

Iowa Eldorado

Searching for Gold in 1858

by Eric Lana

As Iowans sat down to read their newspapers in the spring of 1858, a sudden glimmer of hope seemed to brighten the hard economic times that plagued the nation.

The story began because Iowa farmer Jeremiah Hewitt also caught a glimmer of something bright. Hewitt was prospecting for coal on his 48-acre farm eight miles north of Osceola, in Clarke County. Instead of coal he found gold.

"He struck a small vein of black sand and quartz rock, which upon examination, was found to contain gold," a Mr. Eldridge wrote to the *Burlington Daily Hawk-Eye*, where the story appeared on March 20. Eldridge was certain "there is no humbug about it."

"Several Californians have since visited the place and tested it, and pronounce it pure gold. Men are engaged in digging," Eldridge added. "Great excitement prevails."

The same day that the story appeared in the *Hawk-Eye*, the *Winterset Madisionian* reported discoveries of gold in Madison and Adair Counties. Within five days, citizens in Davenport and Dubuque were reading the exciting news in their own papers.

By mid-April, according to Osceola's postmaster Ridgway, "a company of some 50 hands [was] at work turning South River" and building a dam and a race. "There are others making good wages, digging in the hills bordering the streams."

So began the mad scramble for gold in a new Eldorado—Iowa.

Judging from the newspapers, gold seemed to be just about everywhere. Twenty-three-year-old Benjamin Sears went looking for it along the Maquoketa River, about a mile north of his family's mill. He found it, a Dubuque paper reported, "in every pan of dirt he washed out."

Jonas Keck discovered gold in a slough west of

Sigourney, in Keokuk County. "Mr. Keck spent several years in the gold mines of California," papers said, "and ever since his return has had an abiding faith that the pure metal would be found in many localities in Iowa."

Gold appeared ten miles outside Burlington, on Mud Creek. There, some 50 or more eager gold hunters wanted to tear down "Hall's old Mill" and look for more deposits. The owners resisted; trouble was anticipated.

In Clarke and Madison Counties, gold was showing up "in almost every slough branch."

Farmer Jacob Glass in Marshall County found "a fine specimen of gold bearing quartz . . . near his own residence." Glass must have been startled to find gold there, especially since there were no major waterways in his township, and not even a creek on his 160 acres.

Maquoketa mayor Jonas Clark found "yellow shining particles, very much resembling gold dust, which he dug from the bottom of his cellar, beneath his store room, immediately under the Excelsior office," the paper reported. "Mr. C. has no doubt but this is the pure 'rhino,' and he feels quite confident that large quantities of it may be got by a little more excavation, and by sinking deeper. If this discovery should prove to be a paying one, we may expect soon to see our streets, alleys, and vacant lots dug over into hills and hollows."

In Ottumwa, the same concern surfaced. On a Monday, gold was discovered there. On Tuesday, despite near-constant rain, "a hundred men, perhaps more, were busy in most of the ravines and gulches. . . . It would seem that here, almost in the heart of our city, in every part of our bluff through which a stream penetrates, and in all the ravines about us there is gold."

At the diggings in Burlington, "a great many people were there, and a great many boys, with their pantaloons rolled up very high and very tight, prospecting with tin cups, dippers, gourds, broken skillets, old shoes, cow's horns, broken crockery ware, dilapidated hats, &c., &c. Further up, washers, cradles, and other ingenious machines were . . . [separating] the shining dust

from the common earth. . . . Such a shaking, and scratching and digging and washing, was never seen since the whiteman first crossed the Mississippi. Spades, shovels, hoes, sharp sticks, &c., were used in tossing over the old bones, hair, gravel and sand."

In Iowa City, "mechanics, merchants and laboring men are making exhaustive preparations to dig themselves rich immediately if not sooner."

According to the widespread declarations of gold published in Iowa's newspapers, digging and panning for gold occurred mainly in two distinct regions: the eastern third of the state, and central and south-central Iowa. Some editors, skeptical of "dame Rumor," took care to attribute their reports of gold to "reliable gentlemen" or to "returned Californians" (every town seemed to have a few forty-niners whose experience in the goldfields qualified them as experts in identifying gold or likely places to hunt for it). The cautious *Burlington Hawk-Eye* reported on the "considerable excitement" in town: "Dams have been commenced—races dug, and small streams turned from their channels." But the newspaper still wanted verification from a mint in the East, even though "our own citizens [are] hardly likely to get into a fever about nothing."

Newspapers carefully described the form in which the specimens were found: most often "mixed with black sand" or associated with "rotten" or "decomposed" quartz. But was it the real thing?

Gold made its way into Iowa about 2.5 million years ago. As Paul Garvin explains in *Iowa's Minerals*, glaciers from Canada and Minnesota "scoured weathered granite outcrops and brought small amounts of gold along with rocks and primarily silicate minerals" like quartz and magnetite.

Over time, through weathering and erosion, rocks were slowly broken down and minerals swept into waterways. The gold settled as sediment along with other material of similar size and density, such as magnetite (sometimes called "black sand"), creating what miners would call "placer deposits."

So, yes, there was gold in Iowa—and it was attracting everyone from "inveterate loafers who have never been known to pass an industrious hour at any honest employment" to "men of profitable business [who now] have

appealed to the earth, with spade and pick-axe," as the *Waverly Republican* described them.

Sometimes the gold was the size of a grain of wheat or the head of a pin. Often it was much smaller. Most newspaper reports agreed that successful gold seekers were making \$2 to \$5 a day, "with an occasional 'ten strike.'" This was good money, according to historian Merle Davis. Harvest laborers in Davenport that year were paid \$1 plus board for a 15-hour day (half the rate earned the previous year); heavy rains ruined much of Iowa's wheat and oats, and the hard financial times only worsened the situation for Iowans. But like many papers reporting on the gold discoverers, the *Burlington Hawk-Eye* often asked the question: "Will it pay for digging? Ah! there's the bite."

More Gold Found.—A gentleman yesterday afternoon exhibited to us a specimen of gold-bearing quartz, picked up near the Catfish, in this township. "If this court is any Judge of quartz, and she think she ar," the golp was genuine. Now for a rush to the gold diggins! Dubuque county has never been behind any of her sister counties in any natural or unnatural productions—tall corn, big pumpkins, long squashes, Democratic voters, or wild Irishmen—and she will not be behind any of them in gold. We expect soon to hear of the discovery of an immense placer where one hundred dollars a day can be made with two boys and an old wash pan.

Seriously, however, there is good reason to believe that gold in considerable quantities is to be found in this county. We have long known that upon a certain farm in Jefferson township, owned by a gentleman who has worked in the gold regions of other countries, gold did exist—and we know no reason why it should not be found in other places in the county. Perhaps the golden age is about to dawn again.

Dubuque Daily Times, May 22, 1858

The *Davenport Daily Gazette* answered wryly: "We presume no one man has yet found enough to purchase a meal's victuals."

Still, times were hard, following the national Panic of 1857, and hunting for gold held promise. The economic downturn, the extensive coverage by Iowa newspapers, and plain old curiosity and hope motivated many Iowans to join the search. "We think that there are many persons in various parts of the country now out of employment, who could make sufficient out of the business [of gold seeking] to procure for themselves the necessities of life, with the *chance* of making more," a Davenport newspaper ventured.

Yet Iowa newspapers also cautioned against the lure of easy riches. The *Waverly Republican* advised, "Let those who have nothing to do go to dig, but let no man leave his occupation to look after the gold diggings." The *Republican* also reprinted advice from a Chicago paper: "We trust the good people of Iowa will not run wild with the idea that their State is to be a rival of California. It would be a misfortune if a country so magnificently endowed for purposes of agriculture should have its development retarded by a chase after gold, which never, except in a few rare cases, pays so well as raising potatoes."

As in any gold rush, merchants and tradespeople may have had the most to gain, especially if it brought new people into the state. Some newspapers, playing their important role of town booster, claimed that it did. "Steamboats arriving at [Des Moines] bring with them gold seekers from all parts of the country," the *Waverly Republican* said in late May. The *Marietta Express* reprinted reports that "a large tide of emigration from Indiana and Illinois is pouring into the gold region" in Clarke and adjoining counties. Another paper reported "hundreds from Ohio, Pennsylvania &c."

An influx of people into Iowa would bring a demand for supplies and services, especially important after the Panic of 1857 had depressed prices and stalled railroad and town development. But Iowa editors advertised the promise of fertile soil of Iowa much more than the lure of gold. "Come to Iowa," a Davenport

paper enticed its distant readers. "Our soil is rich in every respect, and gold can be dug from it in more ways than one."

Not everyone wanted a gold rush in Iowa. The *Waverly Republican* foresaw a flood of "adventurers of all classes seeking quick and violent fortunes." A Dubuque paper worried over a "stampede . . . of all that is least worthy, least desirable." The *Clinton Herald* warned of "fools, mad men, and thieves."

"We mourn for Iowa," the *New York Tribune* wailed, in a story reprinted in Dubuque. "No State in the Union has made greater or more rapid advances in population, morality, intelligence, thrift than she has. . . . Though times are hard with her people, as with almost all others, she has an admirable soil and a most industrious, energetic, intelligent people, and was about to work gradually and healthfully out of her difficulties."

"But a great trial, a great peril, has suddenly assailed her. Her future, but yesterday so hopeful, is now over-

More Gold.

We have previously noticed the report finding of gold in Hardon County, and are now satisfied these reports are true. Mr. Stephen G. Crane, formerly of Vinton but now of Steamboat Rock writes us enclosing a specimen that was obtained "from a single pan full of earth, and is poer in comparison with what has been found." This specimen we hand to Mr. Jhon A. Bills, jeweler and goldsmith who subjected is to every known test and pronoces it pure gold. Mr. Crane says a number of peaces worth 25 cents have been found, and one ungget worth \$2.16 dug out a mile abouve the town. The existenco of gold in Hardih can no Joger be donbted, but in remains to be seen wheather mining for wiil be remunerative.—[Vinton Eagle.

Waverly Republican, June 5, 1858

cast and gloomy. Gold has been found on her soil!" Now, the *Tribune* warned, on the "heels of the digger" would come "the whiskey-seller, the dicer, the drab."

Heavy rains and high streams that spring and summer hindered the search for gold, although, as one paper quipped, "the present is an excellent time for wash-

ing, as there is an abundance of water pretty much everywhere." From April through July, 28 inches of rain saturated Iowa City, twice the average of the four surrounding years. In Hardin County, "high water is obstructing the progress of the miners; . . . a great many say that they are making fair wages, with a prospect of doing better as soon as the water subsides."

As summer progressed, reports kept coming in of gold in new places: in Lucas, Decatur, Henry, and Delaware Counties. Near Saylorville and Story City. Panora, Decorah, Danville, and Adel. Steamboat Rock and Strawberry Point. Fort Dodge attorney John Duncombe, rowing by Boonesboro and Millford on his way to Des Moines, observed "the wild gold excitement here" and noted it in his diary. "Every body was hunting gold."

Then he added what all Iowa was finding out: "Small particles were found in many places, but not enough worth digging for."

Iowa's 1858 gold rush died late that summer—barely four months since the first exciting reports, and just as gold was discovered in Colorado. "The gold excitement in Iowa has lulled as suddenly as it started," the *Davenport Gazette* noted in late July. "No one seems to have been injured by it but a few who left their homes in the East to become rich without labor by digging gold in our fertile State. Now and then we still read of small particles being discovered . . . but in no case does it yield as profitably as digging potatoes."

"The 'gold hunters' around Des Moines who were going to turn the Coon, or some other river, or creek, from its bed, and make an everlasting fortune, have broken up," the *Davenport Daily Morning News* observed on August 2. "Thus dies one of the greatest 'discoveries' of the age. There is more money made at Des Moines by turning the stream of State revenue from its channel than in any other way."

Maybe the *Morning News* had said it all back in mid-May: "We have gold here in another shape; we have it in the agricultural wealth of our rich prairie soil." ❖

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NOTE ON SOURCES

Citations and print-outs from Iowa newspapers of 1858 of news items about gold discoveries are held in the *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* production files (SHSI-Iowa City). Harvest wages in Davenport are from Merle Davis, "Wheat, Work, and Wages: The Iowa Experience, 1856-1865" (unpublished manuscript). Other sources include: Paul Garvin, *Iowa's Minerals: Their Occurrence, Origins, Industries, and Lore* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1998), and William J. Petersen, "Gold on the Prairie," *The Palimpsest*, 34:12 (December 1958), 556-59.

Was gold discovered in your county in 1858? Check the newspapers!

You might say that Eric Lana, the author of this article, had something in common with gold-hunting Iowans in 1858. He, too, was searching for gold—but he was looking for it in old Iowa newspapers.

In the last few years, while researching the underground railroad in Iowa with researcher John Zeller, Eric Lana has pored over dozens and dozens of Iowa newspapers from the 1850s. Frequent mention of gold discoveries in 1858 caught his eye and led to further research. He found well over one hundred news items about gold being discovered in Iowa.

Of the 39 counties where gold discoveries were reported, most were in the eastern third of the state: Lee, Des Moines, Louisa, Muscatine, Scott, Clinton, Jackson, Dubuque, Clayton, Davis, Van Buren, Henry, Wapello, Mahaska, Keokuk, Cedar, Johnson, Iowa, Linn, Jones, Delaware, Buchanan, Winneshiek, Bremer, and Floyd Counties. The others were in central and south-central Iowa: Decatur, Lucas, Clarke, Union, Warren, Madison, Adair, Guthrie, Dallas, Polk, Marshall, Story, Boone, and Hardin Counties.

Lana is quick to point out that there may well have been gold discoveries reported in other Iowa counties. After all, he doesn't claim to have read every Iowa newspaper from 1858. In western Iowa, for example, many counties were still being organized in 1858, were sparsely populated, and had far fewer newspapers.

Although gold was indeed found in Iowa, the real treasure, for those of us who love Iowa history, are the extensive collections of Iowa newspapers at the State Historical Society of Iowa's research libraries in Iowa City and Des Moines. Some date as far back as the 1830s and 1840s. Those on microfilm can be borrowed through interlibrary loan. Make the request through your local library. For more information, call 515-281-8741 (Des Moines) or 319-335-3916. Or check our Web site: www.iowahistory.org/library

Iowa newspapers from the last two centuries are goldmines of information about local, state, and national events and attitudes. Whether you're curious about the 1860s—or the 1960s—you'll take great treasures, and pleasures, from reading newspapers from the past.

—The Editor