There had been rumors of gold in California for years. John Sutter was a Swiss emigrant who arrived in California in 1839. Because California was claimed by Mexico, he became a Mexican citizen and received a land grant of 50,000 acres in Sacramento Valley on the Sacramento River. He built a fort and developed a farm and other businesses. Sutter's Fort became a rest stop for travelers and immigrants to California. In 1846, California was occupied by the United States as they tried to acquire it from Mexico. The U.S. obtained California in February of 1848 in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo after the Mexican-American War.

In 1847, John Sutter hired James Marshall to build a sawmill on his property at a site named Coloma, on American River. On January 4, 1848, as they were building the mill, James Marshall found a piece of metal that looked like gold. He quickly took it to Sutter and they did some research to find out if it was actually gold. After some testing, they discovered it was gold. Sutter became very worried about others finding out about the gold. He knew that the discovery of gold would bring many people to his property, and he did not want this. He asked all of his workers to keep it a secret. Unfortunately, the secret got out when merchant and publisher Samuel Brannan returned to San Francisco with a gold nugget from Sutter's Mill and published his finding. Large groups of people proceeded to Sutter's Mill and began a search for gold. This destroyed Sutter's property and all he had worked for. He was disappointed that his land would not become the businesses he had hoped. He gave the land to his son, who realized the potential of the land, and quickly began planning a town, calling it Sacramento. It eventually became the capital of California.

On August 19, 1848, The New York Herald was the first major East Coast newspaper to report about the discovery of gold. On December 5, 1848, President James Polk spoke about the discovery of gold to Congress and confirmed gold had been found. This made gold in California national news. Just as Sutter had feared, more and more people poured into California in search of gold from all over the world.

The first people to rush to find gold were people who already lived in California. Many abandoned their homes, stores, and boats for the opportunity to find gold. Entire families could be found searching for gold, including women and children.
The first prospectors, people who search for minerals, that came to California were able to get rich off of gold. This is because there were only about 6,000 people that came to California in 1848. Only 500 came by land. Many heard about the discovery of gold and sailed to California. Many wanted to get rich quick and then go home. Others were able to make money by building cabins, stores, and cooking food for the men that came to mine for gold.

By 1849, the news of gold had spread around the world. Gold-seekers and merchants caught “Gold Fever” and began to arrive in California from all over the world. These people were called **forty-miners** because they arrived in 1849. About 90,000 people came to California hoping to get rich that year. They expected to find rivers of gold, but instead found fields crowded with miners. By 1855, nearly 300,000 people had arrived in California. Many were Americans, but there were also large groups from China, Mexico, Australia, France, Italy, and Latin America.

The trail to California by land was the cheapest route, but also the slowest. Many Americans traveled by covered wagon to California. They started the trail just as those did that went to Oregon, but split away from the Oregon Trail and took the California trail. One of the benefits of taking a covered wagon was that they could take all of their supplies with them. They were also able to take food and tools they would need once they made it to California. The trail was dangerous, and it was important for the prospectors to get through the Sierra Nevada Mountains before winter. Many would make it to California, but many would also die from illness or starvation.

Most prospectors were previously store owners, innkeepers, teachers, and farmers. After the surface gold had all been panned, it was difficult to find gold. When prospectors didn’t get rich quick, they often started businesses and trading posts. They imported goods to sell to the miners and some began farming and ranching. They used the skills that they already had to be successful in California. By the mid 1850s gold was very difficult to find. People were making fortunes from selling supplies to miners rather than actually mining for themselves.

Although many went to California hoping to get rich quick, there were only a few who actually did. However, many people moved to California and lived there permanently, creating towns and businesses that helped California and the United States become more successful.
The California Gold Rush
Comprehension Questions

1. Who was the first to find gold in California? ________________________________

2. How did they find the gold? ________________________________

3. Why did John Sutter want to keep the discovery of gold a secret? ________________

4. How did everyone find out about the gold? ________________________________

5. How did most people get to California? ________________________________

6. Who came to California? Where were they from? ________________________________

7. When gold became difficult to find, what did many people do to make money? __________

8. If you had lived during this time, and you heard about gold in California, would you have traveled west to California? Why or why not? ________________________________