THE CALIFORNIA GOLD RUSH WAS THE GREAT NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN ADVENTURE. Emerging in a direct line from the triumphant war with Mexico for a continental empire and shielded still from the Armageddon of the Civil War, the news of gold in California set in motion a series of extraordinary emigrations by ordinary people. Americans went West, or more properly to California. They went overland and by sea, and they did so annually for a decade. As with preparing for war, the rush to search for gold in the Golden State involved male companionship, organization into companies for travel and profit, and service in the national interest. It also meant separation from family and community, and accordingly involved questions of family obligation and loyalty.

Unlike a call to arms, however, the California gold rush was generally safe. It left the forty-niner free to participate and free to end his participation, and it had as its object the accumulation of wealth. Indeed, the degree of wealth was something so extraordinary as to call forth historical references to the Spanish conquistadors and the fabulous mineral wealth of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In addition, emigration to California in 1849 provoked speeches, sermons, editorials, and other public expressions that referred to the argonauts as representatives of a superior civilization occupying vacant or sparsely settled lands for new purposes, including the national mission of spreading American political and economic democracy.

The California gold rush took profound hold on the minds of the Republic's citizens. Part of the fascination was gold, and part was the attraction of California itself. The response to the opportunity for new and sudden wealth suggested much about how limited were the lives of many ordinary working American families at mid-nineteenth century. Upon their arrival, the forty-niners immediately fathomed California's appeal—its gentle climate, its many and varied opportunities for economic advantage, its sense of equality—and their stay, however brief or extended, confirmed their perceptions all the more.

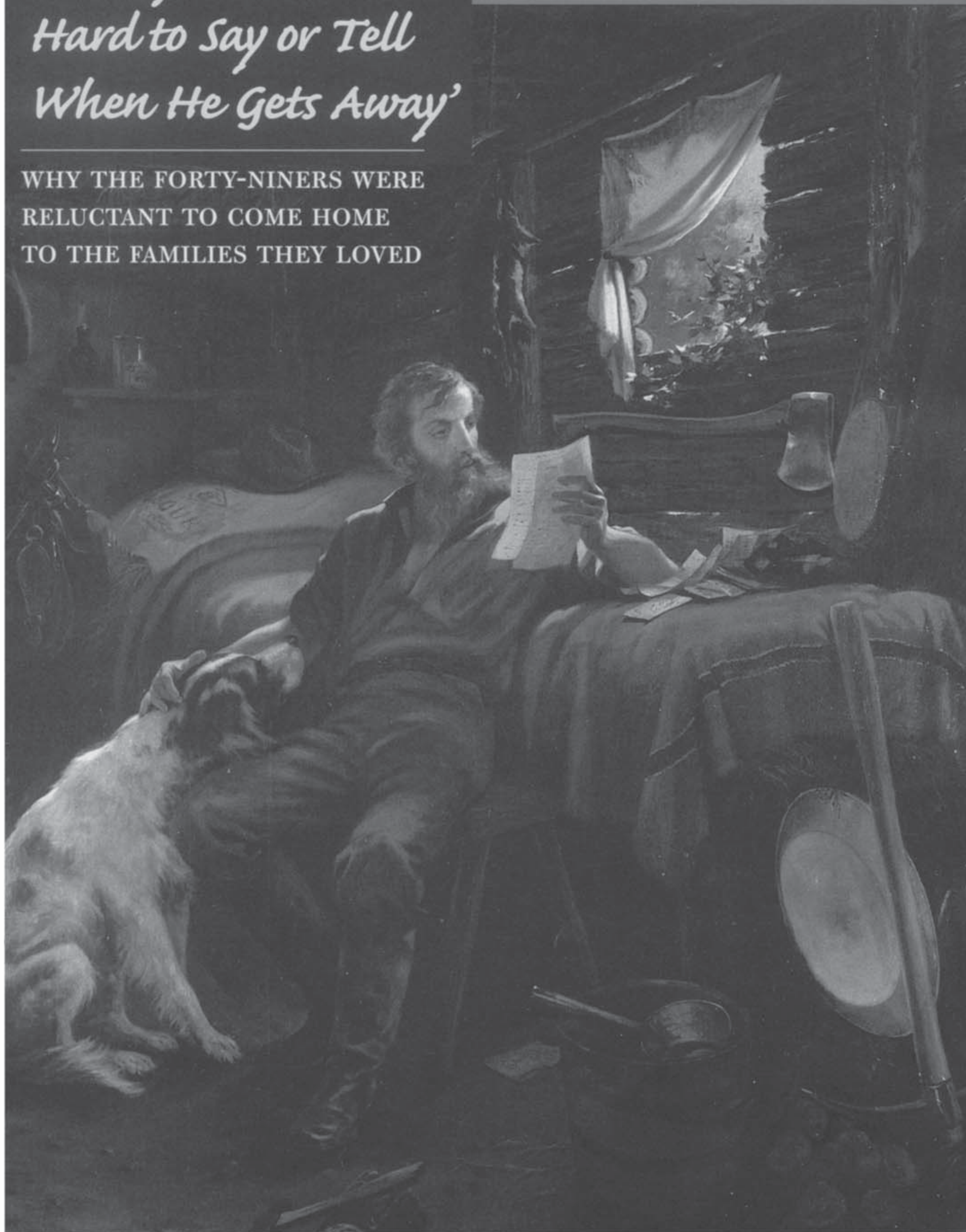
By the time Ernest Narjot painted *The Forty-Niner* (right, oil on canvas, 40″ x 50″) in 1881, the California gold rush was fast becoming steeped in sentiment and nostalgia. It had been the great American adventure in which ordinary people were caught up in something they knew to be extraordinary. For many, it also meant separation and an unparalleled test of family bonds.

by Malcolm J. Rohrbough

Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Gift of Marguerite V. West and Charles H. King.

'When a Person Gits to California It Is Hard to Say or Tell When He Gets Away'

WHY THE FORTY-NINERS WERE RELUCTANT TO COME HOME TO THE FAMILIES THEY LOVED

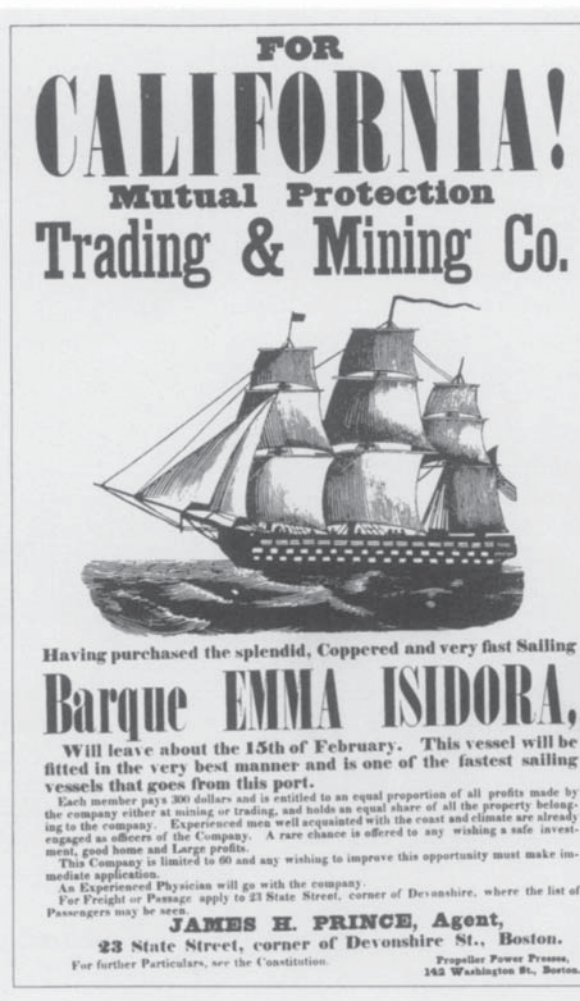


The departure to California by forty-niner companies in winter and spring 1848–1849 were among nineteenth-century America's great outpourings of community solidarity and affection. As in the first months of a war, families, friends, community leaders, churches, and patriotic organizations all turned out to pay tribute to the departing argonauts. The emigrations had about them a combination of religious intensity and patriotic fervor in their immediate goal of wealth and higher national purpose. Public manifestations included parades, speeches, sermons, and songs. Forty-niners marched down to the piers amid ranks of cheering friends and strangers, for the prospect of a voyage to California captured the attention of all manner of citizens. Of his departure from Philadelphia, one argonaut remembered: "As we passed in front of the city we were greeted by Cheers from different crowds who stood on the wharves to witness our departure, to which we responded with cheers and the California Gold diggers song."[1]

The argonauts who went west to California thought they shared a unique experience whose outlines embraced a wide range of new scenes. For seagoing forty-niners, curiosities included porpoises swimming alongside ship and the jungles of Panama. For overland argonauts, herds of buffalo, Chimney Rock, and Fort Laramie were the new wonders. And for everyone once arrived, the placers and bars of the California gold country were singular. Whatever the place, whether en route or in California itself, the experiences associated with the California gold rush were embraced by the phrase "seeing the Elephant," an expression that reflected the unique nature of the exercise. The phrase characterized the gold rush as simultaneously exotic, exclusive, and potentially dangerous. Here was a common, shared adventure that united hundreds of thousands of people who called themselves argonauts and separated them forever from those who remained at home. The experience was thus explained to those in their families and communities as representing the different nature of their new world, and it remained a common denominator among those who later looked back on the "days of gold" as having offered the most dramatic events of their otherwise mundane lives.[2]

So, from the placers and bars in California, from the growing city of San Francisco and the thriving towns of Sacramento and Stockton, from a hundred villages and gold camps, forty-niners wrote home about their experience. Part of their new life was the wealth that beckoned, or at least the prospect of wealth, but that was only a part. There were also the accounts of collective work and companionship, of the landscape and topography of new places, of the range of new adventures they experienced daily. Even as they attempted to explain the attractions of these places, they diminished the expectations of wealth for those at home and tried to bridge the physical distance and vast gulfs of experience that divided them from those they loved but left behind.[3]

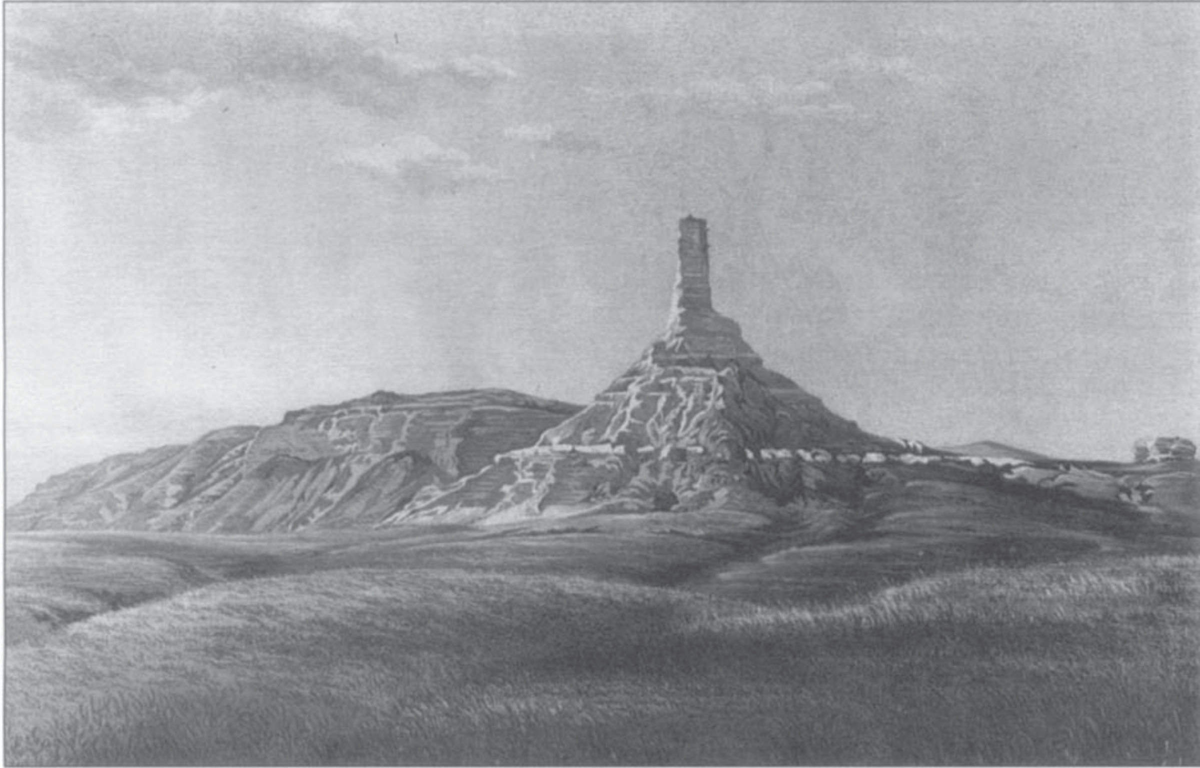
Separated by two thousand miles and half a continent, engaged in the hardest kind of physical labor, living under conditions in which they themselves performed the domestic chores, and weighed down by heavy burdens of expectations, the forty-niners saw "home" as representing everything in comfort, security, and society that they lacked in the goldfields. Many



From *Gold Rush: A Literary Exploration*, ed. Michael Kowalewski (Berkeley, 1997), p. 82

The California gold rush coincided with the great age of sailing ships, and many argonauts went by sea, either around the Horn or across the isthmus of Panama, encouraged to do so by advertisements like this one, which appeared in Boston. With jungle crossings, storms on the high seas, the dangerous passage at the Strait of Magellan, and stopovers in exotic South American ports, the trip was an adventure in itself.

From Frederick Hawkins Percy, *Route from Liverpool to Great Salt Lake Valley* (1855; Cambridge, Mass.,1962), plate 25



The overland journey to California could be as wondrous as the sea passage. Sights and marvels like Chimney Rock (above), Fort Laramie, herds of buffalo, mountain ranges, and encounters with Plains Indians contributed to a sense of high adventure—and distinction from those who remained at home.

of their longings were associated with wives and children; others with a general lack of female companionship. "What a state of exile this is," wrote Peramus G. Ames, "when will it close & I can be *restored to the bosom of my dear little family*." Confided Robert Beeching to his journal: "[B]ut my dear Harriett where is she & where are the little boy . . . could I but have their company for one hour what would I not give but this meeting (if ever) must be in the future." John Craven summarized his longings with the observation: "Oh dear I am so homesick what is Gold to be compared to the comforts of my home." Such longings were remarkably similar across the breadth of the mining country and during the decade of annual migrations to the goldfields.[4]

Isolated in remote gold camps, subjected to continuous physical labor of the most taxing kind, and living in primitive conditions of their own making, the forty-niners conjured up fantasy images of "home" and what their return would be like. They would have romantic reunions with their wives. They would see the faces of their beloved parents and brothers and sisters. They would return to the old boring chores of farm and shop with new energy and appreciation. They would go to church with their families and renew their places within their communities. For single men, they would recapture their social lives with friends, and above all, renew social relationships with the women (or perhaps one special woman) that they had taken for granted when they contracted "gold fever" and suddenly departed from their warm and stable world.

To return with the promised wealth—or even a substantial portion of it—was a triumph, not only financially but for the family itself and the family's place within the community. The forty-niner, whose departure was accompanied by such talk and so many expectations

1. John Cowden to Theodore Garretson, March 4-9, 1849, Letters, Beinecke Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. For some editorials, speeches, and sermons, see Malcolm J. Rohrbough, *Days of Gold: The California Gold Rush and the American Nation* (Berkeley, 1997), 28-31.

2. John Phillip Reid, *Law for the Elephant: Property and Social Behavior on the Overland Trail* (San Marino, Calif., 1980), ix-x. Reid provides an excellent analysis of the term and its wide and varied use.

3. Rohrbough, *Days of Gold*, 55-90.

4. Peramus G. Ames, diary, November 14, 1852, Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California. [hereafter Huntington Library]; Robert Beeching, journal, September 10, 1849, ibid.; John Joseph Craven to his wife, May 20, 1850, Letters, ibid.

The Huntington Library, San Marino, California

"The Mining Business in Four Pictures," from California Letter Sheets printed by the early San Francisco lithographer Britton & Rey, told much about the joy of success and the anguish of failure in the mines. Fear of admitting failure kept many a forty-niner from returning home.

over time and whose activities were monitored by family and local press, had fulfilled every expectation. He was known as someone who had made good in California. For a teenaged son, or even someone in his twenties with a family, such a triumph among family and community was almost as important as the actual gold nuggets or bank receipts. Success brought respect and a change in status that would last a lifetime, remembered by family and community alike in stories that would become legend. He would always be known as one of the community's successful forty-niners, someone who prevailed and returned to family and friends. The county histories of the 1870s and 1880s would note such men and record their achievements for future generations.

What remained was to make the decision to go home and then to act upon it. It would be the most serious choice since their determination to go to California. Many argonauts postponed returning long after their prospects faded. Others came home to families in the East only to return to the Golden State within a few years. And long after the bloom had faded from individual expectations in the placers, annual emigrations continued to California for a decade.

In the first few years, the decision to return home almost always turned on the assumption of success in the goldfields. The returned forty-niner would bring back the wealth that changed the family's fortunes. There would be a new tract of land, a mill, or a fine herd of cattle, or perhaps a new store and fresh goods. Imagine the sense of triumph as family members gathered round to see the new wealth and to hear the returned argonaut's ideas on how to invest it. For others,

5. Solomon A. Gorgas to Mary Frances Gorgas, December 25, 1850, Letters, Huntington Library.

6. George Lawson to his parents, August 26, 1851, Letters, Huntington Library.

7. Gustavus Swasey, journal, March 3, 1850, Huntington Library.

there would be debts to pay and creditors to satisfy. These triumphs would win for the newly returned forty-niner a new position as leader of the family. Argonauts in California magnanimously divided the wealth that still lay in the future, a fortune already vivid in their minds and in the minds of their families. And the generous forty-niner would make provisions for many members of the family, making sure that distant relatives were remembered for past services in making the California venture possible. Solomon Gorgas wrote of the contributions his wife's sister made to the family in his absence: "Sister Mary too, shall not suffer from any debt due to her from our dear departed mother, if I am successfull—she too shall be remembered."[5]

Fortunate forty-niners were able to forward sums periodically that their families might distribute. George Lawson gave directions to his father for distributing his draft for four hundred dollars. "I want you to give Robert the use of thirty dollars of it," he wrote, "Alex twenty & Isabella twenty, which will leave thirty dollars out of the hundred, which I give to you & Mother $15.00 apiece (as a present) I want you to act as agents for me & let the other three hundred out at interest in any way you can. And the interest will be yours untill I return principle & all if I never do, but I hope I shall."[6] It was a triumphal moment for the forty-niner to proclaim his success in the goldfields with small but surely much appreciated gifts to all members of the family.

Monies sent home should have been a comfort but sometimes engendered dispute. Dividing up California gold could be complicated and lead to hard feelings. Several home constituencies might have claims, based on relationships and obligations assumed on the departure of the argonaut. Who was entitled to what? What were legitimate expectations for different individuals within immediate and extended families about distributing this unexpected dividend? A continuing flow of money from the goldfields could generate an atmosphere like that associated with reading a will, and the will might be read every two or three months.

When argonauts died in California, the family might quarrel over the estate. When Gustavus Swasey's brother, Joseph, died in California, Gustavus was responsible for the estate. Mother Swasey expected Joseph's estate to come to the family. Gustavus did send some funds from California, but in his accounting he deducted four hundred dollars that he had loaned Joseph. Although his mother asked that the entire estate be remitted to the family, Gustavus thought himself entitled to the money. In response to her inquiry, he replied that "to expect money from me under such circumstances was certainly absurd, not to say unjust." At the conclusion of their negotiations he retained the money, writing that the final accounting would leave the family dissatisfied, "but I cannot help it. I am poor and must take care."[7]

The issue of debt further inflamed the division of monies from the goldfields. Almost every forty-niner began the journey to California in debt. Support might come from immediate family

California State Library, Sacramento

Return of the Industrious Miner.

Success in the mines meant triumph at home for the returned gold rusher, as the February 16, 1868, illustration at left from the *California Weekly Mercury* made clear. Debts could be paid, new investments made, and new vigor given to what were otherwise mundane lives.

members, from more distant relatives, or from members of the community who provided help in exchange for interest-bearing notes. When anticipated returns fell short of the bonanzas the national press advertised, creditors from family and community grew restless. Such solemn obligations—sometimes involving the family's local reputation—further strained relations between argonaut and family and within the family itself.

Prolonged sojourns in California—soon reckoned at two years and more—interjected other, less happy reminders of home. Forty-niners in the goldfields (or those in mining towns or the enlarging cities) found themselves importuned by family and relatives in the East. Sometimes those who stayed behind to manage the store or shop quarreled about scarce resources, and sometimes about the support to be offered to the families of absent argonauts. Bickering relatives wrote to forty-niners to plead a case and ask for support. Isolated in a remote mining camp, the argonaut could do little but urge restraint by all.

Solomon Gorgas went to California to make money to pay off burdensome debts. No sooner had he arrived in California than he heard that his family's financial difficulties had grown worse because his brother Charles had signed a note as security for a friend. When the friend defaulted, the Gorgas family became responsible for the debt. Mary Frances, Solomon's wife, was outraged, both at the financial irresponsibility and at the brother's carefree and unrepentant attitude. From his mining camp near Placerville, Solomon attempted to soothe the situation. "I am sorry my dear that there are those circumstances to trouble you," he wrote to his wife, "but if the Lord grant us our health & strength we may yet return with enough to satisfy some of our creditors."[8]

Gorgas's calming platitudes did not work. Divisions within the family continued to spill across the pages of their correspondence. The family remained divided in part by the responsibilities Solomon had imposed on everyone through his absence. When confronted with quarrels at home, more than one forty-niner responded with pleas for Christian forgiveness and love.[9]

Among the most serious causes of family contention was separation. The argonaut and his family simply grew increasingly distant from one another. Moreover, the world of California was exceedingly different. Whether in the gold camps, the cities, or the service industries—from entertainment to agriculture—argonauts had too many new experiences. Forty-niners saw the gold rush as formative experience that was more than simply a quest for wealth. It was a series of adventures that by their distance from familiar sources of support and comfort exposed the argonaut to different peoples, customs, and values. Moreover, the gold rush's competitive, all-male character encouraged a sense of independence and differentness. Many forty-niners routinely found themselves doing things and accepting modes of behavior they would never have entertained or countenanced at home—from seeing professionals at hard labor in the "diggings" to men of humble origins becoming bankers, from common Sabbath-breaking to gambling and prostitution. Thus, the veteran argonauts who had "seen the Elephant" were different from the youthful family members who had boarded ships and hitched wagons to head west some years or even months earlier.

For all these reasons, many forty-niners felt an inherent reluctance to return home, however much they longed for that moment and knew it would almost inevitably come. "I shudder when I think of the many trials and temptations to which I have been subjected," one argonaut observed. "How hard it is for the wanderer to turn his steps homeward, those who have never been severed from friends, from the associations of their childhood, imagine that an absence of a few months would fill their minds with an unconquerable desire to visit scenes that were familiar."[10] Yet this sense of differentness brought reluctance to go home, and some argonauts raised the serious question of whether they would ever return.

Every forty-niner solemnly promised to return. Doing so consoled parents and siblings on the eve of departure and served as a reference point for negotiating the prospect of coming home. In response to repeated inquiries, James Barnes wrote to his family:

> You want to know in almost every letter when i am a coming home it would be an impossiblity for me to set any time when I expect my return it may be in one year and it may be in 5 the last words that I promised you when i took the last farewell parting when i last shook you all by the hand when last our tears were mingled together that i would return if my life and health is spread i shall meet you all again in this world if not in a beter one to come.

8. Solomon A. Gorgas to Mary Frances Gorgas, December 25, 1850, Letters, Huntington Library.

9. See, for example, John R. Fitch to his wife, April 23, 1852, Letters, Huntington Library.

10. John M. Kerr to his mother, March 15, 1851, Letters, California State Library, Sacramento.

It was a compact—even a guarantee—that Barnes and other forty-niners were always prepared to honor, at least in the abstract.[11]

Once there, the California adventure turned out to be much more complicated than when discussed with family prior to departure. The question of when to return home became the most common and disputed topic of correspondence. Posing the question of return and responding to it became a standard part of communication between parties, and differing perceptions about the issue became significant. The families back home remembered specific promises; the forty-niners recollected only the agreement to return as soon as possible. The impression persisted that the argonauts, when debating whether to make the trip to California, had promised whatever was asked of them as a condition of permission to go.

Once arrived in California, the world looked different, and the question of when to return home grew much more complex. The forty-niners who talked confidently of going to California and returning within a year soon admitted they would need at least two years and perhaps longer. To them, gold rush realities in California would have to supersede earlier negotiations and promises. If the determination to succeed remained paramount for both parties, families would have to adapt their demands. To the argonauts, the truth of the matter was that only they could make a proper judgment about return, for they alone were sufficiently informed about the complexities and variables of the goldfields to discern correct timing. "You can rest assured that I will not remain in this country one moment longer than I am forc'd from a duty to you and our little ones," John Craven wrote to his wife. But "the time is now approaching when there will be a chance to make something in the mines," he continued, "and I consider it my duty to make this trial."[12] From the perspective of the forty-niner, to remain in California was a heavy sacrifice, but one he was prepared to make for the family.

Forty-niners adopted various strategies to deal with demands that they return home. They might evade the question, agree to a time and then change it, or simply refuse to discuss it. In the final analysis, the decision was theirs. Ephriam Delano summarized the thinking of many argonauts. "You wanted me to say when I was Coming home," he wrote to his wife Jane, "that I cannot say for when a person gits to California it is hard to say or tell when he gits away." He remained loyal to her and to the children but concluded he could not "Come this summer. I think I shall start in the fall if nothing happens it is now very pleasant here."[13] Delano's comments reflected the seasonal nature of California mining, in which the mining cycle ran from the fall of streams in late spring to advent of the rainy season in late fall. Returning home, like so much else in California, became a seasonal exercise, and deciding to do so could only be carried out at the close of the season.

John Fitch sounded a common theme when he argued that the decision to stay in California was a sacrifice made in the interest of the family. "Sorry that I did not go hom[e] last fall," he wrote to his wife, "as you seem to feel so bad about my staying, and the prospect of accomplishing much I find so poor." Yet it was precisely the poor prospects that compelled him to stay. If he had done well, then he could come home with a comfortable sum to meet the needs of his family. Without success, however, he must stay and endure. His sense of responsibility demanded that he pursue every lead, follow every thread of mineral to its source, leave no stone unturned in the swift-flowing mountain streams of California. "If I had gone home then without looking in other places, I should not have been satisfied or thought I had done my duty to you or to my children," he said, concluding, "Had I only consulted my own feelings & inclinations I should have been home long ago, and I thought I was acting for the best by staying—but whether so or not time must determine."[14]

Such persistence became one of the contradictions of the California mining experience. If we are to believe their letters, many forty-niners disdained gambling and all it represented. To risk on the turn of a card the hard-earned money that should have been sent to parents, wife, and children was repugnant. Yet these same argonauts who railed against games of chance could not resist the temptation to keep playing the "lottery" they all knew mining to be. Whatever the odds, they wanted a ticket. So John Fitch and other upright argonauts accepted the risks associated with another season in the diggings, small claims reduced to ten feet square with paying gravels at a depth of twenty feet, a second or third damming enterprise, another prospect for the mother lode or her equally wealthy relative, a

11. James Barnes to Jeremiah Barnes, April 29, 1851, Letters, Bancroft Library, University of California-Berkeley.

12. John Joseph Craven to his wife, May 20, 1850, Letters, Huntington Library.

13. Ephriam Delano to Jane Delano, April 24, 1853, Letters, Huntington Library.

14. John R. Fitch to his wife, February 16, 1852, Letters, Huntington Library.

new trade to try, another service industry to explore. Their intense desire and self-appointed determination to sacrifice for their families mixed with stories of others' success against long odds, regenerating their faith in a golden strike. Hope triumphed again over experience. Under such illusions how could the responsible forty-niner contemplate returning to the comforts and ease of family and home?

Indeed, the challenge to persevere made coming home seem the easy way out. These argonauts of 1849—to distinguish themselves from the original band that sought the Golden Fleece—were made of sterner stuff. The challenges and opportunities of gold rush California would separate those who could pay the price in time and arduous labor from those who would turn tail and return to the comforts of warm feather beds, home-cooked meals, and the daily ministrations of the family's female members. The test of California was to stay in the diggings or in the shop and persist in the name of the family.

Accompanying such determined views was an ill-disguised contempt for those who gave up easily the chance to do something important for their families and returned too soon. With a mixture of confidence and contempt, one forty-niner wrote: "We know you would cheerfully assist us at home, if we were there, but we now have an opportunity to which if we improve aright will be of great advantage to us." With anything like luck, he added, "we cant fail, & Lord only knows what sends so many Georgians home, except the reflexion of how 'comfortably I may live at home at my father's hard earnings.' I know many who refuse large wages here & go home. If necessary I would give names."[15] To give names of those who had gone home was to expose them as failures and shirkers and to the contempt of the community. They had given up when the

Remaining in California to seek an elusive fortune was, to many miners, a sacrifice made in the interest of the family. Staying on meant giving up the pleasures and comforts of home for the ongoing hardship and monotony of life in the mines, playfully depicted in the four-part illustration below.

SUNDRY AMUSEMENTS IN THE MINES.

The Huntington Library, San Marino, California

A SUNDAYS AMUSEMENTS.

A DAILY PLEASURE.

OCCUPATION FOR RAINY DAYS.

A PLEASANT SURPRISE.

conditions got hard. They had turned their backs on their families. They were the real failures of gold rush California. It was not that men returned without anything; it was that they returned at all! The only conclusion possible was that the families themselves should willingly accept the forty-niners' sacrifices, applaud their determination to labor on in the face of hardship, and see it as the harder choice. Better to be a casualty in the battle for a golden future than branded a coward for desertion.

The "Miner's Ten Commandments"—the code of conduct for mining people—spoke to the issues of mining for gold in California at midcentury. It fitted well with the Protestant nature of the nation at the time and probably reassured families in the East to know that their menfolk were being guided by high principles comparable to the laws of the Old Testament. The commandments of California mining laid down standards of behavior concerning claims (concentrate on your own and do not covet your neighbor's), gambling (it cost many a miner a hard-earned "raise"), Sabbath observance (to be honored), and conduct within the miner's own company (unquestioned loyalty to this group). Among the miner's commandments, the seventh dealt with the urge to return home:

> Thou shalt not grow discouraged, and think of going home before thou hast made thy 'pile,' because thou hast not 'struck a lead,' nor found 'a rich crevice' nor sunk a hold upon a 'pocket,' lest, in going home, thou shalt leave four dollars per day, and go to work, ashamed, at fifty cents, and serve thee right; for here, by staying, thou mightest strike a lead and fifty dollars a day."

The miner tempted to return home should instead "keep thy manly self-respect, and then go home with enough to make thyself and others happy."[16] The images of manly expectations were powerful and compelling for the masculine culture of gold rush California. Perhaps it even resonated for the men at home.

The difficulties of coming home or even contemplating a return touched on a range of questions at the heart of the gold rush. Everyone had gone to California to find gold or to enrich themselves in economic pursuits associated with gold. But what constituted enough gold to come home? What number in value or weight satisfied the expectations of individual forty-niners and their families? What represented success, an acceptable return for so many years in the placers? And who was prepared to return home with little or nothing? In short, who was ready to admit that he had failed in a California awash with gold and opportunities to make money. Such a failure involved great loss of face within the family, and it would certainly not be a private failing. The failure would be for the entire family and possibly for the community. How was the forty-niner to justify to inquiring friends and neighbors his prolonged absence when he returned with no more money than he departed with?

For the argonauts of 1849, returning home was the final step in coming to terms with failure. There might have been temporary setbacks in California, but these were always seen in the context of brighter prospects for the next season. To return home with little or nothing was to admit there would be no more seasons. The idea of failure was not easy to come to terms with in America at midcentury, and the more so in view of the many stories of dazzling success told about gold rush California.

One forty-niner wrote that "mortification" over his failure kept him from coming home. For several months he had dug and washed in the mines, worked as a carpenter, clerked in a post office, and yet he had nothing to show for his endless toil. Unable to send his wife sufficient funds to ensure her support, he was deeply distressed by this lack of success. Another wrote to his mother: "I dislike the idea very much of returning without making any thing. . . . besides I know that a good deal would be said about me as every person in the states think that no person that is industrious can come out here without making a fortune."[17] In an event suffused with success, failure could mean deficient character or moral shortcoming.

These argonauts did not wish to measure their thin money pouches against the grandiose expectations their communities had upon their departure. "I cannot think of returning home from the Land of Gold with Nothing, notwithstanding the chords of Fraternal, Conjugal and Paternal Love are drawing me toward home," Levi Hillman wrote. "Would you want me to return without making every exertion to better our condition even though I might be obliged to remain here longer than I intended to stay," he asked. Believing he must satisfy the expectations of friends and family alike, he

15. John Milner to his father, January 7, 1850, Letters, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

16. "The Miner's Ten Commandments," published by James M. Hutchings, Placerville, El Dorado County, California, 1853, Huntington Library. The tenth "Commandment" directed the forty-niner to honor his wife and family and return to them, but only after accumulating "enough" to satisfy them.

17. James Burr to Caroline Burr, December 22, 1850, Green Papers, Southern Historical Collections, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill; Daniel Horn to his mother, November, December 14, 1850, Letters, ibid.

added: "[Y]ou know what I said to my friends when I came away—that when I came back they might know that I had more money than when I went away."[18]

Although some forty-niners remained in California, most of the argonauts returned home to resume their earlier lives. At least they came back, but the circumstances of their return were far different from those of their departure. Writing about the departure of the bright-eyed gold seekers who left his home community of Sag Harbor, New York, Prentice Mulford told how a company of future gold miners set forth with the community's hopes, expectations, and prayers. There was a church service, and as a special reward on the night before they left, the departing argonauts were permitted to stay up late with their girls. But their return, according to Mulford, contrasted sharply with their parting celebrations. "In the course of two years a few of the 'boys' came straggling back," he said.

> The first of these arrivals, I remember, walked up our main street, wearing on his shoulders a brilliant-hued Mexican serape. It created a sensation. All the small boys of the village 'tagged on behind him,' a sort of impromptu guard of honor. The serape was about all he did bring home. He talked a great deal of gold and brought specimens, but not in sufficient quantities to pay all outstanding bills. . . . Relatives of those not returned beset them with inquiries which they found it difficult to answer, because there was an idea prevalent in the village that a man in California ought to make money, and why didn't he?[19]

Why didn't he indeed! This was the question that returned forty-niners did not want to answer.

When they at last returned, the forty-niners discovered that things had changed. Parents had aged and younger brothers and sisters had grown up, some of them married with their own families. The village had new arrivals and old departures, and their formerly tight social groups had changed as well, with some friends married and with children, others moved away, and a few vanished. The adjustments were not ones that they put on paper. Hundreds of future argonauts kept diaries and journals of their journeys to the California goldfields; few kept an account of life after returning home.

The argonaut's trip home was different. Most returned on a cyclical schedule; that is, after the close of the mining season. Then, the season's accounts rendered and squared up, they faced the decision whether to winter over and stay for another season or return and thus avoid the expenses of winter. By 1851, most argonauts went home by way of Panama and Nicaragua. They did so quickly and at the modest cost of $125. Four to five weeks after clearing San Francisco Harbor, they arrived in New York, Boston, or Philadelphia. Debarking there they took a train or steamboat, ultimately reaching town or farm by stage or horseback.

The Huntington Library, San Marino, California

Adventure was not for men only. Forty-niner Mary Jane Megquier, a native of Winthrop, Maine, gloried in the freedom she found in the West. Seated second from right in a circa 1850 daguerreotype, Megquier first traveled to California in 1849 by way of Panama to become a San Francisco boardinghouse proprietor. She eventually left California twice only to return a third time permanently.

From John S. Gardiner, *In Pursuit of the Golden Dream* (Stoughton, Mass., 1970), opp. p. 154

Arrived at the mouth of the Chagres River on the Atlantic side of Panama, portrayed above in a sketch from John M. Letts's contemporary travel narrative, *California Illustrated* (1852), outward-bound gold seekers made their way up river, then across land to Panama City to waiting clipper ships. Steamship companies soon established regular service, and with completion of the Panama Railroad in 1855, the isthmus became the dominant route both to and from California.

At first, their return was euphoric. They were the center of family attention. Lying in bed late in the morning, they could smell the coffee and biscuits made by one of the women in the family. They were warm and dry. For a few weeks at least, there was the thrill of seeing old friends and being the focus of attention for new ones. They met again the girls they had known and found them women. For men with spouses and children, the thrill to be together again as a family and enjoy the intimacy of human contact after so many months of celibate male companionship was joyous. Such were the easy parts of coming home. They lasted a few weeks and sometimes months. Then came the harder parts. First came the questions. Where was the fortune? Where were the funds to repay debts owed to family members and others in the community?

The California gold rush began with blazing headlines, sermons preached on the departure of companies of argonauts, and parades to the waterfront with singing and shouting, the creak of a thousand wagons, and the echoing stamp of teams of harnessed mules and oxen, all in response to a few golden flakes that emerged on the American River on a chilly but sunny January morning. It ended with a few men with long beards and bronzed complexions tramping down the streets of towns they once knew well, with occasional settling of accounts for monies borrowed and interest paid, and finally with a deep and prolonged silence.

Sometimes the forty-niner returned to a series of unpleasant surprises. The outbreak of gold fever in Iowa City, Iowa, led to the departure for California of Philip Clark and Eli Myers, both of whom left behind families. Myers died a few months after arriving in Sacramento.[20] Clark mined for several years with "varying fortunes." Upon his return to Iowa City in 1857, he found both his farm and his wife in the possession of another man. Before he departed for California, Clark had arranged with his brother-in-law, Fernando H. Lee, for the management of his farm, granting a power of attorney that conveyed the right to lease, rent, mortgage, or sell the claim. After Clark had been in the goldfields of California for a few years, his wife sued for divorce on grounds of desertion, and the court sanctioned the divorce. Clark's brother-in-law, Fernando Lee, armed with power of attorney by the absent forty-niner, sold Clark's farm at a low price to a third party. Hidden details of the sale and the parties involved suggested that Lee and his sister had profited from the sale and ended up with the land itself. In his long absence, Clark had been victimized by his own family. When he

18. Levi Hillman to his family, December 9, 1852, Letters, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.

19. Prentice Mulford, *Prentice Mulford's Story: Life by Land and Sea* (New York, 1889), 5.

20. *Portrait and Biographical Record of Johnson, Poweshiek, and Iowa Counties* (Chicago, 1893), 278. I am indebted to Franklin Yoder for calling my attention to this story.

returned, Clark immediately sought legal redress to secure the return of his farm. He was eventually successful, but the case was not resolved without violence, arson, and the death of one of the principals involved. Clark lived on in Johnson County, Iowa, until his death in 1891, a reminder of the unforeseen hazards of joining the rush to California in '49.[21]

Some of those who returned quickly grew dissatisfied with low wages, hard labor, and unhappy family situations and made plans to return to California. The decision to put down permanent roots in California had great implications for their families in the East. What had been heretofore a family with an absent member or members was now a family separated, dispersed, and divided into two entities. Contact between the two parts continued, but issues could be contentious. Some wives of forty-niners refused to move to California. Others set difficult conditions for doing so. Amos Stearns went to California in 1852 and found prosperity as superintendent of a quartz mine, but his wife refused to join him until she could make the entire journey by train. She finally stepped off the train in San Francisco in 1871, almost twenty years later.[22] Other wives went with obvious reluctance. A few became the object of a tug-of-war between the husband and relatives in the East.[23]

Thus, the "family" of the original gold rush fever had become two or more "families." When the younger family member stayed in California, he often married and began his own family. Contact between the two groups by letter involved the exchange of daguerreotypes and locks of hair, descriptions of the new wife, the new home, and the new children. Sometimes the two "families" wrote to one another about the difficulties of maintaining a sense of familial identity.[24]

Many forty-niners simply vanished into the vast landscape and human confusion that was the California gold rush. "Sometimes on visiting my native village," Prentice Mulford wrote,

> I stand before one of those old-fashioned houses, from whose front door thirty-four years ago there went forth for the last time the young argonaut on his way to the ship. But within all are strangers. The father and mother are past anxious inquiry about their son. The sisters are married and live or have died elsewhere. A new generation is all about. They never heard of him. The great event of that period, the sailing of that ship for California, is sometimes recalled by a few—a rapidly diminishing few. His name is all but forgotten.[25]

Families continued to search for them, sometimes into the 1890s. In 1899, on the fiftieth anniversary of the first great departure for the goldfields, Rufus Dickinson wrote to a newspaper editor seeking news of two brothers gone to the goldfields fifty years earlier. One brother had last been heard from in Oregon, he said,

> but I have not been able to learn what town or county he lived in. I have not heard from either of them in almost thirty years. I was about ten years old when they left home. After father & mother died they seemed to forget to write. Rufus worked in the mines part of the time. He was a violinist also. I would be glad to learn what became of them.[26]

He spoke for others. Whatever the returns from the goldfields, many homes and families were never the same again.

The California gold rush separated the life experiences of those who went to the goldfields from those who stayed home. The argonauts went around the Horn, through Panama, or overland in the great transcontinental migrations. In doing so, they "saw the Elephant." They boasted of this strange creature to their relatives and friends. At the same time, they participated in a series of exercises that were hard to describe to those left behind: labor of the most onerous kind in all weather under all conditions; high prices for basic food, shelter, and clothing; increasing competition in the goldfields, with the declining daily return from the mines and the parallel drop in the wage for labor; injury and ill health with poor care; and the continuing and rising knowledge that all these circumstances meant failure in California's goldfields.

21. Ibid., 216-19; G. R. Irish, "Philip Clark—Founder of the First Home in Johnson County," *Forty-first Annual Reunion of the Old Settlers of Johnson County*, (Iowa City, 1907), 25.

22. Ames Keyes Sterns, diaries, November 29, December 2, 14, 1872, Special Collections, California State University-Chico.

23. See, for example, the case of Lemuel Hopkins, who charged that his mother-in-law's influence prevented his wife from joining him in California. Hopkins to his wife, February 13, May 15, 1854, May 28, 1859, Letters, Huntington Library.

24. See, for example, John Kinkade, who went to California in 1849, and introduced his new wife to his eastern family by letter in John Kinkade to his brother James and family, May 20, 1853, Letters, Huntington Library.

25. Mulford, *Prentice Mulford's Story*, 5.

26. Letter to the Editor, November 14, 1899, William Rufus Dickinson Papers, Special Collections, Clarke Library, Central Michigan University, Mount Pleasant.

27. There were exceptions. One group of investors in Tennessee, who put up $1,000 each, sued members of the company who went to California, demanding that the latter fulfill their contract by working three full years. Of the original fourteen who made the trek to California, two had died, and legal depositions from the others provided convincing evidence that none had made anything in three years there. See Walter T. Dunham, *Volunteer Forty-Niners: Tennesseans and the California Gold Rush* (Nashville, 1997), 228-32.

These collective activities often failed to live up to the expectations of those at home, expectations generated by a host of journalists and publicists but also by the forty-niners themselves because they were anxious to receive support for the venture and be permitted to go. The reluctance to return home at last overcome—for whatever reasons—the forty-niners returned quietly to a warm family welcome and pointed questions from neighbors and financial backers. Where were the monies advanced and the interest promised? Most family members and even investors came to realize that nothing would be forthcoming and for good and sufficient reasons.[27] The argonauts' threadbare clothes and haggard bronzed faces explained well enough. To close the accounts of the venture to California—personal and financial—much had to be forgiven on all sides. These were the final acts of the California gold rush. And rich or not, debts paid or not, the forty-niners had at last come home. It would have to be enough.

MALCOLM J. ROHRBOUGH is professor of history, University of Iowa, and the award-winning author of *Days of Gold: The California Gold Rush and the American Nation* (1997), which won the Western History Association's Caughey Prize for best book and shared the Organization of American Historians' Billington Prize for best book on the frontier. He is also author of *Aspen: The History of a Silver-Mining Town, 1879–1893* (1986) and *The Trans-Appalachian Frontier: People, Societies, and Institutions, 1775–1850* (1990).

For many a gold seeker, the great adventure culminated in a longed-for return home. For A. D. O. Browere, the dream of going home was realized twice, first in 1854, when, perhaps inspired by loneliness, he painted *Miner's Return* (oil on canvas, 24″ x 30″), which family tradition says depicts Browere's own return to his home in Catskill, New York. Two years later, Browere, like many others, did return home.

Courtesy Liza Rosenberg