

## **“The Outcasts of Poker Flat”**

by Bret Harte

**1. As Mr. John Oakhurst, gambler, stepped into the main street of Poker Flat on the morning of the 23d of November, 1850, he was conscious of a change in its moral atmosphere since the preceding night. Two or three men, conversing earnestly together, ceased as he approached, and exchanged significant glances. There was a Sabbath lull in the air, which, in a settlement unused to Sabbath influences, looked ominous.**

What does this passage suggest about the characteristics of this mining camp?

### **Online research:**

Historically, what happened to mining camps when the gold was gone? What are these places often called? What are the names of some famous ones? What were they like?

**2. In point of fact, Poker Flat was "after somebody." It had lately suffered the loss of several thousand dollars, two valuable horses, and a prominent citizen. It was experiencing a spasm of virtuous reaction, quite as lawless and ungovernable as any of the acts that had provoked it. A secret committee had determined to rid the town of all improper persons. This was done permanently in regard of two men who were then hanging from the boughs of a sycamore in the gulch, and temporarily in the banishment of certain other objectionable characters. I regret to say that some of these were ladies. It is but due to the sex, however, to state that their impropriety was professional, and it was only in such easily established standards of evil that Poker Flat ventured to sit in judgment.**

What does this passage suggest about the characteristics of frontier justice?

### **Online Research:**

What historical accounts do you know about “lawmen” of the time or famous outlaws? What happened to them?

**3. A few of the committee had urged hanging him as a possible example, and a sure method of reimbursing themselves from his pockets of the sums he had won from them. "It's agin justice," said Jim Wheeler, "to let this yer young man from Roaring Camp--an entire stranger--carry away our money." But a crude sentiment of equity residing in the breasts of those who had been fortunate enough to win from Mr. Oakhurst overruled this narrower local prejudice.**

What does this passage suggest about some of the inhabitants of Poker Flat? What is suggested about John Oakhurst?

### **Online Research:**

What kind of strategies might a professional gambler use?

**4. The road to Sandy Bar . . . lay over a steep mountain range. It was distant a day's severe travel. In that advanced season, the party soon passed out of the moist, temperate regions of the foot-hills into the dry, cold, bracing air of the Sierras. The trail was narrow and difficult. At noon the Duchess, rolling out of her saddle upon the ground, declared her intention of going no farther, and the party halted.**

What does the passage imply about travel in the old west?

**Online Research:**

What historical facts about travel or accounts of journeys do you know?

**5. The Innocent, with the aid of pine-boughs, extemporized a thatch for the roofless cabin, and the Duchess directed Piney in the rearrangement of the interior with a taste and tact that opened the blue eyes of that provincial maiden to their fullest extent. "I reckon now you're used to fine things at Poker Flat," said Piney. The Duchess turned away sharply to conceal something that reddened her cheeks through their professional tint, and Mother Shipton requested Piney not to "chatter."**

What characteristic western phrase does Piney use? What does it mean?

**Online Research:**

What other phrases from the "old West" do you know?

**6. But the crowning festivity of the evening was reached in a rude camp-meeting hymn, which the lovers, joining hands, sang with great earnestness and vociferation. I fear that a certain defiant tone and Covenanters' swing to its chorus, rather than any devotional quality, caused it speedily to infect the others, who at last joined in the refrain:**

**"I'm proud to live in the service of the Lord,  
And I'm bound to die in His army."**

What aspects of "local color" does this passage convey?

**Online Research:**

What other songs of the time might serve to unite people?