

Gold Dust and Gunsmoke: Tales of Gold Rush Outlaws, Gunfighters, Lawmen, and Vigilantes

By John Boessenecker

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A lively collection of true tales of villainy and violence during the California Gold Rush

"Boessenecker has done as much as anyone to change and illuminate California's Wild West image . . . if you would like a good read about how gold fever ignited a rush not only of families, but prostitutes, feuds, lynchings, duels, bare-knuckle prizefights, and vigilantes, then is this the place to start."

—*Wild West*

"A lively, thoughtful, well-researched book, and those interested in the rough, early years of the Mother Lode will not be disappointed."

—*Ledger-Dispatch* (Jackson, Ca)


"[Boessenecker] has done an amazing job of researching newspapers, legal documents, diaries, and other sources, as well as making skillful use of the recent research. . . . Excellent narrative Very well done, Gold Dust & Gunsmoke is a 'must.'"

—*True West*

"Boessenecker's meticulous research and vivid prose make this excellent book a fascinating collection of true stories."

—*Tulsa World*

Packed with never-before-told tales of the American frontier, *Gold Dust & Gunsmoke* sends us galloping through the tumultuous California territory of the mid-nineteenth century, where disputes were settled with six-shooters and the lines of justice were in perpetual flux. Armed with meticulous research, John Boessenecker displays a remarkable knack for finding the perfect details to capture all the color, excitement, and hullabaloo of the Gold Rush. Published in tandem with the 150th anniversary of California's statehood, these authentic stories of gunfighters, lawmen, vigilantes, and barroom brawlers are an important contribution to the rich lore of the American West.

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Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #1221380 in Books
- Published on: 2000-09-11
- Released on: 2000-08-28
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.86" h x 1.02" w x 5.67" l, 1.27 pounds
- Binding: Paperback

- 384 pages

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

Most of this work is a collection of barely connected anecdotes of outrages and villainy perpetrated in post-Mexican War California from 1848 to 1860. In the absence of strong law enforcement, and with an enormous number of young male emigrants and transients, violence became the primary means of settling disputes. Banditry, personal disagreements, official corruption, dueling, and tensions between the Mexican and American populations increased the risk of bloodshed. The violence abated as the Gold Rush culture was subsumed into more mainstream American society, but it left an indelible imprint on American culture and popular perceptions. The anecdotes gathered by attorney Boessenecker (Lawman, LJ 2/1/98) are interesting, but the analysis is sketchy, mostly limited to the observation that murder rates were much higher then than now and that popular writers and myth-makers drastically distorted the facts of the era. For subject collections in larger libraries. AEdwin B. Burgess, U.S. Army Combined Arms Research Lib., Fort Leavenworth, KS

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From [Booklist](#)

Movies and television have created an image of the Old West as an extremely violent place. This is to a large extent false, for most of the West was relatively peaceful during the frontier era. One outstanding exception was California during the Gold Rush. A lust for gold was the driving force behind the conflicts that developed as a diverse group of participants each fought for a share of the promised fortunes. Violence and lawlessness ran rampant in the 1850s, recording the highest homicide rate in the history of peacetime U.S. This is an outstanding collection of true "Wild West" stories told in a most engaging manner. Not only are the cast of characters profiled and events described but also they are placed in context to show how the actions involved were essential in establishing the California territory, and how they even affect the present. There should be considerable interest as the timing of this publication coincides with the sesquicentennial celebration of the Gold Rush and the statehood of California. *Fred Egloff*

From the Inside Flap

Gold Dust & Gunsmoke One moment the California creek beds glimmered with gold; the next, the same creeks ran red with the blood of men and women defending their claims or ceding their bags of gold dust to bandits. Packed with never-before-told tales of the American frontier, Gold Dust & Gunsmoke sends you galloping through the tumultuous California territory of the mid-nineteenth century, where disputes were settled with six-shooters and the lines of justice were in perpetual flux. Armed with meticulous research, John Boessenecker has a remarkable knack for finding the perfect details to capture all the color, excitement, and hullabaloo of the Gold Rush. Gold fever drew a diverse group from around the world to California. San Francisco Bay became a virtual parking lot filled with abandoned vessels whose crews had headed for the hills of the new El Dorado. Remnants of the forces fighting in the Mexican War also got in on the action. These forces included transplanted Bowery Boys, the notorious New York City street gang with ties to Tammany Hall. The Sydney Ducks, a large contingent of new arrivals from Australia's penal colony, added a bit of outlaw innovation from down under. With more than enough gold dust to go around early in the Gold Rush, crime was rare, but as the stakes rose and the easily panned gold dwindled, robbery and murder became a part of life on the frontier. Word of the San Miguel massacre rippled from mining camp to mining camp, retelling of the slaying of ten people, an entire family taken down by gunshot and ax. Settlers throughout the frontier followed the exploits of Joaquin Murrieta, the most famous Hispanic outlaw and the most notorious bandit of the Gold Rush. Bandits, highwaymen, and other desperadoes cruised the frontier

looking for stakes. The stories of their crimes and their confrontations with justice are recounted here, many for the first time. With virtually no police protection on the frontier, vigilance committees took justice into their own hands. Six penalties were traditionally handed down: hanging, whipping, ear-cropping, head shaving, branding, or banishment. Since few people in this transient society knew each other, vigilantes sought ways of physically marking criminals, cropping their ears or branding their cheek with an "R" for robber, or "H.T." for horse thief. California's population swelled in these heady days, spawning dozens of saloons, gambling halls, fandango houses, and bordellos. The names of the rapidly sprouting mining camps reflected the rough society therein: Drunkard's Bar, Garrote, Hell's Delight, Whorehouse Gulch, Git Up and Git. Amusements paralleled the raucous cult of the masculinity of the West. Bare knuckle prizefighting, cock-fights, bullfights, and the brutal bull and bear fights filled the hours not spent drinking, whoring, and gambling. Published in tandem with the one hundred fiftieth anniversaries of the Gold Rush and California's statehood, these authentic stories of gunfighters, lawmen, vigilantes, and barroom brawlers comprise an important contribution to the rich lore of the American West.

Users Review

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