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Article Summary: This story, presented to the Nebraska State Historical Society on January 11, 1881, recounts the mad rush to the mountains in the fall of 1858 and spring of 1859 and the aftermath of disappointment and great financial loss which the parties suffered. From the viewpoint of the occurrences in the town of Plattsmouth where many purchased their supplies, it provides a first-person account of both the stampede for gold and the sorrowful retreat.

GOLD AT PIKE'S PEAK—RUSH FOR—STAMPEDE.

ADDRESS OF DR. A. L. CHILD,

January 11th, 1881.

There is no portion of the history of the past which is not largely obscured, distorted, or absolutely falsified through the *omission* of unwritten portions.

We are prone to forget or fail to realize how intense the interest of the future may be in the doings of *to-day*. Or if we feel the importance of leaving a record we are apt to note only the fading and vanishing items of the past. To make a record of transactions and happenings of *to-day*, of that which every one knows all about, seems uncalled for and useless labor.

Through this neglect important springs of action and leading incidents to even revolutionary acts die out of memory, and are thus lost to the historian, who, for lack of the real causes, founds upon false ones, if any. That truthful history, especially of partisan transactions, cannot be written in present time, is most unquestionably true. Partisan feeling, more or less active, will unconsciously color and distort the views of the most impartial. Still a record of the *facts* of the present may save the future historian much labor and from great error.

I do not flatter myself that I shall make you think that the episode in our history which I have to present to you this evening possesses much importance; and yet the subject matter of it is one which holds no second place in its influence on mankind.

My subject is the discovery of gold in what is now termed Colorado, or, in the language of that day, at "Pike's Peak," the rush from all parts of the country to share in it, and the subsequent stampede, and its consequences.

The announcement of the discovery of a new gold, diamond, or silver mine is not usually slow in gathering a crowd, as California, Australia, Nevada, Pike's Peak, etc., have proved.

A faint and far off sound was raised of gold found by a Cherokee cattle trader, at the mouth of Clear creek (near where Denver is now) in 1852. It was, however, too faint and uncertain to reach across the plains to the people.

Again, in the spring of 1858, a wandering miner from Georgia, re-discovered the gold, verified the previous report of the cattle trader, and announced the auriferous character of the place.

This time the country and the world heard the report, and although the nearest settlements were some 600 miles distant (on the Missouri river), the cry was forwarded, and spread over the country with such celerity and effect that by Nov. 1st, 1858, upwards of 400 men were gathered in the vicinity of the present Denver, with a hard winter, just commencing, upon them. This crowd was gathered largely from the nearest settlements in the Missouri valley, Western Iowa, Missouri, and Kansas. Some had consideration and forethought enough to look before they leaped. With teams and means, they had provided food, clothing, etc., to winter upon. But the larger number, excited and crazed by the idea of unlimited gold, with loose and undefined thoughts of finding it lying around, to be gathered up by the handful—and finding in that thought alone an all sufficient supply of all imaginable wants, rushed out and joined the passing crowd, with but little if any preparation whatever.

The passage of this crowd over the plains was largely up the south side of the Platte river, along the divides of the Blues and the Republican on the south, and of the Platte upon the north. This route for the first half of the journey, and the Platte bottoms for the remaining part, formed a natural highway with but few impediments.

It was a motley crowd indeed, as it passed the writer's residence in Cass county. There were the well appointed horse and mule teams, with all desirable tools, clothes, and provisions; the single horse or mule with go-cart, or saddle and pack tied on behind; the man with the hand cart, the man with a pack upon his back, the man with naught but the clothes upon his back, and—anything more?

Yes, my friends, there was the eleven-year-old boy, with his little boy's wagon—made by himself—a piece of corn bread in it, and his ragged jacket thrown over it. And he "forgot to ask leave of his mother" when he joined the company in Mills county, Iowa. His faith was *really sublime*. He had taken his wagon to haul his gold in on his return! But *faith* was the order of the day. It led the hosts through the wilderness. Ill provided as they were, it bore them on to the promised land.

But this crowd, entirely inexperienced in ways and methods of

search, and with winter's snows and frosts closing in upon them, of course found very little gold, and a large majority none. The larger portion, swayed and governed by little else than the impulse of the moment, as suddenly sickened and became disgusted, as they had previously become excited and carried away. Gold had not automatically fallen into their hands or pockets (patient and persevering toil for it had no place in their conceptions). Their faith died a sudden and violent death. The fever heat of excitement as suddenly fell to arctic rigors.

It is not difficult to imagine the trials and sufferings of these men, confined by the rigors of winter in a place entirely beyond the reach of subsistence, and with no present means to live upon. As a matter of course, those who *had* were obliged to divide with those who *had not*. Long before the opening of spring, the poles of the magnet were reversed, and repulsion instead of attraction was the ruling power, and at the earliest possible hour the back track became again a crowded thoroughfare.

Meanwhile the cry of gold, started the previous season, had spread far and wide, and its magic power had continually increased throughout the country, and many thousands were awaiting seasonable weather to reorganize the advance, with perhaps equal impatience to that of those who would now organize retreat. The advancing and reflux waves met about midway between the Missouri river and Pike's Peak. As the advance skirmish waves met, the prevailing language on each side was of scorn and contempt. The advance saw in the retreat only an idle, lazy class of loafers and beggars, who preferred at least great hunger, if not starvation, to work. While the retreating party saw in the advance the same craze and folly which had driven themselves forward in their mad career. But, as the increasing size and depth of the opposing waves met, they began to force thought, doubt, and question. At the night camps, the meeting trains gathered in large numbers, and the nights were spent in denunciation, argument, and enquiry. At length the party in retreat began to prevail. The increasing numbers and general agreement in report so staggered the advance, that doubt, hesitation, and conviction followed, and turning face to the east the advance began to augment the reflux tide.

The avalanche from the mountain side, when once started, increases rapidly and fearfully. So, from a comparatively few scattered parties

who left Pike's Peak, the movement had grown to a crowd of thousands, a disappointed, angry, and dangerous mass. Disgusted at their own folly in being so easily duped, it took but a short time to transfer their anger from themselves to and against those who had been instrumental in duping them.

They soon arrived at the conviction that the reports and the whole matter had been devised and organized by the traders and speculators at the border or river towns, who, in it, proposed to reap a large harvest from the sale of outfitting goods and merchandise which parties would be forced to purchase before entering the uninhabited country.

That these parties, that is, the traders, had advertised largely was well known, and that they at the same time circulated all favorable gold reports was as well known. Nor was it probable that they suppressed florid reports on account of too high coloring.

Time and facts have proved that these gold reports were *founded* on truths, although in many cases grossly exaggerated.

Yet to this, in a measure, insane crowd, they were all *all* utterly false. And the more they talked and thought over the matter, the more bitter and vengeful their wrath became.

I presume all border towns had more or less difficulty with their stampedees, but my personal knowledge was of Plattsmouth more particularly, this being a prominent place of crossing the river in advance and of course in retreat.

It did a large business in the outfitting line for parties on their way to the supposed gold fields. This outfit embracing all tools, clothes, food, etc., etc., which would be required for an indefinite sojourn in a country supplying none of these necessaries.

The crowd now approaching Plattsmouth, breathing revenge and destruction on "all and every last shark" there, was but a disorganized mob. Some two or three thousand encamped about two miles west of Plattsmouth, and there tried to effect an organization to obtain redress for their wrongs.

Some advocated sacking the town, repaying themselves for all losses, and then burning it.

Others, more moderate, advocated compelling all the traders to refund all the money taken from them, and then they might have what was left of their outfits.

Many other propositions were made and many offered themselves as

leaders to "put the thing through." But fortunately for Plattsmouth, lack of confidence in each other prevailed, and they only wrangled and came to no agreement.

A disorganized company of some two hundred started out for town with great threats as to what they would do. Thus they approached the several business houses where they had previously procured their outfits and made their several and different demands. Meanwhile the larger dealers of the town, more or less (and generally *more*), alarmed by the approach of this threatening mob, seemed to feel that it would not be healthy to allow it to become too intimate with them, and were mostly "out of town."

They left their business houses in charge of the most reliable men to be found, well armed and provided for fight if circumstances should authorize it, and discretionary orders in case of combined and organized attack. In which case it was well known that all the force which could be raised would be but chaff before the wind. The individual method of attack emboldened the guards to meet them promptly and resolutely. Their momentum as individuals was not sufficient for success. They were bluffed off and retreated.

Then they attempted to seize the steam ferry and cross themselves free. But here also, they were so determinedly met and repulsed that they again retired. Finally with much bluster and threatening of what they would do in some future time, the host melted away, got themselves over the river as they could, and went on their way.

Their lack of organization and leadership was probably all that saved Plattsmouth. Well organized and led, they could have made their own terms and done as they pleased. And the spirit of vengeance rampant among them would not have been satisfied short of the destruction of the town.

Many stories are in circulation of heroism and daring by some of the citizens, but with one or two exceptions do not bear tracing back well. One which seems quite authentic ascribes much power and effect on the excited mob to the calm yet decided and resolute address of old Mr. Porter (father of Jas. R. and Wm. B.), then an aged and feeble man, many years since deceased.

Another attributes much presence of mind and resolution to Wheatly Micklewait, who ran the ferry boat, which prevented the taking it from him and running it free.

This mad rush to the mountains in the fall of 1858 and spring of 1859, was the cause of not only much mental and physical suffering, but of very great pecuniary loss. Time has proved that *gold was there*. But without experience, knowledge, or perseverance it was to the mass of seekers but an *ignis fatuus* which led only to disappointment and suffering.

The South Platte road, by which large numbers of these people advanced and retreated, followed for a large part of the way the earlier Mormon overland trail. Parties through Plattsmouth struck this trail about two miles east of the old Salt Creek ford, where Ashland has since been built.

To those who were not eye witnesses of this great movement, it must be difficult to conceive the appearance of this crowd, as it moved on in its advance, not only for a day but for weeks. In passing the writer's residence in Cass county, the trail or road for about one and a half miles, as it followed the divide between the Weeping Water and the Platte, was in plain view. At times this entire length of a mile and a half was so densely crowded by the moving throng as to entirely obscure all view of the beyond. Each team close up to its leader, and from two and three to five or six abreast, and then generally flanked on either side by bodies of footmen. It was a large river of animal life.

In the retreat of the spring of 1859, not unlike the retreat of Buonaparte's poor soldiers from Moscow, vestiges and monuments of the folly were left along the road side, remaining for several years.

As the stampede in retreat commenced its movements, it was largely with starved and hungry teams and men. As they started they gathered all that remained of their belongings. True this made up but light loads for able teams and men, but a short travel proved that they were too heavy for the remaining strength. This growing weakness compelled the gradual dropping of incumbrances by the road side. A horse or an ox would give out. To stop to rest or recruit where no means for sustenance of man or beast existed was folly; hence a part of the load was thrown out. Perhaps the four-wheeled wagon reduced to two and the one remaining animal geared in and urged forward with the rest. This but delayed the general catastrophe. A few miles further and the remaining beast fell, and then with a small selection in shape of a pack, teams, wagons, and contents were abandoned.

Of the footmen, some of whom started with a fair, possibly a large sized pack, the most found themselves forced to drop article after article by the wayside as strength failed them. Six hundred miles is a long and weary road to travel under such conditions.

Valuable property, horses, mules, oxen, wagons, chains, a great variety of mining tools, and even large quantities of provisions were thus abandoned and to the owner lost; although subsequently portions were gathered up and used by hungry followers. But for many years the entire track from the mountains to the Missouri was more or less lined with articles of a less perishable character.

I had designed to append to this sketch some account of the immense freighting business which was carried on over these plains, first by the government to supply the military posts, and then at a later day by individuals and companies increased to huge proportions for the supply of mining camps and settlements in the mountains, till the U. P. railroad came into competition and in a few months almost annihilated the trade of the "bull whacker." But ill health has prevented the effort necessary to obtain the statistics requisite to illustrate this peculiarly interesting and colossal business.
