

William Swain Letter
Written from "The Diggings" in California
January 6, 1850

South Fork of Feather River
25 miles from Long's Trading Post, and
16 miles above Bidwell's Trading Post

Dear George,

It is so long a time since I wrote you and I have passed through so many scenes and changes of condition that I scarcely know what to say among the multitude of things I wish to write. You have probably all had much anxiety about my safe arrival in California, and as you have been unable to hear from me for so long a time, you will be desirous of having a lexicon of our journey. I wrote from Raft River by John Root who packed through from that point, and I will commence my letter at that point. But I can only give you a word in this letter as there is so much to say about California and its mines of gold....

We arrived at Lawson's Ranch on the 8th day of November, tired and worn down with toil and exposure but hardy, healthy, and in good spirits, buoyant with hope. We were in the Sacramento Valley in the rainy season, destitute of provisions, without shelter, and everything eatable worth from \$1 to \$1.50 per pound. In fact, all was dear but rain and mud which was everywhere.

We rested three days and put out for the Feather River mines, where we arrived on the 14th of November at Long's Trading Post, the first mines on this stream.

The swollen river prevented the miners from operating near its bed where gold is found most abundantly. Generally they were doing no more than boarding themselves, though occasionally one would make a lucky hit and find this thousands. During the fall, miners could average their ounce clear in working with rockers on the bars and edges of the streams, and those who were lucky enough to make dams across the streams before the rains often made large sums in a few days and frequently in a few hours.

Mr. Hutchinson had packed through on his pony from the summit where we dissolved the joint stock company that we started with from Independence. He, Mr. Bailey, myself, and Mr. Samuel J. Moore of Calhoun County, Michigan, a Methodist preacher; and Lt. Franklin Cannon of Manchester, Michigan, have agreed to work in the mines on the joint principle.

From all that Mr. Hutchinson had learned and that we could hear, we judged the South Fork of the Feather River to be the most likely to yield a pile another summer, for the following reasons: the main part of the Feather River and all the southern rivers have been overrun and consequently the best and richest placers found and worked. The South Fork of the Feather River was reported to be rich,

and the gold on it coarse and not much worked. There is good timber for building (not the case on many of the streams of California), which with us is an important consideration as we believed our health next summer depended upon having dry, warm, and comfortable habitation during the rainy season.

In late November we bought provisions at Long's Trading Post and took packs of fifty pounds each. We traveled over the mountains for twenty--five miles through rain, mud and clouds and arrived on the South Fork on the third day.

After prospecting two days, we located a spot favorable for damming and draining the river. We made our claim and then built a house as soon as possible to shelter our heads from the soaking rains. So here we are, snug as schoolmarms, working at our race and dam. Whenever the rain will permit, a fall of the river will enable us to get into the bed of the river and know what is there. If there is no gold, we shall be off to another place, for there is an abundance of gold here, and if we are blessed with health, we are determined to have a share of it.

You may have some curiosity to know something about our location and dwelling. Our house is a log cabin, sixteen by twenty feet. It is covered with boughs of cedar and is made of nut pine logs from one to two feet in diameter, so that it is quite a blockhouse. It has a good door made of cedar boards hewn out of cedar logs, but no window. It faces the south and is on the north side of the river. In the east end is a family fireplace, in which large backlogs are burning night and day. At the west end is a bedstead framed into the logs of the cabin and running from side to side. The cords of the bedstead are strips of rawhide, crossing at every three inches, thus forming a bottom tight enough to hold large armfuls of dry breaks gathered from the sides of the mountains, which make a substitute for feather beds. On these are our blankets and buffalo skins. Altogether it makes a comfortable bed. Moore has a bunk in one of the other corners. Over the fireplace are our rifles, which are ever ready, cocked and primed, and frequently yield us good venison. In the other corner may be seen our cupboard with its contents, which consist of a few wooden and tin dishes, bottles, knives and forks and spoons, tin frying pan, boiler, and coffee pot.

Around the sides of the cabin at various points are the few articles of clothing belonging to the different members of the company. Under the bed are five cakes of tallow, under the bunk are three or four large bags of flour. Along the point of the roof is a line of dried beef and sixty or seventy pounds of suet. And out at the corner of the house in a large trough made of pine may be found salt beef in the pickle, in abundance.

At ten in the evening you might see in this cabin, while everything is still, a fire blazing up from the mass of fuel in the large fireplace, myself and Hutchinson on one end of bedstead, Lt. Cannon on the other, and Moore in his bunk. On the roof the incessant rain keeps up its perpetual patter, while the foaming stream

howls out a requiem of the rushing torrent as it dashes on its way to the valley. And here, wakeful and listless, are the members of other circles too. But often the mind is far away, filled with other scenes, far distant homes, and relatives.

In front of our cabin a mountain rises from the edge of the river two thousand feet and hides the sun till ten o'clock in the day. Its top is often covered with snow. The live oak and numerous other mountain evergreens, besides the pine and cedar, green as spring, are loaded with snow near the mountain top and dripping with rain on its side and base. And this is only a specimen of the hills and scenery on all sides of us.

The following is a list of prices current per pound when we arrived at Long's Bar: pork, \$1.25; beans from 75 cents to \$1; sugar, 75 cents; coffee, 50 cents; tea, \$2.50; saleratus, \$6;; vinegar, \$5; pickaxes and tin pans, \$8 apiece; coffee pots, \$6 to \$8; frying pans \$6.

These prices were caused by the rains which commenced six weeks earlier this year than last and consequently found the merchants in the mines without having laid in their winter's stock.

At this time a small steamer comes up to the mouth of the Yuba River and merchandise is brought from there to the mining camps on pack mules. Since this mode of transportation was adopted in December, prices have fallen thirty percent.

We found the most extraordinary state of morals in the mines. Everything in this country is left where the owner wished to leave it, in any place no matter where, as such a thing as stealing is not known.

Miners' rights are well protected. Disputes seldom arise and are settled by referees, as they would be at home.

George, I tell you this mining among the mountains is a dog's life. A man has to make a jackass of himself packing loads over mountains that God never designed man to climb, a barbarian by foregoing all the comforts of civilized life, and a heathen by depriving himself of all communication with men away from his immediate circle.

You can judge my feelings when I inform you that I have not had an opportunity to send to Sacramento City for my letters and papers and have no tidings from home since I received your last letter at Independence, and I have not seen a newspaper since I left the states.

Sutter's Fort changed its name to Sacramento City and postal arrangements are made to that place from San Francisco. I wish you to direct your letters to me at that place, for my business may call me there often during the summer and if not,

I can get letters from there, for persons are going down and back every two weeks and I shall make arrangements to have my letters brought up.

There was some talk between us of your coming to this country. For God's sake think not of it. Stay at home. Tell all whom you know that are thinking of coming that they have to sacrifice everything and face danger in all its forms, for George, thousands have laid and will lay their bones along the routes to and in this country. Tell all that "death is in the pot" if they attempt to cross the plains and hellish mountains. Say to Playter never to think of the journey; and as for you, stay at home, for if my health is spared, I can get enough for both of us.

My health has been extremely good since I arrived here. I am fifteen pounds heavier than when I left home and measured six feet last evening. A slight attack of rheumatism in the left hip has given me some trouble for a few days.

You may think from the tenor of this letter that I am sick of my job, but not so. I have not seen the hour yet when I regretted starting for California, nor have any one of our little party ever regretted that we undertook the enterprise. I have seen hard times, face the dangers of disease and exposure and perils of all kinds, but I count them as nothing if they enable me to place myself and family in comfortable circumstances.

Now you will think that there is a contradiction in the advice that I gave you and others about coming to California and the declaration of my own satisfaction that I have performed the journey. The fact is that gold is plenty here and the accounts received before I left home did not exaggerate the reality. Therefore I am glad that I am here. But the time is past -- if it ever existed -- when fortunes could be obtained for picking them up. Gold is found in the most rocky and rough places, and the streams and bars that are rich are formed of huge rocks and stones. In such places, you will see, it requires robust labor and hard tugging and lifting to separate the gold from the rock. But this is nothing to the risk of life run in traveling to this country. Therefore, if I was at home and knew all the circumstances, I think I should stay at home; but having passed those dangers in safety, I thank God that I am here in so favorable circumstances.

I hope soon to send for my letters, and God grant that they may bring no sad intelligence from home, for I almost dread to hear from that happy home, fearing that our neighborhood may have been the theater of cholera.

You are better acquainted with the state of things around San Francisco Bay than I am, and therefore I say nothing about them.

I have felt great anxiety about my wife and child, as I left them no means to live upon for so long a time, expecting to send home means before this; and also, their necessities might embarrass you. I hope that you will see that they are provided for, and if I can remunerate you for any trouble you may have, I shall

feel willing to do so and ever feel grateful for your kindness. Give my love to Mother, if she is yet living, and say to her that I often, very often, think of her. Tell Sabrina not to be overanxious about me, for I shall be careful of my health, and as soon as I can get the rocks in my pocket I shall hasten as fast as steam can carry me.

Write often, for I may sometime or another get your letters.

January 12

We have had heavy rains and high water, but the weather has now cleared off fine, like Spring. And spring is here, for the mountain oaks are putting out their leaves and all things are assuming a green hue. We are in hopes of having dry weather soon -- then, "you see!"

It is just for me to say that if my health is good and I do not have extraordinary good luck, I may not be home till next Fall. Mr. Bailey is well and sends his love to his family.

January 16

The rapidity with which this country is settling is only equaled by the change being made by Yankee enterprise. Three weeks ago but one steamboat plowed its way across San Francisco Bay and but one traversed the Sacramento River. Now four steamers may be seen making their regular trips from San Francisco to Yuba City, and flour which was then selling at 75 cents is now worth 40 cents per pound, as I have just heard from Mr. Hutchinson, who has come home from Long's Trading Post.

When we first located on this stream, no more than six houses were built on it. Now, within a distance of ten miles, 150 dwellings are built.

The "redskin" who four months ago roamed in his nakedness, the undisputed lord of these mountains and valleys, may now be seen on the hilltops gazing with surprise upon the scenes below -- the habitations, the deep-dug channels and the dams built. The sound of the laborer's ax, shovel, pick and pan are sounds new to his ear, and the sight one to which his eye has never been accustomed.

The natives of these mountains are wild, live in small huts made of brush and go haked as when they are born. They subsist on acorns and what game they kill with their bows and arrows. They are small in stature, and their character is timid and imbecile. When they visit the camps of the miners, they evince the most timid and friendly nature. They are charged with killing miners occasionally when they find one alone, away among the hills hunting. The miners, especially the Oregon men, are sometimes guilty of the most brutal acts with the Indians, such

as killing the squaws and papooses. Such incidents have fallen under my notice that would make humanity weep and men disown their race.

I send this by a man who is going to Sacramento City and to San Francisco on purpose for mails. He leaves here Saturday and will return in two weeks, when I shall probably get my letters by him, paying \$2 apiece for bringing them up.

I shall write often as I can and shall fill my engagements to different persons to whom I promised to write as soon as I have gained sufficient knowledge of the country to do so understandingly. Say to Mr. Burge that this climate in the mines requires a constitution like iron. Often for weeks during the rainy season it is damp, cold, and sunless, and the labor of getting gold is of the most laborious kind. Exposure causes sickness to a great extent, for in most of the mines tents are all the habitation miners have. But with care I think health can be preserved.

Give my love to Sabrina and kiss little Cub for me.

Goodbye George,
William

P.S. I have wafered in some samples of gold found on the main branch of the Feather River. The coarse is a fine specimen found on this fork, but gold found here is often as coarse as a hickory nut.

P.S. An onion in the mines is worth a dollar, and boots \$40 per pair. I have paid \$8 for a jar of pickles.

P.S. All well, and I have sent this to San Francisco by a Mr. Tolles by paying 50 cents.

[TEXT: J. S. Holliday, *The World Rushed In* (1981), pp. 312-29.]