

GOLD MINING TECHNIQUES OF THE GOLD RUSH OF 1849

River Damming

The process of river damming involved many groups of people working together in an interdependent relationship. The gold miners either stopped a portion of a river with a U-shaped dam, known as a wing dam, or they led the entire river into a nearby valley or river. While leading the river into a neighboring river was a simple process not requiring much labor or manpower, both methods completely dried out the river bed to process its dirt in long toms.

Rocker box

The rocker box was one of the most prevalent tools used to separate gold from paydirt during the California gold rush. It was typically placed near the bank of a stream, creek or river. The paydirt was first scooped into a tray at the top, called a sieve. A sieve has the ability to stymie large gravel from passing through. Water is then scooped into the tray, and the rocker box is rocked, hence the name. After that, gold is collected at the canvas apron of the device, or at the riffles at the bottom.

Miners typically opted to work Rocker boxes in pairs. They were usually set on rockers, which enabled them to be rocked, and enabled a person to wash up to 3 cubic yards (2 m³) of gold-bearing gravel. This technique was known as "traying" or "panning" and involved a steady, continuous rocking of the box of a tray to remove every last piece of remaining sediment. An alternative name for a rocker box is a cradle, but in the days of the California Gold Rush, few gold miners actually referred to it as a cradle. Rocker boxes were usually relatively small, measuring only 1 meter long and about 30 centimeters wide, as they had to be moved round and round.

Dry digging

The process of dry digging required a person to sink a shaft into gold-bearing ground, which was usually a hillside or a dirt crevice, with a winch pre-installed at the apex of the wooden shaft. The miners would then dig a horizontal tunnel as soon as the gold-bearing layers were breached. Two men were able to work this mine. One dug in the tunnel; the other worked in the winch. They worked furiously for hours without taking a break, only interrupting their work occasionally to wash the dirt. Since water was essential to the process of washing gold, the miners started to form water companies from 1851 onwards in an effort to secure the water they needed for the dry digging. It was their task to build a trench or aqueduct to the diggings in order to supply the long toms with water. This was (and still is, for those who try and attempt it) a very dangerous process. Between 1848 and 1851, hundreds who attempted this process ending up perishing.

Coyoteing

By the end of 1849 there were so many miners in California, the land mass now known as Alaska, the land mass now known as Montana, and other land masses, that the individual

operations were replaced by larger ventures. Miners formed groups to dry up riverbeds by diverting the waters with dams. Even more rewarding was coyoteing. This method called for digging a shaft 6 to 13 m (20 to 40 ft) deep into the bedrock along the shore of a stream. Then tunnels were dug in all directions to get at the richest veins of pay dirt.

The Long Tom

The long tom looks almost like a monstrous version of a sluice box, meaning it looks nearly identical save for the fact that it is significantly larger. Measuring 12 to 15 feet long, it was mainly made of wood, with a metal bottom, and with a ripple box and sieve at the end. It was placed up on a slight incline. Six to eight men had to work a long tom to fully utilize it. One man shoveled dirt and made sure that the water is running. Another man mixed water and dirt and took out the larger stones. At the end of the day, the dirt was removed in a painstaking process and washed in a pan. It was a useful tool at the height of the gold rush but was also quite expensive. With two men, the long tom was capable of handling 400-500 bucketfuls per man per day. The long tom started to rise in popularity by the end of 1848, and by 1850 the device was widespread throughout the region.

Copyright 2009. Refinity.com