7-2-1850


Matthew Dinsdale

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The following letter gives vivid impressions of a gold miner in the California Gold Rush. It was written by Reverend Matthew Dinsdale to a brother minister who had been associated with him in Wisconsin during pioneer days as circuit riders. The letter was written to "Brother Dyer."

This is very probably Rev. John Lewis Dyer who was a noted pioneer preacher and presiding elder in Colorado and was known as "The Snow Shoe Itinerant." There is evidence that he also pioneered in Wisconsin and became acquainted with Matthew Dinsdale before the latter went to California.

According to the text of this letter both had friends in Linden and Potosi. Records show that Dyer was a member of the Wisconsin Conference from 1851 to 1855 but withdrew over the slavery issue and a few years later went "West" where he joined the Colorado Conference.

Matthew Dinsdale, the author of the letter, was born July 14, 1815, in Askriggs, England. He became a local preacher of the Wesleyan Church before migrating to the U.S.A. in 1845. He joined the Rock River Conference in 1845 and was appointed to Potosi, Wisconsin. In 1846 he went to Winnebago Lake Mission (Oshkosh). In 1849 he went to California, preached on Sundays and dug for gold during the week. He returned to England in 1852 and married Mary Ann Mann and returned to Lisbon, Wisconsin, where he entered the mercantile business with his brother, Edward, for five years.

He joined the West Wisconsin Conference in 1858 and served churches at Hazel Green, Lancaster and Darlington. He was superannuated in 1876 and lived in Madison for ten years while serving nearby churches. He spent the declining years of his life in Linden where he died April 15, 1898.
My Dear Brother Dyer:

Almost eight months have elapsed since I last saw you and that evening I made you at least a partial promise that I would write you a letter should I be preserved to reach this country. Thru the kind providence of God I am here and in the enjoyment of health. Having now seen a portion of California and know what living in it is, I think it is time for me to begin a letter to you.

You will expect from me the truth, this I shall try to give you. You know very well that I shall not try to deceive you. Perhaps I may not communicate nothing new as I suppose you hear and read much about this region. Still I shall have the satisfaction of showing you that I do not forget my friends.

The country as to its physical appearance is much as I expected to find it, mountain and valley with the exception of the great Sacramento Plain. Beginning at the Sierra Nevada, the mountains form a gradual slope to the plain, hence at Sacramento City, perhaps a hundred and fifty miles off you can see very distinctly the principal range covered with perpetual snow. The water here is very good and so far as I have seen yet abundant but as the dry season advances the small streams and those nearest the plain fail as is to be expected. The nearer the mountains the higher the stream except as it is fed below. Mining operations high up are very much obstructed by high water and on some streams the digging season is quite short unless the water can be turned. As a farming country I have not a very good opinion of California, for grazing it is very good where animals can have the range, even near the highest mountains there are some with valleys the grass of which is peculiarly good. I have no doubt but there will be some valuable farms in places but as a general remark I think the country will not be cultivated. The dry season will be the great obstacle. You must not however infer that this is a barren land, it is not. I may have seen its best appearance probably of some parts I have, but with few exceptions all vegetation is green and flourishing. The flowers (of great variety and beauty) are very plentiful and almost everywhere seen. As wild flowers I suppose they are unequalled. At our present camping place we have almost a perfect flower garden. In a valley near us there are some splendid specimens of tiger lily.

That however, for which the country is interesting and now celebrated is gold. That has more than magic charms in the opinion of some and the California were a thousand times worse than it is as a country to live in, I suppose numbers would find their way to it. It is true that gold is here found and in great abundance. But on this subject I want to write correctly and therefore must be on my guard to prevent the misinterpretation of terms for to speak of it as existing in abundance you might perhaps infer that I have much of it, or that all who dig for it get much, or that it is easily obtained, neither of which is the case. A number of names of persons I have heard who are said to be on their way here from Mineral Point. Now that I am here I am ready to wonder what could induce some of them to start. I have always been of the opinion (this of course is a general rule) that a man ought not to leave his family behind; if he will come, let him bring his family
along. And I always thought if a man was in business and making a comfortable living he ought not to break up the establishment for the uncertain rewards of this country. A residence here has confirmed me in the belief that these views are pretty correct. If I have not heard the language of regret, I have seen palpable evidence of it, in the countenance, the deportment and the pursuit. There have been long periods of suffering experienced by some that all the gold of the country could not compensate for. After the dangers of the journey are over, and they are not few or trifling, a wandering life has to be commenced. A man can hardly tell one day where he will be the next. The most familiar sight is diggers "moving", some walking, others riding; some "packing", others with an animal to "Pack" for them. And some of the most painful experience we have is that we have no certain dwelling place. A man's diggings give out and he is off. He hears of a more likely place and he is off. Here to keep pace with the World a man has almost to turn round daily.

In travelling about and exploring the country and even while digging there is necessarily much exposure. I have endeavoured to be as stationary as possible and have been as careful as I could be to preserve my health; but I assure you I have seen the elephant. I mined during the rainy season and there is no mistake about there being such a season. The first house I lived in was a tent, the second a cabin without a floor, the not wholly without a roof, nor yet destitute of sides, but they were open. In journeying, it is desirable to take as little baggage as possible as everything extra is a burden, and therefore, it is difficult to provide for the contingencies of weather. I have slept in turns on the plain, the mountain and close to the stream in the deep valley. By the day I have walked thru falling snow and rain with nothing waterproof on except boots. Health is here placed in great jeopardy by the want of suitable food. I mean vegetable food. It is my opinion that there has always, or nearly always, been enough in the country but a person may very easily be in a part where the supply is limited, and there may be indifference about extra effort to procure it. A disease called land scurvy prevails from this cause. An unpleasant and frequently fatal disease it is. I have hitherto been entirely free from it and hope to continue so. At whatever cost, vegetables ought to be used frequently if not constantly here. The last potatoes we bought cost us 50 cents a pound and poor ones you would think them in Wisconsin. Considerable alarm has been felt in some parts of the mining region on account of hostile Indians. There has been and still is danger from this quarter. We heard much of their depredations and murders and at last we travelled thru the country where their conduct has been most violent and injurious. At one place, the day before we got there, a man had been shot by them and seven oxen stolen. And one night we were told that several hundred warriors were only three miles off. The next morning a party of Americans passed us on their way to chastise them for the injuries lately done, and some of our men soon after heard shooting and firing of arms. The same evening we heard that several Indians had been killed. This was near Bear River, the next large stream north of the north branch of the American Fork of the Sacramento. I must however say in behalf of the Indians that much provocation has been given them. A treaty of peace has lately been made with them and I do think they will not be the first to trample on its provisions. I had the pleasure of seeing the principal chief carrying it about to show to the Whites. He was accompanied by three or four other Indians, bearing white flags.
The labor of mining is quite as hard as I expected it to be and success not so certain. The most difficult part of the work is prospecting and exploring. And it is expensive and tedious in the extreme. I have had a share of it and shall be very glad if I have to do nothing more in that way. Prospecting is necessary when a man has no diggings and in some cases if he has not good diggings. I suppose you hear the most extravagant accounts of some places in this country where pounds of gold is taken out in pans. We are tantalized in this way by reports. And the thing is spoken of as a sort of secret which gives an additional charm and interest. Several times we heard of exceedingly rich places and it was said a man had only to be there to make a fortune in a few days; tho' there was some almost insurmountable obstacle in the way. At one time it was the hostile Indians, at another, mountains which could hardly be crossed, then it was water and last of all, snow. The great object of interest lately has been a gold lake, said to be about two days travel from where I am at present. The most feverish anxiety has prevailed respecting it; tho' I must inform you that I have not been much moved myself. What truth there is in the statements we have heard, I know not. The great difficulty has hitherto been in supposing a whole neighborhood rich merely because a place three yards square has turned out so. As soon as we supposed the rains were over we started for the summer diggings and selected the head waters of the middle fork of the American. This was done because (as everybody said) the country there was known to be very rich, one place especially, called the Big Canyon, was said to be worth any sacrifice to make a claim in. When we got there, we said this is the place and were glad when the place for future operations had been reached. We had a very favorable opinion of this county, 1st. because provisions were high, almost everything being a dollar a pound, 2nd. because there was no grass for our animals, 3rd. because the snow was so deep that we could not ride about much, 4th. because the country was very broken and in coming up from the streams where the gold was said to be we could make about a mile in two hours. I could give other reasons but I forbear. Suffice it to say that we almost killed both ourselves and animals and made less than two dollars in a month. And tho' we left because the water was too high, it was with the belief we should return, as we made some, as we called them, valuable claims. In the Big Canyon I have mentioned I saw one small place out of which ten men had taken out eleven hundred dollars the day before. Yet now a shilling could hardly be obtained for the best improved claim there and competent judges think very little of the part. I think it rich in places. The streams are very rapid and have a great body of water; consequently the gold is washed from all but the most secure places and there it will perhaps be found in large quantities. One place was pointed out to me where last fall, twenty two thousand dollars were taken out in a short time.

I am at present at a place called Grass Valley, four miles from Deer Creek and not a great way from Yuba. The present is my first regular diggings place, having been here five or six weeks. When we came here, we were twenty three in company, then sixteen and now nine. Most of the time we have been the latter number, the others were with us but a few days. These are about average diggings and therefore we neither despond nor boast. We are here until we can do better, having had one or more of our party out prospecting all the time. Some of our company are half mad to be off somewhere else. For my part I am thankful for what we are
doing and for the present content. I will give you our last week's earnings which is about an average of our labors. Monday, eight men working $132, Tues., seven men, $90, Wed., seven $106, Thurs., seven men, $159, Friday, seven men, $61, Sat., Five men, $50. This is reconing gold at $16 an oz., the lowest price in the country. Friday we only washed about three hours and Saturday we quit work early in the afternoon. Giving one share to the man who is out prospecting, we make ten or twelve dollars a day and hope to do still better. The most I have made in one day was $37.25 which was Thursday, the 20th of June. We threw off about three feet of the surface and find gold deposited (principally small or fine) in clay or gravel which we wash. In digging, it is hardly ever seen. But in order to find whether gold is in a certain place or not, a trial is made by washing a panful of dirt. In working ground, this testing process is frequently resorted to. And "it will pay" or "it won't pay" is the frequent cry. We are working on a neck between two valleys a place where the hills (low ones) come toward each other. We operate in the bed and on the sides and we're the first persons to try and move the ground. We have used a quicksilver machine, a rocker, and a "long tom" as it is called, that is a trough about twelve feet long by one and a half wide with a sheet-iron screen at one end and having a box with two or three riffles in it, placed under. The tom is placed on an incline where a stream of water can run thru it, the clay or gravel is thrown in, a man stands at the lower end with a shovel, washes the earth and throws out the stones, the sand and gold are taken together thru the screen and lodged in the box. After a day's work, the sand is washed off in a pan about the size and shape of a ten-quart flat milk pan. The tom is what we have mostly used and like best. I assure you there is work and hard work connected with all this; but I live and am stouter and better able to work than I ever was. On the score of health, I have received much benefit. Our working days are from seven to eleven, and from two to six.

Mr. Wesley is out prospecting at present. He went with seven or eight others who are from Mineral Point. W. I. Tilley is one of the party. They are on the headwaters of the Yuba, and Feather River amongst the snows and mountains.

The gold is generally found in the bed and banks of streams as you will have understood. In some places it is near the surface and in others some distance below. I have also seen persons work on the surface of a hill and find it in the first six inches of soil so as to pay for washing but below that nothing was found.

The other day a trial took place a short distance from our camp. It was in true California style and without expense. A sufficient number were notified to attend. A man was accused of stealing a mule. The case was heard on both sides, each party having chosen six men. The criminal was found guilty and condemned to receive thirty lashes which were there and then inflicted by a Jack Tar. I believe life and property are as secure here as in any other part of the world. The present social state of society is only the necessary result of existing causes. There is much gambling and some rowdism. Is this to be wondered at when moral and domestic restraints on natural, human passions hardly exist here. For my part, I am almost surprised that matters are not much worse. However the prevalence of profane swearing does astonish me, though I never hear it from our party with about one exception and that very seldom.
As to religion, I know it exists in the country for all do not throw it away when they get here. Numbers I am satisfied still believe wisdom to be the principal thing and therefore seek it first. I think being in California will religiously make a man either better or worse. He will be drove nearer to God or further from Him. Hardly anything belongs to a medium state. Good or bad; rich or poor; well or ill; alive or dead. This is the way with us. I have preached Christ in the valleys and on the mountains of this land and at every proper opportunity. I still purpose to do so, the Lord being my helper.

A word about the climate of California of which you have doubtless heard much. The climate is certainly one of its excellencies, else men could not live and toil as they do with so little suffering. Thousands are here without even a tent or anything for a shelter or covering and sleep on the hard ground, Where in the wide world could they do so with impunity for six months together?

The thermometer is now generally over 80 degrees in the shade at noon. In the mornings before sunrise about 50 degrees. For two weeks the nights have been much warmer than they were. Before, the days were hot it was difficult to keep warm with what ought to be sufficient wrapping at almost any season. But you must bear in mind we only have a tent for a dwelling. The rainy season closed on the 17th of April. Since then we have had one day’s rain, viz on the twelfth of May. The thermometer stood at 105 degrees in the morning. We had no thunder that day tho I have heard it at a distance two or three times. We read in turns around one of our camp fires (the rains not being heavy) the trial of Dr. Webster of Boston which we obtained in pamphlet form. Newspapers are read here with much interest and we are glad to obtain one by the payment of a dollar. When just arrived I have heard them called in the streets of Sacramento, price §2.00 each. You must pardon me, I have got away from the climate which I have not quite done with. We mostly have a clear sky with bright and glowing atmosphere. The evenings are remarkably pleasant and, like that of an old and dear friend, their smile is always welcome. If a person can love California for nothing besides, he must for its peaceful and soothing evenings. The twilight is longer than with you. Tho we have had so much dry weather, everything from the weed you tread upon to the lofty cedar is bright, beautiful living green. While I have been writing, a humming bird has been fluttering amongst the flowers near the tent. It is a frequent and welcome visitor. My joys are derived from God and His creatures that live, both animal and vegetable. Provisions are abundant but pretty well up in price. Flour 25¢, pork 40¢, fresh beef 25 to 35¢, dried fruit 60 to 70¢, milk $1.00 a quart and not to be had. Shoes that cost a dollar with you, sell for four here. Common boots $12, to $20, a pair. Coffee I am told now sells in Sac City for 75¢ a lb. A scythe and smooth cost there this summer $75. One man paid $150 for two. This beats you out and out. Shoe tacks, $2, a paper; dear lapping you will perceive. Mules and horses from one to two hundred dollars each. We have a mule that cost $150 and one $130. A man must make something to live here. Letters at the City cost only the regular postage, 40¢, but if brought to the mines by express, $2. is charged for each.
If a man hires out he gets from $8 to $12 a day, the but few do it as if a man is steady, he can make sure of a living. You must not suppose that we live on bread and molasses or butter cake and pork, we are proficient housekeepers and live well to keep ourselves good humored. I suppose however we must resign our commissions when we return and forget arts acquired by much experience. Some of us are excellent washwomen, others good bakers and so forth -- till you reach the end of domestic duties. Those who desire to learn how to batch, ought to come here. No joking when we have good taverns and first rate meals obtained at them, equal and even better than you get on the road from Galena to Chicago, but still I would rather be at our own camp table.

On the whole I am well satisfied that I came here and at present would rather be in California than anywhere else on this earth. But I cannot advise anyone to come, nor do I tell anyone to stay away. Let everyone be persuaded in his own mind which is the path of duty for him. Tho I may venture to say that those who do come, ought not to do so with the expectation of getting rich, lest they be disappointed. If a man is willing to face and try to surmount mighty obstacles and by honest efforts take what providence may apportion, well and good, My sheet is almost full and with that I must close. I shall now expect a letter in return. Tell me some conference news and when and where the session of fifty-one will be held. If convenient, I would like my brother and brother-in-law on Platte to see this. Give my love to my friends at Potosi and Linden. Tell them I often think about them and wish still to be remembered in their prayers. Remember me to Bro. Goldthorpe and to your brother and sister and the boys and lds. The we have tables, I prefer writing in the tent as the wind blows outside. I have therefore to rest my portfolio on my knees and write at a dis-advantage but I hope you will make all out and pardon mistakes.

Yours affectionally, M. Binsdale

Thermometer for the last three days; Before sunrise 57; at noon 72, At —PM 72. The weather is getting very warm, my present location being towards the mountains.

July 14th, evg I have celebrated the event kept in remembrance this day, by the side of "Tom". Thus I manifest my love for independence, both personal and national, by being industrious. I sent you a sample of gold washed out by me this day. It is a fair specimen of the kind obtained here. A little quartz is mixed with some, one piece I sent to let you see their union. The day was not celebrated near us or I should have attended. We are about six miles from Nevada City, on Deer Creek and our animals are all away at present.