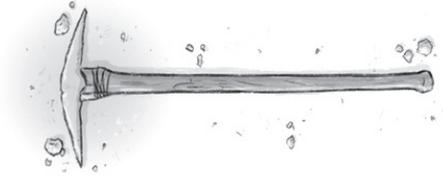


*Adventures on the American Frontier*

# **GOLD RUSH ADVENTURES**

Revised Edition



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# John Sutter's Golden Dream

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Wind tossed the battered sailing ship from the crest of one ocean wave into the pit of the next. It seemed certain that the schooner would be broken to bits on the rocky California coast.

The mate barked orders. Sailors scurried up the rigging to the wooden yardarms. The ship changed its course and headed toward the land.

Big, handsome John Sutter stood on the deck near the ship's prow, his feet apart and his body leaning as the ship rolled. His heart beat quickly, but not with fear for the *Clementine*. The ship had brought him and his men safely all the way from Hawaii to Alaska and down to California. He

was confident that she would weather these last miles to the safety of San Francisco Bay. No, he was not afraid. He was excited. Here, at last, lay the land of his golden dream.

“Here in California I will be master of my own land and live like a king!” he shouted into the wind. His words were lost in the roar of the breaking waves, but John didn’t care. His words were not meant to be heard.

He let his eyes take in all they could of the land and the neck of water that led from the Pacific Ocean into San Francisco Bay. There were low mountains and a rocky coastline to the left. On the right, the land rose more gently. The neck of water was called “The Narrows” in that year of 1839, but in a few years, the explorer John Fremont would give it the lasting name of “the Golden Gate.” No matter the name, to John Sutter, going through it meant the end of a long journey.

As the sailors brought the *Clementine* into the quieter waters of San Francisco Bay, John’s eyes searched the land. Above, to the right, were the old adobe walls of the Spanish-Mexican fort that had guarded the harbor for sixty years. The ship moved on, toward a place where the shoreline curved inward. That was the journey’s end, in the smooth waters of the harbor at Yerba Buena.

John looked at the little town of Yerba Buena that would someday grow into the city of San Francisco. There were fewer than a dozen buildings huddled near the muddy cove. Above the little buildings, the land rose, bare except for low bushes and a few scrub oak trees and pines.

But the sad look of Yerba Buena didn't bother John much. A ship's captain had told him about the Sacramento River to the north and the wonderful land between it and the Sierra Nevada mountains. John's eyes turned away from Yerba Buena, trying to see beyond the waters of the bay to the north. His thoughts were broken by the sound of the ship captain's voice: "Mr. Sutter!"

John turned back toward the waters of the little cove, for the captain had pointed in that direction. A small boat, carrying men in the black-and-red uniform of the Mexican soldiers, was being rowed toward the *Clementine*. The boat pulled alongside, and an officer climbed onto the ship's deck.

"You can't take goods ashore here," the officer told John and the ship's captain. "You must go to the capital at Monterey first."

"But our ship barely made it this far!" argued the captain. "It needs to be repaired before we take to sea again."

The Mexican officer was firm. The *Clementine* had no choice but to leave San Francisco Bay and head down the California coast to Monterey.

John sighed as the *Clementine's* crew eased the ship from the quiet cove. He had left his family in Germany five years before, in 1834, and had crossed the wide Atlantic Ocean to the United States of America. There, a man could make of his life anything for which he was willing to work. But John felt that the eastern states were already too full of people, and he soon headed west to the frontier state of Missouri.

In Missouri, he looked around to see how he could build a good life for himself. He joined some traders who were

following the Santa Fe Trail to the Mexican city of Santa Fe. In Santa Fe, he met a man who had been on a fur-trading journey to California.

“That’s the place where a man could live like a king,” the trader had told John. “It’s under the Mexican government, just as Santa Fe is, but a man who’s willing to become a Mexican citizen can easily get plenty of land for himself. There are places as pretty as a picture, and things grow like magic in the valleys. There’s grass all year to fatten the cattle, too.”

From that day on, John knew that he wanted to go to California. He finished his trading journey back to St. Louis, Missouri, and soon he was heading west again. This time he went by way of the northern trails that led to a great meeting of fur trappers, and he traveled with a party of fur company men. That was in the spring of 1838. No one in the party knew a good land route to California, but they were sure that John could get there from Oregon by ship.

So that winter, John waited at Fort Astoria in Oregon for a ship that would be sailing south to California. Now and then, ships came with supplies for the fur-trading post at the fort, and John always asked the crews if they were headed next to California. But there was little trade between Oregon and California, and John could find no ship going there.

One day a sailor told him, “One of our ships is about to set sail for the Sandwich Islands. Ships sailing for California often stop there on their way. Maybe you could sail to California on one of them.”



The Sandwich Islands, as Hawaii was then called, were a long way out in the Pacific Ocean. But John thought it better to set sail than to keep waiting at the fort. So he sailed to Hawaii, only to learn that he had just missed a ship headed for California. “It may be months before another one goes there,” he was told.

John was disappointed, but he soon learned that the sailing ship *Clementine* was in the harbor, waiting to go on a trading journey for anyone who could pay the expenses. John still had the money he had earned from his trading journey to Santa Fe, so he bought a stock of trading goods and rented the ship. He also found some men who would work for him.

The *Clementine* sailed, but not to California. First she went to Sitka, Alaska, where the crew had heard that there was a Russian trading post in need of the goods they carried.

Then, at last, the little ship turned south from Sitka along the North American coastline toward California.

As John sailed past Fort Astoria, he laughed at what a round-about journey he was taking to California. But as the *Clementine* went on, there was little time for laughing. High winds tried to push the little sailing ship against the rocks of the coastline. Every man fought to keep her afloat. The Golden Gate had seemed like the gateway to heaven after the long, hard journey. And now the *Clementine* had to put to sea again.

Creaking in her joints, she limped down the coast to Monterey. There, John went to see the *alcalde*—the mayor, judge, and father-figure of the area. John showed the *alcalde* all of the letters he had gathered on his journeys stating that he was a man to be trusted, and he told the *alcalde* that he wanted to start a colony on the Sacramento River, where only Native Americans lived at that time.

The *alcalde* considered John's plans. He could see that John could help Mexico grow stronger. "You may begin building your colony," he said. "But you must become a citizen of Mexico. In one year, come back to me, tell me what you have done, and if I approve, I will give you the land."

That was in early August of 1839. A year later, John's dreams were coming true. He had begun to build a huge fort just northeast of where the American River flowed into the Sacramento River. The fort would be five hundred feet long and one hundred fifty feet wide, with walls eighteen feet high, all built of adobe bricks made of clay and straw. The

walls were three feet thick at the base and were rising strong and solid.

The *alcalde* was so pleased that he gave John the land and made him a captain in the Mexican army. In only five years, Captain Sutter became as much of a ruler of the area as the *alcalde* himself.

By 1843, John really was like a king. In and around Sutter's Fort, hundreds of Native Americans and white men worked and lived. There were square towers at two of the corners of the big adobe fort, and from them all four sides could be protected with the guns and cannons that stood ready. Soldiers were always on guard.

But for all its arms and cannons, Sutter's Fort was a peaceful place most of the time. Outside the adobe walls, Native Americans made their homes. Some tilled the soil, tended grapevines, and herded cattle and sheep. Others brought fine beaver furs from the mountain streams not far away.

Inside the walls there were shops of many kinds. In them, grapes became wine, hides became leather boots and saddles, wool became fine cloth, and iron was forged into tools and other useful things. Near the fort, there were mills where grain became flour and where redwoods and pines were sawed into lumber. In the cabinet shop, some of the lumber became furniture for the ever-growing number of houses that would soon be part of the city of Sacramento.

Over it all, John ruled from his office inside the adobe walls. He even had a mint where tin was cut and stamped into money, and he used the money to pay for the work that

was done. A coin with one star cut into it meant the pay for one day's work. A two-star coin meant two days' work and bought twice as many goods at the stores in the fort.

John's kingdom grew, for he bought more land, including two forts from the Russians, who no longer wanted California trading posts when beavers and sea otters became scarce. Soon, Sutter's Fort was the center of trade for all of central California, and the wagon trains that began to come in from the long journey across America found it a wonderful place to end their trip. John's golden dream had come true. But before long, it would turn into a nightmare.

The trouble began in a small way that made John even happier for a little while. It was the year 1847. James Marshall, a carpenter who had come to Sutter's Fort two years earlier, was making plans with John for a sawmill. He would see to the building of it a few miles from the fort on the South Fork of the American River, and they would operate it as partners when it was finished.

All through the fall months, Mr. Marshall had a crew of men working on the mill. They were building it near the pine forests of the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada mountains, where it would have water power from one of the fast-running mountain streams. The men were cutting a channel from the stream to the mill and then from the mill back to the stream. It was almost finished in January of 1848, but Mr. Marshall was not yet satisfied with the flow of water through it.

"The tailrace isn't deep enough," he said. The tailrace was the channel of water that went from the mill back to the stream.

“What do you want to do, boss?” asked one of the workers.

“If we turn the full force of water into it each evening and let it run all night, that should loosen the gravel and help deepen it,” said Mr. Marshall.

So each evening the men opened the gates and let water flow through the tailrace. On the morning of January 24th, Mr. Marshall shut off the flow of water as usual and went to see how much gravel had been loosened. “It’s deep enough,” he decided. He was about to turn back and go up to the cabin for breakfast when something bright in the water at the end of the tailrace caught his eye. He stooped to pick it up and was surprised at how heavy it felt.

Could it be gold? He put the shiny lump between his teeth and bit it. When he looked at it again, there were tooth marks in it, showing that the metal was soft—one of the tests for gold. Mr. Marshall couldn’t believe it. “Most likely fool’s gold,” he said to himself, “and I’d be a fool to think I’d found real gold in these hills.”



When he got to the cabin, Mr. Marshall showed the piece of metal to the men who worked for him.

“It couldn’t possibly be gold, or someone would have found it long ago,” one of the men said.

“I heard of someone finding some gold down in southern California a couple of years ago,” said another, “but I never heard of any around here.”

Mr. Marshall dropped the lump of metal into his pocket. “Let’s get on with the day’s work,” he said, and the men left the cabin.

Outside, Mrs. Wimmer, the woman who cooked and washed for the workmen, was making soap. She had a great kettle boiling over the fire. It held water that had drained through a barrel of wood ashes, turning the water into lye. She had been saving the fat trimmings from the pork she cooked for the men and would soon add the fat to the lye to make soap.

Mr. Marshall had an idea. “Drop this bit of metal into the lye kettle before you add the fat, Mrs. Wimmer,” he said, handing her the shiny nugget. “If it’s what I think it is, the lye won’t hurt it.”

Mrs. Wimmer’s eyes widened. “Oh, Mr. Marshall! Is that gold?”

“I don’t think so,” said Mr. Marshall, “but put it in the soap kettle, and we’ll find out.”

So into the kettle went the nugget, and that night Mrs. Wimmer handed it back to Mr. Marshall, unchanged from being boiled.

The next morning Mr. Marshall found some flakes of gold. Each morning he studied the end of the tailrace and added to his collection.

On January 28th, it was raining too hard for the men to work, so Mr. Marshall went to Sutter's Fort. John was excited at what Mr. Marshall had to show him. He had been a paper-maker in Europe and knew quite a bit about chemistry. He tested the nuggets in more ways and weighed them on his scales. The gold passed every test.

The two men's eyes met. "Not a word to anyone," said John.

Soon they had Native Americans washing out the gravel that was about two feet down in the earth. That seemed to be where the gold flakes were. Each day the digging brought a richer find. It wasn't long before they began finding gold, not only in the beds of the streams, but in dry valleys, too.

"We're rich beyond our wildest dreams," John told Mr. Marshall. Each day he joyfully weighed the gold that his workers brought him.

But he couldn't keep the news a secret. Before long, word of the gold spread, and one day John found men who had never worked for him digging in the streams and hillsides around the American River. They ignored his orders to leave.

"Who says all this gold belongs to you?" the men said. "We have as much right here as you do."

Gold fever hit hard, and it hit everyone around. Soon it seemed to be in the blood of nearly every man in California, and some of the women, too. John couldn't keep people

working in his shops and fields. All they wanted to do was look for gold. Soon the shops and mills were still, and the fields grew to weeds.

By summer, John's land was swarming with miners who were digging holes anywhere and everywhere. His "kingdom" was falling apart. Like King Midas of old, he found his golden dream turning bitter, just as it had seemed that everything he touched would turn to gold.

