GOLD CAMPS

Looking back from the 1860’s on the halcyon days of the California gold rush, Mark Twain nostalgically recalled the forty-niners as, “the only population of the kind that the world has ever seen…Two hundred thousand young men—not simpering, dainty… weaklings, but stalwart, muscular, dauntless young braves… the very pick and choice of the world’s glorious ones.”

Among the thousands who filled the gold camps that stretched for some 200 miles along the Sierras’ western slopes were many who matched Twain’s enthusiastic description. Determined to strike it rich, they spent hours on end in freezing rivers panning and sifting gravel—more often than not, for an ounce or two of gold or nothing at all. After the relatively easy pickings had given out they sometimes formed partnerships to build dams and divert streams so the original beds could be mined more easily. Months of arduous labor were usually required for such projects, and sometimes the rewards were only a monumental backache or a case of pneumonia. A surprising number of the forty-niners were well to do young men, lured west by the promise of adventure as much as by the gold. Others were driven by the hope of escaping a life of crushing poverty back east.

Suspended between wild dreams of wealth and the more frequent reality of dry diggings the forty-niner was often a man of mercurial temperament. A trifling argument over a card game might balloon into a gun battle; a beady eyed stare from a passerby could set knives flashing murderously; a contested claim or a dispute over the ownership of an ounce of gold dust often ended in a bloody brawl. Yet the denizens of such camps as Poker Flat, Indian Bar, Red Dog, Rich Bar, Eureka North and Hangtown were also capable of amazing generosity. At one camp, a teenager down on his luck was given a hundred-dollar grubstake by grizzled prospectors, who then searched out a rich claim for the youngster to work.

Gamblers and “Fancy Ladies”

But in these nearly all-male (92% in 1850), gold obsessed societies, even the fastidious soon forgot the preaching of mothers, wives, ministers, and teachers. Former prigs became masters of profanity and vied in epic contest of verbal insult and threat. The results could be colorful, as when one miner shouted at another, “Only let me get hold of your beggarly carcass once, and I will use you up so small that God Almighty himself cannot see your ghost!”

By the end of 1850 tens of thousands of miners—all of them forty-niners in the public’s view—had poured into the California camps. Aside from white Americans there were some 2,000 blacks, both slave and free, as well as Indians and an assortment of foreigners from Germany, France, Ireland, England, Wales, Scotland, China, Australia, Mexico, Peru, Chile, and even Turkey. The camps also supported a floating population of professional gamblers, barkeeps “fancy ladies,” flinty eyed merchants and preachers. For a time in many camps, lynch law was the only law, although more civilized systems were eventually devised, some alleged lawbreakers were hanged, whipped, and occasionally mutilated on the flimsiest of evidence.

The Forty-niners: High hopes and Arduous Toil

His gaunt frame is hung with a faded flannel shirt and patched trousers. A greasy slouch hat inadequately shades him from the searing summer sun. His arms are pocked with mosquito and flea bites. His hands puffy from submersion in mountain streams, his clothes alive with lice. He is the forty-niner, the Argonaut, legendary elsewhere, but in California one of thousands of weary, mostly inexperienced men digging all day in temperatures over 100 F or wading for hours in icy water. Exhausted, at dusk he fixes a supper of sourdough and salt pork, occasionally varied with beans or dried apples. He probably will get scurvy and dysentery. His strained muscles ache, yet he sleeps on the damp ground. Upon the rare arrival of a family letter, he chokes up with
homesickness. Is it worth it when he averages one ounce of gold dust a day, only enough to break even? Yes, of course, tomorrow he will find a $6,000 nugget-maybe.

“Greasers” and “Chinks”

In some camps all foreigners were barred; in others only certain nationalities were unwelcome. California’s recent masters, the Mexicans were despised as “greasers,” their claims were widely ignored, and their property subject to confiscation. But of all nationalities the Chinese most often raised the hackles of their fellow prospectors. Hated for their color, scorned for their unfamiliar ways, the Chinese were even held in contempt for the diligence with which they worked diggings long since abandoned by whites as unprofitable. They were sometimes victimized by gun-toting thugs who thought it great sport to cut off their pigtails, and on one occasion two groups of Chinese were urged into open warfare by whites. Armed with medieval lances and long swords, provided by local blacksmiths, the rival tongs whacked at one another as white onlookers cheered them on. All had a marvelous time except, of course, the eight dead and six wounded combatants -and one white that was shot by an anonymous enemy.

Occasionally, anti-foreign sentiment was based on a genuine grievance; independent prospectors resented foreign operators who worked their claims with peon labor. Once, when a group of peons working for an absentee Chilean capitalist ignored orders to leave the Rose’s Bar mining camp, the other prospectors strung up their foreman, mutilated one worker, and bullwhipped several others as a warning to all would-be interlopers.

Prospectors with Slaves

There was also one other group of Americans who were anathema to the other miners. These were the slaveholders who relaxed while their human chattel worked in the diggings on their behalf. Many years after the event, an old minor happily recalled the fate of a white Tennessean who had come to Hangtown with three slaves. After claiming what proved to be a rich digging, the Tennessean set his slaves to work. One day, when the white man arrived to collect his gold dust, the Negroes informed him that since they were on free territory, they were no longer slaves. The white man had no right to the products of their labor –unless, of course, he was willing to do a share of the work. The Tennessean appealed to the courts, only to be rebuffed; he returned to his home, divested of both gold and slaves.

By the mid 1850’s most of California’s surface and near-surface gold was played out, and the day of the independent miner was drawing to a close.

The time of huge mining corporations, with capital and equipment to tunnel deep into the hills, had come. Gradually the old camps were abandoned, the prospectors drifting off to new diggings in Nevada or settling down to humdrum lives in coastal towns. A wild raucous, anarchic era had ended. A few men had grown rich; most left as poor as they had come. But all that had survived could look back on a time of high adventure and savor the moment they had left the plow, the ledger, or the textbook to seize the chance of a lifetime.