The Not So Average Gold Miner:
Women in the California Gold Rush, 1849-1853

By Melissa Smith
Popular conceptions of the gold rush of 1849 are pictured as men rushing to California with hopes of becoming rich by pulling handfuls of gold out of streams and creeks. Where were women while men took off to California? Did women join the California gold rush, or did men, with no obligations to a family, rush off to California? Men who rushed to California did indeed have families, but husbands often left their wives at home in order to take care of the family farm.¹ There were, however, women who did insist on following their husbands and taking their families to California. For example, Mary Jane Hayden, who told her husband, “We were married to live together, and I am willing to go with you under these circumstances you have no right to go where I cannot, and if you do, you need never to return for I shall look upon you dead.”²

Women such as Mary Jane have been neglected in the work of scholars who have addressed this topic and time period. Earlier scholars focused on the reasons women decided to stay and manage the family farm or to leave with their husbands. There has also been extensive research regarding women’s changing social roles on the westward trails. More recent works have begun to weave together the experiences of women with those of men. There were various types of women who were part of the gold rushes of American history. This paper will focus on white middle-class women who lived in mining boom towns of California from 1849-1853. These women were unique because only five percent of early gold rushers were women.³ Women who went with their husbands to California experienced the gold rush themselves, but in a very different way.

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³ Ibid., 108.
Women experienced a gold rush through selling products they made and services that men thought only women could perform; however, women had to accept the primitive conditions in which they had to live and work.

Julie Roy Jeffrey’s *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West 1840-1880* is one of a handful of works which devote at least one chapter to women working in California. Jeffrey’s work discusses what women did in mining camps, while men were panning for gold. She argues that women were not trying to move away from the ideology of domesticity, but rather trying to preserve their traditional roles.\(^4\) Jeffrey notes, in order to understand what women were doing in this time period, she had to study women’s diaries and journals, since few works published consider women. Fortunately, there are a vast number of primary sources on this topic.\(^5\)

JoAnn Levy’s *They Saw the Elephant, Women and the California Gold Rush* is the most extensive work done on women working in the California gold rush. Her book is an overview of how people, especially women, traveled to California and formed communities on the mining frontier. The book focuses on the early years of the California gold rush, from 1849 to 1853.\(^6\) Her chapter on women working in mining towns focuses on their scarcity in these camps. Then she describes the types of work that women did, such as taking in boarders, cooking, and washing clothes for men. Her main argument is that there were women in California, who did have a place in gold rush society. Levy states that women supported entire families with the income from their

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\(^4\) Ibid., 3-24.

\(^5\) Ibid., 205.

jobs since men were often away on business or moving around to different mining camps. Women’s jobs, which started as small businesses from their homes, expanded into businesses that were run outside the home.  

Scholarly works done after Levy’s book, give more general overviews of the California gold rush. This is true of Malcolm J. Rohrbough’s *Days of Gold*, which covers a broad range of topics.  

Rohrbough explores the events leading up to the mass migration of people to the West and how these movements called into question many basic values, such as marriage, family, work, and wealth. Rohrbough argues that wives had little choice on whether they went to California with their husbands or stayed to work on the family farm; this decision was that of the husbands. Rohrbough states that women were rare in mining camps and that in California men often shouldered chores that women traditionally did.

Robert V. Hine and John M. Farager’s *The American West: A New Interpretive History* is a general overview of the Californian gold rush, with a focus on Native Americans and other immigrants on the Western frontier. Hine and Farager weave women into the text rather than grouping them into a separate section from what men were doing. Hine and Farager discuss the number of Mexicans, Chileans and Peruvians

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7 Ibid., 92-107.


9 Ibid., 2.

10 Ibid., 173.

11 Ibid., 95.

that were coming North to mine in California in 1849.\textsuperscript{13} Previous scholars fail to mention that there were other ethnicities in California besides Native Americans and whites. Hine and Farager go into great depth on how prostitutes were common in mining camps because women were so rare. Prostitutes were most commonly Hispanic women, and later French women from poorer families.\textsuperscript{14}

Scholars discuss the jobs that women did in mining camps in California and the rarity of women, but none focus on the primitive conditions in which women had to live and work. Women working in these conditions were still successful and often made more than the average miner per month. While many women of the nineteenth century concentrated on the cleanliness of their homes, women on the mining frontier were living and working in sub-standards conditions and still cooking over an open campfire.\textsuperscript{15} Rain and flooding was also a constant struggle for women in mining camps. Women on the mining frontier did not try to stray away from their traditional roles as women, but embraced their place in society.

After the long journey across the Overland trail, what could women expect when they reached the spot that they hoped would make them rich? Women could expect to live in shacks or canvas tents. The majority of mining towns in California had very few houses. The reason for this was that miners were constantly going to other places when news of somebody else striking gold reached them. These conditions would be unheard of for women who lived in developed towns or cities. Luzena Stanley Wilson traveled

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 241- 245.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 265.

with her husband to Sacramento, California in 1849 from Missouri, when her husband caught gold fever.\textsuperscript{16} The Wilson’s did not stay in Sacramento for long, because there was no gold to be found. News had arrived that many people had struck gold in San Francisco. Wilson describes the conditions she endured her first night in San Francisco:

> The first night we spent in our new home it rained, and we slept with a cotton umbrella . . . for days it rained incessantly; the streets ran full of water. Men and animals struggled through a sea of mud. We wrung out our blankets every morning, and warmed them by the fire— they never had time to dry. (Wilson 1937, 19)

This reflects women’s constant struggles with their living conditions. Women tried to improve their living conditions, but their efforts never seem to be enough.

Right after this rain storm, which Wilson implies had been going on for quite some time, a sand barrier broke and Wilson watched as the water flooded the streets and eventually came into her home. Her family had to move back into a hotel that they had just sold. Wilson and forty others had to live in one room for several days.\textsuperscript{17} During this time it began to rain again, so the water level in the streets was not going down. After the water had receded, Wilson and her family returned to their home. There was so much water on the ground of their home that Wilson’s husband “built a floating floor, which rose and sank with the tide, and at every footstep the water splashed up through the cracks.”\textsuperscript{18} Wilson’s family lived like this for six weeks, but Luzena Stanley Wilson was not ready to give up yet, because word had come from Nevada City, California, that


\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 20-22.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, 20-23.
people had “struck it rich.” Luzena Stanly Wilson’s experience was not uncommon; other women and other mining towns had the same living and working conditions.

Mary Ballou, who settled in Negrobar, California, in 1852, expressed her discontent about her living conditions to her son Seldan through a series of letters.19 Like Wilson, Ballou’s experience with the rain in California highlights the primitive conditions in which women and their families had to live in mining camps. Ballou writes about this in her letters to her son, saying, “This morning I awoke and it rained in torrents. Well I got up and I thought of my House. I went and looket into my kitchen, the mud and water was over my Shoes. . .”20 Ballou talks about how there is no door to shut in the kitchen, so that the pigs, chicken and mules can come right into the kitchen. There is also no door between the kitchen and dining room, so the animals that make it into the kitchen also make it into the dining room.21 Ballou is very distressed in her letters about the conditions in which she lives. She then goes on to write, “I felt badly to think that I was detained to such a place. I wept for a while and then I commenced singing and made up a song, my song was this: to California I did come and thought under the bed I shall have to run to shelter me from the piercing storm.”22 Mary Ballou displays how many women felt about the conditions of their houses, even though many would become very successful at cooking and keeping boarders.


20 Ibid., 43.

21 Ibid., 43.

22 Ibid., 43.
Louise Amelia Knapp Smith Clappe, otherwise known as Dame Shirley from New England, traveled to San Francisco, California in 1849. Many of her letters, written to her sister, address the living conditions of women in the mining towns of California. Compared to Mary Ballou’s letters, Clappe’s letters are very descriptive and were intended for reporting back to her sister, rather than expressing her feelings about the living conditions in mining towns. Clappe informed her sister that, “I intend to be as disagreeably statistical and as praiseworthily matter-of-factish... I shall give you a full and particular account of the discovery, rise and progress of this place.” Clappe’s reaction to the first kitchen that she walked into is that, “it is just a piece of carpentering as a child two years old, gifted with the strength of a man, would produce, if it wanted to play at making a grownup house.” As Clappe writes, she conveys the disapproval she had for the conditions in mining towns. She took care to mention each time that she went to a tent or even a log cabin that the floor was made of mud. This is interesting because she cannot comprehend how people can live like this.

Despite the conditions that women had to endure and the distress they had about these living conditions, women were able to become very successful by keeping boarders. Lucetta Rogers arrived in California in January 1853, and wrote letters back home to Connecticut about what California was like. Her short letters show how women were essential to making money in California. Rogers wrote, “… I cannot advise anybody to come, the better work here for 18 Dollars a month until they bring their wives and keep...

24 Ibid., 29.
25 Ibid., 25.
Roger’s letter gives evidence that women were the ones who experienced a
gold rush in California. As she indicated, miners were not making very much money; the
money had been made by wives who kept boarders.

Luzena Stanley Wilson’s husband hoped to “strike it rich,” but it would be
Luzena Stanley Wilson who would end up finding the real gold in California. On the
first night that Luzena Stanley Wilson spent in a mining camp, she came to realize her
special talents:

The night before I had cooked my supper on the camp fire, as usual, when a hungry miner, attracted by the unusual sight of a woman,
said to me, ‘I’ll give you five dollars ma’am, for the biscuit.’ It sounded like a fortune to me, and I looked at him to see if he meant. And as I
hesitated at such, to me, a very remarkable proposition, he repeated his
offer to purchase, and said he would give me ten dollars for bread made by
a woman, and laid down the shining gold piece in my hand. (Wilson 1937, 9)

Luzena Wilson considered this her nest egg. She lost it when she hid it under the wagon
after the first day, but realized, “the homely bird which laid it -the power and will to
work- was still there.” After the flooding that Wilson had experienced in San
Francisco, Wilson and her husband moved to Nevada City, California. This was where
she would acquire most of her success and wealth.

As soon as Wilson arrived in Nevada City, she realized that her family was unable
to even afford a canvas tent, so she cut the undergrowth around the area her family would
be settling and used it to make a home for them. The first thing that she did was to make
sure that everything was waterproofed, because she assumed all of California had


27 Wilson, 10.
problems with rain and flooding. For work, Wilson started a “hotel,” which she realized would be profitable from her first night in Sacramento. Her hotel consisted of two boards that she used to make a table. The table was left out in the elements because there was no money or wood to purchase a cover for it. She purchased the boards that the table was made out of from a man who was building the second house made of wood in the town.\(^{28}\) The amount Wilson invested into this table was symbolic of the amount of money that she eventually made in purchasing it.

Wilson made a meal for twenty miners that night, and before each man had left, they put a dollar in her hand. Even with the primitive conditions in which Wilson set up her business, she was still able to make a profit. Her hotel was so profitable that Wilson’s husband stopped mining gold and decided to become her partner.\(^{29}\) This is direct evidence that cooking for miners was more profitable than standing in the creeks and streams panning for gold. Traditionally, the jobs women did were viewed as being less socially valued. Wilson’s business became so profitable that she was eventually able to provide a wooden roof over the table where she fed the miners. This all took place in a time period of six months. She began to build a proper home for her family instead of the shelter made of undergrowth where they were living. The original table was transformed into a more traditional hotel. Wilson began to take people into her hotel, which was also her home when it was finished. She states, “We had then from seventy five to two hundred boarders at twenty five dollars a week.”\(^{30}\) This was a lot of money compared to

\(^{28}\) Ibid., 27.

\(^{29}\) Ibid., 27.

\(^{30}\) Ibid., 28.
men who were panning for gold. Clappe writes that, “luck is as rare as the winning of a hundred thousand dollar prize in a lottery. We are acquainted with many here whose gains have never amounted to much more then “wages”; that, is from six to eight dollars a day.”

Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher note that most of the gold was gone before the first of the forty-niners even made it to California.

Her living conditions not only improved, she states, “I became luxurious and hired a cook and waiters. Maintaining only as my position as managing housekeeper. I retired from active business in the kitchen.” Luzena Stanly Wilson was able to overcome the primitive society and living conditions in order to create a successful business. This is interesting because women were often the ones to lose out on opportunities to advance themselves economically. But in the case of boom towns in California, it was men who were missing out on the real gold.

Mary Ballou also kept a boarding house, but instead of outwardly discussing her wealth, she hides her success in the way she wrote about the foods she prepared. Her letters are long lists of all the chores that must be accomplished each day. For example,

“I am making mince pies and Apple and squash pies, frying mince turnovers and doughnuts . . . Plum pudding and then I am stuffing a ham . . . sometimes I am making soups and cranberry tarts and baking chicken . . . boiling cabbage and Turnips and frying fritters and Broiling stake and cooking codfish . . . I often cook a nice Salmon trout . . . (Dichamp 1977, 43-44)

31 Wheat, 84-85.
32 Hine and Faragher, 238.
33 Wilson, 28.
34 Dichamp, 42.
Her list goes on, and the only indication that she was cooking all this food for miners is that she had a thirty foot long table in her dining room and that she cooked three meals a day. Ballou also wrote that one of her daily chores was refilling the vinegar bottles, black pepper boxes, mustard jars and butter cups.\footnote{Ibid., 43.} Her dining hall must have been extremely busy, with all the food that she had to prepare and having to fill the condiments frequently.

The work women did to take care of boarders never seemed to earn enough money for women like Wilson and Ballou. Women such as Ballou and Wilson always tried to advance themselves in order to gain more money. They were never content with what they had. Ballou supplemented her income by making household products, such as mattresses, sheets, candles and soft soap. People claimed that her soap was the softest soap ever in California. She made the most money from flags. Ballou made both the Whig and Democratic flags, but quickly realized that the Whig flag would make her the richest, because it would sell for twelve dollars.\footnote{Ibid., 45-46.} She used her maternal qualities to nurse babies for fifty dollars a week. She even tried mining for gold, but only pulled a dollar up on the fourth of July and realized that, “it is harder to rock the cradle to wash out gold than it is to rock the cradle for the babies in the states.”\footnote{Ibid., 45.} Shirley Clappe also tried her hand at mining and managed to bring up three dollars and twenty five cents. She described women who mined as being called mineresses and agrees with Ballou that the hard work put into mining does not yield enough results at the end of the day.\footnote{Wheats, 83.}
Instead of producing goods in her home, Luzena Stanley Wilson realized that a woman could have, “bought out the town with no security other then her word.” 39 Many men were unable to obtain credit, so Wilson used this to her advantage. She started loaning money to men at an interest rate of ten cents per month. 40 Not only did she loan money out, she also kept it in safe-keeping for men. She says, “many a night have I shut my oven door on two milk-pans filled high with bags of gold dust, and I have often slept with my mattress literally lined with the precious metal.” 41 At one point she wrote, “I must have had two hundred thousand dollars lying around.” 42 Wilson became the mining camp’s bank. Women had the power and control of the money flow within these not yet developed communities.

Even with success on the mining frontier, women viewed the society around them as being primitive and immoral. According to Julie Roy Jeffrey, there was a lack of government because miners often moved from town to town, so mining camps usually never came together as communities. 43 Clappe describes the lawlessness she saw in a period of twenty four days and says she has seen, “murders, fearful accidents, bloody deaths, a mob, whippings, an attempt at suicide, and a fatal duel.” 44 Many of the murders and trials that she described are not even ones conducted by authorities, but by the people.

39 Ibid., 10.
40 Wilson, 32-32.
41 Ibid., 31.
42 Ibid., 31.
43 Jeffrey., 112.
44 Wheat, 161.
Women were the ones who kept the laws intact in a society that did not yet have laws. Mary Ballou wrote to her son that she had witnessed a fight in a store, in which a man pulled a pistol out and was going to kill another man. Ballou walked up to the man and begged him for eight or ten minutes not to kill the other man. The man finally complied and left. After Ballou witnessed the fight, she wished she could just “fly back to the states.” She equated the “states” with civilization and morality. Ballou mentions another woman in her letter, Clarks Simmon’s wife, who said, “…if she was safe in the States she would not care if she had not one cent.” There was an overall consensus among women in California that there was money to be made, but the work was hard and women witnessed the lack of values and morals men practiced, since there were no authorities to enforce or make any laws, regulating drinking, prostitution and gambling.

Louise Clappe was disgusted by the profanity men used and the activities that they pursed. She wrote,

> I have never spoken to you of the mournful extent to which profanity prevails in California. You know that at home it is considered vulgar for a gentleman to swear; but I am told here, it is absolutely the fashion, and that people who never uttered an oath in the States, now clothe themselves with curses as with a garment. . . .but in this rag and card-board house, one is compelled to hear the most sacred of names constantly profaned by the drinkers and gamblers. (Wheat 1949, 49)

Women watched as men slipped farther away from the values they had once possessed. Clappe writes that men were drinking and gambling, and Jeffrey writes that this was a

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45 Dichamp, 45.
46 Ibid., 45.
47 Ibid., 44.
common occurrence in mining towns. The reason was that there were so few women that men would go to the bar to share someone’s company. Men would drink and gamble, and bars were filled with prostitutes. Hine and Faragher point out that “the whore with the heart of gold” was not uncommon on the mining frontier. Women who gave sex away freely were appreciated because there were so few women on the mining frontier.

Men even began to notice a change in the morals and values that they had once known. Men, though, blamed it on the fact that women were not coming to California. Joel Brown wrote to his wife, “I attributed so much gambling and drinking to the fact that there are no women in this country.” William Perkins agreed, writing:

The want of respectable female society, rational amusements, and books, has aided greatly to the demoralization of whose natural character would have kept them aloof from temptation had there been other means but the gambling tables and drinking saloons, to have assisted them in whiling away the hours not devoted to labor. (Perkins 1964, 290)

Perkins wrote about the changing morals and values within society. At times, he wrote that he even feared what somebody might do; it was not just women who were in fear when fights broke out. He wrote that there were so many murdered that unless he had his journal with him, he was unable to write about the event, because within an hour another murder was committed.

The years 1849-1853 brought many different types of people to California for gold, but people discovered gold in a variety of ways. Men were in the streams and

48 Jeffrey, 120-124.
49 Hine and Faragher, 265.
50 Jeffrey, 113.
creeks panning for gold, while women were making profits off their unique feminine goods and skills. White women who took in boarders, often made more than the average miner. In Luzena Stanley Wilson’s case, she was the one men looked to for credit when none could be found. Women often had to overcome a major obstacle in dealing with the primitive conditions in which they lived and worked. Women such as Luzena Wilson and Mary Ballou associated their primitive conditions with the rain and flooding they had to deal with and also the lack of established government in mining towns. Louise Amelia Smith Clappe gives a detailed account of the types of conditions in which people lived and the way people behaved. Men such as William Perkins offer valuable insight to show that men as well as women saw people become immoral and loose in their values and were concerned. American popular culture often associates the California gold rush with men; history should not forget to include the important contributions of women to the California gold rush.
Bibliography


