

## In the Gold Fields

Leaving San Francisco behind, tens of thousands of adventurers headed for the Sierra foothills. Vicente Perez Rosales was one of them. He had left Chile in 1849 to find his fortune in California. In his diary, he described the conflicting pieces of advice he got:

-Don't go to Sacramento, there's no gold there. The place is Stanislaus.

-Don't even think about Stanislaus. Sacramento is a better bet. A guy took out several thousands worth in one day.

-The mines are flooded and it's crazy to think you can go there now. A friend of mine has just got back, and now tells me he was wading in water up to his middle.

-What do you mean, water? That place is drier in winter than it is in summer.

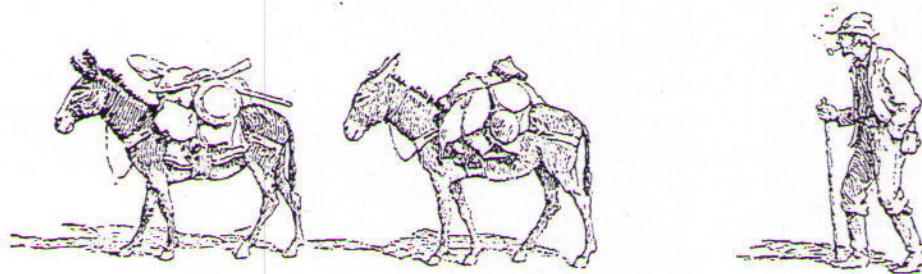
-An ox is worth one hundred dollars.

-It's worth five hundred at least.

-Don't believe anything they say. They're fooling you. There are rich farmers around there who will rent oxen to you. Just bring your carts.

-Don't try to carry a cart through those marshes and up the hills. Buy some horses, or break some wild mares that can be bought for fifty dollars.

-Forget about mares, horses, and carts. Get some good boots and a leather bag. You can only find good places by walking. This was the kind of advice we got.

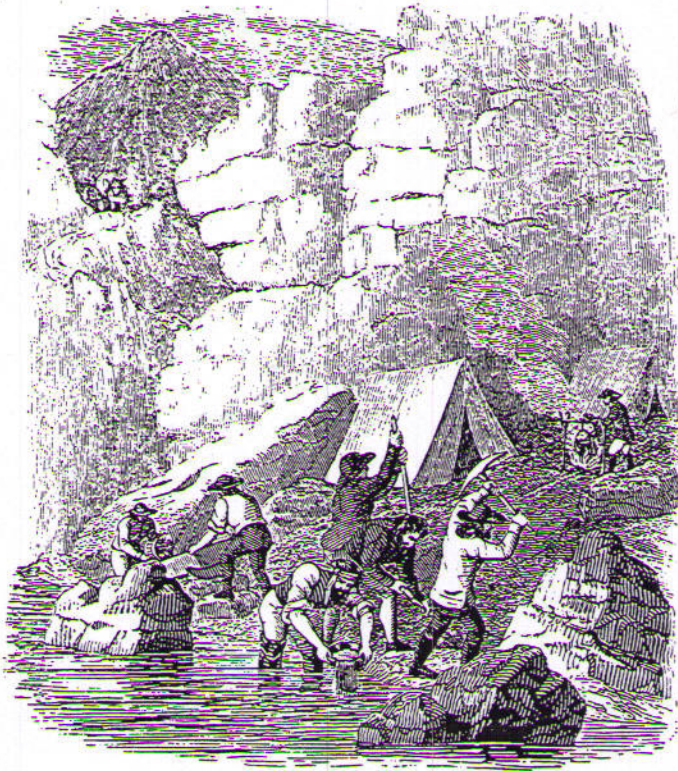


A miner and his pack animals

Finding good places was harder than many people expected. Herman Scharmann left Germany as the head of a company of gold-seekers bound for California in 1849. Here he describes some of his experiences.

We had reached the first gold ditch, which was called Long's Point. Three hundred and fifty tents had been pitched here, all of them clinging to the mountain sides so that they looked like swallows' nests. My curiosity to see the inexhaustible [endless] treasure and my hope to carry away a good part of it for myself grew stronger from day to day. . . .

The gold hunter must creep around among these rocks and has to scrape together the gold gravel with a hatchet or a shovel. Then he pours it into his sack and carries it to the river. He has to be very careful to jump from one rock to another in just the right way, otherwise he might easily break his legs or his neck. When he has carried his sack up to the river, one hundred to two hundred and fifty feet away, he must wash the gravel.



Placer mining was hard work.

Now the question arises, how much can a man earn by this dirty and Exhausting work? When I arrived at the river, everything had been dug up and the best part of the gold was already gone. We scraped until our knuckles were sore, and each person could only make from three to five dollars a day. From this pitiful sum, gained only by the most arduous l[difficult] labor,

and from the terrifically high cost of living it is easy to gauge [measure] the small amount of wealth which the gold diggers are able to capture even though they reduce their own necessities and luxuries to a minimum.

The work was hard, and the comforts were few. Most of the miners were young men, but some families went too. A smart woman could make a pile of money on her own while her husband panned for gold. Luzena Wilson tells how she struck it rich in Nevada City.

We were not rich enough to indulge in the luxury of a canvas home; so a few boughs and branches of the undergrowth were cut and thrown into a rude shelter for the present and my husband scurried way up the mountain to begin to split our "shakes" [shingles] for a house. Since our experiences of rain in Sacramento, we were inclined to think that rain was one of the daily or at least weekly occurrences of a California spring, and the first precaution was to secure a water-tight shelter. Our bedding was placed in the little brush house, my cook stove set up near it under the shade of a great pine tree, and I was established, without further preparation, in my new home. When I was left alone in the afternoon—it was noon when we arrived—I cast my thoughts about for some plan to assist in the recuperation of the family finances. As always occurs to the mind of a woman, I thought of taking boarders. There was already a thriving establishment of the kind just down the road, under the shelter of a canvas roof, as was set forth by its sign in lamp-black on a piece of cloth: "Woman's Hotel meals \$1.00.

I determined to set up a rival hotel. So I bought two boards from a precious pile belonging to a man who was building the second wooden house in town. With my own hands, I chopped stakes, drove them into the ground, and set up my table. I bought provisions at a neighboring store, and when my husband came back at night he found mid the weird light of the pine torches, twenty miners eating my table. Each man as he rose put a dollar in my hand and said I might count him as a permanent customer. I called my hotel "El Dorado".

There was no place of deposit for money and the men living in the house dropped into the habit of leaving their dust with me for safe keeping. At times I have had a larger amount of money in my charge than would furnish capital for a country bank. Many a night have I shut my oven door on two milk-pans filled high with bags of gold dust, and I have often slept with my mattress literally lined with the precious metal.



A miners' camp