

Comment by the Editor

LEAD

All the way up from St. Louis the Mentor, who was a prospector by nature, had informed the Stranger of the lure and importance of lead. Bluffs of Galena limestone commanded attention as the steamboat neared the Fever River, gateway to the region of lead mines. What treasure lay concealed in the fissures of those ancient rocks! Though the Stranger's previous opinion of lead may have been somewhat colored by his prejudice in favor of silver and gold, he began to realize the tremendous influence of the baser metal. He caught the zeal of the men who crowded the boat, eager to be at work in the diggings and find a fortune ready-made. Pioneers they were, but they came with pick and shovel instead of axe and plow.

Long before the white men came in quest of a shorter route to India (and stayed to win salvation in the service of the Lord), the Mentor explained, Indians had beautified their calumets with inlaid lead. They offered leaden ornaments and chunks of glittering ore in exchange for calico and trinkets. Not the dense forests or the rich soil of the prairie, not even beaver pelts, but rumors of fabulous mineral resources intrigued the daring soldiers of fortune who first ven-

tured into the Great Valley and claimed an empire in the name of France.

Nor were they disappointed in their dreams of riches. From the time when the Indians invited Perrot to help them with their mining until Dubuque laid claim to the Mines of Spain, lead had been the chief allurements of the Fever River country. While energetic traders dealt primarily in staple goods like fur and knives, they also speculated in the sale of lead for larger profits. A century of desultory exploration and intermittent mining by legendary figures, who left no trace except the refuse of their digging, served none the less to advertise the district.

The Stranger was curious to know when permanent settlement began and whether mines or farms attracted those who came to make their homes in the valley of the Upper Mississippi.

The settlers did not come until the twenties, said the Mentor, but even then they came for lead instead of crops. On July 1, 1825, there were a hundred miners at the Fever River diggings, and the number increased fourfold within a year. By 1830 the population of Galena was almost a thousand. A newspaper was established there in 1826 (the only one in the whole vast region north of Vandalia), while across the river ten years later the *Dubuque Visitor* was the first paper published in Iowa. Even as late as 1838 the settlers in the vicinity of Catfish Creek did not

produce enough grain and live stock for their own consumption. "The People in the mining country will have to kill all their Cattle & eat Corn Bread", wrote H. L. Dousman, wealthy merchant-trader at Prairie du Chien. The river froze early in November that year and stopped the boats which were bringing winter supplies. In 1844 Ephraim Adams, of the Iowa Band, declared that if the labor of digging for lead at Dubuque "had been expended on the surface of the ground, about six inches deep, the people generally would be better off."

How much ore have these mines produced? The Stranger still conceived of Iowa, Illinois, and Wisconsin as predominantly agricultural.

Nobody knows exactly, responded the Mentor. During the first hundred years no records were kept and Julien Dubuque's production is uncertain. His estimate of 20,000 to 40,000 pounds a year in 1805 was probably more conservative than accurate. In the period of greatest activity between 1835 and 1850, no less than 400,000,000 pounds were mined. David Dale Owen, who made a careful geological survey in 1839, estimated that the annual production at that time was 30,000,000 pounds, one-tenth of which came from the mines in Iowa. This was as much lead as all Europe then produced and nearly a third as much as England. A single fissure in a mine northwest of Dubuque contained three million pounds of ore. In

1843 the value of the exports from Galena and above was \$1,250,000, more than three-fourths of which was contributed by lead and less than four per cent by agricultural products.

The Stranger was impressed, but he was also in a quandary. Should he invest in a lead mine or purchase a steamboat? The Mentor had said that the freight on a cargo of lead sometimes paid for a boat in one round trip. Years later the Stranger was glad that he did neither.

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