



Packing the West - Curriculum Guide

California Gold Rush

To be used with Women of the Old West Films

Louise Clappe/Gold Miner and Mary Graves Clarke/School Teacher

Content Standard - Time, Continuity, and Change - Students analyze events, people, problems, and ideas within their historical contexts.

Content Standard - People, Places, and Environments - Students apply their knowledge of the geographic themes (location, place, movement, region, and human/environment interactions) and skills to demonstrate an understanding of interrelationships among people, places, and environment.

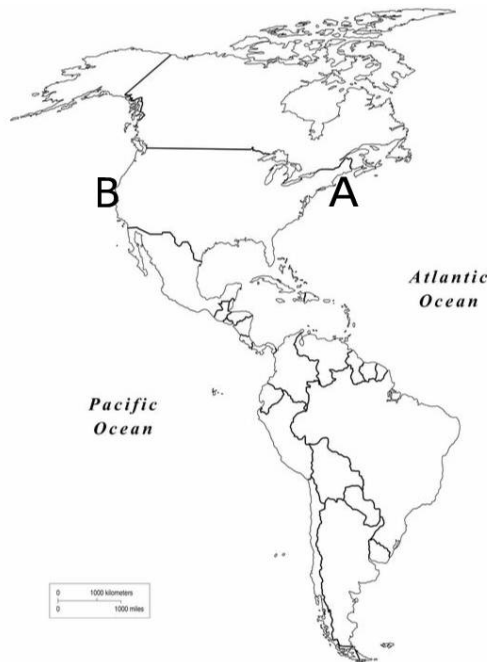
General Introduction

Which Way Did They Go?

On January 24, 1848, gold was discovered on the American River South Fork by James Marshall as he was overseeing the building of Sutter's Mill in Coloma, California (the settlement eventually growing up around Sutter's Mill following the discovery). Even though attempts were made to keep the discovery a secret, the news spread from Sutter's Fort to San Francisco like a wildfire. By May of 1848, gold fever had become an epidemic. By January 1849, the great California Gold Rush had begun.

The mountains to the east of the gold discovery location were impassable in the winter, but eager fortune seekers were unwilling to wait until spring to travel.

At the time there was no easy way to California. But beginning in 1849, there were three major routes taken by the flood of fortune seekers, nicknamed "forty-niners," to the California gold fields. Some traveled overland and others used a variety of boats and ships to reach the gold country. Look below at the map of the Western Hemisphere. Using three different colors, predict and draw the three different ways someone could get from A to B on the map.



Whether coming from within the U.S. or from abroad, forty-niners trying to get to the gold fields faced hardship, and often death, no matter which one of the three major routes was chosen. None were free from challenges or expense. Trips could cost four hundred dollars or more and last several months.

The amount of money the traveler had controlled the route chosen. There was an overland route, a water route, and a combined water/land route.

California Trail Route

Many fortune seekers took the overland route across the continental U.S. Those taking this route could expect six months of hardship and many unpredictable expenses and accidents along the way. Traveling overland, people often ran into independent traders who sold goods at high prices. It is reported that one trader offered water to needy emigrants at one dollar per gallon. Thousands would die before reaching their destinations.

Beginning at Independence, Missouri, the California Trail stretched more than two thousand miles from Missouri to California. The trail departed from Independence, crossed northeast Kansas, then extended over Nebraska following the Blue, Platte, and North Platte rivers. The route crossed into Wyoming east of Fort Laramie, which became a military post the year the California trail traffic began in 1849. Trail travelers in Wyoming followed the North Platte River and then the Sweetwater River to cross South Pass and continue west into Idaho and across Nevada, finally crossing the Sierra Nevada to end at Coloma, where the gold had first been discovered.

This overland trail route took about six months to follow and large sections of it were similar to the route travelers took to Oregon. While many traveling to California used wagons, some men wanting to get to the gold country faster used mules and horses to pack their supplies. Others set off on foot, carrying just a backpack with their essential items.

Traveling by wagon, the travelers were constantly challenged by the varied terrain and obstacles along the way. If favorable conditions were experienced, a wagon could travel about twelve to twenty miles a day. On the other hand, covering five miles was considered lucky when encountering muddy roads or crossing rivers. Sickesses like cholera, smallpox, tuberculosis, diphtheria, typhoid fever, and scurvy were all common trail diseases.

Despite the dangers, more than six thousand wagons carrying forty thousand people had traveled this route to California by the end of 1849.

1. While it is important to remember all people in a wagon train did not ride but some rode horses while many more walked, use the above information to average how many people would be in each reported wagon. _____

Cape Horn Route

Initially, most traveling from the East sailed around the tip of South America (Cape Horn). The sea voyage around Cape Horn was the preferred route in 1848 but was the longest duration, possibly taking four to eight months, which covered approximately eighteen thousand nautical miles (or 21,000 miles). Eastern Argonauts (gold seekers) in the U.S. boarded a ship in either New York City or Boston, Massachusetts. People on the East Coast usually chose the ocean routes because most had immigrated to America by way of ships and were thus used to travel on the ocean. The seafaring travelers would sail the Atlantic Ocean around Cape Horn and then northward to San Francisco, California, where they would disembark. Passengers faced illness, hunger, and poor nutrition during this lengthy trip. These crowded ships caused sickness to spread quickly.

Isthmus of Panama Route

Because of the time factor, many would-be miners focused on the water/overland route. Like the Cape Horn route, passengers boarded sailing vessels on the East Coast, but this alternative route sailed southward on the Atlantic Ocean, then cut westward through the Gulf of Mexico, and turned southward, sailing along the Atlantic side of the Isthmus of Panama. Travelers then took canoes and mules on a week-long jungle trek across the Isthmus of Panama, the strip of land connecting North and South America.

After canoeing up the Chagres River and riding a mule through the jungle, the anxious gold seekers reached Panama City on the Pacific Ocean. There, the travelers waited to catch and board a northbound ship and then sailed to San Francisco.

Those wanting to reduce traveling time by a few months and about eight thousand miles took the Panama shortcut. The traveler had to weigh this advantage against the huge threat of contracting yellow fever and malaria, known diseases often caught in the jungle.

In 1848, three to five months was the average travel time from New York to San Francisco, California. It is estimated that forty thousand gold seekers used the Panama route from 1849 to 1850. This route eventually became the fastest route to California (before the Transcontinental Railroad's completion in 1869) due to the organization of scheduled runs from

the East Coast to Panama's Atlantic side and northward trips to San Francisco from the Pacific side. By 1850, traveling the Panama route took six to eight weeks. Unfortunately, the forty-niners had not been able to make this trip as quickly because many got stuck in Panama waiting to board a northbound vessel to San Francisco.

According to one source, 549 ships docked at San Francisco within a nine-month period.

3. Calculate the average number of ships per month. _____
4. Using what you learned and the map at <https://kids.britannica.com/students/article/California-Gold-Rush/631740> check your original prediction for accuracy, make any alterations to your original map in different colors than original ones used, and list the time durations of each of the three routes available to those so anxious to get to the gold fields.

Other Route Options

There were, obviously, less prominent routes depending upon where you started. There were southerly overland routes to Santa Fe, through the Southwest, and into southern California that were chosen by an estimated ten thousand to fifteen thousand Argonauts.

Some Chinese miners in small boats spent up to two months sailing eastward across the Pacific Ocean.

Each of these routes had its own deadly hazards, from diseases such as typhoid and cholera to shipwreck and death, the ultimate price for the dream of the riches of gold.

Rich Bar

Bar

The word “Bar” in a mining camp’s name referred to the gravel deposit left on the sides of a river or in gulches by flowing water, often containing placer gold.

Rich Bar Mining Camp

In 1850, thousands of prospectors clamored into the hills of California’s Feather River country searching for “Gold Lake,” a lake rumored to be filled with gold. The Gold Lake expedition never found the lake but did locate Rich Bar, roughly 120 miles northeast of Sacramento and site of the largest gold discovery and mining camp in the area.

The river at the Rich Bar site went around a series of sharp bends. This course resulted in the formation of wide gravel bars. Several narrow gold-quartz veins were in the area.

Rich Bar’s first pieces of gold were found in the summer of 1850 at the Feather River’s edge. Gold-hungry miners seeking wealth descended into the canyon by the end of the summer.

It is claimed that the initial prospectors found thousands of dollars in gold within the first few days despite contending with the steep, rugged terrain, the hostile Indians, and the threat of winter weather. Finds of three thousand dollars in gold chunks were reported.

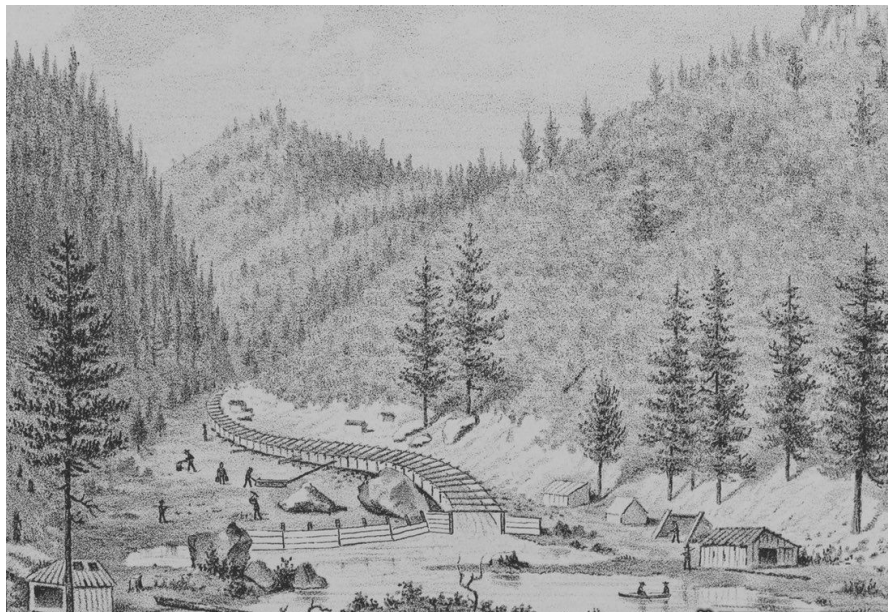
At the time, gold was valued at sixteen dollars per ounce. Within a year’s time, gold mined at Rich Bar was valued between \$2 and \$4 million.

1. At sixteen dollars per ounce, how many ounces would be needed to yield \$2 million? _____

During the first rush, there wasn’t enough unclaimed ground for the more than a thousand gold hunters; therefore, many moved on and made discoveries nearby.

Reportedly, fifty thousand men attempted to reach the new diggings in the spring of 1851. One of them was Dr. Fayette Clapp (often spelled Clappe), who on June 7, 1851, set out with a friend to go to Rich Bar. After establishing himself as the camp doctor, he retrieved his wife Louise and returned in September. Writing to her sister in Massachusetts on September 20, 1851, she remarked, “Those who worked in these mines during the fall of 1850 were extremely fortunate, but, alas! The monte fiend ruined hundreds. Shall I tell you the fate of the most successful of these gold hunters? From poor men, they found themselves, at the end of a few weeks, absolutely rich. Elated with their good fortune, seized with a mania for monte [a card game], in

less than a year these unfortunates, so lately respectable and intelligent, became a pair of drunken gamblers.”



Rich Bar, California, 1851, when Louise arrived

Courtesy https://westernmininghistory.com/towns/california/rich_bar/ Public Domain

From September 13, 1851, through November 21, 1852, Louise Clappe wrote a total of twenty-three letters to her sister Molly in which she described life at Rich Bar (and eventually, nearby Indian Bar). Louise’s letters, which would come to be known as the “Shirley Letters,” would be published from January of 1854 through December of 1855 under the pen name of Dame Shirley.

In her third letter, Louise described Rich Bar to her sister as a tiny valley which was about eight hundred yards long and thirty yards wide. She stated there were about forty tenements. According to Louise, both Rich Bar and nearby Indian Bar were made up of white Americans, Californios, Swedes, Chilenos, Frenchmen, Mexicans, Indians, Hawaiians, Englishmen, Italians, Germans, American blacks, and mulattos.

Louise’s letter of October 7, 1851, mentions a hotel with a “really excellent bowling alley attached to it, and the barroom has a floor upon which the miners can dance, and, above all, a cook who can play the violin”

In February 1852, provisions became scarce when deep snow had prevented routine deliveries. By mid-May, the snow had melted, spring floods had subsided, and fresh provisions arrived. On May 25, Louise noted that hundreds of people arrived at Rich Bar.

The population began to decline swiftly in the fall of 1852, and few residents wanted to brave another winter on the bars. The Clappes were among those. Louise's last letter from the mining camp was dated November 21, 1852.

Because the winters in the Sierra Nevada were harsh and the mining camps were too isolated at this early date, most miners during the first couple of years did not try to spend the winter at their claims. The winter of 1852 to 1853 was the first where miners tried to stay at their diggings all year.

The winter storms were worse than expected and buried the camp of eighty men in deep snow and left them short on supplies. Seven of the eighty miners chose to wait it out at the snow-laden mining camp. The remaining men decided to leave the camp and travel to another nearby area.

2. How many miners left their diggings to escape the wintry deluge?

The boom years of Rich Bar lasted until mid-1853. Mining in Rich Bar finally stopped in 1890.

Women of Rich Bar

When Louise Clappe moved to Rich Bar that September in 1851, she found only four other women there.

Louise Bancroft and husband Curtis owned and ran the Empire, a two-story structure serving as a combination inn, restaurant, and general store. Louise, a twenty-five-year-old woman with a two-week-old baby, was the first woman at Rich Bar that Louise Clapp met. In her letters to Molly, Louise referred to her as "Mrs. B-".

Another woman of Rich Bar is currently known to historians as "Mrs. R-". According to Louise, she and her husband lived in a three-room canvas house which she kept exceptionally clean. In her fifth letter to Molly, Louise quotes a miner who said that Mrs. R- once earned nine hundred dollars in nine weeks for her husband by washing.

Mrs. Nancy Bailey, her husband, and three children shared a dirt floor cabin. Mrs. Bailey became sick and died weeks after Louise arrived in Rich Bar. In a letter to Molly, Louise wrote that she attended her funeral and mountainside cemetery burial.

Known as the Indiana Girl, she was the first woman to arrive at Rich Bar. She and her father ran the Indiana Hotel. According to Louise, the Indiana Girl wore miner's boots and had the "dainty habit of wiping her dishes on her apron!" Her booming voice often gave Louise a headache.

Louise reported to Molly in one of her letters that the Indiana Girl once walked “down that awful hill” in snow that was five feet deep with fifty pounds of flour on her back.

Reading Comprehension

7. What was the name of the fabled lake filled with gold that prospectors were searching for when they discovered Rich Bar? _____
8. A gravel deposit left on the sides of a river that were mined for gold is known as a _____.
9. When was Rich Bar founded? _____
10. On which river was Rich Bar located? _____
11. How many gold hunters attempted to reach the new diggings at Rich Bar in the spring of 1851? _____
12. What was the doctor’s name who came to Rich Bar in 1851? _____
13. What was the name of his wife? _____
14. How many letters did she write to her sister? _____
15. What was her sister’s name? _____
16. Her letters would eventually be published and called the “_____.”
17. What was the pen name of the doctor’s wife? _____
18. What was the name of the boarding house at Rich Bar? _____

Vocabulary and Journal Writing

Purpose: This activity encourages students to write in first-person about a historical event.

Design journals for this activity by cutting brown paper sacks as covers, crumple and moisten with water, and then lay flat to dry. Lace or staple notebook paper inside. The cover then can be designed with drawings and created names.

Students are to develop their own name and character as a traveler going to California to participate in the Gold Rush.

Each day of the lesson, students should write a first-person journal entry as if they are traveling to California choosing a year from 1849 to 1860. They should decide what route they will take, either overland on the California Trail, by sea and land through the Isthmus of Panama, or only by ship traveling around Cape Horn. They should describe their journey and what they see, do, and hear from the perspective of their chosen character. Encourage creativity and references to information they may have learned about the California gold rush. Students may choose to share these daily journal entries in pairs or groups to inspire reluctant writers.

Additional Resources

Del Bene, Terry A. *The Donner Party Cookbook* (with a history of the Donner Party and frontier recipes). Encampment, WY: Grandma's Cabin Books, 2015. 164 pages. (NF)

Erickson, Paul. *Daily Life in a Covered Wagon*. New York: Puffin Books, 1997, Grades 4-7, 48 pages. (NF)

Fifer, Barbara. *Going Along the Emigrant Trails*. Great Falls, MT: Far Country Press, 2006. 48 pages. (NF)

Hale, Nathan. *Nathan Hale's Hazardous Tales: Donner Dinner Party*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2013. 128 pages. (NF)

Hill, William E. *Reading, Writing and Riding Along the Oregon-California Trails*. Independence, MO: Oregon-California Trails Association, 1993. 64 pages. (NF)

Levine, Ellen. *If You Traveled West in a Covered Wagon*. New York: Scholastic Paperbacks, 1992. Grades 2-4, 80 pages. (NF)

Moss, Marissa. *Rachel's Journal*. New York: Clarion Books, 2001, Grades 3-4, 56 pages. (F)

Plain, Nancy and Rocky Gibbons, Editors. *Why Cows Need Cowboys: and Other Seldom-Told Tales from the American West*. Guilford, CT: TwoDot, 2021, 152 pages. (NF)

Philbrick, Roderick. *The Journal of Douglas Allen Deeds: The Donner Party Expedition*. New York: Scholastic, 2001, Grades 4-7, 160 pages. (F)

Turner, Ann. *Red Flower Goes West*. New York: Disney-Hyperion, 1999, Grades K-3, 32 pages. (F)

Other Resources:

<https://www.nps.gov/cali/index.htm>

<https://octa-trails.org/school-resources/>



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