

Lesson Fifty-One

From Atlantic To Pacific

LESSON IDEA

To explain how the United States won control of the southwest from Mexico, and how the gold rush of 1849 helped populate this vast new territory.

PREPARATION

Obtain a map of the western hemisphere that will clearly show the Isthmus of Panama, Cape Horn, and the southwestern states that are mentioned in this lesson.

“FREE! LARGE GRANTS of land! Come to Texas!” The offer of free land on the frontier, widely advertised in western towns in 1836, drew Americans into Texas like a magnet. Even the hint of danger (“Come with a good rifle, and come soon”) did not deter them.

The Spanish, as European landlords of the southwest, were the first to entice American pioneers to settle in what would later become known as the Lone Star State. Mexico continued the policy after winning the South American war for independence. One Mexican law, designed to promote land development in Texas, offered impresarios (promoters) 23,040 acres of land for every 100 families they brought into the territory. A family arriving alone, rather than under a promoter’s contract, could purchase 4,428 acres of pastureland for \$30. For as little as \$3.50, they could buy 174 acres for farming.

For many Americans, it was a grand opportunity for a new beginning and the chance to earn a good living — perhaps even a fortune. So many took advantage of the offer, however, it made the Mexican government nervous. As the wilderness land began to flourish under the management of enterprising Americans, Mexico began having regrets about giving away so much of it away. Was that reaction natural and understandable? [Discuss incidents with which family members are familiar in which people have been willing to part with something that seems to have no value, or requires a great deal of effort to develop, only to regret their generosity once the recipient has made improvements that increase the value of the gift. One example might be a seemingly useless

automobile given to a recipient who is able to get it up and running due to his skill as an auto mechanic.]

The Texas colonists were disgusted by that reversal in attitude, and by policies of the Mexican government in general. The Mexicans were ill prepared for self-government after years of autocratic rule by Spain. They found it difficult to make laws and harder still to abide by them. One revolution followed another until it became virtually impossible to know from one month to the next who would officially be in command. Constitutional law existed in name only; not in practical application.

Why did the adoption of a constitution fail to bring Mexico the same benefits that the United States enjoyed? [Ask for opinions. Emphasize the point that constitutions are largely wasted efforts unless there is sufficient understanding and motivation on the part of the citizenry to energize their words and principles. The former Soviet Union, for instance, had an elaborate constitution with many wordy phrases about human rights, yet it was governed by one of the most oppressive dictatorships in history. Similarly, the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights espouses all sorts of supposed “human rights” and “freedom” that are consistently violated at whim by the UN itself. Indeed, after cataloguing such rights, the Declaration states (Article 29, paragraph 3): “These rights and freedoms may in no case be exercised contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.” Which means that those who oppose the UN have no “rights and freedoms” under terms of the widely acclaimed (and widely misunderstood) UN Declaration.]

Impatient with the chaos and instability of the Mexican government, Texans proceeded to make their own laws and govern themselves. In retaliation, Mexico outlawed self-government for the settlers and closed its borders to further American immigration. Refusing to accept the Mexican decrees, Texans adopted the slogan “Texas and Liberty” and proceeded on their own to promise

free land to prospective settlers and urge them to "Come with a good rifle, and come soon."

Mexico moved to force the rebellious colonizers to heel. An army of more than 5,000 men marched into Texas in March of 1836. It was led by Santa Anna, Mexico's new dictator and one of its most militant generals. A small army of Texans stopped the Mexicans in San Antonio at an old Spanish mission called the Alamo. Among those manning the fortifications were two of the most famous frontiersmen in the history of the American West: Davey Crockett and Jim Bowie.

OUTNUMBERED by more than 30-to-1, Crockett, Bowie, and about 180 of their fellow frontiersmen held off Santa Anna's army for 13 days before they were overpowered and brutally massacred to the last man. Crockett is said to have died swinging his empty rifle as a club while Bowie, suffering from severe leg injuries and unable to walk, reportedly fired his last shots from his sick bed. Santa Anna won the battle, but 46 days later lost the war. By their extraordinary show of bravery, those who defended the Alamo had bought enough time for General Sam Houston to gather an army and defeat Santa Anna at San Jacinto, thereby securing independence for Texas. "Remember the Alamo" became a famous rallying cry for Texans. Do you understand why? [Discuss the significance on the slogan, and of the exceptional sacrifice and courage that inspired it.]

With independence assured, victorious General Houston was elected president of the frontier republic. A nine-year debate about American statehood ensued. The key issue was slavery, and whether or not a territory in which slavery was legal (as it was in Texas) should be admitted into the Union. Eventually, Congress voted for admission, and in 1845 Texas became the 28th state.

No sooner was the question of statehood settled than a boundary dispute arose that threatened to bring war. Texas claimed the Rio Grande River as her southern border, but Mexico insisted that the Nueces River to the north marked the correct line. In the spring of 1846, President James K. Polk sent 10,000 soldiers under the command of General Zachary Taylor to the Rio Grande River to protect the United States claim. Fighting broke out when a Mexican force crossed the Rio Grande

and killed 16 Americans. On May 13, 1846, the United States formally declared war.

When the Mexican-American War ended two years later, the victorious Americans had won a vast amount of territory extending from the Rio Grande to the Pacific Ocean. This area included the present states of New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, Nevada, California, and parts of Wyoming and Colorado. From a fringe of colonies along the Atlantic in 1776, the United States had grown to a continental empire stretching from ocean to ocean. Its land area had increased from less than 1 million to approximately 3 million square miles in only 72 years.

WOULD IT TAKE another 72 years or thereabouts to populate and tame the new territory? The answer was not long in coming. It began on John Sutter's ranch on the Sacramento River in California, nine days before the treaty ending the Mexican War was signed. Sutter had contracted with James Wilson Marshall to build a sawmill, but when Marshall found gold in a crevice of a bare rock on his construction site, the discovery brought an end to peaceful ranching in California and instigated one of the most spectacular frontier migrations in history. One of the men with Marshall on that historic day in 1848 described the electrifying event in these words:

We went in for breakfast and had scarcely commenced our day's work in mill yard ... when Marshall came carrying in his arms, his old slouch hat. With a wise grin, he said "Boys, I believe I have found a gold mine," at the same time setting his hat on the work bench that stood in the mill yard. In an instant all hands gathered round, and sure enough, on the top of his hat crown, knocked in a little, lay the pure stuff — the most part of an ounce from the size of very small particles up to the size of a grain of wheat.

Soon people in Sacramento and San Francisco were hearing rumors about the gold find. In March of 1848, the first newspaper report of the discovery was printed, and by mid-May the rush was on. All along the California coast businesses ground to a standstill as tradesmen closed their

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

The Mexican War, hardly touched upon in this lesson, was conducted with an efficiency almost beyond belief by General Zachary Taylor, Colonel Stephen Kearny, and General Winfield Scott. Their coordinated campaigns resulted in an unbroken series of victories. Consult your local library for books on this subject.

The Mormon trek to Salt Lake City is also a part of the history of this period. A summary of that dramatic adventure story may be found in *Quest Of A Hemisphere* by Donzella Cross Boyle, pages 265-267. Though out-of-print, this excellent text, which belongs in every family library, should be available in most public libraries. Copies may also be found in used bookstores.

shops and merchants locked their stores. "Gone to the Sacramento" was a familiar sign in the village of San Francisco.

William Colton, chief official of Monterey, wrote:

The blacksmith has dropped his hammer, the carpenter his plane, the mason his trowel: the baker his loaf, the tapster his bottle. All are off for the mines, some on horses, some in carts, some on crutches and one went on a litter. The fever has reached every servant in Monterey: none are to be trusted in their engagement [job] beyond a week.

The East Coast was made aware of the gold discovery in June, when a small and almost unnoticed item appeared in the *New York Daily Tribune*. But by fall, letters from California prospectors, spinning spellbinding tales of the boundless riches and excitement in the gold fields, were appearing regularly in the New York papers. One letter, written by General Jesup from San Francisco, reported:

There are subjects upon which one cannot write the truth without exciting incredulity, and it is with great diffidence that I shall attempt to speak of the richness of the mines. I went to them in the most skeptical frame of mind and came away a BELIEVER. From all that I can learn as to similar deposits of gold elsewhere, I believe these to be the richest placer mines in the world. I am satisfied from personal observation, that active workmen can get from 25 to 40 dollars per day, estimat-

ing the gold at 316 per ounce Troy. Many instances are known of persons having obtained from \$800 to \$1000 in a day for each man. I am meeting persons daily in this place who have been absent less than three months, and have returned with from \$2000 to \$5000 in gold dust.

At a time when laborers and clerks were averaging about a dollar a day in wages, this and similar reports were the stuff of which dreams were made.

THE GOLD FEVER that struck the United States and Europe played no favorites. It infected people from all walks of life and in all professions. Hundreds of American soldiers, mustered out of the army in California at the end of the Mexican War, spent their last pay for a pick, shovel, pan, kettle, and flour for flapjacks. A captain at the San Francisco Army base reported: "Last night about 18 men deserted for the purpose of working in the gold mines — nine of them from my company." And the captain himself, when mustered out, joined them.

The Navy suffered a similar manpower shortage as sailors deserted their ships as soon as they set foot on the California shore. A famine in Ireland in 1846, and a revolution in Germany in 1848, resulted in thousands of immigrants from those countries. In a single year, the population of San Francisco swelled from 2,000 to 20,000. Among the new citizens were merchants from New York, a farmer from Pennsylvania, a ship captain from Massachusetts, a sheriff from Missouri, and a minister from Kentucky. From Germany came butchers, bakers, brewers, jewelers, and musicians. From Poland, a peddler; from China, a cook; from Chile, a stock dealer. And from France, a sculptor, an actor, a bookbinder, an artist, a gardener, a watchmaker, a restaurant keeper, a baker, and a hairdresser. The list was seemingly endless in its variety.

Every conceivable means of transportation was utilized by those seeking gold. Wagon and harness shops in Pittsburgh, St. Louis, and the frontier town of Independence, Missouri worked 24 hours a day to fill orders as frontiersmen organized wagon trains for the long trek over deserts, moun-

tains, and plains.

Along the east coast, old ships were reconditioned and often chartered by groups of gold-seekers anxious to make the long trip around Cape Horn. A New York steamship company advertised fares from New York to San Francisco, around the Cape, for \$350. The trip would take 130 days, entailing months aboard ships tossed by tempestuous seas; weeks of waiting for the favorable weather that would allow negotiation of the Straits of Magellan or the rounding of Cape Horn; and rampant sea-sickness, disease, poor food, and unadvertised delays for repairs.

Those who lived in the southern states, along with those who were simply in a hurry, were anxious to find a new route that would avoid the long, hazardous journey around the South American continent. Cutting across the Isthmus of Panama seemed like a viable shortcut, but malaria raged in the Panamanian swamps, and many treasure-seekers survived the treacherous cross-country mountain, river, and swamp ordeal only to find themselves stranded on the Pacific side, unable to book passage on ships bound for California.

Those who survived the ocean voyage or rigorous land routes arrived in California to discover that the glamour of fortune seeking was tempered by backbreaking labor with little reward. Early diggings were soon depleted, and while new lodes were constantly being discovered, prospecting often meant standing hip-deep in icy water for hours to find barely enough gold to meet expenses. Many who arrived dreaming of fortunes became content to accept jobs as clerks, teamsters, or shopkeepers in the fast-growing California towns.

Concluding Thought

The discovery of gold on the Sacramento river near Sutter's Ranch was one of the most important events in U.S. history. It seemed perfectly timed to spur the settlement of the vast southwest territory that the United States had gained from the Mexican War. The gold mining strengthened the nation's economy during a most crucial period.

Looking Ahead

With the United States now stretching from ocean to ocean across the North American continent, new and faster ways to travel east-to-west were

constantly being sought. Next week we will take a close look at the narrow strip of malaria-infested land called the Isthmus of Panama, which appeared to be the most suitable shortcut for both travel and trade.

DURING THE WEEK

During the week, ask member of the family to do some digging of their own for information about the gold rush. Questions that might spark their interest include: What is a ghost town? Why were the gold-seekers known as "the '49ers"? How does one pan for gold? What were some of the gold-mining towns in California and Nevada? Did John Sutter become a millionaire after James Wilson Marshall discovered gold on his ranch?