

# The **P**ALIMPSEST

JULY, 1949

## CONTENTS

*Moses Dillon Jordan*

Westward to Iowa 209

PHILIP D. JORDAN

Moses Sees the Elephant 217

PHILIP D. JORDAN

The Case of the Gold Carrier 229

PHILIP D. JORDAN

Argonauts of 1849 237

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PUBLISHED MONTHLY AT IOWA CITY BY  
THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

ENTERED AS SECOND CLASS MATTER JULY 28 1920 AT THE POST OFFICE AT IOWA CITY IOWA  
UNDER THE ACT OF AUGUST 24 1912



## THE PURPOSE OF THIS MAGAZINE

THE PALIMPSEST, issued monthly by the State Historical Society of Iowa, is devoted to the dissemination of Iowa History. Supplementing the other publications of this Society, it aims to present the materials of Iowa History in a form that is attractive and a style that is popular in the best sense—to the end that the story of our Commonwealth may be more widely read and cherished.

BENJ. F. SHAMBAUGH

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## THE MEANING OF PALIMPSEST

In early times a palimpsest was a parchment or other material from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete; and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

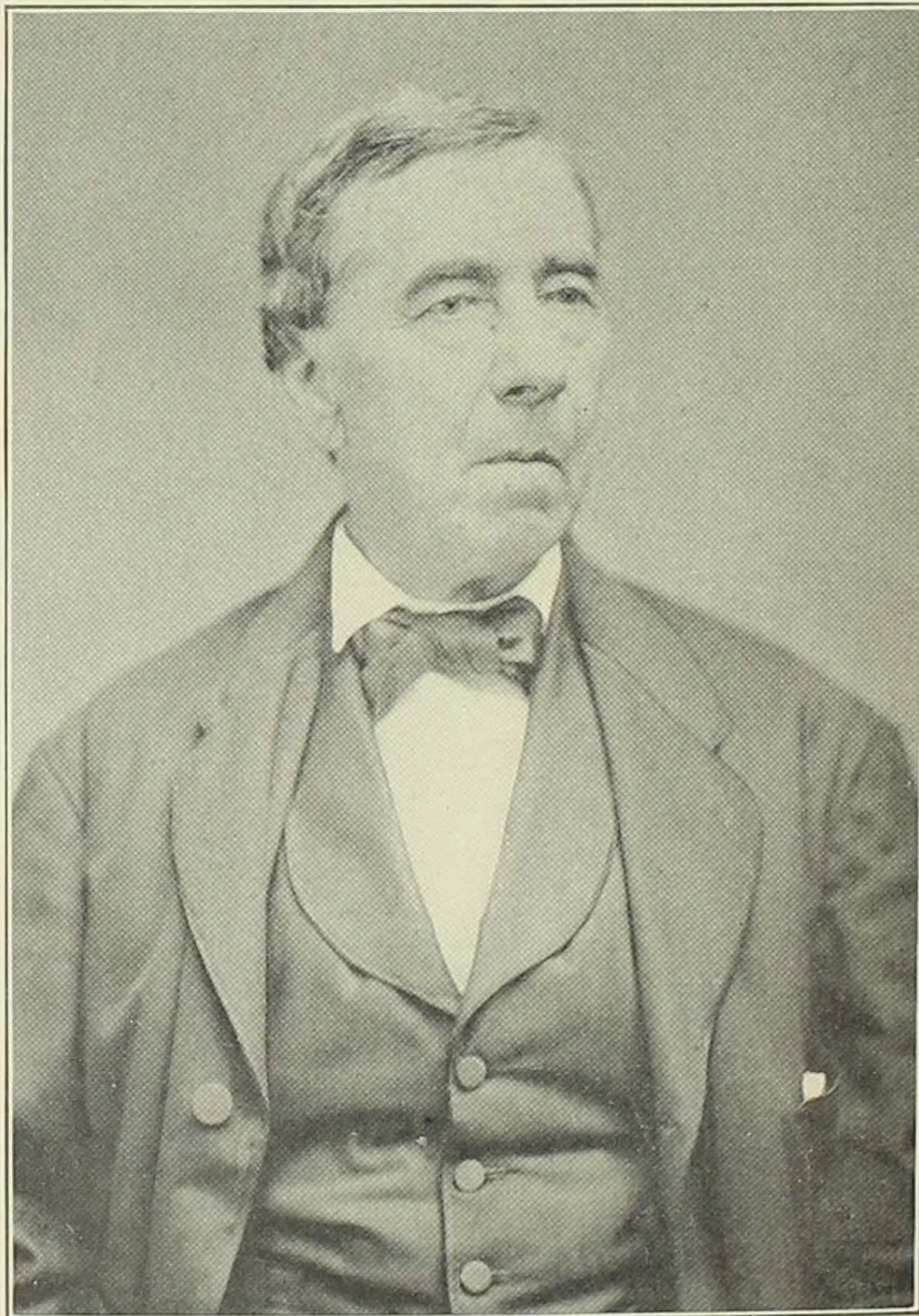
The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the records of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

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PRICE — 10 cents per copy: \$1 per year: free to Members

ADDRESS — The State Historical Society, Iowa City, Iowa





MOSES DILLON JORDAN



# THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

VOL. XXX

ISSUED IN JULY 1949

NO. 7

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## Westward to Iowa

All day the boy hung on the creaking gate, his bright blue eyes fastened to the dusty road that twisted through farm country and meadow land and led eventually into Leesburg, seat of Loudoun County. The War of 1812 was over, and Virginia militiamen were coming home. For a week, little straggling squads of them, rifles over shoulders and powder horns swinging softly against leather shirts, had lounged past the farm where the lad watched. Moses Dillon Jordan was waiting for his father, a big man who, like many another Old Dominion farmer, had put aside scythe and sickle to take up arms in the second war with England.

Moses was too young to know that war all too frequently alters a man's best-laid plans and makes dust of his dreams. But a lad of six or seven — he had been born on September 14, 1807 — quickly realized that the harried and worried-looking man who turned up the lane to hug him close and ruffle his hair had changed. There was



less energy in him. He took a longer time, as the seasons fled, to turn a furrow and to pitch the honey-colored straw. Moses and his brothers did more and more of the work.

By the time Moses was strong enough and old enough to hitch and drive into tree-shaded Leesburg with a load of produce, he was skilled with tools and already had his mind set on leaving Virginia. His brothers could go on coaxing a thinning soil to bear. They were older, and the farm properly belonged to them. Moses had listened to stories of the rich Ohio country and had seen scores of just common people like himself heading for the big woods and fertile fields of Buckeye-land. They passed through Culpepper and Loudoun counties on shank's mare or in rattling wagons or even in pony carts. Their rifles swung easily in calloused hands; their wagons held plows and seeds and pots and pans; their wives and children followed quietly, pausing now and then to switch a brindle cow.

Moses saw the blaze from their campfires and heard them, after the day's slow trek was over, sing the songs their ancestors had brought from England before the days of the Revolution.

'Twas in the merry month of May,  
When the green leaves they were buddin',  
Sweet William Gray on his death-bed lay,  
For the love of Bar-bry Al-len.



The lure of the West pulled at Moses and nagged him until his itching feet gave him no rest. Shortly after he turned twenty, he left Loudoun County, carrying his carpenter's tools in a box slung over his shoulder and hefting in his hand a bundle of clothing. As he struck out for Zanesville in Ohio, he could not know that this was not the end of the trail for him, that the magic pull of the frontier would, in the years to follow, carry him on to the infant town of Cleveland, to old St. Louis, and then to Iowa and across the alkali plains to disaster along California's rivers of gold.

Zanesville, when Moses set down his bundles there early in the 1830's, was a proud and flourishing community. An important stop and stage-coach center on the great National Road that then was pushing its way from Cumberland, Maryland, to Vandalia, Illinois, Zanesville offered plenty of opportunity for a young carpenter who was willing to work. Best of all, Moses had influential and wealthy relatives in town. Indeed, he had been named after Uncle Moses Dillon, who with his brothers John and Isaac had interests in warehouses, grist mills, and farm lands. The Dillons took the traveler in, and, it seems, offered him an excellent opportunity to settle. He could have land on easy terms or could borrow money with which to open a carpenter shop.

Moses delayed his decision. It was not that he



was afraid to work, for his hammer and saw were busy from early morning until sundown. The truth was that, like many another nineteenth-century American, the wanderlust was nipping at Moses' heels until staying in one place very long about drove him crazy. The stagecoaches, all done up in brilliant colors and piloted by picturesque jehus, symbolized to Moses the most romantic life possible. From their curtained windows peered distinguished politicians, noted army officers, cattle buyers, and a sprinkling of foreign travelers, clergymen, gamblers, and patent-medicine vendors. Busy Zanesville on Uncle Sam's highway was vastly more fascinating than sleepy Leesburg.

No doubt Moses would have followed the National Road westward had it not been for a girl. Catherine Farmer kept him in Zanesville longer than he intended, for she was a shy girl and a lass who was not easy to court for all her twenty years. Moses saw her dark eyes in every nail that he drove and spent his days perfecting what he would say to her, but every evening, when he called on her, his carefully prepared speeches slipped away, leaving him ill at ease and saying awkward things he never intended. Only when he talked about the West was he eloquent. On one occasion he said he "spilled on" for an hour or more, telling Catherine that Ohio soon would



be a worn-out country, like Virginia, and arguing that the place of promise lay to the west of the Mississippi. There, he continued, was land for the asking and there was a country where a man had elbow-room.

Catherine and Moses were wedded in 1832, a little more than a year after they first met. Then, like so many other emigrants of their day, they moved on, each journey carrying them farther and farther westward. Moses never forgot that his destination was the other side of the Mississippi. For about three years, he followed his trade in Cleveland on the shore of Lake Erie. But the Western Reserve was not to his liking. Anyway, he had been in one place long enough, and it was time to move. His children were barely old enough to walk when he took them to St. Louis. The journey was made by degrees, with Moses tarrying from a day to a week in villages en route to join together a corner cupboard, repair a trundlebed, or make a long box for a buryin'. He found plenty of such jobs, but the time they took irked him, for as he grew older he grew more and more impatient. Yet he needed the \$3.00 he got for a cupboard and the \$1.50 for putting rockers on a cradle.

St. Louis in 1836, when Moses shepherded his wife and two children across the river, both delighted and frightened him. The big, boisterous



river town was unlike any other community he had ever known. Some twenty thousand persons already were living there. A humming entrepôt, St. Louis was eager to carry on extensive trade with steamboat captains, western farmers, and southern planters. The city itself, Moses soon learned, processed tobacco, and manufactured copper, tinware, shoes, and furniture. The very year that the Virginia carpenter arrived, the St. Louis railroad convention talked the legislature into chartering eighteen new railroads. No sooner had Moses established his family in an inexpensive boardinghouse near the water front, than he was offered work. When his day's labor was ended, he roamed the docks, passing the time of day with steamboat passengers and chatting with roustabouts. "It would be Pleasant to go Up-river," he noted in his brief journal after a talk with a deckhand.

The winter of 1836-1837 was a long, hard one. Catherine had developed a lung complaint, and the children were unwell. Moses worked every day for an Irish carpenter, who always paid off his men on Saturday night and then got drunk until Monday morning. Before spring came, Moses had his mind set on going up the Mississippi into the Territory of Wisconsin. He saved every penny he could, spending only enough for board and room and for a volume on domestic



medicine. This was John C. Gunn's *Domestic Medicine or Poor Man's Friend*. Containing a description of medicinal roots and herbs and showing their use in the cure of diseases, the little book was purchased for \$2.00 and remained in the family for many years.

No sooner was the ice out of the river and steamboat travel begun in 1837 than Moses put his family on board the *Du Buque*, a boat that was "handsome enough," but was overcrowded with a "strange assortment of people" bound for the lead mines of Galena. The trip could not have been too pleasant, even though the scenery was magnificent, for Moses recorded simply: "The children still ill."

What prompted Moses to take his wife and children ashore at the present site of Burlington, no one knows. Perhaps he only wanted to break the trip. Perhaps his passage money would not carry him farther, and *perhaps* that port was his actual destination. Moses may have thought that this little river town, only a few years earlier part of the Black Hawk Purchase, had great possibilities. In 1833, when Indian title to the Purchase expired, everything was in a rude state of nature. That autumn, however, William R. Ross brought in the first stock of store goods, and in December the town was surveyed. When Moses arrived, the community was small but growing rapidly.



Within four years after Moses established himself in a small house near Front Street, the population was 1,300.

There was much work for a skilled carpenter in this new land. In his spare moments, Moses made brooms. His willingness to work and his growing reputation as an honest craftsman kept him comfortably busy. The creation of the Territory of Iowa in 1838 pleased him, for he knew nothing could now stop the flood of people who would need his services. When Iowa became a state in 1846, Moses, for the first time in his life, was financially secure. He and his wife were among the earliest communicants of Old Zion Church and had played a quiet role in civic affairs. Their home was far more elaborate than many of their neighbors, and Moses could look forward to a prosperous middle age. He thought he had conquered the itching in his feet and that never again would he pioneer on another frontier. But in 1848, gold was discovered in California, and soon all Burlington was buzzing with the news. When Moses heard that a group of Iowans was planning to go to California to "see the elephant," he was unable to resist.

PHILIP D. JORDAN



## Moses Sees the Elephant

Iowa, like many another state, followed avidly every shred of news telling of the fabulous wealth that lay scattered along California's rushing streams and slow-running rivers. And Iowans were just as quick to start for the land that promised riches as were adventurers from New England and the South. Hawkeye newspapers not only gave prominent space to news from California, but also printed all manner of editorial comment. Professor J. Pierson of Mount Pleasant dashed off a poem, which the Burlington *Hawkeye* published under the title of "The Gold Diggers' Song." It was sung to the old tune of "Heaving the Lead."

To California, then we'll go  
To Fortune trust, our weal and wo,  
And dig, dig gold.

A dreary pass before us lies,  
Grim with thick glooms, and dark dismay,  
While on each side, rude mountains rise;  
Where savage monsters prowl for prey,  
For smiling Fortune, bids us go  
To her we trust our weal and wo; —  
And dig, dig gold.

Moses carefully clipped the bit of verse, wrote



the date, "January 25, 1849," across the top, and slipped it between the leaves of his journal. Just when he actually made his decision to try the arduous trek to California is difficult to say. No doubt he turned the matter in his mind for days. He was a methodical man, not given to half-thinking. Yet once he made up his mind to do a thing, he let neither God nor devil hinder.

On February 3, 1849, a knot of men met at two in the afternoon at the Des Moines County courthouse to discuss going to the gold fields. Moses attended, sitting a little to one side toward the front where he could see and hear. The little group proceeded to business in formal fashion. Francis J. C. Peasley presided, and Geo. W. Kelley was named secretary. A committee of six was named to draw up details. The time for the company's departure from Burlington was set for March 25. St. Joseph, Missouri, was named as the first rendezvous point.

As Moses walked home from the meeting, his reactions were mixed. He said that he wanted to go to California the "worst way," but he wondered if the trip would be worth his while. He felt that, even if worst came to worst, he could lose little more than the time. He thought too that such an expedition would be beneficial to C. H. Jordan, his son. The decision made, Moses and young Charlie promptly began collecting equipment.



They provided themselves with rifles of large bore, ten pounds of powder, twenty pounds of lead, and twenty-five hundred percussion caps. A pair of pistols, an ax, hunting knife, and a hatchet were added. Next came spades, picks, mining shovels, and pots and pans. The committee recommended taking ridgpole tents of unbleached muslin or sailcloth, but Moses and his son decided against a tent, feeling it would occupy too much space and that they could build a cabin once they reached the Sacramento.

The Jordans, however, followed closely the recommendations concerning the general supplies. These, estimated at 833 pounds per man, were as follows:

Clothing	50 lbs.	Sugar	50
Tools	20	Beans (half a bushel)	30
Tents	10	Rice	10
Ammunition	15	Dried fruit	15
Bedding	20	Salt	10
Bacon sides	200	Soap	5
Flour	300	Pepper and spice	2
Hard bread	50	Candles	5
Coffee	30	Saleratus	1

These supplies were figured to last an argonaut about ten months. Hunting and fishing, it was believed, would furnish sufficient meat. Moses added a reel of three-quarter-inch grass rope, a



ten-gallon water keg, two lanterns, and a few simple remedies.

Supplies and equipment of the Burlington contingent were sent by water to St. Joseph. Delay in collecting necessities postponed the departure of the gold-seekers themselves until about the first day of April. Dr. William Salter, pastor of the Congregational Church, preached an "interesting and instructive" sermon to the group before it left Burlington.

In addition to Moses and his son, the Burlington contingent consisted of a Captain Wile as commander, John Burkholder, L. P. Reed, James Taylor, Jacob Elliott, Henry Wilie, Jr., Jonathan Donnel, Wm. Hendrie, Presley Dunlap, James Cochran, M. McCaslin, A. W. Gorden, W. B. Valentine, Wm. Gennel, Franklin Fredley, Chas. Sower, Thos. Hutchinson, Campbell Suttle, C. Bond, Sam'l Hizer, Perry Stafford, Jacob Arrick, John H. Parmer, Robert Anderson, Chas. F. Mathews, John Hizer, J. E. Friedly, Jacob Shore, J. Frieda, Henry Galvin, J. C. Brand, W. W. Scott, L. B. Austin, Benj. Hizer, Carlton Hughes, A. Sullivan, J. S. Myers, Joshua Holland, Almazer Holland, E. D. Wheatley, L. N. Mead, Adam Friedly, Henry Moore, Ephraim Moore, and Dan'l Purcell.

This was the group that on April 30, 1849, guided their oxen down the crowded, dust-thick



streets of bustling St. Joseph. J. B. Newhall, author of *Sketches of Iowa*, saw them arriving and drew a vivid picture of the caravan. He wrote under his well-known pen name of Che-Mo-Ko-Mon:

Throwing a saddle on one of Leffler's mules, I was off in less than ten minutes to meet them. After riding about five miles, I saw for some distance the road completely enveloped in a cloud of dust, presently the dust began to disappear, as the road wound along a little patch of timber, when suddenly casting my eye to the right, I saw Capt. Wilie, sitting as erect on his steed as a youth of 16! A hearty shake of the hand ensued. "Where are the boys?" said I, but ere the reply was given, along came Moses Jordan covered with dust from the crown of his hat to the sole of his feet. "Hallo! Moses," said I, "don't you see folks when they pass by?" By this time Austin made his appearance; then came L. P. Reed ejaculating "Che-Mo-Ko-Mon" at the top of his voice. Next came Pres. Dunlap in his old blue blanket coat, who by the by, has raised quite a respectable pair of mustaches.

Newhall guided the Iowans into camp about a mile from town, where the entire company gave "three cheers for old Des Moines and three times three for Burlington." After pitching tents, the travelers kindled fires and cooked. Moses sat upon a log frying a can of beans, another mixed saleratus biscuits, Dunlap fried fritters, Charley Miller was slicing ham, Andy Sturgis broiled a "makerel," Reed mothered a slow-to-boil tea-



kettle. After dinner, Moses with his friends walked into St. Joseph to hear a performance by the Virginia Minstrels.

The following morning, May 1, the Burlington contingent collected the supplies shipped by steamboat up the Missouri, packed them in wagons, and began the long westward journey. Sometimes they made only eight miles a day; again they were able to put nineteen miles behind them. By the time they came to the Little Blue, their organization was perfected. They had observed, too, the results of hasty planning and inferior equipment. Ohio parties from Columbus and Cincinnati already were in distress — "they were throwing away their loading, provisions, boots, shoes, tools, both mining and blacksmith, and one wagon; and cutting up and remodeling their beds." At Fort Laramie, the Burlington caravan rested a bit and then plunged on, their twenty-two wagons in perfect condition and their oxen in excellent shape.

In August, some four months after leaving Burlington, Moses arrived in California. Charlie Jordan sent a detailed letter to his mother, a prosaic enough account, but one that carries a certain amount of charm.

We have now been in the gold mines one week. We arrived here on Sunday the 26th day of August, all well and in good spirits. We brought all of our cattle and



wagons through safely, and sold them for \$365. We have stopped in a place called the Dry Diggings, about 45 miles from Sacramento City, and about 200 from San Francisco. . . . It has now been about four months since we left the States, and all we have heard from the States is that Canada had revolted and James K. Polk is dead. . . . California, if the gold was taken away, would be next to no country at all. The land is unfit for cultivation, except a very small portion along the rivers. The gold mines will probably be sought for a number of years. The mines however are as uncertain as a lottery, some in digging find a hole in the rock called a pocket, and get a large amount of gold from it, while others who are less fortunate may dig within 20 feet of him and find nothing.

All through the winter months of 1849 and into the spring of 1850, the Jordans laboriously panned for gold. They built a crude cradle into which they shoveled sand to be sifted through a wire screen which would catch and hold valuable nuggets. "The gold mines are a hard place to work," wrote Charlie. "It is digging among rocks that cannot be moved. We think, however, that we can make something while we stay here." Little by little, their wealth increased until they had taken gold worth some two thousand dollars. Presley Dunlap reported that he had seen Moses in Sacramento and that he was doing well.

Moses and Charlie had, it is true, been reasonably successful, but they had not become wealthy. Indeed, with the exception of twelve and a half



ounces of gold dust which Moses attempted to send to Burlington and which was to involve him in an unusual law suit, they made very little in the gold fields. Perhaps they spent too much of their time moving from one location to another and staking one claim after another. Time and again Lady Luck toyed with them, opening a pocket which gave every sign of being rich and then petering out.

Hours of rocking the cradle, of sluicing, of standing knee-deep in chilly streams, of living on beans, hard bread, and coffee sapped Moses' strength and made Charlie so discouraged that sometime in 1851 the young man left his father and struck out on his own. For a brief spell, letters from Charlie drifted into Burlington. Then they stopped. Charlie never was heard from again, although rumor reached his home that he had died in an isolated camp from a fever.

Moses meanwhile moved up the American River, stopping to try his luck at Hangtown. Then, retracing his steps, he ascended Feather River to mine and do a little trading at Marysville. His pick and shovel turned gravel along Moccasin Creek; he mined briefly at Murderers' Bar; he knocked together a jerry-built hut near Bidwell's Bar; he passed through camps with names like Yankee Jim's and Spanish Bar and Iowa Bluff. He peeked into gaudy palaces of



pleasure and watched whisky-soaked adventurers stagger from primitive saloons along the Beaver River or at Michigan Bluff. He slept where and when he could. Now and again, when panning brought him scarcely enough money with which to purchase food, Moses turned to carpentry. There always was work for a man skilled with tools.

Eventually he worked his way back to Sacramento and from there to San Francisco. His boots, fine and glistening when he left Burlington, were scuffed and tattered. The blue coat showed rips and tears, and his trousers were stained with the mud of a score of creeks. He had been sick, so shaken with fever that not even quinine brought quick relief. Yet, with all his misfortunes, Moses could send home a little song that he had heard and enjoyed. Maybe he liked it because it contained the expression "seeing the elephant"; perhaps he copied it down because it described the plight of so many gold-seekers like himself. It was called "Seeing the Elephant" and was sung to the old minstrel air of "De Boatmen Dance."

When I left the States for gold  
Everything I had I sold;  
A stove and bed, a fat old sow  
Sixteen chickens and a cow.

On I traveled through the pines,  
At last I found the northern mines;



I stole a dog, got whipt like hell,  
Then away I went to Marysville.

I mined awhile, got lean and lank,  
And lastly stole a monte-bank;  
Went to the city, got a gambler's name  
And lost my bank at the thimble game.

When the elephant I had seen,  
I'm damned if I thought I was green;  
And others say, both night and morn,  
They saw him coming round the Horn.

Moses thought San Francisco was an "hysterical" place given over entirely to the gold panic and to fleecing unwary pilgrims. Kearney Street, an avenue of wooden houses and gin mills, reeked of cargoes from a dozen different ports. There were kegs of bourbon, barrels of oysters, casks of cherry brandy, and box upon box of pork, coffee, and tobacco. The Iowan found fairly reasonable lodgings in a rooming house near the water front. Once again, his knowledge of carpentry stood him in good stead. Wages were high, and work was plentiful. "No man should come to California who can't ply a trade when gold-hunting fails," Moses wrote home.

Evenings, when his day's labor was done, Moses wandered forlornly along the congested water front, entering details of a varied shipping in a tiny notebook. He saw clippers from Yankee-



land, whalers from northern waters, sleek steamers from New York, and odd Oriental vessels from China and Japan. Moses shared the opinion of another visitor who described San Francisco and California as a land of "fights, and frolics, and duels, and dog-fights, and bull-fights, and sham-fights, and fist-fights, and murders, and robberies, and arsons, petty thefts, and law-suits, and lynchings, and hangings, by Judge and Juries, or without them."

Finally the time came when Moses, sick of San Francisco's sin and disillusioned with the promise of the gold fields, planned to return to Iowa. Heading back across the plains, Moses let each day determine its events. His destination was St. Joseph from which he had departed with such a light heart with the Burlington contingent in 1849. Now it was the spring of 1852 — early spring, so that a February wind curled bitterly down the back of his neck and numbed the tips of his broad laborer's fingers. The grass of the plains was not yet up, so that the prairies looked like a stretch of dull withered expanse instead of like a carpet of green. Moses rested briefly at Fort Laramie, sold his jaded horse for less than he had paid for it in high-priced California, and joined a party of whipped-down travelers returning to Illinois. They too had failed to find the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.



The closer the emigrants came to the Missouri River, the more they hurried. Up early each morning, Moses kindled a breakfast fire and soon he and the others were wolfing beans and eating thick slices of bread made savory with pork drippings. Then, catching horses and mules, they broke camp for another day of travel. When the Big Blue was crossed, Moses jotted down: "This much nearer Home." He had practically given up writing in his journal, perhaps because his zest had been dulled and perhaps because he was too occupied with the chores of daily existence. After fording the Big Blue — "a beautiful clear stream, twenty yards wide" — the party camped. A few days later, as Moses reckoned it, although actually it was more than a week, the party drove into St. Joseph.

This trail's end flushed Moses with excitement, for now that he was back in "God's country," he was anxious to be off for Burlington. He arrived there on March 10, 1852, with high spirits and confident that the gold dust he had sent earlier to his wife had been received and deposited to his account. Once again, he was bitterly disappointed.

PHILIP D. JORDAN



## The Case of the Gold Carrier

Loss of his hard-earned ounces of gold was a stiff blow to a man who had little else to show for his California experience. Moses, at times, was quick to anger. He was deeply religious and had ingrained in him a sense of righteousness that sometimes made him a difficult person with whom to deal. On previous occasions his unyielding nature had prompted him to seek the assistance of the courts: once he had tangled with the law in a case involving a cow.

The more he thought about the loss of his gold, the more determined Moses was to take steps to right his wrong. He was perfectly clear in his own mind what had happened. Soon all Burlington and a part of Des Moines County knew the story too. In January, 1850, L. P. Reed, a member of the Burlington gold company, decided that he had had enough of California and announced that he was returning home. Several of Reed's Burlington friends asked him to carry gold dust back for them. Apparently Reed agreed.

When Moses heard of Reed's willingness to take gold back to the States, he approached Reed with the request that he carry some for him. Reed, so the story goes, was perfectly willing. Moses



then asked him what he would charge for this service. Reed, said Moses, "refused to take any pay — said he would charge nothing for it." So Moses handed over the small bag and thought little more of the matter until he arrived in Burlington in 1852.

Then Reed denied the entire matter, saying "that if he ever received such gold dust, the same was stolen from him on his return home from California, without any fault or negligence on his part." The controversy between Reed and Jordan made news, of course, for both men were well known in the community. Local sentiment was fairly well divided, one group maintaining that Moses should never have entrusted his wealth to Reed and another affirming that Reed was foolish to have attempted to carry any dust but his own. A few pious folk argued that men who put earthly treasures before spiritual riches could only expect to lose both.

Moses, however, was of a different mind. After attempting to secure satisfaction from Reed and failing, he turned to the courts. The case, first tried in the Des Moines District Court, excited tremendous local interest. It had the thrilling, romantic California for a background; it contained an alleged robbery; and it involved two very determined individuals. The courtroom was crowded, and the jury leaned forward eagerly to hear



the evidence. Moses told his story, and Reed unfolded his. The jury returned a verdict in favor of Moses for the value of the gold dust.

Moses was delighted, but his pleasure was short-lived. Reed's attorneys moved for a new trial because, they argued, "the verdict was against the evidence and instructions of the court." This was indeed a startling development, but of even more interest was the fact that the District Court refused to grant a new trial. Once more, the Jordans felt they would have justice, but they reckoned without knowing the strength of the opposition.

Reed's attorneys, determined that a grave injustice had been done, carried the case to the Supreme Court of Iowa, where it was heard in the June term of 1855. The Court then was sitting in Iowa City, and the members were George G. Wright, Norman W. Isbell, and William G. Woodward. The opinion was written by Chief Justice Wright who pointed out, in clear enough language, that statements given in the lower court alleged that Reed was to be paid a reasonable reward by Moses for carrying the gold dust from California to Iowa. But, continued the Chief Justice, "The evidence shows, quite as clearly as language can make it, that there was no such contract, but that Reed expressly refused to accept compensation, and undertook to take this money,



not for hire, but as a gratuity, for Jordan." He pointed out that the degrees of diligence were different in the two instances — that an individual acting without compensation could not be expected to exert the same care as would be expected from an individual who received compensation. In short, Reed, a carrier of gold receiving no reward for his services, could not be held liable to the same degree as if he had received payment.

Summarizing the scene in California when the gold dust passed from Moses to Reed, the Court showed that Moses requested Reed to take the dust, that Reed consented, that Moses offered to pay Reed a compensation, and that Reed refused to accept it, saying he would charge nothing for his services. Then the Court stated that the jury in the Des Moines County District Court had held Reed responsible to the same degree as if he had accepted compensation. "This," wrote Chief Justice Wright, "was manifestly unjust and unwarranted by the evidence." His opinion in "The Case of the Gold Carrier" reversed the decision of the lower court. It was not necessary for Reed to pay Moses the value of the gold.

Now Moses Jordan was a man who knew a straight line and a square corner when he saw them. Quibbling was not in his line. He had little use for lawyers' logic, except, of course, when such reasoning benefitted him. To his layman's



mind, Chief Justice Wright's opinion only proved that all too frequently a forked tongue concealed, rather than revealed, truth. Moses thought he knew the difference between law and justice. He conceded, although reluctantly enough, that perhaps the law was on Reed's side, but he maintained stubbornly until his dying day that justice was with him. He had entrusted his sweat-earned gold to Reed and Reed had lost it. Therefore, Reed should be liable for the loss.

Many another Iowa miner who had flirted with Lady Luck along California's streams of gold agreed vehemently with Moses. When, in later years, members of the Burlington company came together for informal reunions, they hotly discussed the Jordan versus Reed controversy. Indeed, the case became a local legend, which grew with the telling.

After the Civil War, both Burlington and Moses prospered. He identified himself with the firm of B. & H. D. Howard, which later became Miller & Company and eventually L. H. Dolhoff & Company. His brick home on North Sixth Street, with its kitchen and dining room — as was the fashion those days — in the basement, and its front and back parlors on the first floor, was a place of grace and comfort. For New Year's breakfast, when the Jordan family gathered as was its custom to begin a new year together, Deer-



and-Pine-Tree glass reflected merry light from candles on a table covered with damask. At the head of the table sat Moses, the patriarch.

Now and again, but not too frequently, Moses on these occasions would spin yarns of his Virginia boyhood, tell of the days when Ohio was just emerging from the big woods, describe his months in old St. Louis, and relish again his steamboat trip from there to Burlington. He was much more apt to recall these life chapters than to recount his California tour. Sometimes, of course, the story slipped out, and then it seemed as if Moses would never stop talking.

His gold-rush adventures must have been etched deep with some soul-searing caustic into his memory. The older Moses grew, the more he recalled minute details. He saw again mired-down wagons, heard the cries of children ill with "prairie complaint," remembered the icy cold of creek waters where he panned. The truth was that the loss of Charlie and the tremendous physical exertion of the trip west and back and the failure of Iowa courts to redress his wrongs were blows from which he never really recovered. His health became so poor that about 1872 Moses retired from business. He then was sixty-five years of age. He had raised a family of four sons and two daughters.

Only a few years after his retirement, Moses'



wife Catherine died suddenly while preparing breakfast. Her death took place on March 31, 1877, and the funeral services were held the following day from the home on Sixth Street. The big house seemed empty now, for only two children — Henry Clay Jordan and Miss Fannie Jordan — were left with Moses.

When Moses had passed seventy years, he dictated a brief account of the gold-rush era to one of his sons. With the exception of one experience, nothing new was added to what already had become a part of family history. Moses said that along the Sacramento, in 1851, he had struck a really rich pocket. Working desperately to clean it out before other miners should move in on him, in a little less than ten days he had panned dust worth perhaps as much as seven or eight thousand dollars. A portion of it was spent for a new pair of boots, a shirt, and some provisions, but the bulk of it he carried in bags around his waist.

With this treasure, Moses intended to return to Iowa immediately. He already had determined that the average miner had little hope of becoming wealthy no matter how long he remained in California or how hard he worked. One night he put up in a squalid, small boarding house that offered fewer creature comforts than a pig sty. He slept soundly. The next morning he awoke to find that both his gold and his new boots had disappeared.



He never learned who took them. All he knew was that he slept in a room with three strangers, and that in the morning they were gone.

In 1885 Moses was confined to his home. His health failed rapidly after that, and he died at the age of eighty on November 13, 1887. He had lived in Burlington for about half a century. He had seen Iowa develop through the territorial period into statehood and, as a state, become a great Middle Western commonwealth.

The *Burlington Gazette*, commenting upon his death and his services to both state and community, said: "Rapidly the ranks of old pioneers of Burlington are thinning; one by one they are passing from life to join the great majority. Soon there will be none of those sturdy men and women who witnessed the early struggles of the settlement which was the beginning of this now large and prosperous city, left to tell the tale, but the good that they did will live after them, and their names will long be remembered by those who came and will come after them."

PHILIP D. JORDAN



## Argonauts of 1849

A wave of excitement swept Iowa in 1849. The Mexican War had been won, the spirit of Manifest Destiny was in the air, and the lure of the frontier beckoned men westward. To cap it all, on January 24, 1848, James W. Marshall had discovered gold in the tailrace of a sawmill which he and John A. Sutter were erecting on the South Fork of the American River, fifty miles northeast of present-day Sacramento. News of the discovery had reached St. Joseph, Missouri, about August 1st, but the first printed news in the East had not appeared in a New York paper until August 19th. Soon Iowa editors began reading about it, but apparently they shared the skepticism of many Eastern journalists, for most of the twenty newspapers then being published remained discreetly silent until Christmas time when President James K. Polk's message to Congress confirmed the authenticity of the discovery.

Excited by the prospects of sudden wealth, some Iowans started down the cholera-infested Mississippi to New Orleans, bent on reaching California by way of the Isthmus, or around Cape Horn. Others, fearful of cholera and yellow fever, went by way of New York — a trip



that was long, cold, and expensive. Most Iowans (like Moses Dillon Jordan and his Des Moines County friends) deferred their departure until spring, using the winter months to prepare for the arduous westward trek.

During these months the cry of "Ho for California!" was heard in scores of Iowa towns. "Gold," the *Davenport Gazette*, of January 11, 1849, declared, "is henceforth to flow, not only up the Mississippi" but to "shine through the interstices of the poor man's purse." Many editors, fearing town and countryside would be denuded of inhabitants, editorialized strongly against leaving sure and certain Iowa for distant and uncertain California.

Lurid tales of the fabulous wealth offset most Iowa newspaper editorials. On February 1, 1849, the Burlington *Hawk-Eye* noted that Iowa City gold hunters had formed a company for "mutual aid and protection" and were urging others to join them. The Iowa City compact was reprinted in a number of newspapers under the title "The Iowa-California Compact." Despite this invitation most communities set up their own California Clubs.

Contrary to some pioneer reminiscences, it would seem that Iowa Forty-Niners went well-organized. The Muscatine-California Emigrants' Association outlined the regulations and prescribed the type of outfit its members must own to



make the trip. Davenport, Dubuque, Burlington, and Iowa City were principal points of rendezvous, but some counties, such as Clinton, Clayton, Jackson, Henry, and Jefferson formed their own contingents which frequently joined with companies going from the larger towns.

Many Iowa Argonauts of 1849 made Council Bluffs or St. Joseph their main jumping-off-place for California, since such river towns as Burlington and Dubuque found it more convenient to ship their goods by steamboat and thus ease their load during the first leg of the voyage. Once on their way the Iowans generally followed the main northern overland route via the Platte River, South Pass, and the Humboldt River. Using prairie schooners or pack animals for transportation, they fought their way westward, enduring and sometimes dying from cholera, scurvy, and dysentery. They suffered from heat, dust, mud, deep sand, and from a scarcity of water and provisions.

Fully a thousand Iowans were among the vanguard of Forty-Niners who struck westward in the spring of 1849. These men had invested an average of about \$600 each in the venture, not counting the loss of income. The California gold rush, according to Dr. Fred W. Lorch, cost Iowans well over a million dollars.

Although the loss to Iowa in wealth and man-



power was substantial, the gains were equally important. Purchases of equipment were made in various Iowa communities from the Mississippi to the Missouri. The Dutch at Pella, for example, were saved from destitution when Forty-Niners commenced streaming through their community making purchases of food and supplies. Ferries reaped a rich harvest transporting Forty-Niners across the rivers of Iowa. Farmers, innkeepers, blacksmiths, wagonmakers, and merchants all benefited from the California Gold Rush.

Less tangible but equally important was the increased knowledge of the Hawkeye State gained by Forty-Niners. Many an Argonaut — oppressed by the hardships of plain, mountain, and desert — recalled the fertile prairies of Iowa and returned to them. Those that remained in California took leading roles in the development of the Golden State. A century of time has not diminished the luster of their achievements.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN



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