Iowa Eldorado

Searching for Gold in 1858

by Eric Lana

As Iowans sat down to read their newspapers in the spring of 1858, a sudden glimmer of hope seemed to brighten the hard economic times that plagued the nation. The story began because Iowa farmer Jeremiah Hewitt also caught a glimmer of something bright. Hewitt was prospecting for coal on his 48-acre farm eight miles north of Osceola, in Clarke County. Instead of coal he found gold.

“He struck a small vein of black sand and quartz rock, which upon examination, was found to contain gold,” a Mr. Eldridge wrote to the Burlington Daily Hawk-Eye, where the story appeared on March 20. Eldridge was certain “there is no humbug about it.”

“Several Californians have since visited the place and tested it, and pronounce it pure gold. Men are engaged in digging,” Eldridge added. “Great excitement prevails.”

The same day that the story appeared in the Hawk-Eye, the Winterset Madisonian reported discoveries of gold in Madison and Adair Counties. Within five days, citizens in Davenport and Dubuque were reading the exciting news in their own papers.

By mid-April, according to Osceola’s postmaster Ridgway, “a company of some 50 hands [was] at work turning South River” and building a dam and a race. “There are others making good wages, digging in the hills bordering the streams.”

So began the mad scramble for gold in a new Eldorado—lwa.

Judging from the newspapers, gold seemed to be just about everywhere. Twenty-three-year-old Benjamin Sears went looking for it along the Maquoketa River, about a mile north of his family’s mill. He found it, a Dubuque paper reported, “in every pan of dirt he washed out.”

Jonas Keck discovered gold in a slough west of Sigourney, in Keokuk County. “Mr. Keck spent several years in the gold mines of California,” papers said, “and ever since his return he has had an abiding faith that the pure metal would be found in many localities in Iowa.”

Gold appeared ten miles outside Burlington, on Mud Creek. There, some 50 or more eager gold hunters wanted to tear down “Hall’s old Mill” and look for more deposits. The owners resisted; trouble was anticipated.

In Clarke and Madison Counties, gold was showing up “in almost every slough branch.”

Farmer Jacob Glass in Marshall County found “a fine specimen of gold bearing quartz . . . near his own residence.” Glass must have been startled to find gold there, especially since there were no major waterways in his township, and not even a creek on his 160 acres.

Maquoketa mayor Jonas Clark found “yellow shining particles, very much resembling gold dust, which he dug from the bottom of his cellar, beneath his store room, immediately under the Excelsior office,” the paper reported. “Mr. C. has no doubt but this is the pure ‘rhino,’ and he feels quite confident that large quantities of it may be got by a little more excavation, and by sinking deeper. If this discovery should prove to be a paying one, we may expect soon to see our streets, alleys, and vacant lots dug over into hills and hollows.”

In Ottumwa, the same concern surfaced. On a Monday, gold was discovered there. On Tuesday, despite near-constant rain, “a hundred men, perhaps more, were busy in most of the ravines and gulches . . . It would seem that here, almost in the heart of our city, in every part of our bluff through which a stream penetrates, and in all the ravines about us there is gold.”

At the diggings in Burlington, “a great many people were there, and a great many boys, with their pantaloons rolled up very high and very tight, prospecting with tin cups, dippers, gourds, broken skillets, old shoes, cow’s horns, broken crockery ware, dilapidated hats, &c., &c. Further up, washers, cradles, and other ingenious machines were . . . [separating] the shining dust
from the common earth... Such a shaking, and scratch-
ing and digging and washing, was never seen since the
whiteman first crossed the Mississip. Spades, shovels,
hoes, sharp sticks, &c., were used in tossing over the
old bones, hair, gravel and sand.”

In Iowa City, “mechanics, merchants and laboring
men are making exhaustive preparations to dig them-
selves rich immediately if not sooner.”

According to the widespread declarations of gold
published in Iowa’s newspapers, digging and panning
for gold occurred mainly in two distinct regions: the
eastern third of the state, and central and south-central
Iowa. Some editors, skeptical of “dame Rumor,” took
care to attribute their reports of gold to “reliable gentle-
men” or to “returned Californians” (every town seemed
to have a few forty-niners whose experience
in the goldfields qualified them as experts in
identifying gold or likely places to hunt for it).
The cautious Burlington Hawk-Eye reported on
the “considerable excitement” in town: “Dams
have been commenced—races dug, and small
streams turned from their channels.” But the
newspaper still wanted verification from a mint
in the East, even though “our own citizens [are]
hardly likely to get into a fever about nothing.”

Newspapers carefully described the form
in which the specimens were found: most of-
ten “mixed with black sand” or associated with
“rotten” or “decomposed” quartz. But was it
the real thing?

G
old made its way into Iowa about
2.5 million years ago. As Paul
Garvin explains in Iowa’s Min-
erals, glaciers from Canada and
Minnesota “scoured weathered granite out-
crops and brought small amounts of gold along
with rocks and primarily silicate minerals” like
quartz and magnetite.

Over time, through weathering and ero-
sion, rocks were slowly broken down and min-
ers swept into waterways. The gold settled
as sediment along with other material of simi-
lar size and density, such as magnetite (some-
times called “black sand”), creating what min-
ers would call “placer deposits.”

So, yes, there was gold in Iowa—and it was
attracting everyone from “inveterate loafers
who have never been known to pass an indus-
trious hour at any honest employment” to
“men of profitable business [who now] have

appealed to the earth, with spade and pick-axe,” as the
Waverly Republican described them.

Sometimes the gold was the size of a grain of wheat
or the head of a pin. Often it was much smaller. Most
newspaper reports agreed that successful gold seekers
were making $2 to $5 a day, “with an occasional ‘ten
strike.’” This was good money, according to historian
Merle Davis. Harvest laborers in Davenport that year
were paid $1 plus board for a 15-hour day (half the rate
earned the previous year); heavy rains ruined much of
Iowa’s wheat and oats, and the hard financial times only
worsened the situation for Iowans. But like many pa-
ers reporting on the gold discoveriers, the Burlington
Hawk-Eye often asked the question: “Will it pay for dig-
ning? Ah! there’s the bite.”

More Gold Found.—A gentleman yesterday
afternoon exhibited to us a specimen of gold-
bearing quartz, picked up near the Catfish, in
this township. “If this court is any Judge
of quartz, and she think she arM the golp
was genuine. Now for a rush to the gold
diggins! Dubuque, county has never been
behind any of her sister counties in any na-
tural or unnatural productions—tall corn, big
pumpkins, long squashes, Democratic voters,
or wild Irishmen—and she will not be-
hind any of them in gold. We expect soon
to hear of the discovery of an immense pla-
cr where one hundred dollars a day can be
made with two boys and an old wash pan.

Seriously, however, there is good reason to
believe that gold in considerable quantities
is to be found in this county. We have
long known that upon a certain farm in Jeff-
erson township, owned by a gentleman who
has worked in the gold regions of other coun-
tries, gold did exist—and we know no reason
why it should not be found in other places in
the county. Perhaps the golden age is about
to dawn again.

Dubuque Daily Times, May 22, 1858
The Davenport Daily Gazette answered wryly: “We presume no one man has yet found enough to purchase a meal’s victuals.”

Still, times were hard, following the national Panic of 1857, and hunting for gold held promise. The economic downturn, the extensive coverage by Iowa newspapers, and plain old curiosity and hope motivated many Iowans to join the search. “We think that there are many persons in various parts of the country now out of employment, who could make sufficient out of the business [of gold seeking] to procure for themselves the necessities of life, with the chance of making more,” a Davenport newspaper ventured.

Yet Iowa newspapers also cautioned against the lure of easy riches. The Waverly Republican advised, “Let those who have nothing to do go to dig, but let no man leave his occupation to look after the gold diggings.” The Republican also reprinted advice from a Chicago paper: “We trust the good people of Iowa will not run wild with the idea that their State is to be a rival of California. It would be a misfortune if a country so magnificently endowed for purposes of agriculture should have its development retarded by a chase after gold, which never, except in a few rare cases, pays so well as raising potatoes.”

As in any gold rush, merchants and tradespeople may have had the most to gain, especially if it brought new people into the state. Some newspapers, playing their important role of town booster, claimed that it did. “Steamboats arriving at [Des Moines] bring with them gold seekers from all parts of the country,” the Waverly Republican said in late May. The Marietta Express reprinted reports that “a large tide of emigration from Indiana and Illinois is pouring into the gold region” in Clarke and adjoining counties. Another paper reported “hundreds from Ohio, Pennsylvania &c.”

An influx of people into Iowa would bring a demand for supplies and services, especially important after the Panic of 1857 had depressed prices and stalled railroad and town development. But Iowa editors advertised the promise of fertile soil of Iowa much more than the lure of gold. “Come to Iowa,” a Davenport paper enticed its distant readers. “Our soil is rich in every respect, and gold can be dug from it in more ways than one.”

Not everyone wanted a gold rush in Iowa. The Waverly Republican foresaw a flood of “adventurers of all classes seeking quick and violent fortunes.” A Dubuque paper worried over a “stampede . . . of all that is least worthy, least desirable.” The Clinton Herald warned of “fools, mad men, and thieves.”

“We mourn for Iowa,” the New York Tribune wailed, in a story reprinted in Dubuque. “No State in the Union has made greater or more rapid advances in population, morality, intelligence, thrift than she has . . . . Though times are hard with her people, as with almost all others, she has an admirable soil and a most industrious, energetic, intelligent people, and was about to work gradually and healthfully out of her difficulties.

“But a great trial, a great peril, has suddenly assailed her. Her future, but yesterday so hopeful, is now over-

More Gold.

We have previously noticed the report finding of gold in Hardin County, and are now satisfied these reports are true. Mr. Stephen G. Crane, formerly of Vinton but now of Steamboat Rock writes us enclosing a specimen that was obtained “from a single pan full of earth, and is poor in comparison with what has been found.” This specimen we hand to Mr. Jhon A. Bille, jeweler and goldsmith who subjected it to every known test and pronounces it pure gold. Mr. Crane says a number of pieces worth 25 cents have been found, and one nugget worth $2.10 dug out a mile above the town. The existence of gold in Hardin can no longer be doubted, but in remains to be seen whether mining for will be remunerative.—[Vinton Eagle.

Waverly Republican, June 5, 1858
ing, as there is an abundance of water pretty much everywhere." From April through July, 28 inches of rain saturated Iowa City, twice the average of the four surrounding years. In Hardin County, "high water is obstructing the progress of the miners; . . . a great many say that they are making fair wages, with a prospect of doing better as soon as the water subsides."

As summer progressed, reports kept coming in of gold in new places: in Lucas, Decatur, Henry, and Delaware Counties. Near Saylorville and Story City, Panora, Decorah, Danville, and Adel. Steamboat Rock and Strawberry Point. Fort Dodge attorney John Duncombe, rowing by Boonesboro and Millford on his way to Des Moines, observed "the wild gold excitement here" and noted it in his diary, "Every body was hunting gold."

Then he added what all Iowa was finding out: "Small particles were found in many places, but not enough worth digging for."

Iowa's 1858 gold rush died late that summer—barely four months since the first exciting reports, and just as gold was discovered in Colorado. "The gold excitement in Iowa has lulled as suddenly as it started," the Davenport Gazette noted in late July. "No one seems to have been injured by it but a few who left their homes in the East to become rich without labor by digging gold in our fertile State. Now and then we still read of small particles being discovered . . . but in no case does it yield as profitably as digging potatoes."

"The 'gold hunters' around Des Moines who were going to turn the Coon, or some other river, or creek, from its bed, and make an everlasting fortune, have broken up," the Davenport Daily Morning News observed on August 2. "Thus dies one of the greatest 'discoveries' of the age. There is more money made at Des Moines by turning the stream of State revenue from its channel than in any other way."

Maybe the Morning News had said it all back in mid-May: "We have gold here in another shape; we have it in the agricultural wealth of our rich prairie soil."  *

Eric Lana is a graduate student in public history at Middle Tennessee State University and has worked at the State Historical Society as an archivist and researcher.

NOTE ON SOURCES

Citations and print-outs from Iowa newspapers of 1858 of news items about gold discoveries are held in the Iowa Heritage Illustrated production files (Iowa City). Harvest wages in Davenport are from Merle Davis, "Wheat, Work, and Wages: The Iowa Experience, 1856–1865" (unpublished manuscript). Other sources include Paul Garvin, Iowa's Mines: Their Occurrence, Origins, Industries, and Lore (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1998), and William J. Peterson, "Gold on the Prairie: The Palimpsest, 34:12 (December 1958), 556-59.

Was gold discovered in your county in 1858? Check the newspapers!

You might say that Eric Lana, the author of this article, had something in common with gold-hunting Iowans in 1858. He, too, was searching for gold—but he was looking for it in old Iowa newspapers.

In the last few years, while researching the underground railroad in Iowa with researcher John Zeller, Eric Lana has pored over dozens and dozens of Iowa newspapers from the 1850s. Frequent mention of gold discoveries in 1858 caught his eye and led to further research. He found well over one hundred news items about gold being discovered in Iowa.

Of the 39 counties where gold discoveries were reported, most were in the eastern third of the state: Lee, Des Moines, Louisa, Muscatine, Scott, Clinton, Jackson, Dubuque, Clayton, Davis, Van Buren, Henry, Wapello, Mahaska, Keokuk, Cedar, Johnson, Iowa, Linn, Jones, Delaware, Buchanan, Winneshiek, Bremer, and Floyd Counties. The others were in central and south-central Iowa: Decatur, Lucas, Clarke, Union, Warren, Madison, Adair, Guthrie, Dallas, Polk, Marshall, Story, Boone, and Hardin Counties.

Lana is quick to point out that there may well have been gold discoveries reported in other Iowa counties. After all, he doesn't claim to have read every Iowa newspaper from 1858. In western Iowa, for example, many counties were still being organized in 1858, were sparsely populated, and had far fewer newspapers.

Although gold was indeed found in Iowa, the real treasure, for those of us who love Iowa history, are the extensive collections of Iowa newspapers at the State Historical Society of Iowa's research libraries in Iowa City and Des Moines. Some date as far back as the 1830s and 1840s. Those on microfilm can be borrowed through interlibrary loan. Make the request through your local library. For more information, call 515-281-8741 (Des Moines) or 319-335-3916. Or check our Web site: www.iowahistory.org/library.

Iowa newspapers from the last two centuries are goldmires of information about local, state, and national events and attitudes. Whether you're curious about the 1860s—or the 1960s—you'll take great treasures, and pleasures, from reading newspapers from the past.

—The Editor