

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 ridgepole 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.

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