

Pretend you are walking around outside, and you come across a quarter lying on the ground. When you bend down to pick it up, you notice another quarter just a few inches from the first. Intrigued, you start looking more closely, picking up rocks and digging into the ground a little. In just a few minutes, you have a pocketful of change and a lot of excitement. You try to keep the news to yourself, but little by little, word gets out. Soon people are coming from all around to dig in the spot where you found the quarters. Some people go home empty-handed, but others find a fortune.

This scenario is close to what happened in California in the mid-1800s. Of course, the people in California found gold, not quarters. Gold was worth a lot of money then, just as it is today, and the idea of finding wealth in the ground was hard to resist. Soon people from all over the country headed to California with grand visions of striking it rich.

Gold's Awaitin', Boys!

Gold miners woke before daylight six days a week. Most of them likely dressed in the dark, pulling on a pair of "Levi's" before heading to the mines. Levi's were sturdy pants made from tent canvas by a man named Levi Strauss. Strauss had started selling them when miners complained their pants wore out too quickly. Later, Strauss switched to denim and used copper rivets to make the pockets stronger. Levi's are still sold today, and you might even own a pair yourself.

Miners also wore long-sleeved shirts, sometimes called trapper shirts, probably because they were first worn by fur trappers. Most miners only owned one or two sets of clothing. They wore the same clothes every day, waiting until the old ones were literally falling apart before buying a new set.

After drinking a cup of coffee and eating a hard biscuit, miners were ready for work. The "home" they left behind for the day was not much to speak of. For some, it was just a tent. Others lived in hastily constructed shanties. Whatever shelter they had, most miners slept on a pile of old blankets or furs on the floor.



California gold miners, like the one depicted above, traveled from all across the country to strike it rich.

Aside from their clothing and tools, miners usually owned only a frying pan, a few utensils, a coffee pot, and a tin plate.

No matter how crude the living arrangements were at camp, miners were glad to have the hardships of travel behind them. Nearly all of them had spent months traveling to California. They came by one of three routes, each with its own dangers and drawbacks.



Currier and Ives Lithograph, 1871. This picture shows three different methods for mining gold: the long tom, the cradle, and the simple pan.

The first was over land from the eastern United States, a journey of some 3,000 miles. It took from three to seven months, and travelers faced disease, starvation, and other dangers along the way.

The second was by sea down the East Coast to Panama, across the isthmus by land and then by sea again up the West Coast of North America. This trip was 7,000 miles long and took from two to four months. It was dangerous though, because it involved travel through Panama's jungle.

The final route to California was also by sea, all the way around the tip of South America. Those who chose this option traveled 15,000 miles and journeyed for six to eight months. They had to survive spoiled food, bad water, and other hazards. Some people also sailed across the Pacific Ocean to California from places like Hawaii and China. Because of the dangers of travel in those days, many died before they had the chance to hunt for gold. Sadly, their adventures ended along the trail or aboard ship.

Digging for Gold

Full of hope, a miner shouldered his pick and shovel in the morning and headed out to dig. Each miner had his own section of land in which to dig for gold, called his claim. Gold diggers spent 12 to 16 hours a day digging, scraping, hauling, and washing dirt and gravel. The work was repetitive and backbreaking.

Gold washers, as they were sometimes called, used three main methods to find gold. The first was the simplest. A prospector squatted beside a stream and filled a pan with water and dirt from the stream, swirling the water and gradually washing all the dirt from the pan. Because gold is heavier than other minerals, it would sink to the bottom of the pan. When the dirt was washed away, only the gold would be left.

The second method required the use of a wooden invention called a cradle, which was a trough from six to eight feet long with a rounded bottom. The cradle was filled with dirt and water and rocked to separate the gravel and dirt from the sand and gold. It took four men to run a cradle. The last method prospectors used was even more efficient. It involved diverting a stream to flow right into a box called a long tom. The box filtered the dirt in the stream so that the gold and sand fell into a box below the tom.

Using a cradle, four men could each make about \$25 a day in gold in the early days of the gold rush. Some men made less and others much more. Some lucky folks made \$17,000 in one week! Compare that with some of the wages for common occupations at the time. A farmer could expect to make from \$200 to \$300 a *year*. A factory worker made about \$1 a day. So \$25 a day was beyond people's wildest dreams!

At the end of a long day, miners made their way back to camp. There they sat around the fire eating beans cooked with hot fat and molasses. Dried meat and rice were also common meals for miners. They also ate potatoes, onions, and dried fruit whenever they could get them. Despite their efforts to stay fed and healthy, sickness still claimed many lives.

Gone to Town

Miners worked six days a week, but on the seventh, they often headed for town. Town was teeming with miners, shops, saloons, laundries, and plenty of people to meet. While in town miners first went to the bank, where they exchanged their



African American and white miners sometimes worked side by side during the California gold rush.

gold for money. On the trips to town when supplies were needed, a miner had to be careful how he spent his money. Because business was booming, merchants often raised their prices. A loaf of bread that sold for 22 cents in St. Louis could cost \$2 in San Francisco. A horse could be purchased for \$6 most places, but miners were smart to buy one before they reached California. There a horse cost \$300!

Rubbing elbows with so many other miners was always interesting because the gold diggers were sometimes very different from one another. Some had been farmers or merchants before they headed to California. Others had been doctors or preachers. Women also tried their hand at mining, though they were more likely to cook, run boarding houses, or sell supplies. At first, many different ethnic groups worked together to mine for gold. Mines often had workers from the United States, China, and Mexico, as well as Native Americans. Some enslaved African Americans were even able to make enough money to buy their freedom.

Later, when the gold got harder to find, people were desperate to find more, and some resorted to violence. Chinese and Native American miners, in particular, faced discrimination. They had their claims stolen or were forced to work for white miners. Some were even killed. Lawlessness became a big problem during gold rush days. People got into fights and often gambled away any money they had made. Murder and violence were all too common. But despite all the crime, a miner could still enjoy some frontier entertainment without breaking any laws. Sometimes a musician would play the banjo for the camp, or a traveling theater group might perform a play on a stage made of packing crates.

With a Little Bit of Luck (or Maybe a Lot)

All in all, there was one major ingredient needed to succeed as a gold miner: luck. No matter how many hours a prospector spent shoveling dirt, he could not make up for a claim that just did not have much gold. For the quick-witted, however, failing as a gold miner did not always mean going broke. In fact, many people made their fortunes by supplying the miners with goods and services instead of actually digging themselves. Chances were, however, that if a miner pinned all his hopes on hitting pay dirt, he ended up disappointed. When the gold rush subsided, around 1852, billions of dollars of gold had been removed from the ground, and many lives had been changed, for better or worse.

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

1. What was a long tom?
 - A. another name for a gold miner
 - B. a device used to sift for gold
 - C. a type of cabin in a gold town
 - D. the type of gold found in California
2. Which of the following was one result of the gold rush?
 - A. war with Mexico
 - B. an economic depression in California
 - C. the end of discrimination against minorities
 - D. a major jump in the prices of many goods
3. What major problem faced many gold rush towns?
 - A. increased crime and violence
 - B. too many goods and services
 - C. overcrowded schools
 - D. too many rules and regulations
4. Gold mining was difficult work. Describe how mining for gold could change a person's life for better or for worse. Use details from the reading passage in your answer.