

## Women During the California Gold Rush

Some research compiled by Mrs. Cope for you!

No Place for a Woman?

*The California gold camps were hard on the ladies, but that didn't stop them from arriving, surviving, and sometimes thriving.*

By Patricia Cronin Marcello

Who would have been foolish enough to travel through hell to get to a place where a person's ears were cut off for stealing and murder was commonplace? The women of the California Gold Rush were. They suffered rugged and perilous journeys by land and sea to face the hardest people and the most backbreaking work of their lives.

Why? For some, it was the fantasy of gold, the prospect of untold riches lying on the ground, waiting to be gathered by the wagon load. The dream had the whole world in an uproar by 1849, but by the time most folks could get to California, the days of easy pickings were over. There was still plenty of gold, but it demanded more hard labor than even some strong men could stand, to extract it from the uncooperative earth. Few gold seekers were women.

Some Gold Rush women had come along with their husbands to the mines and had traveled for months in covered wagons to get there, because the overland route was the cheapest. But some sent their man off alone. Eventually, several of the wives tired of waiting for them to return home. So they packed their belongings and set off with their children in tow to find them.

One such woman, Lucinda Mann, waited three years for her husband to come back, before she decided to take her children overland to California. When she reached the mining town of Jackson, she was shocked to learn that her husband had died four months before her arrival. Rather than go back east, she settled there and took charge of the store her husband had started. The following year, she married another miner and eventually she came to be considered a great success by the women of her time.

But only women who actually lived in the camps knew how hard life was there. Basic conditions were not at all comfortable. Miners moved from claim to claim and lived in tents or shacks or slept on the ground until they settled on a site they knew would be productive. Only then would a log cabin be raised. Usually, it had a dirt floor and no windows. Nothing was expected to be permanent in the gold fields, and these rough conditions kept most women in the towns.

One thing was for certain: a woman who wasn't out looking for gold had her choice of permanent jobs. Those who took on the chores of washing and cooking for the men were highly paid. Eastern women, disgruntled over low wages, were encouraged to come to California where cooks could make as much as thirty dollars a day. Women who washed clothes could often make twice as much.

By 1849 standards, this was big money, but not in gold country, where high wages were necessary for survival. At one point, a dozen eggs cost ten dollars and

one potato or one onion went for a dollar each. Often, miners struggled to support themselves. Just saving enough to get back home seemed impossible-never mind being lucky enough to strike it rich.

Luck played a major role in the Gold Rush, and women who came to the mining towns were more likely to be professional gamblers than prospectors. At night and on Sundays, the men wanted recreation. Great piles of gold dust were frittered away at the gaming tables, fixtures in every mining town. Women who dealt the popular card game Monte were bound to make their fortune without even getting a speck of dirt on their gowns. Only in the mining towns could an average woman become fabulously wealthy and maybe move on to an elegant life in San Francisco.

The Gold Rush also had a hand in making some ordinary women famous, if not rich. At Sutter's Mill, where the first gold was found by James Marshall in 1848, a woman named Jenny Wimmer was the cook. It was in her was pot that the first nugget found was boiled in lye overnight, proving when it went unchanged that it was indeed gold.

Dame Shirley was the pen name of Louisa Amelia Knapp Smith Clappe. Her "Letters from the California Mines" ran as a column in a California magazine. She described herself as a "shivering, frail, home-loving little thistle." After living for a time in San Francisco, Louisa and her husband, Dr. Fayette Clapp, moved to the mining town of Rich Bar. She'd had enough dampness and fog. It is through Dame Shirley that we have our best descriptions of the only other women living in Rich Bar at the time.

The Indiana Girl, whose father ran the Indiana hotel, was large and brawny and had a voice to match. Not only did she wear miner's boots, she cleaned dirty dishes with her apron. Once, during a particularly bad snowstorm, the Indiana Girl trudged off to fetch a 50-pound sack of flour, which she lugged back into camp, slung over her shoulder.

A woman known only as Mrs. R. made \$900 in nine weeks by taking in wash. She weighed only sixty-eight pounds.

Many women made a lot of money as entertainers.

Despite their trying circumstances, or perhaps because of them, the women of the Gold Rush were some of the boldest and grittiest women in American history. They deserve our respect for their strength, their tenacity and their ability to adapt and survive in a society composed almost exclusively of men.

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# Women in the California Gold Rush

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From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia (no author)

**Women in [California Gold Rush](#)** were scarce but played an important role. Some of the first people in the [mining fields](#) were wives and families who were already in [California](#). A few women and kids and the few men who didn't leave their family worked right alongside the men but most men left their wives and families home. The number of women in California changed very quickly as the rich gold strikes and lack of women created strong pressures to restore sex balance. As travel arrangements improved and were made easier and more predictable the number of women coming to California rapidly increased. Most women probably came by way of [Panama](#) as this was one of the fastest trips (40–90 days) and one of the most reliable—although expensive in 1850--\$400–\$600/person one-way. Passage via Panama became much more predictable after the [paddle wheel steam ship](#) lines were up and running by late 1849. In [Ireland](#), the [Great Potato Famine](#) was a period of mass starvation, disease and emigration between 1845 and 1852 that drove many desperate women to the [United States](#) and on to [California](#).

Women of many different countries, statuses, classes, and races were involved in the California Gold Rush. The rapidly increasing population had very few women in it and what women there were found myriads of opportunities. As word of the gold rush spread so did the word of opportunities for women to work in the women poor gold fields and communities.

Women going to California to rejoin their families usually had their passages paid for by miners or businessmen who had decided to make California their new home. Most of the male [Argonauts](#) had originally planned on getting their gold and returning home to rejoin their families and enjoy their new riches.<sup>[1]</sup> Typically women euphemistically labeled as *entertainers* had little or no money for passage but as soon as they showed up in California they were hired by various [saloons](#), gambling halls, dance halls, [peep shows](#) and/or [brothels](#). The cost of passage was typically paid for by the *entertainer* agreeing to work for the payees for at least three to six months. These "entertainers" initially were the majority of the female population.<sup>[2]</sup> Very few of these "entertainers" made the five- to six-month trip by wagon on the [California Trail](#) or chose the five- to seven-month all sea journey around [Cape Horn](#).

As the gold mining and associated businesses prospered, many men decided to make California their new home and many husbands or potential husbands sent money back to their original homes for their women and families to join them. Others went back east to wind up their business there and escort their women and families to California. Many single men started communicating with female acquaintances they knew and many proposals were accepted with this long distance dating. Some communities back east were severely -60 days for a letter to go from California via Panama to a city in the east and another 40-60 days for a reply so this was 'slow' courting. If these long distance proposals were accepted, the prospective groom if a successful miner or businessman sent money for passage and spending money. Usually as soon as the prospective bride got off the ship they were rushed to a preacher to get married. Most single women in California quickly had several proposals for marriage.<sup>[3]</sup> As time went on the ever increasing immigration of more women and families started changing the composition of the female population and the *entertainers* soon became outnumbered.

There were many unusual opportunities for women in the cities and gold fields as men, starved for female company, paid extravagant fees to associate with women or buy products that were made by women. There are several stories of women making more money selling homemade pies, doughnuts, etc. than their husbands made mining. Laundrys, Restaurants, lodging, mending, waiting tables, all paid good wages.

These *entertainers* were joined by a few women (less than 3% of initial travelers) who came either overland via the [California Trail](#) or by sea with their husbands and families. They refused to be left behind to fend for themselves or miss an exciting life changing opportunity. A few of these travelers became widows as their husbands died of disease or were killed. On the [California Trail](#), about 4% of the people on the trail died from accidents, [cholera](#), fever, and myriad other causes, and many women became widows before even setting eyes on California. On the sea voyage via Panama there were the usual hazards of traveling across the Isthmus of Panama by canoe and mule, waiting in disease prevalent [Chagres](#) and [Panama City](#), where [cholera](#) and [yellow fever](#) often took a dreadful toll—up to 30% of some groups of travelers. The final step was catching a [paddle wheel steam ship](#) for the 15-20 day trip to California. See [Ulysses S. Grant's](#) biography for a vivid description of the hazards of crossing Panama.

The sex imbalance in California (indeed in most of the West) would persist though several generations as the number of females gradually increased to something roughly equivalent to the numbers of males.

## Entertainers

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Women flooded to California from several countries and cities to work as *entertainers* to capitalize on the scarcity of women. Most had worked as *entertainers* in some other city before going to California. Most were called *entertainers* and worked in [saloons](#), gambling halls, or dance halls. Many came to take advantage of the possibility of getting married to a prosperous miner or businessman and getting out of the business. Many of them did.

Women of all different statuses, classes, and races were involved in the California Gold Rush. The rapidly increasing California population had very few women and women found a myriad of different opportunities which were normally not available to them. As word of the gold rush spread so did the word of opportunities for women to work in the women poor gold fields and communities. Some of the first women to show up were women from southern California, [Sonora](#), [Chihuahua](#), [Acapulco](#), and [San Blas](#). Since Sonoran women predominated they all were typically all labeled “Sonorans” or “Senoritas” by the miners. They were soon joined by women from Panama, Ecuador, Peru and Chile. Since Chileans predominated all the [South America Latinos](#) were all typically called “Chilenos”. As word got back to the east coast of the job opportunities for women and travel arrangements were worked out with [paddle wheel steam ship](#) lines with dependable schedules on the [Caribbean](#) and [Pacific Ocean](#) many more women started coming to California.

Most of the women who worked in the saloons, gambling halls, and dance halls were labeled “entertainers”. Typically these *entertainers* had little or no money for passage but as soon as they showed up they were hired by various, saloons, gambling halls, and/or dance halls who paid for the cost of their trip. The women typically repaid the cost of passage by agreeing to work for the payees at least three to six months. In women-starved California men paid up to \$16.00 to \$20.00 a night for the privilege of having them sit at the same gaming table with them.<sup>[2]</sup> Very few of these “entertainers” made the five- to six-month trip

by wagon on the [California Trail](#) or chose the five- to seven-month all sea journey around [Cape Horn](#).

In San Francisco, an official port of entry for California shipping and passengers, the population exploded from about 200 in 1846 to 36,000 in 1852.<sup>[9]</sup> In San Francisco initially many women (and men) were housed in wooden houses, ships hauled up on the shore to serve as homes or businesses, canvas wood framed tents and other flammable structures. These types of structures combined with a lot of drunken gamblers and miners led almost inevitably to many fires. Most of San Francisco burned down six times in six *Great Fires* between 1849 and 1852.<sup>[10]</sup> From San Francisco by late 1849 [Paddle steamers](#) were transporting the miners and others 125 miles (201 km) to [Sacramento, California](#) and the start of the [California Gold Rush](#) country.

## Other forms of women's work<sup>[edit]</sup>

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A few women came to California with their husbands and children and often help [pan for gold](#) or earn wages/cash while the husband tried his luck panning for gold. One of the most popular ways for a woman to earn a living was to run a [boarding house](#). California was about the only place that women could earn wages higher than men for equivalent work because women were scarce, and the men would pay just to be in their company and have them do household tasks the men did not want or know how to do.<sup>[16]</sup>

Most single women came as part of a family group or as an "*entertainer*". Many men did not find their fortune in the gold fields, and having a woman around to earn money with boarding, washing, cooking, sewing, etc. could mean the difference between the family living well and not.<sup>[17]</sup> A few women even had their own gold mining claims and came out west with the specific intention of panning for gold. As the easy to find placer gold became scarcer or harder to work and mining became more complex than panning for gold as well as capital and labor intensive, women typically moved out of the goldfields and into some other type of work. Most women had many marriage proposals and could get married almost as soon as they found someone they liked.<sup>[18]</sup>

In the mines in the [Sierra Nevadas](#), where there were fewer white women, [Mexican](#) and [Chilean](#) women gained importance as increased competition caused them to leave the larger towns and cities and go to the smaller gold mining camps. This opportunity for upward economic gain was easier for non-white women than for non-white men.<sup>[19]</sup>

## Marriage<sup>[edit]</sup>

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Due to the very low number of women in Gold Rush California, the marriage market was in women's favor. While parental approval and economic concerns still occasionally played a role in engagements, they decreased in importance. Mixed marriages, while still stigmatized, were more common in California due to the diverse pool of women in which white women were a small minority. Women also found it easier to get a divorce in California than elsewhere as the judges seemed to want to increase the number of women in the marriageable "pool". As divorcees, these women did not receive the negative public scrutiny sometimes evident elsewhere because divorce was often part of the new Californian culture.<sup>[20]</sup> Eligible women usually had several proposals for marriage in a short time.

Starting in the mid-1850s, people began to “civilize” the Gold Rush population by settling into their traditional roles, mores and economic classes and abandoning non-traditional gender roles. Many lone men sent for their families and middle class American morality re-emerged as the number of middle class wives and families increased. It is estimated that about 30% of the male miners were married men who had left their families to try their luck in California. Many men returned to their homes but many more decided get their family to California and stay. The influx of more white women, who were seen as symbols of purity and morality in the typical Victorian view, often changed the "*accepted*" morality and mores. In some *Societies* and communities with large populations of non-white immigrants some non-white male groups were assigned formerly “feminine” roles (e.g., the Chinese laundry and cooks).<sup>[21]</sup>

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