

Iowa Pioneers Find a Lost Child

A Dan De Quille Memoir

by Lawrence I. Berkove

DAN DE QUILLE had long since made his mark as one of the West's best-known authors when in 1892 he published a story about a dramatic event in Iowa's pioneer history. The story no doubt enthralled the thousands of enthusiastic readers who followed his frequent byline. Today, this De Quille story about early Iowa, "Trailing a Lost Child," is reprinted here (beginning on page 124) for modern readers.

The search for a lost child is a compelling story in any century, but De Quille's recollection of how a pioneer community in eastern Iowa responded to a call for help is noteworthy for several reasons. First, it rescues from forgotten records a poignant incident of local Iowa history — reminding us how so much that is rich is often lost from historical summaries, and how chancy is what we find out about the past. Second, De Quille's narrative skill renders the episode with authentic and enlivening detail. Finally, the account casts valuable light on this nineteenth-century author just as he is beginning to be rediscovered.

Dan De Quille was the pen name, assumed in Virginia City, Nevada Territory, of William Wright. Born in 1829 on a farm near Fredericktown, Ohio, he lived there for eighteen years until his family emigrated in 1847 with other Ohioans to the settlement that became West Liberty, Iowa. He became the mainstay of his family when his father died soon afterward. He made a success of the Wright farm on the southern edge of Cedar County, then left it to his mother's care when he married Carolyn

Coleman in 1853 and set up a nearby farm of his own. He and his wife had five children in close succession, two of whom died in infancy. The lure of California gold called him, and he went west by himself in 1857 and moved to Virginia City in 1860 (a year after the rich silver vein known as the Comstock Lode was discovered). He spent most of his life there, returning to Iowa only twice: in 1863 for a visit, and in 1897 to live out his last year.

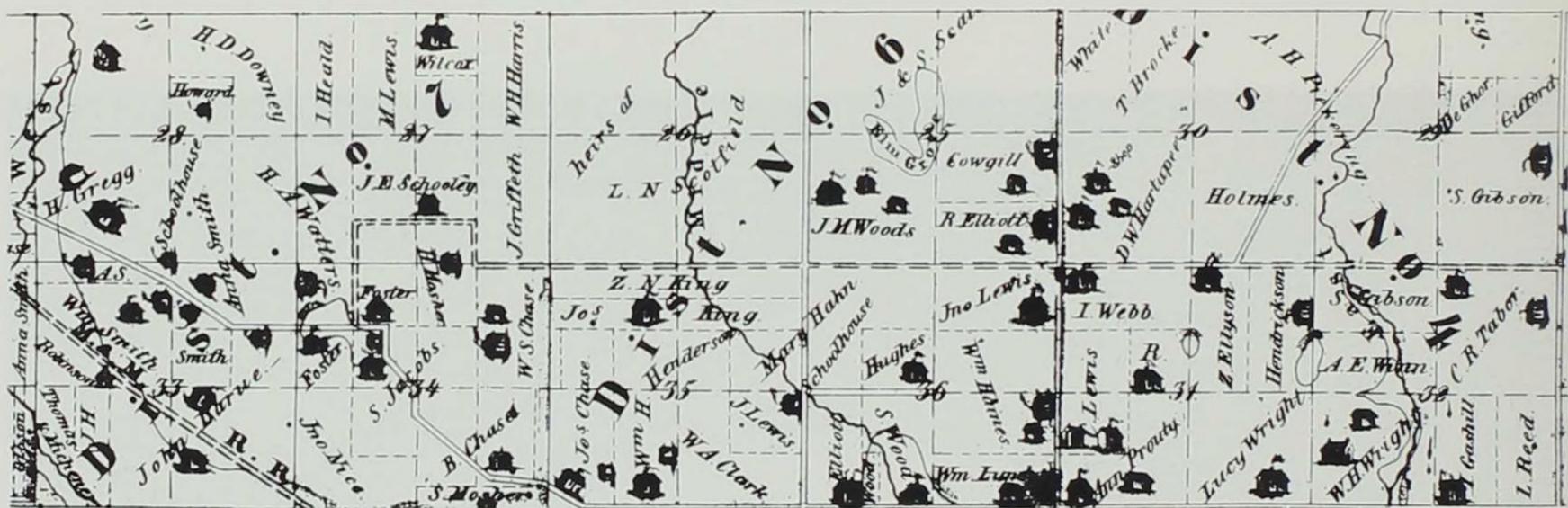
Until very recently, Dan De Quille was overlooked by all except a few western historians and Mark Twain scholars. Although popular in his own time, De Quille neglected to collect and anthologize the scores of stories he had published in dozens of periodicals across the country. When he died, they were lost, and he was almost forgotten along with much of his ephemeral journalism.

Two features of his life, however, saved him from total oblivion. One was that he had been a friend and colleague of Mark Twain's in 1862–1864. The men roomed together when they worked as reporters for the Virginia City *Territorial Enterprise*, the leading newspaper on the Comstock Lode and one of the greatest of the Old West. De Quille was six years older than Twain and more experienced as a writer. Twain became much the better author, but within his more restricted literary range De Quille was also a master and was always preferred over Twain by most Comstockers. Twain scholars have long been aware that each man influenced the other, but recent findings indicate that the extent of that influence was



PHOTOGRAPHED BY RANDALL TOSH THROUGH THE COURTESY OF EVANS MORRIS, OWNER OF ORIGINAL PAINTING

Dan De Quille was forty-nine and a popular nineteenth-century western writer when this 19½" × 23¼" portrait was painted and signed "Petrovits 1878." Reproduction here through courtesy of his great-grandson Evans Morris.



In "Trailing a Lost Child," set in 1851, De Quille wrote of several families (Gregg, Lewis, Henderson) whose farms still appeared on this 1862 plat of southern Cedar County. De Quille's family farm (Wright) is east of these.

somewhat more long-lasting and extensive than had been thought. The other feature that saved De Quille from oblivion was that in 1876 he published *The Big Bonanza*. The book is still in print and is regarded as the best contemporary account of the history and culture of the Comstock Lode and its Big Bonanza, the richest silver strike in American history.

Shortly after the book's publication, however, the price of silver began to drop. The great mining boom was followed by a bust from which the region never recovered. Most Comstockers left the region for more profitable locations, but not De Quille; he loved it too much. The challenge of a long battle with alcoholism spurred him to greater achievement. He took on a job as a weekly correspondent for the Salt Lake City *Daily Tribune*, which was becoming a major newspaper, and he also became a popular freelancer of both fiction and journalism. In the mid-1890s, however, his health broke and restricted his activities. By 1897 he left the Comstock for good. Poor and sick, he returned to his family home in West Liberty, Iowa, where he died in 1898.

BECAUSE HE BELONGED, along with Bret Harte and Mark Twain, to the original generation of western writers, De Quille is an invaluable source of information about the Old West. Living in the West for close to forty years and chronicling its events as a journalist, he also expressed his intimate knowledge of it in his stories.

Research over the last several years has located many of his lost and forgotten writings. Several well-written and historically rich pieces are being edited and some have already been published, finding a new audience in the twentieth century.

Research has also revealed that although De Quille became a westerner, he never forgot his early years in Ohio and Iowa, and sometimes he wrote about them. These recollections, such as the one that follows, fill in blanks about his life and teach us more about his art of transmuting life into fiction.

In the weekly columns which he wrote and mailed from his home in Virginia City, De Quille normally wrote about Nevada. But like today's columnists, he oftentimes let his interests or his fancy dictate his choice of subject matter. He published the Iowa memoir, "Trailing a Lost Child," in the Salt Lake City *Daily Tribune* on Sunday, June 17, 1892. The following week he published another reminiscence of Iowa, "Old Times on the Prairie," a description of the "hunter's paradise" that was Iowa in 1847. Of the two, he must have recognized that there was more dramatic interest in the "Lost Child" article because he modified it slightly and recycled it to another periodical in the form that follows.

The "Lost Child" narrative is essentially true. "Wapse-noe-nock" is the full name of what is now called Wapsie Creek, and De Quille's translation of it as "White Earth Creek" settlement is one of several familiar, local efforts. Families mentioned in the story

(the Hendersons, Greggs, Bozarth, and Lewises) did have homesteads in the area — to the west of the Wright farm — and some of the families still live around West Liberty. Most important, little Lizzie Henderson did get lost one night, and the entire community did turn out to help find her.

De Quille's story is substantiated by a much shorter account of the incident which appeared in chapter 22 of Lemuel O. Mosher's *Log Cabin History*, published in 1910 and reprinted in West Liberty's 1938 centennial history. The De Quille and Mosher versions are remarkably similar regarding factual matters; the only significant disagreement is over the date. De Quille recalls that the incident occurred in 1851; the centennial version, in 1850.

The accounts also differ in some interesting details. The centennial history, for instance, does not mention Milton Moore, whom De Quille calls his cousin and credits with finding Lizzie. In De Quille's tale of the frontier line dividing settlement and wilderness, Milton Moore's portrayal as a white man who is powerfully drawn to Indian ways is peculiarly interesting. This type of man was familiar on the frontier and indeed was a necessary product of the frontier. Moore may thus be regarded as a real-life counterpart of such fictional creations as James Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo, of the Leatherstocking tales. De Quille tells us that Moore eventually resolved his ambivalence about his identity; it

is part of the glory and tragedy of Cooper's Natty Bumppo that he did not.

The danger, particularly to a small child, of wild animals — wolves or coyotes in this instance — is given greater emphasis in De Quille's story than in the centennial story. Furthermore, in the second paragraph of De Quille's original, *Tribune* version, De Quille had mentioned another danger: the call of the wild. That paragraph was dropped in De Quille's revision for the other periodical (the version we reprint here), but perhaps it explains how Milton Moore, twenty-four years old and single, could understand and anticipate a child's behavior so well. De Quille wrote in that paragraph:

"When a child is lost in a wild region, search must be instituted at once. The distance to which even the smallest toddler will often wander is astonishing. Very often, too, children will become wild after being lost for a few hours and instead of showing themselves or answering when they hear voices calling will crawl into a thicket or some other hiding place and be as close and quiet as would a hunted animal. In the early days in Ohio a sixteen-year-old boy who had been lost in the woods for a day and a night suddenly made his appearance in front of his father's house, leaped a pair of bars and ran on like a wild animal. When pursued and caught by a man on horseback he for a time fought with teeth and nails like a young wolf. He had been frightened out of his wits, temporarily, by the blowing of horns and the firing of guns, for in the early days when a child was lost in the vast primitive forests of the West a great racket was kept up during the night search in order to frighten away wolves and other dangerous animals."

Knowing what it was like to be wild himself, the frontiersman Milton Moore was able to empathize with young Lizzie and guess her movements and motives as he tracked her.

Such subtle touches show De Quille to be psychologically astute as well as a good reporter and storyteller. His ability to combine these skills made him a popular writer in his day and demonstrates why he is worth reading today.

"Trailing a Lost Child"
begins on the next page.

NOTE ON SOURCES

The most important archive of De Quille material is the collection of the William Wright Papers in the Bancroft Library, University of California-Berkeley. The Nevada Historical Society at Reno and the State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City) also have important holdings. No biography of him presently exists, but a substantial biographical and critical essay is now available in Lawrence I. Berkove's introduction to Dan De Quille, *Dives and Lazarus* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1988), a newly discovered novella. Other important editions of his works include his *The Big Bonanza*, ed. with intro. by Oscar Lewis (New York: Crowell, 1947); C. Grant Loomis, "The Tall Tales of Dan De Quille," *California Folklore Quarterly*, 5 (Jan. 1946), 26-71; and James J. Rawls, ed., *Dan De Quille of the Big Bonanza* (San Francisco: Book Club of California, 1980). A series of Ohio memoirs, edited by Lawrence I. Berkove, is being published this year by the *Northwest Ohio Quarterly*. The author wishes to express his gratitude to Evans Morris, the great-grandson of De Quille, and to other citizens of West Liberty for their valuable assistance in gathering information about De Quille's Iowa years.