

forty-niners the people (almost all young men) who joined the rush for gold in California in 1849

16.8 The Forty-Niners

In 1848, carpenter James Marshall was building a sawmill on the American River in northern California. Suddenly, he spotted something shining in the water. "I reached my hand down and picked it up," he wrote later. "It made my heart thump, for I felt certain it was gold."

When word of Marshall's discovery leaked out, people across California dropped everything to race to the goldfields. "All were off to the mines," wrote a minister, "some on horses, some on carts, and some on crutches."

The World Rushes In By 1849, tens of thousands of gold seekers from around the world had joined the California gold rush. About two thirds of these **forty-niners** were Americans. The rest came from Mexico, South America, Europe, Australia, and even China.

The forty-niners' first challenge was simply getting to California. From China and Australia, they had to brave the rough crossing of the Pacific Ocean. From the East, many traveled by ship to Panama in Central America, crossed through dangerous jungles to the Pacific side, and boarded ships north to San Francisco. Others made the difficult journey overland.

Most forty-niners were young, and almost all were men. When Luzena Wilson arrived in Sacramento with her family, a miner offered her \$5 for her biscuits just to have "bread made by a woman." When she hesitated, he doubled his offer. "Women were scarce in those days," she wrote. "I lived six months in Sacramento and saw only two."

The search for gold was difficult. Miners spent long days searching through the mud and stones of freezing streams for this precious metal.



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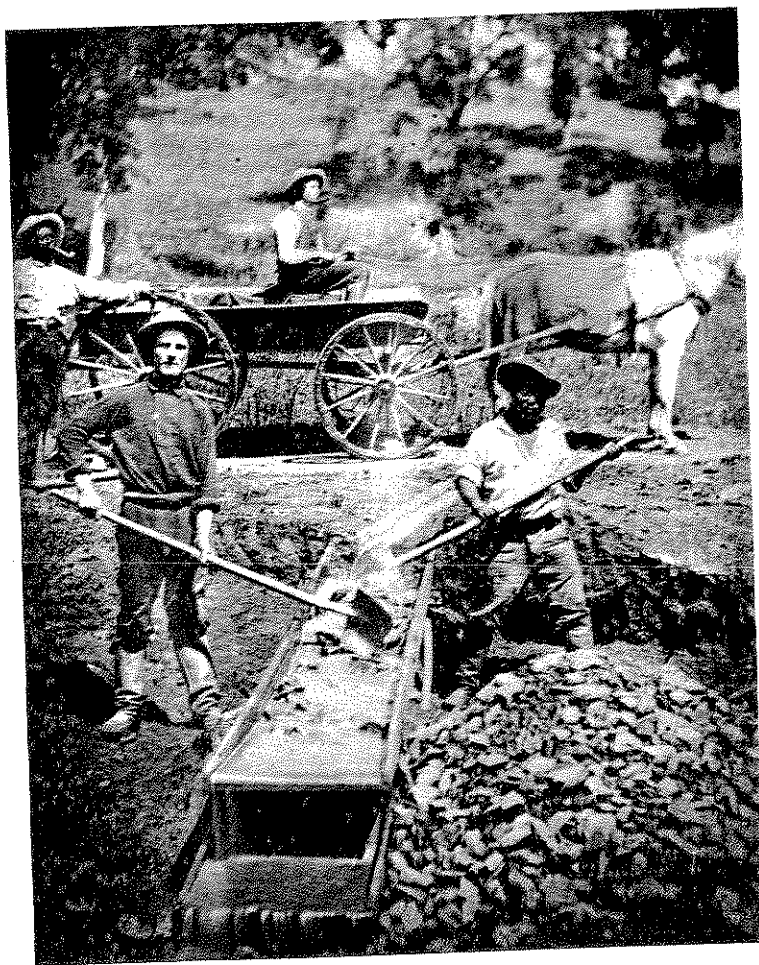
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Life in the Mining Camps Wherever gold was spotted, mining camps with names like Mad Mule Gulch and You Bet popped up overnight. At Coyote Diggings, Luzena found “a row of canvas tents.” A few months later, “there were two thousand men...and the streets were lined with drinking saloons and gambling tables.” Merchants made fortunes selling eggs for \$6 a dozen and flour for \$400 a barrel.

With no police to keep order, the camps were rough places. Miners frequently fought over the boundaries of their claims, and they took it on themselves to punish crimes. “In the short space of twenty-four hours,” wrote Louise Clappe, “we have had murders, fearful accidents, bloody deaths, a mob, whippings, a hanging, an attempt at suicide, and a fatal duel.”

Digging for gold was hard and tedious work. The miners spent long days digging up mud, dirt, and stones while standing knee-deep in icy streams. All too soon, the easy-to-find gold was gone. “The day of quick fortune-making is over,” wrote a miner in 1851. “There are thousands of men now in California who would gladly go home if they had the money.”



The Forty-Niners' Legacy By 1852, the gold rush was over. While it lasted, about 250,000 people flooded into California. For California's Indians, the legacy of this invasion was dreadful. Between 1848 and 1870, warfare and disease reduced their number from about 150,000 to just 30,000. In addition, many Californios lost their land to the newcomers.

The forty-niners also left a prosperous legacy. By 1850, California had enough people to become the first state in the far west. These new Californians helped to transform the Golden State into a diverse land of economic opportunity.

16.9 The Chinese

Gam Saan—“Gold Mountain”—was what people in China called California in 1848. To poor and hungry Chinese peasants, Gam Saan sounded like paradise. There, they were told, “You will have great pay, large houses, and food and clothing of the finest description... Money is in great plenty.”

By 1852, more than 20,000 Chinese had ventured across the Pacific to California. That year, one of every ten Californians was Chinese.

An Uncertain Welcome At first the Chinese were welcome. Lai Chun-Chuen, an early immigrant, observed that they “were received like guests” and “greeted with favor.” In 1852, the governor of California

Miners shoveled gravel into a narrow box called a *sluice*. The water running through washed away the lighter particles, and the gold remained.

praised Chinese immigrants as “one of the most worthy classes of our newly adopted citizens.”

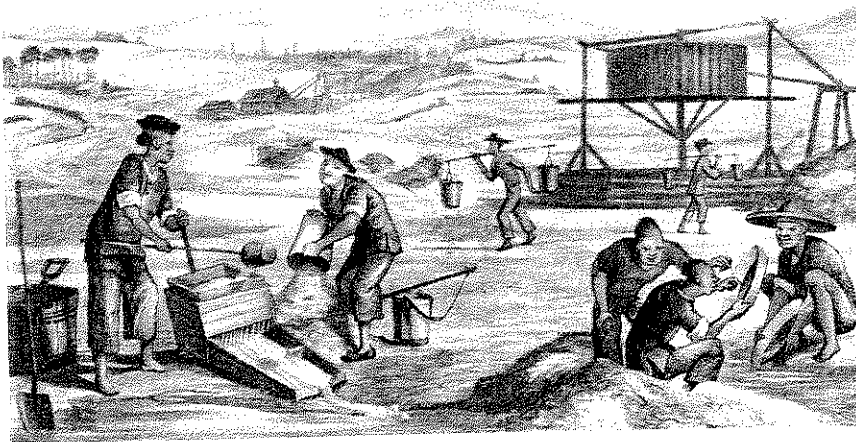
As gold mining became more difficult, however, attitudes toward immigrants began to change. A miner from Chile complained, “The Yankee regarded every man but...an American as an interloper [intruder] who had no right to come to California and pick up the gold.” The Chinese, too, came under attack.

American miners called on the government to drive foreigners out of the goldfields. In 1852, the state legislature passed a law requiring foreign miners to pay a monthly fee for a license to mine. As the tax collectors arrived in the camps, most of the foreigners left. One traveler saw them “scattered along the roads in every direction,” like refugees fleeing an invading army.

The Chinese Stay The Chinese, however, paid the tax and stayed on. When the miners’ tax failed to drive off the Chinese, Americans tried to bully them into leaving. Whites hacked off the long *queues*, or braids, worn by Chinese men. They burned the shacks of Chinese miners. Beatings followed burnings.

Discouraged Chinese immigrants left the mines to open restaurants, laundries, and stores in California’s growing cities. “The best eating houses in San Francisco,” one miner wrote, were those opened by the Chinese. So many Chinese settled in San Francisco that local newspapers called their neighborhood Chinatown. Today, Chinatown remains the oldest and largest Chinese community in the United States.

Other Chinese put their farming skills to work in California’s fertile Central Valley. They drained swamps and dug irrigation ditches to water arid fields. In time, they would help transform California into America’s fruit basket and salad bowl.



Thousands of Chinese left their homeland and flocked to the California goldfields. Most failed to strike it rich. However, many settled in California’s Central Valley, where their knowledge of farming helped the area develop.

The Legacy of the Chinese Immigrants Most of the Chinese who came to California in search of gold hoped to return to China as rich men. A few did just that. Most, however, stayed on in America. Despite continued prejudice against them, their hard work, energy, and skills greatly benefited California and other western states. “In mining, farming, in factories and in the labor generally of California,” observed a writer in 1876, “the employment of the Chinese has been found most desirable.”

The Chinese not only helped to build the West, but they also made it a more interesting place to live. Wherever they settled, Chinese immigrants brought with them the arts, tastes, scents, and sounds of one of the world’s oldest and richest cultures.