Gold Dust or Bust

A Musical Play for Kids about the California Gold Rush

Script, teacher’s guide, and audio recording with songs and instrumental accompaniment

Ron Fink and John Heath

Illustrations by Bert Davis

Bad Wolf Press
Camarillo, California
Gold Dust or Bust
by Ron Fink and John Heath

The duration of the show is about 30 minutes

CHARACTERS:

Luzena Wilson
Becky
John Sutter
James Marshall
Gold Fever Singers
Overlanders
Sam
Argonauts
Pan Miners
Carnival Barker
Johnny the Announcer
Children
Merchants
City Miners

and a Chorus made up of all students who are not playing roles at the time.

FLEXIBLE CASTING:
From 11-40 students.
Use as many Overlanders, Argonauts, Merchants, etc.
as desired; one student can also play more than one role. Note that roles are not gender-specific: Sam
can easily be played by a girl, for example; see our comments on page 30 of the Teacher’s Guide.
So grab your picks and shovels, friends
It's all gonna change real soon
Gold dust or bust
Gold dust or bust
Start singing a different tune.
Gold dust or bust
Gold dust or bust
Gold dust or bust
Gold dust or bust.

(CLASS exits. LUZENA and BECKY step forward)

LUZENA (to audience): Hello. My name is Luzena Wilson. I was one of the first women to come to California during the gold rush. This is my friend Becky, and we'll be your guides today.

BECKY: You're in luck. It's January 24th, 1848, and we're near Sacramento at a new saw mill owned by John Sutter. Luzena, you know what happened here on this fateful day?

LUZENA: I sure do.

BECKY: It's the day I discovered gold and started the gold rush. I was fishing for trout and accidentally hooked a gold nugget the size of a Land Rover. The rest is history.

LUZENA: Becky, let's not start that again.
(to audience)
Becky tends to lie a little bit.
SUTTER:

It’s our little secret
It’s just between us
Our little secret
Let’s not make a fuss.

SUTTER and MARSHALL:

Our little secret
We won’t tell a soul
   (THEY sing the last three words loudly)
Nobody needs to find out we found gold.

SUTTER, MARSHALL, and TWO OTHERS from CHORUS:

It’s our little secret
We’ll just tell our friends
Maybe a cousin
But that’s where it ends.

SUTTER, MARSHALL, and FOUR OTHERS from CHORUS:

Our little secret
We don’t have a doubt
No way our secret can ever get out.

We found gold
We found gold
We found gold
   (quietly)
But it’s a secret.

SUTTER, MARSHALL, and SIX OTHERS (quietly):

It’s our little secret
So don’t talk too loud
If we are careful
We won’t draw a crowd.
LUZENA: Of course, the "secret" was soon out. In December of 1848, President James Polk announced to the entire nation that huge amounts of gold had been found in northern California.

BECKY: President Polk was a great man. He invented television, and so a grateful nation named their favorite card game, poker, in his honor.

LUZENA: Becky, stop it. None of that is true. However, the entire nation did catch gold fever. From New England to New Orleans, people dreamed of getting rich in California.

(THEY exit, as GOLD FEVER SINGERS appear)

GOLD FEVER SINGERS:

Gold fever
All over the place.
Gold fever
A terrible case
Oh gold fever
It’s deep in my chest
Gold fever
We’ve gotta go West.

I dream of golden nuggets (Do-be-do-bah)
Gold dust in golden buckets (Do-be-do-bah)
This bug is so outrageous (Do-be-do-bah)
It’s terribly contagious
Do-be-deh-do-bah, la la la la.

Gold fever
All over the place
Gold fever
A terrible case
Oh gold fever
It’s deep in my chest
Gold fever
We’ve gotta go West.
(THEY exit as OVERLANDERS enter)

OVERLANDERS:

Leaving Missouri one gentle spring day
Hundreds of wagons are going our way.
None of us wants to believe we can fail
But it's mighty rough on the Overland Trail.
Mighty rough
Mighty rough
Oh it's mighty rough on the Overland Trail.

Rivers swell up and you can't get across
Some folks get sick and some others get lost
For some it's the heat and for some it's the hail
'Cause it's mighty rough on the Overland Trail.
Mighty rough
Mighty rough
Oh it's mighty rough on the Overland Trail.

Seven weeks out and the oxen grow weak
We toss from the wagon the stuff we don't need.
The plains start to look like a furniture sale
'Cause it's mighty rough on the Overland Trail.
Mighty rough
Mighty rough
Oh it's mighty rough on the Overland Trail.

Before it snowed
The Sierras were so blue...
ARGONAUTS:

The waves are high
Supplies are low
We’re packed on deck
We’re crammed below

But what is worse
There’s zilch to do
You’re sick of me
I’m tired of you.

We’re Argonauts
We’re going nuts
On a six-month ocean trip
We’re Argonauts
We’re going nuts
16,000 miles by ship.

We’ve read the books
We’ve met the folk
We’ve sung that song
We’ve heard that joke.

We’ve played charades
A million times
We’ve banned the bards
We’ve shot the mimes.

ARGONAUTS and CHORUS:

We’re Argonauts
We’re going nuts
On a six-month ocean trip
We’re Argonauts
We’re going nuts
16,000 miles by ship.

EXCITED ARGONAUT (spoken): Hey everybody, let’s dance!

OTHER ARGONAULTS (bored): Blech.
PAN-MINERS:

I’m just one pan away from striking paydirt
Just one pan away from being rich
There’s icy water up to my knees
Can’t feel my thumbs and my toes might freeze
Still I’ve got that “any day now” itch.

I’m just one pan away from El Dorado
Just one pan to hit the Mother Lode
The air’s a hundred and ten degrees
My head’s on fire and there ain’t no breeze
Still it’s not the time to hit the road.

’Cause I’ve got a fortune
Right here in my hand
I’ve got a fortune
In this mud and sand.
I’ve got a fortune
Waiting for me here
Maybe not this time
but my time is near.

One more scoop
One more scoop
One more scoop
We can’t stop scooping.

PAN MINERS and CHORUS:

I’m just one pan away from striking paydirt
Just one pan away from being rich
There’s icy water up to my knees
Can’t feel my thumbs and my toes might freeze
Still I’ve got that “any day now” itch.
Still I’ve got that “any day now” itch.

(THEY exit. SAM, BECKY, and LUZENA enter. On the other side of the stage a carnival booth appears with a big banner above it reading “Know Your Fires.” The carnival barker at the booth calls out:)}
(a bell rings)

BARKER: That's absolutely correct! Okay, Johnny, tell the lucky lady what she's won.

JOHNNY (stepping in front with a microphone): Better go home and pack, Becky, because we're sending you on six-day, five-night whirlwind tour of...the mining camps. You'll enjoy first-class accommodations in a wet tent at Fiddletown, Red Dog, and Poker Flat. You'll dine in the best saloon in Squabbletown, talk to burnout miners at Mad Ox Ravine, and visit some of the tallest trees in Hangtown. And you'll end your dream vacation at Poverty Hill, all courtesy of Know Your Fires, generously supported by a grant from Leonard's Lumber Supply.

(ALL exit, BECKY shouting "I can't believe I won!" The CHILDREN enter)

CHILDREN:

We are the children of the miners
We are the young forty-niners.
Fetching firewood for sale
Hauling water, hunting quail.

We are the children of the miners
We are the young forty-niners.
Sneaking in saloons next door
Scraping gold dust off the floor.

CHILDREN and CHORUS:

Ooh...

We are the children of the miners
We are the young forty-niners.
If your wond'ring 'bout our smiles
There's no school around for miles.

Ooh...
(MERCHANTS enter)

MERCHANTS:

Mr. Studebaker's got wheelbarrows
Mr. Armour's got his butcher shop
Mark Hopkins comes along now selling groceries
Don't think that he's gonna stop.

We're merchants
And we have found gold
We're merchants
With profits untold.
We're merchants
A marvelous thing
We're merchants
And retail is king.

Mr. Levi-Strauss has got his canvas
Making tents was getting too routine
Now he has got his scissors and his rivets
He's found a fit in blue jeans.

MERCHANTS and CHORUS:

We're merchants
And we have found gold
We're merchants
With profits untold.
We're merchants
A marvelous thing
We're merchants
And retail is king.
CITY MINERS:

We dig in the spring
We dig in the summer
We dig while the blue skies last.

In winter it rains -
The rivers are flooded
We head to the cities fast.

The mud is so deep
The cows disappear now
There's nothing but muffled moos.

We got those cow-sinking

CHORUS: Cow-sinking

Sock-stinking

CHORUS: Sock-stinking

What the heck were we thinking?
Waiting out the winter time blues.

We're sleeping in tents
In cold San Francisco
And looking for work all day.

We're carrying wood
And digging some ditches
And gambling our gold away.
BECKY: Good. Because this gold rush thing is just about over. When my mother invented nuclear energy in 1854 it was no longer economically feasible...

LUZENA: Becky, when are you going to learn? You don’t have to make up history—it’s strange enough by itself.

BECKY: So you don’t want to hear about how Big Foot helped build the Golden Gate Bridge?

ENTIRE CLASS: No!
   (sings)

Restless northern California
In 1855
Not much gold is now found
We start settling down
Just trying to survive.

Restless northern California
In 1855
Cooks and farmers once more
Just like we were before
And hoping we will thrive.

Forget your picks and shovels, friends
It’s all gone and changed so soon
Gold dust or bust
Gold dust or bust
Start singing a different tune.

Russians, Swedish, and Chinese
The world has come to stay
Families from Peru
Struggling like us too here by the bay.

Railroad tracks are coming soon
And folks will come again
Go west they are told
When that spike of gold is hammered in.