



## Smithsonian American Art Museum

April 2012



### *Miners in the Sierras*

1851-1852

#### **Charles Christian Nahl**

Born: Kassel, Germany 1818

Died: San Francisco, California 1878

#### **August Wenderoth**

Born: Kassel, Germany 1819

Died: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 1884

oil on canvas mounted on canvas

54 1/4 x 66 7/8 in. (137.7 x 169.8 cm)

Smithsonian American Art Museum

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1982.120

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*Two German immigrant painters, Charles Christian Nahl and August Wenderoth, painted this colorful scene of gold mining in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada just a few years after the discovery of the precious metal at Sutter's Mills, California in 1848. Researcher Liz decided to research the artists' connection to mining in the Sierra Nevada foothills.*

- **What do we know about the setting where the scene of mining takes place? Is the artist himself in the picture?**

In an exhibition catalogue on Charles Christian Nahl (Stevens, 1976), I learned that the artist, his mother Henriette, his siblings, and fellow artist, August Wenderoth, immigrated to New York City from Germany in 1849. Inspired by news of the Gold Rush, they traveled to California. In 1849, there were only three ways to get to California from the east coast. Before the advent of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, reaching California by land required a hazardous three thousand mile journey by wagon. Two sea routes to California existed; the longer passage went around Cape Horn in South America. The Nahls and Wenderoth chose the shorter passage, boarding a ship in New York Harbor bound for Panama. Once arrived in Panama, the Nahls hired a guide to transport them across the Isthmus of Panama by boat on the Chagres River and over land to the Pacific Ocean, where they boarded another ship for San Francisco. Through the [Online Archive of California](#) (OAC), I found a [painting by Nahl of their Panama passage](#).

Shortly after arriving in San Francisco Harbor in June 1851, the Nahls and Wenderoth traveled to Nevada County east of Sacramento, where they purchased a mining claim in the camp of Rough & Ready, and settled into a cabin on Deer Creek. Unfortunately, their claim apparently had been deceitfully “salted” (sprinkled with gold dust) and despite their efforts at mining, they found little gold. Henriette Nahl made extra money by washing miners’ laundry. Perhaps Nahl and Wenderoth included the red, white, and blue laundry by the hillside cabin as commentary on Mrs. Nahl’s resourcefulness! I believe that the four men working the “long tom” in the foreground of *Miners in the Sierras* may be Nahl and Wenderoth’s self-portraits with Nahl’s brothers, Charles and Arthur.

Through Google maps, I saw that Deer Creek runs north of the center of the modern town of [Rough & Ready](#). I wanted to learn more about the Rough & Ready mining camp. By searching the database, *America History & Life*, I found two very useful collections of essays by individual scholars on California gold mining (Rawls & Orsi, 1999; Starr & Orsi, 2000). One scholar mentioned L.M. Schaeffer, a native of Frederick, Maryland, who observed mining camps in Nevada County in the early 1850’s, including Rough & Ready. (Schaeffer’s account is posted on the [Library of Congress’ website](#)).

Schaeffer described how the long tom was used in “placer” or surface mining to find gold in Sierra streams. The long tom separated the gold from the dug rock and gravel in a wooden trough (as in *Miners* and in this [letterhead by Nahl](#)). Schaeffer wrote:

A long-tom is a trough about sixteen feet long, with a perforated sheet of iron inserted at one end; water is let on, and dirt thrown in, which it is only necessary to stir up and throw out the stones. It was a strange sight to see a hundred men working in pits, some digging, some throwing up the mud and stones, others shoveling it into the box, and others again stirring up the mass and throwing out the rocks.

I also discovered that the [Rough & Ready Chamber of Commerce](#) has a website with information on the town’s history. A Wisconsin mining company named the camp after General Zachary Taylor, known as “Old Rough & Ready.” Firsthand accounts paint Rough & Ready as a tough and lawless place. A census from 1850 listed among residents 360 miners, 14 tavern-keepers, 38 carpenters, 107 traders and merchants, and one painter (probably a sign painter, since Nahl did not arrive until 1851)! (Phelps in Starr & Orsi, 2000)

In 1850, the camp’s citizens decided to secede from the Union in protest of a new mining tax, declaring themselves the Republic of Rough & Ready. When Nevada City refused to sell them liquor, the citizens of Rough & Ready realized that independence came at too high a cost and

decided to rejoin the Union just in time for the Fourth of July! If you go to Rough & Ready in June, you can attend its Secession Days.

By the early 1850's, much of the surface gold had been found, so technology was developed to extract sub-surface deposits. A [wood engraving](#) from 1855 (found on OAC) illustrates some of these methods, as does [Hutchings' California Scenes: Methods of Mining](#), by Nahl and T. Boyd. [The Hearst Mining Collection of Mining Views by C.E. Watkins, 1871-1876](#), from U.C.-Berkeley's Bancroft Library, also on OAC, illustrates mining techniques. "[Placer](#)" mining was the extraction of gold from the surface of the riverbed. "Dry diggings" involved transporting water via wooden flumes from the Sierra Nevada and using wooden "railroads" to transport rock and gravel. Without water, you could not easily separate ore from rock. The term "wet diggings" refers to the practice of physically displacing rivers from their beds so that the riverbed could be mined. Some operations went after gold by tunneling into the rock face of hillsides. Another method extracted gold from quartz rock using steam-powered mills to grind quartz rock. The mining industry used poisonous mercury to help amalgamate (extract) the gold from the rock, and even today, mercury levels in Sierra streams are abnormally high.

Raymond F. Dasmann's article, "Environmental Changes Before and After the Gold Rush," (Rawls & Orsi, 1999) chronicles the damage inflicted by gold mining upon the Sierra landscape. Perhaps the most destructive of all mining methods was hydraulic mining in which high-pressure blasts of water were directed at riverbanks to loosen rock and gravel, often obliterating whole hillsides. [Hydraulic mining](#) wreaked havoc on washed hundreds of tons of rock and gravel into rivers. This material collected downstream causing [massive flooding in urban centers such as Sacramento](#) and in farmland. Hydraulic mining was finally banned by the U.S. Circuit Court in 1884. The snake-like mounds of gravel called the "[Goldfields](#)" along the Yuba River (east of Yuba City, California) remain more than a century later, formed entirely from this mining detritus. These gravel fields are so extensive that one can see them in satellite images.

- **Why has Nahl depicted the hillsides above the stream as partially defoliated?**

Dasmann also addressed the deforestation of Nevada County due to mining. Mining operations needed timber to construct workers' camps, flumes, dams, and mining "railroads." [Saw mills](#) were established on rivers to fulfill the mining industry's need for wood. Therefore, the evergreen cover of Nevada County hillsides was disappearing rapidly.

One mystery that still remains unsolved is whether the painting was commissioned from Nahl by the Heilbron family of Sacramento. The work was donated to the Smithsonian American Art Museum by descendents of August Heilbron and was on display in their mansion in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Through the WorldCat database, I ordered a booklet on the Heilbron House (Baggelmann, 1975). August Heilbron and his brother, Adolph, were both German immigrants who made their fortune in the meat-packing and cattle industry. Yet August Heilbron did not

immigrate to the United States until 1852 and did not arrive in Sacramento until 1856, long after the Nahls had left the city in late 1852 for San Francisco. **Did Nahl and Wenderoth create *Miners in the Sierras* on speculation for future sale, or did Heilbron or another patron commission it?**

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