sutter's Mill

James Marshall was a carpenter building a sawmill on the American River in the Sacramento Valley. On January 24, 1848, Marshall found a piece of gold in the river. He shared his discovery with mill owner and land baron John Sutter. They tried to keep the gold discovery quiet but word leaked out.

In December 1848, President Polk announced that vast quantities of gold existed in California. Beginning in 1849, tens of thousands of gold seekers called 49ers, landed in the Sierra foothills hoping to get rich quick.

2. Mining

Panning for Gold

The first arrivals in the gold fields usually worked alone. They waded into streams and scooped up rocks and sand with a metal pan. Then they swished the water around in the pan draining off the sand and lighter minerals. What was left were rocks and hopefully gold. This method of panning for gold worked well at first, but it was only effective at finding gold at or near the surface.

In addition, California had little law enforcement. **Claim jumpers**, people who illegally took another person's mining area, became a problem for many people working in remote areas.

Sluice Mining

Prospectors began to form groups. Working together they could get more

done and being in a group offered more safety from criminals.

Groups of prospectors built sluices next to rivers. These were small canals made of wood with slats on the bottom. Men would shovel earth into the sluice allowing the water to wash away the dirt and sand, but the heavier minerals would fall to the bottom and get stuck against the slats. Then prospectors would pick out the rocks and hopefully find gold nuggets.

While more efficient than gold panning, this method of prospecting had its limitations. Prospectors could only dig five or six feet down before hitting rock. At this point, prospectors needed more resources than shovels and picks.



Hydraulic mining caused enormous environmental damage. Water and mud flooded the Sacramento Valley destroying homes and farms. Source: Watkins, Carleton E. *Hydraulic Mining*. c. 1870s. Photo.

Hard Rock Mining

To go deep into the earth hundreds or thousands of feet in search of gold required investments that only companies could afford. As the surface gold dried up, miners either returned home in the East, got different jobs, or went to work for the mining companies.

Companies dug thousands of miles of tunnels sometimes a mile deep into the

earth. Cave-ins killed a lot of miners as did breathing in the dust from drilling. But mining offered steady pay, at least for a while.

Hydraulic mining was another way companies pulled gold from the ground. Water canons blasted away mountainsides. Miners diverted the mud into sluices where gold could be picked out. The environmental damage became so bad that a lawsuit was filed against a mining company in 1883. The following year, Judge Lorenzo Sawyer issued one of the first environmental rulings by blocking most hydraulic mining in California.

3. Life in the Gold Fields

Boomtowns

Whenever a prospector found gold, news of the discovery got out. As hundreds or thousands of people moved in, towns appeared so fast they were called **boomtowns**. Not everyone who showed up was looking for gold. Many people made a living supporting the miners by opening businesses like restaurants, hotels, laundries, barbershops, saloons, and gambling halls.

When the gold dried up, things changed just as fast. Unless there was another source of work like farming, ranching, or logging in the area to support a large population, the boomtowns emptied out and became **ghost towns**.

Law and Order

The chance to make money fast caused the non-native population of California to grow from about 1,000 people in 1848 to over 100,000 by the end of 1849.

Unfortunately, gold not only attracted hard-working people who wanted to improve their lives, it also attracted people willing to lie, cheat, steal, and murder for personal gain.

In boomtowns, people got together and formed governments to create laws and appoint a sheriff to enforce the laws. It was common for trials to last no more than a day and punishment to be given out immediately that included banishment, whippings, and hangings.

Sometimes when no government existed or government failed to stop crime, groups of citizens formed **vigilance committees**. These vigilantes made their own laws and enforced punishment. Often the vigilance committees were no better than the criminals they sought to stop. Vigilantes sometimes punished innocent people or sentenced criminals to death for minor crimes.

Immigrants

People came from all over the world including Europe, Mexico, South America, and China. Gold fever was too strong to resist. At first, most people got along, but as the gold became more scarce in the early 1850s, Americans began to see foreigners as competition.

In 1850 and 1852, the new California state government placed a tax on all foreign miners in hopes that they would leave the state. In many cases it worked. The largest minority group making up about twenty percent of the population in California were the hard working Chinese. The state put a \$3 tax specifically on Chinese miners to discourage them.