



Newsletter
March
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A Woman's Impact On The Great Gold Rush to California

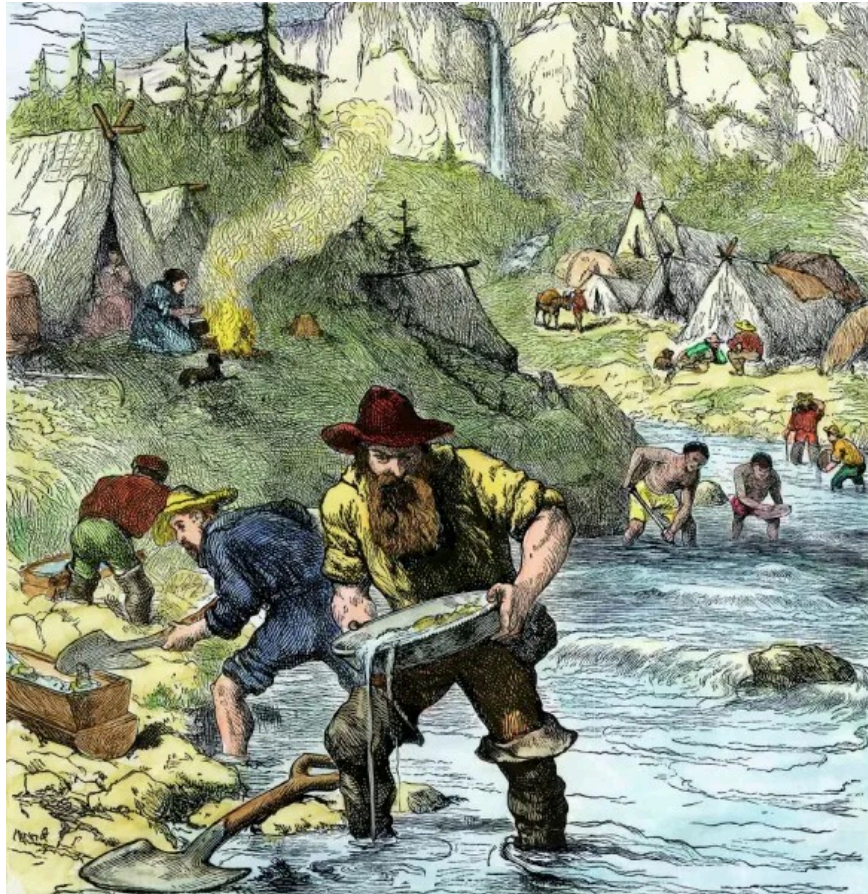
In January of 1848, Henry Bigler (below) noted in his diary “This day some kind of mettle was found in the tail of the race that looks like gold”. A tail race is the channel directing water to the large wheel powering the mill. Bigler was one of James Marshall’s construction crew working on a new sawmill for John Sutter.



Most histories mention only the event itself linked with Marshall's name. Practically no one notes the one woman present and part of this monumental occasion.

Elizabeth Jane Cloud Bays-Wimmer

Elizabeth Jane Cloud was born in Virginia in about 1822 to a tobacco raising family. When her father, Martin, faced financial ruin (thanks to an unscrupulous business partner) he and his wife Polly, along with their son James and daughter Jennie, (as Elizabeth was known) moved south to try gold mining in Georgia.



Typical gold seekers trying their luck in creeks.

Georgia in the 1830's was experiencing a gold rush which began in 1829. While Martin Cloud and son James prospected, Jennie and her mother Polly operated a miners' boarding house and eatery.



Typical miners boarding house.

Every free minute found Jennie using her gold pan in search of nuggets. She soon developed a sharp eye for nuggets and gold bearing ore.

In 1839-1840, an unusually cold and wet winter in Georgia, caused widespread sickness among miners. Jennie reportedly nursed the sick until becoming seriously ill herself. A miner named Obadiah Bays helped her back to health and they were soon married. They decided to move to Missouri and try farming. Their new neighbors were Peter Wimmer, his wife Polly, and their five children.

In 1843, both Polly Wimmer and Obadiah Bays died of a “wasting fever”. Jennie was left with two small children and Peter was left with his five children. The following year, Peter and Jennie were married and now had a combined seven children.



Peter Wimmer



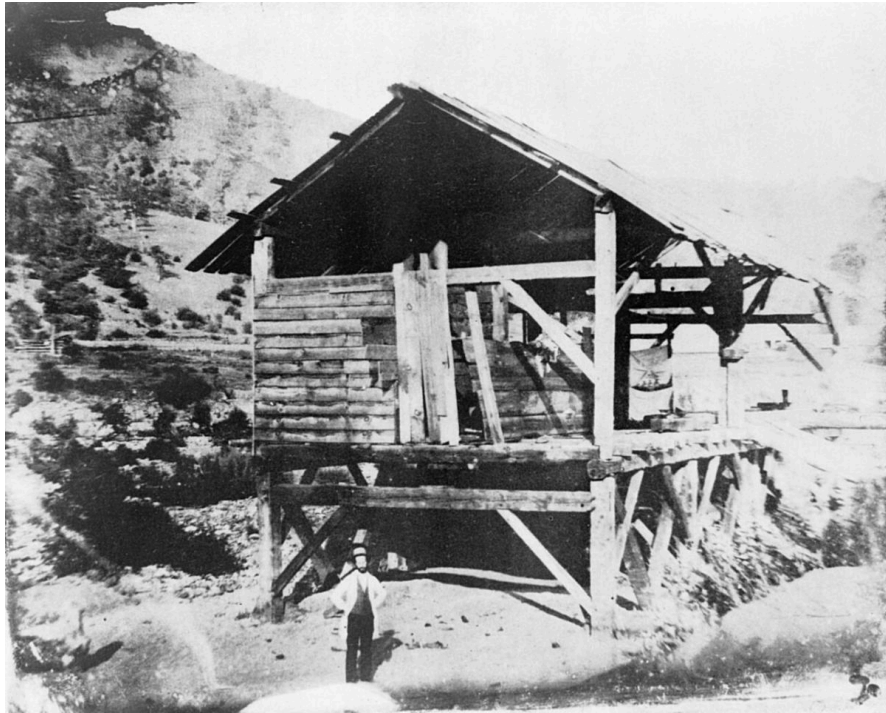
*Elizabeth Jane "Jennie"
Cloud Wimmer*

In roughly May of 1846, they came with a group of fourteen other families leaving Missouri for California. After arriving at Sutter's Fort in November, just days ahead of the ill-fated Donner party, Peter and his sons left to fight in the Mexican War.



A battle in the Mexican War.

After being injured in the war with Mexico, Peter Wimmer was hired by Sutter to help with constructing a new saw mill.



*Sutter's saw mill at Coloma.
James Marshall stands in the tail race channel.*

He moved his family to the small camp on the American River where Jennie agreed to duties as camp cook and laundress.



Making lye soap in an iron cauldron. Jennie would have used one similar. Noxious fumes made boiling lye an outdoor sport.

Jennie was soon the first to bury a child in the Fort's cemetery. It is not clear if this child was a Bays or a Wimmer.



SUTTER'S FORT, NEW HELVETIA (SACRAMENTO), IN 1847.

When the mysterious “mettle” was found, Jennie volunteered “this is gold, and I will throw it into my lye kettle, and if it is gold, it will be gold when it comes out”. It was.



"Boys, I believe we've found a gold mine!"

The crew was skeptical, however, and ridiculed Jennie's "opinion". However, she was no uninformed casual observer as her father and family had been gold miners in Georgia. That experience made Jennie likely the only one present who knew what gold in its natural state looked like. Despite her history with gold mining, the men on the construction crew were certain she was mistaken, and the discovery was merely pyrite or "fool's gold." The nugget was sent to Sutter's Fort, where apparently more scientific methods confirmed Jennie's assertion.



Iron pyrite – fool's gold

When gold was discovered at the new mill, it was one of the Wimmer children who “let the cat out of the bag” to a teamster delivering supplies to the camp.



Freight hauling teamster - 1850

He spread the news at the Fort, and the rest, as they say, is history.

After the discovery of gold, the Wimmer family moved on to several locations throughout California. Peter died in San Luis Obispo County in 1892.

PETER WEIMER DEAD.

He Was With Marshall When
Gold Was Discovered.

Special to THE BEE.

CAMBRIA (Cal.), August 18.—Peter Weimer, a pioneer, aged 82, died at the residence of his brother-in-law, John Phipps near Josephine, this county, yesterday. He drove over from Visalia about two weeks ago, and appeared completely exhausted when he arrived. He took to bed and never rallied.

Deceased was at Coloma, El Dorado county, with Mr. Marshall when gold was first discovered in this State, and his wife, who died some time ago, always carried on her person the piece of gold found on that memorable occasion, and though often offered fabulous prices would never part with so interesting a souvenir. Deceased was at one time considered wealthy, but like a good many more 49ers, was too liberal for his own good.

Peter is buried on the ranch of a friend near San Luis Obispo, not in a conventional cemetery. Also note Peter's name is mis-spelled.

Jennie's death is not recorded, but may have been around 1885. She is buried in a pioneer cemetery in San Diego, previously marked only by a small stone inscribed "Mrs. Wimmer". The City of San Diego has recently installed a bronze plaque detailing her place in history.



Jennie Wimmer's grave as it looks today, San Diego pioneer cemetery.

Today, hardly anyone has heard of Jennie Wimmer or her contribution to a truly world changing event. Even in her day, she is scarcely mentioned. Information was found in only a very few newspaper articles. For years after the event, she is simply called "Mrs. Wimmer".

For more on the subject of women's roles in the California Gold Rush, we recommend "They saw the Elephant" by local author JoAnn Levy.

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SCCBF's current renovation project is the Historic Sutter Creek Grammar School which is rich in Gold Rush history. This beautiful building is California's second oldest two-story brick schoolhouse. There are four rooms within the Historic Grammar School that can be rented. Contact the City of Sutter Creek for information on rates and availability - (209) 267-5647 ext. 230 or email info@cityofsuttercreek.org / [website - cityofsuttercreek.org](http://website-cityofsuttercreek.org)

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