

Provenance of the Californian Gold Rush.

These are the notes of Mark Mongan born 1834 son of John Mongan and Ellen McElvey (McKelvey) of Donegal, Ireland. The couple and their several children left for Australia on the 'Hindoo' in 1837 sailing for Sydney but John apparently died on the trip. The mother and boys stayed in Sydney for some time eventually settling in Yackandandah, Victoria. Mark and his brothers visited the California gold fields in 1849.

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In the year 1848, in my opinion the most remarkable of the many remarkable & surprising incidents of the 19th century was the discovery of gold in Sutter's Mill in California and the then unheard of concession by the Government of the USA of which Country California was then a territory of the right to mine for gold to all-comers irrespective of nationality without fee or charge. Then set in from all parts of the world the greatest stream of emigration the world had ever experienced; an emigration unique in that it embraced the flower of manhood of the whole world only the young, strong and adventurous braving the inevitable hardships attached to long sea voyages and travelling in a strange and unknown land. The gold fever struck Australia in the beginning of 1849 and the first stampede took 2 of my brothers a few months after 3 more of them & 2 cousins; and later in the year your humble servant, then a boy of 13. A scene never to be forgotten was that of the harbor of San Francisco in the latter part of 1849 a complete forest of masts met the view

and in the majority of cases the ships were in the charge of caretakers only the crews having deserted to a man and hurried off to the mines. In one case at least, the Captain leading his men with the remarkable result that after a few months at the mines, he was able to bring the whole of his men back with a competence each and take his ship back to her port. The morning after our arrival the Captain & mate alone were left, all the rest having disappeared; my clothes disappearing too with the exception of what I was standing up in. The marvellous accommodation in wharfs and dockyards we read of as now existing in Frisco contrasts strikingly with the one wharf as I first saw it being simply a narrow wooden pier carried out half a mile into the bay. As a consequence most of the ships had to be unloaded and loaded from punts. Wages were at a rate that to you of a younger generation will appear incredible. Mechanics 16 Dollars or 3 pounds, 4 shillings per day; labourers 10 Dollars or 2-0-0 per day; and I a boy of 13 was offered 7 dollars or 1-8-0 per day & board, but wasn't taking any as I was crazy to get to the mines and make my fortune. The City of SF to the new chum of '49 presented a marvellous and astonishing sight; more like a city of pasteboard than anything else, so flimsy was the appearance of even the most pretentious buildings which were invariably the Gambling Saloons of

which there must have been over 100 occupying the best positions in the main streets. My first experience, when in company with an old family friend seeing sights, was rather startling and trying to the nerves - so trying that my strongest feeling at the time was the wish I was at home with Mother.

The incident occurred in the principal Gambling Saloon of the City which presented a sight never to be forgotten. A hall as large as the Oddfellows, the whole front of which was a high bar magnificently upholstered; mirrors everywhere you looked, (with) about a dozen Bartenders, as gorgeously got up as the Bar, with skill in concocting strange drinks and sliding them from one end of the counter, marble at that - simply marvellous. Then the hall itself simply indescribable, but an attempt must be made. Fancy at intervals of about 5 yards all round the walls, (were) tables for the different games; Taro, Roulette, Monte and a host of others. Piles & piles of gold & silver met the eye on every table; my first impression being that I must be dreaming as I could not realize that so much money existed in the world. Crowds (were) at every table eagerly staking on the turn of a card or the rolling of a ball; sums varying from the humble dollar limit to moderate fortunes but the incident that fairly shook your humble (self) to the very boots was the loud cry of, "You're a darned cheat!" and the immediate discharge of a revolver shot. Then such a rush for the door took place as this child wishes he may never to be an actor in again; for I really think the flattening out I then got, took months to fill out to the normal again. And after all no lives were lost, for the ball from the Revolver, instead of finding a resting place in the carcass it was intended for, struck the skirt of a homespun overcoat worn by a young western Yankee and homespun won, for the bullet fell harmlessly to the floor. That ended my first night's sightseeing for (we) two frightened pilgrims stole off to bed, having had quite enough of that sort of pie.

The next startler was ushered in at daybreak the next morning by the ringing of all the Bells in Frisco; the Vigilance Committee calling the citizens to the hanging of two burglars. But before describing how Lynch Law was carried out, I will by a brief digression show what position Australians held in the estimation of the general public of California. Thinkers will easily grasp the fact that in the first exodus from the Colonies a large sprinkling of the criminal classes made their way to the new Eldorado and as a natural (con)sequence were no sooner there, than their presence was made manifest. Of course they were not the only criminals but unfortunately for the country they hailed from, when lawlessness became rampant and in self defence the citizens were forced to band themselves into vigilance committees to protect themselves, the first wrongdoers caught were found to be two Vandemonian ex convicts. And as Sydney was the only Port ships had arrived from in the colonies up to then, all colonists were classed as Sydney ducks and put down as ex convicts; and so bitter was this feeling that it was actually dangerous to life and limb to admit you were Australian. Though not an apologist for or an admirer of Vigilance Committees, this I must in truthfulness admit, that in all the numerous cases I witnessed of the carrying out of Lynch Law, I never knew one case where the least doubt existed as to the prisoners guilt they in nearly all cases being caught red handed.

Now for a brief description of the execution and as the whole 8 that I witnessed under Lynch Law were carried out on similar lines whether in (the) City or on the mines, whether trees or buildings were the gallows, one description will do for all. The men were placed on the landing platform of a two storied warehouse with two hoisting blocks above them. Ropes were withdrawn through the blocks and the long end passed down to the crowd amongst whom were men with revolvers who forced everyone near enough to catch hold of it, thus implicating as many as possible. And at a given signal, the crowd ran with the ropes, (and) the unfortunate men were hoisted up the rope made fast; and thus the men were left for hours as a caution to others. One more thrilling incident that occurred before I started to the mines requires notice; namely what was for years after known as the 'Big Fire' when a whole block larger than that enclosed by Fitzmaurice Gurwood Trail & Johnstone Streets on which was the principle business places of the city, was totally consumed in a few hours - the Warehouse on which the hanging had taken place being one of them. This fire received notoriety from the amount of goods barefacedly stolen (with) wagons being deliberately driven up and loaded in broad daylight (and) the goods taken to the Auction Rooms and sold. In fact pilfering was so general as to give rise to that now historical salute to a friend who has anything new on; "Hello. Where has the fire been?" Another notable and sad to say tragic incident of the fire, was the burning in a horrible manner of two patentees of a fire proof material with which they had built a house and which they refused to leave though

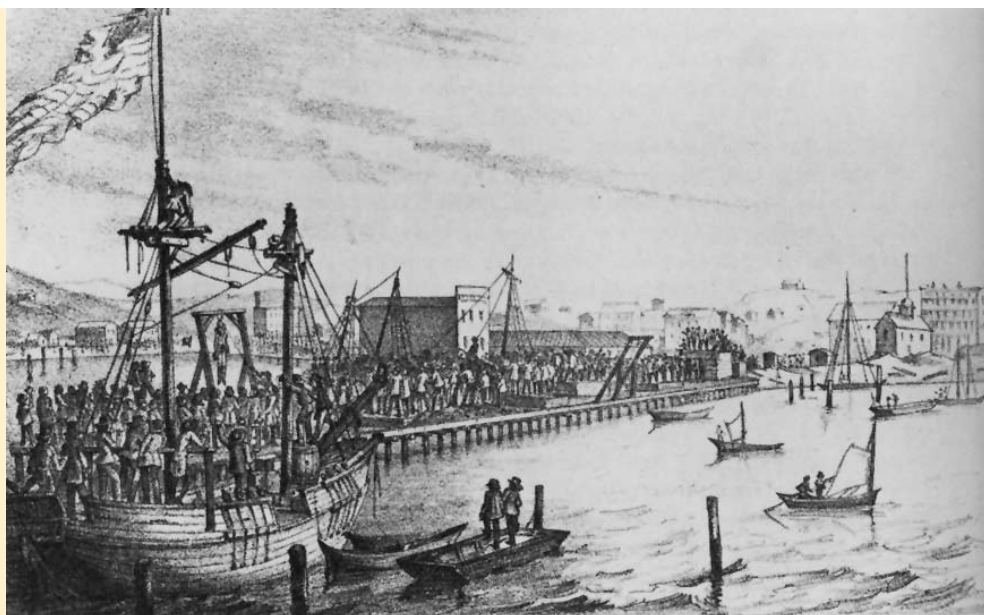
the fire was raging all round them. The last seen of them was in the midst of the flames and their so called fireproof material curling up like paper and actually blowing away.

I will now deal with less gruesome subjects - my start for the mines. It being considered indispensable to be armed on the journey, I (had) to be in the fashion, bought a six chamber Allens revolver, better known in the vernacular (as a) Pepper box, and a Bowie knife about a foot long which was struck in the orthodox Red sash; a truly formidable armament for a 13 year old you must admit. My

vanity carried its penalty with it in the inconvenience it caused in travelling on foot, but its after penalty was the worst, for when I joined my brothers on the mines my war-like appearance was the standing joke against me forever afterwards. The distance from Frisco to the mines, either north or south was about 200 miles. The head of navigation for the northern mines was the city of Sacramento on the river of the same name, while that for the Southern was the Town of Stocton on the San Joakim River. Sonora, the principal town on the Southern mines being 80 miles inland which was my destination – it being only 6 miles from where my brothers were working.

The first portion of my journey opened auspiciously as I happened to strike a time when a cut throat competition was being carried on by 2 rivals steamers; the one I patronized taking Passengers free. I thought I had reason to congratulate myself, till on reaching Stocton, I found the opposition boat not only gave a free passage but treated their passengers to a good dinner as well. Now I had to face the land journey of 80 miles and as the fare by coach (of) 30 dollars was above my means after my extravagance in armament, I had to agree with a mule wagoners to carry my ‘dunnage’ as it was then called – (the term) ‘swag’ not having been christened until after the Australian Rush. As there was several of us going with the teamster, the walking was pleasant enough, making about 20 miles; stopping at night at wayside Pubs, in all stages of erection, (with) only one on the whole journey being completed - the charges for meals and beds being the uniform one of a dollar.

An amusing incident occurred at one of the stopping places. I had been asleep for sometime on a loft under which the teamster and others were gambling. I was awakened by the teamster calling me and asking what country I was a native of, and on telling him “Ireland”, one of his companions exclaimed “Euchred by Judas. You talk darned good American for an Irish boy.” I found out that my friend the teamster had bet him 20 dollars that he could not tell what countryman I was. The phrase ‘good American’ instead of ‘good English’ was, I found afterwards, was common to most Americans. Having arrived on the digging, I was puzzled to see all along Wood Creek, where my brothers were working, hundreds of men rocking cradles similar to this. The system adopted being to put the dirt containing gold in this portion of the cradle and while rocking it with one hand, keep a supply of water on the dirt with a dipper in the other hand, till all the soil had gone through the holes, leaving the stones clean which was then thrown out and the process repeated till it was considered time to secure the gold which by its extra weight, had remained on the slide or bottom of the cradle. This was done by putting such stuff as remained in the cradle into a tin dish which was dipped into the water; the whole shaken gently and letting the water run slowly off the dish taking some of the dirt with it and so on, till nothing but the gold remained. No matter how the dirt is reduced in the first place, the tin dish is the final process. Even in quartz mining a machine to put more stuff through where water was more plentiful was what was called ‘the long Tom’ - a rough model of which I have here. The method of working this was to be set at



The hanging of Sydney convict and murderer James Stuart by the Vigilance Committee on Market Street Wharf, San Francisco on July 11, 1851. Source: 1776 -1976 Australia and America through 200 Years. Ure Smith, Sydney 1976.

an incline sufficient to leave this perforated portion on a level. The dirt was then put in the top portion of the Tom and water, either bucketed, pumped with a California Pump, or run in by gravitation, causing the dirt to run down on to the perforated plate where a man stood with a square nose shovel shoving the stuff about till nothing was left but the stones, which he discarded. As was the case with the cradle, the dirt after going through the holes dropped into a box with shallow bars across it to stop the gold.

Another system for putting a great quantity of stuff through where water was unlimited, as in a running stream with sufficient fall, was the sluice box similar to this. They were made in 12 feet lengths to fit into each other and it was no uncommon thing to see a string of them from 50 to 100 feet long. The mode of working was to have a strong stream of water running in at the head while men threw dirt in from either side - while a man stood on the upper half of the last sluice and with a many tined fork, threw out the stones what was called the 'riffle'. The lower half of the last sluice catching the gold.

Having dealt with the methods of winning the gold from the wash dirt, I will now deal with where gold was obtained and how as to the where. Well, it was found in the early days at all depths from the roots of the grass to hundreds of feet. Where I first worked on Woods Creek it was about 12 feet deep and contained in a depression of the bed rock about 4 feet wide called in mining phrase, 'a gutter'. Away from this gutter, no gold could be found. The mode of working, was to sink a shaft and as soon as the gutter was struck, drive a tunnel along its course sending the wash dirt up to be treated and so continuing until the boundary of your claim was reached; which would not be long for only 12 feet square was allowed for each man. After working that claim out, we started carting, 'surfacing' as it was called, that is literally surface earth, grass, an all. In this case there was only on an average 3" of dirt lying on granite so that in a short time we had several acres stripped and carted to the creek and washed in long Toms - averaging about one and a quarter ounces per man per day. Literally the gold was in the roots of the grass, strange as it may seem; digging with satisfying results pretty well all over the southern mines. The winter of 1850, which happened to be a dry one, found us at Columbia a few miles from Sonora where we had prospected some rich surfacing, but as there was no water handy, we could not treat it. But as it was such a good thing, we determined to stick by it till rain came; to prepare for which, we made two large dams across gullies to impound water sufficient for our sluices. And building a large log house and laying in a good supply of provisions, we waited and waited for months and still no rain. And while we were waiting, things were happening that altered our plans with a vengeance.

About the same time as myself, a Mr Hargraves from somewhere near Bathurst went to California and went mining in the Northern mines. And though he could see miners all round him making small fortunes, he himself had poor luck. But he was so struck with the similarity of the mining country around, physically and geologically with country in Australia he had travelled over, that after a brief stay, he returned to Australia, discovered payable gold and changed it from an almost torpid state to a country seething with excitement, madness and unrest. The news of Hargraves discovery found us still waiting for rain, but the news put waiting out of mind with a suddenness surprising, for though a fortune was certain as proved by those who stepped into our place, (and) though provisions and tools worth a hundred or two were on hand, yet in three days after hearing the news, we were on our way to Frisko, leaving everything behind us and actually came back (to Australia) in the ship that brought the news of the discovery to California. I had intended to ask you to accompany me during the mad times of the early days but the subject is so large, that with your permission, I will in the near future write a paper on early mining in Australia.



Gold was first discovered when John Sutter was in the process of building a sawmill at Coloma California. This led to the famous California gold rush and a full account can be seen by ‘Googleing’ Sutter’s Mill, and at ‘The Virtual Museum of the City of San Francisco’
<http://www.sfmuseum.org/hist2/gold.html>

So many Australians left for the California gold fields, there was a severe labour shortage in this country. As a result the government opened the goldfields near Sofola in New South Wales in an attempt to lure people back. The plan worked, as stated in the Mark Mongan’s letter, however the prospectors were soon to find the conditions were quite different.... Read on.

Mark Mongan stated in his document, his surprise at the US government’s allowance for prospectors to come from far and wide and freely search for gold. This was not the case in Australia as the activity was highly regulated and the rules were sometimes brutally enforced. A Miner’s License was also an expensive purchase incurring a monthly fee. In Victoria there was trouble well before the Eureka Stockade when the government attempted to double the gold licence from 30 to 60 shillings a month.

The following is an extract from: <http://eurekasydney.com/notes.html>

***Diggers’ Grievances.** The Governments of Victoria and NSW were the preserve mainly of the British Governor and the squatters. Neither showed much consideration for the diggers. The diggers had no vote and no representatives in Parliament; if they wanted to settle down as farmers, they found the land was in the hands of the squatters; and, most irritating of all, the Government taxed them heavily, making it compulsory for every digger to pay 30 shillings a month for a licence, whether gold was found or not. A hated police rode around on “Digger Hunts”, checking to see if the diggers had bought their licences.*

To get a better picture of the conditions in Australia go to :
<http://www.convictcreations.com/history/eureka.htm>

It is apparent the civil unrest that led to the Eureka Stockade and the formation of militant trade unions was predominantly as a result of the oppressive bureaucracy of the British colonial government. The following extract is also from the above website.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, America was an inspiration for people around the world. Migrants had flowed into America, stood up to their master class, and against all odds, won their liberty. So inspiring were their stories that migrants tried to replicate them in Australia. They had flowed in Australia looking for gold but instead they found a corrupt ruling class treating migrants the way they had been treating Convicts. To find their liberty, in 1854 the goldfield Diggers designed their flag, said their oath, made their salutes and gave their stirring speeches. Unfortunately, their stand ended in catastrophe. Perhaps the Diggers thought that battles could be won on noble ideals alone. They quickly found out that noble ideals lacking in conviction, weapons, and sound planning, ended in massacre.

Edward Hargraves piggy-backed his gold seeking success off his partners, Johnnie Lister, and William Tom who effectively did all the hard work. Hargraves must have had friends in higher places as he received all the accolades, a £10,000+ reward, plus a high ranking job as the Gold Commissioner with a 20 shilling per day salary, and a healthy ‘forage’ benefit. He also landed an audience with Queen Victoria and a disputed place in Australian history for ‘discovering gold in Australia’.