

Family Letters during the California Gold Rush



ABOUT THE READING The discovery of gold in 1848 at Sutter's Mill in California began the first major gold rush in the United States. By the following year, tens of thousands of "forty-niners" had come to the area in hopes of striking it rich. Most did not become wealthy in California, but many stayed on there. The region continued to grow rapidly, and in 1850, California became a state. The following excerpts show how the gold rush affected a family from New York.



As you read note that Sabrina and William Swain have different views of the gold rush.

Sabrina Swain at Home

Sabrina and William Swain lived in Youngstown, New York. William left for the gold fields in the spring of 1849. Sabrina was left at home with her mother and young daughter. William's brother, George, had also stayed behind. Women like Sabrina whose husbands were gone for long periods of time were sometimes called "California widows."

December 7, 1849

My own dear William,

Through the blessings and mercies of God I am again permitted to resume my pen in addressing a line to you. It is a most affecting thought to me and one that strikes me very forcibly, too, that while I am writing these lines to you, your body may be moldering back to its mother's dust from whence it came. . . .

We have not received even as much as a line from you since you left Fort Laramie and I can assure you

VOCABULARY

ere before

governing disciplining

constitutes makes up

out-chores outside work

Providence God

Sabrina realizes that William may be dead and she would not know it.

Source: J. S. Holliday, *The World Rushed In: The California Gold Rush Experience.* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981.)

the time seems very long. O William, how I want to hear from you and hope long **ere** this reaches you we shall have heard from you. . . It will be nine months the 11th of this month since you left home. How long to be separated from one we dearly love! . . .

Little Eliza has grown nearly half in this time, and she has long ago forgotten that she has or ever had a father. As she grows older, the more I feel the need of a father's care and assistance in lightening the responsibility of **governing** and training her right, and I am placed in such circumstances that I do not govern her many times as I should if I were not by myself. . .

She is now asleep on her little bed by the stove. Mother is reading, and this **constitutes** the members of our family at present. George is at the Suspension Bridge in the Custom House office business. . . So you see, we are left in a rather lonely condition. As to a man for the winter to do chores, I do not know what we shall do yet. . . We must have someone immediately, as Mother and I cannot do both the **out-chores** and what there is to be done in the house. . .

May the hand of **Providence** deliver us all during the remainder of your absence and bring you back speedily to the bosom of your family, is the prayer of your affectionate

Sabrina Swain

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. Why do Sabrina and her mother need someone to help them on the farm?

2. How does Sabrina feel about trying to raise her daughter alone?

William Swain in California

Swain walked 2,000 miles across country to reach California in November 1849. He joined with other men he met on the trail to stake a claim on the Feather River. By then it was not as easy to find gold, because so many miners had come to the area. Men joined together to try river mining. They built dams to divert the water so they could get to the gold trapped in the rocks at the bottom. Swain kept a diary of his journey, and he also wrote many letters home. When he wrote the following letter, he had not yet heard from his family.

February 17, 1850

Dear Sabrina,

I take advantage of an opportunity to send this letter to San Francisco to send you **intelligence** of my good health, but not of great fortune realized. . .

You will of course ask: Have you done nothing yet in mining? Yes, I have done **considerable**. I have **panned** along the banks of the river with various success. My first day's work in the business was an ounce; the second was \$35, and the third was \$92. I picked up a lump worth \$51 which cost me no more labor than stooping down to take it up. But such days' work as these are not a common thing. To be sure, they give tone and character to all the affairs of California. They set prices on all kinds of **provisions** and merchandise and all kinds of labor. The merchant, when told that men find from \$16 to \$100 a day, very **readily** concludes that they can easily pay \$1 for a pound of potatoes, or \$2 for a pound of dried apples, as in the state of New York they can pay half a cent for the former or four cents for the latter. . .

It is also necessary to say that I have spent whole days in tramping along these rocky hills and shores and not found a shilling's worth of gold.

Our dam is finished, and the river, which is high and will probably be so for some months, is running

Source: Swain, William. *Letters, MS: William R. Coe Collection, Yale University Library, as quoted in J. S. Holliday, The World Rushed In: The California Gold Rush Experience. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981, pp. 329–333.*

VOCABULARY

intelligence news; information

considerable a great deal

panned sifted

provisions supplies

readily quickly

People hear stories of overnight wealth and assume that all miners in California are striking it rich.

Some days William has walked miles along the river and not found much gold at all.

The men have set up a new channel for the river to flow through so the old riverbed is exposed.

through our race leaving its old channel bare. We have to remove some three feet of gravel and stone before we find the foundation rock where gold always lies. . . We have found some gold, but in consequence of the thickness of the stones on the bedrock, it will not be so profitable as we expected. . .

They have had to dig through thick rocks to reach the gold, so they will not make as much money as they had hoped.

Give my love to Mother and George and kiss the girl for Father. I shall write as often as I can.

Yours as ever,
William

P.S. I want you to write me (as I suppose you have) a great deal about our little girl. I often think of her when night has hushed all sounds around me but the song of our noble river.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. Why is it so much more expensive to buy things in California than in New York?

2. What can you conclude from this letter about the chances for getting rich from gold mining?

MAKE A COMPARISON

1. What thoughts and feelings do William and Sabrina have in common?

2. Whom do you think had the more difficult life—William or Sabrina? Explain your answer.
