

The Gold Rush: Rise of the Golden State

by RV Staff Writer J.C.H.

California was forever changed the day James Marshall saw flakes of gold sparkling in the American River. Between the years of 1848 and 1855, the discovery of gold would inspire more than 300,000 people to move to California. This “gold rush” helped California to officially become a state.

James Marshall was a carpenter working on John Sutter's property when he found flakes of gold in 1848. Sutter and Marshall became partners and tried to keep the discovery a secret. This proved to be difficult, and once word got out that gold had been found on Sutter's property, people began to move into the territory hoping to strike it rich by selling the gold they found in the area. These people eventually became known as “forty-niners,” as many of them moved to California in the year of 1849. Many forty-niners set up lawless settlements that would eventually become some of the cities that many Californians still live in today.

The first and simplest method for finding gold was a technique called “panning.” Forty-niners would go to streams or riverbeds with a pan and scoop up small piles of earth. They would then put water in the pan and shake it lightly back and forth. If there was any gold in the dirt, it would sink to the bottom of the pan for the forty-niners to find. Over time, more advanced methods were created to make it faster and easier to find larger amounts of gold.

Although the California Gold Rush stimulated the state's economy and helped it to become the state it is today, it wasn't beneficial for everyone. Unfortunately for John Sutter, these forty-niner settlements interfered with his property. By 1852, with his livestock stolen and most of his goods destroyed, he declared bankruptcy. More importantly, most of the Native Americans living in the California were either killed or forced out due to violence, disease, or starvation. Some Native American groups attempted to fight back against the settlers, but, without guns, they usually lost and were killed. Many of the Native Americans that survived were driven out of their territories into areas where food was scarce, causing even more to die.

By 1855, most of the large deposits of gold had been exhausted, ushering in the end of the California Gold Rush. While the time had it's dark side, no one can deny its lasting effect on Californian and American culture. The California Gold Rush encouraged the American Dream—the idea that with hard work and some luck, anyone can be successful. Even now, California's nickname is “The Golden State,” and its state motto is “Eureka” which means, “I have found it.”

Questions

1. Why do you think it is called a gold rush?
2. What does *stimulate* mean here: "Although the California Gold Rush stimulated the state's economy"?
3. Name one of the bad effects the gold rush had.
4. What does eureka mean? How does that meaning relate to the California Gold Rush?