
BACKGROUND SHEET 2

GETTING TO THE GOLD FIELDS

Gold was discovered in sparsely populated areas of western states and territories, sometimes thousands of miles from large population centers. Fortune seekers could spend months just trying to reach the gold fields, and the hardships they faced were at times unbearable. But still they came. They had two ways of getting to the gold – by land and by sea.

OVERLAND

The overland journey required careful planning and preparation. No matter where the gold was found, a traveler had to wait until spring to leave for the gold fields. By spring there was enough grass on the plains to feed the animals pulling their supply wagons. If travelers left too early, their animals would starve to death and the supplies, with nothing to haul them, would be left behind. Leaving too late in the spring could also be dangerous. A gold rusher could get caught in an early snow while crossing the mountains and quickly perish. Many miners purchased supplies and wagons and then formed mining companies so that they could travel together. Some people paid \$300 to join one of these companies.

Even with careful planning a traveler still needed some luck. The overland trails were lined with broken wagons, abandoned supplies, and the carcasses of dead animals. Thousands of people died along the way from disease, especially cholera, and many miners in their haste to get to the gold tried taking short cuts that had disastrous consequences.

SEA

Another way to the California and Alaskan gold fields was by sea ships were in great demand. When all the safe, sturdy vessels were filled, unscrupulous merchants began to book passage on ships that had been abandoned for years. Many were not seaworthy, with rotting hulls. Anything that could stay afloat was pressed into service. All the ships took either the Panama route or the Cape Horn route.

PANAMA ROUTE

Gold rushers taking the Panama route sailed Panama, marched through jungle to the Pacific side, and caught a ship going north to San Francisco. At first, this route was the fastest way to the gold fields, but later, the travelers experienced long delays. When they reached the Pacific Ocean, they found thousands of gold hunters waiting there for a ship to take them north! Many of the sailors who brought the miners to San Francisco did not want to sail back to Panama. Instead, they joined the gold rush. Ship captains had a difficult time getting crews to sail south. Meanwhile, the gold rushers stranded in Panama had to wait weeks, even months, for a ship to take them north.

CAPE HORN ROUTE

Ships taking the Cape Horn route sailed from the east coast around the tip of South American (Cape Horn) and north to San Francisco. It took six to eight months to make this voyage, and it was dangerous. Many of the ships that attempted to sail around the Horn crashed into the rocks and were destroyed. For most miners this route was too slow, and they avoided it, but for voyagers who needed to get large amounts of supplies to the Pacific Coast, it was the best choice.

SUMMARY

Getting to the gold fields was not easy or safe. The gold rushers had to cope with great distances, harsh weather, poor transportation, and disease. Perhaps the greatest danger came from dishonest people who promised quick, safe transportation, but did not honor their promises. In spite of the many difficulties and hardships, the miners continued to come. Gold was a magnet drawing thousands of fortune seekers from all over the world.

BACKGROUND SHEET 3

TOOLS USED FOR MINING

PANNING

Panning for gold was used at the beginning of a gold rush, usually to test a new site for gold. A miner would put gold-bearing gravel in a pan, lower it in the water, and swish it around. The heavy gold stayed at the bottom while the water and lighter pebbles washed out. A single pan usually yielded little gold, but a few fortunate miners sometimes found thousands of dollars worth of gold in a single panning.

CRADLE

The cradle, or rocker as it was sometimes called, became a popular device for mining gold. It could be purchased in a store or made. It resembled a cradle, and it had a perforated steel plate on top. Sand and gravel was piled on top, and water was poured over it. The gold and sand fell through the holes and lodged themselves in strips of wood called riffles that were in the bottom of the cradle. A cradle required a minimum of two men to operate it, but having three was even better. One man was needed to dig, another to carry dirt, and a third to operate the cradle.

LONG TOM

The long tom was a wooden trough 12 - 25 feet long and open at both ends. At one end the bottom widened and was covered with a steel plate similar to the one used in the cradle. Under this plate was a box filled with riffles. The miners positioned the trough so the water from a stream could run through it. They shoveled in the dirt, and the water washed away the sand and gravel, leaving the gold trapped in the riffles. A long tom averaged four to five times more gold than a cradle.

COYOTE MINING

Over the centuries heavy gold sifted its way through the sand and gravel until it came to rest on bedrock. Many miners, hoping to get this gold, sunk shafts as deep as 150 feet into the ground (or until they hit bedrock). The dirt was hauled up with a rope and bucket, and washed through a pan or cradle. This method of mining, called coyote mining, was dangerous, and many miners died when these shafts caved in on them.

HYDRAULIC MINING

Hydraulic mining used high-powered hoses that shot powerful streams of water against the sides of a mountain. This process created rivers of mud, which were channeled through long toms where the gold collected. Since hydraulic mining required a great amount of capital, only large companies could afford to use it, but it was very profitable. Though profitable, this kind of mining ruined the environment. Rivers of mud polluted streams, ruined farmland, and destroyed the natural beauty of the countryside. Many states banned this form of mining by the end of the 19th century.

BACKGROUND SHEET 4

CALIFORNIA GOLD RUSH

DISCOVERY OF GOLD

In 1848 John Sutter hired a carpenter, James Marshall, to build a sawmill. As the work on Sutter's mill neared completion, Marshall made a startling discovery - gold! He had found gold at Sutter's mill on the South Fork of the American River. The date was January 24, 1848.

HOW THE GOLD RUSH BEGAN

Sam Brannan rode up and down the streets of San Francisco with a bottle of gold dust. He was shouting "Gold, gold, from the American River!" Soon the city was nearly abandoned, and the news went east. On December 5, 1848, James Polk, the president of the United States, announced to the nation that gold had been discovered in California. This announcement sent thousands of men to California in 1849. These men were called the "Forty-Niners."

WEALTH

In 1854 the Calaveras nugget was unearthed. It weighed 162 pounds and was worth \$43,543. At Rich Bar four men found \$50,000 worth of gold in one day! It was not uncommon for men to find \$1,000 worth of gold in a single panning. In all the Mother Lode (a name for the California gold fields) yielded more than \$250 million.

UNIQUE PROBLEMS

The sudden increase in population created many problems. California was sparsely populated before gold was discovered. This meant there were only small towns dotted far apart and there were no established laws and no policeman to enforce any laws! Suddenly thousands of men appeared, and they were forced to create their own laws and government. Another problem was that there was a serious lack of food and supplies available. Of course, that sent the prices of any available supplies skyrocketing. Eggs cost \$3 each, and a barrel of flour was \$800. All of this was at a time when the average working man earned \$4-\$8 a day.

IMPACT

Gold brought thousands of people west. In 1848 San Francisco had only 1,000 people. By 1860 there were more than 50,000. The population of California rose from 26,000 in 1848 to 380,000 in 1860. In 1850, California became the 31st state to join the United States. California became an example for other gold rushes. The Forty Niners' laws and mining techniques were so effective that they were used by other miners at later gold rushes.

BACKGROUND SHEET 5

LAW AND ORDER

MINERS' GOVERNMENT

Gold was usually found in sparsely populated areas that had little or no government. The miners were forced by necessity to create their own laws. They would call a camp meeting; elect a presiding officer, a recorder, and sometimes a marshall. The meetings were democratic and had two purposes: first, they made laws; second, they enforced these laws. If a miner felt mistreated or wanted a problem solved, he could call a meeting by posting a notice. A judge and jury would be selected, hear the miner's case, and render a decision. This decision was backed up by other miners in the camp.

STAKING A CLAIM

The most important laws to the miners were those that governed the staking of a mining claim. The first task in any mining community was to decide how much land a miner could claim. The size of a claim varied from camp to camp, depending on the amount of gold the claims held. Usually a miner could claim 100 square feet at the richer sites and as much as 10,000 square feet at the poorer sites. Once a miner had selected a claim, he had to mark it so that other miners knew it was taken. This procedure was usually done by driving a stake into the ground (hence the term "staking" a claim) and filing the claim with a camp recorder. A miner could keep a claim as long as he worked it. Generally this meant the miner had to be present one day out of three. If a claim went unworked for more than 10 days, another miner could claim it.

CAMP JUSTICE

Justice in the camps was quick and rough. Trials were short, and punishments were handed out immediately. For capital crimes such as grand theft and murder, the punishment was hanging. Lesser offenses such as petty theft usually resulted in a flogging and banishment from the camp. Eventually legal systems replaced the miners' version of camp justice. Sheriffs and judges were hired, and jails were built. Most of the judges were fair, but there were some exceptions. One judge, for example, seemed interested only in collecting fines. In one case this judge fined a man \$110 for robbing a miner of his gold. Since the thief didn't have any money to pay the fine, the judge ordered the man who had been robbed to pay it! Until a standard legal system was established, the miners' brand of justice was fair and reasonable for those in the mining camps, although there were exceptions, especially for minorities.

RACIAL PREJUDICE

The mining camps were populated by people from all over the world. Although most of the miners were white-skinned and English speaking, the camps had many minorities, including Native Americans, Latin Americans, Chinese, and nationals from all over the world. These people were frequently mistreated and not protected by the miners' system of justice. Native Americans were driven from their land. They saw their beautiful landscape destroyed, their streams polluted, and wildlife scared away. The miners who came from Mexico and South America were unkindly called "Chilenos." They were beaten, robbed, and had to pay high taxes. Although they were allowed to stake a claim, they were forced to leave any claim that proved to be rich. Chinese miners came to the gold fields by the thousands even though they received the worst treatment of any non-white group. They could mine only where the whites had already mined or where no one else wanted to mine. Frequently they were beaten, run out of town, or had their homes and businesses destroyed. Many miners were hostile and cruel to people who were not like them. Racial prejudice was a common part of mining life.