California Gold Rush 1849

ames Marshall removed a shiny dime-size bject from the water at Sutter's Mill in orthern California on January 24, 1848. Ie had discovered gold, and when word of is discovery reached the rest of the world, touched off the great California Gold ush. Soon tens of thousands of fortune-eekers were pushing westward to Califor-ia in search of wealth.

At first, the news spread slowly and most eople brushed off the stories with skep-cism. But people living in nearby Cali-ornia towns kept hearing reports — which ecame more exaggerated with each re-ounting — and later they saw gold ore eing shipped from Sutter's Mill. Soon gold ever began sweeping through California. y May the population of San Francisco had windled from approximately 900 persons o about 100, and the rocky streams of the ierra Madres foothills began giving up heir deposits of gold to shopkeepers, farm-ers and fishermen. Even soldiers station in the West were lured away from duty b the prospect of striking it rich.

During the fall of 1848, news of the go strikes reached America's East Coast. Hov ever, since California had just become a American territory and was nearly 3,0 miles from the East Coast, it took mo than rumors to spread gold fever in th East. Then President James K. Polk's an nual report to the nation on December 1848 confirmed the presence of vast go deposits in California.

Soon there was a stampede of fortun seekers east of the Mississippi River. Thes prospectors were called forty-niners for th year the gold rush reached its peak. The made their mark on history, for their un equaled rush to California was mainly re sponsible for transforming the sparsel populated territory into the thirty-firs state by 1850.

There were three ways to reach the gold
ds — all filled with hardship. When the
t forty-niners were ready to head west,
overland route was closed until spring.
s left two sea routes. One was a voyage
und the South American continent.
ough by far the longest — six to eight
nths — it was the most popular route at
beginning of the rush. Those who
ked passage on a sound ship with a good
tain, experienced a reasonably comfort-
e trip. Unfortunately, as more and more
d seekers headed west, ships were crowd-
ar beyond their intended capacities, and
n unseaworthy vessels with incompetent
tains were pressed into service. Many of
se ships sank in the open sea with all
ds and passengers lost.

Another route took the forty-niners by
o to the east coast of Central America,
small boat and on foot across the steam-
disease-ridden jungle to the Pacific
st and then by ship to California. Many
victim to malaria and cholera. Long de-
s were also experienced while waiting
a ship. Frequently, the normal six-week
stretched into months.

Westward by wagon was the other alter-
ive. When spring came, thousands of
forty-niners set out in covered wagons
"California or Bust" was their motto. Th
Easterners, unaccustomed to the harsh lif
of the wilderness, soon discovered th
meaning of "bust." Over seemingly endles
plains, rugged mountains, rushing river
and blazing deserts, they struggled to reac
California. The overland route was slov
and tortuous, but it prepared the forty
niners for the harsh life of the gold fields.

As they soon learned, very little gold wa
just waiting to be picked up. Instead, mos
of the gold was in the form of specks an
flakes that had to be separated from th
cold water and mud. It was backbreakin
work, but some did find wealth beyon
their dreams. Most of the forty-niners
however, could have made more money —
with less work and personal discomfort —
had they stayed at their jobs in the East.

After awhile many realized this and gav
up prospecting to return to the way of lif
they knew best. Many of the forty-niner
stayed in California as farmers, craftsme
or merchants. Gold had lured them west
but the fertile land and warm climate kep
them there. Thus, the forty-niners helpe
bring civilization to the American West.