

A Golden Dream? A look at Mining Communities in the 1849 Gold Rush

From the late 1840's to the mid 1850's, gold rushes took place in what is now modern day Nevada, Montana, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, Oregon, Alaska, and Idaho. Wherever gold was discovered, hundreds of miners would join together to put up a camp and stake their claims. Women and children were not particularly welcome in these camps, so they rarely traveled with the miners to them, but on special occasions, they would arrive at the camps with food, wine, and other supplies. With names like Whiskey Bar, Rough and Ready, Jackass Gulch, Hangtown, Hell's Half Acre, Flapjack Canyon, Poker Flat, and Hazy Jackal, each camp had its own saloon and gambling house. Shanties constructed of ravaged cloth tacked to wood frames was generally what the miners called their homes. Miners spent the bulk of their free time drinking, gambling, arm wrestling, and if a controversy of some sort arose (which was often), fist-fighting.

The Gold Rush begat rapid inflation through the region. The price of eggs jumped to 50 cents each, potatoes skyrocketed to about \$1 a pound, and boots sold for \$20 a pair. All the traditional side effects of an economic bubble were alive and well at the height of the Gold Rush.

Some frontier mining settlements would rapidly come into creation and then vanish in a flash as soon as word spread that all the gold in the settlement had run dry. Other settlements became established strongholds in the region lasting to this day—in some incarnation anyway. Overtime, newspapers, literary societies, and social clubs--created for the purpose of discussing the hot topic political and cultural issues of the day--were created in these mining cities. Eventually, schools were founded. At the beginning, few children lived in the region, so attendance was low, but as more babies grew into school age children, the schools began to flourish.

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