

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **Gold Dust Lore**

In our last report in the Diary we were writing of California gold and its medium of exchange for the necessities of life, so today we will continue the history of gold dust during and after the discovery of this precious metal in 1849.

This gold dust ranged from exceedingly fine flakes and larger grains and scales to little lumps, smooth or rough, and bigger ones, often of fantastic shapes, called nuggets. To the gold seekers, few of whom had ever seen it before, gold dust was a strange kind of money. It seemed suitable for the purpose in only two ways: (1) It was easily carried, being of small bulk in proportion to its value, (2) It was indestructible, being safe from almost every hazard except theft. In all other ways it was a wretched substitute for money.

Gold dust varied surprisingly in value, from several causes. The amount of silver and other metals in the substance of gold itself varied greatly according to the locality. Gold dust varied in the amount of dirt and sand it contained, according to the care with which it had been washed and blown. These differences in value were seized upon by gold buyers and greedy merchants as an excuse for paying the miner as little as possible for his dust either in money or goods.

A serious disadvantage in the use of gold dust as money was the ease with which it could be adulterated with brass filings or other base metal. Dishonest traders often placed false weights in their gold scales or used concealed magnets to increase the effect of the weights.

But this was not all. We read in "Making Money in Early California" that in using and handling gold as money, people found gold dust to be an almost perfect nuisance. It was carried about in a buckskin sack or "poke" of a diameter about a quarter of its length. The miner could enter a store, draw out this purse, untie the bowknot in the thong around its neck and pour a quantity of the grains into the merchant's "blower." This was a flat, oblong metal pan about the size of a hand, with three shallow sides, the fourth side or end being only an inch or two wide, and open, so that the gold dust could be poured or shaken into the gold scale pan. Lighter impurities such as fine dirt could be

removed from the gold by blowing it gently with the breath as it was poured from the blower.

Usually dust was taken at \$16 the ounce. Thus, if the purchase was a dollar the weights placed in one pan of the scales would be a penny-weight (80 cents) in one piece, and six grains (20 cents) in one or more pieces. These little weights had to be separately handled. The merchant often blew dust cleaner before he poured it into the pan to balance the weights. The miner meantime watched him to see that he did not blow out, either accidentally or on purpose, any "colors," as the separate grains were called.

The balancing was a delicate business, for a "pinch" of gold dust was equal to about one dollar. In fact it often passed for a dollar in the absence of scales. When the beam was horizontal, the merchant poured back the remaining dust into the poke and the miner retied the little bowknot around its neck, dropped it into his strong and capacious pocket and went his way.

Today it is hard to imagine going to so much trouble every time one wished to buy even a loaf of bread.

To escape this constant annoyance, the first thought of the miner was to turn some of his dust into real money. At once he was in the hands of the gold-dust buyers and brokers or dealers in money. Instead of \$16 for his ounce of gold, he received fourteen and sometimes only eight or ten. Average clean gold dust from California was worth well over \$18 at the Philadelphia mint.

(To Be Continued)