

A Brief Look at the "Miners Improved Gold Scale Manufactured Expressely for California"

by Jeffrey R. Millet

"Gold! Gold! Gold on the American River!"

The words rang throughout the empty mountain valleys of northern California in early 1848, downstream past Captain John Sutter's fort at New Helvetia and all the way to the sleepy bayfront town of Yerba Buena, later renamed San Francisco. Eventually the cry was heard in the streets of Boston, New York, Paris, and Liverpool, and in countless far-distant places around the globe. It unleashed a tide of humanity unlike any known to history before or since.

California's Gold Rush was on! Thousands swarmed to this pastoral wilderness just won from Mexico, so many that by 1850 the only recent dream of America's "Manifest Destiny" had become reality. In just two short years California would go from a dim awareness in the minds of most of the population to the thirty-first-and-richest-state in the Union.

The lure of this new golden empire and its sudden wealth was irresistible for many who were possessed by visions of picking up rocks of solid gold from the ground, free for the taking. Free, that is, to those with the dash and the daring to get there. But, as California's gold regions were unsettled, they would need to bring with them everything for the task at hand: food, clothing, woolen underwear, broad-brimmed hats to shield their eyes from the intense California sun, India-rubber boots to insulate their feet from the icy waters of its gold-bearing streams, patented gold-washing machines, picks, pans, and of course, scales with which to weigh their "dust."

Naturally, the so-called argonauts wanted to identify with and to be identified with their great adventure. Soon a flood of special "California Goods" was on the shelves of tent stores in every river port and mining camp in the Sierra foothills. California boots, knives, brandy and gold amalgamators appeared as well as the subject of our story, the fascinating "Miners Improved Gold Scales - Manufactured Expressely For California."

MINERS.

**NEW GOODS,
PROVISIONS, TOOLS,
CLOTHING, &c. &c.**

GREAT BARGAINS!

MINING TOOLS, &c.; BUILDING MATERIALS, &c.

Cradles, Shovels, Spades, Hoes, Picks, Axes, Hatchets, Hammers; every variety of Workman's Tools, Nails, Screws, Brads, &c.

SUPERIOR GOLD SCALES.

MEDICINE CHESTS, &c.

Superior Medicine Chests, well assorted, together with the principal Important Medicines for Dysentery, Fever and Fever and Ague, Scurvy, &c.

N.B.—Important Express Arrangement for Miners.

The Subscribers will run an EXPRESS to and from every Steamer, carrying and returning Letters for the Post Office and Expresses to the States. Also, conveying "GOLD DUST" or Parcels, to and from the Mines to the Banking Houses, or the several Expresses for the States, insuring their safety.—The various NEWSPAPERS, from the Eastern, Western and Southern States, will also be found on sale at our stores, together with a large stock of BOOKS and PAMPHLETS constantly on hand.

Excelsior Tent, Mormon Island,
January 1, 1850.

ACTA CALIFORNIA PRESS

WARREN & CO.

These pocket-size gold scales have long been favorites among mining and western Americana collectors. Their colorful oval tin boxes with fancy gilt decoration and "California" lettering uniquely echo the flavor and history of the pioneer mining days of so long ago.

As with many items used during the Gold Rush, the "Miners Improved" scales were imported. A few are marked "Germany" on their lid, fewer still on the brass balance beam. Occasionally the small brass weights are stamped with the name, "Hammel Riglander & Co. Germany." Perhaps this gives us a clue to the maker of the scales as well. Construction is uniformly good, of soldered tin with a single hinge at the rear. Little is known about them otherwise, but they apparently date from the 1850s, and perhaps into the 1860s.

While some variations exist within the "Miners Improved" scales, such as lettering size and hinge style, they nevertheless appear to be the product of one maker. Two basic sizes are seen, the larger box measuring about 7 1/4 by 3 3/8 inches and the smaller size about 6 1/8 by 3 1/8 inches. Exteriors are painted in a variety of colors, designed no doubt to catch the eye and the fancy of the young and energetic Forty-Niners: apple green, dark green, black, translucent royal blue, dark blue, dark yellow, ocher brown, dark brown, red, and maroon examples are known. Perhaps the more common exterior colors seen by collectors are the red, brown, and dark green; certainly rarer colors are the translucent royal blue, dark yellow, and black -- the latter known only in the smaller size, at least to this writer. Any "Miners Improved" scales are rare and desirable, however.

Interiors are frequently painted a contrasting color from that of the outside and have a separate tin compartment, often with a hinged lid, to hold the troy weights ("troy" being the common measure for weighing gold). Excepting the iron pointer (sometimes seen in brass), the scales themselves are of brass construction throughout: balance beam, suspension chains, and double pans.

Interestingly, one apparently earlier version has been observed, though not personally by the author. On the lid was the legend, "Miners Gold Scale -- Manufactured Expressely for California." Note that it does not include the word "Improved," and that the difference was in earlier style string pan suspensions rather than brass chains.

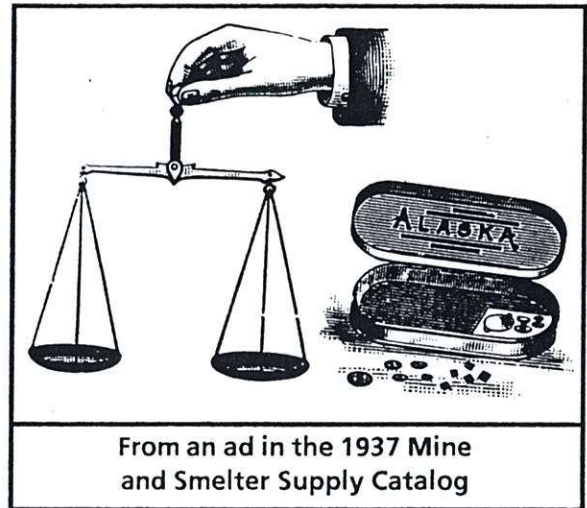
Markings on the domed, oval-shaped box lids are uniform in both sizes. A single line border surrounds the legend "MINERS IMPROVED GOLD SCALE" and in quotes, "'manufactured expressely for California'" in two arched lines above and below a classic American spread-wing eagle. The eagle clutches an olive branch and three arrows in his talons and bears a shield across its breast.

Perhaps the most frequently encountered versions have the word "JMPROVED" spelled with a "J" instead of "I" as the first letter. This was apparently a common German usage of the period, as it has been noted elsewhere. These examples also have the word "Expressely" spelled with a third "e," and together these spellings have been observed on both the large and small boxes. Later the maker corrected these misspellings, as seen on a large-size example in the author's collection. This example also has the word "Germany" centered below the corrected "Expressly."

Far more common, but likely made by the same firm, are those boxes made without the lettering but having the same eagle and line border. Variations are seen in the border designs: "vine and leaves" and "holly and berries" styles have been noted. While these may have been used for other weighing needs, apothecary, for instance, no doubt many found their way to the stream beds, stores, and saloons of the Gold Rush.

Another, and doubtless later, version of the "Miners Improved" gold scales is known, -- the rectangular box having rounded corners. It too is seen in both the large and small sizes, of the same approximate dimensions as the oval boxes. Chief differences, aside from the shape, are the absence of quote marks, block lettering with an apostrophe added to "MINERS'," and the large, horizontal flying eagle, which holds in its claws a ribbon bearing the patriotic legend, "E Pluribus Unum." Inside, a wooden block held in place by pins encloses five cylindrical brass weights with finger knobs. With the exception of a slightly larger brass beam and hanger on an example in the author's collection, the scales themselves are unmarked and virtually identical to those found in the oval boxes. All noted specimens of the rectangular box, incidentally, have been the same color inside and out: a medium forest green with gold lettering and trim.

Similar, even larger examples of scales in flat, oval green boxes are also known to collectors, some bearing the bold word, "Alaska" in gold, others with "Seattle Hardware Company" in gold or a mustard-yellow color. Usually there is a raised, oval border stamped into the lid, as well. These were obviously intended for sale and use during the great Klondike Rush of 1897, when hundreds of hardy men and women headed "North to Alaska" to pursue yet another golden dream.



From an ad in the 1937 Mine and Smelter Supply Catalog

Though not "Miners Improved," another early type of gold scales falls within the scope of this article, and is of great collector interest. This is the "Miner's Companion" scale, of which only a handful of examples are known. Of the several known to this writer, all are virtually identical: a rectangular wood box having rounded corners, paved with red leather, and measuring approximately $7 \frac{3}{8}$ by $4 \frac{1}{4}$ inches by $1 \frac{1}{2}$ inches deep. On the lid is a single-line border with filigree corner designs, and the large block letters "MINERS COMPANION" in either block or gold. The inside is lined with deerskin and has fitted compartments for the large, brass-beam scales, eight special-size cylindrical brass weights, and a small brass-lidded compartment for small weights. The lid is closed by a latch with a brass button release on the outside. In any condition, "Miner's Companion" scales are rare and desirable.

Yet, no matter which type of pocket scale you own, all are colorful relics of a compelling and bygone era. Fortunate indeed is the collector who has several sizes and colors of "Miners Improved" scales in his collection, or even knows the whereabouts of a "Miner's Companion." And the "Alaska" marked specimens are increasingly popular as interest in the Klondike Gold Rush grows. Each provides a fascinating window to our historic western and mining past, deserving of continued research and study. I hope this article provides a small start in that direction.

Jeff Millet is a lifelong collector of California Gold Rush and western history. He lives in southern California where he is a partner in Graphic: Publishers, specializing in the publication of collector, civic and educational books. If you can add to the information in this article, please write to him at PO Box 6506, Santa Ana, CA 92706.