



Save Our History: Gold Rush Ghost Towns

One can almost imagine the strength of the promises and bitterness of broken dreams when gazing at the boarded up buildings and decaying structures of the Gold Rush ghost towns. The discovery of gold in 1848 drove tens of thousands of hopeful souls West in a slow migration that made California one of the nation's most prosperous and vibrant states. *Save Our History: Gold Rush Ghost Towns* takes viewers on a trip West to see what remains of these towns and the vital efforts underway to preserve these living representations of 19th century boom and bust.

While the first discovery of gold may have made the mining of this ore seem easy, this documentary shows how extracting this resource from the Western landscape was actually quite difficult. Host Steve Thomas explores the technology Western innovators used to drill, blast, and sift their way to fortune. Historians and preservationists in towns such as Bodie, California and Garnet, Montana keep the memories of these techniques fresh as they lead viewers through the caves and tunnels gold seekers constructed in their quest. A log cabin in decay is saved from ruin along this journey through a careful exploration of the architectural style and original materials used during the Gold Rush era.

The picturesque scenery of the American West is the backdrop for this one hour episode, in which viewers can envision the wonder this rugged landscape inspired as new arrivals came in droves. *Gold Rush Ghost Towns* evokes the outlaw culture and frenzied determination of these fascinating chapters in the American past, revealing the importance of keeping these towns around for generations to come. A trip to a carefully preserved iron foundry in Sutter Creek, California highlights the benefits of maintaining the tools and machines gold processing required. Together, these sites make vivid a

common saying the documentary quotes, encapsulating in one sentence the tough spirit of the Gold Rush: “You might be just a few feet from a million dollars, on the other hand, you might be a million feet from a dollar.”

Curriculum Links:

Save Our History: Gold Rush Ghost Towns would be useful for American History, American Culture, American Studies, Civics, Current Events, and Science and Technology Courses. It provides an excellent opportunity for educators to teach students the meanings and value of historic preservation and restoration. It is appropriate for middle school and high school. This documentary fulfills several National Standards guidelines as outlined by the National Council for History Education including: Human Interaction with the Environment, Civilization, Cultural Diffusion and Innovation, and Patterns of Social and Political Interaction.

The History Channel would like to thank Bank of America for sponsoring the airing of this program and for their support of educational initiatives. For more information about their commitment to education and to preserving our nation’s history, please visit: <http://www.BankofAmerica.com>.

Vocabulary:

confluence
extract
foundry
isthmus
perpetuity
preserve
pulverize
restore
vigilante

Discussion Questions:

1. What is placer mining? Why was this considered the best method for extracting gold?
2. What were the main routes West to gold country?
3. After gold seemed to be tapped out in California, which states became the focus of gold seekers?
4. Why do you think there were so many outlaws in gold rush towns? What was the primary means of maintaining order?
5. What kinds of new technology were created to find gold? Do you think the difficulty of extracting gold pushed industrialists to find new technologies?
6. How was gold transformed from its raw form to a commodity that could be sold?
7. What is the Knight Wheel and why was it important to the Gold Rush?
8. Why did the ghost town cabins featured in the documentary appear to be shrinking into the ground?
9. Why do you think so many gold rush towns were abandoned? Can you think of any modern day equivalents to the ghost town?
10. How do you think the gold rush shaped the course of U.S. history? How would the country be different if it had never happened?

Extended Activities:

1. This documentary highlights several of the Gold Rush towns of the West. These towns remind us of the rapid boom and eventual bust gold inspired. At the library or using the Internet, research Gold Rush towns. Discover the common businesses and features typical Gold Rush towns shared. Then, make a creative representation of one of these towns, either fictional or real. These projects could take the form of a drawing, a computer presentation, or a 3 dimensional diorama. Include a brief write-up describing the important buildings and locations of your town.
2. This program highlights the hope and disappointment typical of the Gold Rush. For every miner who discovered large or small quantities of gold, there were many more that searched in vain and came up empty handed. Imagine that you are a miner or another person living in a Gold Rush town. Write a poem or a short one page story describing or evoking your experience in the Gold Rush era. Share these writings with your larger class or group.
3. One of the major routes West is known as the Overland Trail. Countless pioneers headed West across this route in the search for gold. At the library or using the Internet, research the Overland Trail and its route. Break up into groups of four or five. On a poster-board or long piece of white rollout paper, create a map of the Overland Trail. Include on your map the location of the important towns, rivers, and landmarks along the route. You can decorate your timeline with images and photos associated with the trail.
4. Without the efforts of historic preservationists, many of the memories and artifacts from the Gold Rush would be lost forever. This documentary shows some of the methods those dedicated to preserving Gold Rush history have used. Based on what you learned from this program, write a short essay of 1-2 pages describing what historic preservation is and why it is important to save the history of the Gold Rush.

Additional Resources

Books

Brands, H.W. *The Age of Gold : The California Gold Rush and the New American Dream* (Anchor, 2003).

Carlson, Laurie. *Westward Ho!: An Activity Guide to the Wild West* (Chicago Review Press, 1996).

Sprague, Marguerite. *Bodie's Gold: Tall Tales and True History from a California Mining Town* (University of Nevada Press, 2003).

Woodroof, Elvira and Beth Peck (Illustrator). *Dear Levi : Letters from the Overland Trail* (Yearling, 1998).

Websites

An excellent site with Gold Rush activities, primary sources, and background information:

<http://www.museumca.org/goldrush/>

An in-depth site on one Gold Rush town in California:

<http://www.ncgold.com/goldrushtown/>

The San Francisco Museum's Gold Rush page, featuring excellent primary source links:

<http://www.sfmuseum.org/hist1/index0.1.html#gold>