

Primary Sources: Life at a Mining Camp During the California Gold Rush

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Circa 1890-1900: A mining camp at the eastern base of the Sierra Nevada mountains in Nevada. The area was mined for silver ore almost exclusively after its discovery in 1859. Hulton Archive/Getty Images

Editor's Note: The letter below was written by Louise Clapp (1819–1906), who used the pen name “Dame Shirley.” In 1849, Clapp and her husband left the East Coast for California, where they eventually settled in the Sierra Nevada mountains. There, they spent more than a year at two mining camps, called Rich Bar and Indian Bar. A bar is a sandbank at the mouth of a river where miners searched for gold.

Clapp wrote to her sister, Molly. Along with 22 other letters, it was published in a California magazine. The subject of the letters was life in the gold mining camps during the California Gold Rush, when about 300,000 people flocked to California in search of gold.

RICH BAR, EAST BRANCH of the NORTH FORK of FEATHER RIVER,

September 20, 1851.

Dear M., today I will give you a full and true account of how Rich Bar was discovered and how it has grown. Let me first describe how this place looked to my wondering and surprised eyes. Remember, I had never seen a mining camp before coming here.

"Imagine A Tiny Valley"

Imagine a tiny valley about 800 yards in length, and perhaps 30 in width. This valley is surrounded by steep, tall hills covered with beautiful fir trees. The blue Feather River winds along the base of these mountains.

The bar was formed when earth rolled down from the mountains. When they met the river, these huge piles of dirt pushed the water aside and took over part of the riverbed.

A street now runs through the middle of Rich Bar. Along it stand about 40 homes. These range from tents to shacks to log cabins. Some are elegant while others are humble indeed. One is just a hut built out of pine branches and covered in old shirts.

"The Doctor's Office ... A Rough And Simple Place"

Today I visited the doctor's office, the only one on the river. I had heard so much about it that I really did expect something special. When I entered the place I sank helplessly upon one of the benches and laughed until I cried.

It is a rough and simple place. There is no floor, only dirt. The shelves on which the medicines stand look like sticks snatched hastily from the woodpile.

During my call at the office I was introduced to one of the founders of Rich Bar. Later on, he gave me the full story of its discovery. He is a young Georgian, who I will call Mr. H. He informed me that on the 20th of July, 1850, the men at Nelson's Creek heard a rumor. The story they heard was that "Somebody" had discovered great piles of gold some 40 miles to the northeast.

"Many Of The Men Rushed Off"

No one was quite sure who that "Somebody" was. Still, many of the men rushed off to find him. No trace of him could be found, but that did not stop the miners. A large group quickly started out in search of the gold, without knowing where they were going.

They traveled for nearly a week, in every possible direction. Finally one evening about 100 men found themselves at the top of a large hill, from which they could see the river below. Half of them descended the mountain that night. On arriving at Rich Bar, some of the adventurers camped right there.

The next morning, two men turned over a large stone. Beneath it they found quite a sizable piece of gold. They washed a small panful of the dirt, and obtained from it 256 dollars worth of gold.

"The Exciting News"

The two quickly began staking off as much land as the law would allow them to claim for mining purposes. The rest of the party soon descended the hill and heard the exciting news. Before night the entire bar had been claimed.

In a little more than a week, 500 men had settled upon Rich Bar. Soon after, gold was found on several other bars nearby.

Those who worked in these mines during the fall of 1850 were very fortunate. Many were not fortunate for long, though. Sadly, the craze for playing cards ruined hundreds.

"Spending Freely And Living Wildly"

Shall I tell you what happened to the two most successful gold-hunters? Both had started out as poor men. At the end of a few weeks they were suddenly very rich.

Excited by their good fortune, they began spending freely and living wildly. Both were drawn to the card game monte, and in less than a year these unfortunates became a pair of drunken gamblers. In no time, all their riches were gone.

One of these men now works for five dollars a day. The other often goes hungry. Stories like theirs are far too common among the men drawn to these mines.

Quiz

- 1 Based on information in the article, which of these statements is TRUE?
- (A) The homes in Rich Bar were large and luxurious.
 - (B) News of gold being found in Rich Bar traveled fast.
 - (C) The men who struck gold were good at saving their money.
 - (D) News about gold being found in Rich Bar was false.
- 2 Which information most contributes to the organization of the third paragraph from the section "The Doctor's Office ... A Rough And Simple Place"?

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- (A) the mystery of who "Somebody" was
 - (B) the description of the doctor's office
 - (C) the tale of the discovery of Rich Bar
 - (D) the identity of the man named Mr. H
- 3 Which sentence from the section "The Exciting News" shows what happened to many of the men who got rich by finding gold?
- (A) The rest of the party soon descended the hill and heard the exciting news.
 - (B) In a little more than a week, 500 men had settled upon Rich Bar.
 - (C) Those who worked in these mines during the fall of 1850 were very fortunate.
 - (D) Sadly, the craze for playing cards ruined hundreds.
- 4 Finish the sentence below.
- Overall, the article is organized around
- (A) a place and its founding.
 - (B) a person and their friends.
 - (C) an event and its outcome.
 - (D) an idea and its consequences.

