

IOWA HISTORY



Courtesy Library of Congress
Gold miners at work

Plenty of Gold, Shortage of 40-rod Whiskey

“Left Canton Iowa 4 Oclock AM April 24th, 1864. Arrived at DesMoin City at 10 PM Monday May 9th.”

“Camped by a pond near an encampment with others.”

“Stampede of horses at night.”

The diaries of John and Margaret Tomlinson recount the couple’s trek by wagon from Canton, Iowa, to the gold mines of Montana in August 1864. Four months earlier Montana had become a territory of the United States.

Some expected to make their fortunes panning for gold. John Tomlinson, who became known as the “mill man,” was bringing machinery to build a saw mill. He hoped to set up his business on the Yellowstone River and supply lumber for construction of boats to carry men and supplies up and down the river.

The Tomlinsons joined up with a wagon train. That’s when they saw their first prairie dogs and buffalo herds. Wolves howled at night as they camped along the Nebraska bluffs. During the daylight hours they passed markers with the names of men, women and children who had died before reaching their destinations.

Encountering a band of Indians, the travelers accepted the chief's invitation to assemble into a circle and pass a pipe. Margaret was fascinated with a beaded cape worn by one of the Indian women.

Entries in the Tomlinsons' diaries mention Margaret suffering from an illness. "I was quite sick. Dr. Hull sent medicine," she wrote on June 14. There was no mention of what ailed her, but the birth of her first child in April 1865 meant she was probably in the first few months of her pregnancy as she made her way across the prairie in the ox-drawn wagon.

At one point two women were almost killed when fighting dogs incited a horse stampede. The wagon train decided to break into two different groups. The one for dog owners was called the "dog train." The Tomlinsons wrote that there were "no hard feelings" over the situation.

When the Tomlinsons reached their destination on the Yellowstone River in Montana Territory, they and other Iowa emigrants began to build a town they named Yellowstone City. They built cabins out of logs, with layers of pine poles, topped with soil and grass as roofs. The floors were bare dirt, sometimes carpeted with fresh elk skins.

The settlers quickly enacted written laws. But they revised them "almost every day." The new laws offered "ample protection" for the women of the settlement. Any man who dared insult a woman was dealt a "terrible punishment."

The nearby mines became known as Emigrant's Gulch. Although the gulch was reported to be rich in gold, huge boulders made it almost impossible to mine. It was not easily accessible by pack mules, and men ended up carrying their provisions on their backs. Those who were lucky enough to find gold worked all day for \$6 per man.

The mining season ended on October 20 in 1864 when ice formed in the sluice box. The miners headed into Yellowstone City. The winter of 1864-65 was a long, hard one. There were few supplies in the only store. And everything was expensive. A 96-pound sack of flour went for \$28. Coffee cost \$1 per pound, tea was \$2 per pound. Tobacco was \$5 per pound. The settlers paid carriers 37 cents for taking a letter from Yellowstone City 100 miles to Virginia City.

At one point there were two saloons in town, but one located in a tent had to close its flaps. Nobody wanted to drink there because the owner didn't offer 40-rod whiskey. It got its name from miners who said it could kill a man from 40 rods. Some said it took its name from a unique recipe: 40 gallons made from one gallon of good whiskey mixed with strychnine.

No one got very rich at Emigrant's Gulch. They could never overcome the problem of the huge boulders that blocked the miners' access to the gold. As one miner put it, "There's plenty of gold, if you could only get it."

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Sources

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