TheWriteQuestion_1029_NathanielPhilbrick

Lauren Korn Hello and welcome to The Write Question, a radio program and podcast featuring authors from the American West and beyond. The Write Question is supported in part by members of Montana Public Radio and by the Greater Montana Foundation, encouraging communication on issues, trends and values of importance to Montanans. I'm Lauren Korn, speaking with Nathaniel Philbrick, author of The Rush, California Gold, The Civil War and The Making of the Modern World. This book reveals how California's gold rush forged the modern United States and how it lit the long fuse to the Civil War. In this panoramic, character-driven narrative, Nathaniel, or Anat, transforms the gold rush from the tale of sudden riches into the origin story of America's modern contradictions. Capital consolidated at dizzying speed, democracy enthralled to private power, xenophobia Weaponized in the name of liberty. And a stubborn belief in the American experiment that refuses to die. Nat, thanks so much for being here. Welcome to The Write Question.

Nathaniel Philbrick It's great to join you.

Lauren Korn I'm going to start pretty broad. What question did you or were you seeking to answer when you began researching the California Gold Rush.

Nathaniel Philbrick The gold rush for me began out of curiosity generated by kind of a local story. I live on Nantucket Island. I've been there for 40 years. It was once the whaling capital of the world. And in the late 1840s, Nantucking was on the skids. New Bedford, founded by Nantuckerers in the previous century, had a deep water port and that was becoming the new Nantucken. And then in 1846, they had the Great Fire, which destroyed the waterfront, which was soaked with whale oil, and burned a third of the town. And then just a few years later, they read in their newspapers, in the Nantucket Inquirer, that gold has been discovered in the foothills of California. And it's not just a a few nuggets, it's paved with gold, according to the paper. And so these Nantucketers... They loaded their whale ships with would-be prospectors, I mean, packed them in, and sailed around Cape Horn, which is no big deal for them because on a typical whaling voyage, they would sail into the Pacific and spend three to four years hunting whales before they returned. So they sail around Cape horn through the Golden Gate and literally abandon their ships right beside the waterfront of San Francisco. And they light out for the gold fields, abandoning the ships upon which they depended for their livelihoods. And in just six months, Nantucket would lose a quarter of its voting population to the goldfields. And so, you know, and Nantucking was an extreme example. Just about every town in America under went this kind of rush of population west. And so after I'd finished my three books about the American Revolution. And I said, OK, this is the founding of the country. Something happened in the 19th century, you know? And I think it might be the California gold rush. And so that was five years ago. And I set out to write what would become the rush.

Lauren Korn In this book, you are connecting the California Gold Rush to the Civil War to, I'll just state the subtitle, the making of the modern world. Why do you think that these explicit connections between the Gold Rush, the Civil war, they hadn't yet been made in the way that you're making your argument here or written in this way? Why were those connections not made yet?

Nathaniel Philbrick Well, you know, it's interesting. In the last 20 years, there's been all sorts of new scholarship around the American West in general and the gold rush in specific. And you know it's it's in there that, um, you can see it, but, you know, I, I think most of us have grown up thinking of the California gold rush as this kind of historical cul-

de-sac it was, you know, people went out West. They lived the life of a Bret Hart short story, you No. Raucous miners, and some of them made it, some of them didn't, and then it petered out, and that was the end of it. Well, as I researched what would become the rush, I realized, whoa, no, that's just a small portion of what happened with the discovery of gold. For one thing, it was an international event. Even before the Americans got there, there were large numbers of Chileans, Sonorans from Mexico, Chinese and Australians. They were half the distance from California as someone getting into a ship in New York and sailing around Cape Horn. And so, you know, this created this multicultural cauldron. And what's interesting is as the Americans arrived, they decided, okay, teach me how to do this. I don't know how to gold mine. Pulled out the revolvers. Once they had learned how to do it from the Chileans and the Sonorans and said, get out of here, this is American gold, you know. And so it would go, and as they were mining, and it was an individualistic endeavor, they decided that we don't want unfair, for a southerner to bring African-American slaves, it's unfair, and it's an unfair competition. So once California had the threshold population to become a state. It was 60,000, they had 100,000 in less than a year. They decided if we're gonna enter the country as a state, it has to be a free state, not because they were abolitionists, far from it. They just didn't wanna share the gold fields with African Americans. And so the thing of it was, at this point, half the states are free, the other half are slave. A balance has been maintained. There's now this huge, after the Mexican-American War... We have... A vast amount of land, including California, that is now part of the country, will it become free? Will it become a state of slave? California coming into the Union as a free state enrages the South. We don't want that. Finally, a compromise is reached, the Compromise of 1850, out of which the Southerners got all sorts of concessions, including the Fugitive Slave Act, which meant that if If you're an African-American in the North, you can now be dragged. Back to the South if you're accused of being a fugitive slave, and this made, this started the division over slavery that would build with each succeeding year, and it was the California Gold Rush that lit the long fuse to the Civil War.

Lauren Korn Let's like step way back to the beginning. Can you give our listeners the short, a relatively short version of how gold was first discovered in California? By whom? And I think you kind of touched on it. I think it's worth noting that it was in proximity close to the Mexican-American war right in the annexation of california in fact

Nathaniel Philbrick When gold was discovered, the treaty that would end the Mexican War hadn't been signed yet. It would be signed 10 days later with no one, of course, knowing about the discovery. And the discovery was this, an inventor named John Sutter had a fort in what's now Sacramento where Native Americans would run his wheat farm and all of this, but what he needed now was lumber. So, he hired a carpenter named James Marshall. To build him a sawmill. And the ponderosa pine that were the perfect tree for the sawmill didn't start until you got up into the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains. And so he had made his way up along the Southern Fork of the American River where he found a place where there was a good turn in the river that was ideal for creating a saw mill right next to a big grove of ponderosapine. So he starts building what will become known is. As Sutter's mill. And it was while excavating the tail race of Sutter mill. This is the ditch through which the water runs that powers the mill. It was while digging that he sees a few golden flakes and he knows enough that if it's really gold it's soft and malleable. And sure enough, Marshall has discovered gold in the tailrace of Suttar's mill and it would take a couple of months for the word to spread. But finally, in May of 1848, months after the discovery, which was in January, a lapsed Mormon named Samuel Brannon would learn about the discovery of gold. And after buying up every piece of mining equipment he could for his trading posts, announced in the streets of San

Francisco waving a quinine bottle full of gold. Gold! Gold! In the American River! And that launched the rush. Pretty soon San Francisco was stripped of able-bodied men and the rush was on.

Lauren Korn Yeah You've mentioned a few of the, I guess the cast of characters in your book, some of these main characters, I'll say the people you follow. You've got Samuel Brannon, you've got, you just mentioned Sutter, there's William Gwynn, there's David Broderick, there is, you mentioned there was a pretty large population of Chileans in California at that time, and you follow a trio of brothers trying to kind of turn their family fortune around. Trying to convince all of these white minors that they were French, trying to avoid some of the violence and discrimination that you spoke of. How did you decide whose stories would carry this narrative, right? Like you're really honing in on specific people in this book in order to tell the larger story.

Nathaniel Philbrick Yeah. You know, I tell narrative history. It's not comprehensive history. I'm telling a story and the challenge of this book is, um, it's a broad scope. It, it's the gold rush and I take it 20 years out. And you know, there, how do you find a character to take it with you? And that was a challenge. But initially I thought, you know it's, the diversity of the gold mines I think is a real surprise to most Americans. Um, You know, it was amazing. There were half the minors in the early months of the Gold Rush were native Californians, native Americans, many of them hired by white Californians. But, you know, there was a population of 250,000 native Americans in California. Spoke 100 languages. I mean, this huge, vibrant population. And then you've got the Chileans, you've the Mexicans, you now, and you know they're all converging, and then you have. Uh, the Americans arriving. And I thought, you know, I need a perspective that will bring this out. And Rosales is this Chilean, you know, he goes with his three brothers to, um, Chile and he w had been educated in Paris, so he was fluent in France and along with other languages. And, um you know is He's and he's experienced in the world, you know, he's seen the French Revolution at least, you know, a later version of it. He's seen all sorts of stuff, but he can't believe what's going on in first San Francisco. You know, it's a city where it just people are so busy getting wanting to get rich that, you can't even look anyone in the eye, you it's just everybody's rushing all over, and then they go into the gold fields where it's clear the white Americans are prejudiced against anyone who isn't a white American. Especially Chileans, and so he pretends he's French and throws around the name Lafayette, friend of Washington, and that gives him a good cover. But that only works temporarily. But Rosales, he would be later described as the Mark Twain of Chile. He just really smart, a great sense of humor. And a perspective that's truly global. And so when I first read his journal, which is a series of letters he wrote to his mother back in Santiago, I just said, man, this is such good stuff. It's personal, you've got a personal story and he's likable. And he has a perspective that is just incredible. So anyways, he begins the book, and then it became a situation in which I would, he's there for a couple chapters, and then who else do you find? I really wanted it to be a narrative that, you know, it's by nature episodic because you're not following the same person the whole way, but there is kind of a dramatic spine to it, and it does build around. The whole issue of slavery, California, and what's happening in the United States.

Lauren Korn You're listening to a conversation with Nathaniel Philbrick. I'm Lauren Korn. This episode of The Write Question is supported by Montana Book Company, located in downtown Helena since 1978, offering new books for all ages, vinyl records, and community activism. Delivery in Helena and shipping is available online at mtbookco.com. There were also those people who went to California, not for gold specifically, but for, we'll say, political power. And there were people other than the prospectors and even the

politicians that had a lot to gain during this time, right? California was becoming a state, and so there was a lot of infrastructure and there was lot of things to gain. I'm wondering, I guess this is like a two-pronged question. How did the motivations of these people, which feel maybe not in tension with one another, but like, how did the tension between, say, the miners or the prospectors and the politicians play out on the ground, or the miners and all of these other people who were coming along to create San Francisco and Sacramento? What was the relationship between them? And then ultimately, who actually got rich during? The California Gold Rush.

Nathaniel Philbrick Yeah, I mean, you've got the mining going on, and it's crazy in the mine. So one miner describes it as pandemonium on a frolic. You know, it's just- It's chaos. It's chaotic. It's just chaos because you're in a void between the Mexican government, which has been overthrown, but the U.S. Congress hasn't been able to figure out what to do with California, so there's nothing. You know there's at one point overheard at a- around a campfire at a mining town. Hey, you know, there's no law against murder in California. I think I just might kill that guy tomorrow. You know, that's where it is. And so it is crazy. And so, but you know the miners, some of them get rich, most of them don't. Most of them barely get by. Some of them die in misery, you now, in the mud. Of California as the rains of winter come in. But it's the people who provide the miners with goods. There's a lapsed Mormon named Samuel Brannon, the one who waved the quinine bottle full of gold and said, golden them there are hills. He creates a system of trading posts. Even before the gold rush has started, You launches it and he becomes one of California's first millionaires. It's the people who are selling stuff to the miners who profit. And then the other thing that's going on is the technology of mining changes so quickly. I mean, you know, I think we all kind of grow up with the image of individualistic miners with their picks and pans and their shovels, you out across the foothills. But within just a few years, they're inventing technologies that change it completely, and by the mid-1850s, there is hydraulic mining, in which they take these fire hoses, industrial scale, you know, which fire a huge bolt of water capable of washing away a hillside so that they can get at the gold quickly. And this means that instead of thousands of miners spread out over a field, you've got a corporation employing a handful of men using these fire hoses to wash away the hillside. At one point, there are 5,000 miles of aqueducts crisscrossing the interior of California to get water to these things. And so it's changing, it's going corporate. Right away and you know those who are getting rich are not necessarily are not the miners and you know there's one example from nantucket 16 year old kid named jimmy folger doesn't like mining starts selling roasted coffee beans to the miners and folgers coffee is the result and so it's this you know it's this crazy hive of action in which the way to wealth is not always obvious in the beginning but I think speaks to the direction the country will be going in the years ahead.

Lauren Korn We're going to stay on this topic of technology, which maybe not drives the aboutness of this book, but it certainly drives the pace and the narrative kind of. The Telegraph makes news of finding gold in California. It travels much faster. That's how people know about it. You've got the steamboat, you've got clipper ships coming in, vessels that allow for faster travel. You've got the transcontinental railroad. You just mentioned hydraulic mining. I mean, I guess they didn't call it the gold rush for nothing. All of these things quickened what would have otherwise been a very slow moving phenomenon, I guess.

Nathaniel Philbrick Yeah, yeah. I mean, it's the rush. That's why I named the book The Rush. I began to realize the real story is not necessarily the gold. It's how the velocity of life increased with the discovery of gold in California. Because suddenly, just all those

innovations you mentioned, that means the word of it gets out really quick. Not only across America, but around the world. And so it just brings this avalanche of humanity in California's direction. And with the technologies, everything's increasing the velocity of life. And there's this element of impatience and that hadn't existed before because suddenly we're not moving west gradually so that we can get new land for a farm. So we can, you know, farm just like our parents did, but in a new area. This is now, we want to leapfrog, you know across 2,000 miles and get to California. We have no intention of living there necessarily. We're in our only intention is to get rich as quickly as possible in a couple of years and then go home and live the life of luxury. A Mark Twain has this wonderful. Comment where he you know, he was a teenager when gold was discovered. He was in Hannibal, Missouri and He said, you know growing up no one talked about as a child getting rich I mean that just wasn't on the radar He said but then came the California Gold Rush and then all of these Missourians went out You know with the intention of getting rich he's and he said, do you know from that point on a hardness and a the cupidity of life began to rise to the fore. He would call it the Gilded Age, I think appropriately, given how it all started. And so one of the arguments of my book is that the California Gold Rush wasn't just about gold, it was about how it created a new sense of impatience and speed that I think we're still living in its consequences. And so, you know, that's... What I felt was, you know, and it speed increased not just, you know in terms of the pace of life in San Francisco, but what was happening in the country, particularly when it came to slavery.

Lauren Korn Let's get into this idea of California as a free or slave state. I'm going to kind of just quote back at you Nat for a couple of minutes here. You write that the rush to California, it turned out, was about much more than gold. It was about whether the new western half of the country was going to be free or slaves. And then that the Civil War was more than a decade away, but in a very real sense, the first skirmishes of that looming conflict were about to be fought in the gold fields of California. We've discussed all of this. And speaking to what you said at the beginning of our conversation, you write that the white, specifically the white minors, anti-slavery was driven not by abolitionist ideal, but by a refusal to compete with slave labor or share the wealth with black people. I'm wondering, that paradox, I guess, that free white men refuse to dig alongside slaves, how did that, for you or maybe just like... How might this book more broadly reframe what I'll call like the American myth of Western freedom.

Nathaniel Philbrick Yeah, yeah, no, it's it's, it is a paradox, you know, that the the miners see themselves as as in search of liberty and freedom in the mines And that means they don't want to share it with anybody else and so they drive them off and and then it comes to the fore over this issue of slavery and so you have American miners many of them from Oregon and and northern areas who object to the southerners who show up with enslaved workers and expect to enlist them in mining. And so there's this one incident on the Yuba River very early on in 1849, in which they come to almost literal blows over it. And the enslaved people end up running away and the southeners give up. But it's kind of one of the first skirmishes of the Civil War, I think you can see. And so, you know, California is gonna have to come in as a free state, but it's not because people are abolitionists, it's because they don't wanna share with the gold fields. And this means that southerners, pro-slavery southerner, even though California is a free State, it doesn't mean they might be able to dominate California politically.

Lauren Korn Yeah, in this book, right, you're sort of spotlighting the fact that gold or wealth was flowing from San Francisco to the North, right? And I'm wondering how critical that wealth, that very new wealth was to the Union and sustaining a war that was ultimately won.

Nathaniel Philbrick Oh, it was absolutely essential. Yeah, I mean, they were sending three to $4 million of precious metals east every month. I mean this is, it's huge. And you know, the Civil War begins to break out. The South would love to have this supply. The North would love this supply, I think many Americans don't realize how close it came to going. With the South. I mean, it was very close. But it would go with the North ultimately. And as Ulysses Grant would write, I don't know how we could fight this war without the gold from California. And as a Southerner would say after the Civil War, you guys didn't beat us on the battlefield. You beat us, you know, on the ledger sheet. You know it was it was the gold it was. It was the Norse ability to take out these huge loans that to finance the war. And it was California gold that enabled this to happen.

Lauren Korn This is maybe a strange question, maybe not, but talk Nat about how the gold rush of this mid 19th century sort of normalized or even presumed failure.

Nathaniel Philbrick Yeah, yeah. It's so different from the age of Ben Franklin and all this stuff. This is something where you go at it with your arms pinwheeling, your head butting in, and you're going at it full bore, not worrying about who you're gonna knock down, and not worrying if you hit a brick wall and need to start all over again. I mean, failure is assumed to be part of it. Because you just keep trying, keep trying keep pushing, and who knows, you might break through and be one of the few that actually become rich. And so this is an ethos of the California gold rush that it's a straight line into the future in terms of, Mark Twain was alluding to it, it's just an approach that is messy. Is potentially terrifying, but can work in a big way. And so you see so many of the people, instrumental in the California Gold Rush that I depict in this book that finally bust through, but then they'll lose it again because they're just always.

Lauren Korn That was Nathaniel Philbrick, author of The Rush, California Gold, the Civil War, and the Making of the Modern World, out now from Viking Books. To listen to this conversation again, to share it with friends, or to learn more about Nat, head to mtpr.org. You've been listening to The Write Question. This episode was produced by Chris Moyles and me, I'm your host, Lauren Korn. Chris also engineered this episode. The artwork for The Write Question was designed by Molly Russell. Funding for The Write Question is provided by the Greater Montana Foundation, encouraging communication on issues, trends, and values of importance to Montanans. Many thanks to Humanities Montana for supporting this program since 2008. And thank you for listening. The Write Question is a production of Montana Public Radio.