



gold
fever



As California celebrates the sesquicentennial anniversary of the Gold Rush, we present a preview of “Gold Fever! The Lure and Legacy of the California Gold Rush,” a special event running at the Memorial Auditorium August through October.

As a longtime Sacramento resident, I’d heard the term “Gold Country” used again and again in real estate ads, restaurant menus and street names. I’d dutifully toured Sutter’s Fort with out-of-town visitors and reveled in dark imaginings at Donner Pass on the way to Lake Tahoe. But it wasn’t until I moved to Folsom—

and a house literally built on top of mine tailings—that I developed my own case of gold fever. • In addition to these physical remains of large-scale dredging, which we uncover every time we plant a rosebush, I also have a husband who can’t take our raft out on Lake Natoma without checking every glittery rock. “Think of it—we could pay off our mortgage with one nugget,” he says with a certain mad gleam in his eye, and I think to myself that if we’d lived 150 years ago, I’d have undoubtedly been left in Boston with our children while he sailed through the Golden Gate as a prospector. Or worse yet, he’d have talked me into strapping our belongings to a covered wagon and heading west, a trip I’d have whined and complained about for the rest of our lives. • Maybe it’s my writer’s imagination, but other stories capture me as well—most of them inspired by the history my neighborhood is steeped in. A pioneer cemetery, for example, that illustrates the stamina of those early arrivals—Robert Hayes, 1828–1903, a native of Belfast, Ireland; and Mary Kirtledge, 1835–1920, a native of Maine—as well as their hardships: three children of the Perry family who died within weeks of each other. Or the nearby Sacramento Valley Railroad turntable, built by Theodore Judah to bring supplies and people to boomtown Folsom and the mining camps in the foothills. And there is Old Town itself, with buildings that once housed supply stores filled

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with mining equipment and \$800 barrels of flour and \$3 eggs—prices set, of course, to dig the gold out of prospectors' pockets faster than they could dig it out of the mines. Lastly, there are the memorials: Negro Bar across the lake, named for African Americans who first successfully mined the area, and the Chinese Cemetery Park, an apology from city leaders for mining operations that desecrated Folsom's Chinatown and its gravesites generations ago.

In fact, it's these stories that continue to fascinate me as Sacramento begins a series of sesquicentennial events this summer, all commemorating this most pivotal development in our state's history. Perhaps the most interesting is an exhibit titled "Gold Fever! The Lure and Legacy of the California Gold Rush," running at the Memorial Auditorium Aug. 1 through Oct. 31. Through the use of artifacts, art, photography, narration, and personal letters and diaries, it strives to bring to life the sights, sounds and voices of the era. Also unique is its unflinching look at the period. "Because of its educational arm and the fact that we approach the subject in such an honest fashion, we've received support from both Hispanic and Asian historical societies, which often don't endorse these types of events," says Richard Feinberg, exhibit manager. Although it won't substitute for a walk through the real thing, we offer here a sneak preview of the event (see *Going Places Calendar of Events* for hours and ticket information).

Discovery

"My eye was caught by something shining in the bottom of the ditch. I reached down and picked it up; it made my heart thump, for I was certain it was gold. The piece was about half the size and shape of a pea. Then I saw another."—*James Marshall, on finding gold*

The Gold Rush began with the simple discovery on Jan. 24, 1848, of a gold nugget by James Marshall, a New Jersey native who was building a sawmill for John Sutter on the south fork of the American River, called "Culuma" by the Maidu Indians who inhabited the area. Although Marshall later died a pauper—and indeed, his original discovery is now on display in the Gold Fever

exhibit—he set in motion the most cataclysmic event in California history.

Although there was an effort by large landowners in the area—such as Sutter and William Leidesdorff, who owned a ranch that later became the town of Folsom—to keep the news from spreading, it wasn't long before the word was out. President James Polk's State of the Union address in December, for example, officially confirmed gold in California based on reports he'd received from the U.S. Army, accompanied by 230 ounces of pure gold. And on May 12, Sam Brannan, a Mormon settler, reportedly returned from Coloma to San Francisco, clutching a bottle filled with gold dust and shouting, "Gold! Gold! Gold from the American River!"

By mid-June, three-quarters of the men in San Francisco had closed their doors and hung signs: "Gone to the Diggings"—although, interestingly—most didn't stay. Mining was hard, back-breaking and often disappointing work; although there existed true stories of miners who struck \$50,000 in one day, the reality was that this type of

fortune was rare. And the cost of living was so high at the mining camps that even those finding gold barely broke even. Living conditions were poor as well, and disease—such as cholera—was everywhere. Not only was medical care expensive, but the sick were often vulnerable to less-than-ethical physicians. "Diarrhea, chills, fever and scurvy begin to make their appearance and I ain't well myself. There has been three doctors, or things they call doctors, working at me for some time. Have now paid out all my gold and they leave me worse in health," wrote one miner.

Instead, many California natives figured out early on that no one could survive in the mountains without food and supplies—and that any gold found there would eventually find its way back through the valley. Perhaps the most successful recipients of gold fever were those who opened shops, hotels and supply stores, as well as the gamblers and land speculators who preyed on the 300,000 naive and inexperienced argonauts who arrived daily from the east.

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Getting There— By Land or By Sea

“Both sides of the road were lined with dead animals and abandoned wagons. Around them were strewed yokes, chains, harnesses, guns, tools, bedding, clothing, cooking utensils and many other articles. The owners had left everything, except what provisions they could carry on their backs, and hurried on to save themselves.”—*Margaret Frink, on the wagon trail to California*

Historians say the world was ripe for gold fever. In the eastern United States, many adventure-hungry descendants of the country's settlers were bored with farming and shop keeping. And in Europe, South America and Asia, political instability, repression and famine urged people to pursue dreams elsewhere.

Certainly the dream of California was an alluring one: temperate climates, fertile valleys, sparkling rivers and, of course, the chance of limitless wealth. Like today's lottery player or Las Vegas gambler, people were certain the trip to the Golden State—no matter the hardships—would be worth it in the end. “Beloved Georgiana, I am desolate at parting from my best friend on earth and that darling blue-eyed boy. I go from a sense of duty, for to succeed may place us . . . independent of want,” writes one prospector to his wife.

Unfortunately, for many, the six- to nine-month journey by land—or the four- to six-month journey by sea—was something they were ill prepared for. The Oregon Trail, which can still be followed across the United States today, is littered with pioneer graves—entire wagon trains wiped out by disease or starvation. The same is true of the route by sea, where tropical storms and shipwrecks were common, as well as scurvy and fevers, which reportedly killed as many as half those aboard some ships.

And for those who did arrive—more than 300,000 in the end—life did not always get better. In fact, weakened by the journey and unused to such hard physical labor, many prospectors were as poorly prepared for life in the mines as they had been for a cross-continental trip. And while it can be argued that the arrival of so many people

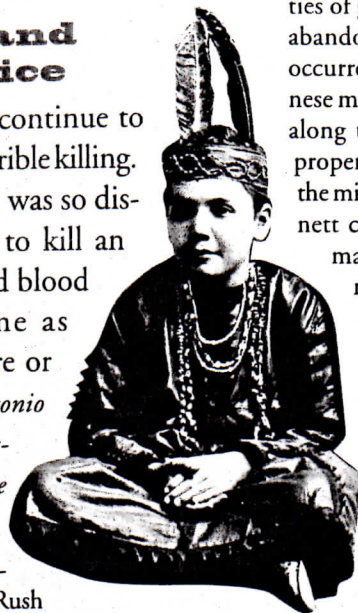
helped create the culturally diverse state we have now, it can also be said that the competition, greed and desperation of these inexperienced miners resulted in racial and ethnic atrocities for both native Californians and non-Caucasian immigrants.

Greed and Prejudice

“I could not continue to watch this horrible killing. The situation was so disgraceful that to kill an Indian in cold blood was the same as to hunt a hare or rabbit.”—*Antonio Coronel, on massacres of Native Americans*

One positive aspect of the Gold Rush was people's stamina and often-heroic efforts to help out their fellow men. But there are an equal number of tales that show the darker side of human nature. Many of the victims were non-white populations, who were either already here—in the case of Hispanics and Native Americans—or who came to mine the gold fields.

By far the worse case involves the native Maidu and Miwok Indians, who had inhabited for centuries what came to be known as the Gold Country. (You can still see evidence of their camp sites along the American River—spots where they stone ground corn, for example.) Most tribes knew where to find gold—their culture had simply never valued it—and early on they helped white settlers establish mines and even set up small-scale operations themselves. Eventually, however, they were resented and were kicked off claims, legally forbidden to own land or simply killed by Caucasians. Massacres of entire villages were common: “The miners are sometimes guilty of the most brutal acts with the Indians, such as killing the squaws and papooses. Such incidents have fallen under my notice that would make humanity weep and men disown their own race,” writes one prospector. By 1900, the California Indian population had been reduced from 300,000 to 16,000.



Other non-white groups faced discrimination as well, which often manifested itself in physical assaults or prejudicial laws, such as the Foreign Miners' Tax.

The Chinese, who were extremely efficient miners, often found large quantities of gold in mines that Caucasians had abandoned as unprofitable. One example occurred in Folsom, where a group of Chinese miners offered to lease a piece of land along the American River from a white property owner, D. W. Burnett. Although the miners offered \$100 for two years, Burnett charged them \$150, thinking he'd made a killing on worthless land. The mine eventually produced \$30,000 in gold dust.

African Americans were here too—some brought as slaves to work the gold mines for their owners, even though California was admitted to the Union as a free state. But free or slave, many were motivated by the unexpected chance at personal freedom, for themselves or their families: “There are Negroes here laboring for their liberty. On the Louisiana claim, one is to pay \$120,000 for himself and his wife and child,” writes a miner. Another example is the case of Archey Lee, who won his freedom in a landmark fugitive-slave case when nearly 4,000 free African Americans financed his defense.

The Legacy

“The Yankees are a wonderful people. If they emigrated to hell itself, they would somehow manage to change the climate.”—*Mariano Vallejo, on the arrival of American settlers*

For better or worse, James Marshall's discovery on that winter day in Coloma forever altered the destiny of California. And although it's true that large-scale mining destroyed the environment, it also helped create some of the most active environmental groups in the nation. Similarly, while racial prejudice and discrimination are a part of the story, so is cultural diversity, which has long been a part of the Golden State. Enjoy the stories and exhibits and events this summer, and if gold fever strikes, remember: It is estimated that 90 percent of the gold in the American River is still there. ■