

The gold rush



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The California Gold Rush When people today think about the California Gold Rush of 1849, they usually have vague impressions of an old white man, bent, wrinkled and dirty from working in his dusty mines, leading an equally old and stubborn mule loaded down with pick-axes, shovels, boxes and other strange devices. They think of men bent over streams, panning for gold and men digging into mountainsides hoping to hit the 'mother lode.' Most people, though, don't think about the people who were in place before gold was found or the effects the gold rush might have had on the development into today's society. The gold rush seemed to spell the beginning of the end for the people who lived in California when gold was found, it was also the beginning of equal rights for others who had long been oppressed by these same oppressors.

There were several people already in California when gold was discovered. In addition to the white men that were moving into the west as a result of the Mexican-American War, there were plenty of Mexicans already living on the land of California, colonists sent by Mexico and Spain called Californios. Although many of the Mexicans who settled in California to work the 'southern mines' were experienced miners in the same sort of climate as they encountered in California, their expertise and success was resented by the white colonists. "In a little over two years, Americans came to resent the fact that foreigners -- particularly those from a country the United States had just defeated in war -- were making it rich off land that they now considered exclusively theirs" (Chavez, 1998). As a means of 'evening up' the playing field, the white settlers struggled to gain control of the legal institutions and thus bring about laws that favored them while significantly reducing the resources and recourses available to the Mexicans or people of non-white

descent.

Another group of people had also been living on California land in the mid-1800s. They made up a variety of tribes and distinctly separate cultural groups, but history has clumped them together under the common term Native Americans. These people had long lived off of the fruits of the land, fitting themselves within the rhythms of the natural seasons and placing value on things that actually benefited them directly, such as food, clothing, shelter and workable metals or stone. Materials such as gold had little value to them because it was too soft to be dependable and did not provide any other direct benefit. However, these Native Americans were willing to help crazy white people who moved into their territory eagerly willing to trade valuable supplies for worthless metal. Before long, though, the Native Americans were mostly killed off through violence or disease or sold off as slaves or indentured servants as a means of clearing the land for white habitation (Magagnini, 1998).

In direct opposition to the direction taken by the Mexicans and Native Americans, though, women and blacks were able to find the sort of independence they needed to prove that, when given the opportunity, they could often become even more successful than their white male counterparts. In the rough and wild west with its legendary shortage of white women, women were able to find various ways of exploring their own entrepreneurial spirit. This was done in a variety of ways, enabling women to both earn money and care for the family without necessarily losing their good reputation (Perkins, 1998). Black people, too, discovered a new freedom to explore the fruits of their own labors, often finding enough gold to free themselves as well as their families and opening up businesses in the

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west that gained them a high degree of equality unmatched in other areas of the country (Magagnini, 1998b). It is not hard to imagine that these efforts planted the seeds for the beginnings of women's suffrage and the Civil Rights movements that brought about today's more open society.

Thus, while California during the gold rush can be said to have been a land of opportunity for many, particularly if you were someone coming from anywhere but originally within California itself and especially if you were white, it was also a land of destitution and degradation for proud peoples who had lived their lives on the land for generations. It was a multi-racial land that perhaps planted the earliest seeds for equality and integration in the rest of the country, but it was also a place where segregation, oppression and lack of human rights based upon skin color ran rampant.

References

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