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Songs of the Gold Rush

Every period of history has its special songs. Stephen Foster, America's most famous song writer of the nineteenth century wrote many of his compositions around the time of the California Gold Rush. Two of the most famous melodies, "Oh, Susanna" (1848) and "Camptown Races" (1850) provided enjoyment for the miners with an appropriate change of lyrics. Enjoy singing them to the familiar tunes!

"Oh, Susanna"

I come from dear old Boston with a washbowl on my knee,
I'm going to California the gold dust for to see.
It rained all night the day I left, the weather it was dry,
The sun so hot I froze to death, dear brother, don't you cry.

Oh, Cal-i-for-ny

O-That's the land for me! **(CHORUS)**

I'm going to Sacramento

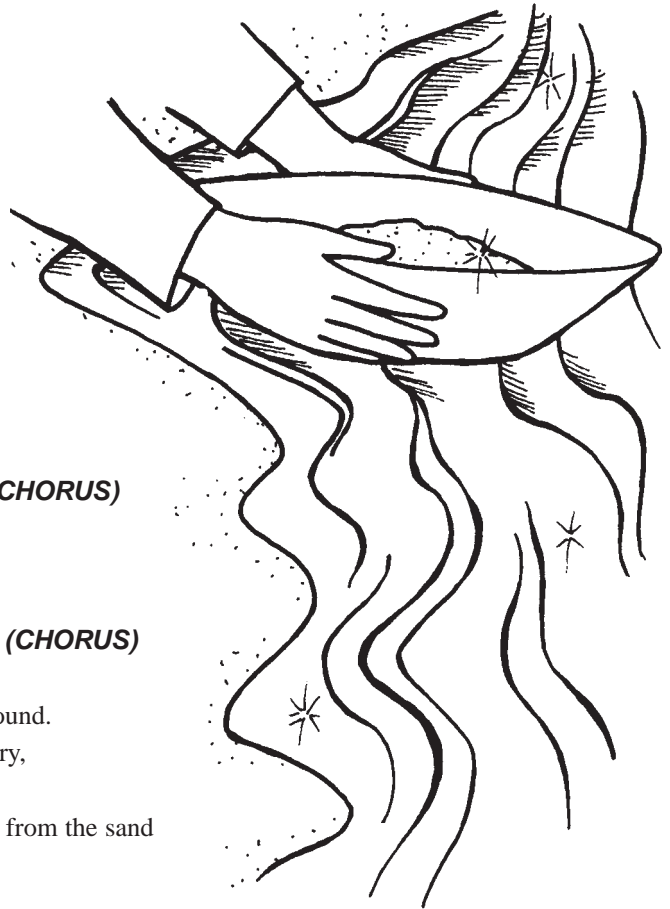
With a washbowl on my knee.

I jumped aboard the largest ship and traveled on the sea,
And every time I thought of home, I wished it wasn't me!
The vessel reared like any horse that had of oats a wealth,
I found it wouldn't throw me, so I thought I'd throw myself! **(CHORUS)**

I thought of all the pleasant times we've had together here,
And I thought I ought to cry a bit, but I couldn't find a tear,
The pilot's bread was in my mouth, the gold dust in my eye,
And I thought I'm going far away, dear brother, don't you cry. **(CHORUS)**

I soon shall be in Frisco and there I'll look around,
And when I see the gold lumps there, I'll pick them off the ground.
I'll scrape the mountains clean, my boys, I'll drain the rivers dry,
A pocketful of rocks bring home, so brother, don't you cry.

* washbowl-pan that the gold miners used to separate the gold from the sand



"Camptown Races"

A bully ship and a bully crew
Dooda, dooda,
A bully mate and a captain too,
Dooda, dooda, day

Then blew ye winds hi-oh
For Cal-i-for-ny-o,
There's plenty of gold so I've been told
On the banks of the Sacramento.

Oh around Cape Horn we're bound to go,
Dooda, dooda,
(CHORUS)

Around Cape Horn through the sleet and snow,
Dooda, dooda, day
(CHORUS)

Oh around Cape Horn in the month of May
Dooda, dooda,
(CHORUS)

Oh around Cape Horn is a very long way,
Dooda, dooda, day.
(CHORUS)

Ninety days to Frisco Bay,
Dooda, dooda,
Ninety days is darn good pay,
Dooda, dooda, day
(CHORUS)

I wish to God I'd never been born,
Dooda, dooda,
To go a-sailin' round Cape Horn,
Dooda, dooda, day
(CHORUS)

To the Sacramento we're bound away,
Dooda, dooda.
To the Sacramento's a heck of a way,
Dooda, dooda, day.
(CHORUS)

How the Town Got Its Name

Rough and Ready	You Bet	Ragtown
Last Chance	Bedbug	Sailor's Slide
Skunk Gulch	Fiddletown	Shirt-Tail Camp
Shinbone Creek	Angels Camp	Red Dog
Poker Flat	Ten-Cent Gulch	Fair Play
Get-Up-And-Git	Dogtown	Total Wreck
Chucklehead Diggings	Salt Pork Ridge	Humbug Canyon

The towns of the Gold Rush had colorful names, and each one probably could “tell” a story about how it got it. However, since almost all are ghost towns now, it is difficult to find out how they got their names. Anyhow, it would be more fun to make your own stories.

Choose one of the town names and create a story of how it got its name. The story can be humorous or serious. It will be pure fiction, so make it as wild as the West was in 1849! Need an example? Here's one about the town Jack chose to dig near—Hangtown.

It was called No-Name Town when 10 hearty miners built a little cabin in the mountains 90 miles northeast of Sacramento. Almost as soon as they began digging, gold was found. Hundreds of people quickly moved into No-Name Town.

Before long there were little stores built and, of course, a hotel and numerous drinking establishments. The miners were hard working and rarely did any trouble develop. There were a few fights on Saturday night, but they were usually settled quickly. On Sundays the men wrote letters home and did their laundry, getting ready for the hard week ahead. By the afternoon on a sunny Sunday there were hundreds of red flannel shirts waving on clotheslines all over No-Name Town.

Three men rode into town one day early in 1849. They were not hard working miners. In fact, these men wanted to make their money by stealing other men's gold. They decided to take Big John's gold late on Friday night. But Big John had a big loner wolf he had trained to watch over his claim. The thieves got within 6 feet of the claim when the wolf attacked. There was such a commotion that Big John and his friends were there within a minute.

The robbers were sentenced to death on Saturday with the hanging to take place the next day. Every person in town wanted to be at the execution, so they did their laundry early that Sunday. Miners from other towns nearby began arriving. A group from Red Dog rode through No-Name Town and noticed all the red shirts flapping in the breeze. It was such a funny sight that they called it Hangtown—and that's how it got its name.

(Hangtown, by the way, was one of the few towns that still exist today. It was renamed Placerville, and has many buildings and sights left from the frontier days.)