Introduction
There are all kinds of people on earth that you will meet some day... They will be looking for a certain stone. They will be people who do not get tired, but who will keep pushing forward, going, going all the time... These people do not follow the way of our great-grandfather. They follow another way. They will travel everywhere, looking for this stone which our great-grandfather put on the earth in many places.

Sweet Medicine

On the morning on January 24th, 1848, a man named James Marshall walked along the banks of the American River in California, to check on the progress of a mill he was building.

"And he looks down where the soil has been dug and there's a sparkle, and there's a glint in the morning light, and he reaches down and he picks it up with his stubby dirty fingers, and the last thing in the world he might have expected, and here is this, this speck of the future, this tiny little shock that's going to reverberate right to today -- literally till now! He picks it up, and he says, you know, he says, 'My God!' And he yells out, he said, 'My God, I think I've found gold!'"

J. S. Holliday

My Share of the Rocks

By the beginning of 1849, over 50,000 American goldseekers had decided to head for California. The only question was how to get there. Since it was impossible to go overland until spring thawed the prairies and mountain passes, the most impatient prospectors started off by sea -- 14,355 nautical miles -- all the way around the tip of South America. But most of the Americans decided to wait and go by wagon train.

April 11, 1849
All my things being ready last night, I rose early and commenced packing in my trunk, preparatory to leaving home on my long journey, leaving for the first time my home and my dear friends with the prospect of absence from them for many months and perhaps for years.

William Swain

William Swain was a twenty-seven year old farmer's son from Youngstown, New York, utterly convinced he would find riches in California. His wife, Sabrina, was against his going west. She did not know if she and their infant daughter, Eliza, could bear to be apart from him. William's older brother George was for it. If pickings were as easy as the newspapers said, he would go west, too, the following spring.

Swain's plan was to take the overland route to California, make a quick $10,000 in the gold fields, and return home. He carried with him a guidebook to the Overland Trail, a Bible -- and his diary.

I had fortified my mind by previous reflection to suppress my emotions, as is my custom in all cases where emotion is expected. But this morning I learned by experience that I am not master of my feelings in all cases. I parted from my family completely unable to restrain my emotions and left them all bathed in tears, even my brother, whose energy of mind I never saw fail before.

William Swain

He is a farmer. He lives a simple life. He's pretty well educated. He's read Shakespeare, he's read Wordsworth. His wife is a teacher. They have a very comfortable life. They don't have anything to
complain about in eighteen forty-nine. This is a key point. They did not have anything that would cause them distress. His expectations were perfectly comfortable expectations of an average family, a farming family in America. The Gold Rush changed that. Suddenly he wanted more. Suddenly he wasn’t satisfied.

J. S. Holliday

April 12th, 1849
At half past two o’clock we took passage for Detroit on the steamer Arrow. The lake is very smooth, and the boat shoots along like an arrow, and as she leaves, far in the distance, objects familiar to me and bears me on to those that are strange, I feel that she bears me and my destiny.

William Swain

April 15, 1849
Dear, dear William,
I feel as though I was alone in the world. The night you left home I did not, nor could not, close my eyes to sleep.... William, if I had known that I could not be more reconciled to your absence than I am, I never could have consented to your going. However, I will try to reconcile myself as well as I can, believing God will order all things for the best.

Sabrina

May 6, 1849
Independence, Missouri
We came up from St. Louis with a company... from Marshall, Michigan. They are got up on the joint stock principle and are going with ox teams. They proposed that we should join them by paying $100 each into the fund, furnishing a wagon and thus becoming members of their company... which we have done.

William Swain

The members of Swain’s company printed “Wolverine Rangers” on their wagons with axle grease. Other companies had their own nicknames: "Wild Yankee," "Rough and Ready," "Live Hoosier," and "Never Say Die." But in honor of the momentous year they believed would change their lives, they all proudly called themselves "'49ers."

Thirty thousand people -- that’s not an exaggeration -- in the spring of 1849, take off from Independence and St. Joseph, Missouri, and travel along the Great Platte. Hundreds of miles of wagons. You can look to the west and as far as you can see on a dusty day, there are wagon trains, way off into the distance. And you turn around to look back, and they’re stretched all the way back as far as you can see.

The men who traveled to California in the Gold Rush years had a conscious sense of the need to organize. There are rules. For instance, no swearing -- literally! They have constitutions, they have these rules and orders: No swearing, No drinking. We will observe the Sabbath. Many a company broke up over the argument of whether or not to observe the Sabbath. ‘How can we observe the Sabbath? Here it is the middle of June, we’re already behind. These people are passing us on Sunday, they’re rolling. How can we sit here?’ So they have arguments about it, and companies split up over the moral question of whether to observe the Sabbath or not.

J. S. Holliday

For thirty days, the Forty-niners crossed rolling prairie in what is now Kansas and Nebraska. It was Indian Territory, where tribes from the East had been relocated a decade earlier. Fears of Indian raids proved mostly groundless: men were more likely to die by drowning at a river crossing, or by an accident with their own guns, than they were at the hands of Indians. The Sac and the Fox, the Pawnees and Kickapoos, charged tolls at bridges and fords. The Potawatomis sold the emigrants bacon, beef and vegetables, and charged from one to five dollars to ferry emigrants across the Kansas River.

The real danger on the plains was cholera -- with its soaring fevers, chronic dysentery and ghastly death from dehydration. Cholera was rampant all across the United States in 1849, and quickly spread through the wagon trains. Some 1,500 of the goldseekers who set out for California that spring died from it on the trail.

Youngstown, New York
Dear Brother William,
We... were in a perfect fever of anxiety about you.... We know the cholera will be with you in crossing the plains.... Please write as soon as you get there.

George Swain

Sabbath, May 27, 1849
In violation of our principle, we travel today on account of the sickness on the route.
May 31, 1849
I was attacked at noon by dysentery very badly. I... got Reverend Hobart to make me a composition tea.

June 1, 1849
Still taking medicine, opium and astringent powders... Today I have thought much of home and of my little girl, who is today one year old.

June 7, 1849
I am... on the gain, but very weak.... My appetite is good but I cannot eat hearty for fear of the consequences.

William Swain

On June 13th, William Swain and his companions passed Fort Kearny on the Platte River. By early July, they reached Fort Laramie, in what is now Wyoming. They had gone nearly 700 miles from Missouri. But they still had more than 250 to go before they reached South Pass, which would take them through the Rocky Mountains. And nearly 1,000 more before they actually reached the gold fields.

On July 31st, they crossed the Continental Divide at South Pass. They were now through the Rockies, more than halfway to California. But the hardest part -- the deserts and the Sierra Nevadas -- still lay ahead.

Everyone on the trail that summer had heard the story of an earlier wagon train that had taken a supposed shortcut called "Hastings Cutoff," only to be trapped in the Sierras near Truckee Lake. Half of the emigrants had died; some of the others had survived by eating the flesh of their dead companions. They were remembered as the Donner Party.

William Swain and the others were late too and they knew it. Snow would soon begin to fall in the mountains. They also began to follow short-cuts that seemed likely to speed them through to the goldfields. Sublette's Cut-Off. Hudspeth's Cut-Off. And in the western Nevada desert, Lassen's Cut-Off.

You had heard by the grape vine that there is desert, there's death, there's desolation, there's horror, ahead. Everybody thinks they want to go due west. Lassen's cut-off presumably leads you due west, across the desert, over the Northern end of the Sierra Nevada, and down into the warmth and the rewards of the Sacramento Valley.

So at the point where you make the choice, there is this moment where scores of men stand around, and they debate and they argue and they discuss and they read little signs on the road. And a barrel, a big barrel, full of cards and full of information. You sift through it: 'Oh, George went this way, Sam went this way, Louie went that way. What am I going to do?' There's choices being made. And they stand around and they debate, and sometimes companies'd argue and they split, and there'd be fights, and We'll go this way and We'll go that way. So it was a life-and-death choice, everybody knew it to be that. Wasn't just some casual matter of saving a few hours, it might save your life.

J. S. Holliday

July 4th, Independence Day
Dear Sabrina,
I have just left the celebration dinner table, where the company now are drinking toasts to everything and everybody and cheering at no small rate. I enjoy myself better in conversing with you through the medium of the pen....
I am hearty and well, far more so than when I left home.... I am also more fleshy. Notwithstanding these facts, I would advise no man to come this way to California.
Kiss my little girl for me, give my love to George and Mother, and tell them I am determined to have my share of the rocks. Your affectionate husband until death.

William Swain

Stay At Home
August 25, 1849
Dear Husband,
What a long summer. O!! how I want to see you. Sometimes I almost imagine myself with you, but alas it is only the dream of fancy.... O! William, if I could see you this morning, I would hug and kiss you till you would blush.
Sabrina

Beyond the North Platte, William Swain and the other Forty-niners in his company endured fifty miles of treeless sagebrush dotted with pools of alkaline water fatal to oxen.

Wagons and carts were scattered on all sides, and the stench of dead and decaying cattle actually rendered the air sickening. Some idea can be drawn from the fact that in one spot could be seen 150 dead creatures.

William Swain

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J. S. Holliday
On September 21st, William Swain and the Wolverine Rangers joined the stream of 10,000 gold-seekers and started down Lassens Cut-Off. It, too, would prove a mistake.

They first had to struggle across the searing Black Rock Desert, traveling by night, to save their oxen. Then, they had to face the mountains. The roads were made up of almost equal parts mud and boulders. Wagons broke down. The Wolverine Rangers agreed to split up into small groups. It would now be every man for himself.

November 6, 1849
We commenced, our way in ten inches of snow. I carried a change of underclothes, both of flannel and of cotton, two pairs of socks, one coat, one pants, one neck handkerchief, my journal, pocket Bible, pocketbook and a few day's provisions.... The storm increased as the day advanced.

William Swain

"But when you get to the other side of the Sierra Nevada, you don't see the green of the Sacramento Valley, you see the desolation of the Pitt River Valley. You see rocks and stunted growth, and mountain deserts. It's just, it's just a pain, it's a shock, it's a hit in the head! It hurts your heart to see what still lies ahead. And you haven't gone a short cut. What you've done is you've gone north, and you're at what's called Goose Lake. So instead of going west, you've gone north-northwest. Now you've got to go south.

J. S. Holliday

At dawn we arrived at Antelope Creek, eight miles from Lassen's Ranch, and found it not fordable. The sky cleared. We kindled a rousing fire, dried and rested ourselves till noon when two other men and myself -- with our clothes lashed to our shoulders -- forded the stream.... It was the hardest job I ever had. When I stepped onto the opposite shore I thought my flesh would drop from my bones.

William Swain had finally made it to California.

January 6, 1850
Dear George,
There was some talk between us of your coming to this country. For God’s sake think not of it. Tell all whom you know that thousands have laid and will lay their bones along the routes to and in this country... and as for you, STAY AT HOME, for if my health is spared, I can get enough for both of us.

William Swain

The Diggings
"What they had expected was the image that they had received in November, December of 1848, and the story of digging up gold, and all the people succeeding. They were stunned, shocked, dismayed. The realism that struck them above all else was there're so damn many miners. There were forty thousand miners in the mining camps and the mining regions of California by the fall of 1849.... These are people who've been coming... overland... as early as August. They've been coming by ships since December. They've been coming from Hawaii, from Oregon, from Chile, from Sonora. They've been pouring in. The world rushed into California."

J. S. Holliday

South Fork of Feather River
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 schoolmarm, working at our race and dam. 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.

William Swain

Digging for gold was hard, monotonous -- and mostly unrewarding. It combined, one miner said,"the various arts of canal-digging, ditching, laying stone walls, ploughing and hoeing potatoes."

"It's called the diggings. That was the word, the diggings. And why, because that's what they were doing. When we think of mining we think of a mine shaft. But that's later. These are river banks, river bars, dried creeks, rocks, rocks, by the millions, and the gold is beneath those rocks. Now this is placer gold. That means that for eons of time, the gold has been abraded, has been separated, by the action of water and rocks, so that the pieces of gold are pure.
You pick 'em up, and that is gold. That's all there is, but just plain gold.

You're working in freezing water up to your waist for hours at a time. You're reaching down, moving rocks, bringing in the rock and the gravel and working it all the time, with your hands, with the shovels. Moving always this debris, to get rid of the debris, to pull out the little tiny samples of your future, the little tiny pieces that are going to make everything possible for you. Going to buy you the means to get rid of your mortgage, that are going to make it possible to buy some more land in Iowa, in order to move, and then pack up and go to some new place. All of that is built into every effort you're making, every single day.”

J. S. Holliday

But everything in the diggings cost too much: a dollar a pound for potatoes, eggs at fifty cents apiece, twenty dollars for a bottle of rum. John Sutter peddled wheat to hungry miners at $36 a barrel. At his store, the Mormon Sam Brannan, was clearing $2,000 a day in profits exchanging tools for gold dust.

The Emporium of the Pacific
You came down after a year or so in the mines freezing your butt off, working like a dog, living under absolute primitive conditions. And here you got in San Francisco, a boat ride away, one of the great metropolises with everything available to you, and you just went crazy. You gambled, you bought, you whored around and you drank. And the people who took your money were the ones who got rich. It's just the way it was.”

T. H. Watkins

Everything had gone wrong for William Swain. He'd spent the whole cold, rainy winter in a claustrophobic cabin on the Feather River. In the spring, he and his partners moved to Foster's Bar on the Yuba, only to be kept from panning by a heavy spring snow melt that turned the clear stream into a roaring brown river. "Five month's rain," he wrote, "four month's high water, and three months... almost too hot to work." Day after day without success taxed him. But so did his fear of returning home a failure.

"Pride is a powerful force. The pride that kept so many men in California. They want to go home. But I can't go until I've got something to prove my success. They've been reading about success back home. I know, says the miner, how many people are failing. Failure is the most common fact of life in California. They don't know that. How can I go home a failure, when they expect me to come home a success? So they stay.

J. S. Holliday

In the fall of 1849, the village of San Francisco had barely 2,000 residents. Just one year later, the population had grown to nearly 35,000, and it had become the West's first full-fledged city. A single house lot on Portsmouth Square grew in price from $16.50 to $45,000 in just three years. Everything was brought in by sea at first -- whisky, shovels, lumber all the way from the forests of Maine, even a cargo of cats, ferried in to take on the rats that ruled the waterfront.

"It was one of the world's great commercial empires, one of the world's great cities within a matter of 4 or 5 years. The simple reason was gold. There's no other way to explain it. Half a billion dollars worth of gold was pulled out of California's mines and streams between 1849 and 1860. Half a billion dollars in 19th century money. That's an extraordinary amount of money. It absolutely defined what the city was."

T. H. Watkins

The Days of Forty-nine
Youngstown, New York
And now, my dear, allow me to ask, are your most sanguine expectations realized or at least being so? Or do you find things very much exaggerated? Would you advise anyone to go to California? There are many anxious to hear from you and learn the prospects.

Sabrina

William Swain

Dear Sabrina, My specific answer to your kind question is that my expectations are not realized. We have been unlucky -- or rather, by being inexperienced, we selected a poor spot for a location and staked all on it, and it has proved worth nothing... I mostly regret the necessity of staying here longer.

William Swain
By the summer of 1850, William Swain had been away from home for more than a year. All he had to show for his trek across the continent was $500 - nowhere near his goal of $10,000. Then he got a letter from his brother.

Youngstown, New York
Dear William,
Keep your courage up. If you fail there, you are not to blame. You have tried your best to do well, and if you can't do it there, you are better off than many who have gone there with their all and left nothing behind to fall back on. You have something, and friends who will meet you just as cordially unsuccessful as successful... To tell the plain truth, I wish most sincerely you were out of that (if you are alive) and at home, no matter if you haven't got a single mill.

Your Brother,
George Swain

Reassured by his brother's letter, in November Swain left the diggings and headed for San Francisco. By the time he paid for his passage home by sea, he had no more cash in his pocket than when he'd left Youngstown eighteen months earlier.

November 6, 1850
San Francisco
Dear Friends
It is a long time since I have written home... I have got enough of California and am coming home as fast as I can.

I remain, as ever,
your Son, Brother, and Husband,
William

Absence from my friends has given me a true valuation of them, and also it has taught me to appreciate the comforts and blessings of home...

William Swain

William Swain had found no gold in California, and had gone home and started farming again, as if he'd never been away. He and his wife Sabrina had three more children, and Swain eventually became the biggest peach grower in Niagara County, New York.

But in the evenings on his farm, when the work was done, he never tired of telling his wife, and his children and grandchildren, about the great adventures he had had crossing the country when he and he had both been young.