



Words and Their Stories: Pan

Now, the VOA Special English program WORDS AND THEIR STORIES. Today's word, pan, takes us back to the days of the gold rush in California.

On January twenty-fourth, eighteen forty-eight, a man named James Wilson Marshall discovered gold in the territory of California. The news spread quickly. Thousands rushed west. They traveled on foot, by horseback and by boat to reach the gold fields. By eighteen forty-nine, the great gold rush was on.

Towns and cities grew overnight. Throughout the territory – in the mountains, along the streams and rivers – thousands of people searched for gold. They had food to eat and blankets to cover them. They also had mules to ride, and picks and pans to search for gold.

Some found areas of mountain rock thick with gold. These men got rich. But such areas were few and quickly claimed by the first men to find them. Others searched for gold in the rivers coming down the mountains. They were after pieces of gold that the rains had washed down from above.

The only way to find this gold was by panning. First a gold miner put dirt in a metal pan and added water. Then he shook the pan so that the water would wash the dirt. Slowly, he poured the water out of the pan. If he was a lucky miner, pieces of gold would remain.

Across the nation, newspapers carried stories of the gold being found. One told how thousands of people climbed the mountains looking for gold. Some stories told how others followed the rivers and streams with pans. Each one hoped that the place he claimed panned out well – had some gold.

For many, gold mining did not pan out. For a few, it panned out well. But in time, huge machines were built that could wash many tons of dirt at a time. Panning died out.

The word, however, remained in the language. Today, Americans still say, "It panned out well," when something they have done pleases them. A business, a discovery, a simple event pans out well if it is successful. Unhappily, sometimes things do not pan out.

In recent years, the word pan has taken on another meaning. Today, it also means to criticize. How it got this meaning is hard to discover. But the job of a critic is to sometimes pan the work of a writer, artist or singer.

Sometimes, critics may pan a movie or play so severely that no one will go to see it. There are times, however, when a play became highly successful, even though most of the critics panned it without mercy. The pans should have washed out the play. But, as actors have pointed out, sometimes a critic's pan turns up gold.

(MUSIC)

This VOA Special English program WORDS AND THEIR STORIES was written by Herb Sutcliffe. I'm Warren Scheer.