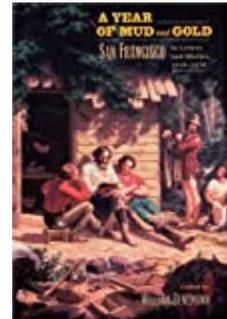


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

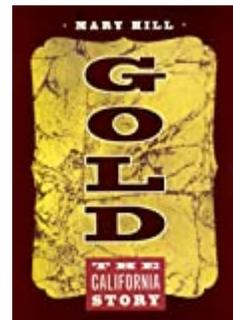


**William Benemann.** *A Year of Mud and Gold: San Francisco in Letters and Diaries, 1849-1850.* Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1999. xxvi + 242 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-1293-0.



**Peter J. Blodgett, Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery.** *Land of Golden Dreams: California in the Gold Rush Decade, 1848-1858.* San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Library, 1999. 147 pp. \$20.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87328-183-6; \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87328-182-9.

**Mary Hill.** *GOLD: The California Story.* Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1999. xi + 306 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-21547-4.



**Reviewed by** Robert J. Chandler (Historical Services, Wells Fargo Bank, San Francisco)

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## GOLD FOR DUMMIES

Ever had problems telling an anticline from a tectonic plate? Look no further. Geologist Mary Hill, in a readable, pleasantly-written, well illustrated volume, explains all – from the creation of the world to the present. Readers of all ages, from high school students to professional scholars, will benefit.

In California sesquicentennial celebrations, Jim Holliday's *Rush for Riches* (1999) looms as the Mother Lode, but as with all mining, good leads are elsewhere, too. Hill's is one of them. Holliday, for instance, stops at 1884 with the farmers' victory over hydraulic mining. Hill goes on. While much of the Gold Rush story Hill tells

is common, she enlivens it with well-chosen illustrations and sidebar vignettes and songs. Even folklore appears through tales of lost mines and buried treasures.

For instance, one fine map shows gold discovery sites before James Marshall checked the American River mill race on January 24, 1848; another nine-page section on the cemented blue gravel complete with diagrams explains "Mining the Dead Rivers" through hydraulicking and drift mining; a third diagram illustrates how the huge tailing wheels at Jackson's Kennedy Mine worked.

Hill's tables are worth the price of the book. One lists shipwrecks that may contain California gold, with a special section on the *Central America*, whose treasure trove of 1857 San Francisco \$20 "Double Eagles" and rare assay bars came on the market this year. Another tallies the largest gold nuggets found; a third gives yearly gold production; and a fourth tells where to see gold and mining artifacts.

Covering such a wide range of topics, in non-mineralized areas, Hill occasionally stumbles. For instances, she states, "By the winter of 1851 Wells, Fargo and Company were in business" (184), amazing for a firm formed in New York City on March 18, 1852, which opened in San Francisco and Sacramento on July 13, 1852.

Hill shines when she discusses geology. Readers ought to pan her chapter on "The Natural History of Placer Gold." Little did I know that placer gold was more pure than quartz gold, in part due to precipitation from the water. Best of all, she closes with a chapter "Mining Gold for Fun and Maybe Profit," including large open-pit leach mines to weekend recreational miners.

Before you go out panning, strike *GOLD* with Mary Hill.

#### *A GOLDEN DECADE*

Southern California's Huntington Library is a treasure-trove of riches. To showcase some of them for California's Sesquicentennial, Western Manuscript Curator Peter J. Blodgett gathered the best of the best. Blodgett incorporated displayed materials into this narrative catalogue for the Library's conferences and exhibit, which runs from September 28, 1999 to September 10, 2000.

Appropriately, Blodgett presents 150 color illustrations. Unlike Jim Holliday's similar *Rush for Riches* (1999), most are paper items rather than artifacts. The Huntington displays sketches, water colors, and prints;

writing in various forms—letters, letter sheets, pamphlets, and newspapers; and a few photographs. This work is a treat for those who cannot see the real items, and a memento worthy of further study for those who can. For collectors, it will incite lust, envy, and covetousness.

With Blodgett's direct, literary narrative, this catalogue has a learned – but not academic – tone. Of course, it is well researched. His four chapters incorporate many of the themes in the scholarly overviews and bibliographic essays in the four-part *California History*/University of California Press salute to the Gold Rush. Two parts have appeared: *Contested Eden: California Before the Gold Rush* (March 1998) and *A Golden State: Mining and Economic Development in Gold Rush California* (Winter 1998-1999).

Blodgett, however, provides an intriguing narrative in a single voice. Of course, exhibit materials limit his range, but focus his analysis. Peter Blodgett and this year-long exhibit cover four themes: The Adventure Begins; Days of '49; California Transformed: Organizing a New Society, 1850-1858; and The Legacy of El Dorado.

For a prelude to a trip to San Marino, a finely-crafted item in any gold-seeker's library; and the stuff for California dreamin', pick up the *Land of Golden Dreams*.

#### *A BANCROFT BONANZA*

Librarian William Benemann, head of technical serves at Boalt Hall Law School Library, a few hundred yards from The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, became intrigued with its holdings. To Benemann, experiences in the famed Bay City during first year of gold under military government before California even became a state, were unique. "What is more," he states, this time "was *viewed* as being unique by the many people drawn there by the hope of riches" (222).

Benemann draws the magic forty-nine for the number of his San Francisco correspondents and diarists, and wrestles with either running them chronologically or dividing this multitude of experiences. He chose eight subjects and broad sketches, drawn from a few basic books, introduce each. His topics are: First impressions; yearning for news from home; death ever present; exuberance, crime, and mayhem; fire; men without women; politics in a mixed population; and a home in the West. Since Benemann holds this year to be self contained, time within it does not matter. Within each of the eight divisions he arranges selections randomly rather than chronologically.

Sometimes, though, introductions reveal little about

selected material, and occasionally Benemann does not explain allusions in the quotations. An example is his very first offering labeled, "Anonymous: Journal of a voyage from New Bedford to San Francisco, 21 September 1849" (5). In this account, Captain Seabury prominently appears as he narrowly keeps the ship off lurking rocks. With the date of arrival and captain, it is easy to find this narrative concerns the ship *America*, built 1811, which came into port with seventy-five passengers. Similarly "Anonymous" describes, "A fine fellow, a Lascan [an Alaskan?] sailor..." (6), who is instead, an East Indian Lascar.

Quibbles aside, Benemann's selections are excellent and graphic. Whereas Malcolm Barker, in his well-received *San Francisco Memories, 1835-1851* (1994) for the most part quoted recollections of the days of old, the days of gold, the days of '49, Benemann's choices provide gripping immediacy.

Nuggets abound. For instance, George May writes to Joseph R. Curtis on 20 November 1849 about the dismal

competition in the private coining business—a delightful letter not cited in Donald H. Kagin's classic *Private Gold Coins and Patterns of the United States* (1981). Intriguingly, prospective coiner Curtis became a partner in one of the firms, Moffat and Company, which gained its circulation "principally through the gamblers, who circulate more money here than any other class of men" (117). Similarly, John McCrackan writes (118) to his sister Mary on 9 December 1849, that brown paper parcels of gold dust in sums as little as 25 cents circulated due to the shortage of change, precursors of the 25 and 50 cent gold coins privately minted by French jewelers from 1852 to 1856.

For observing the Gold Rush as men and women lived it from the perspective of 150 years, pick up William Benemann's accounts to wallow in *A Year of Mud and Gold*.

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