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News from El Dorado: Newspapers and the California Gold Rush”

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When James Wilson Marshall discovered gold at Sutter’s Mill on the South Fork of the American River on January 24, 1848, he not only touched off the greatest gold rush the world had ever seen but also ignited one of the great writing frenzies in American history. Guidebooks, diaries, and letters all told of a new El Dorado where unimaginable riches could be found simply by picking them off the ground. But it was the newspaper that served as the chief mechanism by which the good news from California rocketed around the world. Furthermore, the newspaper played a major role in informing anxious gold hunters of how to get to California as quickly as possible, what to expect once they got there, and finally, as the golden dreams turned to cold reality, telling its readers that digging for gold was really backbreaking, dangerous work to be undertaken only by the young and strong.

In this paper, I will cover the discovery and its reporting by the local press, the spread of the news, the experiences of the Argonauts as recorded in the national and international press, the singular value of newspapers as a link to home, and the unprecedented birth and death of newspapers in California during the first years of this international rush for riches.

News of Marshall’s great find which took place east of present-day Sacramento spread slowly at first, but on March 15, 1848, a tiny article appeared buried in the *Californian* of San Francisco with the headline “Gold Mine Found.” It went on to report: “In the newly made raceway of the Saw Mill recently erected by Captain Sutter, on the American Fork, gold has been found in considerable quantities.” Local residents greeted this news with resounding indifference. The rival and incredulous *California Star* did not even report the news until April 22, 1848.

However, as more and more people came into Sutter's Fort or San Francisco and Monterey with bottles and sacks filled with gold, indifference turned to rapt attention. The *Californian* on May 17 (a full two months later), reported:

“The Gold Mine Again. We have been informed by a gentleman recently from the gold region that DIGGING continues brisk, with a great demand for spades and pickaxes. Many persons have already left the coast for that region, and considerable excitement exists in our midst, which bids fair to become quite a gold fever. The merchants and mechanics are closing doors, the lawyers and alcaldes [mayors] leaving their desks, the farmer neglecting their crops, and whole families forsaking their homes, all suffering from the effects of this fever.”

This is the first use of the term “gold fever,” an expression that would shortly become universal to describe the California gold mania. Still, there were skeptics. Edward Cleveland Kemble, the editor of the *California Star*, seeing his town deserted, made a trip to Sutter's Mill to investigate what this gold fever was all about and pronounced the whole thing “all sham—a superb take in, as was ever got up to ‘guzzle the gullible.’” Despite Kemble's doubts, by late May, the run for riches had turned into a stampede, and on May 29, the *Californian* issued a broadside with the following notice:

With this slip ceases for the present the publication of the *Californian* – “Othello's occupation's gone!” The majority of our subscribers and many of our advertising patrons have closed their doors and places of business and left town. The whole country, from San Francisco to Los Angeles and from the sea shore to the base of the Sierra Nevada, resounds with the sordid cry of “*gold!* **GOLD!! GOLD!!!**”

Kemble's *California Star*, likewise announced its suspension on June 14. Both papers, however, returned in August when others realized more money could be made in town providing services and selling products to the miners.

James H. Carson, a writer for the *San Joaquin Republican* of Stockton, left us the best description of a case of gold fever. It was his own. Upon hearing of the discovery of gold in the foothills of the Sierra, Carson, then an army sergeant stationed at Monterey, deserted his post. He recalled:

A frenzy seized by soul: unbidden, my legs performed some entirely new movements of polka steps. Piles of gold rose before me at every step; castles of marble, dazzling the eye with their rich appliances; thousand of slaves bowing to my beck and call; myriads of fair virgins contending with each other for my love— were among the fancies of my fervid imagination. The Rothschilds, Girards, and Astors appeared to me but poor people; in short, I had a very violent attack of the gold fever.

News of California placers first reached the newspapers of the eastern United States on August 19, 1848, when a letter from a “volunteer” correspondent appeared in the *New York Herald*. This letter originally written on April 1, however, stressed the area's overall mineral wealth ranging from copper to coal without placing any real emphasis on the precious metal. It did not create much excitement. The writer casually noted “I am credibly informed that a quantity of gold was picked up lately in the bed of a stream of the Sacramento,” and concluded with the following colorful words: “I would predict for California, a Peruvian harvest of the precious metals, as soon as a sufficiency of miners, &c., can be obtained.” How right that prediction turned out to

be! Little did he know that from 1848 to 1853, California would yield well over \$200,000,000 dollars worth of the glittering dust and nuggets, an incomprehensible sum of money at the time.

Those closest to Upper California, quite naturally, heard the news first. By the spring of 1848, merchants and sea captains spread the glad tidings to the Sandwich Islands, and the June issues of the Honolulu *Polynesian* and *The Friend* ran articles concerning the excitement. By August, word had spilled northward appearing in the *Oregon Spectator* of Oregon City, and by September, in the New Orleans *Daily Picayune*. The *Spectator*, touched with its own case of gold fever, hysterically declared “almost the entire male population had gone gold digging in California.” Reports of this fabulous Golconda soon appeared in the *gazetas* or newspapers of Mexico and Chile causing a mass northward migration. Latin Americans, already experienced in mining, literally saw a golden opportunity, struck it rich, and sent home a fortune in gold. It did not take long for Australia and the Orient with its maritime connections to receive the news, and soon, a flotilla of ships was bound for the banks of the Sacramento. In short, the world rushed in.

Intelligence concerning California’s riches gradually reached the population centers of the United States via returned travelers and articles in San Francisco newspapers. At first, however, the eastern and Midwest press greeted these reports of a new El Dorado with much skepticism. The New York *Sun*, for example, claimed that the metal found was really mica and warned its readers “that all is not gold that glitters,” and the East Bennington *Vermont Gazette* surmised that there was “far more moonshine than Gold” in California. The *Saint Louis Daily Union* for October 12, 1848, proclaimed “that the gold fever was an unmitigated humbug, in which knaves and fools were the partners.”

All of this changed when President James K. Polk, in his annual message to Congress said, “The accounts of the abundance of gold in that territory are of such an extraordinary character as would scarcely command belief were they not corroborated by authentic reports.” These authentic reports, written by government officials on the spot including military governor Colonel R. B. Mason and Lieutenant William Tecumseh Sherman, the future Civil War general, gave California gold instant credibility. To further dramatize the extent of the mines, Mason sent to the War Department 230 ounces of placer gold in a tea caddy. Electrified, the press seized the moment by printing Mason’s report in scores of newspapers. Gold fever spread like wildfire, and everyone, to use a 19th century expression, was “off to see the elephant.” Horace Greeley in his *New-York Tribune* proclaimed “The Age of Gold” and the neighboring *New-York Express* exclaimed “never were more people worked up.” The *Hartford Daily Courant* for December 6, 1848, wrote, “The California gold fever is approaching its crisis. We are told that the new region is El Dorado after all. Gold is picked up in pure lumps.”

It did not take long for this glorious and fantastic news to leap across the Atlantic. London and Liverpool papers in December 1848 and January 1849, reprinted the information from American newspapers. A month later, Parisian papers carried the intelligence from America and described the “auriferous fields” as 800 miles in length and 100 miles wide strewn with “gold dust, gold nuggets, gold ingots, weighing from one to twenty-four pounds.” Newspapers from Hong Kong to Hamburg wrote in glowing terms of California and its gold. If one believed these accounts, men, women, and children using only spoons and pocket knives were literally harvesting gold by the bushel. Reports of making thousands of dollars in far off California when skilled laborers in the big cities made a dollar a day could not be ignored. With the aid of the world press, California proved to be an irresistible magnet. Furthermore, social unrest beset much of Europe

and opium wars wracked China at the close of the 1840s, and some saw California as a safety valve, a new promised land. The French called for the colonization of California and one English writer wrote that even if there was no gold, go there anyway as the opportunities would be much better. Cornish miners from the south of England read these tales of gold with interest, quickly set sail, and within a few short years, operated some of the most lucrative mines.

Not surprisingly, these press reports became highly exaggerated. As one wordsmith put it: “A grain of gold taken from the mines became a pennyweight in Panama, an ounce in New York and Boston, and a pound nugget in London.” Over and over, accounts appeared in the papers telling of incredible gold strikes, boulder size nuggets being dug up, and the streets of Sacramento and San Francisco being paved in gold. Stories concerning high prices, lawlessness and violence, rampant gambling, absence of women, and lack of decent food and basic sanitation were overlooked during those frenetic early years of the rush.

With gold in great abundance confirmed by the president, the newspaper played a vital role first by publishing eyewitness accounts from Argonauts returning home with bags of gold, and then providing information and advice on the best and quickest way to reach the golden shore and what to take. Every scrap of news was printed and reprinted. Proprietors of newspapers editorialized on the economic and social impact of so much gold flooding the market and the upheaval it caused in so many communities. The papers carried sermons by ministers warning would-be gold hunters of the evils of mammon and the untrammelled vice that reigned in California. “Take your Bible in one hand and your New England virtue in the other,” railed one preacher. Soon the papers in the port cities of the eastern United States and Europe were filled with announcements for California bound ships. One of my favorite Gold Rush paintings beautifully depicts a raging case of gold fever in Long Island, New York. Titled *California News* and painted by William Sidney Mount in 1850, it depicts a group of anxious looking men and women in a post office with walls plastered with circulars announcing sailing dates for California. But, symbolic of the importance of newspapers, the central figure holds a copy of the *New-York Daily Herald* which he is reading to a transfixed audience.

Those in the interior of the United States used the newspaper as a means of promoting routes through their city or town as the “shortest and best” way to reach California. The *Arkansas State Democrat* of Little Rock, the *Louisville Courier*, and *Daily Missouri Republican*, for example, all touted their place as the best place to begin and purchase supplies, and not surprisingly, wrote disparagingly of other cities and routes. The Little Rock newspaper warned its readers that those who embarked from St. Louis and took the northern trail faced entrapment in the snow and “starvation and cannibalism.” They did not, of course, mention that their route took gold seekers through the forbidding deserts of Arizona and southern California.

It is fascinating and amusing to read the advertisements that appeared in newspapers of the day for California products. The papers happily published endless columns advertising such items as “Fever and ague and disinfecting liquid,” “Indian Rubber Outfits,” white rubber tents, air beds, preserved meats, and every possible type of weapon and article of clothing. Daguerreotypists did a booming business taking pictures of Argonauts as a memento for loved ones before departing for “Kaliforny.” Taking advantage of the gullible, advertisers trumpeted a variety of gold washing machines which, of course, proved to be completely useless and were quickly trashed upon arriving in the mines. Editor Horace Greeley correctly noted, “The only machinery necessary in the new Gold Mines of California is a stout pair of arms, a shovel and a tin pan.” I

might add that his paper carried an advertisement for “California Ginger-Bread” as “just the thing to stay the stomach” while digging for gold or as a remedy for seasickness.

The trek to California resulted in hundreds of accounts appearing in the newspapers. Rarely in the history of the nation had so much printer’s ink been expended. This after all represented the adventure of a lifetime, and fortunately, many literate people with keen powers of observation took the trouble to record their experiences in letters and diaries. Those taking the overland trail frequently sent letters back home. These epistles were enthusiastically published in the hometown newspaper and eagerly devoured by local readers hoping to hear about a loved one or contemplating a trip themselves. Those going by sea encountered a different type of adventure than the “overlanders.” The vast majority faced a long and tedious incarceration on ship and devised all kinds of ways to pass the time. Some of the more imaginative ship passengers combated the boredom by actually producing their own newspapers. Since they did not have access to a printing press, they wrote it out by hand. Once the editors completed an issue, they either passed the sheets around, posted it in a prominent place, or, following afternoon tea, read it out loud on deck to fellow passengers. Most contained summaries of the voyage, poetry, cartoons, and humorous sketches. I know of twelve such examples. At my own institution, we have seven of eight issues of a folio-size newspaper called *The Barometer and Gold Hunter’s Log*. It was written between February 21, 1850 and April 14, 1850, onboard the barque *Mary Waterman*. Those going by way of the Isthmus of Panama frequently had to wait weeks to pick up a California-bound ship on the western side. J. B. Bidleman saw an opportunity and catered to stranded and bored Americans in Panama City when he inaugurated a weekly called the *Panama Star* on February 24, 1849.

Because of the incredible stories that daily poured out of the mining camps, a number of journalists made their way to California as either observers or as actual gold seekers. Consequently, some of the best travel writing from the 19th century centered on the run for gold. To illustrate, E. Gould Buffum of the *New York Tribune*, William Dennison Bickham of the *Cincinnati Gazette*, Dr. James Delavan of Jonesville, Michigan, and Ramón Navarro, a future Argentinian journalist, all penned wonderfully descriptive diaries and letters. Without doubt, Bayard Taylor of Greeley’s *New-York Tribune*, stands as the best. His book, *El Dorado or Adventures in the Path of Empire* went through eight authorized and three pirated editions by 1859 and it is still in print today with the last edition published in 2000. Another journalist worth noting is Alonzo Delano, better known in California by the sobriquet “Old Block.” He published one of the most compelling series of overland letters which appeared in the *Ottawa* (Illinois) *Free Trader*, *New Orleans True Delta*, and the *Galena* (Illinois) *Weekly North-Western Gazette*. He wrote “Gold is the talisman. Gold is the lamp of Aladdin. Gold is the magic wand.”

Once people arrived in California they thirsted for news from home. Letters from family and friends became more precious than gold for these homesick miners. Long lines formed outside the post offices when the steamers arrived with mail from home, and some enterprising souls made a substantial sum holding places in line or selling coffee, pies, and newspapers to those in the queue. The hometown newspaper ranked second only to the letter in importance as far as reading matter was concerned. While not personal, these columns of tiny type provided the lonely Argonaut with a physical link to loved ones. Because of this, the arrival of a batch of newspapers caused almost as much fuss as a shipment of mail, and it did not matter if its masthead bore a many months-old date. The aforementioned Bayard Taylor wrote with astonishment in 1849 about a man from New York who arrived with 1,500 copies of his own

Tribune and sold them all within two hours for a \$1.00 a piece! If adjusted for inflation, that amounted to around \$20,000. Seeing this golden opportunity, Taylor immediately searched his valise for newspapers and turned them over to a newspaper merchant at a 4,000% profit. Four years later, New York newspapers still commanded outlandish prices. In 1853, the Reverend John Steele paid \$1.00 for a copy of Greeley's weekly. He touchingly told how the paper substituted for a letter from home:

Others, anxious because the expected letters had not come, usually tried, after the style of an auctioneer, to buy a paper containing the general news from their part of the country. It was common at such time to hear the exclamation, "Who has a paper for sale from New York?" or from such and such places; and people receiving papers, after their perusal, sometimes sold them for fifty cents or one dollar. Some receiving bad news, went sorrowfully aside to weep.

A natural outgrowth of this insatiable need for newspapers saw the rapid development of bookstores, literary societies, and club libraries. By the early 1850s, virtually every city, town, and mining camp provided newspapers. Reading a New York or London newspaper offered a much more positive and civilizing alternative to the gambling dens, drinking saloons, and whore houses. Bookstores in the gold camps boasted that they offered a full line of Atlantic and European newspapers. The Merchants' Exchange in San Francisco in 1849, for example, opened a reading room for visitors to read Eastern and European newspapers charging 75 cents a day or \$2 a week for the privilege. A year later, as reported in the April 25, 1850 *San Francisco Daily Alta California*, a private club library offered not only a wide array of "fictitious, historical, and scientific works" but also an "abundance of papers, of all tongues, parties and sects." The *Alta* proudly noted that San Francisco now had a place for "the gold of the mind."

Concomitant with the rise of reading rooms was the establishment of newspapers up and down the state. By the early 1850s, California witnessed an unprecedented demand for a local press and editors and typesetters readily met this need. The majority were crude weekly affairs consisting of two to four pages and often filled with old news received from eastern and European papers. Most gold camps of any size spawned a newspaper that lasted as long as the gold held out, and when a new strike was made, the editors loaded the press in a wagon and headed off for a new opportunity. The larger cities and towns often enjoyed daily and multiple newspapers. San Francisco, in fact, could boast that it not only consumed more champagne than Boston but it also published more newspapers than London. The San Francisco press even printed special "steamer editions" to be placed on outbound ships carrying news of California to the world.

One printing press had an impressive record compiling a number of newspaper firsts worth noting. When the Mexican governor of California wanted to print forms and other governmental documents, he imported an old Ramage screw-type press from Boston in 1832. That same press Walter Colton and Robert Semple used to print California's first newspaper, appropriately named the *Californian* in 1846. The following year, new owners moved the *Californian* to San Francisco and took the press with them and continued its use until the paper merged with that city's first newspaper, the *California Star*. The merger formed the *Alta California* which lasted into the 1890s and rightly received the appellation of "the Mother of [California] Newspapers." Edward Kemble took possession of the press, transported it to Sacramento, and on April 28, 1849, printed the river city's first newspaper, the *Placer Times*. Kemble, by the way, did not

have a large enough typeface for his masthead and used a jackknife to carve out the words “Placer Times.” Later, the same Boston press headed south to print Stockton’s first newspaper, the *Stockton Times*. The venerable machine continued its amazing journey and turned up in the gold mining town of Sonora, and on July 4, 1850, produced the *Sonora Herald*, the first newspaper published in the mines. From there it made its final journey winding up in the rough and tumble town of Columbia, and once again, gave birth to that town’s first newspaper, the *Columbia Star* on October 25, 1851. Regretfully, this historic press became the object of a law suit and vandals got hold of the press and put the aged relic to the torch in the middle of the street. As Kemble lamented: “A greater outrage never desecrated the name of an American town.”

Newspapers published in the gold camps and cities are invaluable for recording California’s astonishing growth not only in population but also in infrastructure, culture, and events. Conflicts between American and foreign miners, attacks by and against Native Americans, the formation of Vigilance Committees, and the numerous hangings, shootings, fires, and floods provided ample subject matter for pioneer editors. Early on, this center of wealth imported world class entertainment. Consequently, the goings and comings of great pianists like Henri Herz, the performances of the notorious dancer Lola Montez, and the concerts of Kate Hayes, “the Swan of Erin,” as well as hundreds of Shakespearian performances received adulatory attention in the local press. The advertisements that ran in these papers provide fascinating reading. One can quickly obtain an appreciation of how rapidly goods and services of all kinds were imported into California from the finest liquors to barrels of nails.

California, with its unparalleled riches, quickly became the most heterogeneous spot on earth with the influx of peoples from all points of the globe. The California press reflected this extraordinary ethnic diversity. Soon French and German language papers flourished; *La Estrella*, printed in Spanish and English served Los Angeles, and on April 28, 1854, *The Golden Hills News*, a Chinese paper rolled off the press. Papers representing a multitude of political, religious, and cultural beliefs sprouted. Others specialized in gossip, humor, theater, literature, and science.

As a testimony to California’s improbable and rich newspaper history, Edward Cleveland Kemble, that pioneer editor who earlier had called the gold discovery “a sham got up to guzzle the gullible,” wrote a history of newspapers in the Golden State published in the Christmas 1858 supplement of the *Sacramento Union*. It consisted of thirty-five columns of tiny type, enough to make it the longest article ever published in California up to that time, and if printed in book form, a tome of over two hundred pages. Kemble presented a remarkable, fact-filled summary of the years 1846 to 1858. Using a questionnaire, he received returns on 324 different titles from forty-eight localities. This represented an impressive figure when you consider that prior to 1848, California supported just two newspapers and a non Native American population of less than 15,000. San Francisco led the way and Kemble provided the following summary of the diversity that characterizes the city and California to this very day:

They [newspapers] number 132 in all, and the united number of their proprietors, editors and reporters is more than a thousand. No city in the world can boast a newspaper press so great in its development, so singular in its character, so wonderful in its fortunes. The papers have been printed in six different languages, have represented nine different nationalities, have devoted themselves to the interests of religion, politics, morals, law, medicine, literature, commerce, agriculture, news and slander; have preached eight

different forms of religion, and have been the organs of seven distinct political parties.

This pioneer newspaper historian went on to write that most were short-lived affairs and that California was a virtual newspaper graveyard. Of its editors and proprietors, one was killed and four others wounded in duels. One died at the hands of an assassin and another seriously wounded with a knife – all for articles they had written. Two others wound up in penitentiaries; one took to the pulpit, and two others to the stage. These figures do not take into account the number of newspapers destroyed by the devastating fires and floods that ravaged many Gold Rush cities. As Kemble ruefully observed, “Not one can be said to have become rich from the profits of their newspapers.”

I will conclude with a colorful passage from those rambunctious days which I think provides the best happy ending experienced by a gold seeker and demonstrates the magnetism of the Gold Rush. It appeared the *Boston Chronotype*:

A man had returned to California with gold to the amount of 64,000 dollars, which he deposited in one of the mints. He took off his old threadbare unmentionables and was about to throw them away, but his wife (good prudent woman) laid hold of them, and, with a trifling effort, took 23,000 dollars - worth of gold-dust out of them.

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