There’s Still Gold in Those Hills

America experienced a “gold rush” in the middle of the nineteenth century. Gold was discovered in the California mountains in 1848, and thousands of people hurried there. These gold seekers were called forty-niners, named after the year that followed, 1849. Gold rushes also took place in the present-day states of Colorado, Nevada, Montana, Arizona, New Mexico, Idaho, Oregon, and Alaska.

Now, over one hundred years later, the gold-mining operations have long since been abandoned, but that doesn’t mean that all the precious metal is gone. In fact, there’s still gold in those hills, and with a little luck and a bit of work, people can find it. They can pan for gold, just as the forty-niners did so many years ago.

Where to Look

Although gold has been found in all 50 states, the most promising areas in which to search are the states in the western third of the country. Because the metal gets washed out of the mountains by water, a gold seeker looks for a stream. A smaller creek is usually the best place to find gold, since a stream that fills with rainwater from time to time will have seen a good deal of erosion, allowing gold to travel most easily.

With much luck, gold can be found in nugget form, but most often, it appears as small flakes. Gold is very heavy and sinks. A miner might look for a little waterfall in the stream, as gold may be below it. Also, gold gets trapped deep down along the banks where the creek bends or might also be found immediately downstream of a boulder or rock formation in the stream.

Getting to the Gold

Those searching for gold will likely need a shovel to dig up the rocks in the stream where there might be gold, as well as a pan that looks like a pie plate. Gold-panning pans are still sold at sports stores and hobby shops. Knowing how to care for the pan, however, is especially important.

Any grease or oil in the pan needs to be removed. If there’s anything slick on the pan’s surface—even just oil from a person’s fingers—the flakes of gold will be washed out. Heating the pan on a fire or the stove is the suggested way to get rid of the oil and make the pan ready for use!

A gold seeker digs up a shovelful of gravel from the stream and puts it in the pan; then, he or she dips the pan into the stream and allows the water to soak the material. The seeker shakes the pan a few times to let the heavier bits settle to the bottom. After the pan is tipped slightly so that the grass, leaves, pine needles, and any other material float out, the gold will begin sinking to the bottom of the pan.

The seeker will want to get rid of the remaining rocks and gravel but should avoid using his or her hands, since the oil left behind by fingers will wash the gold out. It is best to use a stick to scrape out the top inch or so of gravel.

More Water

Unless a gold seeker spies a nugget in the pan (what luck!), he or she needs to add more water to the mix. The seeker swishes the material in the pan in a slow, circular movement. The pan is tilted
slightly so that the lightweight sand slips over the edge. Water is added as needed, and the process is repeated.

Soon only a small part of the pan will be covered with concentrated material of what appears to be black sand. The swishing motion will spread the sand out in a feather pattern. The bits of material at the tail end of the feather are called tailings, and it is in these tailings where the gold bits can be found.

Is It Gold?

The black sand is called magnetite because of its magnetic properties. By using a magnet, the sand can actually be picked up and moved out of the pan. What gold panners hope to see left behind are flakes of gold, which can be tiny specks or larger flakes the size and shape of breakfast cereal. But people can be tricked by the matter that twinkles like a crystal. This material is probably “fool’s gold”—a nearly worthless material that resembles gold—while actual gold is yellow with a sheen to it. Tweezers are used to pick out the authentic gold flakes and place them in a container. Now the gold miner is ready to dig up another shovelful of gravel and begin the process all over again.

What if the miner didn’t find any gold? He or she shouldn’t give up. Even the best miners didn’t find precious metal in every pan. But like the gold seekers of today who enjoy panning, the forty-niners were well aware that there was still gold in those hills.

How to Pan for Gold

1. Fill the pan almost to the top with sand and gravel from a stream.
2. Dip the pan into the stream to fill it with water.
3. Swirl the pan so the gold sinks to the bottom.
4. Scrape the top layer of sand out of the pan.
5. Add water and repeat the process until a small amount of sand remains.
6. Remove bits of gold with tweezers.
The following letter was written in 1850 by Sheldon Shufelt, a gold seeker who wrote to his cousin from the gold fields in California.

Letter from a Gold Miner

Dear Cousin,

We hired an ox team to carry our baggage and started for this place . . . . Ten miles from the river we passed Sutters fort, an old looking heap of buildings surrounded by a high wall of unburnt brick, and situated in the midst of a pleasant fertile plain, covered with grass and a few scattering oaks with numerous tame cattle and mules. We walked by the wagon and at night cooked our suppers, rolled our blankets around us and lay down to rest on the ground . . . . After leaving the plains we passed over some hills that looked dry and barren being burnt up by the sun and the long droughts that we have there. We reached this place at night on the fourth day, and in the morning found ourselves in the midst of the diggings, being surrounded by holes dug.

We pitched our tents, shouldered our picks and shovels and with pan in hand sallied forth to try our fortunes at gold digging. We did not have very good success being green at mining, but by practice and observation we soon improved some, and found a little of the shining metal.

It is found along the banks of the streams and in the beds of the same, and in almost every little ravine putting into the streams. And often from 10 to 50 feet from the beds up the bank. We sometimes have to dig several feet deep before we find any, in other places, all the dirt and clay will pay to wash, but generally the clay pays best. If there is no clay, then it is found down on the rock. All the lumps are found on the rocks—and most of the fine gold. We tell when it will pay by trying the dirt with a pan. This is called prospecting here. If it will pay from six to 12 ½ per pan full, then we go to work. Some wash with cradles some with what is called a tom and various other fixings. But I like the tom best of anything that I have seen.

It is a box or trough, about 8 or 9 feet long, some 18 inches wide and from 5 to 6 inches high, with an iron sieve in one end punched with ½ inch holes. Underneath this is placed a ripple or box with two ripples across it. The tom is then placed in an oblique position, the water is brought on by means of a hose. The dirt, stone, clay and all is then thrown in and stirred with a shovel until the water runs clear, the gold and finer gravel goes through the sieve and falls in the under box and lodges above the ripples. Three men can wash all day without taking this out as the water washes the loose gravel over and all the gold settles at the bottom.
The passages *There's Still Gold in Those Hills* and *Letters from a Gold Miner* are both about the history of gold mining. Explain how the passages help the reader understand the history and process of gold mining in the United States. Write a well-organized, structured response using specific evidence from BOTH passages to support your answer.