

## Chapter 1



Dick Anderson

# Gold in Them Thar Hills

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*Through our great good fortune,  
in our youth, our hearts were  
touched with fire.*

— Oliver Wendell Holmes

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**T**he trail to Canyon Creek snakes its way for a mile down the side of a steep, heavily wooded canyon in the Sierra Nevadas, California's mother lode country. It is so steep you can touch ground with your uphill hand without bending over, and if you lose the trail you are liable to fly down the entire mountain by the seat of your pants. I know this is true because I flew down half the mountain toward Canyon Creek by the seat of my own pants until I was stopped by a tree. The thick layer of dried pine needles and leaves made the slope as slippery as ice, and since no one had been on the trail for what looked like months, traction was nonexistent. My knees shook uncontrollably as I looked down the rest of the hill into the dark of the canyon. There was only one way to stay on the path and that was by watching closely for the old blaze marks that had been chopped years before into the thick bark of ancient pine trees by hopeful seekers of gold.

The man I had just married was a reincarnated forty-niner, a seasoned adventurer who had an uncanny knack for finding gold. That June morning in 1968, Dick Anderson's internal calendar sped back to the year 1849, when thousands of fortune-seeking adventurers descended on the California mother lode to search for gold.

This Canyon Creek trip introduced me to the slippery world of treasure, where men scratch, blast, dig, dynamite, pump and drill their way through river banks and sea beds in search of the great something-for-nothing. Dick had



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Launching the expedition in the California River.

access to a mining claim in Canyon Creek, which is near the North Fork of California's Yuba River, east of Sacramento on Highway 49 outside Downieville. He hadn't been to Canyon Creek in years. It was here that he and his friend Donald Carter spent every summer years before. The two of them fared pretty well at Canyon Creek. Dick even came away with a sizeable amount of nuggets to show for his work. Then Carter fell down a mine shaft in Nevada and died. That cooled Dick's gold fever, but only for a time. Gold-seekers have a history of such disasters and accept them as part of this glittery game of chance. Dick could hardly wait, in fact, to start digging again once he made up his mind to it.

Before starting down the trail to the bottom of the canyon we had checked in with Cliff Laurent, the deputy sheriff at the Cal-Ida sawmill near the top of the trail. This stop was required by law. If we accidentally ignited a forest fire, there would be a clue as to who did it, but more importantly, if we didn't check out after a reasonable length of time, someone would come looking for us. As I slipped and slid down the trail behind Dick, I wondered if Cliff Laurent would really go to all the trouble. I was convinced that no one could ever find us. Our Volkswagen bus had been carefully buried in the trees so that the bears wouldn't eat it; and right then I was sure that they'd skip the bus anyway and head out to snack on

us. In that place we were so alone that I couldn't help but think how easy it would have been to disappear off the face of the earth without anyone knowing it.

Our dog Igor was having a fine time. A poodle-terrier mix, Igor was hardly a dog of the woods and feared everything, but as a trail scout he did fine. He ran ahead and back in a fraction of the time it took us to navigate one way. I would stop to rest while Dick tried to find the overgrown and faded blaze marks. Igor would run off, run back, run in little circles, look out into the deep woods, look worried and then whine. I identified with him a lot, but I never said a word. New brides always want to be good sports.

On my back I carried a lot of the groceries and some of the diving gear. Dick hauled more of the diving equipment, plus pans, picks, supplies, gasoline and more groceries. On top of it all, he dragged a mattress behind him, saying that since no one had been to the cabin in five years, any leftover supplies would be gone, used by stray fishermen or prospectors—or eaten by the rats. He was sure that the rats had eaten the mattress that had been left there. These rats were ferocious, he said, and from everything I heard about them I figured they might have eaten the cabin itself. Bus-eating bears and cabin-eating rats: this had to be the mother lode version of *The Call of the Wild* and I was Buck, stolen from my comfortable home and pressed into service as a trail beast.

When I saw the cabin I was greatly cheered. It sat back from the creek, 100 feet or so, up a little trail in the trees. It was the real live log kind that measured about 15 by 20 feet, and it had a creaky wooden door crowned with a set of old reindeer antlers at the top. A single window faced the river. Just outside the door was a tiny dirt terrace and on its uphill side was a wood-burning stovetop set into rocks. There was still a neat stack of old wood underneath a rickety workbench to the right of the stove. The river in front of the cabin formed a deep pool that was cold and crystal clear, and Dick said it was full of trout.

I looked at everything and felt much better. Igor wasn't so sure. He kept backing up and growling and I half expected something wild to leap out of the woods and attack us. Animals are supposed to have uncanny instincts about other animals lurking nearby, so I was always watching Igor's displays of uncanny instincts. The only trouble with this alarm system was that Igor was deathly afraid of things like falling leaves and rolling stones, and by this time he had become a bundle of dog nerves.

The inside of the cabin was a wreck. Even though the supplies had been hung from the rafters years before so that the rats couldn't get at them, the vermin had found plenty of other things to chew on. The entire room was a rat's nest. Everywhere we looked was shredded paper, cloth, bits of this, piles of that, pine needles, wood chips nibbled and chewed. Dust and dirt covered the wood plank



Courtesy of Keene Engineering, Inc.

Diver scans bedrock for seams of gold, which are often covered with surface soil.



Courtesy of Keene Engineering, Inc.

floor, and the crude shelves that held big glass jars of five-year-old rations were covered with rat trails.

Igor growled and backed up from the door. Had I known what he was trying to tell me I might have growled and backed up, too.

In about four or five hours we had the cabin completely swept and cleaned, our new supplies in, the old ones out, thrown on the rubbish pile at the far end of the outside terrace. The crowning touch was when Dick installed the mattress on top of the old, rusty bedsprings. Igor wasn't taking any chances and immediately rushed up on the bed and didn't move for the rest of the day or evening.

Before dark we lugged in several pails of water from the river for cooking and washing, and took a brisk swim in the freezing, clear pool in front of the cabin. Then we set about cooking dinner, which was some magic thing that expanded from a small box onto a mismatched pair of tin plates. This, together with boiled river water, was as wonderful as cordon bleu and champagne—all because we were in the woods.

That night, Dick hung his revolver on the tree-limb bedpost and turned down the kerosene lamp until it went out. Igor was asleep at my feet and I was feeling quite fine. I was blissfully tired and almost dropping off to sleep.

Suddenly the bedsprings began to rattle furiously. I sat straight up and Igor disappeared down the crack between the bed and the wall.

"Dick!" I said. "What's that?"

"Don't know, just a minute."

He fumbled around in the dark. The bedsprings rattled again, more violently this time.

"Iggy, where are you?"

The bedsprings rattled again.

"Rats," said Dick. "I can't find the matches."

Whatever was making the springs rattle like that had to be a gorilla.

"Hold on, I found them."

Dick lit the kerosene lamp and when the light came on I was instantly horrified. Sitting on the cross beams of the wall at the foot of the bed was the biggest rat I'd ever seen. Its eyes glowed in the light of the lamp and it looked at us, transfixed and evil. I was speechless.

Dick, being a reincarnated forty-niner, knew exactly what to do. He reached for his revolver. The rat was immediately dead. Then Dick holstered the gun and turned off the light.

I was stricken by dumbness undefinable. The dog jumped back up to his place at my feet and I was now supposed to go to sleep. There was no way on



Courtesy of Keene Engineering, Inc.

*Diver with dredge and sluice at work.*

earth I could close my eyes. I lost every shred of blessed tiredness I had earned and I lay there in the sleeping bag bed, stiff as a board, the image of that splattered rat indelibly etched into my brain. I was alone for what seemed like hours with the image of that rat.

What I hadn't learned yet was that rat-shooting is nothing when you're looking for gold.

For the next week Dick and I sniffed and sniped, which are two ways of picking around for river gold. A sniffer, which sort of resembles a giant turkey baster, will suck up any flakes or small nuggets that might be stuck in the cracks of a river bed. More often we sniped, using a fireplace poker to scrape out the cracks and crevices.

Gold that is found in rivers and streams is called placer gold (a word that rhymes with plaster). Essentially it is gold that has been getting stuck for millions of years in the natural ripples of the river bed—the cracks, crevices and deep potholes. Dick taught me how to spot likely looking cracks for gold—cracks which run from one side of the river to the other, but which are hard to spot because they are often covered with surface soil. We could usually see some part of them if we traced them carefully from either side of the river. Once we located such a crack, we'd put on our masks and snorkels, and dip our heads underwater for a

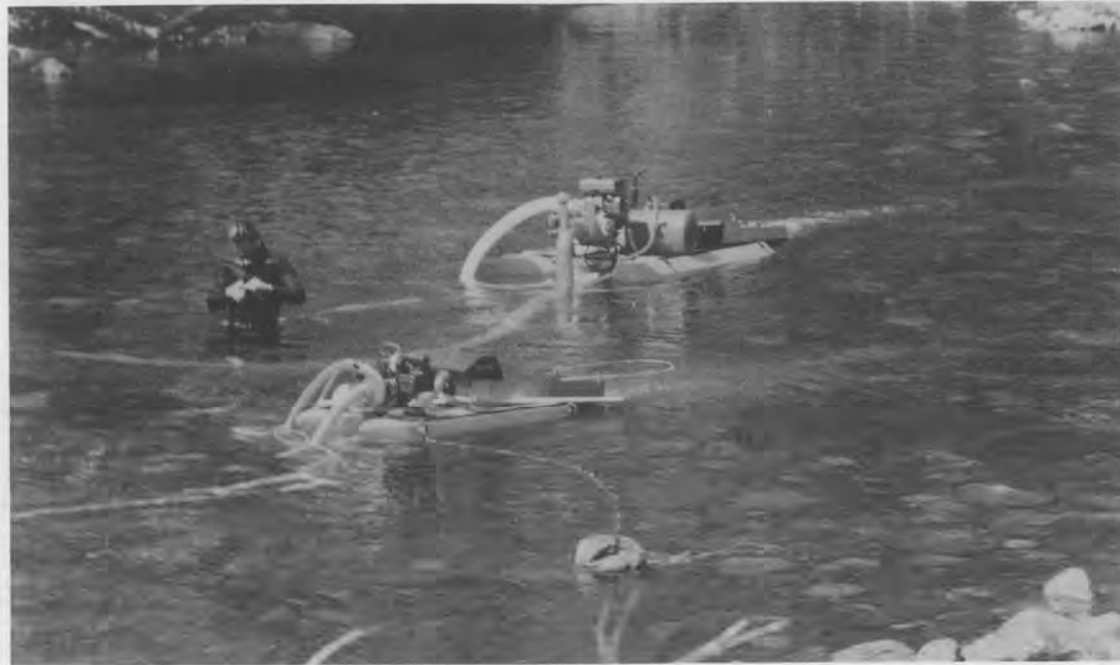


Courtesy of Keene Engineering, Inc.

look. The water was only three or four feet deep in the area we were diving, but it was always swift. If I got swept away, Dick advised me to relax and enjoy the ride until I got to the nearest falls. At that point, he said, I should start worrying.

Once under water we'd snipe the loose dirt and sand from the crevice into the gold pan. The gold pan was the essential tool. All the excavated sand and gravel went into it, and when we had collected enough of it, Dick would begin to pan. Panning is done just like in the movies. Dick dipped the pan into the river, then swirled and dipped again and again, to wash off the top layer of sediment, picking out the larger rocks and dipping again. When he finally reached black sand at the bottom of the pan, I was leaning over him like a hawk. Suddenly I realized I had caught a little of the thing called gold fever. When a few tiny chips and flakes of gold appeared I shrieked as if we'd unearthed Fort Knox.

A few chips and flakes were not enough for Dick, so one morning he dug out the old rusty parts of his dredge from inside the cabin. Dredges are called "suckers" among gold divers, because they are essentially underwater vacuum cleaners that quickly remove all the overburden—the sand and gravel which sits on top of bedrock where the gold is trapped. Our dredge had a lightweight metal vacuum tube at one end and a sluice box with the riffle tray at the other. When the dredge was fired up, water ran through the sluice box and into the riffle tray at the



Courtesy of Keene Engineering, Inc.

*The sluice and riffle tray eliminate sand and mud, allowing gold to get caught in the coarse metal mesh.*

other end. The dirt, sand and gravel shoveled into the sluice box were sent through the riffles in a wash of mud. Any gold in the sand and gravel would sink down and get caught in the coarse metal mesh. With this dredge Dick and I were ready for some big nuggets.

With a sluice box and dredge we didn't bother with turkey basters or fireplace pokers. We used shovels. We first had to find a likely looking spot where gold might have settled into the bedrock, and the likely looking spot we picked was within the roots of a big tree near the river bank. Dick set up the dredge and connected up the pump, and we both proceeded to dig. And dig. We shoveled so much dirt into that sluice box that I was sure we would reach China by noon. I developed a severe case of blisters and so I volunteered to serve as cheerleader, watching over the riffle tray for signs of color. I have to admit I became a fickle hunter of gold. By the end of the afternoon I had taken up trout fishing instead, using a jar of iridescent orange salmon eggs as bait. It turned out to be a great day for me. I ended up with four trout. Dick ended up with a hole the size of a mass grave, a set of rippling muscles and toughened hands.

By the end of our adventure in the woods, I had become an excellent trout fisherwoman, sniper and digger of holes; and I hadn't been swept over the falls. Dick and I left Canyon Creek with one small vial of flakes, not enough to pay for

the gas we'd fueled the dredge pump with, but one has to be a good sport about such things. One has to be a good sport, also, about climbing a mile out of a steep canyon. Hiking down that trail was rough, but it was child's play in comparison to the hike up. Each step was a deep knee-bend and we performed hours and hours of them.

Igor was the happiest dog I'd ever seen. He repeatedly ran up ahead of us and back with cheery barks. On one hand, I think he was reminding us that there are some advantages to being a dog—like having four legs—and on the other hand, I think he was letting us know he was glad to get out of the woods and back to the city. Sometimes dogs just have no sense of adventure at all.

Dick and I went to Canyon Creek several times during the next few years. It always seemed just enough gold appeared to make us go back for more, but never enough to make us believe that we went for the gold alone. I finally realized that the value of gold was not the sole reason for seeking it, but that the act of looking for it propelled me. If a man is lucky enough to strike gold, it is a near mystical indication that he is favored by the Hand of Fate. The dice are not always rolled for fortune alone, but because man likes to test himself on many different levels.

When I first started going to Canyon Creek I was a young bride out for a spree in the woods, accompanying a husband who had a nose for gold. I didn't know then that in all that digging the seeds of adventure were being planted within me, seeds that would bloom later when I was no longer with him and during times of choice between the safe and the uncertain. In these later years, I opted more and more for the uncertain, because I sensed that, like gold, the richest experiences of life were often in a hidden lode just beneath the surface of the obvious.