The Gold Rush

In 1848, when the California Gold Rush began, the Sierra Nevada foothills between the Feather and Merced Rivers contained the richest deposits of gold ever found on Earth. This narrow belt of gold-bearing quartz veins became known as the Mother Lode. In northwest California, the Trinity, Marble, and Klamath Mountains also contained significant gold deposits. The first miners used picks and pans to pluck gold from the existing streams. Within two years the gold became much harder to find. Miners used picks, shovels, and rocking sluice boxes to locate gold in the dry gravel beds of former stream channels. Eventually, large companies formed to search for more gold in channels where the river used to be. This process, called hydraulic mining, required dozens of workers, diverted hundreds of streams, and washed tons of sediment from the Sierra Nevada into the Central Valley. Gold has been found in all but nine of the 58 counties in California. The search for gold continues today in the same regions, although on a much smaller scale.

IMAGE BELOW: Hydraulic mining at Malakoff Diggings in the Sierra Nevada foothills around 1876. Water is first diverted from streams and then forced through metal cannons. The powerful spray exposes long-buried gold deposits.

SOURCE: UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA BANCROFT LIBRARY

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