

LITERARY CALIFORNIA

How The West was won and where we're heading

The Goldrush Era

The following text is taken from the book „A Frontier Lady“ by Sarah Royce. Upon her son's request, in 1880 Sarah Royce recollected from her „Pilgrimage Diary“, as she named the diary of her family's journey Westward, the hardships of the travel and the hopes of the Forty-niners. Gold seemed to be waiting just to be picked up, and everybody capable of digging a hole in the ground was lured to California by the prospect of immense riches.

The Royce family, including their daughter Mary traveled by wagon, by foot and by horse; they departed from Council Bluffs on the banks of the Mississippi, and followed the route to Fort Laramie, past Independence Rock, Salt Lake City and finally made it to Hangtown. Aside from the struggles and perils during their travel, one of the most vivid impressions Sarah Royce provides us with is the geographical turning point of their journey as they finally pass the Sierra Nevada.

„That night we slept within a few yards of snow, which lay in a ravine; and water froze in our pans not very far from the fire, which, however, was rather low the last part of the night. (...) So, without flinching I faced steeps still steeper than yesterday; I even laughed in my little one's upturned face, as she lay back against my arm, while I leaned forward almost to the neck of the mule, tugging up the hardest places. I had purposely hastened, that morning, to start ahead of the rest; and not far from noon, I was rewarded by coming out, in advance of all the others, on a rocky height whence I looked, down, far over constantly descending hills, to where a soft haze sent up a warm, rosy glow that seemed to me a smile of welcome; while beyond, occasional faint outlines of other mountains appeared; and I knew I was looking across the Sacramento Valley. California, land of sunny skies - that was my first look into your smiling face. I loved you from that moment, for you seemed to welcome me with loving look into rest and safety.“

Royce's son, Josiah, and his wife Katharine contributed various quotes and introductory notes to each chapter, which are also included here.



When foreigners accuse us of extraordinary love for gain, and of practical materialism, they fail to see how largely we are a nation of idealists. (...) I am not at all unmindful of that other side - that grosser material side of our national life, upon which our foreign critics so often insist. (...) But you cannot prove the absence of light merely by exploring the darker chasms and caverns of our national existence. Vast as are these recesses of night, the light of large and inspiring ideas shines upon still vaster regions of our American life.

JOSIAH ROYCE, *On Certain Limitations of the Thoughtful Public in America*

[After a long summer filled with privations and dangers the Royce family found their journey's end, late in October, in a mining camp. Nerves made taut by the danger of death relaxed. With feelings of relief and gratitude Mrs. Royce sought to reestablish her home in a community whose only hope of stability lay in the gold in the gravels which underlay it. It was not a community of homes but of unattached men who sojourned within it while their luck was good and who quit it without thought upon news of a new strike elsewhere. In October, 1849, when Mrs. Royce came among them, most of these miners were, as yet, beginners, untrained recruits in the army of gold diggers, who were still living under the influence of the customs and sanctions of the established societies from which they had departed but a few months before. Most of these novices were too busy at the unaccustomed task of cradling gold to realize the possibilities of freedom on the new frontier. Mrs. Royce left her first camp before freedom had evolved into license.]

AND now began my first experience in a California mining camp. The sense of safety that came from having arrived where there was no danger of attacks from Indians, or of perishing of want or of cold on the desert, or in the mountains, was at first so restful, that I was willing, for awhile, to throw off anxiety; and, like a child fixing a play-house I sang as I arranged our few comforts in our tent. Indeed, part of the time it was fixing a play-house; for Mary was constantly pattering about at my side; and often, things were arranged for her convenience and amusement.

Still, there was a lurking feeling of want of security from having only a cloth wall between us and out of doors. I had heard the sad story (which, while it shocked, reassured us) of the summary punishment inflicted in a neighboring town upon three thieves, who had been tried by a committee of citizens and, upon conviction, all hung. The circumstances had given to the place the name of Hang-Town. We were assured that, since then, no case of stealing had occurred in the northern mines; and I had seen, with my own eyes, buck-skin purses half full of

gold-dust, lying on a rock near the road-side, while the owners were working some distance off. So I was not afraid of robbery; but it seemed as if some impertinent person might so easily intrude, or hang about, in a troublesome manner.

But I soon found I had no reason to fear. Sitting in my tent sewing, I heard some men cutting wood up a hill behind us. One of them called out to another "Look out not to let any sticks roll that way, there's a woman and child in that tent." "Aye, aye, we won't frighten them" was the reply, all spoken in pleasant, respectful tones. A number of miners passed every morning and afternoon, to and from their work; but none of them stared obtrusively. One, I observed, looked at Mary with interest a time or two, but did not stop, till one day I happened to be walking with her near the door, when he paused, bowed courteously and said, "Excuse me madam, may I speak to the little girl? We see so few ladies and children in California, and she is about the size of a little sister I left at home." "Certainly," I said, leading her towards him. His gentle tones and pleasant words easily induced her to shake hands, and talk with him. He proved to be a young physician, who had not long commenced practice at home, when the news of gold discovery in California induced him to seek El Dorado, hoping thus to secure, more speedily, means of support for his widowed mother and the younger members of the family. His partner in work was a well educated lawyer; and another of their party was a scientist who had been applying his knowledge of geology and mineralogy in exploring; and had lately returned from a few miles south with a report so favorable they intended in a day or two to go and make a claim on his newly discovered ground. Here, then, was a party of California miners, dressed in the usual mining attire, and carrying pick, shovel and pans to and from their work; who yet were cultured gentlemen.

I soon found that this, was by no means a solitary instance. But a much larger number of the miners belonged to other very valuable classes of society. Merchants, mechanics, farmers were all there in large numbers. So that in almost every mining camp there was enough of the element of order, to control, or very much influence, the opposite forces. These facts soon became apparent to me, and ere long, I felt as secure in my tent with the curtain tied in front, as I had formerly felt with locked and bolted doors. There was, of course, the other element as elsewhere; but they themselves knew that it was safer for law and order to govern;

and, with a few desperate exceptions, were willing to let the lovers of order enjoy their rights and wield their influence. And the desperate exceptions were, for the time, so over-awed by the severe punishment some of their number had lately suffered, that, for a while, at least, in those early days, life and property were very safe in the mines; unless indeed you chose to associate with gamblers and desperados, in which case you of course constantly risked your money and your life. But, the same is true, in the heart of New York, Philadelphia, or London.

During my short residence of only two months in Weaverville I had but a few brief glimpses of the objectionable phases of society. Indeed, I ought not to say glimpses, for it was almost wholly through the ear, that anything of this kind came to me. There was on the opposite side of the ravine, some rods down, a large tent, or rather two tents irregularly joined, which, at first, I heard called a boarding house, then found was a public stopping place for travelers; and afterwards it turned out to include a full fledged drinking and gambling saloon. From this place, at night, we sometimes heard the sound of loud talking; but I recollect only once hearing anything alarming from there. That was past midnight, one rainy, dark night, when we were startled from sleep by a loud shout, followed by various outcries, several running footsteps, and three or four pistol shots. We looked out and saw a light or two in the direction of the saloon but heard no more of the noise. The next morning we were told by one who had inquired, that a gambler who had lost several times, and saw himself about to lose again, had snatched all the money from the table by a sudden movement, and fled out into the darkness before any one had been aware of his intention. Then, two or three had followed with shots; but he had escaped them.

The other sound I caught from that direction, came through a woman, the only one besides myself in the town. There had been another when I first came, a delicate, lovely invalid who, away back on the Platte River, had for awhile traveled in the same company with us, riding much on horseback in hope of benefiting her health. She and her husband stayed in Weaverville a short time but, when the rains began they sought the valleys farther to the south. This other woman who remained was a plain person who, with her husband, had come from one of the western states, and was acquainted only with country life. She was probably between thirty and thirty-five years of age, and the idea of "shining in society" had evidently never

dawned upon her mind, when I first used to see her cooking by her out-door camp fire, not far from our tent. Ordinary neighborly intercourse had passed between us, but I had not seen her for some time, when she called one day and in quite an exultant mood told me, the man who kept the boarding-house had offered her a hundred dollars a month to cook three meals a day for his boarders, that she was to do no dishwashing, and was to have someone help her all the time she was cooking. She had been filling the place some days, and evidently felt that her prospect of making money was very enviable. Her husband, also, was highly pleased that his wife could earn so much. Again I saw nothing of her for some time, when again she called; this time much changed in style. Her hair was dressed in very youthful fashion; she wore a new gown - with full trimmings, and seemed to feel in every way elevated. She came to tell me there was to be a ball at the public house in a few days; that several ladies who lived at different camps within a few miles, chiefly at Hang-Town, were coming; and she came to say that I might expect an invitation as they would like very much to have me come. I laughingly declined, as being no dancer, and entirely unfitted to adorn any such scene. The assembly I think came off, but I did not get even a glimpse of its glories; and as she, soon after, left the town, I never saw her again. I only remembered the circumstance because it amused me as being my first invitation into "Society" in California; and also as it gave me a glimpse of the ease with which the homeliest if not the oldest, might become a "belle" in those early days, if she only had the ambition; and was willing to accept the honor in the offered way.

Soon after arriving in Weaverville, my husband had met with an acquaintance who had been a traveling companion in the early part of our long journey. He had washed out a little gold, and was desirous to go into business. He had made two or three acquaintances who also thought this new mining settlement presented an opening for a store; but none of them were accustomed to trading. They understood that my husband was; so they proposed to him to enter into partnership with them, proceed immediately to Sacramento City to purchase goods, and they, by the time he returned, would have a place prepared to open a store.

An effort was made to get a house built. The plan was to hew out timber for the frame, and to split shakes for the roof and sides. But when they tried to get men to help them so that the building could be done in anything like reasonable

time, they found it impossible. All were so absorbed in washing out gold, or hunting for some to wash, that they could not think of doing anything else. On all sides the gold-pans were rattling, the cradles rocking, and the water splashing. So the best that could be done was to hew out some strong tent poles and ridges, and erect two good sized tents, one behind the other; the back one for dwelling, the front for a store. An opportunity occurred to buy a large cook stove, which was placed near the junction of the two tents. The back part of the back tent was curtained off for me, leaving a space round the cook stove for kitchen and dining room. One of the men slept in the store, and the other two had a small tent on one side. They managed to buy some packing boxes, and other odds and ends of lumber, and so made shelves and a counter, which did very well for those primitive times.

We were soon fixed in our new quarters, the goods arrived from Sacramento, and business was opened. As one of the partners had formerly been in the meat business, some fat cattle were purchased, and beef was added to the other articles sold. This drew quite a crowd every morning; for fresh meat had not yet become very plentiful in the mines. It had not been thought necessary for all the men of the firm to devote their time to the store. Two of them continued mining; so, when a large number of customers came together, I helped to serve them. This gave me an opportunity to see most of the dwellers in Weaverville, and observe in a small way their behavior to each other. The majority of them were, as I have said, men of ordinary intelligence, evidently accustomed to life in an orderly community, where morality and religion bore sway. They very generally showed a consciousness of being somewhat the worse, for a long, rough journey, in which they had lived semi-barbarous lives, and for their continued separation from the amenities and refinements of home. Even in their intercourse with each other, they often alluded to this feeling, and in the presence of a woman, then so unusual, most of them showed it in a very marked manner. But, mingled with these better sort of men who formed the majority, were others of a different class. Roughly-reared frontier-men almost as ignorant of civilized life as savages. Reckless bravados, carrying their characters in their faces and demeanor, even when under the restraints imposed by policy. All these and more were represented in the crowd who used to come for their meat, and other provisions in the early morning hours. There were even some Indians, who were washing out gold in the neighboring ravines, and who used to

come with the others to buy provisions. It was a motley assembly and they kept two or three of us very busy; for payments were made almost exclusively in gold-dust and it took longer to weigh that, than it would have done to receive coin and give change. But coin was very rare in the mines at that time, so we had our little gold scales and weights, and I soon became quite expert in handling them. While thus busy, in near communication with all these characters, no rude word or impertinent behavior was ever offered me.

But, among this moving crowd, thus working and eating, buying and selling, sounds of discontent and sadness were often heard. Discontent; for most of them had come to California with the hope of becoming easily and rapidly rich; and so, when they had to toil for days before finding gold, and, when they found it, had to work hard in order to wash out their "ounce a day"; and then discovered that the necessities of life were so scarce it took much of their proceeds to pay their way, they murmured; and some of them cursed the country, calling it a "God forsaken land," while a larger number bitterly condemned their own folly in having left comfortable homes and moderate business chances, for so many hardships and uncertainties. And still, many of them kept repeating this same folly, by being easily induced, when they had struck tolerably fair prospects, and were clearing twice as much per day as they had ever done before, to give up their present diggings, and rush off after some new discovery, which was sure to be heralded. every few days, by the chronic "prospectors." who then, (as too commonly ever since) kept the whole community in a ferment.

But the sounds of sadness were deeper, and more distressing than those of mere discontent, for they were caused by sickness and death. Many ended their journey across the plains utterly prostrated by over-exertion, land too often poisoned by unwholesome food, and want of cleanliness. Three or four young men, living within a mile of us, had crossed the country from the Missouri to the Mines in three or four months; and during that whole time, as they reported to their neighbors, they had not once taken off any of their clothing-not even their boots and had lived on salt meat and "hardtack." Of course disease claimed them as natural prey. One of them died soon after arriving; the others suffered long, and when we last heard of them, were still in a critical condition. But, aside from instances of glaring imprudence or ignorance, many felt the effects of long-

continued over-exertion, extreme changes in temperature and ways of life, and often of sickening depression from the disappointment of too sanguine hopes. Those thus suffering were sad in voice and looks, needing all the cheering influence the healthy ones could afford.