Finding aid of the Henry William Bigler Diary C059079

Finding aid prepared by Michael Lange
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Title: Bigler, Henry William Diary
Identifier/Call Number: C059079
Contributing Institution: Society of California Pioneers
Language of Material: English
Storage Unit: B001627
Storage Unit: C059079
Physical Description: 1.0 folder(1 page from diary)
Date: 1848
Abstract: Two pages of Henry Bigler's original diary, with the first written mention of the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill. Though the first discovery of gold in California had been attributed to James W. Marshall of Sutter's Fort in Coloma, on January 19th, 1848, there was some dispute about the accuracy of the date. A committee was appointed to investigate the matter, using the research of John S. Hittell, and explored the diaries of both Henry W. Bigler, who claimed the date of discovery as January 24th, 1848, and Azariah Smith, who corroborated Bigler's claim by recording the date of discovery as falling in the week before January 30th. Bigler was a companion of Marshall's; Smith was a laborer at Sutter's Mill. Because Marshall did not keep a diary, these statements are the most accurate available. (Source: The Discovery of Gold in California (1919). California State Printing Office, Sacramento. Pamphlet in General Info file)
creator: Bigler, Henry William, 1815-1900
Conditions Governing Access note
Collection open for research
Conditions Governing Use note
There are no conditions on access
Preferred Citation note
Henry Bigler Diary Page, The Society of California Pioneers
Donor
Gift of Henry Bigler, date unknown.
Biographical/Historical note
Henry William Bigler was born on August 28, 1815 in Shinnston, Harrison County, Virginia (now part of West Virginia) to Jacob and Elizabeth (nee Harvey). At the age of 19 he and his family became Mormons. He was part of the Mormon Battalion, the only religious military unit in U.S. history. The battalion arrived in San Diego on January 29, 1847, just a couple weeks after the fighting had ended in California with the signing of the Treaty of Cahuenga. The men were put to use in various other duties throughout Southern California until they were eventually discharged in Los Angeles on July 16, 1847.
In late 1847, Bigler arrived at Sutter's fort in Sacramento where he was hired. Sutter had assigned James Marshall the job of building a sawmill on a site that Marshall had already selected on the South Fork of the American River, in an area known by the Native Americans as Colluma, later to become known as Coloma. Bigler and three other Mormons were selected by Marshall to assist in the task. Sometime in late January 1848 James Marshall discovered gold in the tailrace of the under-construction mill propelling him to fame as California became a state, while people from all over the world rushed to the state to try to find their fortunes in the gold mines.
The exact date when Marshall made his discovery was quickly lost to time. By 1857 people were trying to recall exactly when it had happened, and 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 near the 18th and 20th of that month -- 1848, I went down as usual..." The exact date would be in question for many more years to come. Bigler had done a little gold mining following Marshall's discovery, but he soon returned east to rejoin his family and church. He and his family eventually settled in Farmington, Utah where Bigler worked as a farmer. From 1858 to 1870 he led a fairly quiet, low-profile life, and not much is written about him during this period.
In 1870 Bigler heard that the date of Marshall's gold discovery was in question and realized he might possibly be the only person alive who knew the exact date. He had kept a journal his entire life, writing in it almost every day. He wrote to the editor of the Daily Bulletin, a San Francisco newspaper, who put him in touch with historians Hubert H. Bancroft and Charles S. Hittell. Bigler showed them his diary entry, dated Monday, January 24, 1848, which read: "this day some kind of mettle was was found in the tail race that that looks like goald first discovered by martial, the boss of the mill." The journal was examined and pronounced authentic, and is now the only first-hand account accepted as historically accurate when it comes to determining the precise date, which made Bigler somewhat famous. Azariah Smith, another Mormon working at...
the mill site that day, also kept a journal, but Smith only wrote in his on weekends and didn't record the memorable event until several days later. When he did, he simply wrote that it had happened "this week", without mentioning the date or even day of the week, though he did correct that oversight many years later after Bigler's journal revealed when it had happened.

In late 1877 or early 1878, when he was 62, Bigler married Eleanor Emett, following the death of his first wife Jane. At this time, he was working for the temple in St. George, Utah. In January 1898 the Society of California Pioneers decided to have a Golden Jubilee celebration to honor the 50th anniversary of the gold discovery. Naturally, they invited the man who had let them know what day they should be celebrating on. When he received the invitation, Bigler suggested they should also invite the other three surviving Mormon workers who had been with him at Sutter's Mill, and all four of them were brought back to California where they were put up at the luxurious Russ House hotel on Montgomery Street in San Francisco. The celebration that year is what really brought Bigler's name to the public and he became even more of a celebrity for the final two and a half years of his life.

Bigler died in St. George, Utah on November 24, 1900 at the age of 85.

Scope and Contents note
Though the first discovery of gold in California had been attributed to James W. Marshall of Sutter's Fort in Coloma, on January 19th, 1848, there was some dispute about the accuracy of the date. A committee was appointed to investigate the matter, using the research of John S. Hittell, and explored the diaries of both Henry W. Bigler, who claimed the date of discovery as January 24th, 1848, and Azariah Smith, who corroborated Bigler's claim by recording the date of discovery as falling in the week before January 30th. Bigler was a companion of Marshall's; Smith was a laborer at Sutter's Mill. Because Marshall did not keep a diary, these statements are the most accurate available. (Source: The Discovery of Gold in California (1919). California State Printing Office, Sacramento. Pamphlet in General Info file)

Transcription, with original spelling, of the two pages (176 and 177) of Bigler's Diary: "Jan. 1848 Breakfast, we was washing our faces we was cale the second time before we was ready to obey. She told us plainly that she was Boss and that we must cum at the first call which we had alwais had done be fore.

'On Christmas morning in bed she swore That she would look for us no more Unless we'd cum at the first call For I am mistress of you all.'

This we did not like and we Revolted from under [illegible] government. She was partial in her kooking she had some favorites and would always keep back the best part of the vituals.

Monday 24th – this day some kind of mettle was discover was found in the tail race that that looks like goald [abrupt change of ink] first discovered by James Martial, the boss of the Mill.

Sunday 30th – clean I has been all the last week. Our metal has been tride and proves to be goald it is thought to be rich we have pict up more than a hundred dollars worth last week.

February 1848 Sun 6th – the wether has been clean and warm the past week. Today myself & Mr. Bargen went over the creek to look for goald. I found 6$ dollars worth

Saturday 12th – this afternoon I did not work being tired not verry well. I took the gun & went a long way down the creek to hunt for ducks.'

Existence and Location of Originals note
The Society of California Pioneers, 300 Fourth St, San Francisco, CA 94107

Related Archival Materials note


Subjects and Indexing Terms
Sutter, John Augustus, 1803-1880

California--History--1846-1850

Gold Discovery - California

Gold mines and mining -- California -- History.

Mines and mineral resources--California, Northern--History