

The California Gold Rush, 1849

In January 1848, James Wilson Marshall discovered gold while constructing a saw mill along the American River northeast of present-day Sacramento. The discovery was reported in the San Francisco newspapers in March but caused little stir as most did not believe the account.

The spark that ignited the gold rush occurred in May 1848 when Sam Brannan, a storekeeper in Sutter's Creek, brandished a bottle filled with gold dust around San Francisco shouting 'Gold! Gold! Gold from American River!' The residents of the city now had proof of the discovery and the stampede to the gold fields was on. San Francisco's harbor was soon cluttered with derelict ships deserted by their crews. Workers abandoned their jobs - San Francisco's two newspapers were forced to close their doors as their staffs were struck by gold fever. The populations of many of the coastal towns were depleted as prospective prospectors headed to the gold fields.

The *New York Herald* printed news of the discovery in August 1848 and the rush for gold accelerated into a stampede. Gold seekers traveled overland across the mountains to California (30,000 assembled at launch points along the plains in the spring of 1849) or took the round-about sea routes: either to Panama or around Cape Horn and then up the Pacific coast to San Francisco. A census of San Francisco (then called Yerba Buena) in April 1847 reported the town consisted of 79 buildings including shanties, frames houses and adobes. By December 1849 the population had mushroomed to an estimated 100,000. The massive influx of fortune seekers Americanized the once Mexican province and assured its inclusion as a state in the union.

S. Shufelt was one of those gold-seekers. All that we know about Mr. Shufelt is contained in a letter he wrote from the gold fields to his cousin in March 1850. We don't know if he struck it rich or whether he ever returned to his wife and home - we don't even know his first name. On May 11, 1849 he boarded the steamer *Panama* in New York City along with about 200 fellow fortune hunters risking all on a gamble in California. Behind him he left a wife and child in Windham, NY near the Catskills.

Mr. Shufelt reveals his motivation when he tells his cousin that: "I have left those that I love as my own life behind and risked everything and endured many hardships to get here. I want to make enough to live easier and do some good with, before I return." These same thoughts no doubt inspired the majority of those who made the trek to the gold fields - they were not intending to stay, but planned to make some money and return to their origins.

Mr. Shufelt's letter was discovered at an auction in 1924 and is now part of the collection of the Library of Congress.