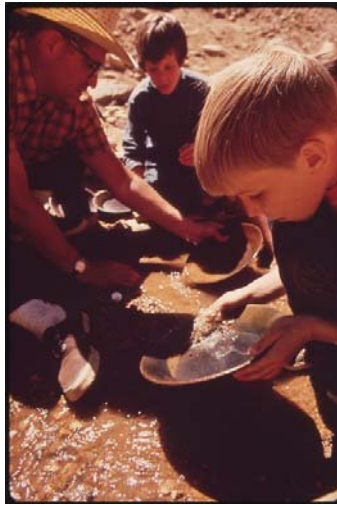


Panning for History

Michael Stahl



The Young Scout troop went on a camping trip one weekend. The 12 boys and their patrol leader went into the woods close to their home city of Sacramento, located in the state of California, U.S.A. They had many activities planned. The boys were going to learn about pitching tents, cooking on a fire, wood carving, and, because there was a river close by, panning.

Panning is simple and has a long history. It has been used for centuries to find rocks, minerals, and riches in riverbeds. All a person has to do is dip a large pan into a river, allow water, dirt, and stones to collect in it, and then shake. The pan can either have tiny holes or lengthy slits that will allow the water to escape, while leaving the rocks behind. There is always a chance that one of those rocks might actually be very valuable. One might even be a golden nugget!

The patrol leader had brought along six pans for the fun learning experience, so the boys worked in pairs. For a time, the boys went through the panning process and looked closely at the rocks they found. As they dipped and shook, then dipped and shook their pans some more, their patrol leader explained to them that panning for gold was in part responsible for one of the most important times in American history. And though a lot of people found riches in California, the gold rush of the mid-1800s also destroyed one man's fortune. That man's name was John Sutter.

Sutter had traveled to America from his home country of Switzerland after having a lot of trouble making money there. He left his wife and children in Switzerland, while he moved around the western part of the U.S. hoping to find a way to earn money. After years of effort,

his work finally paid off. He was granted land in 1839 to form the colony of Nueva Helvetia, which means New Switzerland. This region is now known as the city of Sacramento. In the center of the colony in 1841, he was able to build “Sutter’s Fort” as a trading center. Native Americans helped him build it, and he was able to give jobs to many people who were coming into the area from the eastern parts of the U.S. as well as some local Native Americans.

In 1847, Sutter was hoping to increase his wealth, and he began construction on a sawmill. A sawmill is a place where large tree trunks are cut down to make useful lumber. In January of 1848, the mill was almost complete when one of his workers came to him with a discovery that changed the United States forever. The worker, James W. Marshall, had found gold in a nearby river. He told Sutter, his boss, about it. Sutter felt that this discovery was actually a bad thing for him, and he was right.

Sutter and Marshall tried to keep the gold a secret, but people eventually found out. This first affected Sutter because many of his workers just stopped working for him and began searching for gold. Then, thousands upon thousands of people from the Eastern U.S., Mexico, and even Asia invaded the area, hoping to strike it rich. Many of these people were poor and desperate, so they were willing to make the long, dangerous trip to California from wherever they lived. A lot of them used the panning process in rivers to find gold because it was inexpensive and did not require large machines or explosives.

Many moved there in the year of 1849 and were then called ‘49ers. The nearby city of San Francisco grew tremendously, eventually becoming one of the biggest cities in the country. Roads were built so that people could get into the area. New laws were written, and, by September 1850, California was named the 31st state in the United States of America—one main reason being that so many people had moved there for gold.

Though some people struck it rich, Sutter was ruined. Nobody would work for him, and many people who came into the area stole from his farm and orchard. Soon, he would leave California and try his luck living in Pennsylvania.

None of the Young Scouts found any gold in the river during their camping trip. However, they heard quite a history lesson from their patrol leader about a really exciting time in history.