CALIFORNIA GOLD DIGGERS

LETTERS, JOURNALS AND OTHER INFO RE: MADISON COUNTY, AR PEOPLE

WHO MADE THE JOURNEY TO CALIFORNIA

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In 1849 and 1850, there were at least 130 people (and possibly more) from

Northwest Arkansas who made the journey to California in search of "gold".

The following are letters written by people who traveled those long miles

in an attempt to make their lives better.

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Letter from E. H. P Davis to his wife in

Fayetteville, Arkansas -

postmarked San Francisco June 1, 1850:

May 8th, 1850

My Dearest Wife:

It has been so long since I wrote to you, I scarcely know where to begin or

what to write, save that I am well as might be expected for a laboring man.

Since I last wrote you I have been traveling over the country hunting for

"good diggins" or as it is called here "prospecting" -- which is decidedly

the hardest work the nerves of man can be subjected to. the prospecting

party begin by fixing their packs, not for mules, for the country is so

rough and mountainous that you dare not venture into the hills with them,

which consists of your gun which is an indispensable article for we hear

daily almost of small parties of men being attacked by the wild Indians and

more or less of them killed. The large influx of whites has driven the

Indians to the verge of perpetual snow where they can neither get game or

any kind, nor can they with safety approach the Rivers to fish, so they are

quite in a starving condition and consequently desperate.

Old man Colville and Andy and a man from Oregon were all killed by them a

short time since on Feather River. I saw a gentleman well acquainted with

them who assisted to take them from the water where they had been thrown by

the Indians and buried them. so the gun is necessary safeguard against the

Indian and Grisly Bear which are very numerous in the mountains. then we

have say 3 blankets to the man, as it is very cold in the vicinity of the

eternal snows, and provision to last for 10 days or two weeks, making

altogether between 60 and 80 pounds that is carried on the back on one man.

This could be borne if we had a level road to pack over, but the country is

so rough it is impossible to travel more than about 8 miles a day with such

loads. No language can convey any adequate notion of the mountainous

character of the country. The mountains will average from 2 to 5 miles from

the summit to the water's edge and so steep you are compelled to cling to

the shrubs to enable you to get up and down them. The streams have no

valleys -- nothing but dark deep caverns, through which the pure snow water

from the Sierras rushes with a power and velocity unknown to any other

country under the sun. The water is but melted snow and is now quite as

cold as any ice water you ever tasted, and I am told will continue so

throughout the season.

While out prospecting we passed over snow 8 feet deep, and are still in

sight of the mountains where it is 20 feet deep at this time. the exposure

gave me a very severe cold that has given me much concern, though I am much

better than I have been. There is now 24 in number of us, including Mankins

Company, Waits and Sanders from Huntsville and many others you are not

acquainted with, engaged in turning the River which is here about the size

of White River where we crossed it in going to Widow Lee's after our pork.

It is what is called the Middle Fork of the American Fork of the Sacramento

River, and is considered the richest stream in California. We are located

about 30 miles northeast of Sutter's Mills and about the same distance from

the main summit of the far famed Californian Mountain that now in all

probability holds the first drop of snow that ever descended upon it from

the heavens.

In 2 days more we will have our race dug, which is 300 yards long, 12 feet

wide and 10 deep. It is the hardest kind of work to shovel gravel and sand

and roll large stones out of such a ditch. If I can stand such work it will

perhaps make a man of me. In ten days we can erect our dam and then we can

ascertain whether there is any dust in the bed of the River. We can't dam

however, until about the first of July by reason of the high waters caused

by the melting snows. there are a great many engaged in turning this River

at different points, and it is thought the stream will not in its entire

length run 5 miles in its original bed this fall.

Many other streams will share a like fate. This whole country is swarming

with human beings. Every ravine and mountain is crowded and wherever level

ground enough can be found it's certain to be covered with tents. And I

learn there are still more coming from all points of the Union. In the name

of heaven let no person that you can influence even come to this wretched

country. I have heard but one opinion expressed by all considerate men, and

that is that gold can never pay a man for coming to this country. A few

honest men have made fortunes digging gold; speculators in lands, town

property and provisions and the gamblers have done the best, but the large

mass have more than worsted their condition by coming here.

I think the country decidedly unhealthy, and the exposure a man must

subject himself to in order to make anything renders it doubly so. Nathan

Lewis died about a month ago of lung fever. Peter Mankins and Burt Sanders

were on the verge of the grave and are now just getting about. All have

been sick more or less. Of the 130 that left Arkansas, their ranks have

already been more than decimated.

I have not heard from Hoge since I left him at the Salt Lake and presume he

is there yet. Doc Cunningham, North and others I have not heard from since

last fall. they are up on the waters of Feather River somewhere. Murphy

(at) the last accounts was on the Yuba at a town called Vernon selling

whisky! for a living.

As to the political and social condition of this country, you doubtless

have a more correct knowledge than I have, as everything said, thought, or

done here gets into the papers and to see a newspaper is quite a wonder out

in these hills. I have not seen a newspaper or a woman for many months, and

begin to have great doubts whether I should be able to recognize either

should I meet them in my journeyings. According to your mode of thinking,

this is no disadvantage to me. It may be so.

I am very anxious to hear from (you) as my last dates from home come up to

your November letter only, at which time I was delighted to learn all

things were well with you. If I could (receive) your February letter and

learn of your confinement, its happy termination and the result you so

kindly predicted, and that I much and anxiously desire, the measure of my

happiness would (be) full to overflowing.

You should write to (me) regularly if possible. My chances to write are but

few and they somewhat uncertain. A man who carries letters to and from the

post office out into the mountains is to be here today or tomorrow, and

will deposit this in time for the June steamer. He will return about the

first of June and bring me some letters from home. We have to pay 50 cents

to have a letter carried from here to the post office and $2.00 to bring

one back -- so the way things go in California.

Peter Mankins does not know but his family may need some money before he

gets home; he is willing to pay 10 percent. If they should need it, they

may call on you to borrow some 3 or 4 hundred dollars until Christmas. If

you can assist them, do so, as Mankins is every way responsible. This is

the last sheet of paper in camp. Goodbye for the present, my dearest and

much beloved wife. remember me kindly and affectionately to the dear

children, and think of me often yourself.

H. Davis

If you can spare the money, let Pete VanHoose know it and he will tell

Mankins family.

If my health does not just utterly fail, I will not be home until October

or November. I will write every chance. My hands are so bruised and

swelled, I write badly, and compose words, as I have not half sense as soon

as I begin to write and think about you and home.

Submitted by: Sherry Healy [Doug-sherryhealy@worldnet.att.net]

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Copy of letter from Charles B. Sanders to his brother,

George Woodward Sanders, Junior of Huntsville, Arkansas.

(location of original unknown) [Spelling is original letter!]

"California, September 3, 1850

Dear Brother and sister,

It is with much pleasure that I except of the present opportunity of

righting you a few lines which will inform you that through the blessing of

the kind providence I am still in the land of the living and blesst with

good helth at this time. and Cinceerally hoping these few lines may come to

hand and find you all enjoying the same like blessings. Your vary

interesting letter of April 5th came to hand on the 17th of Aug. which

afforded us all the greatest of satisfaction to hear that you was all well

and doing well. I cannot say that I have anything of much interest to right

.. I do not know of any one making vary much at this time..the company

above us have got the water turned. They have been at work 8 or 10 days in

the river and have not made much yet..still they may..but it causes me to

have some little doubt about the value of our claim..so if it dos not pay

us for all the labour and expence that we have been at..I may not leave

hear this fall. however I have not desided whether I will or will not go

home this fall.. Their is a good many of our old acquaintances getting hear

and they are vary anxious for Jospeph and Myself to stay with them but

Allen and George [WAITS] will go..as they seem altogether in that notion.

They say they will start the first of Nov..whether we do or not..we learned

a few days since that the people still higher up on this stream was a doing

vary well at least some of them and some was a doing well on this stream

some two or three miles below hear. But how ours will turn out we cannot

tell. Still every appearance seems vary flattering. Their is a number of

persons at work on the bank clear out of the watter oposit our claim and

making from 8 to 16 dollars per day to the hand.. but their is a great many

hear that seem to be doing almost nothing..and out of money..and every

thing else that they need.. Their is entirely two many people hear now..if

the emergration this ceason had had staid at home it would have been better

for them and us two..and I have no doubt for !

the whole community at large..for if they come another ceason as this their

will be more suffering than ever was known in the same length of time

before. It is bad aknuff as it is..though you that have not experienced a

trip of this kind cannot tell any thing about it from what little we right.

All of the good deegings is dug out I mean dry deeging that have been

discovered..and the river deegings is all taken up and will be dug out this

fall. Still a man can dig almost any whare and make a little..but that will

not pay a man for all his trouble and expence...at least it would take him

a long time to make a fortune. Helth hear generally speaking is not vary

good..though not vary many deaths. The most sickness is amongst the new

emergrants. We have been throwd back with our world in consequence of the

walling washing down in our race..now it seems that nothing could give me

greater satisfaction and peace of mind than to be at home with you all. But

I do not want to come as I am hear as long as I can make anything or at

least to gave me a good start in the world for I know the chance is dull to

make fast in the States. I think I will have a better chance to make an

other ceason than any of the new emergrants as I know more about the

country than they do. You will say to brother John and Gildia LONG that I

have rote to them twice and have not yet saw the scratch of a pen from

them. I have riten to several others that have not rote to me. So they will

all be certin to answer the next one I right to them you will tell brother

Willis BEARD that James BLACK is hear he has been vary sick but on the

mend. I will right to you again as soon as we prospect river I will then be

able to let you know wheather I will come home this ceason or not and

excpet for your selves our love and best wishes so nothing more at present

but rem your most affectionate brother until seperated by death.

Charles B. SANDERS"

Submitted by: Sherry Healy [Doug-sherryhealy@worldnet.att.net]

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Family tradition says that my 2gg. John Bowen who was born in Grainger

County, TN and came to Madison County with his family in the 1830's went to

the California Gold Rush. Apparently he was not successful because he

returned to Madison County and married Tennessee Boatright in the 1850's.

Submitted by: Janelle Richardson [janl@discover.net]

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Letter from John Bowen to Samuel and Margaret Bowen Haney

Weaver Creek California

Oct. 20, 1850

Dear brother and sister,

I except of this opportunity for the purpose of writing to you. I have

landed in California. I arrived in Long Town California the 28th of August.

I will give you a short account of California. The reason I say a short

account is my knowledge of California is limited.

When I arrived here I had no funds to go on, therefore, I had no

opportunity to look around. I had to engage in labor to get support. The

next day I worked for three dollars per day then the next day I got 5

dollars per day.

After a few days Riley Barnes and I started a partnership and bought mining

tools and went to work on Weaver Creek. The 10th of Sept. we have taken out

about 5 hundred dollars since we started work. Our expenses for tools and

provisions has been one hundred seventeen dollars and 65 cents.

California is a very expensive country on account of provisions being so

high. Flour is 20 dollars per hundred, pork is 28 dollars per hundred,

potatoes is 20 dollars per hundred pounds, coffee is 50 cents a pound, rice

is 25, and sugar is 50, crackers is 75, butt $1, onions 85 and 90 cents per

pound, and all other provisions in proportion. Boots is from 14 to 16

dollars per pair, shoes 5 dollars per pair, socks $1.

Let me say to you, California has been overated in the states. There is a

great many persons in the states think that the gold in California lays on

top of the ground but I will beg leave to differ with them. I assure them

that it does not. If it does I have never been so lucky as to come across

it in that situation. What little I have got of it I have had to dig

tolerable deep for it. Sometimes we dig a hold 10 feet deep and not find

any gold. Some stated in their letters of find lumps that weighed 7 or 8

pounds. The largest that we found in a lump weighed 13 dollars and 50

cents. Riley dug that up yesterday while I was washing out gold. We found

another piece that weighed better than four dollars.

I have not heard anything of Allen Waits or the other boys as yet. I have

not give any account of my trip for tis reason it was such a rough trip

that I don't wish to talk about it. I will say this much. We had to walk a

good portion of the way and carry our blankets and what little provisions

we had. Also lived on half rations. I never want any of my friends to try

such a trip. I told you before I left that I knew all about hard times, but

I will say now that I knew nothing of hard times.

John Bowen's letter to Samuel and Margaret Bowen Haney is in the Special

Collections Library at the University of Arkansas.

Submitted by: Janelle Richardson [janl@discover.net]