

Series:

Images of America: Colfax, CA

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INTRODUCTION

Once word of the discovery of gold in California echoed around the globe, pioneers rushed en masse to the Sierra Nevada foothills seeking their fortune and hoping for a bright new future. They imagined getting rich quick by merely scooping up nuggets by the handfuls out of mountain streams. The scramble to realize those dreams caused tiny settlements to sprout up along every riverbed and ravine and up the mountainsides.

Native Americans who lived in the area were all but wiped out by the pioneer invasion and the towns that usurped their territory. Newcomers rapidly seized land and consumed resources, displaying greed and an attitude of manifest destiny. Indians died from foreign diseases, starvation, and outright decimation. Others were displaced. Most settlers held no respect for the Indians and their different way of life. Instead, the native presence was seen as an impediment and a threat.

Few miners found enough gold picking or panning to sustain them, let alone get rich. The work was physically demanding and often yielded little. Those discouraged miners with an entrepreneurial spirit abandoned the pursuit of a chance fortune. Instead, they began “mining the miners,” says Colfax historian Nancy Hagman. Merchants sold the miners the tools needed to chase their dreams—simple things like picks and shovels, pans and coveralls, and of course, good food. The price of food soared after the discovery of gold in California. In 1849, a slice of bread might cost \$1—and a buttered slice might cost \$2. Potatoes and onions were \$1.50 per pound. The women cooking stews and baking biscuits fared very well, as they could

set their own prices, which miners gladly paid, savoring every “home-cooked” bite.

Illinoistown, a half-mile from the future Colfax, became the major supply distribution center from ports in San Francisco and Sacramento. Many items also came overland by mule teams and stagecoaches. Wares were then distributed to merchants in remote towns and to miners at their claims, scattered throughout the foothills. Hotels, forges, brothels, saloons, and general stores offered both the goods and entertainment opportunities the miners coveted. Farmers also found the area’s climate conducive to planting orchards along with a willing market for produce.

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