

GOLD RUSH!

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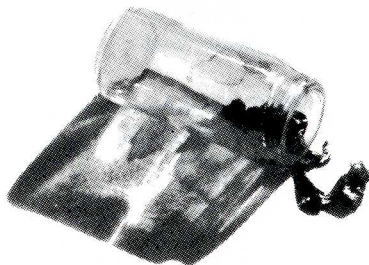
THE GOLD RUSH IS ON!

The first true gold rush began with the discovery of gold in California in 1848. Everywhere men abandoned their families, businesses, and some said, common sense, in order to head out to a remote, little-known land where the promise of riches beckoned even the humblest and most inexperienced of pioneers.

At least a quarter of a million men reached this "land of plenty" during the five years (1848-1853) that comprised the gold rush proper, producing an extraordinary amount of gold, valued in excess of \$200 million. Although most were Americans, the gold seekers came from virtually every corner of the civilized world, including China.

No "rush" of such proportions, wealth, or pandemonium, no hysteria so unrestrained or so world-encompassing in its influence had ever been witnessed before. Improved means of communication, especially through widely circulated newspapers, and the beginnings of modern transportation, such as clipper ships and ocean-going steamers, both contributed heavily to the magnitude and speed of the movement.

Although many "forty-niners" organized themselves into formally constituted "companies" before they left home, virtually all of these groups disbursed immediately upon reaching California. These circumstances left the individual to work out his own destiny among foreigners in a strange land utterly unprepared to cope with the throngs of newcomers.



Although merchants and shipowners throughout the world quickly adjusted operations to serve this booming new market, food and supplies of most kinds were scarce, expensive and subject to unsteady price fluctuations.

Housing was primitive and high-priced in the towns and did not exist at the mines, so each individual was resigned to building his own home or pitching a tent. Society was constantly in flux, with crowds of restless gold seekers stampeding off when each new mining town was rumored to be "rich," leaving many ghost towns in their wake.

The news of the "discovery" took some time to reach the East. It came at first in rumors, via ship around Cape Horn and up the Atlantic. Busy with their own aspirations, Easterners did not give much credibility to these whisperings in the early months of 1848. They had no time for the exaggerated tales that were constantly coming from the unknown parts to the west. As a consequence, the first rush to the diggings were mostly comprised of local folks.

The East was finally awakened to the rush when a letter from California Governor Richard Barnes Mason to the War Department announced: "There is more gold in the country drained by the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers than would pay the cost of the late war with Mexico a hundred times over."

