

Westward Expansion The California Gold Rush

The year was 1848. John A. Sutter was building a new sawmill in Coloma, near Sacramento, California. The area was mostly wilderness. He never expected the treasure that the unexplored land held. In January 1848, the chief builder of the sawmill, found Sutter one rainy afternoon. The chief made him lock all of the doors to his office. Then, in a secret voice, the chief told Sutter about a discovery that would change the entire West Coast of the United States. He had discovered gold in the stream near the sawmill.

Sutter asked all of his workers to keep the news a secret for just 6 weeks. But it was hopeless. The news spread like **wildfire**.¹ Everyone wanted some gold. The American West was advertised all over again as a land full of promise and wealth. Soon accounts of gold were greatly exaggerated. In early 1849 the editor of the *New York Tribune* wrote: “Fortune lies upon the surface of the earth as plentiful as the mud in our streets.” People had gold fever.

Tens of thousands of men traveled to the west coast to seek their fortune. These men were nicknamed 49’ers. Do you remember the song “Clementine?” That folk song is all about the **miners**² who came west. High in his hopes, one man called California, “a land of glittering dreams.”

However, life was not always rosy for the miners. Their day-to-day life was very difficult. Most miners never found the slightest trace of gold, much less enough to strike it rich. Still, the **vast**³ California countryside contained endless possibility. This sense of possibility was the **allure**⁴ of the American West.

One of the greatest fortunes made from the gold rush had nothing to do with gold. In the spirit of invention, Sam Brannan came up with a **scheme**.⁵ He had found out about the gold from a reliable source. But at first the tale seemed

¹ **wildfire** – a huge fire that spreads very quickly

² **miner** – a person who digs in the ground for valuable rocks or metal

³ **vast** - huge, enormous

⁴ **allure** – something that has the power to attract

⁵ **scheme** – a plan

too tall to believe. Brannan changed all of this. He ran through the streets of San Francisco yelling and carrying a bottle of gold dust.

Why did he want everyone to know about the gold? Well, Brannan never even planned to search for gold. He had no interest in digging or panning for specks of yellow. Instead, he planned to make even more money. Brannan knew that the flocks of miners would need tools. He started a business selling them shovels. Brannan sold shovels to thousands and thousands of fortune-seekers. He made more money than all of them.

By the end of 1849, most of the gold was gone. Still people kept digging. The population of California grew steadily. At one point, on average, 30 homes a day were built in San Francisco! Soon the huge population increase of the West Coast would lead to the United State's decision to build a continental railroad.

Clementine

*“Oh my darling, Oh my darling, Oh my darling Clementine,
You are lost and gone forever, Dreadful sorry, Clementine.
In a cavern, in a canyon, Excavating for a mine, Dwelt a miner,
forty-niner, And his daughter Clementine.
Yeah, ho. Yeah, ho, ho, ho. Yeah, ho, ho, ho.
Ah, ho. Yeah, ho. Ah, ho. Yeah, yeah, ho.
Ten thousand cattle gone astray, left my range and traveled away.
And the sons of guns are here to stay,
and left me dead broke today In gamblin' halls delayin',
Ten thousand cattle strayin' In gamblin' halls delayin',
Ten thousand cattle strayin'.
Oh my darlin', Oh my darlin' Clementine.”*