



# THE MUSEUM GAZETTE

## Seeing the Elephant: The California Gold Rush, Part II

In many ways, the story of the California Gold Rush is a microcosm of that of westward expansion. From the initial discovery of gold to the exciting movement of more than 100,000 persons west within just a few years, the story of the Forty-Niners embodies timeless human qualities of bravery and adventure, as well as greed and cruelty.

Having survived the exhausting journey to California, the goal of the Forty-Niners was to begin finding the wealth they had come so far to acquire. Working alone or in small groups, they staked out and worked their claims. They began by employing the most primitive methods of mining, crevicing and panning. The first of these consisted of scraping out the gaps and cracks between rock outcrops or in ditches, using nothing more than a knife. More often, pans were used. This method involved dipping a pan full of dirt in water, and then with careful circular motions sifting out the dirt, leaving the heavier metal behind. This difficult operation placed great stress upon back, leg, and arm muscles as the typical miner sifted through about fifty pans over a ten or twelve hour day's work. Perhaps as many flakes went out of the pan as stayed in, depending upon the skill of the miner.

Although panning best fits the popular image of the Forty-Niner, most miners soon graduated to better methods. The cradle was a box-like contraption in which water was bailed into a perforated hopper filled with dirt. The miner then rocked the cradle, causing water and gold

dust to flow through the holes, catching the gold behind metal riffles at the lower end of the box. This method was probably even less efficient in retaining the gold than the pan, but the much larger quantities of gold that could be processed led to a better return for the miner. Altogether, it seems that in the early days of the Gold Rush, gold was plentiful enough that the average miner could hope to wash out something close to an ounce a day, worth about \$16. Actually, this was quite a good wage by the standards of the time, but very small when one considers the effort, time, and money spent in traveling to California, or the fact that prices in the stores and mining camps were highly inflated.

As the gold rush continued, it became more and more difficult to find payable quantities of the metal using these individualized methods. Gold still existed, but was locked in subterranean quartz deposits or in underground streams. Only large businessmen possessed the necessary capital to bring in elaborate digging and hydraulic machinery to reach the hidden gold, completely ignoring the harm done to streams, hills, and valleys. They often employed former Forty-Niners, so that in an ironic way, the men who had come so far to seek an independent life often found themselves the employees of eastern capitalists.

The term "men" is used deliberately here, for the overwhelming majority of those who came to California during the Gold Rush were male. According to the 1850 census, just one in twelve

Californians were of the “fairer sex.” The arrival of a woman in a mining camp was regarded as a major event. For example, a Mrs. Galloway, the first female resident of Downieville, was met on the trail and carried into town on the backs of miners. Her mule was also carried in! Eliza Farnham advertised in the east for 100-130 “intelligent, virtuous and efficient” women to come to California, as “the presence of women would be one of the surest checks upon many of the evils that are apprehended there.” The particular evil that Mrs. Farnham was referring to was rampant drunkenness, but society in California, made up principally of young men far from home and their families, could indeed be rambunctious as well as evil.

One example of this took place at a camp called Old Dry Diggings, in which five men were caught in the act of robbing a gambler. A jury of some two hundred miners arrived, and the thieves were quickly sentenced to thirty-nine lashes each for their crime. After the whippings were completed, three of the men, two of them French and the other Chilean, were accused of previous attempts at robbery and murder. Unable to speak English and too weak from the whippings, the three could not defend themselves before the impromptu court. They were tried, found guilty, and hanged, all within half an hour, and Old Dry Diggings became known as Hangtown (later Placerville).

The fact that these undeserving, if not completely innocent men, were French and Chilean is typical of the attitude of many of the Forty-Niners toward foreigners. Early in the Gold Rush, all Spanish-speaking miners, including long-standing California residents, were expelled from the camps at the American River with only three hours notice. Violent incidents took place most often against those perceived to be “different.”

Motivated as they were by greed, the Forty-Niners compiled a poor record in their dealings with American Indians, even judging by the standards of the westward expansion movement. On the way west, the Indians were much feared but rarely encountered. Once in California, the miners simply eliminated those in their way. Many Indians were shot, expelled from their dwellings,

or employed as laborers at starvation wages - for example having to mine a pound of gold for a pound of raisins. Unaccounted-for crimes were apt to be blamed upon Indians, with predictable results, given the informal court system that existed in the early days.

As we have seen, this record of abuse of others as well as the environment was often not countered by great success in mining. James Marshall himself, original discoverer of the gold, and John Sutter, on whose land it had been found, both ended their days in poverty. The handful of the fortunate was vastly outnumbered by Forty-Niners who found nothing or so little gold that they could barely make ends meet.

Some of the most successful Forty-Niners were those who “mined” gold from the pockets of the miners. John Studebaker made wheelbarrows in Placerville for six years, beginning the climb which led to his family’s becoming one of the leading carriage makers in the United States, and eventually to the production of automobiles. Levi Strauss, a dry goods dealer just arrived from Bavaria, soon found that he could make a living selling heavy trousers to the Forty-Niners, while Phillip Armour earned his fortune by slaughtering and packing beef to satisfy their ravenous appetites.

Although relatively few of the Forty-Niners found the fortune they had sought, many still felt the experience had been worth it. Many miners joined the later rushes that took place in Colorado, Nevada, and elsewhere. They recalled the struggles to get to California in the first place, and to find gold once they arrived, and felt that they were part of something great and sublime. As Enos Christman, who found just one hundred ounces of gold in three years of searching put it, “Indeed my hopes have been gratified and I have realized a fortune.” These people were exploitive and selfish almost beyond belief, but also possessed that essential quality of adventure that is part of the human spirit.

This spirit is epitomized by the story of “seeing the elephant.” According to legend, a Midwestern farmer had a lifelong dream to see an elephant. He

loaded up his wagon and headed for the market at the next town, where he knew the circus was playing. The farmer was ecstatic to finally see elephants, but his horses were not - they bolted away, overturning the wagon. The farmer had lost his wagon, his horses, and the produce he planned to sell, and had to walk home, but said, "I don't give a hang. I have seen the elephant." Today, the Gateway Arch symbolizes that spirit, and commemorates those people who went west to "see the elephant."

