Gold in the Prairies

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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 ignus 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 farm-
ers anxious for some change in their programme of opera-
tions; 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 thous-
ands 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 tempo-
rary 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 ele-
ments 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