Gold rushes are made, not born. They do not spring to life immediately upon the discovery of gold in far-off places, but arise, instead, from the publicity given to such discoveries by a variety of interested parties. Such propaganda, falling upon minds which are naturally receptive to it, or upon those ears made preternaturally attentive by unhappiness or misfortune, can have volcanic effects and move both men and mountains.

The rush to California received its most compelling impetus when, on December 5, 1848, President James K. Polk proclaimed that “the accounts of the abundance of gold in that territory are of such extraordinary character as would scarcely command belief were they not corroborated by the authentic reports of officers in the public service who have visited the mineral district.” Thus did Polk confirm the many rumors already widely prevalent concerning the riches of the land so recently ceded to the United States as a result of the War with Mexico.

The Wisconsin lead mining region, which lies mainly in southwestern Wisconsin, but includes parts of Illinois around Galena and the Iowa mines around Dubuque, was peculiarly susceptible to news of a new bonanza. The Walker Tariff of 1846 had permitted Spanish lead to enter the United States at ruinous prices, while the Wisconsin lead mines themselves, after nearly a generation of productivity, had begun to penetrate below the ground water level, and had become increasingly difficult and expensive to operate. A lead mining population already made restless by declining prices and increased costs of production was all too eager to seek its fortune in the new mines of the far west.

The interest which the Wisconsin miners and their neighbors took in California gold is perhaps best indicated by the large amount of information which the Wisconsin newspapers of the time found it advisable to print, quite evidently in response to a considerable demand for news of the developing gold fields. “It is

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1 James D. Richardson, ed., Messages and Papers of the Presidents (Washington, 1900), IV, 636.
not our intention to foster anything like a mania with regard to the California Gold Mines," said the editor of the Galena Gazette, "but our readers have a right to know the current reports, and we have no desire to withhold them." This equitable attitude was reflected in the widespread publicity given to the President's December 5 address, the frequent printing of advice on how to equip oneself for the trip to California, and on how to choose the best route by which to go there, and in a multitude of published letters from those who were on the way to, or who had at last reached, the mines of California. News of the rush was in demand, and few editors had sufficient fortitude to withhold it from their readers.

The editors of the mining region, however, were thoughtful and perspicacious men who realized that if favorable news and publicity could begin a gold rush, adverse propaganda could probably slow one down, and retain in the lead mines at least some of those sturdy citizens who might otherwise depart for California. These editors began their campaign subtly by putting forward general economic arguments against gold mining and inflation, by pointing out that all is not gold that glitters, and that happiness and comfort at home might in many cases be preferable to suffering and riches on the Pacific coast. As news came back from those rushers on the way to the mines the editors seem to have sought out tales of difficulties, sickness, and privation on the routes, by either sea or by land, that led to California. Disappointment in the mines, too, was a frequent topic, and reports of disillusioned miners were often prefaced by some sort of hortatory editorial "I told you so!" to make sure that the Wisconsin readers got the point. This is not to say, of course, that all the California news printed in the mining region papers was hostile to the gold rush; that was far from the case. Rather, the effort seems to have been to print all of the news, both good and bad, but to give undue prominence to the bad news, while publishing the good without comment. The editors apparently knew that they could not shut off the gold rush, but they seem to have hoped that they could slow it down.

The first point of attack against the rush lay in editorial statements about the undesirability of gold rushes in general. "The fatal dowry of gold which that new territory has brought to the Union is already producing its wonted effects. In the country itself all the usual occupations of industry—all the ordinary pursuits of life, are abandoned in the insane and insatiate thirst for treasure," cried the Galena Gazette.3 "Is the discovery of the Gold mines of

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2 Galena Weekly North-Western Gazette, 27 December 1848.
3 Ibid., 17 January 1849.
California a blessing?” asked the Oshkosh True Democrat. “We say that it is not; we go farther, we think it is an injury. It is drawing men from producing to non-producing industry. There is already money enough in the country, and more is only injurious.”

The burning question of slavery in the new territories was quickly raised by the Janesville Gazette which predicted that if the new lands should “resound, like Mr. Polk’s plantation, with the crack of the overseer’s lash and the groans of unrecompensed, hopeless Toil then far better for us and for all had they been left to the bear and the savage for ages to come.”

Individual miners, as well as the nation as a whole, cautioned the editors, would suffer from a gold rush. The mines would attract “the most degenerate class of foreigners in the territory,” “the refuse population more than the good population” herded together with “no law, no government, no means of protecting life or property,” a population composed of “desperate ruffians” among whom the honest miner might lose his life, if not his reputation. Indeed the Galena Gazette laid great stress upon this latter attribute, pointing out that “a man’s character is worth considerably more than all the gold of California,” and that conditions in the diggings might well “drive even a tolerably firm will and watchful conscience from the line of moral propriety.”

The editors also hoped that appeal to sentiment would deter the tender-hearted or weak-willed from attempting the trip to the mines. “What recompense would all the gold in the world be,” queried the Lancaster Herald, “for the burial of one of your dear children . . . in the sands of the Great Desert?”

“Money can never make good the deep distress, suffering, and death which will ensue” warned the Janesville paper. Poetry, a feature more popular in newspapers then than it is now, was used to discourage the gold seeker. A touching “Father’s Advice to His Son, Leaving His Home for California,” cautioned the prospective emigrant to make his peace with both his God and his family before departing for the mines:

Then, if beneath the evening star,
Beside the great Pacific’s wave,
Thou find’st an early tomb afar,
His grace will there thy spirit save.

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4 Oshkosh True Democrat, 23 February 1848.
5 Janesville Gazette, 28 December 1848.
7 Ibid., 26 December 1848.
8 Lancaster Herald, 24 February 1849.
9 Janesville Gazette, 11 April 1850.
Or if upon thy safe return,
Thou find’st no more thy father here,
Pay one sad visit to his urn,
Drop on his dust one filial tear.  

More deliberate humor, generally in the form of parodies of California news, or instructions, was frequently employed in the attempt to make the prospective gold-rusher repent of his decision. A “Treatise on the Yellow Fever (Golden Fever)” written in imitation of the many columns of medical advice then common in the news pointed out that in the early stages of the gold mania “the disease might be easily counteracted by a small dose of common sense” but that in more advanced cases “a pill composed of five grains fear of Cholera, four grains of want of ready funds and two grains of reason will frequently produce a decided improvement.” Invertebrate cases, however, could be helped only by “an emollient embrocation of the comforts, ease and enjoyment of the patient at home . . . applied to his mind by his wife or some other female attendant.”

The editors soon concluded that appeals to morality, sentiment, or laughter would not long deter the westward rush of Wisconsin miners; they quickly turned to arguments addressed to the pocketbooks rather than the hearts of their readers. A Whig paper, for example, pointed out that President Polk’s information about the new territory might well be highly suspect, for Polk, said the editor, “looks upon California as his bantling, and is extremely anxious to have it settled.” Stories of gold were claimed to be “exaggerated if not idle tales, calculated to draw the imaginative, the restless and improvident away from their regular employment.” Speculators who had California lands to sell were also blamed for much of the favorable propaganda, for “persons having lots in that region which at this time sell at the rate of $2,000 for one 36 by 160 ft, desire to see a rush for gold.” Even if there was gold in California, the editors agreed, a gold field some 150 miles long by 40 miles wide would not be quickly exhausted, and the gold rusher had no need to participate in any hasty or ill-considered emigration in order to get his share. The propaganda which had a generation earlier produced a rush to the Wisconsin mines was held up as an example of the disappointments which the rushers might expect in California. One editor reminisced that when the lead miners had come to Wisconsin “we found that it was indeed true that some had made from $100 to $200 per day . . .

10 Ibid., 26 April 1849.
11 Lancaster Herald, 13 January 1849.
12 Galena Gazette, 2 January 1849.
13 Janesville Gazette, 28 December 1848.
14 Mineral Point Tribune, 29 December 1848.
but...for every individual that had met with such good fortune there were nine hundred and ninety-nine who barely eeked out a subsistence.”

News from emigrants on their way to the mines was also a common item in the papers of the lead region. One gold-seeker, writing from Chagres on the Isthmus, reported that “it rains in these latitudes ten months a year” and that even during the dry season the thunder and lightning were so terrific that they shook the ground and left the rattlesnakes and alligators glassy eyed. During the wet season he implied things were a good deal worse. Cholera and smallpox were reported to be prevalent on the Isthmus, where they wrought havoc among the weary miners waiting interminable weeks to catch a northward ship to San Francisco, “Under these circumstances,” said the Janesville Gazette, “nothing but infatuated recklessness is evinced in encountering such hazards, and the safe return of the adventurers is a thing more to be hoped than expected.”

The Overland Trail to California, in spite of its hardships, was both quick and cheap and thus attracted the greatest number of gold rushers and produced a correspondingly large number of letters-to-the-editor in the Wisconsin papers. One editor, summarizing reports from the various routes to the mines concluded that “Those who have taken the overland route generally advise their friends not to come that way, while others, taking the isthmus route, give the same advice. For the present we are inclined to consider the advice of each as good.”

Many a letter reiterated this editorial conclusion. One emigrant reported that St. Joseph, Missouri, the starting point of the Overland Trail, was “filled with gamblers, thieves, swearers, and others no better” and that “the most abandoned and iniquitous city in the world would turn away with disgust from the exhibitions of demoniac knavery and wickedness of St. Joseph.” Pressing westward into the desert, a correspondent reported that “not one man in a hundred at home can imagine so poor and awfully wretched a country as the valley of the Platte” and went on to assure his readers that even this wilderness was “very rich indeed compared with the remainder of the journey, from Fort Laramie to the base of the California mountains.”

The newspapers of the 1850’s seem to have devoted an immense proportion of their space to advertisements for patent medicines and nostrums reputedly good for the ills of man or beast.

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15 Ibid., 20 February 1849.
16 Prairie du Chien Patriot, 14 March 1849.
17 Janesville Gazette, 22 March 1849.
18 Janesville Gazette, 26 March 1849.
19 Janesville Gazette, 1 March 1850.
20 Janesville Gazette, 16 May 1850.
21 Janesville Gazette, 18 May 1850.
22 Galena Gazette, 6 February 1850.
Possibly this lively interest in diseases and their cure may have led the editors to suppose that reports of the prevalence of sickness on the road to California might dissuade some of their readers from making the journey. The steamer Mary, for example, was reported to have begun a trip to Council Bluffs with four hundred Mormon emigrants aboard, only to bury fifty-eight of them along the way, victims of the dreaded cholera. Epidemics of both cholera and smallpox swept the entire nation, but the editors stressed that they seemed to strike with peculiar severity upon the plains where privation and exhaustion made the emigrants especially susceptible to their deadly ravages. "Not a day passes," said an early letter to the Galena Gazette, "that we do not meet with the graves of those who but a month since left home with buoyant hopes and light hearts."

Soon, however, the editors found it necessary to abandon this particular line of argument, for the cholera struck so vigorously in the lead mines that Galena in a single week lost one per cent of its entire population, and the citizens may well have begun to believe that even the plains might be healthier than Wisconsin.

Strangely enough the threat of Indian attack on the Overland Trail received very little mention. Only a few items on this subject made their way into the newspapers, and these, in the light of modern-day TV massacres, seem to have been minor and inconsequential scuffles. This lack of stories of Indian attacks, however, was compensated for by the striking and gruesome quality of the one story which did circulate widely—the tale of a "Horrible Revenge" which was visited upon the son of a Mr. Green, of Green's Woolen Factory at Fox River:

It is reported while passing through a tribe of Indians, this young man, naturally full of mischief, killed a squaw. The tribe, having become well advised of the fact, hastened after the company and overtook them and demanded the murderer. At first the demand was resisted but after the Indians had informed them that they would destroy the company if their request was not granted, the youth was surrendered into their hands. They then stripped him and in the presence of his father and the whole company, skinned him from his head to his feet.

The story, of course, appears to be apocryphal, for it is attached to a wide variety of western localities, and the name of the unfortunate victim is variously given as Green, Wasson, Picket, or Esterbrook. Nevertheless, as an invention designed to slow down migration to California it was certainly a triumph of editorial ingenuity. Even though it later had to be repudiated by the various papers which had published it, the tale has become firmly

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\[31\] Ibid., 26 September 1849.
\[32\] Council Bluffs (Iowa) Frontier Guardian, 1 May 1856, exchanged from an earlier issue of the Galena Jeffersonian.
fixed in western folklore. To this day a “Rawhide” pageant is annually given by the townsfolk of Lusk, Wyoming. Each year they find it necessary to get a new man for the “lead.”

A less painful problem, but one which was frequently mentioned, was the lack of good food, and the consequent indigestion to be encountered on the plains. One correspondent cautioned his hungry readers against eating too many prairie dogs, for this “causes considerable noise in the lower regions, about the time one wants to sleep, but cannot, for the barking of the dogs.” He further pointed out that “as wild meat is of a running breed, and you of a tame one, you needn’t be surprised to find yourself running the day after eating it.”

Such experiences on the Overland Trail taken all together caused many an emigrant to write back to his home-town paper that “nothing on earth would ever induce me to undertake the trip again,” or “had I known, or could I have had the slightest conception of the discomfort of the route by land, I would certainly never have started. No one, not experienced, can form the slightest idea of the privation and suffering to which the traveller over these plains is subjected.”

Once in the mines, the emigrant was faced with a problem of making ends meet. Some correspondents said that “California and its gold mines are a perfect farce” and that there was hardly any gold to be had. Others allowed that there was gold to be dug, with the most onerous labor, but that the cost of living, with flour $100 a barrel and other expenses in proportion, made it impossible to save enough to make the trip worth the effort. The thought of buying California whisky at $50 a gallon must have seriously discouraged a good many hard-drinking Cornishmen from ever leaving Wisconsin. The California rainy season, too, when no man could work at all, but living expenses went on just the same, was said to reduce the amount of gold a miner could lay by against his return to the states when he had seen the “bullephant.” Even if a miner worked for others and got paid in gold for his labors, the chances were good that he might be given a spurious gold dust made of sulphuret of iron, for the Mineral Point Tribune mentioned that a New York manufacturer had “received an order for 700 lbs. of this worthless compound” for the San Francisco market.

With such conditions reported in the mines, it is small wonder that many correspondents wrote, and editors happily printed, letter after letter urging the lead miners not to come to California. “Any

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23 Galena Gazette, 17 January 1849.
24 Ibid., 26 September 1849.
25 Ibid., 24 October 1849.
26 Mineral Point Tribune, 15 February 1849.
person doing a fair business had better remain at home," said one. "My advice is, to every one, to stay at home and be content with whatever lot may befall him there, rather than risk health and comfort," wrote another. "Tell all those who are in good circumstances at home not to come here, for they will surely repent it," said a third. It may have been good advice, but print it as they would, the editors of the lead region could not substantially diminish the rush of Wisconsin miners to the Pacific coast. By 1850 over two hundred men from Mineral Point alone, including 17 percent of the town’s leading citizens, had left for the mines, and it was estimated that adjoining towns had been similarly depopulated. Even the newspapers appear to have suffered, for as a general thing 1850 shows a marked decline in both press and editorial work, indicating that some of the newspapermen, at least, may have departed for the California diggings.

The editors had done their best. Judicious selection of the news from California and diligent editorial comment upon it, alike had failed to stem the tide which flowed westward from the Wisconsin mines. Once started, the California rush had been too big for the editors to stop.

— Galena Gazette, 1 May 1850.
— Ibid., 20 March 1850.
— Ibid., 6 February 1850.