

The American frontier began to move across the central United States to California as soon as news that gold had been discovered spread. Individual prospectors found it very difficult to get the gold out of the ground with the simple, crude tools they possessed. In the following selection, Alfred Jackson recounts the joys and hardships of a miner's life in the California gold country. After having lived in the gold camps a few years, Jackson found his life style had changed since he had left Virginia.

1850, 1852 A 49er's Diary



How did living in the California gold country change the course of Alfred Jackson's life?

August 10, 1850.—Anderson moved his traps over to my cabin and we are living together. It makes a lot of difference having a pard with you, somebody to talk and tell your troubles to, although he laughs at me, swears that I have no troubles and don't know what troubles are. I have told him about the old folks and Hetty and about my plan to buy the Slocum farm, and he says: "Don't worry about the girl, she will wait for you fast enough as long as you are sending home money; and as for troubles, when you are married then you will begin to know something about them." I asked him if he was married and he said "yes" and then shut up like a clam. We have dug more than half the ditch and will finish it this week. There are a couple of gray squirrels that frolic around in the big pine tree near the cabin. I got the shotgun out, but Anderson said: "Why kill God's creatures? Let them live their lives." He's strange in some things. He laid there half the afternoon, watching them scampering around the limbs or setting up on their hind legs eating pine nuts, and said there was more satisfaction in enjoying their antics than eating squirrel stew.

August 17, 1850.—We finished the ditch on Thursday and turned in the water. It carries a lot more than we need and when we ran it into the gulch, Anderson got a new idea. We put a trench down through the middle of the ravine and there was a pretty heavy fall. The top dirt is nothing but red clay and he began picking the dirt and watching it run off into the creek and then he said: "What is the use of shoveling this all off when the water will do it for us?" Sure enough, it worked like a charm. We pulled off our shoes, turned up our overalls, jumped into the trench and worked away like beavers, and the water did more work in one day than both of us could have stripped shoveling in a week.

By Saturday noon we had cleared off a strip forty feet long and ten feet wide, and will set the Long Tom to-morrow and clean it



Could Anderson have been considered a conservationist in his time?

Vocabulary

<i>famine</i>	an acute and general shortage of food
<i>hub</i>	the part attached to a center of interest, importance, or activity
<i>Long Tom</i>	a long container used for washing gold-bearing earth
<i>pard</i>	the shortened form of <i>pardner</i> (partner)
<i>zephyrs</i>	west winds; soft, gentle breezes

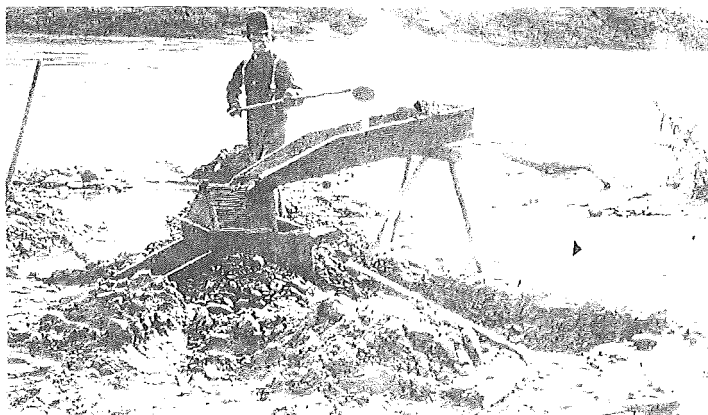
up. It looks like pretty good ground, as we could pick up lots of pieces of gold, some of them weighing two bits.

The weather is awfully hot; believe it is warmer than summer in the States, but it don't bother us much to work when it's the hottest and I have not heard of anybody being sunstruck. It's curious how quickly it cools off after sundown. A breeze starts and blows up the creek strong enough to sway the tops of the pine trees, and the noise it makes through the branches sounds like a lullaby. Since Pard came to camp with me, we spend an hour or two every evening after supper sitting out under a big sugar pine that grows just in front of our cabin, smoking our pipes, but we don't talk much....

May 11, 1852.—The creek claim panned out well for the week, the clean-up yesterday amounting to sixty-one ounces. Dunn and his partners have been at the cabin all the afternoon bargaining to buy the claims outright, and we agreed on terms. They are to give us three thousand dollars in cash and we turn the ground over to them. This suits both of us, as we will go away next month and do not want any interests left behind, as neither of us calculate on coming back. As we have already agreed to sell our interests in the river claims for six thousand and are to receive our money on June 1, we will have nine thousand dollars to divide between us, which is not very bad for a winter's work.

I had some nice letters from home and a copy of the Winsted Herald, in which there is an item that Mr. Alfred Jackson, of Norfolk, had made his fortune in the California mines and would soon return and settle down in his old home. I guess the editor is mistaken about my settling down. Norfolk is too small a village for me, although there was a time when I thought it was the greatest place on earth. I am beginning to believe with Pard that this is going to be a great State, and the chances are that here

This miner is sluicing gold. The sluice, a trough through which water flows, has grooves to trap the gold.



summer's heat has come and the foothills are an earthly paradise. We have even become too lazy to ride around the country. I content myself with an evening gallop to town and back, and the rest of the time we loaf under the trees. Pard quotes some old Greek poet about the Elysian Isles, "Where Rhadaman thus dwells, and pain and sorrow come not, nor rain or wind, and the never dying zephyrs blow softly off the ocean."

That will do very well just now, but it would not be very apt during one of our winter storms with a gale blowing through the pines, the limbs breaking and crashing to the ground, and everything in an uproar. I have a copy of Byron and am reading aloud his "Childe Harold." It is a great poem.

Nevada City is growing out of all bounds and is a big town. There are at least five thousand people living in and around it, and it is fast filling up with families from the States; wives and children come out to join their husbands. As a consequence, it is getting to be a much more orderly and decent community.

They nearly had a famine during the winter rains, but the roads are all in good order again and prices of all kinds of supplies reasonable. They are talking of building a wagon road over Sugar Loaf, down Rock Creek to the river, bridge that stream, and then over the Yuba divide to Cherokee and San Juan, both of which having grown to be good-sized and prosperous mining camps.

Source

Chauncey L. Canfield, ed.,
The Diary of a Forty-Niner
(New York: Morgan Shep-
ard Company, 1906), pp.
18-19, 207, 208-209.

Inquiry

1. Why was Jackson's friendship with his Pard so important to him?
2. How did the money Jackson was making affect his attitude toward the future? Why?
3. Do you think the miner stayed in California? Why or why not?



Why do you think some gold miners became friends? Why did some become enemies?

Coronado traveled parts of what became the Santa Fe Trail. In 1806, Zebulon Montgomery Pike passed over sections of the trail while exploring for the United States government.

Evaluating Responses to Inquiry

1. Students should realize that in the opening paragraph Gregg discounted the dangers of Indian attack; then in the second paragraph he contradicted himself when he mentioned “the terrible extremes to which their [Indian] excesses might be carried.” A similar contradiction occurred at the end of the reading, when Gregg mentioned the Indian attack and followed it with a statement about how seldom it was that lives were lost in such “encounters” with the Indians.
2. Answers will vary. Some students might say that she loved her husband and did not want to leave him. Others might say that she enjoyed the Indian way of life.
3. Students should offer several interpretations of both the Indians’ and the traders’ attitudes. Judging from the remarks of Josiah Gregg, the traders generally distrusted the Indians. The Indians were concerned about the traders traveling through their territory. They probably liked trading with the white men, but may have been wary of losing their lands to white settlers.

Further Investigation

Students might wish to read *The American Heritage Book of the Indians*, edited by William Brandon, and *A Pictorial History of the American Indian*, by Oliver La Farge.

1850 Gold! pages 173–177

Using the Selection

The average California gold miner made more money than an ordinary laborer in the East. But necessities were so expensive in the gold country that most of the miner’s earnings went to the merchants who supplied the goods.

Developing the Key Concept

demand for goods

The miners in California did not have time to raise crops or hunt game; looking for gold took all their time and energy. Both the transporters of goods and the merchants who sold them supplies charged extremely high prices, partly because of the great distance, but also because the miners were willing to pay. As long as they had gold to spend, the miners continued to demand the goods they needed, regardless of price.

Background Information

In 1848 James Marshall discovered gold while erecting a sawmill for John Sutter on the American River near Sacramento, California. Soon the news that gold had been discovered in California spread across the country. Fortune hunters came to the gold fields from all over the United States and the world.

Evaluating Responses to Inquiry

1. Students should realize the expense and effort it took to get goods to the gold country. Most of the goods came to San Francisco by ship from the East. From there it was at least another hundred miles to the gold country. There were few roads, and they were in poor condition. Considering these factors, it is easy to understand why the merchants, traders, and transporters charged such high prices.

2. Most students will realize that a majority of the gold seekers did not make a fortune. The high cost of supplies took a great deal of each man's gold; and some of the miners gambled and drank excessively, both of which were expensive habits. But most miners simply did not find large strikes.

3. Students should offer many responses. Some might say that the danger of disease was the major disadvantage. Poor diet and exposure to extreme heat and cold were the main causes of illness. (Many of the miners developed scurvy and died.) Some students might mention the hard work as another disadvantage.

Further Investigation Refer students to *California Gold*, by Edwin R. Bingham, and *Gold Is the Cornerstone*, by John W. Caughy.

1850, 1852 A 49er's Diary pages 177–182

Using the Selection After almost three years in California, Alfred Jackson became “comparatively rich.” He enjoyed living in the new territory and did not think he would be going back to Virginia to marry his fiancée, Hetty.

Developing the Key Concept companionship
Having someone to share one's interests, activities, feelings, or experiences with is important to most individuals. (You might wish to relate discussion of this concept to Inquiry 1 of this reading.)

Background Information In his diary Alfred Jackson described a mining technique known as wet digging, in which water is used to separate gold from the earth. In dry digging, the miners remove gold from the earth with a sharp object.

Evaluating Responses to Inquiry

1. Having a close friend in the unfamiliar territory gave Jackson someone “to talk and tell his troubles to.” Companionship is essential for most people.
2. The large amount of money Jackson was making was a major factor in his desire to travel to Europe. He wanted to come back and settle in California, which he considered a land of great opportunity. Jackson thought that he could not make as much money on a farm in Virginia as he could in California.
3. Most students will say that Jackson probably made his home in California. His intentions seem apparent in such statements as “the chances are that here will be my home,” and “I will come back to San Francisco and settle down there.”

Further Investigation Students may wish to read more about life in the California gold camps. Refer them to *Journals of Forty-niners*, by Leroy R. and Ann W. Hafen.

1868 The Alaska Frontier pages 183–186

Using the Selection Frederick Whymper enjoyed the hospitality and traditions of the Russians in Sitka, especially the “Russian steam-bath.” He thought that Alaska had a great future because of its abundant natural resources.