

Young Lieutenant E. Gould Buffum had been sent to California during the Mexican War. He finished his service in 1848 and, like most of the soldiers discharged in California, he rushed off to find gold. He kept a journal, part of which he had published in book form. The public, eager to learn about life in the gold-mining camps, snapped up copies of the book.

# 1850 Gold!

We reached the mill about nine o'clock in the morning, a little too late to get a breakfast at one of the stores, where sometimes the proprietor was sufficiently generous to accommodate a traveler with a meal for the moderate price of five dollars. The only resource was to lay a cloth on the storekeeper's counter, and make a breakfast on crackers, cheese, and sardines. In order not to make a rush upon the trade, we divided ourselves into three parties, each going to a different store. Mac and myself went together, and made a breakfast from the following items; —one box of sardines, one pound of sea-biscuit, one pound of butter, a half-pound of cheese, and two bottles of ale. We ate and drank with great gusto, and, when we had concluded our repast called for the bill. It was such a curiosity in the annals of a retail grocery business, that I preserved it, and here are the items. It may remind some of Falstaff's famous bill for bread and sack.

*Keep in Mind*

*Was the average miner making a good living?*

|                                 |                   |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|
| <i>One box of sardines,</i>     | <i>\$16 00</i>    |
| <i>One pound of hard bread,</i> | <i>2 00</i>       |
| <i>One pound of butter,</i>     | <i>6 00</i>       |
| <i>A half-pound of cheese,</i>  | <i>3 00</i>       |
| <i>Two bottles of ale,</i>      | <i>16 00</i>      |
| <i>Total,</i>                   | <i>\$43 00...</i> |



Among the peculiarities consequent upon the extraction of gold, may be mentioned the fact, that in Weaver's Creek, during the

*Do you think this gold hunter was prepared for life in the gold camps?*

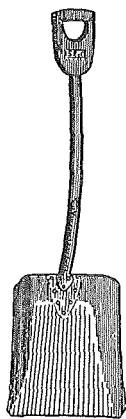
## *Vocabulary*

|                 |                                          |
|-----------------|------------------------------------------|
| <i>arduous</i>  | difficult to do                          |
| <i>bilious</i>  | resulting from some ailment of the liver |
| <i>sack</i>     | dry white wine                           |
| <i>virulent</i> | extremely poisonous or injurious; deadly |

whole winter of 1848, the price paid in silver or gold coin for gold dust was from six to eight dollars per ounce. I, myself, bought some hundred ounces of a Mexican for six dollars and a half. The only object in selling gold for coin was to procure specie for gambling purposes,—and gambling was the life of two-thirds of the residents there at that period. At the same time, communication with San Francisco and Sacramento City having been closed by the rains, provisions were enormously high. A few items will give an idea of gold-mine prices. Flour was selling at one dollar per pound, dried beef at two dollars, sugar at a dollar, coffee seventy-five cents, molasses four dollars per gallon, pork two dollars per pound, miserable New England rum at fifty cents per glass or eight dollars per bottle, and tobacco at two dollars per pound. At these prices, the trader and transporter realized a greater profit from the miner's labour than the miner himself; but provisions must be had, and no price, however great, could deter the labourer from purchasing the necessaries of life...

A man named Stockton, who came to California in the same ship with me, and who was a private in our regiment, settled upon the Stanislaus River, in the early part of September, 1848. He was a keen, trading genius, and, striking out of the beaten track, bought a mule, and started, with a small lot of trinkets and little articles of luxury, into the mountain Indian region. Here his faculties "for driving bargains" were brought into full play, and it is said to be a fact, that he has sold several boxes of raisins to the Indians at their weight in gold! Stockton made a great deal of money; but lately, through some mismanagement in his business, has, I believe, failed, and commenced the world over again...

It is proper, before closing this work, and it will probably be expected, that I should make a sort of recapitulation, and give some advice in regard to prospects and plans of proceeding in the gold mines of California. To advise is always a difficult task,



and in this instance it is peculiarly so; but I will endeavour to give a fair statement of facts, and the best advice I can. The number of persons at present labouring in the various portions of the mining region is about one hundred thousand. Of these, at least one-third are Mexicans, Chilenos, Pacific Islanders, and Chinese, and the remainder Americans, English, French, and Germans; and I should divide their locations as follows: on the North, Middle, and South Forks, say twenty thousand; on the Stanislaus, Mokelumne, Tuolumne, Merced, Mariposa, and other tributaries of the San Joaquin, forty thousand; on Yuba and Feather Rivers, twenty thousand; and, scattered over the various dry diggings, twenty thousand more. During the past summer and autumn, I should estimate the average quantity of gold dug daily at eight dollars to a man; for although it is by no means uncommon for an individual to "strike a lucky place," and some days take out from a hundred to a thousand dollars, others spend whole days in search and labour, without finding more than two or three dollars a day. From my own experience in the mines I am, however, satisfied, that, during six months in the year, a stout man, with health, energy, and perseverance, can average sixteen dollars a day in almost any portion of the placers; and that, for twenty years, from three to ten dollars a day can be made by individual labour. Still, I would advise all who are in good positions at home to remain there. The labour and hardships consequent upon the life of a gold digger are of the most severe and arduous nature. Prying and breaking up huge rocks, shovelling dirt, washing it with wet feet all day, and sleeping on the damp ground at night, with nothing above but a thin covering of canvass, or a leaky log roof, are not by any means agreeable to one who has been accustomed to the civilized life of cities. Richelieu says, that "the pen is mightier than the sword." Many a fine, spruce young clerk coming to California with golden dreams of wealth before him has proved,



*Does the man to the right in the picture above look as though he is up to no good? Do you think very many greenhorns—inexperienced people—were deceived by swindlers during the gold rush?*



A Pilgrim from the Eastern shore  
Stood on Nevada's strand;  
A tear was in his hither eye,  
A pickaxe in his hand  
A tear was in his hither eye—  
And in his left, to mate,  
There would have been another tear,  
But for a leading patch.

to his sorrow, that the crowbar is heavier than the pen. I hesitate not to say, that the labour of gold-digging is unequalled by any other in the world in severity. It combines within itself the various arts of canal-digging, ditching, laying stone walls, ploughing, and hoeing potatoes, —and adding to this a life in the wilds of the mountains, living upon poor provisions, continually exposed either to the burning rays of the sun, or the heavy dews of night, and the occupation becomes anything but a pleasant one. But to a man endowed with a constitution to endure hardship, with hands that have been accustomed to labour, and with a heart which suffers not itself to be sorrowed with disappointment, there was never a better opportunity in the world to make a fortune, than there is at present in California....

The best season for proceeding to the mines is about the end of the month of August. The waters which have been swollen by the melting snows in the summer, have then subsided, and the heat of the summer months has then given way to the cooling breezes of autumn. From that time till the middle of December, the weather is most delightful, and the opportunities for profitable labour are far better than at any other time. About the middle of December, the rainy season commences; the rivers immediately commence rising, and labour is prevented both by this and the inclemency of the weather. The life of the miner during the winter months is exceedingly unpleasant, and I would advise no one to proceed to the gold region after the month of November. The rainy season usually closes about the middle of February, but the roads are exceedingly muddy until the first of March, and from that time till July, labour can be performed to advantage in the various dry-diggings, and upon some of the rivers. By this time the hot and sickly season commences, and the waters upon the rivers are at their greatest height. The thermometer ranges from 90° to 120° in the shade at noonday, and the heavy dews

*Many fortune hunters became discouraged by conditions in the gold camps and left. Where do you think they went?*

of night fall upon the labourer, who has been all day at work beneath a broiling sun. This of course produces disease, and in that wild region, where the comforts and attendance that should ever surround a sick man's bed, are unknown, disease is usually followed by death. The most prevalent diseases during this time are fever and ague, and bilious fevers of the most virulent nature. But I am satisfied that, setting aside the prevalence of diseases common to all new countries, a large portion of the sickness of the summer months is caused by the exposure consequent upon the present mode of life of the miner. When the same comforts are introduced, when good houses are built, and wholesome provisions can be procured, the mining regions of California will compare favourably with Illinois, Indiana, or any of the new states in point of healthiness.

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### *Inquiry*

1. Why did the storekeepers, traders, and transporters charge such high prices for goods in the gold country?
  2. How many of those who went to California in search of gold made a fortune? Why?
  3. What do you think were the main disadvantages of being a gold miner? Why?
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### *Source*

E. Gould Buffum, *Six Months in the Gold Mines: From a Journal of Three Years' Residence in Upper and Lower California, 1847-8-9* (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1850), pp. 81, 96, 126-127, 131-133, 134-135.