



Image: VisitJulian.com



Theeaglemining.com

A Golden Touch at the Eagle Mining Company

By Emily Nye

This week's visit to the Eagle Mining Company provides hands-on experience of the California Gold Rush—and perhaps a new appreciation of the historic town of Julian as well.

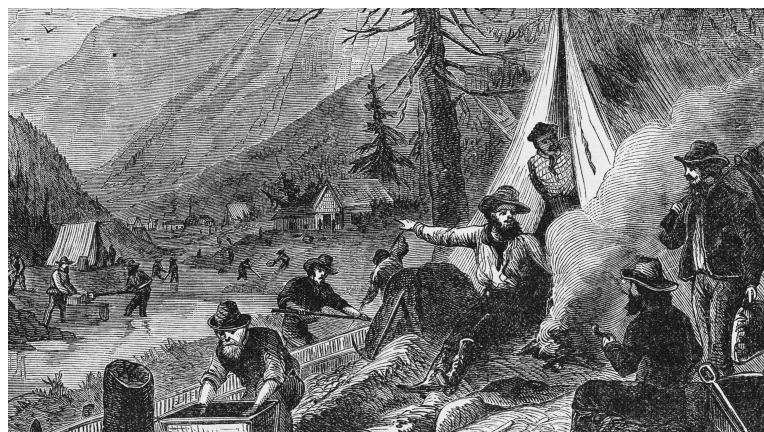
Grab your shovel and pan, wear your best mining attire, and see if you can strike it rich.

The Nelson family runs the Eagle Mining Company, started by their grandparents, Ed and Ellen Sprague, in 1967. The Spragues opened the Hardrock Tunnels and restored them to how they were in the 1870s.

For more than 50 years the Eagle Mining Company has been open for tours, providing a nugget of California history to about 10,000 people a year.

Where it All Began: The California Gold Rush

You might be wondering: what does an old gold mine have to do with the existence of a quaint little town (known for great pie) just north of San Diego? Like most good stories, this one requires knowledge of history, hearing about some colorful characters of the Old West, and recognizing the courageous efforts of our pioneer predecessors.



Gold Rush Mining Camp

Thoughtco.com

It all began in the mid 1800's, when settlers found gold in the Sacramento area, launching the California Gold Rush that attracted more than 300,000 people to the state. The Gold Rush lasted from about 1848 to its peak in 1852, and it had a profound impact on the settling of California (Brittanica).

By 1849 more than 80,000 gold miners were reported in the Sacramento area (they are sometimes called "forty-niners"). The number of miners grew to 250,000 by 1853. Over the Gold Rush years, it's estimated that miners extracted more than \$2 billion in gold. But gold mining was hard work, and few miners actually became rich.

The Gold Rush changed the face of California in several important ways. Before 1848, the population was around 160,000 people, most of whom were Native Americans. But the Gold Rush brought fortune seekers and immigrants from across the U.S. as well as South America, Europe, and China. Historians also suggest that it was the Gold Rush that led to California's statehood in 1850.

Mining Tools and Processes

A pan: A light pan was used to sample gravel. Gold is heavy and sinks to the bottom of the pan.



Images: Wikimedia Commons

A rocker (cradle): The miner pushed the handle on the rocker back and forth; gravel fell into a top part and heavy particles dropped through a screen, washed through by water. The bottom part of the rocker had slats to sift out heavier metals.



Long tom: A paddlewheel kept water sifting over the gravel over a long wooden course. The slats sifted out the heavier ore.

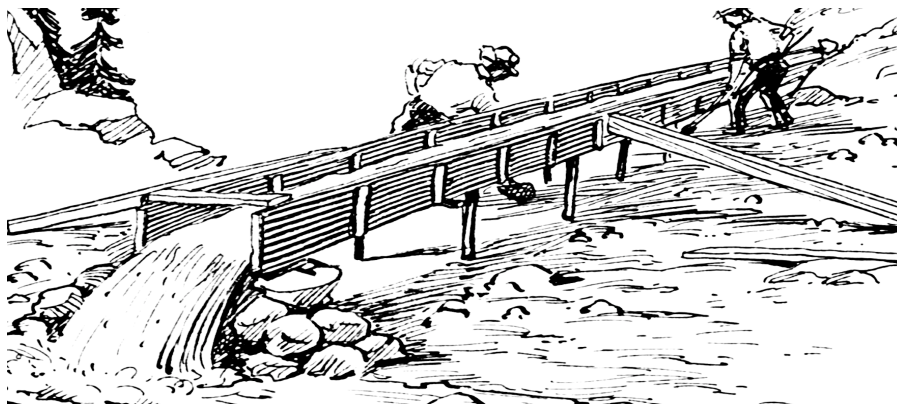


Image: Wikimedia Commons

<http://www.sierrafoothillmagazine.com/goldmethods.html>

Miners also needed food supplies including beans, flour, and coffee. Other essentials included tents, lamps, kettles, and bedding.

Many miners formed rough gatherings and camped out, and in larger places boarding houses and hotels sprung up to shelter the workers and other members of these ramshackle communities.

According to The Vintage News, as miners flooded into the region, competition was fierce. Some historians suggest that it was the shopkeepers who struck the most gold as many gouged prices.

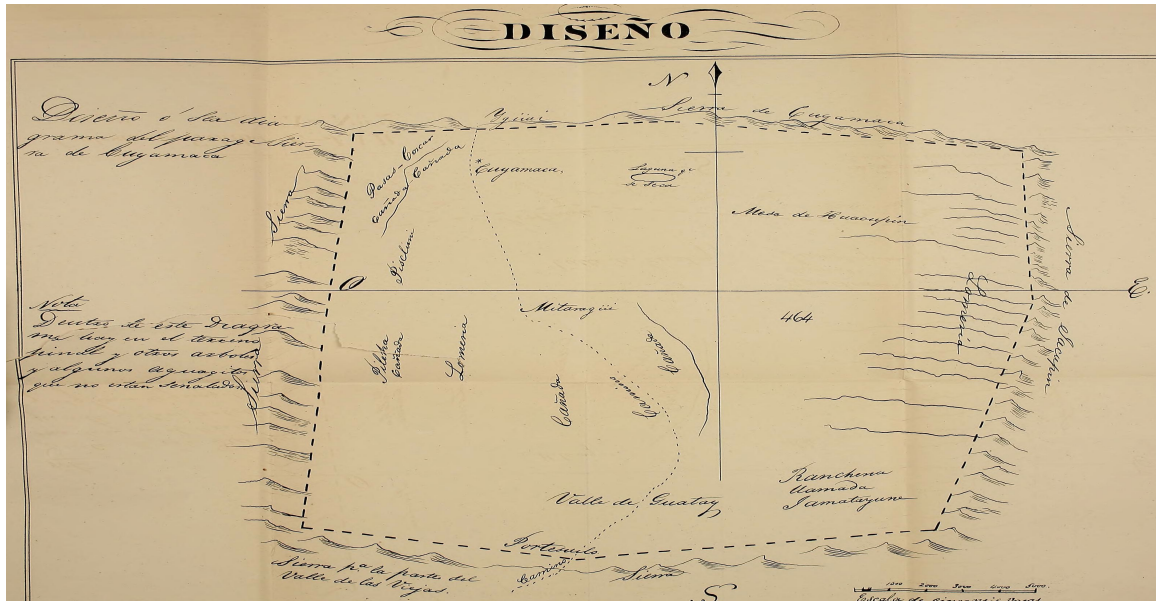
The Vintage News reports these steep inflation rates:

Necessity	Pre-1849	Post-1849
Pan	20 cents	\$8.00
Boots	\$6	\$185
Shovel	\$36	\$1,000
Eggs	\$1/egg	3/\$92

<https://www.thevintagenews.com/2017/12/06/california-gold-rush-mining-pans/>

Striking it Rich: The Making of Julian

Gold was discovered in Julian in 1869, after the peak of the main California Gold Rush. Of course, it wasn't named Julian yet. The mining boon lasted until around 1900 ([visitjulian](#)). Unlike many mining towns that went from boom to bust to nothing but dust, Julian was unique.



Wikimedia Commons: Julian mines survey of the Cuyamaca Grant (1873)

Local historian Kathryn Jordan researched and wrote about Julian’s history. Fred Coleman was the man credited with discovering gold in Julian that year. A former slave, he formed the Coleman mining district, which drew hundreds of prospectors. The other key players in Julian’s Gold Rush history were four cousins from Georgia who took a meandering path through the west in search of farmland and a home. Drury and James Bailey and Mike and Webb Julian took a liking to the Cuyamacas and decided to homestead in what is now Julian.

In 1870, the cousins discovered two gold deposits, and together with several additional prospectors they established the Julian Mining Company. One of the Bailey cousins suggested naming the little town “Julian” –because Mike Julian “was the most handsome man in town, and it sounded better than “Bailey” for a town name” (Jordan).

More than 70 mines—including the Eagle and High Peak mines--were operating in the area between 1880 until after WWII. The mines brought in more than \$3.5 million (Lepper).

Down in the Mines

As you approach The Eagle Mining Company, you'll notice that it is tunneled into the hillside, which leads to the High Peak mine. The mines extend about 2 miles. The two mines were cut into each other to make it easier for miners to access the tunnels with their heavy loads.

Miners performed the back-breaking labor of building the tunnels and extracting the ore. The ore cars could carry 1-2 tons of rock. In addition to the ore cars, many wheelbarrows of rock left the mine every day. They also chiseled cross cuts in the rock tunnel to extract the gold.

Tools from the Eagle Mining Company Image: <http://www.theeaglemining.com/>

Not all the mining equipment was operated by hand. You'll also see a gas-powered hoist that transported the rock ore.

How much did a miner get paid? Company guide Jack Bisplinghoff said that miners worked 12 hours a day and earned anywhere from \$1 to \$3 a day. This was considered a good wage at the time.

But they worked hard for their money.

Bisplinger explained, "You have to crush a ton of rock to get one ounce of gold out" (Lepper)



But mining wasn't just physically challenging. It was a complicated. Land grant politics drove many a miner, farmer, and businessman to drink! Conflicts arose in the area between settlers who wanted to use Julian land for agriculture and lumber, in contrast to those who wanted to use it for mining. Landowners wanted royalties for gold found on their land—an unpopular proposition with the miners. An agreement was eventually reached that granted miners some access to the goldmines, and land grant boundaries were adjusted.

Julian Survives...and Thrives

So why was Julian different from other communities that ended up as ghost towns? The Eagle Mining Company might have played a major role, in that it attracted a good number of newcomers to the area. But as historian Jordan suggests, Julian wasn't just a collection of rough and tumble single men out to prospect for gold.

The settling of Julian required the services of a range of workers, from blacksmiths to carpenters, druggists to bakers. Many ethnicities were represented: Italian, English, Polish, Jewish, and African American to name a few. The people of Julian seemed to support and tolerate one another.

As with most mining communities in California, profitable businesses during and after the Julian gold strike were hotels and boarding houses for miners, stores stocked with supplies, and schools for children. In fact, in 1872 it was noted that more than 100 children attended the growing school district. The schoolteachers tended to be single young women. This situation worked nicely to pair up miners with their wives. Many couples stayed in Julian.

And then there is the pie...

Even today we know Julian for its delicious apples, and this is because of the orchards first cultivated by East Coast transplant James Madison around 1867. Apple orchards thrived in the rich Julian soil. In the 1907 Jamestown Virginia Exposition, Julian apples won eight gold medals!

Summary

Today Julian is a fun tourist destination, especially in the fall when the famous apples are ripe for the picking. Now you know that it was a lot more than its orchards that gave Julian its start.

How amazing to breathe the same air as the Eagle Mining Company miners did in the 1880s... to walk through those same dark cold tunnels.... to imagine the promise of finding a flake or nugget of gold.

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