

Life on the Plains and Among the Diggings

Alonzo Delano

Introduction

***I suggest reading Delano before Dame Shirley's letters. In other words, start here.*

In January 1848, builders working on a new water-powered sawmill near the South Fork American River near Sacramento, California, found gold flakes where the river banks met the Sierra Nevada Mountains. The Mexican-American War ended a month later in February, 1848, just as news of the first gold strike on Sutter's Mill spread throughout the country, and before long, filtered across the globe. 80,000 people poured into the new U.S. territory of California during 1848 alone. By 1853, over 250,000 people had migrated to the now state of California. The "forty-niners" were a diverse group, made up of Americans from the East Coast, Chinese and Mexican workers brought to CA on labor contracts to work for mining companies, African Americans, Indians, and immigrants from all over Europe.

The myth of the individual miner, panning for gold and eventually making his fortune, is just that – a myth. Within months of the discovery of gold, large mining companies with capital and machinery controlled all of the lucrative mines (and many of the less successful mines as well, to avoid any competition at all from individual miners). In the absence of a functioning state government, mining companies hired armed vigilante white men to keep miners in line and, most importantly, clear the Native Americans from the area around mining fields. White Americans, angry that the promise of gold was not panning out as they hoped, harassed foreign miners, especially the Chinese and Mexicans. The companies empowered these men to shoot miners on the spot if they were disagreeable, stopped for water or rest too frequently, or for any reason whatsoever. The makeshift camps were violent and unsanitary, and miners quickly became dependent on the company for necessities like food and water.

Indians living in California suffered an even more violent fate. Companies encouraged the extermination of Native Americans with impunity. The white vigilante mobs targeted and killed thousands of Indians simply because of their proximity to the camps, not because of any violence from the Native Americans themselves. In addition to the mobs, everyday miners also enjoyed the "sport" of "Indian hunting," as they called it. Murdering Indians (including women and children) was a common activity of the miners during their down time. Again, there were no consequences for this mass extermination. In fact, companies encouraged these activities.

Readers from around the world – but especially the East Coast – found tales from the "Gold Rush" mesmerizing. The popular press published hundreds of first-hand accounts from the gold mines. The most popular stories spun a tale of rivers of gold just waiting for hardworking Americans to come mine them. Many people took these reports to heart, leaving their family and home behind in search of instant wealth in the hills of California.

Alonzo Delano was born into an affluent and well-connected family in upstate New York in 1806. His father's family, the Delanos, arrived on the Mayflower, and already counted politicians, physicians (Alonzo Delano's father was a surgeon), and prominent businessmen by the 1840s, although, arguably, Franklin Delano Roosevelt is the best-known descendant of the Delano family. Alonzo Delano was a writer, journalist, and illustrator when he set out for the California gold mines in 1849. Like most miners, Delano left his wife and children behind, and would not see them again for six years. His articles and letters recounting life in gold mines and surrounding towns and cities captivated readers across the country. He often wrote under the moniker, Old Block, a nod to the printers' mark on his writings. Delano published his second essay collection, *Life on the Plains and Among the Diggings*, in 1854. The following excerpt is Delano's account of day-to-day life in the mines during the first year of the Gold Rush.¹

Primary Source

Nelson's Creek rises about fifteen miles above Independence, near the base of the main ridge of the Sierra Nevada and likely nearly all the streams in that high region, flows through a deep gorge till it disembogues into the Middle Fork of the Feather river, about sixty miles in a direct line from where the latter united with the main or North Fork. Independence Bar was first located in June, 1850. Enormous hills rise on each side, exhibiting a highly volcanic appearance, based upon a talcous slate formation, and the country is highly auriferous, and above the mountains till eight o'clock in the morning, and disappeared behind the western hills a little after four in the afternoon². Although the nights are cold – the frequently forming in our buckets – the days are hot, and oppressive. Scarcely a night passed in which we did not hear rocks rolling from the hills into the gulf, which were loosened from their beds by the action of frost, rain and sun; and egress and ingress was over steep hills by means of zigzag paths, difficult, and often dangerous.

As a description of mountain life may not be wholly uninteresting, and as it possesses a general character in these isolated wilds, I shall give a brief description of some of the occurrences which transpired there. And again, I beg the reader to remember, that my object is to exhibit the struggles that all miners first undergo, at new points, through the whole length and breadth of California, though frequently diversified in their character.

From the mouth of Nelson's Creek to its source, men were at work in digging. Sometimes the stream was turned from its bed, and the channel worked in other places, wing dams were thrown out, and the bed partially worked; while in some, the banks were only dug. Some of these, as is the case everywhere in the mines, paid well, some, fair wages, while many were failures. One evening, while waiting for my second supply of goods, I strolled by a deserted camp. I was attracted to the ruins of a shanty, by observing the effigy³ of a man standing upright in an old, torn shirt, a pair of ragged pantaloons, and boots which looked as if they had been clambering over rocks since they were made – in short, the image represented a

¹ [Full source is believed to be in the public domain.](#)

[More on Alonzo Delano and his \(quite perilous\) journey westward in 1848.](#)

² Talcous, auriferous, etc should be familiar to those who have taken geology. If not, it will only take a minute to look them up!

³ A crude representation of person intended to publicly shame said person. Effigies are often burnt, hanged, or otherwise destroyed during protests against a political leader and/or their regime. Interesting that Delano uses this term to describe what he finds.

lean, meagre, worn-out and woe-begone miner, such as might daily be seen at almost every points in the upper mines. On the shirt were inscribed, in a good business hand, “My claim failed – will you pay the taxes?” (an allusion to the tax on foreigners) appended to the figure was a paper bearing the following words: “Californians, - Oh, Californians, look at me! Once fat and saucy as a privateersman, but now – look ye – a miserable skeleton. In a word, I am a used-up man. Never mind, I can sing, notwithstanding,

“Oh California! This is the land for me;
A pick and a shovel, and lots of bones;
Who would not come the sight to see, -
The golden land of dross and stones.
O Susannah, don’t you cry for me,
I’m living *dead* in Californ-nee”⁴

Ludicrous as it may appear, it was a truthful commentary on the efforts of the hundreds of poor fellow in the “golden land.” This company had penetrated the mountain snows with infinite labor in the early part of the season, enduring hardships of no ordinary character – had patiently toiled for weeks, living on the coarsest fare; had spent time and money in building a dam and digging a race through rocks to drain off the water; endured wet and cold, in the chilling atmosphere of the country, and when the last stone was turned at the very close of all this labor, they did not find a single center to reward them for their toil and privations, and what was still more aggravating, a small, wing dam, on the very claim below them, yielded several thousand dollars. Having paid out their money, and lost their labor, they were compelled to abandon the claim, and search for other diggings, where the result might be precisely the same. The only wonder is that the poor fellows could have the courage enough to sing at all.

The population of Independence represented almost every State in the Union, while France, England, Ireland, Germany, and even Bohemia⁵, and their delegates. As soon as breakfast was dispatched, all hands were engaged in digging and washing gold in the banks, or in the bed of the stream. When evening came, large fires were built, around which the miners congregated, some engrossed with thoughts of home and friends, some to talk of new discoveries, and richer diggings somewhere else; or, sometimes, a subject of debate was whiled away in pleasant, and often instructive, discussion, while many, for whom this kind of recreation had not excitement enough, resorted to dealing monte, on a small scale, thus either exciting or keeping up a passion for play. Some weeks were passed in this way under the clear blue sky of the mountains, and many had made respectable piles.

I highly enjoyed the wild scenery, and, quite as well, the wild life we were leading for there were many accomplished and intelligent men; and a subject for amusement or debate was rarely wanting. As for ceremony or dress, it gave us no trouble; we were all alike. Shaving was voted a bore; the air hole in our pants were *not* “few and far between,” and our toes were as often out “prospecting” from the ends of our

⁴ [Oh Susanna! is a minstrel song written by Stephen Foster in 1847](#), inspired by the minstrel shows he saw while living in Cincinnati, Ohio. The song quickly became a staple of the minstrel shows that inspired its composition. Minstrelsy should be in your notes. *Oh Susanna!* proved equally popular among middle class white Americans, who bought the sheet music in record number. Men heading to California in search of gold brought the song with them, tweaking the lyrics to fit the occasion known as the “Gold Rush lyrics,” pinned here to the effigy of a dead miner. As with most compelling music, there is a lot more going on with this song than what you hear. [Al Jolson, performing Oh Susanna! in blackface, sometime in the 1930s.](#) [Original minstrel lyrics.](#)

⁵ The Kingdom of Bohemia emerged as a nation-state after the fall of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806. Bohemia encompassed present-day Slovakia and Czech Republic and a bit of eastern Germany.

boots as any way, and two weeks before my last supplies arrived I was barefoot, having completely worn out my shoes. At length, a monte dealer arrived, with a respectable bank⁶. A change had been gradually coming over many of our people, and for three or four days several industrious men had commenced drinking, and after the monte bank was set up, it seemed as if the long-smothered fire burst forth into flames.

Labor, with few exceptions, seemed suspended, and a great many miners spent their time in riot and debauchery. Some scarcely ate their meals, some would not go to their cabins, but building large fire, would lay down, exposed to the frost; and one night, in the rain. Even after the monte dealer had cleared nearly all out who would play, the fame was kept up by the miners themselves in a small way, till the fragments of their purses were exhausted. There were two companies at work near me, who, when I first went there, were taking out daily in each company, from one hundred to one hundred and fifty dollars.

This they continued to do for more than two weeks, when it seemed as if the gold blistered their fingers and they began a career of drinking and gambling, until it was gone. Instead of going to work on their claims again, they were seized with the prospecting mania, so common at that time among miners, and after spending some days in looking for other diggings, in snow and rain, finally went to the valley – many not having money enough to pay small bills against them. Among the miners was one who had lost nine hundred dollars, another, eight hundred – their whole summer's work – and went off poor and penniless. The monte dealer, who, in his way was a gentleman, and honorable according the notions of that class of men, won in two nights three thousand dollars! When he had collected his taxes on our bar, he went to Onion Valley, six miles distant, and lost in one night four thousand, exemplifying the fact, that a gambler may not be rich to-day, and a beggar to-morrow⁷. Gambling at that period was more prevalent in the mines than it is now; and it is but justice to say, that very many men did not play at all, nor incline to dissipation; and that at this time, a great reformation has taken place throughout the mines, although gambling is carried on to some extent.

We were startled one morning, with the report that two men had been murdered a short distance above us. On repairing to the spot, a ghastly spectacle presented itself. Two men, having their heads cut open with a hatchet, lay in the creek, perfectly dead. The circumstances were these: Three men from near Vergennes, Vermont, named Ward, Lawrence, and Luther, lay in a tent on the bank of the creek, at the foot of a high, steep hill. Their bed was a flat rock, and their feet reached within a few inches of the water. As they all lay asleep about ten o'clock at night, Ward was suddenly awakened by a noise, when looking up, he saw a man standing over him with a hatchet, in the act of striking. Instantly he sprang to his feet, and encountered another man, who made at him, but he turned and ran out at the lower end of the tent, and clambering over a pile of rocks, escaped and continued his flight into the dark toward a cabin about forty rods distant, showing "murder!" Reaching the cabin, the inmates turned out as soon as Ward was able to give a distinct relation of the affair; and on reaching the scene of slaughter, they found that the assassins after completing their work of death, had robbed their victims of about four hundred dollars each, and then had thrown their bodies into the creek and escaped. As the parties were going down, they heard the sound of somebody scrambling on the hill-side, overhead, but in the gloom of the night, and from the nature of the country, pursuit was impossible. Suspicion naturally enough fell on poor Ward, but an

⁶ The "banker," or "dealer" in the Monte games popular in Mexican culture. Three-card monte is probably the best-known remnant of the monte card games. "The Monte" arrived in the camps with money to lend the miners and around the clock card games for them to lose it to the house. As Delano previously stated, small-scale Monte games were common among the miners as a way to pass time when they were not murdering Indians.

⁷ Eight hundred to four thousand dollars is a lot of money to win or lose today (at least from my perspective). Imagine what winning and losing that money meant in the 1850s.

investigation being held, all circumstances were in his favor, and he was fully acquitted. Indeed, his terror, and his almost miraculous escape, scarcely allowed him to sleep for many nights. They were industrious, prudent men, and esteemed by all who knew them

Robberies, too, occasionally occurred. One poor fellow's cabin was robbed of fifteen hundred dollars while he was at work. Thus in a moment he was tripped of the result of months of hard labor. He could scarcely suspect the author of his misfortune. At a gambling house near the mouth of the creek, a man who had started for home was induced to try his luck at the monte table, when under the influence of liquor, and in the excitement of having lost his money, he attempted to seize it again, drawing his pistol on the gambler, when the latter shot him dead! He had previously written to his family that was about starting for home, but this one thoughtless and imprudent act cost him his life, and his family would look long and in vain for the return of the husband and father, and probably without ever learning his sad and discernable end.

About four miles below Nelson's creek, on the Middle Fork of the Feather River, arose to a great height an old extinct volcano, which curiosity impelled me to visit. Crossing the river at the mouth of the creek, I commenced a toilsome ascent of the steep mountain, and after half a day of hard climbing, I gained the summit of what had once been its crater. Vast quantities of lava had been ejected, which, mixed with quartz and volcanic debris, formed a mass of flint-like hardness, and it was heaped up and piled around the apex of the mountain, in rough, columnar shapes, resembling in some measure rude pillars and cones, while in cavities the action of the flames seemed to as fresh as if it had been recently done. In one place was a deep, narrow chasm, which the eye could not fathom, and on throwing down a stone, a sound was heard as though it was striking against rough points till gradually it was lost to the ear, without apparently reaching the bottom. It appeared as if the flames had burst forth, throwing out the rock in a melted state, which had cooled without forming a regular crater, leaving the lava in a cemented mass, with chasms which reached to a vast depth in the bowels of the earth. On the side next the river, projections had been thrown out, and a little farther east, on the southern slope, the sides were smooth and shining, and a miss step would have precipitated the unfortunate traveler a quarter of a mile down its sides, before any jutting would have caught his mangled and bleeding form. The panorama around was beautiful and sublime, and I counted in the view no less than five volcanic peaks in the wild, broken range of the wonderful Sierra.

My thirst prevented the full indulgence of my curiosity. I gladly would have spent the night in this elevated and inspiring situation, but I was reluctantly obliged to descend. Taking a circuitous route – indeed the only practicable one in that direction – I commenced a descent towards Rich Bar, which lay at its base. It required nearly two hours to accomplish the descent. Indeed, the labor was quite equal to the ascent. The bar at its base proved to be one of the richest which had been discovered, and a large amount of gold was taken from it. One man took out of a pocket fifteen hundred dollar at one panful of dirt. This, of course, was only a single instance, for as at every other bar through the mines, while some were richly rewarded, others scarcely got enough to pay expenses.

Mr. Gridley had sold out his stock before Mr. Brinkerhoff and I removed to the mouth of the creek, and had gone below. Messrs. Lathrop, Rockwell and Fish, from Jackson, Michigan, were the purchases; and after we had closed our sales, Mr. Brinkerhoff, availing himself of an opportunity, went to Marysville, and as his health continued bad, subsequently to New York. I took up my quarters with Messrs. Lathrop & Co., with whom I had a cheerful time, for, isolated as miners are, they are disposed to avail themselves of every little circumstance which may provoke mirth, and the eight days I stayed with them, waiting a chance to ride to the valley, forms one of the pleasantest reminiscences of my mountain life. If these pages should ever meet their eyes, it will call to mind many a story and jest, which whiled away our long,

cold evenings, at the foot of that five-mile mountain, which towered above the Middle Fork of Feather River.

A few weeks later found me a resident, and a man of business, in San Francisco, without anything occurring sufficient to interest the reader; and from this period personal adventure will be merged in a more general history of prominent events as they occurred in the State, some of them taking place under my own eye.