Striking It Rich

Sutter’s Mill
On the morning of January 24, 1848, James Marshall picked up a yellow rock near a sawmill he was building for John Sutter, a rancher who owned 50,000 acres of land in central California. Marshall and Sutter soon realized that they had found gold. At first the information was known only locally, but the news soon spread like wildfire throughout California, the country, and the world. By the summer of 1848, three out of every four men in San Francisco had left town to search for gold in the Sierra Nevada foothills. The miners quickly destroyed Sutter’s land and the Native American villages in the area.

Forty-Niners
As the gold fever spread, men began to stream into California, which was pictured as a land where gold could literally be picked up off the ground. Two-thirds of the American men in Oregon went south to “strike it rich.” News reports in September added to the excitement. President James Polk helped spread the news in his 1848 address to Congress.

In 1849 alone, almost 90,000 people—mostly men—set out for California. They came to be known as Forty-Niners. Tens of thousands journeyed for months on wagon trains across the country. Others traveled by ship. The sea voyage took three to six months whether they went around South America and sailed north or crossed the Panama jungle in Central America and then sailed up the west coast to California. Either route involved seasickness, storms, poor food, illness, and for a few, death.

Within a decade almost 400,000 more people arrived from some 70 nations. Hawaiians, Chinese, Mexicans, Chileans, Europeans, and many others came to strike it rich. Freed American blacks and some Native Americans also prospected for gold. More than 1,000 black slaves were brought to California by their owners to help dig for gold.

Hunting for Gold
Forty-Niners soon found that the easy-to-find surface gold was gone. Miners used pans to separate gold from dirt and water. Those who could afford it operated a wooden rocker to separate the gold from worthless dirt and rock. Others set up sluices, or slides, across a bend in the river and washed dirt through them. Gold was so heavy it stayed on the bottom of the pan, rocker, or sluice when the water and dirt were washed away.

Sometimes miners found enough gold to keep them in supplies. More often, they found no gold at all. Thousands of Forty-Niners turned around and returned home with nothing but their lives to show for their efforts. Very few found enough gold to make them rich.
Striking It Rich (cont.)

Merchants Strike It Rich

The most successful people never dug for gold. They took it from the miners. Merchants sold picks, shovels, mining pans, food, and other supplies to the miners at prices 10 to 20 times higher than normal.

A miner’s wife named Luzena Wilson made a fortune feeding hungry miners at her inn. Saloon owners used gambling and drink to separate the miners from their gold dust.

Wah Lee, a Chinese man who opened a hand laundry, found his own gold mine washing shirts for the wealthy. Levi Strauss promoted a material he thought would be perfect for tents. It was not that great for tents, but the clothes he made from this denim material were very durable.

Strauss made his fortune selling pants, and today the pants he created are known as “Levis.” Henry Wells and William Fargo set up a company that delivered mail and bought gold for cash. It became the most successful business in the West and today is the Wells Fargo Bank.

California’s New Look

Before the Gold Rush, California had 14,000 non-native residents. Just three years later, it had 250,000 people—most of them men. The city of San Francisco grew from less than 1,000 to over 35,000 people. It had newspapers, hospitals, churches, and over 500 saloons. It also had 15 fire companies, which were desperately needed. The rapid growth led to crowded housing and frequent fires, many set by thugs. In 1850 California became the thirty-first U.S. state.

Trouble in Paradise

With the arrival of people from all over the world, many American miners began to try to push out the foreigners. The California state legislature even passed a tax of 20 dollars a month on all foreign miners. Many foreigners left because the tax was more than the gold they found.

There were 20,000 Chinese miners in California. For the most part, they paid the fee and stayed, but this led to violence against them. Their shacks and equipment were burned, and many Chinese were beaten or murdered.
Striking It Rich (cont.)

Squeezed Out
Native Californios of Mexican ancestry often found their land grabbed by the newly arrived Americans. Although many Californios participated in the effort to achieve statehood, they often lost everything they owned. Native Americans were also pushed out of the mining fields. Their native hunting and fishing areas were destroyed, and thousands died from diseases brought by the whites. Native Americans of all ages were attacked, imprisoned, scalped, murdered, and driven from their lands. In 20 years' time, the Native American population in California dropped from 150,000 to 30,000.

The Comstock Lode
Gold was discovered elsewhere, too. In 1859 gold was found in Gold Hill, Colorado, near Denver. The rush there did not last long because the strike required deep mining. A wild rush called the Comstock Lode did occur in 1859 and 1860 in Virginia City, Nevada, when both gold and silver were found on the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada mountain range. Miners rushed to Nevada from the camps in California where there was very little gold being found, but unfortunately the most successful mining here also involved digging deep into the mountains. Only a few men struck it really rich.

Other Strikes
A strike in Idaho from 1860 to 1862 was better for miners who washed gold out of streams. Gold was discovered in mountain valleys and gulches near Virginia City, Montana, in 1863. The Black Hills of South Dakota near Deadwood were the scene of a major gold rush in 1876. This rush caused major problems because the gold was found on land promised by a treaty to the Native Americans. Whites overran the area, and major conflicts broke out. The defeat of General George Custer and his troops at the Little Big Horn was a consequence of this gold strike.

The city of Tombstone, Arizona, had a silver strike in 1877 which lasted for several years, and rich ores were found near Cripple Creek, Colorado, in 1892. The last major gold rush occurred on the Klondike River in the Yukon Territory of Canada in 1897. More than 100,000 Americans set out in 1897 and 1898 for Dawson City in this desolate area. Gold discoveries were also made in nearby Alaska in 1899.
Striking It Rich Quiz

Directions: Read pages 25–27 about the gold rushes during the Westward Movement. Answer each question below by circling the correct answer.

1. Who first discovered gold in California?
   a. James Polk
   b. James Marshall
   c. Levi Strauss
   d. Henry Wells

2. Who came to California to find gold?
   a. Americans
   b. Europeans
   c. Chinese
   d. all of the above

3. Who made the most money from the Gold Rush?
   a. miners
   b. merchants
   c. Californios
   d. cities

4. What happened to Native Americans in California?
   a. Their land was stolen.
   b. Their hunting grounds were destroyed.
   c. Many died of disease.
   d. all of the above

5. What was a result of the Gold Rush?
   a. Miners became rich.
   b. People came to the U.S. from around the world.
   c. War broke out.
   d. Californios got more land.

6. Where was the Comstock Lode?
   a. Canada
   b. Nevada
   c. Montana
   d. South Dakota

7. When did California become a state?
   a. 1849
   b. 1860
   c. 1850
   d. 1897

8. Which foreign miners paid to keep their claims in spite of violence against them?
   a. Chinese
   b. Native Americans
   c. Californios
   d. Europeans

9. What business did Levi Strauss start?
   a. cleaning shirts
   b. serving food
   c. making pants
   d. buying gold

10. Which of these tools was not used to separate gold from dirt, sand, and water?
    a. rockers
    b. metal pans
    c. sluices
    d. plows
Gold Rush Prices

The prices that gold miners had to pay for goods varied during the gold rush, depending on where they were. Regardless of location, however, the prices were high. Look at the prices listed below for an idea of what things cost back then.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food</th>
<th>Clothing and Supplies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>beans (1 pound)</td>
<td>$45.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bread (1 loaf)</td>
<td>$100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>can of sardines</td>
<td>$16.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>coffee (1 pound)</td>
<td>$5.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dozen eggs</td>
<td>$15.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sausage (1 pound)</td>
<td>$50.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Directions: Use the above prices to solve the following word problems.

1. How much would it cost to buy five pounds of beans and one pound of coffee?

2. How much would a pair of overalls, a shirt, and a pair of boots cost?

3. Sam Garcia bought a pan, a pickax, three pounds of beans, bread, a can of sardines, and a dozen eggs. How much did he spend in all?

4. Jeremiah Smith found $20 worth of gold. He bought a pound of sausage, a dozen eggs, and a loaf of bread. How much did he have left?

5. The Johnson brothers bought a can of sardines, half a pound of coffee, bread, 10 pounds of beans, two pans, and a pickax. How much did they spend altogether?

6. Jonas Atkins wore out his boots and needs to buy a new pair. If he typically makes $5.00 per day panning for gold, how many days will it be before he can buy the boots?

7. Wong Lee made $500 doing laundry for miners. If he spent 30 percent of that on food and supplies, how much did he have left?

8. Old Tom Jenkins made $200 on his claim. He lost one-fourth of it by gambling. Then he bought a new shirt and pair of overalls. How much did he have left?

9. Four miners split the cost of two cans of sardines, three pounds of sausage, a pound of coffee, two loaves of bread, a dozen eggs, a pickax, and 20 pounds of beans. How much did each miner have to pay?

10. Alfonso Rinaldi mined $250 worth of gold at his claim. What food, clothing, and supplies could he purchase with that amount of money?