



## Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush

By Susan Lee Johnson Ph.D.

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### Winner of the 2001 Bancroft Prize.

Historical insight is the alchemy that transforms the familiar story of the Gold Rush into something sparkling and new. The world of the Gold Rush that comes down to us through fiction and film?of unshaven men named Stumpy and Kentuck raising hell and panning for gold?is one of half-truths. In this brilliant work of social history, Susan Johnson enters the well-worked diggings of Gold Rush history and strikes a rich lode. She finds a dynamic social world in which the conventions of identity?ethnic, national, and sexual?were reshaped in surprising ways. She gives us the all-male households of the diggings, the mines where the men worked, and the fandango houses where they played. With a keen eye for character and story, Johnson restores the particular social world that issued in the Gold Rush myths we still cherish. Maps, illustrations.

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## **Bibliography**

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## **Editorial Review**

From Publishers Weekly

The California Gold Rush is commonly identified with the peculiarly American movement of Manifest Destiny, but as Johnson reveals in this informative study of the period, the Gold Rush was in fact one of the most cosmopolitan and multicultural events of the 19th century. Mexicans, French, Chinese, African-Americans, Chileans and Miwok Indians all panned for gold alongside their WASP counterparts in the foothills of the Sierra Nevadas. The collision of these cultures sometimes led to humorous misunderstandings (as when Chinese miners mirthfully watched a white colleague struggle to use chopsticks), but just as frequently it produced ugly crimes, like when Mexican prospector Joaquin Murrieta was assaulted and evicted from his mining claim by jealous whites. Complicating relations in the mines was the almost complete absence of women; Johnson shows how men of all races found themselves reassessing gender roles in ways that had everything to do with ethnicity and cultural hegemony. For example, Anglo miners tended to feminize Chinese and French men, who made their fortunes in laundry and cooking as often as in mining gold. Johnson skillfully investigates the ramifications of these social pressures, though at times she surrenders to the ivory tower habit of interpreting the interpretations, analyzing the discourse about events instead of the events themselves. Hers is an intensely academic brand of social history: readers will find phrases like "homosocial," "gendered meanings" and "constructions of race" liberally sprinkled throughout the text. Underneath the jargon, however, is a valuable study of the complex, often troubled societies that contributed to one of America's great national mythologies. 15 photos, 1 map. (Jan.)  
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From [Booklist](#)

The California gold rush and the social and cultural forces it unleashed have become part of our historical and literary tradition. Johnson, professor of history at the University of Colorado, provides an excellent survey of the mini-universe that quickly developed as a result of the massive influx of wealth seekers into the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, around the town of Stockton. While her story lacks the romanticism of a Twain or a Harte, it offers a hardheaded look at the ethnic and class diversity that frequently led to violent conflict. Yet this is not a one-sided account of the strong devouring the weak. Johnson shows that conflict frequently coexisted with tolerance and harmony, and the eventual outcome was a degree of peace and stability in a new and vibrant society. This is a well-written account that effectively mixes personal stories with broader historical trends. *Jay Freeman*

From Kirkus Reviews

A dutiful, ponderous reconstruction of daily life in the California gold fields. Johnson (History/Univ. of Colorado) argues that the commonly held view of the gold rush leaves out many of its principal actors; derived in large part from the chummy, mud-spattered writings of Bret Harte, that view centers on Anglo-American miners while elbowing thousands of Eastern-European, South-American, African-American, Mexican, and Chinese workers into the background to say nothing of the Native Americans on whose territory the gold rush took place. Johnson looks beyond Hartes tales of camaraderie to depict the California gold camps as hotbeds of ethnic and cultural strife, battlegrounds on which Anglo-Americans not only sought their personal fortunes but asserted political dominion over the region, newly conquered from Mexico, a task that made them anxious about issues of gender, of race and culture, and of class. Their attempts to impose this control, Johnson suggests, were often misguided. A monthly \$20 tax on foreign (that is, non-Anglo) miners, for instance, drove away much-needed cooks, haulers, and common laborers, and it was soon done away with. Johnson turns up useful correctives for one, that most Chinese workers came to

California freely, rather than as indentured laborers and gives needed attention to the Miwok and other Indian peoples who often fell afoul of the gold seekers, sometimes because of simple cultural misunderstandings. The more interesting threads of her argument, however, are buried in a surfeit of incidental detail, and her narrative too often becomes a mere recitation of undigested facts, betraying its origins as a doctoral dissertation. Published a shade too late to join the flood of books commemorating the 150th anniversary of the gold rush, Johnson's study makes a useful yet decidedly secondary reference for scholars and students of the period. -- *Copyright ©2000, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

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#### **Isaias McGee:**

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#### **Cathrine Hart:**

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