Imagining the West:
The Gamble and the Myths of the California Gold Rush

by

Ray Ward
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Introduction

In early 1850, less than one year into the California Gold Rush, a small group of prospectors struck gold approximately one hundred and fifty miles east of San Francisco. The area proved immensely rich, and within months, thousands of miners had flocked to the region in search of gold. Later known as Columbia, it became one of the largest Gold Rush boom towns of the 1850s. At its peak, it boasted nearly 30,000 Americans, several banks, general stores, fire stations, and a multitude of drinking and gambling houses. Throughout the 1850s and 1860s, the mines in Columbia yielded approximately $100,000 per week during the mining seasons, advancing its growth into one of the largest towns in California.\(^1\) Fires twice nearly destroyed it, but the town continued to be rebuilt and developed. When mining output weakened in the late 1860s, Columbia deteriorated and its population shrank to only several hundred. By the time of its decline, the mines had produced nearly $90 million in gold.\(^2\) In the 1920s, renewed interest in the region brought plans to preserve and restore the buildings as a historical site. In 1945, the center of the town became a state park and a popular destination for Gold Rush tourism.

Today, Columbia remains a window into the world of the Gold Rush, a family-friendly tourist attraction offering an assortment of Gold Rush-themed activities. From “Fiddle and Banjo Contests” to “Candy Cane Making” to “Fandango and Casino Night (Adults only! Victorian dress encouraged!),” these events allow tourists to experience the jovial qualities of mid-nineteenth century California culture. Tourists can search for gold, tour an old Wells Fargo building, and attend live theater shows. Re-creations of mining camps also provide a visual representation of miners’ domestic lives and a
glimpse into the exceptional environment they inhabited. The events hosted in Columbia create a selective image of Gold Rush California; here, the Gold Rush lifestyle is defined by both its benign crudeness and simplistic charm.

Although Columbia is one of the largest Gold Rush attractions in California, there are many others, as Gold Rush tourism continues to thrive in a number of former mining regions. These sites offer the opportunity to reignite the spirit of reckless, outdoor adventure that has continued to define the Gold Rush. In an online advertisement for Calaveras County, one of the original counties in California, a description reads:

“Calaveras County is fun! With its diverse terrain and year-round recreational opportunities seeking refuge in wide-open spaces, embarking on a wild adventure or anything in between is possible at any given moment. What are you waiting for? Just Go!”

Such destinations sell the idea of both reliving the Gold Rush experience and escaping the drudgeries of modern life, as miners sought to over a century and a half ago: “Those of you looking to momentarily escape the tension of metropolitan life will find yourselves captivated, entertained, and rejuvenated by this part of California Gold Country.” Gold Country is thus, not simply an area for historical insight, but also a site for a getaway.

Attractions like Columbia compel us to ask: what makes Gold Rush California so appealing? And why is the historically brief episode of the Gold Rush endowed with such enthralling, vitalizing qualities? Perhaps this is due, at least in part, to the dynamics and aesthetics of nineteenth-century mining and Gold Rush society. Contemporary tourist mining offers a peek into the adventure of the Gold Rush, reviving the process of testing one’s luck in the mysterious yet stirring quest for gold. There is something dramatic in this practice that is profoundly exciting, attracting tourists to experience it
for themselves. In tourist attractions, Gold Rush society is portrayed as a unique blend of minimalism and carousal, where miners enjoyed the uncomplicated pleasures of living in nature. It is viewed as both separate from conventional culture and distinctly American.

But aesthetics alone do not explain the Gold Rush’s fixture in popular imagination and the disproportionate amount of attention given to this short-lived event. The Gold Rush is also widely regarded as an integral piece of the American story, a catalyst for California’s development and the creation of the American West. Miners, thus, did not just embody an exceptional lifestyle; they also contributed to the economic and territorial expansion of the United States. Their presence in California was both disconnected from wider American society and a crucial component of its progress. This dynamic, on the surface, is alluring; the miners abandoned confining traditionalism, becoming pioneers in the process.

The popular Gold Rush narrative revolves around concepts of the American spirit and the transformation of California into a thriving, white civilization. On Columbia’s Chamber of Commerce homepage, an account of the town’s discovery unfolds almost as a folk tale:

On March 27, 1850, Dr. Thaddeus Hildreth, with his brother George and a handful of other prospectors, made camp near here. They found gold, and miners streamed in to share the wealth. Before the month was out Hildreth’s Diggings, a tent and shanty town housing several thousand miners, was created. Its original name was soon changed to American Camp and then, because that sounded too temporary, to Columbia.⁵

In this story, Hildreth, formerly a middle class professional, ventures west, mines with a small group, and eventually discovers one of the richest areas in Gold Rush California. Although he is simply an ordinary American citizen in an extraordinary place and time, his discovery is momentous. While this particular narrative is engaging and seemingly
straightforward, it obscures historical fact. The gold in “Hildreth’s Diggings” had actually been mined earlier in 1850 by a group of Mexican miners, who were forced off the land by Americans a few months later. Although Columbia was built by American miners, the gold discovery that enabled the town’s growth was falsely claimed by whites. This appropriation continues today, evident in the benign tales of the discovery and subsequent development in Columbia.

Columbia provides only one example of the ways in which Gold Rush history is oversimplified and confined to an Anglo-centric, American narrative; literature, films and other forms of popular culture have also contributed to this process. Analyzing the event thus presents us with distinct gaps between reality and myth. While popular culture is generally unconcerned with such inconsistencies, they are nevertheless important for historical insight. The Gold Rush, in fact, is not a linear story of American migration and settlement; it produced an intricate web of relationships that tangled national identity, gender and race, creating a highly diverse society. And while the mining lifestyle is often used to represent peaceful escape, mining societies were often violent and embittered regions marked by ethnic conflict. Thus, the social and cultural dynamics created by the Gold Rush often contradict the romantic elements used to characterize the event.

It is somewhat easy (and not entirely misguided) to romanticize the Gold Rush because of the dramatic qualities it embodied. The journey to California was both dangerous and demanding, requiring an adventure without exception. Whether by land or sea, travelers hastily abandoned their old lives and undertook a journey of immense peril. Old identities dissolved as 1849 Gold Rush immigrants, known as “forty-niners,” sought to redefine their lives in a territory that was newly American, undeveloped, and
laden with promise. California’s natural wealth was seemingly available for the taking, and forty-niners were eager to test their luck, even when it meant sacrificing everything they had. As they left for California, they imagined a more exciting, rewarding world ahead. And what could possibly be more glamorous than gold?

The myths of the California Gold Rush took form even as the event occurred, and were further developed in later retellings. They began before the Gold Rush materialized, as the idea of Manifest Destiny grew in scope, and continue to be modified in present-day depictions of California and the Wild West. The myths are also present in the accounts of forty-niners themselves, who were deeply attracted to what Gold Rush California represented. These myths explore concepts of new opportunity, the elimination of social restrictions, and the notion that wealth would no longer be predetermined by birthright. American expansion and Manifest Destiny would play a major role in the way the discovery of gold was interpreted, and helped to formulate the myths as distinctly American. Masculinity is also at the center of the myths, as the Gold Rush seemingly provided a way for American men to reclaim a sense of masculine adventure. The proprieties and moral codes of their home lives would no longer apply, and California culture came to be defined by the presence of wild, enterprising men.

The Gold Rush presents us with challenging contradictions. On the one hand, it was simply too good to be true. On the other, it happened, and the results were indeed extreme; many acquired quick wealth, and California became a place of simultaneous excitement and disorder. The Gold Rush was an integral component of America’s westward expansion, and helped to form the modern boundaries of the United States. But in order to really understand the Gold Rush, it is essential to take the myths apart, for they fail to offer us a balanced understanding of the event as a part of American
The “forty-niner,” for example, is the exemplary mythical figure of the Gold Rush. Images of rugged, bearded young white men dominate the popular portrayals of California forty-niners. But who exactly was the forty-niner? Do the thousands of Mexicans, Chileans, and Chinese who immigrated to California count as true forty-niners? Do “Californio” Spanish speakers or Indians who inhabited California prior to white settlement fall into this category? In truth, the Gold Rush transformed California into an astoundingly multi-ethnic and multi-racial society, and the relationships between groups were fraught with difficulties.

Gold Rush historians have offered their own deconstructions of Gold Rush myths. Susan Lee Johnson attributes American culture’s perception of the Gold Rush to a collective misremembering, one which developed as white society established dominance in California and effectively wrote Gold Rush history. Our “memory” of the Gold Rush ultimately determines our understanding of its historical significance. Since the Gold Rush fits neatly into a narrative of Manifest Destiny, in which American emigration helped to change the nation’s demographics, it is fairly easy to confine the Gold Rush within this basic storyline.

The myths of Gold Rush migration were not all created after the fact, and many forty-niners at the time believed themselves to be participating in a defining event in American history. They were aware that they were chasing a dream that would leave the past behind and offer the chance to redirect their lives. Brian Roberts analyzes the Gold Rush as a transformative event for middle class culture, in which Americans sought to escape the confines of wage-based capitalism in the States and pursue a more exciting fortune in the new California. While Gold Rush mythology involves Manifest Destiny, the desire for escape and pursuit of an American dream is also central to the myths. But
what happened when gold became scarce? Or when disease spread? Or when foreigners claimed gold that was fervently believed to be exclusively American? For most forty-niners, the Gold Rush became a struggle, failing to live up to the fabled qualities it came to represent.

This thesis explores the Gold Rush as an event shaped not only by the diversity of peoples in California, but also by the wide range of experiences it created. It was an electrifying time in American history, encompassing many extremes; lucky miners could dig out fortunes in a single day, and then lose them at the gambling tables with the turn of a single card. But California was also a place of great frustration, as many prospective miners had their dreams thwarted by the unsuccessful chase for elusive gold. Ethnic diversity produced hostility, and punishment came to be defined by excess, as theft and other crimes were dealt with in brutal fashion. Most forty-niners were forced to confront the gaps between the mythical qualities of the Gold Rush and the thorny experience that it created. This thesis is an effort to unravel Gold Rush myths and use them to explore the event in a deeper context. My hope is to reveal both what California represented to the United States as an expanding nation, and what it became to the thousands of gold-seekers who poured into the region after 1849.

With this in mind, I try to tell the tale of the Gold Rush using the voices of those who lived through it. I will focus on a narrow range of real-life “characters,” whose experiences reveal the heterogeneity of Gold Rush living and the interplay between reality and myth. Most of these sources are letters, journals and memoirs of migrants published after the California craze had ended. They provide powerfully honest, albeit biased, accounts of the journey and life in the golden territory. From the forty-five year old military man who ventured across the plains to the West; the sea-faring young
Pennsylvanian who abandoned mining for wage labor; the doctor’s wife who became an unlikely entrepreneur in female-scarce California; these characters embody the great diversity that the Gold Rush enabled. Some of their stories are typical while others are more unusual, but they each help to illuminate certain components of Gold Rush life.

Part I analyzes the momentum of the Gold Rush and how widespread circulation of information contributed to the phenomenon of “Gold Fever.” It examines the motivations of Gold Rush migrants and the symbol of California as a new beginning. This section also looks into the journey itself and the immense sacrifice that gold migration required. Part II is an exploration of Gold Rush society and the unusual circumstances that it produced. It looks into the world of mining, the lifestyle of Californians, and the outcomes for particular individuals and groups. It examines ethnic conflict and the extent to which California’s diversity prompted tension and violence. Part II also analyzes the evolution of Gold Rush California as it developed socially, politically and economically. Part III examines Gold Rush mythology in greater depth, beginning with California’s popular culture, which included mining images and songs. Part III also scrutinizes post-Gold Rush productions that selectively reestablished and refurbished Gold Rush myths. Such sources include nostalgic literature and paintings which choose very specific elements of the Gold Rush to “remember.”

This thesis is concerned with the way in which a historical event is understood within the context of a national story. The Gold Rush plays an important role in the narrative of the United States, and influences the way in which American identity is conceptualized; the spirit of independence, opportunism and entitlement that was heightened during the Gold Rush is no less relevant today as we consider the character of the United States and its role as a nation. Real-life accounts complicate the story, but
their relationship with myth is often multidimensional; reality can influence myth, and vice versa. In the context of the Gold Rush, many of its myths are unrealistic and misleading, but they provide a framework through which to analyze the experience. They also helped Gold Rush participants to use a broader perspective in order to make sense of their surroundings.

While other studies have mentioned the contrast between expectations and the reality of Gold Rush California, this thesis attempts to analyze both the formation and modification of Gold Rush mythology in greater depth. It explores the way in which myths influenced the experience and how the experience both disrupted and advanced the myths. My hope is not necessarily to “debunk” the Gold-Rush myths, but rather to scrutinize the processes of mythical production and their consequences.
Part I

Gold Fever

“Seeing new countries and the prospect of making a fortune in a few years— that takes hold of my imagination, that tells me ‘Now is your chance. Strike while the iron is hot!’”

- Franklin Buck, 1849
Early California and Marshall’s Discovery

Prior to Mexico’s independence from Spain, the northern regions of California were used as missionary sites for the Spanish. The missions, positioned on fertile frontier land along the Pacific Coast, were designed to convert California’s diverse native population to Catholicism. After Mexico gained independence, California officially became a part of Mexico, but control over the region proved difficult due to both the vastness of the territory and its distance from Mexico City. Nevertheless, nearly seven thousand “Californios,” or Spanish speaking Californians, resided in California by 1846. Californios were usually independent ranchers, farmers or traders who took advantage of California’s hospitable climate and abundance of natural resources. While few were of pure Spanish descent, many had light skin and sought to differentiate themselves from newer arrivals from the interior of Mexico who immigrated steadily into California after the disbanding of missionary lands. “Californios” became an umbrella term for the Spanish speakers in California, though they represented the broad spectrum of Spanish-Indian mixing since the early stages of colonization.

The Californios were not all Mexican citizens, but many were given land grants by the Mexican government that legitimized their ownership rights in California. Thus, the Mexican-American War (also known as the Mexican War) of 1846 represented a direct threat to Californios. Two months after the United States declared war on Mexico in May of 1846, the news reached California. An American military surge was initiated by Captain John C. Fremont, who had anticipated the war and taken sixty soldiers into California in December of 1845. For the next seven months, the Americans battled Californio forces until armed resistance ceased in early 1847. The Treaty of Guadalupe
Hidalgo in 1848 officially gave the United States control over California, a vast body of territory that encompassed nearly all of modern-day Nevada, Utah and Arizona. While some Americans voiced concern over the conquest, the Mexican War was widely considered to be a triumph, and California was eyed with great interest. Still, no one could have predicted that American settlement would materialize so quickly, as the gold discovery soon mobilized western migration in a way that was entirely unexpected.

The Discovery

Prior to 1849, most Americans in California were temporary residents or sporadic settlers. Independent American traders and trappers had operated in California under Mexican rule, conducting business mostly with Californios and taking advantage of Mexico’s loose regulation over the territory. Following the Mexican War, more Americans trickled into California, but at a modest rate. Settlers who already occupied western territories, especially those who had made their way to Oregon during the 1840s, were likely candidates for California migration between 1846 and 1849. Several large groups of Mormon settlers also ventured to California in hopes of establishing a safe haven for Mormonism. The Mormons would play a particularly significant role in California, as their search for labor in the American West brought them to John Sutter’s Fort in Coloma, where a gold discovery would capture the interest of the entire country.

John Sutter, a Swiss immigrant who became a Mexican citizen, had built a supply fort in the early 1840s on land granted to him by the Mexican government. The fort remained as a trade center throughout the 1840s, bringing in steady business from white settlers, Indians and Californios. As the Mexican War developed, Sutter supported the idea of California as an independent republic, but offered no resistance when American
soldiers took control over the fort for a short period during the war. Though disputes over the legitimacy of his land holdings would later occur in the 1850s, the United States was not yet concerned with his property rights and Sutter’s Fort remained in operation after the Mexican War. By 1848, the fort was in need of both upgrades and repair. Sutter teamed up with James Marshall, a carpenter from New Jersey, to build a new sawmill on the banks of the American River in Coloma. By January of 1848, Marshall had built the frame of the sawmill along with a crew of Mormon laborers, and was in the process of digging a ditch that would allow river water to flow to the mill.

On January 24, 1848, Marshall spotted a glittering substance in the sand of the mill’s tailrace that he thought might be gold. Over the next several days, Marshall and Sutter examined the flakes and small nuggets found in the riverbed, and attempted to determine whether they were in fact gold. After crudely testing the substance’s density and malleability, they realized Marshall had indeed struck gold and that the California riverbeds were potentially extraordinarily rich. While the discovery produced excitement around the sawmill camp and Sutter’s Fort, it did not provoke hysteria; the Mormon workers continued their daily labor, honoring their commitment to finish the mill, despite the temptation to mine. Yet their interest had been sparked, and many picked up loose gold on their days off.

Azariah Smith, a Mormon laborer on the sawmill project, wrote in his journal that he took numerous Sunday walks along the river, picking up a few dollars worth of gold virtually whenever he wanted. This wealth was untaxed and unregulated, and to pluck it out of a stream required little effort. While this was enticing for some, many of the Mormons, including Smith, were skeptical of gold mining; he noted that in his casual gold-seeking ventures he had “picked up a little more of the root of all evil.” After
construction of the sawmill was finished in March, some workers committed to mining full-time. Others though, like Smith, remained unenthused by the gold and sought to leave California.

Smith, along with a few fellow laborers, joined a group of other Mormons roughly fifty miles from Sutter’s Fort and began the journey to Salt Lake City, where Brigham Young had established a growing Mormon community. Smith was both physically ill and intent on reuniting with his mother, and wrote, “I did not care whether there was gold in the locality or not.” Still, his exit from California would have a significant impact on the future rush to the gold regions. In order to save time, the Mormon group pioneered a new trail across the Sierra Nevada Mountains, later called the Mormon-Carson pass, which would become a favored land route to Sacramento. Tens of thousands would eventually use this trail, solidifying the legacy of the Mormons’ somewhat unlikely role in California’s Gold Rush.

If the gold failed to inspire some, it mesmerized others, and the secret was beginning to leak out of Sutter’s camp. Sutter himself was in a frenzy, and tried in vain to establish legal authority over the land around the sawmill. He also bragged about the discovery and caught the attention of other Californians, despite his initial desire to insulate the news. Within a few months, the story had reached Samuel Brannan, a charismatic Mormon living in San Francisco, who traveled to Sutter’s Fort to verify the discovery. Brannan had arrived in San Francisco in 1846 with a group of several hundred Mormons. By 1848, San Francisco was a legitimate town in which Brannan had great influence as an articulate leader with a knack for entrepreneurship. When he arrived at Sutter’s Fort in the spring of 1848, virtually everyone around the fort was prospecting for gold and accumulating astounding sums. Brannan began to discuss
ambitious plans with Sutter. He proposed opening stores and a supply warehouse in the area, convincing Sutter that the discovery needed to be shared with San Francisco.

Sutter lacked Brannan’s savvy and could not decide what to make of the gold around his land. Already resigned to the leak of the secret, Sutter acquiesced, and soon Brannan was building his stores, setting the wheels of the Gold Rush in motion.

Brannan returned to San Francisco in May of 1848, intent on selling the authenticity of the gold discovery. While rumors had swirled in San Francisco throughout the spring, Brannan brought the first legitimate proof: a bottle of golden nuggets to display as his screams of “Gold from the American River!” rang through the town square. He gained the attention of San Francisco and soon sold the idea of heading to the goldfields and prospecting. While some Mormons remained indifferent to the discovery, Brannan was stirred by the potential it represented, and became enormously invested in the gold migration. He was a true salesman and an expert in advertising; soon the majority of San Francisco males had made their way to the gold regions, buying supplies in Brannan’s shops en route.

But Brannan envisioned an even larger movement to the goldfields and sought to gain the attention of those back in the States. He printed the story of the discovery in the California Star, the small newspaper he published, and sent it east. Many midwestern and eastern city presses did not reprint these claims, believing the stories to be rumor. Still, the news spread rather quickly to Mexico and Chile, and soon groups of immigrants began working their way to California in search of gold. By the summer of 1848, a significant number of white settlers, Indians, Californios, Mexicans and Chileans were mining in California.
While success was not guaranteed, 1848 was generally a peaceful and prosperous year for gold mining; competition was relatively scarce, supplies were not too difficult to come by (due mostly to the proximity of Sutter’s Fort and the stores owned by Brannan), and gold could even be found resting on top of the sand. Because the riverbeds were extensive and the presence of miners still rather small, little tension existed over mining claims, and the diverse set of miners worked in proximity to one another without much hostility. For some, a fortune could be made on a single claim and could be extracted within a matter of days. And even for those who never found large claims, mining proved to be a steady and profitable endeavor, providing greater earnings and far more freedom than they could have found elsewhere. By the end of 1848, California’s non-native population had grown to approximately twenty thousand, about five thousand of whom were mining for gold.11

Despite the skepticism in the States concerning the reports of gold, the news gained momentum. Colonel Richard Mason, assigned as the acting American governor in California, sought to clarify the widespread rumors of gold, and journeyed to Sutter’s Fort in July. What he found astounded him; while San Francisco was virtually abandoned, gold camps along rivers were flourishing. Mining had spread along the Sacramento River to what would later be known as the Southern Mining Regions, and miners were making considerable profit.12 Mason witnessed the extraordinary amounts of gold extracted by handfuls of amateur miners who had abandoned their former occupations to pursue gold full-time. Aware of how profoundly gold had altered the way of life in Northern California, he did not restrain himself as he described the vastness of California’s rich gold supply in an official report:

The discovery of these vast deposits of gold has entirely changed the character of Upper California. Its people, before engaged in cultivating their small patches of ground, and guarding
their herds of cattle and horses, have all gone to the mines, or are on their way thither. Labourers
of every trade have left their work-benches, and tradesmen their shops; sailors desert their ships
as fast as they arrive on the coast; and several vessels have gone to sea with hardly enough hands
to spread a sail. Two or three are now at anchor in San Francisco, with no crew on board. Many
desertions, too, have taken place from the garrisons within the influence of these mines…I have
no hesitation now in saying, that there is more gold in the country drained by the Sacramento and
San Joaquin Rivers than will pay the cost of the present war with Mexico a hundred times over.13

This enthusiastic assessment by Colonel Mason, the highest American authority
in California, soon grabbed attention in Washington. In a message to Congress on
December 5, 1848, President James Polk informed the American people of the
discovery, corroborating the rumors which had swirled in the States since Brannan’s
publication in the spring. What had been dismissed as hearsay was now confirmed by
the President himself: “The accounts of the abundance of gold in that territory are of
such extraordinary character as would scarcely command belief were they not
corroborated by the authentic reports of officers in the public service who have visited
the mineral district.”14 After this message, a great wave of excitement spread throughout
the entire country; the Gold Rush had begun.

**Fever in the States**

After Polk’s message, the reaction to California gold quickly transitioned from
skepticism to feverish jubilation. It had been almost eleven months since Marshall’s
discovery, but the initial lethargy in the States regarding the tales of gold was surpassed
many times over by the excitement that followed the discovery’s confirmation. Rumors
of California gold had circulated in the States almost as a folk tale or fantasy, but when
Polk authenticated the discovery, the response was electric. While skeptics remained,
they were outnumbered by those eager to rush to California and dig a fortune out of the
ground. Western migration in 1849 would transform the American landscape; only a few
hundred U.S. citizens were in California prior to the gold discovery, but by 1850, nearly 100,000 whites would reside there, a number that would continue to grow. Getting there, however, was far from easy. From the East Coast it might take seven or eight months, and depending on the route taken, it could involve food shortages, exchanges with hostile Indians, extreme weather and disease. The path to California was certainly not paved with gold; it was fraught with peril.

What motivated those emigrants who were willing to abandon their old lives and begin anew? The lure of gold sparked this movement, but there were other factors at work, and those who ventured to California left for a number of reasons. Whether it was the bold young man in search of quick wealth so he could get married back home, or the curious lawyer who wished to witness the development of a new territory, all emigrants were willing to take extraordinary risks in an unknown, faraway land. And migration was not limited to Americans, as many foreigners also chose to try their luck in the golden territory.

Potential travelers had a difficult time resisting the temptation of California gold. After Polk’s address, steamships filled the harbors in major cities, advertising trips to California. Franklin A. Buck, a twenty-two year old trader from Massachusetts, became swept up in the excitement while living in New York. Initially dismissing the trip as too risky and expensive, he eventually convinced himself that leaving for California was a rational decision. In a letter to his sister he wrote,

Look out on the docks and you will see from twenty to thirty ships loading with all kinds of merchandise and filling up with passengers, and I see business firms- rich men- going to it, men who know how to make money too, and young men of my acquaintance leaving good situations and fitting themselves out with arms and ammunition, tents, provisions and mining implements, there is something about it- the excitement, the crossing the Isthmus, seeing new countries and the prospect of making a fortune in a few years- that takes hold of my imagination, that tells me ‘Now is your chance. Strike while the iron is hot!’
Buck had caught the “Gold Fever,” and no one could talk him out of it. He dreamed of a quick strike, one that could carry him through the rest of his life and give it purpose and direction. The adventure, too, was attractive; Buck envisioned a time of travel and excitement, an experience that would open his eyes to a vast world he had never known. This vision offered an entirely different future from the prospect of wage labor in New York, and Buck knew he might never have the opportunity again. What caused him to see gold migration as a real possibility rather than fantasy was that seemingly everyone else was going, even reputable and levelheaded men. If he passed up the chance, he would have felt foolish laboring on the East Coast while thousands made their fortunes in California. As more emigrants left, Buck’s temptation grew, and he found the prospect of gold impossible to resist.

While most men who left for California were in their twenties, a great number of older, more established men were willing to leave careers and families behind, and journey west. Even those leading comfortable, stable lives found the prospect of gold too enticing to refuse. J. G. Bruff, a forty-five year old Treasury employee and former military man, was one of these older victims of Gold Fever. Although Bruff’s journal spends little time discussing his motivations for leaving, his temporary abandonment of his family seemed to him both a rational business decision and an unparalleled opportunity for excitement. Thirsty for adventure, he reveled in the prospect of a triumphant journey. In a poem he wrote four months into his California trip in 1849, Bruff declared,

> “Hurrah for a trip o’er the plains,  
> With wagons and steers and mules;  
> No matter for the clouds and rains,  
> ‘Go-ahead’ is the order that rules!”\(^\text{16}\)
Bruff was eager to rekindle the excitement of his military days, and forming a mining company gave him a legitimate excuse to rush off to a distant land in search of fortune.

The role of newspaper accounts in fueling Gold Fever was enormous. After Polk’s address, California gold became the hottest news item in the States, and the headlines were difficult to ignore. “Gold!” in large bold letters greeted east coast readers, and when they read further, the numbers astounded them. Early reports estimated that California gold might eventually yield value in the billions of dollars. An article in the Republican Farmer in December of 1848 declared, “the mines…are on the public lands of the territory, and their value is estimated in the thousands of millions of dollars.”17 The apparently unlimited supply of gold in California overwhelmed those in the States, and legitimate newspapers were confirming wild dreams. In July of 1849, the New York Herald wrote that public attention remained on California and that Gold Fever was stronger than ever: “Nothing, scarcely, is talked of now-a-days, but gold. California Fever, which raged with such violence six months ago, has broken out afresh.”18 During the summer of 1849, the first wave of emigrants had already left and many potential California travelers waited to see what the news would bring. Most of what they read only tempted them further. The papers reported that a million dollars had come into the United States mint within six months, and that mining yields showed no signs of slowing down. Wide-eyed Americans had been staring at these stories for months, and they would continue to follow California news with great interest.

Despite the publication of a few cautious pieces, exaggerated and outlandish stories of gold bombarded the public. Many claimed a new “El Dorado” had been found, a gold paradise that could be tapped by any citizen willing to take the risk. One of the earliest headlines described the California mines as “inexhaustible,” and the belief
that the gold was virtually unlimited would continue to flourish in newspapers, magazines and guidebooks into the early 1850s.¹⁹ The New York Herald gushed over the discovery, announcing,

The El Dorado of the old Spaniards is discovered at last. We now have the highest official authority for believing in the discovery of vast gold mines in California, and that the discovery is the greatest and most startling, not to say miraculous, that the history of the last five centuries can produce.²⁰

The media exaggerated the vastness of the California gold supply, focusing on the amount of gold rather than the obstacles and difficulties of California mining. This would later contribute to the surprise many California emigrants felt when they were confronted with the realities of the mining experience.

Marked by the growth of penny newspapers beginning in the 1840s, the era was an unparalleled time for media circulation across all social classes. Everyone knew about California gold, and information spread furiously. The press energized the Gold Rush in a unique way, and shaped the public perception of the event. The growth of advertising and consumer culture also played a significant role in both generating and perpetuating Gold Fever. Advertisements for basic consumer products might contain the word “Gold” to quickly grab a customer’s attention, eager to use the popular language of the Gold Rush.²¹

A market for Gold Rush-specific products also began to grow in 1849, as potential gold-seekers searched furiously to find an edge. Aside from maps and general information on California, local stores began to sell products designed to give miners an advantage in the search for gold. Virtually all of these new items were developed by those with no mining experience who looked to turn a quick profit by exploiting the feverish demand of forty-niners. Perhaps no Gold Rush product was outlandish as “Gold Grease,” which was marketed as a cutting edge technique for trapping gold.²²
The grease was supposed to be heavily applied on the body of the miner, who would then roll down a California hillside and trap small particles of gold to their grease-soaked, naked frame. “Gold Grease” sold for $10 a tin, making it both a bizarre and highly expensive item, equivalent to over a $200 purchase today. Despite the prevalence of Gold Rush products back in the States, almost all were eventually abandoned as forty-niners settled into real life as miners. Although everyone was talking about gold, few knew anything at all about mining. Yet the time, this was irrelevant, for gold-seekers believed if they could just make it to California, the rest would fall into place.

California guidebooks also became immensely popular items during the Gold Rush, as potential travelers were intent on learning more about the territory. Fayette Robinson and Franklin Street both published highly successful guidebooks in 1849, providing readers with detailed descriptions of California mining, demographics and natural resources. Both guidebooks offered highly exaggerated accounts of the new territory, including wild success stories rather than realistic descriptions of daily mining. Nearly every word they wrote gushed over the region; California was heralded as a beacon of hope, a paradise that had been designed exclusively for Americans. If the newspapers had gained the public’s attention, the guidebooks assured it that California truly was the place to be.

The circulation of gold mining stories served as a crucial catalyst for Gold Rush migration. Newspapers and guidebooks, knowing their audience, were keen on including stories of the “everyman” who stumbled into a fortune within a matter of days. The press was particularly drawn to Colonel Mason’s report, for while the stories he told were extraordinary, they had been confirmed as true. Robinson’s guidebook included a number of excerpts from Mason’s report, choosing to include stories of early miners,
who easily extracted a fortune in gold using limited supplies. One of Mason’s accounts integrated into Robinson’s guidebook, read:

A small gutter, not more than a hundred yards long by four feet wide and two or three feet deep, was pointed out to me as the one where two men—William Daly and Perry McCoon, had, a short time before, obtained $17,000 worth of gold.24

Other popular accounts involved soldiers stationed in California who had abandoned their service due to the vastness of the gold supply and the ease of its accumulation. Readers could not help but be amazed when they were exposed to confirmed stories of hundred dollar nuggets, abundant and available in a day’s work. The immense success achieved by those seen as regular people in California caused many to ask themselves: why not me?

While the media was significant in stirring Gold Fever, other social factors contributed to the immense rush of 1849, revealing the shifts within a growing American middle class. Increased industrialization in the 19th century had changed an older, simpler way of life; the United States was growing quickly, and the wave of technological change was highly visible and seemingly impossible to stop. By the middle of the century, the country was moving toward a new stage of industrialization, marked by the ubiquity of steam power, complex machinery, and far-reaching railways. Ordinary citizens were unable to ignore these developments, and Americans reacted to the changes differently. While rapid growth enticed some, it frightened others who feared industrialization was destroying the quiet, peaceful way of life that Americans had enjoyed since Independence. California travelers were not homogeneous in this regard, having different ideas about how California would function for them.

Elisha Crosby, a well-connected lawyer from upstate New York, embraced technological progress with open arms, arriving in California with great hopes for the
development of the new territory; he enthusiastically predicted a vast network of businesses would thrive in the region, and that a transcontinental railroad would link the eastern and western economies. As an individual, Crosby, who was in his early thirties, hoped to benefit from his foresight and eventually move into the upper tiers of society. Thus, Crosby was less concerned with escaping east coast living, and more focused on integrating life on both coasts and contributing to the cohesive development of California. Crosby would later help draft California’s State Constitution, and while he stood to profit from business in the new territory, he was genuinely enthusiastic about its potential for growth.

But most travelers were not as focused on California’s future as a developed state; for the majority, the new territory represented an opportunity purely for individual capital accumulation. California was where the gold was, and many forty-niners saw the region as a temporary stop in the process of making a fortune and returning home in style. California was a place for new beginnings, where men of all classes had an equal chance of striking it rich; those with greater means could travel easier and afford a more comfortable way of living, but they had no definitive advantage in the mines. California was viewed as an equalizer, and this made it immensely attractive for those looking for greater social mobility. Many middle class citizens were confined within a structured system which had brought limited fulfillment. Advancement into higher society was generally restricted, but California offered the real possibility for a quick upgrade of both wealth and social status.

Gold mining was also seen as a democratic way of making a living, for it required limited capital investment. Aside from the cost of the trip, which indeed was often quite high, California mining in 1849 could require as little as a shovel and a pan. With the
absence of large mining corporations, small teams or “companies” of miners thrived in
California. The Gold Rush came to embody a certain ideal of a Jacksonian democracy,
in which the profits from the expansion of the United States would be available to all
classes of white men. This made the prospect of gold tremendously appealing for
Americans, for it allowed for the possibility that newcomers could establish themselves
regardless of who they had been in their previous lives.

Middle Class Migration

There is a tendency for Gold Rush history to frame the western migration as a
movement of the lower classes and readily accessible for most American citizens.
Donald Jackson suggests, “most Americans who dreamed of California in 1849 could
find a way to get there.”25 While this is true to an extent, the Gold Rush was
fundamentally a middle-class phenomenon; lower classes simply could not afford the
trip. Costs varied depending on the route taken and the level of comfort expected, but
$600 represented the minimum cost for one person traveling to California. With the
average American wage at less than $300 per year, the cost of the journey was far from
insignificant.26 While many were able to scrounge from their savings, take out a loan or
join a company, California gold was generally out of reach for the lower classes. It was
also unappealing to most within the upper classes; wealthy Easterners generally stayed
put, seeing no reason to rush into uncertainty in the mines.

But while the Gold Rush was generally restricted to the middle class, there was
tremendous variability among the California hopefuls. Those on the upper end of the
middle class were generally clerks, doctors, lawyers and other professionals. These
migrants saw great potential in California as a gold region, but also a place where their
services would be valuable. Since the territory was undeveloped, migration offered them
the opportunity of starting or joining a business on the ground floor. Those in the
lower-middle classes often found a way to finance the trip by exhausting most of what
they had, expecting big gains in the mines to reimburse them rather quickly. For them,
everything was risked for the chance of gold.

The transition from the gold discovery to a “rush” was not accidental, for it
reflected changing demographics within American society. Most forty-niners were born
in the 1820s, during an industrial boom that was changing the economic foundation of
the United States. Factories began to appear in cities, and the proportion of Americans
working for wage labor increased dramatically. This period represented the emergence
of a middle class, one that was moving away from small farming as the primary focal
point of economic activity. White-collar labor also became common for an increasing
number of middle class professionals. This growth enabled California migration, as
more middle class Americans had greater savings and could afford the venture. And
because many saw themselves occupying a larger, more complex world, they were more
willing to leave their current situation behind. As the Gold Rush gained momentum, the
opportunity for escape materialized, and it was easy to embrace the newness that
California embodied.

The search for gold in California offered a legitimate opportunity for adventure,
excitement and escape from structured east coast living. The American middle class felt
a general sense of restlessness as they worked long, arduous hours and found their
opportunities limited. To many who found themselves stuck within a given social role
or profession, California seemed to provide a perfect escape. Not only did it offer the
prospect of adventure, but it also represented the availability of open land and the
chance to start anew. While the middle class may have benefited from industrialization, many saw themselves as trapped, contained in a dull way of life without mobility. Even those who were fairly well off remained unsatisfied; the professional classes found themselves occupying a rigid, uninspiring environment. As Susan Lee Johnson suggests, “They [forty-niners] joined the rush for a variety of reasons: for gold, to be sure, but also to escape this new world of competition, the stultifying walls of moral codes and lawyers’ offices.”

Forty-niners dreamed of a simpler and more prosperous life. The California lifestyle seemed both free from the restrictions of traditional society and home to masculine adventure. In contrast to the laborious tasks of manual employment or clerical work, California was imagined as a place where a man could be a real man, fight, curse, and brave unknown obstacles. This fantasy also represented a considerable shift in the popular perception of the way in which to accumulate wealth. The get-rich-quick mentality that fueled the Gold Rush was a sharp break from the ethos of the traditionally prudent American workforce, which had been content with a slow and steady rise up the economic ladder. Forty-niners did not care about the business ethics of hard work and morality that Ben Franklin had preached a century ago; they wanted to test their luck and win big. Instead of cautious rationality, they decided to gamble.

But while the gold generated frenzy, it also provoked a backlash. Though forty-niners embraced the spirit of quick wealth enabled by the Gold Rush, many Americans saw the craze as not just a fad, but also a dangerous lure away from suitable living. “Gold Fever” became the defining phrase of the Gold Rush, and it was indeed viewed almost literally as a sickness, something that could entirely consume an individual. The reaction against Gold Fever was to be expected; family men were leaving their
established lives, young men were abandoning the comforts of home, and all forty-niners committed themselves to undertake tremendous risks in order to realize their wild dreams. Gold Fever had clearly gripped the nation, affecting even the most reasonable citizens, and there was a growing concern that gold hysteria would disrupt the country’s moral foundation.

Preachers warned of the vices of the gold chase, describing Gold Fever as an easy path to sin and a distraction from God. The eagerness that the discovery had created seemed to outweigh even the fervor of religion. An opinion piece in New York’s *Weekly Herald* commented on the singular focus of the American public: “Gold! It is the God of this world. Only whisper the word, and its worshippers fall down on the knees. Breathe it in the valleys, and it is heard at the mountain top. Tell where it can be found, and the millions rush to the spot faster than they would go to heaven.” There was a distinctive fear that enthusiasm for gold would undermine devotion to the Christian faith, and religious leaders warned against the sins of reckless greed. While many miners would maintain their faith while in California, the Gold Rush was a secular movement that valued self-interest and luck rather than diligence and devotion. The journey to California was a gamble that shunned social constraints, and while this enticed many, it was problematic for the morally conscious. The reaction against Gold Fever, however, was not strong enough to stop the powerful forces that propelled California migration.

**California and American Destiny**

The timing of the gold discovery was almost as important as the discovery itself, for it occurred only a few weeks after California passed from Mexican rule into U.S. control. The Mexican War had occurred at a critical developmental stage for the nation;
the United States was still young, searching for identity and definition. The push to reach to the Pacific Coast guided this process, allowing for the United States to be viewed as a rapidly growing and even “chosen” nation. Expansion had yielded an American West full of new promise for the American populace, and the possibilities for growth seemed endless.

In this regard, California was portrayed explicitly as an integral part of an American project. To achieve its Manifest Destiny, the United States had to bring California under its wing. Fayette Robinson’s California guidebook declares, “the spirit of enterprise of our country has been aroused,” suggesting that California would become an integral part of the U.S. economy. In November of 1851, during the height of the Gold Rush, the *New York Times* published an article entitled “The Wonders of California,” affirming the discovery of gold as a high point in American entrepreneurial history:

> Nothing in the past twenty years—nothing indeed since the discovery and success of Fulton—not even the great application of his principle to the railroads, nor the establishment of the telegraph—to excite the admiration of this favored people to the same degree as the discovery, under American colors and the development under American labor, of the California gold mines.

The prospect of wealth and opportunity had produced enough excitement to mobilize a nation, and the discovery of gold was recognized as a significant development for the economic future of an expanding United States.

Elisha Crosby was one of the first forty-niners to ‘rush’ into California, but he had no intention of mining. The discovery of gold had provoked his deepest curiosity, and the magnitude of the California excitement led him to predict that the territory could easily change the United States in a significant way. On December 26, 1848, just three weeks after Polk’s catalyzing speech, Crosby headed to California to examine the region. Crosby had Gold Fever, but it wasn’t the digging that attracted him most; like Brannan,
he recognized there might be more to California than just mining. While he was interested in the gold discovery and how mining operations worked, he ultimately hoped to prosper without having to rely on digging his fortune out of the ground.

Crosby’s migration to California was somewhat atypical considering that most forty-niners had their hearts set on rich mining strike, but it represented a distinct component of the Manifest Destiny concept; if the United States was destined to expand and develop westward, California would not simply be a temporary settlement for mineral extraction. California was a rich land, and while many forty-niners hoped to exploit its wealth and return home, there were those such as Crosby who recognized California’s potential to thrive as an integral part of the Union, both socially and economically. Crosby made the risky decision to travel west without much hesitation, revealing the extent to which he believed California was truly a place for future growth. With Manifest Destiny firmly ingrained into the American consciousness, California gold was interpreted not simply as a fortunate accident, but as an act of God, one that signaled that westward development and expansion was inevitable.

Yet in order for Manifest Destiny to be realized, the West had to be viewed in terms of American ownership, excluding those who had previously occupied the land. California in the hands of the United States was viewed not only as destiny, but also better for the land itself, which would prosper infinitely more than it had under Mexican rule. Mexicans were generally regarded as inferior and degraded, unable to use the land to its full potential and therefore undeserving of its wealth. Fayette Robinson’s guidebook frames both the Mexican government and the Californios as incompetent owners of the territory: “They [Californios] were in favor of declaring California independent of Mexico, which evidently was unable to govern it. The Californians were
a very ignorant people…” The Mexicans, from the U.S. perspective, could not control anything worth owning, and substandard when it came to business and development. From this view, Mexicans had neither the intellect nor aspirations of American citizens, and were undeserving of the land.

The American West, from its beginning, was imagined as a place where the masculine ambition of American men thrived. As the United States expanded into western territories, the manhood of Mexican men was called into question. The Mexicans were unable to stop the ‘inevitable’ growth of the United States and were thus forced to submit as subordinates. Throughout the Gold Rush, Mexicans were depicted as less than real men, part of an attempt to ensure that Americans’ sense of masculinity remained protected. According to an early traveler’s account that Fayette Robinson cites, even the Mexican women seemed to prefer the white men:

Another cause of the general feelings against the Americans and Britons in California was the fact that the Senoritas, the dear ladies, in the plenitude of their taste and sympathy for foreigners, preferred them as husbands.

Interracial relations, especially through prostitution, would later become a staple of Gold Rush California, and these basic prejudices thrived as white miners imposed their will on Mexican women. These Anglo-centric views furthered the perception of California as a region destined to be American.

The California Indians were also portrayed as unworthy inhabitants of the territory, and any right they had to the land was effectively ignored. Despite California’s large and diverse native population, Robinson diminishes the significance of any Indian presence in California, making it clear that only white people could give the region a legitimate history: “… [California] has never been inhabited within the memory or traditional history of the present races of men, except by a few wandering tribes of
Indians…” Because the acquisition of California was interpreted as a natural outcome of civilization’s progress, its native population was rendered negligible. This provided the foundation for Indian removal in California as the Gold Rush progressed.

California was depicted as a pastoral paradise in early guidebooks, enticing prospective travelers. Franklin Street’s 1849 guidebook describes California as a “healthy country,” free of disease and abundant in fresh air, rivers and natural splendor. Descriptions of the aesthetic beauty and healthy climate of the region are consistent in the California guidebooks, implying that the territory is a vigorous place for a man to be outdoors. In one section of his guidebook, Robinson tells a sentimental tale of a Tennessean backwoodsman who had made the journey west:

This country was suited to his tastes. Its climate allowed him to sleep in the open air most of the year; an abundance of native animals covered the hills, and nature was spread out luxuriantly everywhere in wild and untrodden forest.

California, inhabited mostly by Indians, was depicted as not only an attractive area, but an unused space that could now be put to good use.

Non-Americans, Non-Whites

While the discovery of gold fit neatly into a narrative of Manifest Destiny, the Gold Rush did not materialize as an exclusively white American movement. Emigrants from all over the world would eventually leave their home countries to hunt for California gold. Foreigners rushed into California for the same reasons Americans did; they wanted both a fresh start and a chance to strike it rich. While forty-niners came from a number of countries, certain foreign populations had a particularly large presence in California. This depended on a variety of socioeconomic factors, including proximity to and relationship with the United States, economic conditions of the home country,
and its own history with mining. While the Gold Rush was a transformative event for
the United States, California became an extremely diverse region, one that hosted miners
from a variety of ethnic backgrounds.

Mexicans were the largest foreign population in the gold regions. Americans
believed the gold was destined to be theirs, but Mexicans were far more connected to
mining and the California region than white migrants from the United States. Although
many of the Mexicans who immigrated to Gold Rush California had never been there
before, Mexicans had a much longer history with the territory and with gold and silver
mining. And while Americans from the East Coast spent months on the long journey,
access to the region was much easier for Mexicans.

The majority of Mexican forty-niners came from Sonora, the northwest corner
of Mexico. Sonora had a strong tradition of mining, mostly in silver, and the industry
was controlled by the Spanish under colonial rule.38 The Sierra Madre Occidental, a
large mountain range in western Mexico, cut off Sonora from the rest of Mexico,
isolating it economically as well as politically from the nation as a whole. Sonora’s
dependence on mining and the colonial system made political support for independence
weak in the region. And indeed after 1821, when Mexico did gain independence, the
mining industry began to decline. The Spanish system’s powerful protection and
promotion of Sonoran mining vanished, and the region fell into an economic slump.
The discovery of gold in California was a boon for Sonoran miners, who had both the
experience and the incentive to leave their land and search for gold. They had many
advantages in the early stages in the Gold Rush: they heard the news quicker, had the
ability to react faster, and knew how to mine better than the majority of forty-niners
from the United States. And by the late 1840s, Sonorans, desperate for change and
without strong ties to their nation, were eager to leave Mexico and stake out a claim in the California mines.

Chileans, for similar reasons, also established a major presence in California during the Gold Rush. After Chile gained independence from Spain in 1817, the region underwent a period of immense economic change. Both Mexico and Chile became a part of larger world markets after Independence, which hurt the competitiveness of many domestic producers. Increased foreign trade hurt local wool production in Chile, as cheap cotton from Britain flooded the market and undermined domestic industry. Chile had also been growing rapidly, and population growth had created an enormous class of small agriculturalists with little land. This dynamic was also a legacy of the colonial system which had created a minority landowning class that granted small plots of land to rural workers in exchange for labor. The conditions for small farmers failed to improve as this system persisted after Independence, worsening as commodity markets became increasingly open. In this sense, the effects of Independence in Chile functioned differently than in Sonora; in Chile, the colonial structure was still preserved, worsening the conditions of middle and lower classes as other economic changes took hold.

But the reaction in Chile to the discovery of gold in California was similar to that in Sonora; California migration was imagined as a way out of economic decline, into a world of greater opportunity. Chile also had a history of mining, and many Chileans had some experience in mining for gold, including those in the upper classes. Chilean migration to California would not simply be a movement of the lower classes; many elites, in need of a capital boost, envisioned increased opportunity in the goldfields. For Chileans, the Gold Rush journey may have made even more sense than it did for
Americans; California was easily accessible by sea and gold mining was a familiar practice.

Forty-niners also poured into California from all over Western Europe. By the time news of the gold discovery arrived in Europe in 1849, the Gold Rush was already underway in the United States. European immigrants were not part of the earliest waves of California migration, but Gold Fever did extend to particular regions of Europe. This included France, which sent the most European immigrants into California. France was undergoing a period of immense political instability and economic turmoil. As disputes over election laws led to a regime change and a new president in December of 1848, an economic depression took hold, causing a massive wave of unemployment and food shortages. Rioters filled the streets and many of the French lower and middle classes became increasingly desperate. When news of California gold reached France, its citizens were ripe for change and eager for material improvement. California gold offered the perfect escape; as Howard Lamar suggests, “[when news of the discovery reached] It was then that depression-ridden Paris went wild.”

Jean-Nicolas Perlot, a Belgian who had immigrated to France, was excited by the reports from California and formed a small mining company that would arrive in San Francisco in the spring of 1851. Perlot, whose father ran a fairly successful stone quarry business, was part of the Belgian middle class, but had come to Paris as a young man to seek fortune. He encountered a nation in deep distress that failed to offer the opportunity he had sought. California, with its prospect for adventure and easy money, resonated deeply with Perlot. Those in the lower classes in France, however, did not find California as accessible, for it was a difficult trip without at least a modest capital
stake. Although some opportunities materialized for the lower classes, the Gold Rush remained essentially a middle class migration in France and Europe as a whole.

The Chinese were perhaps the most surprising group of California immigrants. China’s extensive period of isolation was beginning to fade; after the Opium War of 1839-1842, Europe and the United States began to push China towards a more market based economy. The result was a period of increasing trade ties between China and the United States.42 The United States was no longer as distant and unknown, allowing a greater number of Chinese to consider the possibility of immigration. China was also undergoing significant changes. The Taiping Rebellion represented a bloody time of social unrest in South China during the 1850s, in which old structures of power were challenged and the calamity of civil war loomed. South China was also experiencing a population boom, which worsened conditions for many of the working classes. Leaving China became an enticing possibility, and when news of gold reached the Far East, the Chinese responded vigorously. Many families sought to send sons to California, hoping they would be able to make enough money to send home remittances. Although the cultural differences would be vast, many Chinese were willing to undertake the risk and leave home after 1849. Their presence would solidify California’s status as an astoundingly diverse region.

African Americans, both free and enslaved, would also add to the new territory’s heterogeneity. Enticed by reports from the West, black forty-niners, like whites, imagined California as a symbol of hope for a better life. California, for African Americans, was also more appealing than other western territories which often imposed barriers on black migration. As Rudolph Lapp suggests, “The reports of social fluidity of the California frontier environment perhaps suggested racial equality to some blacks.
Furthermore…the laws of western states that barred or created financial hurdles for free Negroes who wished to migrate to those states, did not materialize.”\textsuperscript{43} Still, for free blacks in the North, western migration was incredibly risky. Aside from the high costs and danger of the journey, the racial climate in California was unknown, and because of the lack of law and regulation, no rights were guaranteed. Even though California was viewed as more welcoming than other parts of the West, free blacks ran a significant risk of migrating to a more hostile environment. Nevertheless, the abolitionist press and a number of black leaders, such as Frederick Douglass, were encouraged by the developments in California, especially as rumors swirled about outlawing slavery in the territory.\textsuperscript{44}

California also represented an opportunity for enslaved blacks, though many made the journey involuntarily. Most slaves who arrived in California came with their masters, who sought additional labor power in the mines. These slaves would later be exposed to the free-for-all of Gold Rush society, where the possibility of freedom loomed as the slavery debate raged in California. The new territory was also imagined as a possible escape destination for slaves, although it is difficult to determine how many runaways actually made it to Gold Rush California. But the black population in California remained fairly small throughout the Gold Rush; it hovered around only one thousand in 1850 and accounted for roughly one percent of California’s total population throughout the 1850s.\textsuperscript{45} Nevertheless, the participation of African Americans in the Gold Rush reflects the extent to which the dream of California extended across racial lines; the optimism that the new territory represented was not confined solely to white Americans.
The Road to the West

As Gold Fever developed, many Americans gathered in shops and saloons to discuss the prospect of going to California. How they were going to get there presented difficult choices. There was no cheap way to California, and every option required a substantial amount of risk. Although plans for a transcontinental railroad began to develop by 1850, the project would not be completed for several years, and gold seekers had limited options: they could travel by land, by sea, or some combination of both. For those close to port towns and familiar with sailing, the answer was obvious; the sea route was generally safer than the land route, requiring far less labor. While overland travelers plodded their way on carts, fixing wheels, fording rivers and hunting for food, ships bound for California would move briskly, offering passengers plenty of leisure time. Food shortages were not as common at sea, where a fixed supply of food and water provided for the passengers throughout the voyage. The sea route also avoided hostile Indians, who harassed and sometimes attacked overland travelers.

But the journey on the ocean had distinct drawbacks. It was significantly more expensive than travel by land; while the overland journey required substantial investment in livestock, carts and general supplies, it generally did not surpass fares by sea, which could easily exceed $1000. The land route also seemed more suitable to those unfamiliar with ocean travel, or disliked the idea of being at sea for months at a time. Seasickness was rampant, and the possibility of a major storm was always a threat. The sea route also required at least one stop in Latin America, either in Panama or on the South American coasts, unsettling those who did not wish to cross the borders of the United States. It was not always easy to get a ticket on a California ship, as intense demand crowded the
limited number of vessels. Those who could not wait nor quickly obtain a ticket were more inclined to head west right away. While trips to California varied in length, price and comfort, the journey itself was almost always a long and difficult process, testing the will of those who had abandoned their lives back home.

The choice also depended on the decision to join a group or travel as an individual. Larger groups of miners had an advantage on the overland routes, for greater numbers represented more labor power, better ability to deal with hostile Indians, and lower costs as provisions were shared and bought in bulk. By sea, fares remained the same for each person, and the advantage of a larger group was minimal. For individuals with little or no companions en route to California, the overland journey made little sense, as they would surely suffer if they traveled alone. For many adventurous young men who whimsically attached themselves to a California dream, a fixed rate by sea made the most sense. But if a large contingent of prospective miners could be formed, and had access to an experienced guide, the overland route reduced costs and avoided the unpredictable ocean.

Those who undertook the California journey were primarily men, for the trip was viewed as too dangerous for women. California was not regarded as a proper place for women; the men knew they would be “roughing it,” and a society of miners in undeveloped land did not seem suitable for a lady. California was not a place to start a family or to settle down; many forty-niners wanted to get in and out rather quickly. Some men, however, did take their wives with them, usually indicating a desire to stay in California for an extended period of time. Aside from the company, this decision had other material advantages; because of the scarcity of females, “women’s work” or
domestic labor, would become incredibly valuable in Gold Rush California. But these cases were rare, as over nine in ten forty-niners were male.

Once California-bound travelers decided on a route, they needed to find a way to fund the venture. Even if a group chose a land route, a significant amount of capital had to be raised in order to purchase supplies in bulk; expenses would accumulate as oxen died along the way, tools broke, and food and water supplies dwindled. At sea, the cheapest of fares hovered around $250, but to be clothed and fed along the way required large additional fees, especially for the longer journeys. Layovers would also add to the cost; those who traveled through Panama could wait up to two months to get on a steamship to California, having to provide for themselves while in Central America. They also needed capital upon arrival in California; prices were high, and it could take time to set up a mining operation. Travelers by sea would arrive in San Francisco, and if they wished to search for gold, would face the cost of getting to the mining regions, which were spread out across California. Sutter’s Fort, for example, was about a 130-mile journey by land from San Francisco. Estimates vary, but the California traveler could not reasonably make the trip with much less than $600, forcing many to scrounge intensively for funds.

For the California dream to become a reality, many middle class Americans were forced to tap every asset they had. As Oscar Lewis suggests, “Homes and farms were blithely mortgaged, thriving businesses were sacrificed for a quarter of their value, and possessions of every sort were put up as security…”46 Because California gold was regarded as infinite, gold seekers were willing to sell absolutely everything, believing it to be an investment. Lewis also argues that the credit market became uncharacteristically loose during the Gold Rush, stating, “…a young man who set out none too hopefully to
borrow the amount of his passage found the task surprisingly easy.” While some evidence suggests that Lewis is right, it remains unclear the extent to which finding creditors was an easy process. Banks were not likely to lend to the average forty-niner, as the mining business was generally not well understood. Additionally, gold rushers were headed thousands of miles away, perhaps never to be seen again. This meant that payment methods would be unpredictable and difficult to enforce.

There were, however, wealthier citizens who dabbled in financing miners. If a mining company could be established with respected men leading the operation, an investor might be willing to stake a portion of the costs in hopes of earning a percentage of the mining returns within a few years. Risk was reduced if wealthier individuals formed or joined a mining company and went along to California themselves. In this situation, they could subsidize the costs of the other miners while making sure that the profits were distributed accordingly. But getting to California this way required connections, and many forty-niners simply did not have the right ones. Those without external support were forced to exhaust their savings, or those of their parents, and sell everything they had if they wished to search for gold.

By Sea: Around the Horn

Those who chose the sea were generally limited to two options: they could sail around South America via Cape Horn, or they could take a shortcut across the Isthmus of Panama. California travel “round the Horn” was somewhat daunting, not just due to the perils of the sea, but also because of its incredible length. While the overland route represented a relatively straight, three thousand mile journey, traveling via Cape Horn was immensely indirect, and the total trip could exceed twenty thousand miles. Though
the Panama option provided a much shorter travel, it was significantly more expensive; it was the preferred route for the professional classes, as the price put it out of reach for many within the middle and working classes. According to official records, by the end of 1849, 15,597 immigrants to California had traveled the Cape Horn route since the beginning of the year, while 6,489 came across the Isthmus.48

Enos Christman, a twenty-year-old forty-niner, abandoned his apprenticeship as a printer and set sail for California via the Horn in July of 1849. Christman was a young Northerner who looked to settle the anxiety over his future by striking gold out west. Despite the boldness of his decision, his excitement was often threaded with distinct melancholy; his journal reads, “My feelings and emotions on leaving my friends and my native land on such an expedition, I cannot describe. I have left all that is near and dear and turned my face to a strange land, expecting to be absent two or three years, hoping in that time to realize a fortune; and then return and be greeted by kind friends.”49 Christman recognized the sacrifice he was making, especially since he was leaving behind his fiancée Ellen Apple, whom he would worry about constantly while he was away. He knew he was taking a considerable risk in leaving for California, and not just because of the dangers along the way, for he was forced to deal with the lingering fear that Apple would not remain true to him throughout his absence.

Christman was also well aware of the wave of speculation that had turned the gold discovery into an all out frenzy, and he wisely wrote, “Lofty castles have oft been built in the air and a single rude breath sufficed to level them to the earth.”50 His calm rationality might seem to clash with the fervor that perpetuated the Gold Rush, but even in recognizing that the sprint to California was in some ways a wild dream, he still decided to take his chance, considering it a fairly logical decision. And despite the
ominous journey around the Horn that lay ahead, he maintained a steady resolve, for he was conscious of both the sacrifice and its potential.

Christman joined the California Gold Mining Association of Philadelphia funded by his former boss, who would receive half of his earnings for two years after his arrival in California. Although this was considerable debt, it was a fairly amicable agreement, and did not bind Christman to a fixed payment aside from a percentage of his earnings. He started out with money in his pocket and a great sense of anticipation, but the initial exuberance began to fade away as the days at sea piled on. Ocean scenery lost its unique beauty and became “a dreary waste of blue sky above and rolling water below.” Two months into the trip, the sea was anything but exciting for Christman, who wrote, “its novelty is now over and it hath no charms any longer for me.”51 The months at sea would eventually wear on Christman, confining him to a dullness that drained the exuberance out of the rush for gold.

Boredom was a significant problem for those who traveled by sea, particularly those who took the Cape Horn route, who could face a full seven months of rarely interrupted repetition. Every seaman had his own way of coping with the tedious life at sea. Many wrote letters back home, as did Christman, who corresponded regularly with his fiancée throughout the journey. Most used tobacco in some form, either by chewing or by smoking pipes or cigars. Others sang songs or read their Bibles. The most common way to pass the time, however, was gambling. On ships that were primarily occupied by relatively young men, gambling provided excitement that few other activities could offer at sea. Gambling soon consumed much of the downtime for many forty-niners at sea. As Christman wrote, “it is a singular fact that some of the passengers have become so infatuated in the passion of cards that they play from sunrise till bedtime.”52
Many gold seekers predicted that they would soon be rich, and were willing to risk a fair amount of money en route to the golden land. The length of the trip also made it easier to keep games going longer, and one had the ability to recuperate large losses due to the sheer number of games that could be played. Over time, as the men became more familiar with one another, they were more willing to allow gambling on credit. And with millions of dollars worth of gold potentially within their reach, frugality was generally snubbed and credit remained loose.

Franklin Buck originally wished to sail the Panama route, but could not afford it on his own. He was lucky, however, for his trip was subsidized his uncle and a family acquaintance journeying to California. He reveled in the preparation for the journey, buying various items to tide him over at sea: “We bought 58 volumes of books for $9.44 and a B.G. board and one dozen packs of cards. We have 24 rifles, powder and shot, harpoons, fishing tackles and a sail boat and all the little etceteras you can think of, to amuse ourselves on our long voyage.” While Buck was intent on getting to California, the journey itself was immensely exciting to him. He planned reading and relaxing while at sea, learning Spanish, and taking breaks from sea-life in exotic locations along the South American coast.

For Buck, travel around the Horn lived up to his expectations; throughout the journey he seemed to be having the time of his life. In a letter to his sister, he wrote,

We enjoy ourselves very much on board. Our library contains over 150 volumes and we have cards, chess and backgammon- besides this beautiful scenery; sky and water….The evenings in the tropics coming out were beautiful. The air was so mild and there appeared to be twice as many stars as there are North. The only trouble is, we get so confounded lazy, having nothing to do but kill time- and a warm climate at that. We have some music on board: two violins and two flutes and two of the passengers sing. We practice every day.

Unlike Christman, the tedious repetition of life at sea did not appear to wear on Buck, as he enjoyed the warm laziness of southern sailing. He also grew very affectionate towards
South America at certain stops along the way. In Rio De Janeiro, Buck rode through the city with his buddies, “just like boys let loose from school,” traveled through the mountains, and ate unfamiliar and delicious tropical fruit. He drank the finest coffee he had ever had, spotted pretty and exotic women, and all but declared Rio an absolute paradise. The scenery to him was overwhelming, and here California gold was far from his mind.

Buck did not glamorize all of South America, declaring Callao, Peru to be a “mean dirty hole,” but once he reached Lima, he was enthralled once again. For Buck, Lima was most enticing for its women; he wrote, “the ladies are the most beautiful women I have ever seen…They do have small feet and ankles and they do smoke cigarettes…I have been reveling in a cloud of smoking ever since I have been here.” Buck was a romantic, finding it easy to imagine marrying one of these women and settling down for a life of leisure in a tropical paradise. In the letters to his sister, he hints at the possibility that he will return to Lima after acquiring a fortune in the West.

Unlike many travelers who went around the Horn, Buck was not overly anxious to get to California, especially when on South American coastal land. He found the journey invigorating and mostly pleasant, but this was certainly not the case for all travelers who took the Cape Horn route.

Like any long journey, travel around the Horn provided a series of high and low points for those aboard. Seasickness was a common ailment that affected nearly everyone not used to the turbulent ocean. Enos Christman was sick for weeks towards the beginning of his journey, and sickness plagued his spirits as he pondered his great sacrifice and loneliness at sea. His correspondence with his fiancée does not indicate any regret of his choice to leave home, but his letters reveal great frustration as the journey
drags on and sickness prevails. At times, everything to him seems unfailingly boring and bleak:

Without any employment and a continual sameness, time hangs heavily on all hands. Cards have lost their charm and a party can scarcely be raised to take a game. Drunken frolics, which were very popular for a short time, have also failed, for the bottle is empty and the spirits cannot be raised. The newspapers, books and novels have all been read and discussed, and nothing seems to remain for us to do but sit down and brood over our ills, which is well-calculated to breed discontent.57

In addition to sickness and boredom, oppressive temperature affected travelers around the Horn. For the forty-niners who left in the winter, the initially intense cold at sea would give way to oppressive heat as they moved below the equator. Although Christman left in July and was fairly comfortable on the beginning stage of the journey, he was later subjected to an overbearing sun for months. There was rarely ventilation below the deck on these ships, and it was nearly impossible to find a cool place to escape the heat.58

Food and water supplies were another source of exasperation and conflict. Contracts stipulated the allocation of resources along the way. The meals generally had minimal variety, and food provided yet another source of monotony en route to California. Salted fish or meat and potatoes were the standard, with beans, tea and dried fruit providing additional sustenance. Ships began with a large amount of food and water, but it was necessary to pick up additional supplies in South America. Tensions arose when supplies ran short, and though little evidence indicates that anyone actually starved on the Cape Horn route, travelers could get angry in times when rations were trimmed. Christman saw his contract become irrelevant as his weekly provisions were cut significantly during the last month of the trip. While the ship had restocked in Valparaiso, the Captain skimped on purchases in order to cut costs, infuriating Christman, who called the whole operation “a system of plunder” and the owners “the
most systematic robbers I ever heard of.” Even though the Gold Rush represented an opportunity for individual enterprise, the journey by sea required dependence on the ship and the crew. This provided a considerable source of tension, as the forty-niners were eager to get to California and be on their own. But the ship was a confined space, run by a system out of their control.

The stops along the South American coast did, however, provide a break in the monotony that Christman greatly appreciated. He enjoyed the fruit and scenery of Valparaiso, causing him to reflect more favorably on his journey to California. He also remarked on the attractiveness of the females, but unlike Buck, he could not envision settling down in South America; his dreams were generally confined to California and returning home rich to his fiancée. These stops were important for the morale of the travelers, and Christman, who did not enjoy the journey, wrote pleasantly about his time in Chile. Every stop on land represented progress, which most men were desperate for. When they finally neared the Pacific Coast, their lethargic boredom dissolved instantaneously; everything would change when they got to California.

The Isthmus of Panama

Those who traveled to California via Panama experienced different problems as well as distinct advantages. While these forty-niners still dealt with bouts of seasickness and boredom, their time at sea was not nearly as long. The shorter trip lessened the likelihood of supply shortages and offered the opportunity for ambitious forty-niners to beat the rush, as most others would be traveling slower routes. But the shortcut presented unique difficulties, and the Panama route did not necessarily end up as the best or easiest way to get to California.
The way through Panama entailed sailing down the Atlantic coast of the United States, usually with a stop in Cuba. A ship would then take the traveler across the Caribbean to the village of Chagres in Panama. The next step would require a short trip up the Chagres River, usually in paddleboats operated by Panamanian natives. This involved approximately three days of travel and camping each night. What followed was a fifteen-mile trip across the Isthmus of Panama, a small strip of land that provided a barrier between the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean. This short trip could be done in a single day, usually accomplished by horse or mule. From there, a steamship was taken up the Pacific Coast to San Francisco. This final portion of the trip did have some precedent; steamships had been running from Panama to California beginning a few years earlier for the purpose of delivering mail to settlers in Oregon. This last stretch was thus fairly well-known and generally very safe.  

If the traveler was lucky, the Panama route could be smooth and rather quick. Elisha Crosby made it to California rather easily, and his entire voyage lasted only two months. In his case, Panama was the perfect alternative to the Cape Horn route; he left before the crowds of the summer rush, enjoyed leisurely but brief stays in Cuba and Panama, and arrived in California in late February of 1849. For Crosby, the whole excursion was comparable to a vacation. Even before Gold Fever had hit, he had considered taking some time off, and although it would eventually lead to business, the California trip was primarily an expedition of curiosity.  

Crosby did not have to put everything on the line to go to California, and he was neither desperate nor rushed. When describing his time in Cuba, he wrote, “The contrast of climate and scenery between New York in the middle of winter and the tropical beauty and foliage of the delightful island of Cuba, produces the most agreeable
sensations. I advise you to try the experiment.” 

He also enjoyed his time in Panama, for it was not nearly as crowded as it would be in the spring and summer of 1849. He did not have to wait more than a few days for a steamship to California, and somehow through his connections, was even provided with a “large Mexican Hammock” on the steamer while most passengers crowded on the deck’s floor. Crosby enjoyed an easy trip to the West Coast, but this was uncommon.

Panama would not remain quiet for long; the Gold Rush would bring thousands into the area within months, complicating the shortcut. Finding lodging in Panama would soon become difficult and chaotic. Obtaining a ticket for a California steamship also became a significant challenge. Mary Jane Megquier, the wife of a physician from Massachusetts who crossed the Isthmus with her husband in 1849, was one of very few women to make the trip, and was perhaps one of the first. Unlike Crosby, she began the journey as the momentum of the Gold Rush was increasing, which negatively affected her passage. Initially though, Megquier enjoyed the voyage en route to Panama. Despite uncomfortable bouts with seasickness, she remarked in a letter to her daughter that, “I have enjoyed it much better than I expected, there are about two hundred gentlemen and I am the only lady and in that case I receive every attention.” Once in Panama, however, her tone changed significantly and the journey became increasingly discouraging.

As the Gold Rush gained traction in the spring of 1849, Panama became overcrowded with Americans. For the forty-niners, many of whom had never left the United States, the Panama experience brought culture shock. Megquier was not enticed by the fruit, food, or change of scene in Panama, and saddened by the conditions she witnessed there: “…no one can have any idea of the misery there is in the world until
they have seen some of these old towns where everything speaks of misery and decay…”

64 She pitied the natives, but was generally repulsed by them, and the sense of peace that she had enjoyed on the ship was profoundly disturbed. Upon arriving in Panama, she thought the wait for a steamship to California would be no longer than a week or two, but it would be almost two months before they left. Panama was lively and chaotic, but unappealing to Megquier, one of the very few white women in the area. She remained anxious over the separation from her children, which made the wait even more miserable.

The concentration of people in Panama also increased the risk of disease along the way. Cholera, a fast-spreading and deadly infectious disease, was rampant in Panama, where groups clustered together and food and water were easily contaminated. Cholera played a significant role in the Gold Rush, claiming the lives of many California travelers on both land and sea routes. Cholera generally did not, however, spread as quickly on the Cape Horn route, which did not require extended stays in overcrowded areas. While the journey around Cape Horn was considered more dangerous because of the weather conditions and distance covered, Panama proved to be a riskier venture. Many were fortunate enough never to deal with cholera firsthand, but all travelers were wary of it and forced to remain on their guard.

Demand for food and lodging was incredibly high in Panama, and prices began to skyrocket. Mary Jane Megquier’s husband was doing well there as a physician, so they lived fairly comfortably - but for many, it was difficult to find food and a place to stay. The crowds were enormous, and everyone was anxious for a spot on one of the scarce California steamships. Americans continued to rush into Panama, often without a real plan of how to get to California. As Megquier suggests, “The Americans are pouring in
from all parts of the States, notwithstanding they have been written to, that it is very
difficult to get a passage. Their thirst for gold is such, they start without a ticket or the
means of getting a passage in a sailing vessel when they arrive here.”65 She also notes that
the Americans spent most of their time gambling and “looking less like civilization than
the natives.”66 In this overcrowded and disorienting environment, traditional social
conventions were eschewed, and the rugged lifestyle of a miner was already beginning to
take form.

The frenzy of California for many travelers was prefigured by the hysteria of
Panama, where gold rushers lived amidst chaos while waiting for a steamship. By the
end of 1849, nearly 6,500 Americans had crossed the Isthmus of Panama en route to
California.67 During the spring of 1849, as many as two thousand Americans could be
packed into a small Panamanian town at any one time, bringing enormous change to the
area. But not everyone on the steamships to California was American, as forty-niners
from Latin America often stopped in Panama en route to the goldfields. On one of the
first steamships to leave for California in mid-January of 1849, one third of the
passengers were from Peru. This infuriated a crowd of Americans who watched a group
of nearly seventy foreigners pass them in the rush to California. Even this early in 1849,
the precedent set for ethnic conflict that would erupt throughout the Gold Rush.

American General Persifor Smith, briefly stationed in Panama on his way to
California, spoke out angrily against foreign presence on American steamships. Like
most American forty-niners, Smith associated the California expedition with American
destiny and the expansion of American wealth. Smith would later become a strong
nativist voice in the new California, once stating, “nothing can be more unreasonable or
unjust than the conduct pursued by persons not citizens of the United States, who are

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flocking from all parts to search for and carry off gold belonging to the United States in California…” 68  Tension between Americans and foreigners would only increase as the Gold Rush progressed.

Overland

The majority of forty-niners avoided the sea altogether, braving the slow, daunting land trails to California. By the end of 1849, an estimated 40,000 California emigrants had arrived by land. 69  The overland journey, despite being the cheapest option, carried the greatest variety of challenges, and was the most dangerous method of travel to California. While travel by sea had drawbacks, there is little evidence to indicate that any shipwrecks occurred en route to California; almost all sea travelers arrived safely. Supply constraints were more dire on the land routes, and disease was usually more common and of greater variety, as these forty-niners battled cholera, scurvy and dysentery with regularity. Death by the hands of Indians was less common, but was a constant fear that weighed on the American migrants. Land travelers frequently encountered gravestones along the way, and reminded of the perils of the long journey.

Most overland forty-niners took the Oregon Trail, which began in Independence, Missouri and had been used frequently since the 1830s, when settlement of the West began to expand. This was a favored route for Americans in the Midwest who, after arriving in Independence, could follow a well-known trail most of the way. They would diverge from the Oregon Trail slightly past Fort Hall, in present-day Idaho, and take the California Trail to Sacramento. The California Trail, used only sporadically since the mid-1830s, was a lesser-known route that could present serious challenges. The trail led through desert in Nevada and the Sierra Nevada mountain range in
California, forcing travelers to deal with brutal extremes of climate. The last leg of the trail, pioneered by Azariah Smith and his Mormon crew, allowed for a direct pass through the mountains into the Sacramento Valley. An alternative route was the Mormon Trail, which began in Nauvoo, Illinois, joined up with the Oregon Trail, and then diverged south towards Utah. It had been created earlier by Mormons headed to California, unaware that thousands would later use the trail.

All of the overland trails had significant variations, and navigating decisions were not always straightforward. Travelers relied on guidebooks and word of mouth to help direct them, but were often forced to make choices based on instinct. Even if there was no question of which trail to take, choosing how to cross a river, by fording or ferrying, could prove daunting. Even when this decision was clear, the wait to cross a particular river could be extensive during the height of the Gold Rush. J.G. Bruff, the forty-five year old former military man, faced an enormous line in Saint Joseph, Missouri when his newly formed mining company attempted to cross the Missouri River. Instead of waiting, Bruff boldly decided to travel north, keeping east of the Missouri River, to Fort Kearney near Nebraska City so he could cross there. This decision avoided the conflict that brewed over obtaining a ferry ride, which Bruff reported to have resulted in the murders of multiple men. Bruff used a number of guidebooks and maps to navigate a variety of small side-trails; many of them had first been used by Indians and were not commonly known, but Bruff used the advice of locals and other travelers to his advantage, and was willing to adapt his plans.

The experience of land travelers varied greatly, for there were elements that made the journey invigorating as well as terrifying. At times, Bruff seemed to be having the time of his life out in open land, reveling in the uncertainty of the adventure. The trail
was often packed with other travelers headed for California, and Bruff enjoyed meeting and dining with the leaders of other crews. His crew was often able to hunt and fish along the way, enjoying the opportunities that outdoor travel provided. They took time to nap and play cards during afternoon breaks, singing songs and telling stories at night. But Bruff’s crew never lingered long, averaging over seventeen miles a day, much of it accomplished with lumbering oxen. They would eventually abandon the oxen for mules, exchanging strength for greater speed, for they were anxious to make it to California as fast as possible.

The overland journey required an immense amount of work. Wagons constantly broke down and needed repair; wheels needed adjustments and entire wagons could collapse on uneven terrain. Steep valleys could delay travelers as they pondered the best way to descend without crashing and damaging vital supplies. Land migrants were forced to begin the journey in the spring because they needed adequate grass for the animals, but were unable to cross the Sierra Nevada Mountains once the cold of winter took hold, rendering speed an absolute priority. Yet progress was often sluggish; dust and heat in the arid Southwest slowed groups as they inched closer to California, and days of repetition threatened morale. Bruff himself was forced to manage dissent within his crew, as some resented his requirement of a nightly watch for Indian attacks, and others had differing ideas about the best ways to get to California. Unnerving sights also confronted land travelers almost daily. Gravestones were spotted along the trails, and dead oxen carcasses were a ubiquitous sight; Bruff once counted forty-six dead oxen along the trail on a single day. Wildlife was also threatening, as crews encountered bears, rattlesnakes and wolves as they moved towards the Sierra Nevadas.
But land travelers were rarely completely isolated, and often had the ability to interact with others along the way. Many groups saw miles of wagons ahead of them at certain points of the trip, providing greater security as they moved further into unknown territory. Stops at large forts also gave them a chance to rest, replenish supplies, and connect to life back home; Fort Laramie, for example, served as a post office for the land emigrants. Travelers also exchanged advice with traders, Indians and other migrants at various points of the trip. Interactions with Indians varied widely, as travelers found it necessary to be both open to peaceful contact with Indians, and adequately armed in preparation for a potential attack. Bruff’s crew experienced a number of bloody encounters with Indians, causing a few very serious injuries, but he also engaged with natives in constructive, peaceful ways. Despite Bruff’s clear prejudices against Indians, he understood the variability amongst tribes, and was at times willing to share supplies with them and smoke a pipe. Although such respites occurred frequently on the long journey to California, land travelers were faced with strong and perpetual fears of the unknown.

Perhaps the most daunting prospect of cross-country travel was being trapped miles from civilization without adequate supplies. Thought they often saw others along the way, travelers were virtually isolated on certain stretches. Fresh water was usually the greatest concern. Kegs of fresh water were stored on wagons, but only so much could be added before the wagon slowed to a crawl. If water ran low there was no easy solution, and forty-niners often battled sicknesses acquired from drinking contaminated water. Fuel for nighttime fires was another major concern, as wood became scarcer in the dry, barren arid regions of the West. Crews improvised, often using buffalo chips to
hold a flame, but the possibility of insufficient fuel provided another source of potential disaster.

Despite the immense obstacles by land and sea, an extraordinary number of travelers made it to California. Approximately 80,000 gold-seekers, about a quarter of whom were foreigners, arrived in the territory in 1849. The majority of Americans took overland routes, but about half of all forty-niners (Americans and foreigners) came by sea. The numbers would continue to grow, and by 1860, an estimated 300,000 people had made their way to California since Marshall’s discovery.73 To be sure, there were elements in such migration that were irrational and speculative. Yet many showed improbable steadiness and resolve en route to California. Despite the potential difficulties, the prospect of a life-changing payoff would always be present as long as they made it to the mines.
Part II

Boom in California

“I think money can be made here quicker than in any other part in the world”
-Enos Christman, 1850
Rumors, Excitement and the California Shores

Arrival in California brought the journey to a close, and quickly reinvigorated prospective miners. Most who traveled by sea arrived in San Francisco, which was positioned as an ideal natural harbor and soon became one of the fastest growing cities in the United States. For those who arrived early in 1849, San Francisco was a modest town, even a disappointing site to some early forty-niners as they departed their steamships. Elisha Crosby, who arrived in February, estimated the population in San Francisco to be roughly three hundred, remarking, “If the 450 who came off the steamer had remained there, they would have considerably more than doubled the population.”

But as the Gold Rush evolved, newcomers were greeted with an increasingly lively reception in San Francisco, which held tens of thousands of non-natives by the end of 1849. It was an exciting region, full of activity and temptation. Yet for gold-seekers, decisions had to be made quickly, and they were forced to start planning right away.

San Francisco served as an anchor for the Gold Rush. Here miners bought supplies, heard news of gold strikes, and sought directions and advice. By the summer of 1849, new arrivals were greeted by an explosion of activity and a town that had undergone unprecedented expansion. Franklin Buck wrote of San Francisco, “The town is growing very fast. You can see it grow every night. It already contains streets and squares, several large hotels and any quantity of grog shops and gambling saloons.”

The development of San Francisco was molded by the mining lifestyle and all-encompassing Gold Fever. Hotels thrived as most miners had no permanent home. Shops sold out quickly and struggled to keep up with demand for food and mining supplies. Gambling and booze also became major businesses. Written law was non-
existent, and society in San Francisco was instead held together by loose codes of conduct. Forty-niners quickly adapted in California, and were forced to embrace the rough and unregulated qualities of their new environment.

One of the most striking features of California for the newcomers was not the culture, but the prices. Although modest board could be found, hotels were limited and rates were roughly five dollars a day, a substantial sum at the time. Land speculation and the extremely high cost of lumber caused owners to demand large rents. The cost of labor was also significant, and hotels commanded high prices for feeding their customers. With no kitchen supplies and little cooking experience, most new arrivals initially had no other option but to pay for meals in San Francisco. Due to enormous demand for prepared food, prices climbed and the new Californians continued to pay them. Hotels thrived in San Francisco throughout the Gold Rush, and those that served good, competitively priced meals could become rich very quickly.

The difficulty of getting goods to California was the fundamental cause for such high prices. Without a railroad line to connect it to the States, the territory received goods by sea from South America and the eastern United States. Business was booming, but industry and infrastructure were still highly undeveloped. Yet demand in the growing California economy was strong, and traders knew if they could acquire goods they would be sold easily. This system sustained itself because the region was flush with new money, and the gold from mining strikes eventually made its way to the gambling tables, saloons and hotels in San Francisco. In his journal, Enos Christman wrote, “Money here goes like dirt; everything costs a dollar or dollars. What is considered a fortune at home is here mere pocket money. Today I purchased a single potato for 45 cents.” But economic growth ensured that most were not squeezed out of the market.
for basic goods; wages for hired labor were high, and many new Californians worked part-time jobs in addition to mining. Eventually, many forty-niners abandoned mining efforts altogether but still earned much higher wages than they ever would have outside of California.

Mining efforts materialized throughout California, but two general areas known as the Southern and Northern Mines were found to be most abundant in gold. Marshall’s discovery occurred in the Southern Mines, which represented a large area east of San Francisco, extending north past the Feather River and as far south as Fresno. Sutter’s Fort in Coloma was near the center of the Southern Mining region, over a hundred miles away from San Francisco. The Northern Mining region was not popular until 1851, when a series of strikes extended the Gold Rush into new territory. Although it was smaller, this area became an attractive destination for miners. The Northern Mines ran east of the Sierra Nevadas, extending to near the top of California, and was much further from San Francisco than the Southern Mines; Yreka, one of the northernmost towns in the region, was over three hundred miles away. A miner’s choice of location varied depending on their capital stock, the current rumors, and their willingness to travel. Most American forty-niners had no experience in mining, often choosing locations based on mere hunches or whims. They rarely stayed in one place for very long; although the journey to California was over, most migrants were forced to stay on the move.
It is difficult to underestimate the significance of rumor in manipulating the decisions of the average miner. Without any real insight into geology or practical experience in gold mining, word of mouth generally dictated where a mining group would travel. Tales of gold discoveries were indeed what had prompted the California migration in the first place, and relied upon as miners chose their locations. If $20,000 in gold was discovered in an area a week earlier, it seemed logical to travel there and try one’s luck. Since most miners were otherwise clueless, following rumors was potentially a way of increasing their odds. But making it to the area might take days or weeks, and by then most of the easy diggings were often exhausted. As both information and the miners themselves traveled slowly, following rumors became a painfully delayed process.
Mining in California thus took on a definitive pattern, in which hundreds of miners unsuccessfully attempted to extend the strikes of a relative few. In his memoir, Belgian Miner Jean-Nicolas Perlot describes a typical story:

Except for the happy proprietors of the famous pit, who had worked it as far as thirty feet in depth and had found twenty-two thousand dollars there, the others had been no luckier than we. Fifteen days after the discovery, there were more than four hundred miners occupied everywhere in turning the soil, and at the end of a month there remained twelve of them: those who were working in the pit in question.77

As rich strikes became famous by word of mouth, miners poured in and overwhelmed the area. Generally, only a few were able to profit from this form of secondhand mining, causing immense frustration among miners; the jackpot claim was incredibly elusive, requiring improbable luck. Thus, great emphasis was placed on finding some kind of edge that could provide an advantage. James Marshall, for example, was repeatedly hired for great sums to help wealthy gold-seekers in mining endeavors; even without a real sense of mining, his perceived aura of “luck” trumped all else. Yet Marshall would never again discover gold in any significant amount.

Gold rumors were almost impossible to ignore because they were often true. Certain stories were exaggerated, even fictitious, but with many mining strikes exaggeration was not necessary. One forty-niner described the excitement that kept hopes alive as miners traveled around California, noting, “many were the extravagant yet fully credited rumors whispered around from friend to friend….78” Tales of success were also not entirely distant from the everyday miner, as there was often contact with a person or a group of miners who managed to accumulate substantial wealth. In growing mining towns, and certainly in San Francisco, one did not have to look far to find someone who had made their fortune in the mines.

The pervasiveness of gold rumors extended the boom of the Gold Rush, but while they were often true, the stories could be misleading. Upon arriving in San
Francisco in the summer of 1849, Mary Jane Megquier was immediately encouraged by the signs of easy wealth that surrounded the area, remarking, “the news from the gold regions far exceeds our expectations, every man that goes to the mines picks up a fortune.” Accounts of rich mining claims drowned out all accounts of failure, so it was easy in 1849 to believe that everyone was making a fortune. As Californians saw or heard of fellow miners striking it rich, they again asked, “Why not me?” clinging to the remote hope of finding luck in the mines. But such lofty expectations could prove dangerous, setting gold-seekers up for a bitter and overwhelming sense of failure as success eluded them.

A Miner’s Life

Gold mining had great appeal for forty-niners because of the limited capital investment it required. Although mining pans generally sold at the inflated sum of ten dollars, they were relatively cheap compared to the potential reward. This was, of course, like no other occupation in the United States. Anyone could mine, and in California, virtually everyone made at least a modest attempt in prospecting. Even professionals, who were invested in California as a place of business, had stakes in mining. Though mining may have been secondary to their interests, it was too lucrative to ignore. And because it did not entail an enormous investment, individuals could mine on the side, almost haphazardly, much like amateur gamblers. Even as wage labor was secured in California, part-time mining was almost a given throughout the early 1850s.

For those who fully immersed themselves in gold mining, the challenge was to adapt to a new lifestyle dependent on uncertain and varying income. The life of a miner soon came to mean a number of things, ranging from the foods they ate to the way they
relaxed. The scarcity of goods, infrastructure, and written law created a culture that was unembellished and rough around the edges. Gold was the center of the economy, both as an industry and as a mode of exchange, as the metal was used for purchases more frequently than cash. Informal trade also thrived as an absolute necessity, for shops were often scarce as miners moved about California. Miners might have a substantial amount of gold but no supplies, forcing them to pay a premium as they bargained with those they encountered.

*Panning*, the use of a metal pan for accumulating gold, was a common mining technique during the early stages of the Gold Rush. The miner would dip the pan into the bottom of a riverbed and scoop a clump of wet dirt. Heavier objects were removed along with lighter sand, and the miner would continue to swirl the water in the pan. As a dense metal, gold would quickly settle to the bottom of the pan. With some luck, the pan would eventually contain water, a bit of loose dirt, and gold dust. After the early mining days of 1848, it was rare to simply pluck gold from a riverbed, and panning became a more viable option.

Panning was an individualized activity, but most miners formed groups in California. If travelers were not part of a company or informal group prior to their arrival, they soon joined others in order to increase their chances of success. Groups provided meaningful protection, decreasing the exposure to attacks or theft. They also helped to ease the distribution of household tasks involved in mining camps, ranging from cooking to the procurement of supplies. And perhaps more importantly, groups that shared earnings minimized the risk of having nothing. Groups also decreased the chance of starvation and supply depletion, and had more ears to listen to the latest news.
As mining evolved in California, groups became essential for increasing the efficiency of gold mining.

Since panning was both a limited and tedious technique, new mining technology quickly developed in Gold Rush California. A cradle-like box, known as a rocker, soon became a popular tool for miners. A large quantity of dirt and rocks was dumped into the rocker, which resembled a child’s cradle in size and shape, was then shaken from side to side using a handle while water was dumped onto the rocker’s contents. A screen sifted heavier mineral deposits to a lower region of the device, which could be removed and examined for gold. A rocker was fairly effective, but miners quickly looked for ways to improve the operation. A long tom employed the same basic idea, but was much longer and slightly more complicated. It was thinner, but could stretch to over a hundred feet long. It also had a paddlewheel to keep a continuous flow of water, and required a larger group of miners to help shovel the dirt along. Other variations of this design, such as the sluice box, flourished in early California mining, and exposed panning as a basic and less effective method of mining.

Miners also tested riskier and more elaborate ideas in the search for gold. One fairly common scheme was to divert the water from a river, leaving a long, dry riverbed which could be easily mined for gold. Since strong rapids prevented mining in certain areas, this method promised to unveil a vast, untapped source of gold deposits. One miner’s memoir describes the growing popularity of this method as the Gold Rush’s second major mining season approached: “Hence, in the summer of 1850 a large percentage of the miners clubbed together to turn the various rivers of the mining-belt from their beds, at the more favorable points, by means of canals, or flumes, or both…” For some, their participation in these projects simply tested out another
forward-looking idea. For others, it was a desperate effort to try something new. In California, there was often little hesitation not just to move, but also to find new partners, a new combination of tools, and a different approach to mining.

Ditch mining was both labor-intensive and laden with risk. Instead of mining, the workers spent most of the mining season building the flume or canal. This required a significant investment of both time and money, and if the results were not favorable the entire season was wasted. Hiram Pierce, a middle-aged miner who had sacrificed tremendously to come to California, undertook the risk and put all of his modest capital into such a project. Angry with early mining failures and his inability to send remittances home to his family, he had been eager to try something new, but again found disappointment; the project had yielded virtually nothing and the mining season passed in vain.81

Ironically, many miners encountered a frustrating reversal of an American axiom, in which hard work could easily amount to nil. While the gold-seekers had been attracted to the apparent ease of acquiring wealth in California, they found that the mining lifestyle had been considerably misrepresented. Instead of picking up golden lumps, they slowly accumulated gold dust, and at no small price. Even if the capital investment was small, the physical toll was demanding, and hours of continuous shoveling, mixing, swirling and rocking wore on the forty-niners. While most had come to the golden land to escape the constraints of traditional labor, they usually found mining to be just as arduous, if not more so. The lack of wage contracts or any formal mechanism for stabilizing earnings also provoked immense anxiety, as miners struggled to find any basic form of security. While post-Gold Rush art tends to project leisure and natural comfort onto these early
mining years, the reality for most was not as romantic, involving considerable corporal challenges as well as severe tests of will.

Yet some miners found a way to make a relatively steady living in California mining, at least for a time. Miners who found a decent claim could have a regular source of income for several months before the claim ran dry. In certain areas, although daily income fluctuated, miners came to expect a fairly reasonable, even substantial average wage. Jean Nicolas Perlot, who consistently moved about California after his arrival in 1851, participated in a variety of mining endeavors with an ever-changing set of business partners. His original mining company almost completely disbanded, yet he often reconnected with his old partners in various regions of California. When he exhausted a claim, he relocated quickly, and began a search for a new claim. Perlot’s perseverance guided him towards a respectable level of savings, nearly 60 ounces of gold (valued at approximately $16 an ounce) by the spring of 1852. Still, this money might not have even equaled the cost of his journey to California, and his claims were a far cry from the stories that circulated in the mining towns.

Although Perlot was consistently able to keep his head above water, he was oftentimes dangerously close to nothing. High expenses were a consistent drain on a miner’s resources; with a stretch of bad luck, savings could evaporate very quickly. After mining a claim that averaged between five and twenty-five dollars per person, per day, Perlot’s group soon hit a wall:

…for a long time we had done nothing but spend, and my word! The purse was growing light; in the month of April, at the time I left for Fresno, I had fifty-eight ounces of gold; now at the beginning of November, there remained to me no more than ten ounces. 82
The unpredictability of gold mining often made it a brutal endeavor, which miners found to be unbearably disheartening. While Perlot took swings of fortune in relative stride, the irregularity of mining was an immense source of anxiety for many prospectors.

The general pattern of a mining expedition involved traveling to a certain area to stake a claim, whether guided by knowledge, intuition or rumor, and upon determining its suitability, buying supplies that would last several months. Claims were often a considerable distance from a supply town, making trips back and forth undesirable, if not inconceivable. Stockton, a town eighty miles from San Francisco, served as the primary supply center, distributing to smaller trading posts throughout California. Yet many posts were sold out or abandoned at various points during the year. When demand for certain goods was high, a miner might travel several days before discovering a necessary item was no longer in stock. This was an expensive process, and the spoiling of meat or grain could prove to be devastating.

Miners learned to survive on the bare minimum, and were forced to abandon their customary standards of living. For those who had left their families, the gap between California mining and domestic life was at times comically vast. While a home was created on the basis of comfort and settled family life, mining camps were haphazard, uncomfortable and temporary. Tents were usually abandoned when miners relocated, and the sight of abandoned settlements became common during the Gold Rush years. For most, this kind of living created a void; the volatility and difficulty of mining contributed to this, but perhaps more importantly, the lack of women and children was the most palpable absence that miners felt.

Miners made attempts at domestic life with varying success. Some who were unsatisfied with the transience of camp life built cabins to establish a sense of stability.
Cabins provided some semblance of a life back home, offering comforts that tents could not provide. Cabins were a more domestic setting, and mining groups often had a rotating system of household chores to keep the house in order. When the Gold Rush became a popular subject for artists in the 1870s and 1880s, cabin dwelling became a common representation of mining life. Cabins were generally depicted as a cozy nook for the adventurous miner, a site for solace and male bonding. The all male cabin was justifiably a great source of interest, and this bizarre “home” life of miners was too much for artists to resist. Yet these arrangements were fragile, and would generally disband after a relatively short time period. Even when miners desired the stability of domestic life, it was very difficult to establish, and the lack of women seemed to render these arrangements incomplete.

The rainy season in California, which lasted throughout the winter, provided a significance hindrance to mining, and most gold-seekers took a break from prospecting during these months. Although the lull rarely seemed like a vacation for those with limited resources and no source of income, the rainy season provided a respite from the backbreaking labor of mining. A dedicated Perlot however, managed to work two to four hours a day during the winter of 1852, pulling in between five and eight dollars a day from his sporadic mining. Most camps and trading operations were shut down during the winter, and Perlot consistently faced supply shortages. He hunted for meat, which was sparse, killing mostly rabbits and squirrels during these meager times. He formed a number of temporary partnerships, but occasionally found himself entirely alone, holding out hope of reuniting with his old mining company, and self-medicating with cases of wine.
Health in California was often extremely poor, and miners faced the looming threat of sickness and disease at their camps. Exposure to the elements, poor water sources, and malnutrition contributed to the sickness that existed nearly everywhere in California. Mary Jane Megquier’s husband had factored in the lack of doctors in his decision to move to California, and while this provided steady income for the Megquiers, the shortage of healthcare was devastating for the many miners who became sick. Sickness often went unattended, and finding a doctor often required high fees and a long trip, a considerable obstacle to poor miners in the wilderness. It was rare for one in California not to have known someone who had been struck down by disease.

**Weighing the Mining Experience**

Despite the difficulties that marred life in Gold Rush California, certain qualities of the mining lifestyle became appealing to the miners themselves. Although the literary and artistic representations of the Gold Rush tend to overemphasize such pleasures, they did exist in some form for most miners. Both Saturday, a day to catch up on domestic chores, and Sunday, a day of leisure, were greatly appreciated in California. Without such a respite, mining would not have been tolerable. Most spent their Sundays without church or the attachments of family life, allowing for a new kind of freedom. While some enjoyed relaxing in the California wilderness, others preferred to drink, gamble and seek female company in the dancehalls. Regardless of how free time was spent, Sundays rejuvenated the new Californians. Franklin Buck, in a letter to his sister, described his satisfaction with the relaxed environment of California and his enjoyment of Sundays: “The country is as quiet and peaceable as you can expect where there is no government,
no police, no society and where every man does what is right in his own eyes. Sunday is respected but there is no church and no parson.”

Buck was forever changing his mind on California. His correspondence with his sister, which lasted over twenty years, provides insight into his evolving perceptions of the new territory and its inhabitants. Though his trading business spared him the necessity of mining for a living, California often depressed Buck, causing him to think longingly of either home or South America. The lack of society and infrastructure in the early Gold Rush years made relatively simple tasks difficult, and he often expressed his annoyance with the crudeness of California living. The shortage of available women also caused Buck to at times question his decision to remain in California. Yet at other times Buck seemed perfectly content to stay, fantasizing about owning a farm in a peaceful rural area. Even though the aura of California had been somewhat diminished by moderate earnings and hard work, it still had some allure for Buck, and he expressed his appreciation for the distinctiveness of California when he was in better moods.

Enos Christman was similarly conflicted in California. As a forty-niner with great exuberance and ambition, he immersed himself in the new world of the West and was attracted to the excitement that surrounded it. In his first days of searching for gold he enjoyed a strong feeling of optimism and relished the novelty of mining. A miner’s life carried a certain mystique, and he was thousands miles away from home, actually living it. Christman’s journal entries reveal the exhilaration of trying something entirely new. Despite making only seventy-five cents in his first mining attempt, Christman recognized the significance of this initial effort, writing, “I shall never forget the first panful of sand I washed.” Even the basics of a miner’s cuisine were enticing, and
Christman found great satisfaction in learning how to make pancakes, the authentic meal of a miner:

Heretofore we have several times attempted to manufacture some good cakes out of flour, known in this country as ‘flapjacks,’ but they always came out heavy dough things which we could hardly eat. This evening we tried it again and succeeded beyond our most sanguine expectations…Such delicious cakes as we had, I have not tasted for a long time…We have to experiment on everything until we get it to suit our tastes, and what is learned in this way will not soon be forgotten. We can now get up some fine dishes.86

Christman, like most who had traveled to California, had been drawn to the West not just for the chance of striking it rich, but also to engage in labor that was wild, unique and exciting. On the surface, the miner’s way of life was appealing; it brought independence, and stirred masculine sensibilities in a lifestyle that left traditional society behind. Though he found himself basking in this aura early on, the novelty would not last.

The search for gold became increasingly frustrating for Christman, who despite his determined efforts, achieved only sporadic and relatively meager results. A letter to his fiancée describes how his mining partner abandoned the search after only a few weeks:

McCowan also is not as well as he was a few days since, and is now quite disgusted, with Mariposa in particular and the gold mines in general. He is determined to leave as soon as possible and endeavor to get a berth at his trade, blacksmithing. But as we are now considerably in debt there is no telling how soon any of us can leave.87

Debt could provide a substantial barrier to mobility in California. Since many arrived with very little, prospective miners often had to borrow in order to finance initial mining efforts. But if luck eluded them, it was difficult to establish a payment schedule and debt could often snowball as high expenses continued to weigh on the gold-seekers. The unpredictability of mining and the looming cloud of debt often pushed miners towards steadier wage labor occupations. The good news was that the boom of California put
laborers in demand, and relatively high wages were often attractive alternatives to mining.

Christman, like his partner, soon gravitated towards more secure employment. As a former printing apprentice, he eventually found a job working for a California newspaper. That Christman resumed essentially the same profession he had traveled thousands of miles to escape was an ironic wrinkle, but Christman was generally pleased with the arrangement. His wages of fifty dollars per week made the few, inconsistent gold flakes he had found as a miner look petty and undesirable. He was earning substantially more money than he could have on the East Coast, and he enjoyed life in the emergent California. Miners often worked part-time jobs to accumulate funds for a mining expedition, but some, like Christman, abandoned mining altogether.

If mining efforts failed, the prospects were not always gloomy. Well after Christman had given up mining, he wrote, “I think money can be made here quicker than in any other part of the world.” He had been lucky to secure his newspaper job, but recognized that rapid economic growth had created opportunity for a variety of people in California. Gold mining had sparked this growth, but an increasing number of business owners, speculators and investors were growing wealthy, while remaining distant from the mines. And it was not just the rich who were having success in this regard; since corporations had not yet established themselves in California, there was great potential for small business operations to grow.

Franklin Buck was often bored with his trading work, but remained relatively content throughout his time in California, as he never had to rely on mining to make a living. Though he did not strike it rich, there was still opportunity in the territory, and a greater likelihood of expanding his business than perhaps anywhere else in the United
States. Though he often complained about California, the potential for wealth kept him there. Buck eventually settled down in California, and participated in a number of business projects over the years. As a growing number of towns were established, the need for all kinds of labor, business and infrastructure continued to increase. Buck was part of a group of investors and laborers that sought to build a sawmill in a Northern California town, and though the effort was only moderately successful, he continued to look for similar opportunities. The growth of California allowed for ambitious individuals to pursue these kinds of projects. As in mining, they would need a little luck, but their chances were often better than elsewhere in the country.

For the new California economy, the key to survival and prosperity was the provision of goods and services that freshly dug gold could be spent on. A significant amount of gold was shipped to mints and banks on the East Coast, but much of the wealth stayed in California. Soon, the most successful business was not mining, but one that catered to the vast number of miners who were often concentrated in specific areas. Small hotels, shops and restaurants became prosperous if they were run well, and soon the richest people in California were business owners, not miners. Levi Strauss, who developed pants designed for mining, became very wealthy as the apparel became almost essential for miners. Samuel Brannan, who had spread the news about Marshall’s discovery, became California’s first millionaire as his mining shops became more lucrative than even he could have imagined. While thousands of miners headed every day towards an uncertain outcome, Brannan could be sure that most would pass through his stores multiple times during the course of a year.

Yet it was not always easy to become a business owner in California. Most of the new arrivals lacked the capital, resources and knowledge of the area required to set up
successful businesses. Even among those who arrived in the summer of 1849, many felt that they had not arrived early enough to take advantage of California in any other way than mining. Brannan and Strauss were innovators, and for every one of them, there were thousands of new Californians who found it very difficult to shape their success during the frenzy of the Gold Rush. For the forty-niners who arrived with ambitious expectations, California became both a mesmerizing and maddening place. Signs of new wealth were everywhere, but many were at a loss when it came to making it for themselves. They retained hope in knowing that they still had a chance as long as they continued to mine, but the whirlwind of California offered them very little control over their future.

As the Gold Rush progressed, more credible information concerning California was made available. While stories of big strikes and gold shipments continued to entice those outside of California, a greater number of sobering reports on mining life began to trickle out. Interpreting the various accounts of California was often confusing; while some raved about the golden land, others had become hardened skeptics. Peebles Prizer, a friend of Enos Christman who remained in Pennsylvania, wrote anxiously to Christman for credible information. In deciding whether or not to venture west, Prizer had trouble making up his mind, and found the process of sorting out the California stories to be difficult: “The intelligence we have from California is very contradictory. We scarcely know what story to believe. From some of our California boys we have melancholy news- from others just the reverse.”89 Those who remained home were eager to hear the truth about the Gold Rush, whether it actually provided the glory of easy money or if it had been exposed as a fraud. The reality was a mixed bag. With a little luck, California was the greatest place in the world, providing a heightened sense of
personal freedom and excitement. Without it, however, California could be both a burden and a menace.

By the early 1850s, conceptions of California were becoming less vague, and it was clear that the West was not for everyone. Thousands continued to arrive on the California coast, but the advice coming east was now more balanced. One Californian wrote, “I would not advise a single person that has a comfortable home in New England to leave its comforts and pleasures for any place with all its gold mines.” The rush to California was not necessarily a bad decision, but it was uncertain, and after a few years the risks and rewards became clearer. To leave a good life, and risk both the dangers of the journey and the chance of finding nothing, simply did not make sense.

But for those with little to lose, an adventure to California was ideal. In an article published in the *New York Times* in 1852, the author deemed California foolish for the risk averse, writing, “Change, for the love of it, we do not counsel: it is seldom for the better.” Yet for those with fewer resources and attachments, the search for gold represented a real chance for a better life: “But to the unfortunate, who struggles here for his daily bread with daily anxiety, and inability to use his hands, and arms, and muscles, we say, get thee hence to the golden land, and put money in thy purse!” California continued to represent both the excitement of new beginnings and the disappointment of unrealized dreams. Even if the situation was not always desperate, it rarely lived up to the great expectations of the California dream. While the forty-niners had sought to escape plodding and toilsome labor, they often found themselves doing exactly that.

Despite disappointment, many continued to view California as the place to be. For Enos Christman, failure in mining did not discourage him from seeing the California
journey as a net positive. Aside from the steady income he earned working for the newspaper, he also took pleasure in the excitement of California. He kept his fiancée entertained with stories of ethnic conflict, enormous gold strikes, and the political developments in California. His closeness to it all was exciting, and he developed great affection for the region and its chaos. His letters reveal strongly mixed feelings about his time in the West, yet he continued to acknowledge the great opportunity in the new territory and its importance in the history of the United States. California was growing right in front of him, and its rapid development suggested that conditions were going to improve.

Women in California

Gold Rush California was in many ways a world of men. For women, the California journey generally had less appeal; the lifestyle was crude, the dangers were extreme, and there were few guarantees once a life was established in California. Social constraints also made it nearly impossible for single women to leave home in pursuit of a California dream. Thus, in the early years of the Gold Rush, the white population was roughly ninety-percent male. Still, women played a major role in shaping the development of California. Because women were scarce, they were highly in demand, in both sexual and non-sexual contexts. Domestic labor, including cooking and cleaning, became a highly valued service in Gold Rush California, providing the foundation for the success of a number of female entrepreneurs. Prostitution became common practice in the many bars and dancehalls throughout California, especially in San Francisco. A number of married women also journeyed with their husbands to California, doing their best to assist their spouses and establish some form of respectable society.
Mary Jane Megquier was initially unnerved by the crudeness of California and the mining lifestyle. In describing the prospective miners during the journey to San Francisco, she wrote, “many of them I think would not be recognized by their friends.”

Megquier was aware of the transformational qualities of the gold-seeking journey, and as a respectable wife of a doctor, she was wary of how her life would change in California. She recognized the great potential of California as a land of gold and a part of Manifest Destiny, yet she was conscious of the irony that this produced; the American forty-niners were becoming more vulgar and uncivilized under the wide umbrella of “progress.”

Yet Megquier still allowed herself to imagine capturing a bit of California luck; although she kept her distance from the mines, she saw the territory as having enormous potential to upgrade the wealth and status of her family. Upon arrival in California, she became caught up in the whirlwind of optimism and felt her life would improve. From what she saw, everyone was accumulating wealth. In a letter to her daughter she wrote, “…everybody is digging gold, even the cabin boy has his thousands, they get in big lumps, one passed through this place weighing thirty six ounces pure gold. In about one year you will see your Mother come trudging home with an apron full, but without joking, gold is very plenty…”

For Megquier, the separation from her children and immersion into undeveloped territory tested her endurance. California was not yet a place for families or formal society, and she was lonely, longing for both. Yet California did excite her and allowed her to imagine a more prosperous life. In this way, her desires were similar to those of any male forty-niner, and she soon found herself sharing the spirit of California exuberance.
Despite Megquier’s relative privilege, she was willing to work hard: “…a woman that can work will make more money than a man, and I think now that I shall do that which will bring in the most change.” While gold was often elusive, the demand for female labor was a certainty, and Megquier began making good money performing domestic tasks. This awakened an entrepreneurial spirit in her, and she was soon relishing her role as a wage earner. By 1853, the Megquiers owned a successful boarding house, which allowed Mary Jane to have hired help and work significantly less. Though she remained torn over the separation from her children, she, like many of those who had made the journey, found a place in her heart for California and spoke highly of its opportunities; she happily wrote that she could make “more money in a month here than I could in the states in two years.” California allowed Megquier to embrace a role she had never fulfilled before; though her husband owned the hotel, she effectively ran it, and was invigorated by the sense of independence and self-worth that this produced. Even if California was a man’s world, it provided distinctive opportunities for women, and certain enterprising females emerged onto the Gold Rush stage.

The Gold Rush also distorted gender roles and the allocation of responsibility for women who remained at home. Though the California journey was regarded as one for the single man, a great number of married men took the risk, leaving their wives at home to run businesses and households. While husbands entertained Gold Rush fantasies, a disproportionate amount of responsibility was placed on wives who often had to become steady breadwinners. Hiram Pierce, who had left a successful blacksmithing business to search for gold, counted on his wife to manage the household while he was gone. His lack of fortune in the mines prevented him from sending home any remittances for the entirety of his stay in California, which lasted over three years. While his attempts at
contributing to the family were sincere, they were fruitless and self-indulgent, and the burden of accountability fell on his wife. She managed to succeed in keeping the family afloat, yet her increased responsibility provided more anxiety than empowerment. For such women, there is little evidence to suggest that the new role of breadwinner was accepted as anything other than stressful necessity.

Women were significant in their absence from California, for much of what motivated the miners themselves involved women. Though the myth of the forty-niner suggests he is strong, infinitely capable and unhindered by dependency, the real forty-niner was often attached, either to a specific love interest or a fantasy of marriage. Even for those who had no marital obligations, their goal was usually to find enough gold to be able to settle down upon returning home. For the male forty-niner, the desire for women went beyond sexual needs, as many voiced desire for the soft and caring qualities of maternal femininity, mourning the absence of women. Although the irregular and overwhelmingly masculine environment of Gold Rush California would later be sentimentalized, it proved inadequate for most who experienced it.

**California Vice**

**Prostitution**

Although women were scarce, they could certainly be found, especially in San Francisco or other California towns. It soon became common for a man to pursue female company, usually at a dancehall, or “fandango,” where dances were held and gold was gambled unreservedly. The lively environment of dancehalls allowed for masculine energy to be channeled in extroverted ways. Fights and drinking contests occurred regularly, and dancing provided a welcome relief from the drudgeries of mining. Contact
with women was most cherished; men even dressed up as females and danced with other males to simulate the effect. Dancing with a real female, however, offered brief yet revitalizing escape from the crudeness of California. Male-female interaction could be innocent and playful, as men often paid a woman sit down with them, drink, or dance. But sex was also a central focus, and soon sexual commerce became major business.

Prostitution thrived throughout California, contributing significantly its reputation as a territory lacking the morals of the rest of American culture. The scarcity of women frustrated miners, and prostitution became a relatively straightforward way to achieve some form of release. New wealth and the gold commerce allowed many customers to free up their purses at the dancehalls, especially when drunk. Prostitution, of course, existed elsewhere in the United States, but it fit more easily into California society than virtually anywhere else. Without the strong foundation of social institutions, especially churches and families, to dissuade men from engaging in casual sex, prostitution was much more visible in California than in most of the United States.

The Gold Rush embodied the spirit of finding quick solutions, and prostitution provided exactly that. Since available, marriageable females were almost unattainable, men were forced to pay for female companionship, even if they would not have dared to do so back home. With the restraining influences of family, church and society now very distant, Californians often easily gave way to the temptation which surrounded them. Even after California was officially part of the Union, legal oversight remained loose for years, and business owners had a great stake in the booming enterprise of sex. Until California towns became better organized and prone to family life, prostitution would remain as a central fixture of California society.
The dynamics of the Gold Rush facilitated great demand for available prostitutes, but a supply of willing women was necessary in order for the business to grow. Many of these women were foreigners who had recognized the great opportunity of California migration. French prostitutes, for example, soon became a common sight in bars and dancehalls. Susan Lee Johnson argues that the highly regulated prostitution industry in France frustrated its workers, who saw an attractive alternative in California, which had essentially no rules: “The freewheeling world of the Gold Rush must have looked good to women accustomed to the strictures of regulationism, which represented an attempt to stabilize unstable sexual and economic categories among urban women.”97 In California, prostitution could be rather informal and even part-time; a woman could serve as a bartender or a card dealer in addition to selling sex.

France’s staggering economy also provided motivation for an urban woman’s emigration. In Europe, California was spoken of as a golden land where economic prosperity was readily available. French political organizations capitalized on the demand for California travel and organized the distribution of lottery tickets that would pay for all or part of the passage to the Pacific Coast. These tickets were used as a way of pushing out both political undesirables and social pariahs, including prostitutes. It soon became common to see French women at the gambling tables, either serving men or gambling themselves. They developed a reputation for being dominant, aggressive and crafty, challenging the egos of their potential customers. As Johnson notes, “French women put Anglo men’s control of their own resources at risk. This potential loss of control mocked dominant definitions of manhood, in which manly restraint was supposed to coexist in symbiotic relationship with womanly moral sensibilities.”98
Thus, despite the moral hazard of purchasing sex, men still wished to see the qualities that embodied their established conceptions of womanhood. Yet they could not have it both ways, and were often unnerved by this. For the French women, prostitution did not always imply acquiescence, and some were able to become richer than male miners. Prostitutes often grasped the spirit of California just as much as their male contemporaries; they could be as crude and direct as the men, enjoying both the festivities of drink and dance and the pursuit of personal gain. Their relationships not only served the needs of the customers, but also their own; sharp talking, as hard drinking prostitutes eschewed societal constraints on femininity. In this way, prostitutes became empowered in California, challenging the authority that men felt they were entitled to.

Prostitutes came from many different ethnic backgrounds, and were judged by the miners primarily by their race. Many Mexican women, having an easier journey to California than most Americans, responded quickly to the high demand for females. So, too, did a great number of Chilean women, many of whom were part of the landless, wandering rural class in Chile that sought a better life in California. Some were already prostitutes, but for others it was a completely new occupation, as they sought to make a living in whatever way they could. White women had higher status, but were relatively scarce compared to the Chilean, Mexican and Miwok Indian women who dominated the Gold Rush scene. Chinese prostitutes were also common, and were usually controlled by other Chinese immigrants, some of whom became very wealthy in California. This small group would include the legendary Cantonese madam Ah Toy, one of the first Chinese prostitutes in California, who later expanded her business into a vast network of female workers.99
While white men continued to write about the region’s lacking morality and shortage of white women, they were often intrigued by the possibility of having sex with an ethnic woman of perceived lower status. Many miners sought to establish dominance over such women to appease their own sense of masculine authority. In the homosocial world of California, gender roles and social relations were confused, and men often looked to prostitutes to realign their boundaries and prove their masculinity, to themselves if no one else. In contrast to the French women, non-white prostitutes were perceived as having a lack of independence and a willingness to submit to white men. Even if a particular ethnic woman appealed to a miner, marriage was socially scorned, and these relationships were generally limited.

Alfred Doten, a young Northern forty-niner, relished the moral ambiguity of California and began sleeping with a slue of non-white women, none of whom he saw as anywhere near his equal. These relationships gave him confidence in his own capacity to dominate and control, and while he wrote home to a white sweetheart, he enjoyed an empowering sexual awakening in California. In describing his relationship with one of these women he wrote in his diary, “Maria has fell in love with me and wants me for her lover as she is a yellow gal and it would hardly do for me to marry her legally…She is a real good looking girl of fine shape and no doubt a fine bedfellow.” Doten’s efforts to keep up appearances back home while indulging himself in California exposes one of the contradictions of Gold Rush life; while men often spoke of California as a degraded and morally bankrupt place, most found themselves engaging in the activities of which they supposedly disapproved. Even if their desire for California to become “civilized” was sincere, they found it difficult to resist paying for sex, especially when it offered them the illusion of control.
Prostitution embodied what many saw as the great wrong of California as a place of quick fixes and moral emptiness. But prostitution was also a response to a great need for female company, for fun and for escape in a world of men where life was crude and volatile. For the prostitutes themselves, their work often gave them an opportunity to achieve a standard of living they might not have achieved elsewhere. The complicit attitude towards prostitution in California also provided an environment that did not ostracize sex workers, though they were rarely treated with legitimate respect. Many “part-time” prostitutes found ways to subsidize their living by other means, usually through card dealing, bartending, or musical performance. They were also exposed to areas that were flush with gold, and with some luck, they could accumulate a substantial sum for themselves. Since female labor (not just sex) paid a premium, many of these women found a way to profit during the Gold Rush. Life was hard, however, for the majority of prostitutes, especially non-whites. While they had sought a new life in California, most prostitutes, like miners, struggled.

**Gambling**

Gambling, as it had been on the ships to California, was the central leisure activity on Gold Rush soil. *Monte* and *Faro*, the two most popular card games, involved betting against a “bank” controlled by the dealer, and rewarded various combinations of cards. Though these games usually involved more luck than skill, players used various betting strategies to try to beat the bank, and the games proved highly addictive. Professional gamblers emerged in California, and if savvy enough, they could make a living prying gold from the pockets of miners. These games were also the cause of most drunken violence that occurred in California’s bars and dancehalls. Players were
sensitive to being cheated and felt violated when they felt someone had taken their money unfairly. In many ways, gambling was a natural extension of the journey to California, and provided another source of competition in which the outcome required more luck than skill or dedication. And when the new Californians lost money, they were convinced the only option was to keep playing, continuing to test their luck in hopes of a payoff.

During the mid-nineteenth century, American society viewed gambling in increasingly mixed terms. On the one hand, gambling had been traditionally condemned as a harmful moral vice, disconnected from the values of the prudent, hard working American prototype. The practice abandoned discretion, even rationality, in pursuit of an unlikely windfall. It was also addictive, and many feared that gambling would undermine both economic productivity and the cohesiveness of the family unit. Yet gambling did not just persist in nineteenth century society, it thrived, becoming increasingly mainstream as the economic system of the United States evolved. As stock market bets became increasingly popular among the upper and middle classes, many implicitly condoned the practice of speculating on uncertain outcomes and taking risks. Since no labor was involved, increased participation in the stock market, as well as other risky economic practices, such as land and bond speculation, represented a clear break from American economic traditionalism. Though such investors might still condemn gambling that occurred at card tables or informal casinos, the distinction between the “good” of the formal American economy, and the “bad” of the gambling periphery became harder to maintain.

As Ann Fabian argues, gambling represented the spirit of speculative capitalism in its purest form, and it was difficult to simply label gambling as a moral transgression
resembling other forms of sin: “…the split between virtuous speculation and vicious
gambling could never be maintained with absolute precision: gambling contained too
much of capitalist virtue to stand exalted as unalloyed vice.”
Gambling was moving
further into a moral grey-area as the nineteenth century progressed, even where it was
illegal. It also transcended class, and it was not uncommon to find gambling in both
poverty-stricken urban streets and the mansions of elite southern landowners. It
appeared that mid-century Americans were not as concerned with risk-taking behavior
and cared less about the way in which capital was accumulated. As industrial labor and
corporatism grew in magnitude, the everyday laborer was both envious of the existence
of new wealth and intrigued by the possibility of becoming rich without much effort.

Without this shift in attitude towards gambling and risk-taking, the Gold Rush
would have been entirely different. Had gold been discovered half a century earlier, it
might have caused a significant stir, but would not have set off the immense hysteria and
wave of migration that defined the Gold Rush. Because the belief in the “deep morality
of production” was dissolving, gold seeking was generally respected as a fairly reasonable
undertaking for an ambitious male. Though resistance to Gold Fever was strong and
sincere, especially from religious leaders, it could not restrain the powerful forces of
desire and self-interest that defined both the migration to California and the spirit of the
new American capitalism.

The Gold Rush had brought a group of risk-taking migrants into a highly loose
and unregulated environment rich in gold - ideal conditions for gambling. Gold served
as the perfect gaming chip, allowing for vast sums to be wagered without a passing
thought; it was extremely rare to have thousands in cash at a gambling table, yet it was
not uncommon to witness thousands in gold change hands in California. Because wealth
was so immediate and ostensible, it provided the illusion that everyone was becoming wealthy and that a fortune could be achieved with relative ease. Both Enos Christman and Mary Jane Megquier wrote of events in which over twenty thousand dollars exchanged hands in a single game or turn of a card. The numbers were so inconceivable that it was almost impossible not to view California as an exceptional place, one that transcended the traditional means of obtaining status, wealth and well-being.

Even if the new Californians had not been inclined towards games of chance, the options for leisure activity were very limited, and gambling provided a continual source of entertainment. Without women to court or social gatherings to attend, miners relied on gambling to pass the time. Gambling was also not limited to cards, and branched out into other areas that presented themselves. Enos Christman witnessed a great gambling event in San Francisco, in which men placed bets on a fight between a grizzly bear and a wild bull. Gambling houses soon became some of the largest commercial operations in California; while casual games could be found everywhere, these establishments proved a considerable lure for the working miner. These sites were social magnets that brought Californians together in the spirit of a good time, offering a certain coziness compared to the tents of mining camps. In his journal, Christman wrote, “The gambling saloon is the most comfortable place[the miners] can find, hence they resort to it, and go on step by step until they lose their money as fast as they can make it.” Gambling echoed the underlying spirit that motivated the Gold Rush, and as long as the rush thrived in California, there were plenty of games to be found.

To those who remained home, stories of reckless gambling and casual exchanges of wild sums provided enormous entertainment. Such descriptions contributed to the perception of California as a nearly alternate reality, where traditional values that guided
work, society and everyday life did not apply. During the post-frontier era of the 1870s and 1880s, fiction writers such as Mark Twain and Bret Harte, relied on gambling to engage their readers in depictions of the Gold Rush. Professional gamblers were ideal protagonists for many of these tales: they were bold, non-conforming outlaws, yet unthreatening enough to encourage sympathetic identification. Gamblers eschewed risk aversion, moderation and traditionalism, yet they were not perceived as social perverts lacking any moral sensibility, as they might have been in earlier years. Especially in the work of Bret Harte, fictitious gamblers often had strong redemptive qualities despite their unconventional lifestyle. Gambling thus became an important component of Gold Rush mythology, both as the era unfolded and after its end.

**Alcohol**

While food and mining supplies were pricy and relatively scarce, liquor was shipped to California in great supply and often inexpensive. Enos Christman wrote in his journal that, “champagne and other liquors [were] selling for a little more than one-half what they can be bought for at home.” He described the festivities surrounding a Sunday, a day usually equated with heavy drinking: “Every kind of business, except mining, appears brisker on Sunday than any other time and gambling and drinking houses are better patronized than on any other day.” The role of the Sabbath was yet another example of the Gold Rush warping traditional American living standards; going to church on Sundays had been replaced by drinking in bars, and no one seemed to mind. Even for Christman, who read his Bible frequently and was not much of a drinker, alcohol was simply accepted as a staple of Gold Rush life.
Drinking, like gambling, was a sin condoned to a certain extent by American society, and more even more so within lawless California. Like gambling, alcohol had fervent opponents in the United States, but their voices were distant in California. The lack of restraining influences opened up the floodgates for excess. Beer, wine, champagne and liquors of all kind were readily available, and viewed as complementary to the mining lifestyle. Drunken miners gambling, dancing, and socializing at a town bar were a common sight. So, too, was the often excessive drinking in mining camps. To not drink was simply to move against the grain in California; very few temperance advocates were likely Gold Rush participants, and booze was soon accepted as a staple of California’s euphoric wildness. As Franklin Buck wrote, “In this city everyone drinks, some more and some less.”

Those with authority, such as haphazard sheriffs and judges, also often drank heavily in the early days of the Gold Rush. Elisha Crosby wrote about a presiding officer of a town in 1849, who charged a fine of six to twelve bottles of ale for any minor crime committed by the residents: “The penalty was paid on the spot and the ale was brought in and drank by the court and its friends.” Such justice embodied the spirit of the early Gold Rush, which was defined by relaxed standards of morals and decency. Even as the upper crust of Gold Rush society sought to set standards for law and order in California, drinking was common, and often done in excess. Crosby described many of the members of the first California state legislature as “sterling men,” but noted that others were clearly drunks. He wrote anecdotally one of these men in his memoir: “He was a man of some fortune and he had established just out of the Legislative Hall a place where he kept a supply of whisky and every chance he got he would say, ‘Well boys, let’s
go and take a thousand drinks.” Crosby tended to disapprove of such indulgence, but was forced to accept it as part of life in California.

Even Crosby, who worked to promote stability in California, was not immune to such forms of enjoyment. He attended San Francisco parties in which “Champagne was bountifully supplied as well as everything else that was nice.” The “everything else” included food, dance, and women who hosted the gathering, some of whom were prostitutes. Crosby remarked that “it was astonishing to see the class of men gather there - executive, legislative, judicial commercial, ministerial, all of what are commonly considered the upper class of society.” And although he described the behavior of some of these men as improper, he made excuses for it: “The attraction of the female sex was somewhat a matter of circumstances and surroundings, where men were deprived of intercourse with females they gradually lost their sense of propriety and their earlier appreciation of refined and educated females.” While Crosby’s mission was to allow California to function like any other state in the Union, he viewed the circumstances of early Gold Rush California as highly unique and worthy of certain moral flexibility.

Alcohol consumption also represented escape from the adversity of mining and the difficulties that consumed the everyday miner. Drinking was a welcome cap to a hard day of labor, and a temporary relief from the grueling mines. Miners drank to escape feelings of longing and doubt as they considered the lives they had left behind and wondered if they would ever see home again. The California journey had represented new beginnings, but many found themselves craving old comforts, and had no means to reverse their decision. During the cold months of the rainy season, drinking was often the only available source of warmth or entertainment. Many miners, such as Jean-Nicolas Perlot, bought alcohol in bulk to alleviate the difficulties of crude
living conditions and to keep spirits high in dire circumstances. The heavy drinking in Gold Rush California eliminated many dull moments and contributed to the territory’s charisma, yet it reflected the conditions of insecurity and longing that the Gold Rush produced. Thus, alcohol revealed both California’s levity and its sorrow.

Prostitution, gambling and drinking were of course not exclusively California endeavors, and occurred in excess elsewhere; especially in urban areas of the United States, brothels, bars and gambling establishments were not particularly hard to find, even tacitly accepted by a considerable portion of society. Vice did not make California unique, but the nature and extent of such behavior did. The lack of regulation in California allowed morally ambiguous establishments to materialize without significant opposition. And as much of the new population either participated or did not mind such activities, vice became much more visible in Gold Rush California. Without families or community leaders to catch them in the act, Californians did not have to conceal their desires. The standards of California were different, and newcomers caught on quickly. The Gold Rush also lent itself to particular forms of vice due to specific circumstances. Aside from lacking oversight, prostitution sought to alleviate the scarcity of sexual partners; drinking helped to reduce the stresses of mining; and gambling allowed smaller gold rushes to take form using cards instead of shovels. The Gold Rush promoted excess in all three of these activities, and they often went hand in hand. Although the vices were not new, they took on new life in California.

Theft

Theft was also a common occurrence in California, given the distressed circumstances that the Gold Rush often provoked. During a desperate winter, Jean
Nicolas Perlot and a partner’s makeshift cabin was raided by thieves. Fortunately, their cashbox, containing all their gold from the previous mining season, remained undiscovered. Extra steps were taken to ensure that valuables were hidden and someone held watch whenever possible. Clever methods were employed for protection: “…then, by means of a thread tied at one end to a plank adroitly hidden under the sill of the door, at the other to the trigger of a revolver, we took our precautions against our friends the thieves.” Thievery occurred frequently in virtually every area where mining was established. Desperation motivated theft, and in destitute conditions, stealing was a relatively easy way to stay afloat. Since initially no banks existed, miners were forced to hide their earning and hope they would go undiscovered. As mining was usually mobile and temporary, many Californians with gold were hesitant to invest in assets, such as land, property or a home. Thus, gold, if not gambled, was hoarded and in constant danger of theft.

No legitimate force existed to enforce the rules of California mining, which were informal codes of conduct rather than actual law. Local militias occasionally had the capacity to discourage theft, but in sparsely populated mining areas, there was little cohesion in the effort to fight thieves. The great amount of crime revealed the inadequacy of law and regulation in early California. Even as efforts developed to create legitimate rule of law, most of the Gold Rush years are characterized by loose, disorganized, or irrelevant regulation. Greed and self-interest trumped the moderating influences of bureaucratic or legal systems. The psychology that had created the frenzy of the Gold Rush also had implications for the lawlessness of California. Conventional values of diligence and hard work had been replaced by a feverish desire for wealth that would materialize quickly and with relative ease; thieves displayed the kind of reckless
opportunism that had provided the foundation for California migration. And because mining was often informal, it lacked the ethics of traditional business practices. If a thief stole from a miner who had not registered a claim, the result was somewhat ambiguous, and legality was extremely vague. Despite mining codes, without legal rights, ownership became an indistinct concept.

As theft became increasingly problematic, California miners looked for someone to blame, and ethnic minorities became common scapegoats. The abundance of gold had made California diverse but not tolerant, setting the stage for intense waves of racialized violence. Since thieves were often elusive and mysterious, they came to represent another concern for the American miners: the undesired influence of foreign presence. For those who believed American citizens were entitled to California gold, the mere existence of foreigners in the mines was disturbing, and they were further enraged when they suspected that non-Americans were stealing from white American miners. When theft occurred, blame was usually placed on foreigners, primarily Mexicans, whom most white gold-seekers came to fear and despise.

Clashes between whites and Mexicans provided the foundation for the legend of Joaquin Murrieta, a Mexican thief who supposedly terrorized American mining camps throughout California. Accounts of the famous bandit are so varied and often contradictory that it is difficult to determine whether or not he actually existed, but he became a symbol of the menace that Mexicans came to represent during the Gold Rush. Though theft was perpetrated by both Americans and foreigners who faced desperation, the easiest option usually involved blaming the “unknown” who operated in relatively close quarters. While the lawlessness that existed during this period is portrayed nostalgically in Gold Rush myths, it created a bitter and tense environment in
many mining camps. On top of the sheer difficulties of gold mining, miners often feared theft and the threat of a foreign presence that they came to resent.

**Violence, Vigilantes and Divisions of Race**

Most California towns had some loose form of law enforcement or a court system which most of the time simply gave way to mob rule. Both Franklin Buck and Enos Christman expressed their discomfort with such systems, which were usually eager to punish and hesitant to acquit. In a letter, Buck described an event in which an Irishman was arrested for murder, and then fell victim to the angry whims of a mob:

> …the sovereign people: i.e. a mob, held a meeting and resolved to take him…it was decided that it would save time and money and be altogether better to try him and hang him right off…I say Heaven preserve me from falling into the hands of an excited people. It is a hard tribunal and if circumstances are against you, however innocent you may be, you stand no chance. Give me a dungeon in the Tombs and all the police in New York first.111

The brutally quick justice system was unnerving for Buck, who soon found that in California, “A man’s life is but little thought of.” This impromptu quality of vigilante justice contributed to the freewheeling reputation of Gold Rush California, yet mobs were not composed of professional gamblers or outlaws; usually, the vigilantes were ordinary citizens who feared the unknown.

Even Enos Christman, who was wary of the lack of judiciousness in mob rule, recognized the necessity of vigilante organization in California. He noted, “In almost every camp and city in the country, the most respectable portion of the community have formed what are called ‘Vigilante Committees’ which appoint officers, organize courts, catch rascals, try them, and when found guilty, punish them by whipping, banishing or hanging.”112 Christman believed that some form of organization was necessary in order to protect small California communities demoralized by theft and murder. Vigilante
committees provided at least some form of protection: “Frightful disorders prevail, for California has been scourged by as desperate bands of villains as the whole world could produce. For a long time they have preyed upon us, and our laws, on account of their loose administration and many technicalities, have been found inadequate to the protection of life and property.” This protection, of course, came at a cost, especially to those unfortunate enough to run up against an angry California mob. Justice was imperfect, and the majority of arrests targeted non-Americans. Elisha Crosby noted that participants in “Vigilante Committees” were nicknamed “Hounds,” and were effectively anti-foreigner bands justified as regulators. As blame was mostly attributed to foreigners, “justice” often translated into violence against ethnic minorities.

The summer of 1848 had allowed for relatively peaceful coexistence of Chilean, Indian, Mexican and American miners, but the subsequent wave of American migrants destroyed California’s placidity and laid the foundation for ethnic conflict. California, to an extent, had leveled the economic playing field, and unlike other sectors of the American economy, a non-white could easily make more than a white American on a given day. Foreigners typically shouldered the blame, not just for the disappearance of items, but also for lack of American success in the mines; their presence was felt everywhere, and this gave way to the perception that foreigners were “stealing” American wealth. The frustration of white miners was often channeled into a strong distrust of non-white, non-Americans. Anti-foreigner campaigns soon developed in California in one form or another, ranging from mob violence and intimidation to official policy initiatives directed against non-Americans.

The Gold Rush created a hyper-masculine, immensely competitive environment in California, which generated conflict in many forms. Disagreement over claims,
resentment of success, and general restlessness contributed to these tensions, and
violence often resulted. Violence was not always confined to ethnic or racialized attacks;
white miners often fought amongst themselves, especially when alcohol was involved.
Yet the roots of the most extreme forms of aggression lay deeper than the standard
drunken brawl, as most of the killing in California pitted whites against non-whites,
mostly Americans against Mexicans, Chileans and Indians. For the majority of American
miners, non-Americans on California soil generated a severe sense of distrust. For
European miners such as Jean Nicolas Perlot, prejudice and discrimination was common
obstacle, and they remained wary in the presence of Americans. Against Chinese miners,
discrimination was even more severe, as the Chinese found themselves at the mercy of
vicious taxation and economic control. But most of the bloodshed, for different
reasons, involved Americans, Chileans, Mexicans and Indians.

Mexicans

Few whites made the distinction between Mexican and Chilean miners, often
using the category of “Mexican” to define all Californians of Spanish-Indian origin.
They were also blind to the class distinctions among Mexicans and Chileans; a wealthy
Chilean landowner had no more say than a landless Mexican, for both were non-white
foreigners “taking” American gold. The resentment of Mexicans grew out of a number
of critical developments. The Mexican War had been an ideological as well as territorial
victory for the United States, providing Americans with a sense of ownership over the
entirety of North America and its resources. California represented the new
opportunities for American wealth, and when Mexican miners began to dig up gold,
Americans were taken aback. These feelings were exacerbated when many Mexican
miners, who had experience in both silver and gold mining, had greater success than the Americans in the mines.

The Mexican War had supposedly established the superiority of Americans over their Mexican neighbors, yet the events of the Gold Rush did not follow this myth. Instead of dominating the Mexicans, Americans felt threatened by them, and sought to reestablish their “right” to California. Due to their relatively large presence and general success, Mexican miners represented a powerful threat to the masculinity of American miners, who viewed mining yields as a validation of manhood. Gold represented power, status and the ability to provide for a family, and Mexican miners were regarded as a direct threat to such ambitions. Racial stereotypes also contributed to this perceived danger; while other ethnic groups in California were perceived as soft or feminine, Mexicans were viewed as thieving and violent, and the most significant obstacle to white American primacy.

For Enos Christman, California provided the shock of a violent and vindictive world in which justice was equated with vengeance. Incidents between Mexicans and Americans became platforms for retaliation against one group or the other, even if the victims had nothing to do with the original transgressions. Christman describes one of these events in his journal, revealing how hostile incidents could extreme tension to an entire community:

This section of the country has been infested by numerous bands of Mexican guerillas, and life and property have been very insecure…The whole country became alarmed. Public meetings were held, and organized parties raised to ferret out and bring justice the authors of these horrid crimes…

Among the persons murdered was one named Miller…He and his partner kept a public house on the road between this and Stockton. One evening about bedtime, seven Mexicans came in and professed to be friends. After taking a drink and buying a sword, one of them made a pass with it at the man behind the counter. This was thought to be a joke and so passed off. Soon after, however, another pass was made and this time the man was stabbed through the right breast. A scuffle then ensued between the two Americans and seven Mexicans in which one of the former was killed and the other badly wounded. During the affray an American teamster
rushed out and shot one of the Mexicans through the head, killing him instantly…The Mexicans plundered the tent and left the two men for dead. 116

The Americans in the region took the attack personally, and all Mexicans were quickly seen as potential murderers. They carried guns for protection, and toyed with idea that all Mexican inhabitants should be removed from the area:

No one dared to travel without being armed to the teeth….The miners along the lone hillside took turns and kept watch during the silent hours of the night. A violent feeling of hostility existed between the Americans and Mexicans. Since the work of murder continued without the capture of the perpetrators, the Americans threatened to issue an edict compelling every Mexican to leave the country. 117

Christman saw firsthand the panic that gripped Americans in California as they feuded with Mexicans, creating a deeply precarious and unsettling environment.

Christman also had to confront the politics of group fear in his community. He was uneasy about the removal of Mexicans from the area, yet acknowledged that support for this action was strong: “It would be making the innocent suffer with the guilty, yet the measure had many advocates.” Eventually, the ordinance passed in the town, and Christman pitied the Mexicans who were forced to leave:

Two hundred Mexicans with their pack animals marched through this place on their return home, poor and dispirited. They had come here, many of them with their families, for the purpose of becoming good citizens and settling in the country.118

Due to the lack of centralized authority, Gold Rush laws were community-specific and enacted via loose, quasi-democratic systems. Yet even when town meetings and voting were involved, the lack of official protocol enabled anger to trump forethought, allowing rash measures to gain strong support. In the context of Mexican-American conflict, justice was mostly one sided; Christman noted that shortly after the ordinance was passed, “one American shot another (Mexican) in the street and the occurrence was not noticed as much as a dog fight at home.”119 While the majority of miners, both Mexican and American, were not prone to hostility, violent incidents quickly pit the groups
against one another. Unfortunately, retaliatory measures usually affected those who had no intention of getting involved.

**Indians**

The California Indians also represented an obstacle to American supremacy in Gold Rush California. While they were generally not viewed as competitors for gold as Chileans and Mexicans were, hostile Indians were regarded as a significant threat to the possessions and lives of Americans. Even peaceable Indians stood in the way of American occupation of the most desirable land, and the new Californians soon began to drive out the natives by treaty or force. Tensions grew between whites and natives, and attacks were initiated on both sides. Although the California Indians were very diverse, few white miners paid attention to the distinctions between tribes; it was common for retaliation against an Indian attack to be carried out against the wrong tribe altogether.

Pushed out of fertile California land and into the mountains, many natives became ragged, starving and desperate. In response, Indian raids often targeted American camps, involving both theft and bloodshed. Yet when one white man died, entire tribes paid the price. One forty-niner described his role in a retaliatory attack against a group of Indians, who were thought to have killed two Americans, but turned out to be entirely innocent:

> The Indians were utterly defenseless; but their pitiable plight did not in the least restrain our valorous men from rushing down on the huts, plundering them of everything that was deemed of any value, and then putting the rest to torch. In ransacking the lodges, a half-grown boy was found hidden away, and was dragged out. The little fellow begged piteously for his life; but he was coolly shot down, notwithstanding. It turned out ultimately that these Indians had no thought of attacking the whites; that they had no connection with the Eel River murders; and that the scare over the anticipated war of extermination was based on the veriest moonshine.\(^{120}\)
Indian life was given little thought, and as their numbers dwindled in California, their extinction was regarded as inevitable and in keeping with the notion of American destiny in California.

In 1851, Congress passed the Indian Appropriations Act as a response to the growing scale of western settlement. The bill outlined the establishment of Indian reservations, which restricted California Indians to areas protected and preserved by the United States government. Jean Nicolas Perlot discussed these negotiations and their effectiveness in his journal:

> By this treaty, the United States undertook to feed the Indians for three years; to get them the necessary cattle, if they wanted to raise them; to furnish them tools, if they wanted to work; on the condition that they would remain, during this time in what were called reservations...Most of the surrounding tribes having accepted this treaty, we found ourselves almost rid of the Indians.¹²¹

Negotiations were often carried out between tribal leaders and white representatives, and native tribes reacted differently to these efforts. Certain tribes were desperate, eagerly accepting the offer of protection and food provided by the reservation agreements; others responded with hostility, leading to increased spurts of violence in various regions. The efforts, however, were effective, and Indians became increasingly scarce in the mining regions. Initially, reservation land was relatively substantial though the areas were less than desirable. As American settlement increased, however, both the resources and the size of the reservations dwindled significantly.

After the Indian Appropriations Act, the mistreatment of Indians in mining areas, now implicitly condoned by the government, became even more common. Perlot cited a sheriff’s decree in Mariposa County that was enacted in response to increased Indian hostility, allowing for the murder of any Indian upon sight:

> ‘Whereas the Indian has openly made war on the miners and against all kinds of property, without their being in any way able to deliver the malefactors to justice: I pronounce the Indian disallowed. Consequently, everyone is permitted to kill the Indians he encounters anywhere in
the county of Mariposa, on the sole condition of burying them and of letting the sheriff know where and how many of them he has killed."\textsuperscript{122}

As it was impossible for the Americans to distinguish the “bad” Indians from the “good,” displacement and extermination were believed to be the only solutions for preventing further Indian attacks. Following the Indian Appropriations Act, Indians not confined to reservations could be declared as vagabonds and even sold into slavery. Though California was a “Free State,” it was not uncommon for starving Indians, especially children, to be subjected to indentured servitude or some form of informal slavery. In addition to violence and starvation, disease ravaged California’s native population; twenty years after the first rush of 1849, approximately 120,000 natives had been wiped out, nearly eighty percent of the entire Indian population.\textsuperscript{123} While the Gold Rush represented a path toward new beginnings for the American middle class, it marked the beginning of a severe erosion of Indian presence in California.

**Chinese**

The most distinguishable among the new Gold Rush immigrants were the Chinese, who steadily poured into California after 1849. Prior to the Gold Rush, fewer than one hundred Chinese laborers lived in the territory, but this number would swell to well over a hundred thousand by the mid 1870s. Chinese presence in California initially caused a certain degree of amusement, but this quickly gave way to antagonism in the mining regions. As Mark Kanazawa suggests, Americans’ dislike of the Chinese was rather straightforward: “…antipathy toward the Chinese was driven by the simple fact that foreign miners competed with native miners for the scarce gold, thus lowering their productivity.”\textsuperscript{124} Although Americans were generally not as threatened by the Chinese as they were by Mexican miners, the mere presence of Chinese gold-seekers invigorated an
intense bitterness that loomed over the fate of the Chinese. Yet violence between Chinese and American miners was rare, and they often avoided each other. Still, significant action was taken to ensure that Chinese prosperity in California would be extremely difficult.

Due to immense linguistic and cultural barriers, as well the strong need for ethnic solidarity, the Chinese usually kept to themselves in large camps. Many were poor and lacked the capital to mine in methods other than panning, even as mining technology progressed. The Chinese often mined claims that had already been abandoned, and were generally wary of infringing on American mining territory. There were some exceptions to Chinese poverty, as a handful of Chinese miners, business owners, and prostitutes accumulated significant wealth in California. For the most part, however, the Chinese fared worse than whites and Mexicans, remaining in concentrated, impoverished camps. Although the Chinese did not embody fierce mining competition, mistreatment of the Chinese could still be severe, as the Americans had come to resent any non-American on California soil.

In response to the strong xenophobia that grew in California, a Foreign Miner’s Tax was established in 1850, requiring all foreign miners to pay twenty dollars a month in order to acquire a mining license. Its hefty sum was sporadically collected, but the controversial tax heightened tensions between American and foreign miners. In areas where race relations were tense, especially in moderately rich gold regions, the tax was enforced as a way of overpowering foreigners and forcing them to leave. The tax was designed as a revenue generator for the sparse new California state budget, yet it raised no more than $34,000 in 1850, significantly less than was anticipated. Despite the loose collection efforts, the tax reinforced anti-foreign rhetoric in California, assuring
American miners of their entitlement to California and its resources. The tax also laid a foundation for justifying xenophobic violence in California, as the presence of foreigners was now strongly discouraged by law.

The Foreign Miner’s Tax was repealed the following year, but reintroduced in 1852. The restructured tax required a fee of three dollars a month, a significant reduction, but collection was now expanded and better organized. Greater incentives to tax collectors were also provided, allowing them to keep nearly half of all collected revenues. Although the new tax did not officially target the Chinese, they were its most consistent victims; a tax collector could simply find a Chinese camp and be rewarded with a taxpayer base that was generally willing to pay. The tax could even be collected twice or more in a month, as language barriers prevented many Chinese from understanding the specifics of the law. Chinese camps, usually larger than those of Mexicans or Europeans, often stood out in particular communities. They were also perceived to present less of a retaliatory threat against tax collection. Though the updated tax was relatively small, it proved an immense financial burden on the struggling Chinese, who continued to live in deprived conditions.

The new Foreign Miner’s Tax was a powerful fiscal success, accounting for between ten and twenty-five percent of total California state revenue between 1853 and 1864. Other legislation took aim at the Chinese with greater specificity; the *commutation tax* required vessels to post a $500 bond for each incoming foreigner to California, and the *capitation tax* charged ships bringing “incompetent” foreigners to the West Coast. Such taxes fell disproportionately on the Chinese, who unlike most other foreign groups, continued to immigrate steadily into California throughout the 1850s. Due to the success of such taxes, few efforts were made to remove Chinese immigrants from
California, as they provided a valuable source of revenue. The Chinese were soon essential to the health of the California budget; in 1855, the Altan Californian declared, “Were it not for the taxes paid by the Chinese, the credit of nearly every mining county would now be verging on bankruptcy.” Although most discriminatory practices against the Chinese were non-violent, they were severe and generally successful in limiting upward Chinese mobility in California. Still, the Chinese would retain a significant presence in California, contributing to labor-intensive projects such as the Transcontinental Railroad, often working in grueling conditions for below market wage.

The Chinese had pursued the same California dream as Mexicans, Europeans and Americans, in which the drudgeries of an old life would be abandoned for a new experience of prosperity and self-determination. Yet while the Gold Rush inspired such dreams, most of them went unrealized, as the impoverished Chinese, who often traveled and sacrificed the most to get to California, found reality extremely harsh. In addition to the severe difficulties of gold mining, the Chinese were dispirited by extreme taxation and mistreatment on the part of the Americans. They were also angered by the lack of distinction made between Chinese and other races. A New York Times article in 1855 highlights this as the writer cites a Chinese plea for respect in California:

They plead that Emperors have always treated Europeans equally well as citizens. They thought they were promised a reciprocity of politeness. (Citing a Chinese miner) “But of late days your honorable people have established a new practice. They have come to the conclusion that we Chinese are the same as Indians and Negroes, and your courts will not let us bear witness….”

The Chinese argued for recognition of racial complexity, maintaining a distinct sense of difference and superiority to Indians and blacks, yet this provided them with little leverage in California. Some whites did however, sympathize with the Chinese to a greater extent than Indians or Mexicans; the Chinese were more exotic, and some Americans were intrigued by the culture and history of the Far East. This included Bret
Harte, who called attention to the California Chinese in his short story *Wan Lee: the Pagan*, which lamented white cruelty directed towards the Chinese. Yet for American miners in Gold Rush California, the Chinese ultimately represented more foreign infringement on American wealth, and were treated with disrespect and hostility.

“Civilizing” California

The wildness of Gold Rush California did not last forever. Soon after the initial wave of immigration in 1849, the gears were set in motion to establish government and rule of law in California. Greater amenities also became available, a welcome development for most miners. As economic development continued to boom in California, life became more convenient and increasingly similar to the world American emigrants had left behind. While greater development infringed on the Eden-like imagination of California, it was well-received by most of those who occupied the region. In the summer of 1850, just one year after his arrival, Enos Christman could reflect on the immense changes that had occurred in California:

“One who has not been in California can hardly credit the changes that take place here in a very short period of time. But one short year ago I was crossing the barren plains on foot. The wandering gold hunter in traversing our mountains and desert then had to carry everything he required with him, his blanket, his provisions, his frying-pan and his tea-kettle. He would often travel a whole day in some parts of the country without coming to a single habitation where a cup of tea could be procured...Now everything is different. No canteen is necessary. You need not even carry your blankets, for all along the roads trading tents and good houses are erected, where travelers can be accommodated with good meals as well as a good clean bed.”

Life in the new territory became easier, and though the California bubble was still young, the region was already imagined as a New York of the West.

Elisha Crosby became increasingly invested in the development of California and its acceptance into the Union. In addition to providing legal services at Sutter’s Fort and
other areas, Crosby was determined to become an entrepreneur and a property owner. Due to his early arrival, relative wealth, and extensive business connections, Crosby found this objective relatively easy, and began to buy land. Soon after his arrival, he formed a partnership with three other speculators and purchased eighteen hundred acres of land on the east bank of the Sacramento River. But his aim was not just to speculate, but also to develop, and by the fall of 1849 the land had become a legitimate town, boasting over six hundred residents. Determined to learn as much as he could about California, he traveled throughout the region, visiting mining camps and examining mining techniques. Though he would not mine himself, the world of California fascinated him and he believed in its enormous potential for growth.

Crosby wanted California to become civilized, with laws and a legitimate voice in the U.S. political system. Though California would continue to be seen as a reckless and lawless region for years to come, efforts to establish government and law materialized rather quickly. In September of 1849, General Bennett Riley, the military governor of California, held a convention in Monterey to address such concerns. He assigned delegates to certain districts and called on them to help form the basis of a state government. Crosby, as one of the delegates, experienced both the optimism that the new development inspired and the frustration that the difficulties ahead would cause.

The most contentious issue in establishing the state government concerned California’s admission as a Slave or Free State. This would become a raging source of debate throughout the United States during the 1850s, as the nation attempted to incorporate vast new territories into an intensely divided nation. These hardening divisions surfaced during the early efforts to establish California’s statehood. Both Northerners and Southerners occupied California, and great tension existed on both
sides. But a large number of delegates, including Crosby, sought compromise so that business in California would not be hindered by an ideological battle.

Despite his Northern roots, Crosby expressed his support for electing a senator from the South who was an ardent defender of slavery:

I was induced to vote for him as U.S. Senator because he was known as an extreme Southern man and unless we sent some such man as that to Congress we had no chance of being admitted as a State…the admission of California to the Union was paramount to every other consideration.132

Like his contemporary, Senator Henry Clay from Kentucky, Crosby did not wish to resolve the issue of slavery or commit to one side of the debate. Instead, he wished to appease both sides long enough to allow business and economic development to continue in California. Crosby had visions of a grand economy of the West and a transcontinental railroad that would increase mobility of people and goods - an expansionist effort that would be beneficial to all. Though the issue of slavery would continue to be hotly contested, most of the political figures in California were eager to reach a compromise.

Crosby did find reasons to be hopeful at the first convention in Monterey. A fixed boundary was proposed for the state, which included land west of the Sierra Nevada Mountains to the Pacific Coast. The new boundary would shrink California to a more manageable size, though it would become one of the largest states in the Union, second only to Texas. Californios were present at the convention, and by Crosby’s accounts, were cordial and helpful towards the Americans, meaning they had accepted American rule as unavoidable: “recognizing the fact that the American occupation was inevitable, the submitted with what grace they could.”133 Crosby was also encouraged by the efforts to draft a state constitution and proposals for accruing state revenue, such as
taxation on foreign miners. After the first convention, he saw that California’s statehood was indeed on the horizon.

Without a formal government or legal system, California was vulnerable; as Crosby put it, “a territorial government would furnish us very little protection.” While much of the focus on California had been spawned by its perceived inimitability, Crosby saw in California the potential to function simply as any other state. The early miners did not give much thought to the territory as an official state, or even as land that had permanent significance other than its gold supply. But Crosby carefully considered California’s future and was committed to its organization and stabilization. He realized only this result could provide the legitimate basis for future growth in California: “… we were absolutely in a state of chaos, society was entirely unorganized, and the recognition of our status as a state with a state government seemed to be the one essential thing to give us a foundation to start upon.”

Crosby began working locally, printing and distributing both campaign literature and the proposed State Constitution. He committed nearly two thousand dollars of his own money to the process, for which he claimed he never received adequate reimbursement. To Crosby’s surprise, two anti-slavery candidates were elected to occupy California’s senate seats and proposed that California be admitted as a Free State. The reason for this decision was not driven as much by racial views as it was by practical concerns for the miners; slavery created an unfair advantage for slave-owning miners, causing most to oppose slave systems in California. The State Constitution was presented to Congress in March and hotly debated for months as political leaders in the States struggled to find a compromise for newly acquired territories. But on September
9, 1850, California was officially admitted as the thirty-first state in the Union. And as part of the Compromise of 1850, it would be a Free State.\textsuperscript{137}

Although such issues may not have concerned the miners during the early stages of the Gold Rush, there was great interest in the political developments leading up to California’s acceptance into the Union. Campaign and voting information, distributed by political initiators such as Crosby, informed the public of local elections and events, in which many were eager to participate. The establishment of local officials such as sheriffs and town clerks had become matter of great importance to those who sought greater stability in wild California. Christman described a broad interest in politics, both before and after the territory became a state, great enough that even non-residents were encouraged to vote:

\[
\text{Everybody was invited to vote, whether residents or not. Some of the persons who are interested in the success of the city even went down to the river and invited some boatmen who were passing by to come up to the polls and vote. At first they refused, but being insisted upon, they stated they were citizens of the world and not of any particular place, therefore they might as well vote here as anywhere.}\textsuperscript{138}
\]

Though the informality and general disorganization of the voting process was expected in California, the desire to put in political leadership and establish a functional society was a significant development in the region. This strong interest reflected the extent to which California was beginning to be seen as a place to live, not simply to mine.

Political developments allowed many newcomers to understand themselves as “Californians” for the first time, sharing a sense of collective identity with other Americans who inhabited the region. This implied a degree of exclusiveness, as non-whites and natives were kept out of political processes, but it represented a recognition of unity among the American emigrants. The Gold Rush had initiated a competitive free-for-all, but California settlement eventually brought more restraining influences.
Though many had rashly rushed to the goldfields, new Californians soon had to come to terms with the enormity of their commitment. The journey home was long and costly, and if a fortune had not yet been found, returning east was an admission of failure. Many miners realized that their stay in California would be longer than they had imagined, perhaps even permanent. This allowed for political developments to both garner interest and hold actual merit in Gold Rush California. When news of California’s admission as a state reached San Francisco in October of 1850, the city burst into celebration; the American newcomers had become attached to California, and its entry into the Union reassured them that the significance of the West had been recognized by the United States government.

California’s acceptance as a state was also welcomed as a sign of greater stability for everyday life. The rough and uncouth qualities of Gold Rush living gave way to a great longing, not just for women, but for society and material development. As Christman rejoiced in better opportunities for accommodation and “a good clean bed,” many others celebrated the development of California and its growing coherence. By 1853, Franklin Buck was settling down in a small town in the Northern Mining Regions, and relatively satisfied with the town’s growing stability: “Our Court House and jail are finished and the morals of the place visibly improving.”139 In a letter to his sister, however, he wrote with a twinge of sadness that the freshness and excitement of California had dissipated: “…the Indians and the romance of traveling have disappeared.”140 The end of the romance, for Buck, signified the necessity of settling down and establishing a meaningful life as a California citizen.

By 1860, Buck’s town contained children, small schools, and nearly equal gender distribution. Buck had married, and wrote, “This place is getting so civilized that really I
have nothing to write. We are getting settled down like a New England village.”

Though Buck would later complain of boredom during these post-Gold Rush years, he generally welcomed the progress that had moved California along. Development tamed the wild society, and although some had enjoyed the old ways, the American Californians generally welcomed greater civility and material comforts.

**End of the Rush**

Though there is no definitive endpoint for the California Gold Rush, it is clear the qualities that had defined it were evaporating as the 1850s progressed. The Gold Rush had grown into an immense bubble of speculation, to which individuals and families had committed their lives. But after the mining summer of 1849, it became apparent that the gold supply was not inexhaustible, and even if it were, it was not nearly as accessible as was imagined. The experience of the forty-niners curbed their own expectations and those back home, where letters and newspapers became increasingly skeptical when reporting on the Gold Rush. But California still offered opportunity, migrants continued to arrive in California after the initial wave of 1849. The spirit that fueled the Gold Rush, however, dissipated rather quickly.

The availability of surface gold continued to decline, and by 1851, it was extremely difficult to find a well-paying, independently owned claim. Early Gold Rush mining techniques such as panning and rocking were soon rendered inadequate. It also became increasingly difficult for small companies to survive, as larger mining conglomerates began to dominate the business. This was due in part to new mining innovations, which allowed for significant gold accumulation but required large amounts of labor and investment. *Quartz mining*, for example, was a highly sophisticated method
of mining that grew in popularity after 1850. Rocks were mined out of the ground through the use of mining shafts, mechanically crushed to produce stone dust, and then mixed with mercury to separate gold dust from stone. Wealthy financiers outside of California often backed these operations and offered steady wage labor to Californian workers. Hydraulic mining, introduced to California in 1853, became another powerful, large-scale mining method that replaced smaller operations. It required the use of strong, pressurized hoses to shoot large streams of water at rocky hillsides, washing dirt and rock into large gravel heaps, which gold was then separated out of. Like quartz mining, the hydraulic method required more capital and an available pool of wage labor.

For the everyday miner, these new jobs provided the stability of a steady wage and were greatly appreciated as when finding gold became increasingly difficult. But wage-based mining eliminated the opportunities for individual entrepreneurship which had defined the ethos of the Gold Rush. Escape from wage labor and the pursuit of financial independence had brought travelers to California, but the modernization of mining had turned gold-seeking into a capital intensive, corporately controlled business, and small mining groups were forced to consolidate. Due in part to new mining technology, gold exports from California jumped from approximately $45 million in 1852 to over $56 million in 1853, yet the Gold Rush as a migratory whirlwind was diminishing in its magnitude and scope. While immigrants still ventured to California, the journey was generally initiated by those who were more realistic and had sacrificed less. Lofty ideals were no longer projected onto California as they once were.

There are a number of lenses through which to evaluate the Gold Rush’s demise. The increased “civilization” of California began to reign in the ruggedness that had served as a representative quality of Gold Rush living. It could be argued that
California’s admission into the Union marked the end of the Gold Rush, as it brought California under the same standards as the rest of the United States. This began California’s transition from a free-for-all territory to an organized state. The end of 1849, a year that could never have matched its overwhelming expectations, could also be seen as an endpoint. The Gold Rush was driven by immense optimism, and once the thorny realities of California living set in, it became difficult to view California in the same redeeming light. The evolution of mining from a small business enterprise into a corporate endeavor also signified the end of the independent spirit that had allowed Gold Rush to boom. Ultimately, the Gold Rush ended when Gold Fever relaxed its grip on the entirety of the nation. When unbridled enthusiasm and impulse gave way to cautious rationality, the Gold Rush was over.
Part III

Enduring Myths

In the days of old, in the days of gold
How often I repine
For the days of old when we dug up the gold
In the days of '49

-Excerpt from “Days of Forty Nine”
The Gold Rush’s role in our collective imagination of the American story compels us to scrutinize the event in greater detail. In places such as Columbia, California, the Gold Rush is alive and well, not as a complex historical episode, but as a fantasy in which the determination of ordinary Americans allowed the United States to progress as a nation. The persistence of Gold Rush myths in popular memory makes the event worth investigating, as they provide valuable insight into how history is shaped to fit a particular storyline. Part III explores various productions of Gold Rush myths, from both post-Gold Rush enthusiasts and miners themselves; *Popular Culture and Myth* examines the dynamics of California popular culture during the Rush and how they furthered the romantic narrative of the Gold Rush; *Remembering the Rush* analyzes nostalgic post-Rush images and narratives; and *The Romantic and the Real* considers the shortcomings of mythmaking processes. These sections provide an analysis of both the formation and trajectory of Gold Rush myths in greater depth. They deconstruct the allure of the Gold Rush for non-California audiences, and attempt to provide a framework in which to view the event with greater clarity.

**Popular Culture and Myth**

Despite the inconsistencies between reality and myth, myths influenced the beliefs and behavior of California travelers in real ways; forty-niners were forced to interact with and confront myth as they put their journey in perspective. Californians often found their relationship with these concepts to be complex. Even though their Gold Rush dreams had been unrealistic, miners clung to them through forms of popular culture; the poems, images and songs that circulated helped them frame a perspective from which to reflect upon their experience. Singing jovial songs about California
mining allowed them to see themselves as part of a folk tale, one that had redeeming qualities and an assured place in American history. As forty-niners left behind everything and everyone familiar, they were aware they were embarking on a transformative experience, one that required abandoning the old rules and ways of life. While forty-niners often lamented such difficulties, they could at times revel in the unique world that they had created.

Forty-niners knew the world back home was eager to hear about their exploits, for they were aware that to those who remained at home, they were distant characters in a narrative of Western adventure. Thus, the documentation of their experience was often taken quite seriously. J.G. Bruff, for example, constructed a vast set of drawings as he journeyed through California. Though he had little mining success, he believed his library of sketches would have immense future value, and turned down an astounding offer for his work: “In Sacramento (1850) I was offered Ten Thousand dollars cash, for my rough sketches of the overland Travel: but declined it, for obvious reasons.” That Bruff, who was of moderate means, refused a small fortune in exchange for his drawings reveals the extent to which value was placed on the California experience. This sense of the California adventure’s significance made its way into popular culture. The poems, songs and letters of the California migrants reinforced a sense of unity among forty-niners and served to share their exploits with those back home.

A common way for miners to communicate the Gold Rush experience involved the use of a letter sheet, a piece of paper marked with printed images, that could be folded and mailed without an envelope. A letter sheet was generally 10 ½” by 8 ½”, and was the primary method for those on the East Coast to connect visually with California. Usually, these sheets depicted various scenes in the miner’s lifestyle, from working the
mines, to washing clothes, to gambling. Letter sheets brought the West closer to the East; while the urban-American middle class worked in offices as clerks, small business owners or professionals, the miners lived in tents, hunted game, and explored open land.

One letter sheet, entitled *Sundry Amusements in the Mines*, depicts four scenes in which two miners engage in various domestic activities. The images are somewhat comical but also sentimental, revealing a way of life that offers simple but appealing forms of pleasure. The image on the upper left corner, “A Sundays Amusements,” shows the two miners relaxing, bathing and washing clothes at the edge of a river; “A Daily Pleasure” shows the miners cooking a simple meal over a fire; “Occupation for Rainy Days” depicts a casual passing of the time by repairing boots and clothes; and the ironically labeled “A Pleasant Surprise” shows the miners discovering a bear in their tent. This letter sheet, as the title suggests, casts mining camps in an amusing light. The images, however, do not contain any depictions of mining itself. Although other letter sheets would do so, this particular set of images focuses on the kind of life that California mining created, not the actual activity of mining.
These images are not necessarily unrealistic, but they fail to provide a comprehensive representation of life as a California miner. A complete view of mining is, of course, not the intent of this particular letter sheet, but for the receiver, it might be one of the few images of the Gold Rush they would encounter. Although photography existed in California, few photographs were widely distributed to the East. The letter sheets made it easier for certain myths about mining to persist; adventure, escape from civilization, and the wonders of nature are all definitively embedded into Sundry Amusements. The scene of the bear, for example, is both comical and exciting. The
miners experience the mystique of wildlife up close, but do not appear to be in great
danger; it is after all, a “Pleasant Surprise,” and the event is rather amusing. And no
matter the outcome, these miners would have a story to tell, bringing great appeal to
such a scene.

Another letter sheet with two images, “Sunday Morning” on top, and “Log
Cabin” on the bottom, offers similar qualities in its depictions. “Sunday Morning” is a
quintessential representation of mining leisure; the miners are relaxed, lying down, and
shoeless. Their tent, supplies and stove are rudimentary, and a vast natural landscape
surrounds them. The land is idyllic, and the miners appear to have carved out a
comfortable nook in the wilderness. They are humbled by the landscape, but appear to
be making progress, transitioning from tent to cabin, gaining greater control over their
surroundings. Both forms of housing seem appealing; tents for their simplicity, and
cabins for their durability, and Gold Rush living seems to embody relaxed, steady
progress on tranquil land.

It is an interesting feature of Gold Rush images, created both during the event
and afterwards, that they focus on miners’ spare time rather than everyday labor. While
depictions of mining did command interest, a disproportionate number of images
portray scenes of leisure. While the Sunday interval was highly prized, it represented a
small portion of time compared to the long hours of mining. Letter sheet images
presented the best of what the California mining lifestyle had to offer, and in response,
recipients developed a sense of sentimentality towards such living, a feeling that would
only strengthen in the years following the Gold Rush.
Another letter sheet entitled “A Miner’s Life - Illustrated,” containing multiple images accompanied by a pair of “Honest Miners Songs,” is one of the most engaging pieces of this kind. As in other letter sheets, it presents a series of scenes. The largest image is of the “Miner’s Home,” in which a small cabin overlooks a quaint settlement surrounded by large mountains. The landscape is beautiful and perhaps somewhat daunting, but the cabin remains snug within a clump of surrounding trees. The other images vary from depictions of miners’ leisure, to their dreams, to the claims themselves.
One image characterizes California Indians as “Friends in the Country,” and shows whites interacting amicably with Indians. Considering that conflict with natives provided a great source of anxiety on both sides, this letter sheet is deceptive in its representation of white-Indian interaction. And although “Miner’s Claim” shows two men digging for gold, it is outweighed by the numerous depictions of fun and leisure, most notably “Miner’s Evening,” “Saturday Night,” and “Miner’s Slumbers.”

The two “Honest Miner’s Songs,” provide a significant contrast to one another, complicating the underlying message that this letter sheet sent to a non-California audience. While the images are romantic and selective, the songs create a clear distinction between the expectations for California mining and the real difficulties that the experience produced. This adds another layer to what appears to be a sentimental portrayal of Gold Rush California through the use of folk images. The contrast presented in the songs allows viewers to see the Gold Rush in a more intricate way, revealing the true feelings of many miners who, despite their adventures, could often be quite despondent and homesick.
The “Honest Miner’s Songs” and an Illustrated Miner’s Life.
The One he Sung at Home

Like Argos of the ancient times,
I'll leave this modern Greece;
I'm going to California Mines,
To find the golden fleece.
For who would work from morn till night
And live on hog and corn,
When one can pick up there at sight
Enough to buy a farm?

CHORUS: Oh California! that's the land for me,
I'm going to California the gold dust for to see.

There from the snowy mountain's side
Comes down the golden sand,
And spreads a carpet far and wide
O'er all the shining land.
The rivers run on golden beds,
O'er rocks of golden ore,
The valleys six feet deep are said
To hold a plenty more
Oh California! &c

. I'll take my wash bowl in my hand,
And thither wind my way,
To wash the gold from out the sand
In Cal-i-for-nee-aye.
And when I get my pocket full
In that bright land of gold,
I'll have a rich and happy time:
Live merry till I'm old
Oh California! etc.

The One he Sings Here

I'm sitting
on a big quartz rock,
Where the gold is said to grow;
But, I'm thinking of the merry flock,
That I left long ago.
My fare is hard, and so is my bed,
My CLAIM is giving out,
I've worked until I'm almost dead,
And soon I shall "peg" out.

I'm thinking of the better days,
Before I left my home;
Before my brain with gold was crazed,
And I began to roam.
Those were the days, no more are seen
When all the girls loved me;
When I did dress in linen clean
They washed and cooked for me.
But awful change is this to tell,
I wash and cook myself;
I never more shall cut a swell,
But here must dig for pelf.
I ne'er shall lie in clean white sheets,
But in my blankets roll;
An oh! the girls I thought so sweet,
They think me but a fool.

The two songs reflect both the hopeful exuberance behind Gold Fever and the frustration that mining in California eventually produced. The first is a lofty dream of “golden beds” and a “shining land” where there is enough gold for anyone who is willing to pursue it. The second is a lamentation of a mind “crazed” with gold, leading the miner away from the security of home and into a strange and uncomfortable land. Though the experience of individual miners would vary greatly, most could relate to both kinds of feelings and would lean towards one or the other at different times throughout their stay in California. The journals and letters they left behind echo such emotion, and often oscillate between revelry in the California lifestyle and a melancholy longing for home.

One of the most popular mining songs was “Oh California,” an uplifting ballad sung to the tune of “Oh Susanna.” Remarkably similar to the first “Honest Miner’s” song, “Oh California” encapsulates the spirited optimism behind Gold Rush migration: even though the journey is long and rough, no tears should be shed, for the future in California is wide open, and one strike could change everything. The song embraces certain mythic qualities of the Gold Rush; California is a land of new beginnings, almost larger than life. The folksy image of a “washbowl on my knee” gives it endearing charm, and the song is a powerful story of both sacrifice and relentless hope.
Oh, California! 148

I came from Salem City,
With my washbowl on my knee,
I'm going to California,
The gold dust for to see.
It rained all night the day I left,
The Weather it was dry,
The sun so hot I froze to death,
O! brothers, don't you cry!

Oh! California
That's the land for me!
I'm going to Sacramento,
With my washbowl on my knee.

I jumped aboard the 'Liza ship,
And traveled on the sea,
And every time I thought of home
I wished it wasn’t me!
The vessel reared like any horse
That had of oats a wealth;
I found it wouldn’t throw me, so
I thought I’d throw myself.

Chorus: Oh! California
That’s the land for me!
I’m going to Sacramento,
With my washbowl on my knee.

I thought of all the pleasant times
We’ve had together here,
I thought I ort to cry a bit,
But couldn’t find a tear.
The pilot bread was in my mouth,
The gold dust in my eye,
Although I’m going far away,
Dear brothers, don’t you cry.

I soon shall be in San Francisco,
And Then I'll look around,
And when I see the gold lumps there,
I'll pick them off the ground.
I'll scrape the mountains clean, my boys,
I'll drain the rivers dry,
A pocket full of rocks bring home,
So brothers, don’t you cry.
This song was sung in the mines and in California saloons with regularity throughout the Gold Rush. The song is uplifting, yet makes no attempt to disguise the hardships. Still, it ends with an affirmation of optimism and expectation, for the “golden lumps” are still out there for the taking, and finding a fortune would make it all worthwhile. “Oh, California” is not an accurate reflection of everyday mining, but it is a realistic portrayal of the feelings behind the Gold Rush that powerfully mixed hope with sadness. The songs of the Gold Rush vary in their focus, but as a whole, serve to balance these conflicting emotions.

Other forms of art also developed in Gold Rush California. Though some professional artists ventured west as forty-niners, much of this work was done by amateur artists, who wrote poems and songs, and drew sketches of what they saw around them. Some, such as J.G. Bruff, did so for historical purposes, while others did so for amusement or sentimental reasons. Although photography of the early Gold Rush was limited, more photographs were taken as it progressed, primarily to document the miners and the growth of California’s new cities. Daguerreotypes, early forms of photographs, were primarily used for portraits, and miners could have a pocket-sized daguerreotype taken of them at a moderate price. Many of these portraits were sent home to friends and family, often to their shock as they noticed the changes in the miners’ appearances.

It is difficult, however, to determine the extent to which certain images circulated in California. Portraits were generally sent home, and other photographs may have reached the hands of only a relative few; a given photograph might circulate within a mining camp but not move elsewhere. Thus, no photographic image developed comparable ubiquity to common miner’s songs, such as “Oh California,” which unified
the popular culture of Gold Rush California. Forty-niners could identify with one another, and shared a popular culture that hinged on their highly irregular way of life. Songs and stories were often identifiable across towns and camps, and certain images, usually in letter sheets, had the same effect. Photographs did not have the same kind of widespread circulation, but were an effective method of documentation nonetheless.

Daguerreotype of Enos Christman, Pennsylvania forty-niner, 1851: 

Though the miners were often inclined towards romanticism, especially in song, unlike most post-Gold Rush artists, they provided the most balanced and realistic portrayals of the experience. Miners were generally not shy in their letters describing the many difficulties they faced and their strong desire to reunite with family. Gold Rush participants were forced to juggle their everyday labor with idyllic and mythical
conceptions of what California represented. Interpreting these accounts requires a balancing act, but it is indicative of the complex world that the Gold Rush created.

**Remembering the Rush**

As Gold Fever cooled, western migration slowed and the expectations for California began to change. The frenzy of the Gold Rush had ended, and greater awareness developed in regard to “those early days” of forty-niner mining, both among outsiders and former miners. By the 1870s, the Gold Rush was seen as a distant past and a distinct moment in history. California had been a state for over twenty years and its growth had transformed the territory into the economic powerhouse of the West. The first transcontinental railroad, finished in 1869, now allowed easy access to California via the relative comfort of rail travel. The western stretch of railroad followed the main overland trails to California, once traveled arduously by cart. It was clear that America’s relationship with the West Coast was changing, and the Gold Rush became a focal point for looking back and reliving the early developments of the Wild West.

During the 1870s and 1880s, the market for Gold Rush artwork, in the form of paintings, songs and literature, was at an all time high. As early forty-niner days gave way to a new, post-Gold Rush California, popular demand for artwork depicting the event surged, and artists responded accordingly. The predominant myths of the Gold Rush resurfaced and were developed further as artists added their own twists. Much of this work had sentimental qualities, shaping the way in which the Gold Rush was integrated into the collective memory of the American story. Artists gave the public what they wanted, and their art reinforced and expanded upon the mythic qualities of the Gold Rush. These developments are why most famous “Gold Rush” works of art are in
fact post-Gold Rush productions. Even the journals and memoirs of forty-niners fall into this category to some extent, as most of such accounts were not published until the early twentieth century. In these cases, great nostalgic interest encouraged such works to be published and more widely circulated.

**Literature**

Bret Harte, who emerged as a leading literary figure in the late 1860s, gained great popularity with his Gold Rush fiction and tales of the frontier. His stories are famous for their depictions of rough, hardened miners who are revealed as good, simple men. Harte did experience California during the Gold Rush era, traveling there in 1853. After failing in mining efforts, he wrote for newspapers until 1871, when he returned east. As Harte spent time in the region, he became increasingly interested in California as a literary setting and the mining lifestyle as a point of focus. His stories exude a sentimental quality that his audience was powerfully drawn to, and he began to imagine the forty-niner as a mythic character. In Harte’s literature, the forty-niner is generally coarse and unsophisticated, a gambler with a taste for hard liquor. But in such works, the forty-niner is more pure than the rest of civilization; he is in nature, free from society’s constraints, and his modest living reaffirms the simple pleasures of life.

Harte’s stories revolve around characters that embody the exceptional qualities of Gold Rush California. In the short story *The Outcasts of Poker Flat* (1869), John Oakhurst is a calm, courageous professional gambler in a lawless and chaotic town. Despite his status as an outcast, Oakhurst is a heroic and ultimately good-hearted character. This is a common theme in Harte’s western literature, which often endears society’s outcasts to the reader. Harte depicts Gold Rush California as an almost
mystical setting, where strange and mysterious events often occur. This is evident in
Wan Lee: the Pagan (1876), a short story in which a Californian is introduced to Chinese
mysticism and philosophy. The man’s Chinese acquaintance, Hop Sing, owns a
warehouse that hosts a variety of unusual artifacts:

There was that deliciously commingled mysterious foreign odor that I had so often noticed; there
was the old array of uncouth-looking objects, the long procession of jars and crockery…Kites in
the shape of enormous dragons and gigantic butterflies…; gods of china….; jars of sweetmeats
covered all over with moral sentiments from Confucius; hats that looked like baskets, and baskets
that looked like hats…

The setting is surreal and a great source of amusement to the American narrator, who
enjoys the exotic company of the Chinese man. Wan Lee is ultimately a criticism of
nativist violence, but it also reveals the extent to which Gold Rush California was
imagined as entirely separate from the rest of the States. In creating such a setting, Harte
was aware that part of what made the region exotic to non-California readers was the
presence of foreigners, most notably the Chinese. The story creates an environment that
seemingly could not have elsewhere in the country, emphasizing Gold Rush California’s
unique status.

Harte’s most famous story, The Luck of the Roaring Camp (1868), is another highly
sentimental piece of fiction, reaffirming and embellishing many of the predominant Gold
Rush myths. Roaring Camp is a California mining camp inhabited by a group of
uncouth miners whose lives are transformed when a dying Indian prostitute births a
child, who is subsequently adopted by the men. The child’s pure disposition has a
profound effect on the miners, who begin to bathe and keep clean, cease using vulgar
language and soften their demeanors. They pay greater attention to their surroundings
and quality of labor, and bring flowers to the child. As Harte wrote, “The men had
suddenly awakened to the fact that there were beauty and significance in these trifles,
which they had so long trodden carelessly beneath their feet.”\textsuperscript{151} The child’s presence tames the miners, who allow their hard exteriors to give way to a more satisfying temperament of gentle thoughtfulness.

The men are also blessed with increased success in the mines, presumably as a result of the child’s influence. The camp functions almost as a paradise, a thriving and insular community that is wary of outside influence:

They were ‘flush times,’ and the Luck was with them…No encouragement was given to immigration, and, to make their seclusion more perfect, the land on either side of the mountain wall that surrounded the camp they duly preempted. This, and a reputation for a singular proficiency with the revolver, kept the reserve of Roaring Camp inviolate.\textsuperscript{152}

Roaring Camp represents an escapist ideal, in which men bond together in nature and work hard to make a comfortable living. The story however, contains no actual descriptions of mining, simply portraying the labor as successful and relatively undemanding. Harte is, of course, dwelling on romantic elements of the Gold Rush, reinforcing the myth of California as an idyllic natural setting where rough men were rewarded. Although the child dies at the end of the story, perhaps complicating Harte’s vision of the camp, there is a sense of nostalgic sadness in the tale; although the utopia ultimately could not last, it represented a powerful and profound setting. \textit{Roaring Camp} would touch the hearts of many readers throughout the United States, ingraining Gold Rush mythology further into popular culture.

Mark Twain is another popular writer commonly associated with the frontier genre and Gold Rush literature. After the Civil War broke out in 1861, Twain headed west, traveling overland to Nevada and eventually San Francisco. His adventures would later inspire the travel narrative \textit{Roughing It}, as well as a number of short stories set in post-Gold Rush California. While in San Francisco, Twain worked as a journalist, prospected for gold and silver, dabbled in real estate speculation and met other
California writers, including Bret Harte. Like Harte, Twain was intrigued by the literary potential of California and the Gold Rush as an exotic recent history. His stories also exude similar nostalgia for the early days of Gold Fever and the extraordinary society it produced.

Twain’s 1865 short story, *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County* is an entertaining, lighthearted tale of Gold Rush gambling. The setting is a California tavern where the narrator is told an old Gold Rush story about Jim Smiley, a gambling addict who is willing to place a wager on virtually anything. Smiley, as the story goes, bets a stranger that his renowned jumping frog will out-hop any other frog that can be found. The stranger is able to con him by putting quail shot into the frog’s mouth, weighing it down and causing Smiley to lose the bet. The story is an easygoing tale that portrays Gold Rush California as a fun and lively place, rich with gamblers and colorful characters. Indeed California could often provide this kind of environment, but tales such as Twain’s furthered the perception of the Gold Rush as a source of folklore. The actual labor of mining is not of interest in this kind of literature; greater emphasis is placed on the rugged, masculine culture that it produced and the exceptional events occurring in this setting. In this way, forty-niners become folk heroes, not simply ordinary Americans making a living.

Twain provides a more sobering account in *The Californian’s Tale*, a short story set in a deserted post-Gold Rush mining town. He depicts a rather empty world, where the surface digging is all finished and the boomtowns largely abandoned. The old miners are a depressing lot; some had lost fortunes, while others never made it rich and were too embarrassed to return home. The story centers on a man whose wife has been killed by Indians, and who is left alone and delusional in a deserted town, convinced his wife will
return home. The story’s sadness contrasts with the levity of *Jumping Frog*, but contains a similar sentimental quality that laments the Gold Rush’s demise. In *The Californian’s Tale*, the Gold Rush had given the town life but its end brought depression, abandonment, and unrealized dreams. The burst of the bubble represented an end to a time that was both extraordinary and exciting. Like Harte, Twain does not present Gold Rush California as utopian or necessarily ideal, but these stories give it tremendous appeal and provoke a distinct sense of nostalgia.

“The Days of Forty Nine,” a post-Gold Rush anthem, reflects a similar sense of melancholy in looking back on the Gold Rush as a momentous event that had passed with astounding quickness. The song is one of mourning and sadness, for the characters that are introduced have all faded away; these roughnecks all met sudden and violent deaths, leaving the song’s narrator, Tom Moore, alone in an aimless state of wandering. Despite Moore’s sense of emptiness and loss, he has a flicker of life left in him, which is directed toward remembering the glory “Days of ’49.” Perhaps Tom Moore had a difficult life as a miner, but it does not keep him from lamenting the end of that exciting period in California: “How often I repine, For the days of old when we dug up the gold…” The lyrics, similar to the stories of Twain and Harte, reveal a set of distinctive Gold Rush characters that could not exist elsewhere. Their abrupt deaths further immortalize them as tragic folk heroes, ultimately too wild and rough for civilization. The song’s date and author remains unclear, but it is certainly a production of the post-Gold Rush era, and a reflection of the wistful reminiscence that characterizes much of post-frontier artwork.
Days of Forty Nine

I'm old Tom Moore from the bummer's shore
In the good old golden days.
They call me a bummer and a gin sot, too
But what care I for praise
I wander around from town to town
Just like a roving sign,
And the people all say "There goes Tom Moore
Of the days of '49.

chorus: In the days of old, in the days of gold
How often I repine
For the days of old when we dug up the gold
In the days of '49.

There was Nantuck Bill, I knew him well,
A feller that was fond of tricks.
At a poker game he was always there
And heavy with his bricks.
He would ante up and draw his cards
And go in a hatfull blind
In a game of bluff, Bill lost his breath
In the days of '49.

There was New York Jake, a butcher boy
He was always getting tight.
And every time that he got full
He was always hunting a fight.
One night he run up against a knife
In the hands of old Bob Kline
And over Jake they held a wake
In the days of '49.

There was poor old Jess, the old lame cuss
He never would relent.
Her never was known to miss a drink
Or ever spend a cent.
At length old Jess like all the rest
Who never would decline,
In all his bloom went up the flume
In the days of '49.

There was roaring Bill from Buffalo
I never will forget.
He would roar all day and he'd roar all night
And I guess he's roaring yet.
One night he fell in a prospector's hole
In a roaring bad design,
In that hole roared out his soul
In the days of '49
Paintings

Paintings of the Gold Rush also flourished during the 1870s and 1880s. Artists such as William Smith Jewett, Frederick Wenderoth, and Christian Nahl flocked to California in the 1850s, with both artistic and gold mining interests in mind. Like J.G. Bruff, these artists recognized the potential for visual documentation of California. Many of these artists left California after a few years of minimal mining success, only to discover vast demand for their artistic work upon returning home. Most Gold Rush paintings were produced within a thirty-year period following its end, and they present a variety of content, ranging from depictions of mining camps, to beautiful California landscapes, to portraits of famous Gold Rush figures. Such paintings also represent different ideas concerning the Gold Rush and what it meant to be a part of it. Some are simple, sobering and realistic, while others are decidedly romantic. Regardless of their message, these works reveal many of the popular thematic elements of the Gold Rush as well as the nature of demand for such paintings.

Christian Nahl’s *Sunday Morning in the Mines* is one of the most iconic painted images of the Gold Rush. Nahl, who arrived in San Francisco in 1851 and returned east shortly thereafter, was familiar with the realities of mining methods and lifestyle, giving his artwork a distinct aura of credibility. Although his paintings could be realistic, some were clearly nostalgic productions for an eager and imaginative non-California audience. *Sunday Morning* belongs to the latter category, depicting a series of separate but simultaneous scenes reflecting common Gold Rush themes. The scenes are not entirely unfathomable as real events, but their juxtaposition is selective, and the painting is an artistic fabrication designed to grab the viewer’s attention.
The painting is divided into three scenes, but seemingly split into two halves.

The right half depicts leisurely miners washing clothes, reading and writing letters home. These are diligent and relaxed miners who avoid Sunday’s temptations. The other half of the painting depicts their opposites. The scene at the forefront on the left shows a horse race and a drunken miner tossing gold dust into the air while being held upright by his comrades. The background image depicts a fight scene, presumably over a card game, as these miners rowdily gamble on their Sabbath. These two scenes provide a distinct contrast to that on the right; they are fast-paced, disorderly and chaotic, while the other presents a calm and leisurely sense of well being.
Despite the contrasts, both types of scenes appear to be sentimentalized in the painting. The distant view of the Sierra Mountains and the comfortable nook the camp occupies in the wilderness provides great appeal as a window into the Gold Rush. This suited the tastes of east coast audiences, and the painting became Nahl’s most popular work. The miners are presented as rugged, hard-edged men, but they live simply and comfortably in nature. Free from the confines of society, they do as they please, be it rowdy and boisterous activity or more peaceful pursuits. And all the commotion ensures that life in the camp is never dull. *Sunday Morning* is a powerful visual representation of post-Gold Rush sentimentalism designed for non-mining audiences, providing valuable insight into how the Gold Rush was interpreted in the years following its end.

A.D.O. Browere’s *Lone Prospector (1853)*: 

Another popular theme that developed in post-Gold Rush painting was the image of the “lone prospector.” This character was an independent, adventurous, and self-sufficient mining prototype that became an important part of Gold Rush mythology.
In A.D.O. Browere’s representation, the lone prospector trudges through a verdant wilderness on his mule, carrying only a few supplies on his journey. While he is armed and seemingly wary of his surroundings, he is immersed in a beautiful scene, emerging into a sunnier, more open area. The prospector is an engaging character, entirely alone with endless possibilities ahead. This element of freedom persists in the post-Gold Rush imagination. Such miners, to a non-California audience, offered a glimpse into the miners’ escape from civilization. As the scope of American capitalism became progressively more daunting, the image of the lone prospector developed great appeal. But the “lone prospector” form of mining, if it existed at all, was quickly been replaced by the operations of larger mining corporations and the development of large-scale mining methods. Thus, the myth of the lone prospector is similar to that of the “noble savage,” in which the innocence of natives is corrupted by the forces of Western civilization. As an extinct way of life, Gold Rush prospecting became increasingly treasured in the public eye, and the “lone prospector” became a fixture in post-Gold Rush images.

The romantic portrayal of the Gold Rush in the years following its end is far from accidental. The miners’ eccentric lifestyle became unsustainable as soon as the gold bubble burst and California transitioned into an economy no longer dependent on mining; forty-niners either went home or settled down to find a new profession. The Gold Rush quickly became a thing of the past, and nostalgia developed rather early. The rapid processes of modernization in the United States contributed to the sentimental view of the Gold Rush as a simpler time, in which an individual’s success did not come from status or place in society. The effects of modernization were evident in the evolution of mining itself, which had been transformed into a wage-system of corporate
control by the 1880s. These stark developments made the American public eager to experience Gold Rush art and contemplate an uncomplicated, no-frills way of life that was part of a relatively recent past.

The Romantic and the Real

As suggested, the myths of the Gold Rush developed during the initial fascination and speculation about California soon after Marshall’s discovery, and were revitalized as post-Gold Rush nostalgia manifested in popular art forms. While the myths are often based on slivers of truth, they involve selective memory, and do not provide a comprehensive or accurate portrayal of the event. The benign, straightforward narrative told in Columbia, California as a tourist attraction reveals the way in which such processes continue today. Historical inaccuracy is perhaps the nature of myths, but it is nevertheless revealing to examine them in relation to historical fact. Gold Rush California was a violent, racist and unforgiving environment that crushed the expectations of most miners. Its eccentricity provided the mining lifestyle with certain favorable qualities, but these elements should not be exaggerated or made paradigmatic for Gold Rush history, as the predominant myths suggest. Such recognition does not render Gold Rush California any less of an extreme place, for it was undoubtedly wild, but a skeptical view provides us with a clearer understanding of what actually occurred and what it meant to be there.

The notion of a “lone prospector,” for example, was a fictional, imaginative production of the post-Gold Rush era. The idea of a bold and self-sufficient man in the wilderness had tremendous appeal, but it did not reflect the working conditions of most
miners. Even before more sophisticated methods of mining developed, early mining was mostly conducted by small teams. And even when mining used only pans, men usually worked together in a group that would scope out claims and pool efforts. While mining in 1848, and simply plucking surface gold, was relatively easy for individuals, many gold-seekers still operated as part of smaller groups. And, as the Gold Rush progressed, it became increasingly difficult to mine without the support, both in knowledge and physical labor, of a mining team. The lone prospector is thus, not an inconceivable possibility, but a misrepresentative image that falls outside the realm of most Gold Rush mining activity.

Although there is a tendency to romanticize the high potential for reward, most did not strike it rich, and were committed to an endless search for something that continually evaded them. The labor was backbreaking and exhausting, and the difficulty of mining itself would make it hard for most miners to sentimentally reflect on their work’s relationship with the natural outdoors. Though the miners knew they were taking a risk, few were aware of how difficult it would be, shattering the myth of California as easy money. The predominant myth in regard to the relationship between labor, nature and reward is clearly distorted and misleading, glossing over the more painful realities of professional mining.

The image of California as a pastoral paradise is complicated by the Gold Rush experience. California, a beautiful and fertile land, converted many settlers into permanent westerners and eventually allowed for a growing agricultural sector in the new state. But while many pastoral California scenes are idyllic, miners often confronted brutal conditions. Images such as Sunday Morning in the Mines, and John Gast’s American Progress depict nature as a form of comfort to the settlers, but harsh deserts and
mountains were perilous obstacles to the California travelers. The long rainy season was a frustrating impediment to their work, discouraging miners as they remained cooped up for months at a time. While California’s natural beauty was evident, miners most likely cursed nature just as often as they admired it during the Gold Rush years.

The American miners were also forced to confront the myth that the California gold belonged only to them. This myth developed simultaneously with the discovery of gold, and is implicit in much of post-Gold Rush art. It was an extension of Manifest Destiny and the sense of entitlement to the land and resources of North America. But as many American miners struggled to uphold this idea through intimidation and attacks against non-U.S. citizens, they were met with a resiliently diverse California that did not allow them to restrict the gold to American hands.

Although the subjugation of foreigners by violence and taxation, as well as the funneling of Indians onto reservations could be considered a “victory” for American nativist efforts, California never became a land that could be completely excluded to U.S. citizens. Many successful miners were Chileans or Mexicans who arrived in California before most Americans. Even if they arrived later, many were already familiar with mining, giving them an advantage over the Americans, who were generally mining novices. Though perceived as a divine reward for the Mexican War, California gold found its way into the hands of many foreigners while evading a great deal of Americans, providing a bitter wrinkle to the Manifest Destiny concept. Even as mobs, vigilante justice and public policy ensured that non-citizens were dominated in social and political spheres, this process was hardly neat or clean, often accompanied by brutal forms of violence.
Thus, peaceful American settlement of California did not materialize, providing a sharp contrast to both the rhetoric that surfaced in early California guidebooks and images that later documented the Gold Rush. Westward expansion was interpreted as a natural process ordained by God, and the Gold Rush was supposed to embody the purest form of this development. This sentiment is perhaps best summarized in Gast’s allegorical painting *American Progress*, which depicts mining settlers and modern machinery being guided westward by an angelic, female representation of America. The miners walk with their tools under a light and sunny sky, while the Indians and wild animals flee into the dark wilderness, powerless against the momentum of civilization. According to the myths, Manifest Destiny involves unchallenged progression that occurs naturally; it is after all, “destiny,” preordained and ultimately unavoidable.

For Americans in the 1870s and 1880s, it was somewhat easy to adopt this view of western settlement and the Gold Rush. The rush to California had, in fact, brought the territory into the forefront of American consciousness, and California had become a successful engine of economic growth. Gast’s sanguine narrative of Manifest Destiny, however, ignores the hostility that American occupation created and the violence that erupted in the West. In the end, California became a powerful entity that the United States could claim as its own, but this development was neither peaceful nor uncontested. This complicates the underlying Gold Rush myths that viewed American settlement as natural and steady progression.
Conclusion

The Gold Rush was enabled by a set of myths that celebrated both individual enterprise and the spirit of a collective America. The myths took on a life of their own as the Gold Rush expanded, and were later recreated as audiences sought to understand its legacy. Most of these myths are fabrications that distort the realities of the mining experience and Gold Rush society, but they were nevertheless significant as the event unfolded. The interaction between reality and myth provided a struggle for the new Californians, and continues to challenge historical perspective today. The gold migration was imagined to represent the best that the United States had to offer - opportunity, personal independence, and the pursuit of wealth - and for some, this was real. But the Gold Rush also facilitated greed, violence, bitter prejudice and desperation, which of course, contradict the foundation of the myths.
In this sense, clarity can only be achieved by juggling such contradictions. This work is an attempt to do so, using particular stories of those who inhabited Gold Rush California. While this paper has focused on a narrow set of characters, thousands of separate individual outcomes compose the Gold Rush experience. This thesis has offered only a window into the tangled event, but has illuminated the tensions between real-life and myth that arise as we analyze the Gold Rush as a part of American history. The Gold Rush must be recognized as a complicated episode that produced an array of outcomes for a diverse group of peoples. But for all their differences, these individuals were brought together into a Gold Rush society that found itself separate from the rest of the world. They made similar sacrifices and came to California for many of the same reasons. For better or worse, these migrants knew that California offered them at least a sliver of hope, a chance to realize a vision of what an individual, or a nation, could become.
Notes:

2 Ibid. P.39
3 See the Calaveras Visitor’s Bureau website. Available at: http://calgold.org/pages/gold_country_regions.cgi
4 See the Gold Country, California website. Available at: http://calgold.org/pages/calaveras.cgi
5 Taken from Columbia, California’s Chamber of Commerce website, available at: http://www.columbiacalifornia.com/timeline.html
10 Ibid. P.122
11 PBS’ West Film Project (2001), Available at: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/goldrush/timeline/index.html
13 Mason’s report can be accessed through the Virtual Museum of the City of San Francisco, available at: http://www.sfmuseum.org/hist6/masonrpt.html
20 Excerpt from *American Progress* in Part III, P.157.
22 Headline taken from PBS’ West Film Project (2001), Available at: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/goldrush/timeline/index.html
24 Ibid. P. 37
26 Ibid. P. 71
27 Ibid. P. 71
28 Ibid. P. 126
29 Blumin, Stuart. (1989). *The Emergence of the Middle Class*. Cambridge University Press. P.110
30 Ibid. P. 66
37 Ibid. P.69
38 Ibid. P.7-8
39 Ibid. P. 65
41 Ibid. P. xix
44 Ibid. P. 15-16
45 Ibid. P.49
47 Ibid. P.11
50 Ibid. P. 11
52 Ibid. P. 29
54 Ibid. P. 35-36
55 Ibid. P. 33
56 Ibid. P.41
61 Ibid. P.11
63 Ibid. P.8
64 Ibid. P.11
65 Ibid. P.13
66 Ibid. P.13
68 Cited from Ibid. P.81
69 PBS’ West Film Project (2001), Available at: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/goldrush/timeline/index.html
71 See Ibid. P. lxix and p. 88
72 Ibid. P. 18
73 Statistics from: PBS’ West Film Project (2001), Available at: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/goldrush/timeline/index.html

147


Story of Hiram Pierce, used from PBS’ West Film Project (2001), Available at: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/goldrush/


See later section on Gold Rush Art: Sunday Morning in the Mines, Sundry Amusements in the Mines, Log Cabin

Ibid.  P.154


Ibid.  P. 134-135

Ibid.  P. 184

Ibid.  P. 160


Ibid.  P. 17

Ibid.  P. 16

Ibid.  P.69

Story of Hiram Pierce, used from PBS’ West Film Project (2001), Available at: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/goldrush/


Ibid.  P. 167


Excerpt from Ibid.  P. 159


Ibid.  P.5

Ibid.  P.11


Ibid.  P. 144


Ibid.  P. 108-109


Ibid.  P. 190

115 The term “Mexican” was generally used by most white miners to describe both Mexicans and Chileans, and I have adopted this terminology in this particular sections. In many accounts, there are no distinctions made between the two groups, making it difficult to distinguish the reception of Chileans from that of Mexicans. In this section, I use the term “Mexican” to refer to all miners of recognizable Hispanic descent. While in other sections it was important to make the distinction between Chileans and Mexicans (analyzing patterns of migration, for example), it is unnecessary here, since the way in which the groups were received by Americans, who generally could not differentiate them, does not appear to diverge.


117 Ibid. P. 173-174

118 Ibid. P. 178

119 Ibid. P. 178


122 Ibid. P. 132

123 PBS' West Film Project (2001), Available at: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/goldrush/timeline/index.html


125 Ibid. P. 785

126 Ibid. P. 785

127 Ibid. P. 785

128 Ibid. P. 785-786

129 Excerpt from Ibid. P.788


131 Ibid. P. 187-188


133 Ibid. P.38

134 Ibid. P. 42

135 Ibid. P. 42

136 PBS' West Film Project (2001), Available at: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/goldrush/peoplevents/p_hill.html

137 The Compromise of 1850 settled a number of disputes regarding newly acquired U.S. land, including those over territorial boundaries, the slave trade and the rights of fugitive slaves. See: Rozwenc, Edwin. (1957). The Compromise of 1850. Boston, D.C. Heath & Company


140 Ibid. P. 130

141 Ibid. P. 182


145 Sunday Morning: Log Cabin. Lithographed and Published by Britton & Rey, San Francisco. Accessed thru the California State Library.
147 See Appendix for “Honest Miner’s Songs” lyrics.
151 Harte, Bret. The Luck of Roaring Camp (1870). Taken from: Ibid. P.23
152 Ibid. P. 24
157 A.D.O. Browere (1814-1887), The Lone Prospector, 1853, oil on canvas. Hideko Goto Packard.