

A Place in History: The Impact of the Sutter's Mill Gold Discovery on Henry Bigler

M. Guy Bishop

January 1898 found Henry William Bigler, an unpretentious Latter-day Saint temple worker from St. George, Utah, staying at San Francisco's palatial Russ House, a three-hundred-room hotel in the city's business district. How could this impoverished Mormon be staying at one of San Francisco's finest hotels? Henry Bigler was in San Francisco as an honored guest of the California Pioneers Historical Society. He was there to participate in the state's Golden Jubilee celebration commemorating the 1848 discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill near Sacramento.

As the Mormons were evacuating Nauvoo and beginning their famed westward journey, Bigler accepted a call to serve in the Mormon Battalion. This campaign launched Henry Bigler's flirtation with history. His Battalion experience was typical of Bigler—he willingly answered the call of his religion. However, Henry Bigler was not a willing soldier. Like many of his fellow Mormons, service with the Battalion was an unsought, unwanted duty solely for the benefit of the Church. "It was against my feelings also against the feelings of my brethren [but] we were willing to obey counsel,"¹ so they had enlisted at Brigham Young's urging. This willingness to obey counsel, however undesired, was a trademark characteristic of Henry Bigler, the Latter-day Saint.²

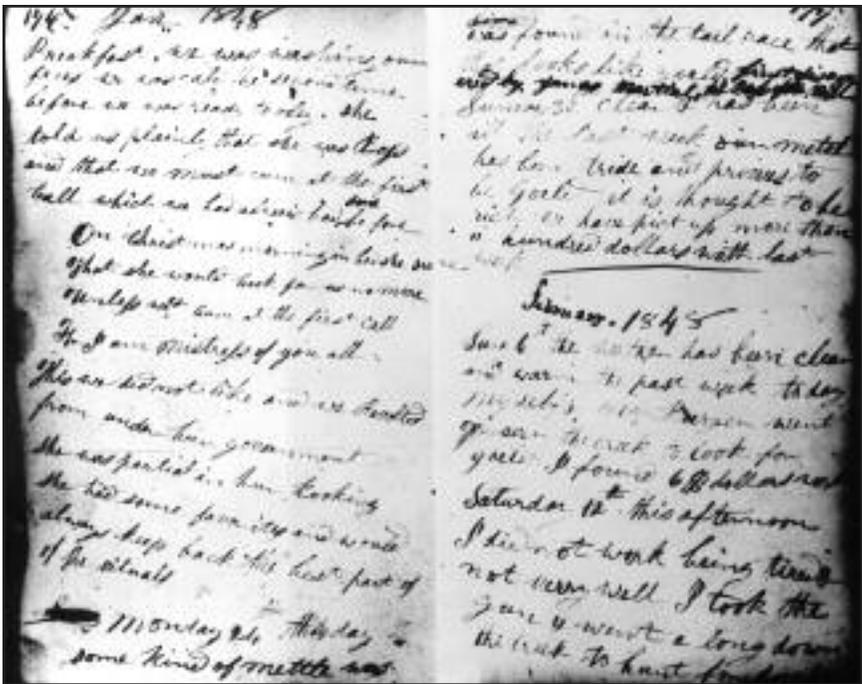
For Bigler, the Mormon Battalion experience, notable as it was, proved but a prologue to his real niche in western American history.³ During the months

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following his release from military service, Henry Bigler inadvertently found his place in history. In 1848, for one fleeting moment along California's American River, Bigler dallied with national celebrity. Not only was he present at the gold discovery at California's Sutter's Mill but also he recorded the event.

It is doubtful that on Monday, 24 January 1848, Henry Bigler realized what a decisive moment in history had just occurred. Nevertheless, he did record it in his journal. Bigler had been keeping an almost-daily record throughout the months of the Mormon Battalion's march to California (1846–47). In January 1848, he was merely maintaining an established habit of registering the day's events each evening. So he wrote that evening: "This day some kind of mettle was found in the tail race that looks like goald."⁴

Over thirty years ago, historian Erwin G. Gudde rather dismissively judged



Henry Bigler's diary page for 24 Jan 1848
recording the discovery of gold

Courtesy of The Society of California Pioneers

Henry Bigler's role in the gold discovery as an "accident."⁵ But Gudde was wrong. Bigler's position as the chronicler of the discovery was the result of a well-established habit of journal keeping. Although Henry Bigler's presence at Sutter's Mill that fateful day may have been "luck," his recording of the discovery was not.

During late 1847 and early 1848, Bigler and several other Mormon Battalion veterans were in the employ of Johann Augustus Sutter at his fort in Sacramento. Sutter had arrived in Mexican California in the late 1830s from Switzerland. He was fleeing a debtors' prison and an angry wife. By 1839, he had convinced California Governor Juan Bautista Alvarado that he, Sutter, could act as the semiofficial representative of Mexico in the interior of northern California in exchange for the right to occupy fifty thousand acres of land near the confluence of the Sacramento and American Rivers.⁶ Aided by this fortunate development, the one-time Swiss debtor was soon on the road to financial success. His Sacramento fort became a gathering place for American immigrants to California. Wishing to secure a ready supply of lumber to sell to the newcomers, Sutter struck a bargain with James W. Marshall,⁷ a Mexican-American war veteran who, much like Bigler and the other Mormon Battalion veterans, had stopped at the fort in search of work.

This is where chance came into play for Henry Bigler. He and three other Mormon workmen employed by Sutter were visited one night by Marshall and recruited to accompany him to the Sierra Nevada foothills to construct a sawmill. Bigler, for one, was delighted with James Marshall's offer. Building the sawmill in the mountains would pay the same as working for Sutter in Sacramento, and Bigler, a Virginia frontiersman by upbringing, quickly became the camp hunter. The notion of getting paid to hunt was very appealing to Henry Bigler.

The party of four Mormons led by Marshall arrived at the chosen mill site from Sacramento on 29 September 1847. Towering mountains, covered with a dense growth of pine and oak, provided ample habitat for wild game. The Mormons took up lodging with Peter L. Wimmer, his wife Jennie, at least one small child, and Wimmer's aged parents in a double cabin at the mill site. Peter Wimmer was Marshall's construction assistant. According to historian Kenneth Davies, the family had a Mormon connection. The parents "definitely were Mormons" writes Davies.⁸

By late December 1847, there were six Mormons working on the sawmill—Alexander Stephens, James S. Brown, James Barger, William Johnson, Azariah Smith, and Henry Bigler—along with non-Mormons Marshall, Wimmer, Charles Bennett, and William Scott.

The discoverer of the gold, James S. Marshall, kept no diary. But Henry Bigler did. According to Bigler's diary, Marshall was in the habit of inspecting the tail race, which the workmen were digging, on a daily basis. He had ordered that the gate to the race be opened each night to let water flow through the ditch, possibly thinking it would speed up the process.

In 1857 James Marshall wrote:

I used to go down in the morning to see what had been done by the water through the night; and about half past seven o'clock on or about the 19th of January—I am

not quite certain of a day, but it was between the 18th and 20th of that month—1848, I went down as usual . . . [near] the lower end [of the mill race], . . . upon the rock, about six inches beneath the surface of the water, I DIS-COVERED THE GOLD. I was entirely alone at the time, I picked up one or two pieces and examined them attentively.⁹

In 1870, upon learning that there was uncertainty over the exact date, Bigler moved to remedy the situation. Recalling the particulars, “which are as fresh in my mind as though they happened last week,”¹⁰ Bigler shared excerpts from his diary from that fateful day with historians Hubert H. Bancroft and Charles S. Hittell. Bigler’s role in the gold discovery was now forever fixed in the historical record. His place in history was secured.

Henry Bigler’s sincere and modest efforts to set the record straight had two significant impacts upon his later life. First, he realized that his historical information truly was valuable. And second, his correspondence with the editor of a San Francisco newspaper about his knowledge of the discovery of gold ultimately put Bigler in contact with Bancroft and Hittell. The efforts of these men would guarantee Bigler’s place in history.

Discussions about the true date of the gold discovery and the role played by Bigler, Marshall, and the others would be led by these historians. At this time, a significant amount of information was disseminated through newspapers and periodicals. Bancroft and Hittell, as professional historians, were very familiar with this outlet. As present-day historian John W. Blassingame has observed, “one of America’s favorite pastimes” during the nineteenth-century was writing letters to newspapers.¹¹ Henry Bigler contributed at least six letters to the editors of three different newspapers between 1870 and 1900, his most noteworthy being the 1870 letter to the *San Francisco Daily Bulletin* in which he revealed to the world the existence of his diary and its record about the discovery of gold.

Following this disclosure, Henry Bigler emerged as a popular spokesman for Mormonism and a valuable witness to this important aspect of American history. Of importance, Bigler’s writings were distributed far beyond the narrow confines of his St. George, Utah, home. His writings were submitted to non-Utah, non-Mormon newspapers and were available to many audiences. They provided readers with a perspective not only on the gold discovery but also on Mormonism and Utah.

Bigler’s contributions were seen as far east as his native state of Virginia¹² and on the west coast. He wrote of his experiences as a gold miner in California and as a Mormon missionary in Hawaii. For many, Henry Bigler was recognized as an informed voice from the Mormon West—that exotic land of Brigham Young, polygamy, and LDS temples.

In 1885, Bigler undertook another important writing project. He became a regular contributor to the *Juvenile Instructor*, a faith-promoting publication for Mormon youth. This periodical was edited by George Q. Cannon, an old friend

of Bigler's from his Hawaiian Mission days. Using the Hawaiian pseudonym, "Henele Pikale," Bigler wrote a twenty-part series entitled "Recollections of the Past" for the *Juvenile Instructor* during 1886. He told his young (and likely older) readers of his Mormon Battalion experiences, the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill, and early days in Utah. He often extracted almost verbatim from his diaries.

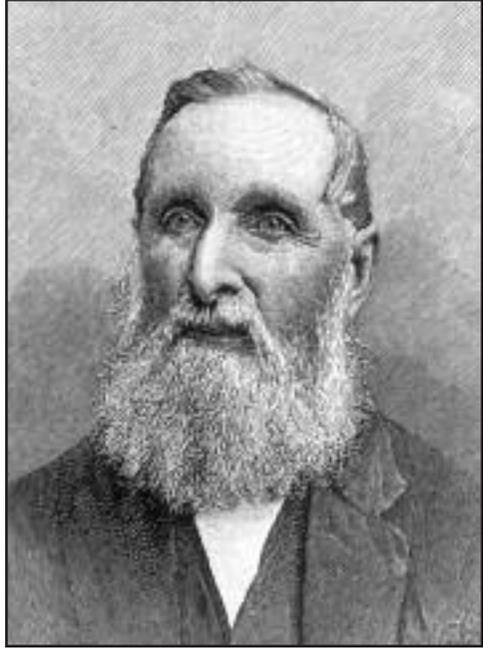
For his Mormon readers, Bigler told not only of the famous story of the gold discovery but also of the hardships and meager returns from a life as a miner—hopefully discouraging LDS youth from such pursuits. "I sat in one position for hours picking up the valuable particles [of gold]," he wrote, "[and] as I arose to my feet I yelled with pain; I reeled and staggered and it seemed as though my back was broken."¹³ Henry Bigler made certain Mormon youth knew that life in the gold fields was far from idyllic.

Although Bigler was not the only nineteenth-century American to have interesting experiences, he was one of the relatively few who preserved them in a journal. Knowledge of his colorful life brought Bigler later fame. Such was the response he received that Bigler embarked while in his mid-eighties on writing his own autobiography. As he told his old friend, Alexander Stephens: "I am now writing my own history. . . . This I do for the benefit of my own children after I am gone."¹⁴

As fascinating as his autobiography was and as important as its author depicted it, Henry Bigler's most famous words were those that were first published in the *Overland Monthly* in 1887:

On January 24th while looking at the race, through which a little water was running, [Marshall] saw something yellow on the bedrock. . . . Just before we quit work for the day Marshall came up and told us he believed he had found a gold mine.¹⁵

It was Henry Bigler who diligently noted Marshall's find in his diary. Of all of the supposed first-hand accounts of the gold discovery, only Bigler's 1848



Henry G. Bigler, ca 1887
courtesy of Bancroft Library
University of California

diary account has stood the test of historical scrutiny. Importantly, he made his entry on the very day the gold was found. These words earned Bigler his place in history.

Bigler's words are given further certitude by those of Azariah Smith, another Mormon present at the time, who was also keeping a diary; but Smith wrote in it only on the weekends. Smith's entry for Sunday, 30 January, reads, "This week [Mon. the 24th, date inserted later] Mr. Marshall found some pieces of (as we all suppose) Gold."¹⁶ Henry Bigler, out of a habit developed during the march of the Mormon Battalion, faithfully recorded the discovery on the very day it happened.

As California historian Hubert Howe Bancroft observed years later, "Marshall admits he does not know the date."¹⁷ But Henry Bigler did. It was



Golden Jubilee Celebration, 1890

*left to right:: Henry Bigler, William Johnston, Azariah Smith, James Brown
Courtesy of California Section, California State Library*

right there in his Mormon Battalion diary. For Bigler, the story of gold does not end there, however.

Bigler next stepped upon history's stage in 1898 when he attended the Golden Jubilee celebration at San Francisco. Early in 1897, John S. Hittell had written to Bigler on behalf of the California Pioneers Historical Society, the holders of Bigler's gold discovery journal. Henry Bigler was invited by the soci-

ety to a gala golden jubilee celebration of the celebrated discovery to be held the following January. Bigler promptly wrote back suggesting that the Society might also want to invite all four survivors from Sutter's Mill—James S. Brown, William Johnston, Azariah Smith, and himself—to the event.

On 21 December, Bigler received the hoped-for invitation: "This evening the Celebrating Committee of Pioneer Historical Society adopted a resolution to invite you to the Golden Jubilee of California as an honored guest of the Society."¹⁸ First-class transportation from Utah to California, along with ten days' lodging at a San Francisco hotel, was to be provided. As Bigler had recommended, the other three survivors were also invited.

James S. Brown was probably the best known of these aged Latter-day Saints after Bigler. Brown's 1894 reminiscences, *California Gold, An Authentic History of the First Find*, had gained him a degree of fame. Though Bigler did not believe that Brown "would tell anything he did not believe was true," still he confided to Hittell that Brown's account was "full of inaccuracys [*sic*]." Ever humble, Bigler candidly told Hittell that "it would not become me to criticize and say much as it might seem I wanted to have the honor of making known how and when the first find was made."¹⁹

A welcoming committee from the Pioneers Historical Society met the four Mormons upon their arrival at San Francisco. Bigler was delighted when Mary M. Greer, a relative of Hittell's, welcomed him with these words: "Mr. Bigler, I am pleased to meet you. I know your history [as] I have read your journal."²⁰ The date of 24 January 1898 was described by Bigler as a "cold and disagreeable day."²¹ The survivors, joined by local dignitaries, paraded through San Francisco's business district. "Many wanted to know which was Mr. Bigler, I being the one who gave the true date of the discovery," Bigler proudly observed.²²

Henry Bigler's life before 1898 had been that of a low-profile Mormon farmer and, later, a Latter-day Saint temple worker in St. George, Utah—hardly the stuff of which fame is made. But his presence at Sutter's Mill in January 1848 and the record he created that day earned Henry Bigler a well-deserved place in history. Bigler had marched west with the Mormon Battalion (1846–47), an act that placed him in northern California at Sutter's Mill in January 1848. The event that took place here, along with Henry Bigler's prodigious efforts as a chronicler, honed during the Battalion's trek, merged to earn Bigler a place in western American and Mormon history.

Notes

1. Henry William Bigler, *Autobiography*, ca. 1898, 40, Archives, Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

2. For further examples of Bigler's willingness to forego personal desires for the sake of his religion, see M. Guy Bishop, *Henry William Bigler: Soldier, Gold Miner, Missionary*,

Chronicler (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1998).

3. On Bigler's Mormon Battalion experience, see Bishop, *Henry William Bigler*, Chapter 3; Erwin G. Gudde, *Bigler's Chronicle of the West: The Conquest of California, Discovery of Gold and Mormon Settlement as Reflected in Henry William Bigler's Diaries* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1962). Norma Baldwin Ricketts, *The Mormon Battalion: U.S. Army of the West* (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1996) provides a larger overview of the entire subject.

4. For a readily available source on Bigler's words regarding the gold discovery as well as the march of the Mormon Battalion, see Gudde, *Bigler's Chronicle of the West*, Chapters 2, 3, and 7 and Bishop, *Henry William Bigler*, Chapters 3 and 4.

5. Gudde, *Bigler's Chronicle of the West*, 135.

6. See H. H. Bancroft, *History of California*, 7 vols. (San Francisco: The History Book Company, 1884–90), 6:28; James P. Zollinger, *Sutter: The Man and His Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939).

7. Bancroft, *History of California*, 6:29; John Walton Caughey, *The California Gold Rush* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1975), 6; Teresa Gay, *James W. Marshall: The Discoverer of California Gold* (Georgetown, California: California Talisman Press, 1967).

8. Kenneth L. Davies, *Mormon Gold: The Story of California's Mormon Argonauts* (Salt Lake City: Olympus Publishing Co., 1984), 357.

9. James W. Marshall, as quoted in *Hutchings California Magazine* (Sacramento, California) 2 [November 1857]: 201.

10. "Diary of H. W. Bigler," *Overland Monthly*, 242.

11. John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), ix.

12. Bigler's letters appeared in the *Clarksburg Telegram* and the *Clarksburg News* during the 1870s.

13. Henry Bigler, "Recollections of the Past," *Juvenile Instructor* 21 (1 November 1886): 329.

14. Letter, Henry Bigler to Alexander Stephens, 5 April 1891, Special Collections, Merrill Library, Utah State University, Logan, Utah.

15. [Henry W. Bigler] "Diary of H. W. Bigler in 1847 and 1848," John S. Hittell, ed., *Overland Monthly* 10 (September 1887): 242.

16. *The Gold Discovery Journal of Azariah Smith*, David L. Bigler ed. (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1996), 108.

17. Bancroft, *History of California*, 6:32n; also see Bishop, *Henry William Bigler*, 126.

18. Bigler, *Autobiography*, 21 December 1897–7 January 1898, 341–43 provides a record of Bigler's correspondence with Hittell about the Jubilee.

19. Letter, Henry W. Bigler to John S. Hittell, 7 February 1897, Bigler, Memorandum and Letter copybook, Henry William Bigler Collection, The Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

20. Bigler, *Autobiography*, 345.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*