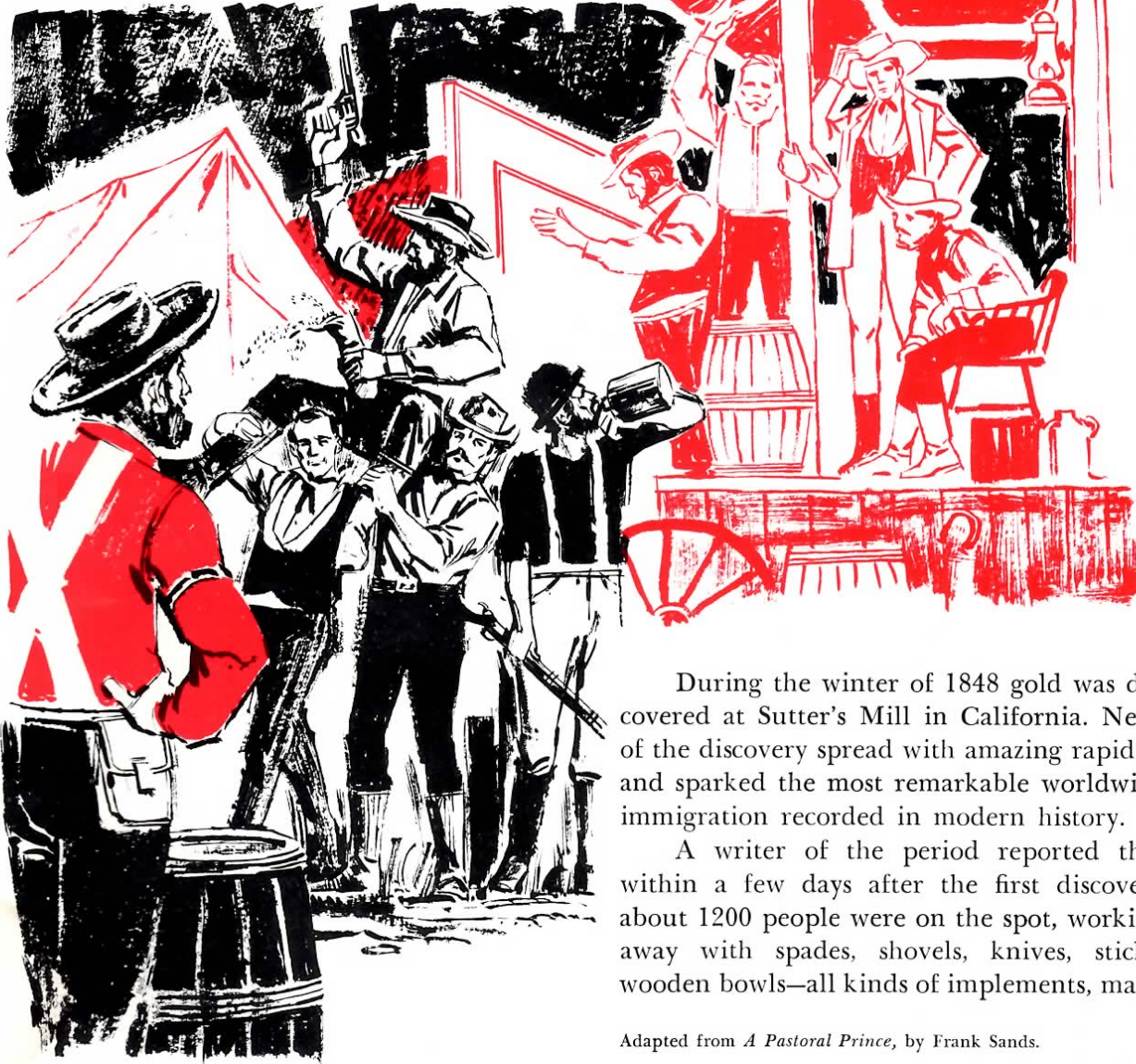


SAN FRANCISCO, BOOM TOWN

by Frank Sands



During the winter of 1848 gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill in California. News of the discovery spread with amazing rapidity and sparked the most remarkable worldwide immigration recorded in modern history.

A writer of the period reported that within a few days after the first discovery about 1200 people were on the spot, working away with spades, shovels, knives, sticks, wooden bowls—all kinds of implements, many

Adapted from *A Pastoral Prince*, by Frank Sands.

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of them crude and primitive. All over California the excitement was extraordinary. The husband left his wife, the father his family; servants and masters alike all hurried to Sutter's Mill. Soon nearly the entire male population of the country became infected with the maddened whirl of the "yellow fever" and rushed off to gather the riches.

Listening to the remarkable stories about the yield from the mines, the gold hunters supposed that all they had to do to become fantastically wealthy was purchase a pick and shovel and do a little digging. Indeed, there were some authentic reports that gave credibility to these ideas. At a site known as the "Dry Diggings" the amount of gold obtained was enormous. One chunk of pure metal weighing thirteen pounds was discovered. One man dug out \$12,000 of gold in six days, three other men obtained \$8000 in a single day, and still others made their \$5000, \$10,000, or \$15,000 in only a few weeks. But these were isolated and exceptional cases, for the plain truth is that from \$10 to \$15 worth of gold dust per day was the average reward for a miner who worked steadily and industriously.

A less attractive side to the picture was the great amount of severe illness that existed in the mines, probably produced by the insufficient shelter, unaccustomed diet, and hard labor. What is worse, in the wild race for riches the sick were neglected and in many instances died alone and unmourned.

Mining for gold, then, far from being the romantic occupation we are sometimes led to believe, was trying in the extreme. A good many of the miners simply gave up

and sought other methods for the attainment of the golden spoils.

The gold rush probably had more effect on San Francisco than on any other town in the country. In June 1847 it had 459 people, but by 1849 the population had soared to at least 25,000, with immigrants continually arriving in town and departing shortly thereafter for the diggings. At the same time there flowed into the city a constant stream of men from the mines—the lucky to spend their money, the sick to regain their health, and the unsuccessful to follow some new pursuit there.

In the San Francisco of that time, houses were almost impossible to find and only the great gambling saloons, the hotels, restaurants, stores, and a few public buildings made any pretension to elegance. The streets were so muddy, crooked, uneven, and unsafe that everyone who went out in the evening took a lantern—if one was to be had.

It seemed that every man in San Francisco had taken up a new life, for few followed the business in which they had been trained. Doctors and dentists became barbers or shoeshine men; merchants became laborers, and laborers became merchants; lawyers became butchers, and waiters drove horses. It was a topsy-turvy town of chaos, hurry, and confusion, but somehow it thrived and grew.

Wages were the highest in all history, with even ordinary labor bringing a dollar an hour. Carpenters who had been getting twelve dollars a day struck for sixteen. Everyone was prospering and spending money.

However, it required an almost princely

income merely to live. Rents were enormous—\$3000 a month for a small wooden store. For a medium-sized canvas tent, a gambling saloon paid \$40,000 a year in rent. The cheapest seat at the circus cost three dollars, a pair of heavy boots brought forty, and a really good pair of boots commanded fully a hundred. With flour selling for forty dollars a barrel and a loaf of bread costing fifty cents, a man could not eat really well for less than thirty dollars a week.

Those were the prices in San Francisco. In the mines prices were four to five times as great. Eggs were sold at one, two, and even three dollars each; inferior sugar, tea, and coffee went at four dollars a pound; picks and shovels were from five to fifteen dollars each.

Despite the cost of living, everybody made money, for there was a continuous flow of gold from the mines. Probably there never was a city that had such an amount of gold in circulation as did San Francisco from 1848 to 1851.

It is not surprising, then, that the most remarkable characteristic of the city was the prevalence of gambling. It was the main recreation of most of the people, and the gambling saloons that studded the plaza were crowded night and day. All was mad, feverish mirth, and fortunes were lost and won by the impatient revelers who never could find enough excitement or get rid of their golden heaps too soon.

Hand in hand with gambling and drinking went duels, robberies, and murders, until the place was dangerous at all hours of the

night. Murders were daily occurrences, and, indeed, more than a hundred took place within a period of a few months, without one of the killers ever being brought to justice.

This state of affairs, with everyone in terror of his life, could not last. In the end, in one of those strange, turbulent popular uprisings, the people took the matter into their own hands. In 1851 they organized the celebrated Vigilance Committee, which included some of the city's most respected citizens.

Under the committee's leadership, the worst desperadoes were hanged, others lashed and branded, and a great number ordered to leave the territory. The committee's actions called forth applause, wonder, scorn, and indignation, but the work went on. To control terrible crimes, terrible methods were employed.

The methods did, in fact, work, for the city was soon cleaned up, crime gave way to order and peace, and the people became law-abiding. Able at last to concentrate on law and order, they laid out adequate streets, built sidewalks, put up new buildings, established schools, and in general created evidence of solid prosperity and comfort.

From its beginning as a trading port in 1835, San Francisco had in a few short years grown into a thriving commercial center. On a single day in 1851 there were 451 ships lying at anchor in the harbor. About four years earlier, before the impetus of the gold rush, that number had been just about the total population of the town!

CHECK YOUR READING

- 1. The immediate reaction of people to the discovery at Sutter's Mill was one of**
 - A controlled curiosity
 - B vigorous opposition
 - C frantic excitement
- 2. For a digger to find thousands of dollars worth of gold in a few days was**
 - A commonplace
 - B extraordinary
 - C unheard of
- 3. The writer says that the lives of most gold miners were**
 - A rigorous
 - B romantic
 - C routine
- 4. The San Francisco of 1848-51 can best be described as**
 - A placid
 - B chaotic
 - C elegant
- 5. A major lack in San Francisco was**
 - A jobs
 - B housing
 - C money
- 6. In 1848-51 the cost of living in San Francisco was**
 - A higher than it had ever been
 - B lower than at the mines
 - C Both A and B
- 7. The chief recreation in San Francisco was**
 - A circuses
 - B gambling
 - C boating
- 8. The Vigilance Committee was organized by**
 - A elected officials
 - B saloon owners
 - C concerned citizens
- 9. The article implies that the Vigilance Committee used methods that were**
 - A outdated and ineffectual
 - B harsh and perhaps illegal
 - C enlightened and humanitarian
- 10. After cleaning up crime, the city leaders turned their attention to**
 - A improving the city physically
 - B making the mines safer
 - C encouraging art and music

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