

Gold on the Prairie

With poor crops and a panic to plague them, it is not surprising that some Iowans should look for greener pastures. California was a long way off for the less venturesome but maybe, reasoned some, there was gold at home. Actually, small quantities of gold were found at various points in Iowa, causing a gold rush fever to develop in 1858. The following letter, sent from the postmaster at Osceola to the Burlington *Hawk-Eye*, was reprinted in the Davenport *Weekly Gazette* of April 29:

The gold excitement is high here. There is a company of some fifty hands at work turning South River, and as soon as they get it completed, the dam and race dug, expect to find plenty of the precious metal. There are others making good wages, digging in the hills bordering the streams. It has been found in a number of places in this [Clarke] county.

A letter from Leon, quoted in *Ward's Own* of Bloomfield of May 6, 1858, declared there were several gold mines in Decatur County, and that "genuine gold" had been found in Ringgold, Clarke, and Madison counties. The same newspaper quoted a dispatch from Keokuk stating the *Gate City* editor had seen specimens of gold mined

near Winterset. Another dispatch indicated men were making five dollars a day at the Iowa diggings. A month later, on June 10, 1858, *Ward's Own* declared:

A number of our citizens talk of going to the mines as soon as the streams run down a little, so that they can prospect in the beds of the creeks. Soap Creek has furnished pearls, and we know of no good reason why Fox, Jaquest [Chequest?], or Shunam branch should not yield a sprinkling of the filthy lucre. The "Hairy Nation" is very prolific in a great many things, and why may it not abound in the specious trash found so extensively in other portions of the State.

The *Sioux City Eagle* of June 5, 1858, agreed the "gold fever" was running high in Iowa but knew of no one who had "accumulated a pile" despite the numbers who had spent "considerable time" searching for it. Where one man made "two dollars a day and roast beef" in the Iowa diggings, the *Eagle* concluded, "there are a dozen who do not make their bread and butter." The *Davenport Daily Gazette* was equally skeptical.

We have heard of one of the citizens of Davenport leaving our city in the search, who when he reached Iowa City was informed that there was no gold there to justify the digging, but that there was plenty of it further west. The further west he proceeded the same illusion was held out to him, so conceiving the whole thing to be a humbug he left the pursuit to the ignis fatuus and returned a wiser man — as many have done before him — to his home.

Meanwhile, saner minds endeavored to calm

restless Iowans. The *Iowa Farmer* of April 1, wisely observed:

There is gold on every farm in Iowa. A good team attached to a good stout plow, run ten inches below the surface will secure more gold than half our farmers would know what to do with, if they persist in this plan a few years. — There is more gold in our soil than was ever or will be dug from the sand banks of California — and when it is laid up for use, it looks clearer and brighter than found in any other kind of mine. Remember, it lies principally at *ten inches or more* below the surface.

Scarcely had the gold fever in Iowa subsided than news sped over the prairies of the discovery of gold in the "Cherry Creek Diggins" or "Pike's Peak Gold Country" in Colorado. By the fall of 1858 fantastic yarns of gold strikes were being spread by the merchants and newspapers of Missouri River towns hopeful of becoming outfitting centers in a gold rush. The Webster City *Hamilton Freeman* of January 21, 1859, mindful of the unrest in that sparsely settled county of 1,655 souls, endeavored to discourage farmers from pulling up stakes and setting out for the diggings.

There is just now a wonderful uneasiness among all classes of people, east and west, occasioned by the pretended gold discoveries at Pike's Peak. The infection has extended even into this garden of the West. Many of our farmers, we are sorry to say, are talking of going to the gold regions, and others would go if they could. It seems to us that the farmer who exchanges his certainly golden prospects in Hamilton County for the shadowy

visions of the new Eldorado, is very shortsighted, to say the least. It is true . . . the hard times, and the wet summer of 1858, have both contributed to make our farmers anxious for some change in their programme of operations; and the prospect of gold at Pike's Peak imparts the first ray of hope. . . . gold-digging is but a lottery, at best, in which the good luck of here and there a man is heralded to the skies, while the miserable failure of thousands is unchronicled and unknown. Farming, intelligently pursued, invariably leads to success.

We believe the future is bright with promise to every man in Hamilton County, who sticks to his farm. The drawbacks of the last year and a half are merely temporary and exceptional, and will soon give place to a better state of things. Everywhere the times have been hard, and almost everywhere have only meager crops rewarded the labors of the husbandman. We have not suffered more than other localities. With a soil abounding in all the elements of fertility — a climate the healthiest on the globe — good society — and the promise of a market as soon as any new section of our country will have one, there seem to be a hundred inducements to farmers to remain here, where there is one to leave for the uncertainties of gold digging. Times have often been harder and prospects more gloomy throughout the West, than at present. But the clouds have speedily given place to sunshine. — They will do so again.

Although the logic of such arguments may have restrained farmers in 1858, thousands of Iowans joined the Pike's Peak Gold Rush in 1859.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN