

Brown County Journal

June 15, 2013

Events:

Brown County Historical
Society meeting
July 1

Brown County Genealogical
Society meeting
July 9

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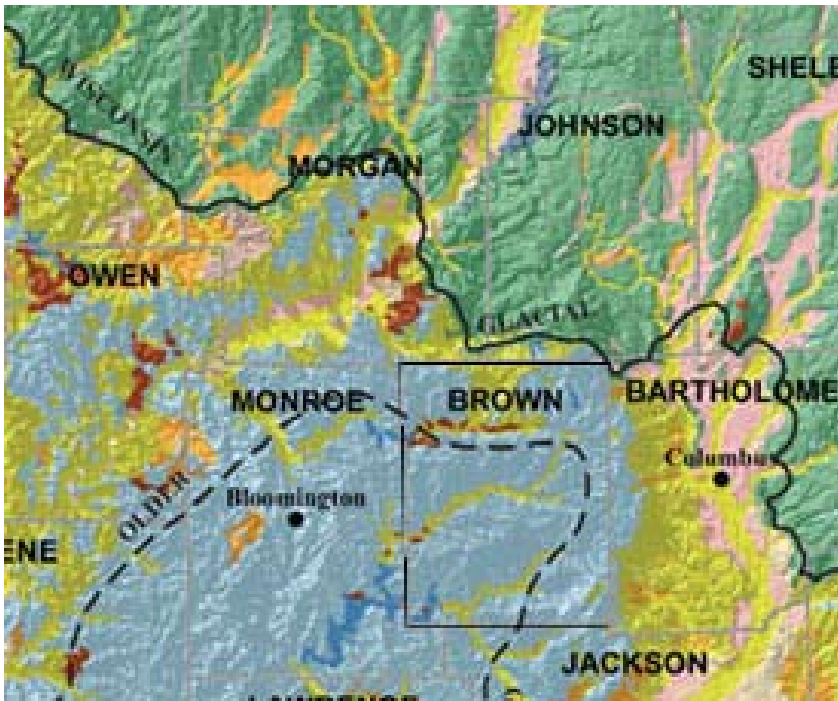
Rhonda Dunn

Gold Rush in Brown County?

Yes, I guess you could say that happened. There were a few times in our early history that residents found gold nuggets or more likely gold dust in the creeks and streams. How quickly the word spreads for a find like this. There have been a few attempts to industrialize gold production, but most never lasted. All that is left now is a handful of recreational gold panners. It does sound like an interesting hobby. If you can save up a vial of gold dust you might fetch a few hundred dollars for it to boot! Let's learn a little bit about the gold rush in Brown County.

Where did the Gold Come From?

First, let's start with a little geology lesson. "The northern boundary of this county is about 30 miles nearly due south of Indianapolis. The county is bounded on the east by Bartholomew, south by Jackson County, west by Monroe and north by Morgan and Johnson Counties. It contains an area of 320 square miles, the surface of which is very broken, except in the southeastern corner, where there is a large area of level table land. The "knobs" of southern Indiana, stretching northward from Floyd County, attain in "Weed Patch Hill," south of Nashville, the county seat, their highest elevation - 1,147 feet above sea level. Salt Creek, the principal stream of Brown County, is composed of three main branches, the North, the Middle, and the South forks, which unite near the southwest corner of the county, and flow thence through Monroe and Lawrence into East White River. Thus, almost the whole watershed of the county, together with a considerable portion of Jackson on the south, is drained by this stream. Bean Blossom Creek has its source in the northeastern part, its principal tributaries in northwestern Brown being Bear and Lick creeks, both flowing



Glacial boundaries in South Central Indiana

of the ridges and hills of Brown County is a soft, bluish knobstone shale, which weathers readily into a plastic clay. In places beds of sandstone occur, while the crests of the hills are capped with limestone with its characteristic accompaniment of geodes. The valleys of the county, now containing its richest soil, have been eroded by flowing streams, leaving the strata of the hills as they were originally deposited by sedimentation in an ocean which covered this region ages before the dawn of the Glacial Period.” (From Indiana State Geologist, W. S. Blatchley’s Report “Gold and Diamonds in Indiana” 1903)

With the retreat of these prehistoric glaciers a goodly amount of glacial debris, which covers almost the entire 1/3 northern part of the county, was dumped here by their sudden halt which incidentally happened in our county’s northern sections. “All gold found in the State up to the present time is ‘free’ or ‘placer’ gold, the particles ranging in size from those too small to be seen with the naked eye up to nuggets whose value was five to six dollars (in 1903). Occasionally, a piece of quartz or other igneous rock is found which contains particles of gold, but in each instance this quartz is a pebble or boulder of drift origin.” Most of the gold dust itself seems to occur in the same area as black sand. The accompanying minerals that comprise the black sand (magnetite) seem to come from the same source as the gold dust - all of igneous origin. Their origin derived from the Canadian north around the Hudson Bay area. This glacial debris was carried hundreds of miles by the glaciers and dumped here in Indiana, especially along a jagged line going through the counties of Brown, Johnson, Morgan, and Monroe.

nearly south. Just across the northern boundary in Morgan County, and in a valley nearly parallel with the county line, is Indian Creek, flowing in a general western direction. High ridges surround Brown county on all sides, while from east to west and southwest three similar ridges traverse the county, all connecting on the divide near Trafalgar, in Johnson county. The first and most northern ridge constitutes the southern bluff of Indian Creek, and is called “Indian Creek Ridge;” the second ridge, south of Bean Blossom is known as Bean Blossom Ridge, and the third, passing nearly through the middle of the county, is named Central Ridge. The bed rock composing the body of most



John Dine in 1929 Panning for Gold

Gold Rush Stories

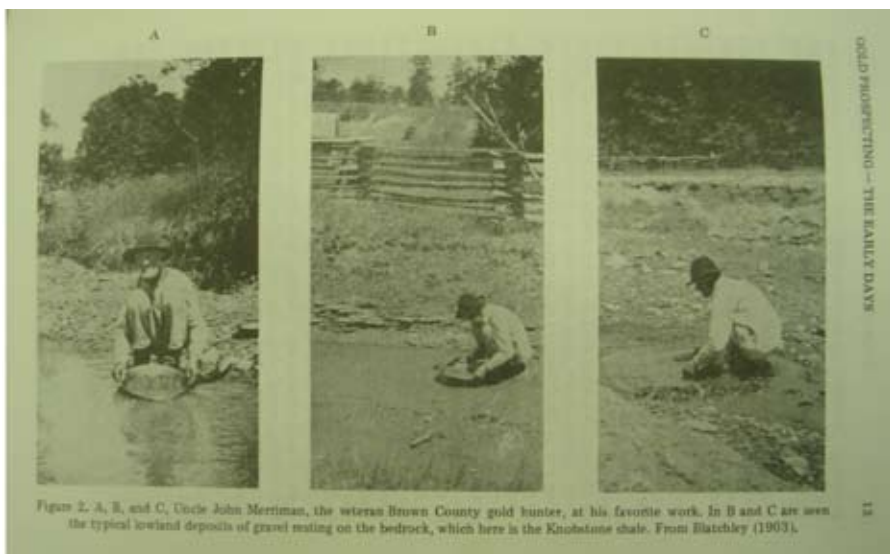
The earliest record of gold recovery was reported in June of 1850 by Professor T. A. Wylie of the University of Indiana, announcing the discovery of gold in nearby counties. He stated that gold had been found in the rivulets of Morgan, Jackson, Brown, and Greene Counties. The first known mention of finding gold in Brown County in Weston A. Goodspeed's "County of Brown, Indiana" of 1884 is found in the chapter on Jackson Township. "At the old gold placer of John Richards on Bear Creek" which was talking about the geodes that are found with the gold. There is no

date referencing this quote. It also states that "numerous gold excitements growing out of some lucky discoveries, have occurred in the past, during which time companies were formed, leases were bought, sluice ways were constructed, and long-toms and rockers prepared." Numerous other gemstones of lesser quality can be found in small quantities also.

In 1864 according to Blatchley's Report, Richard Owen told of gold mining in Brown County. "Although some prospecting has been done on 'Bear Wallow Hill,' on head waters communicating through Lick Creek to Salt Creek, as also in what they term the gravel of Greasy Creek - a deposit of disintegrated shales - the main localities in which success has attended the gold washings in this county are on Hamblin's fork of Salt Creek, three quarters of a mile in a direct line from the west limit of Bartholomew near Mt. Moriah post office. Here we found extensive preparations in the way of sluices and hose, rockers and 'long toms,' picks and shovels, etc. Notwithstanding the rain, we panned out enough to convince ourselves that the black sand in many of the pockets contains a considerable amount of gold particles. Occasionally they pan out flat scales worth from a dollar to a dollar and a quarter."

Some stories are told by the locals of finding gold occasionally in the creeks. After the rains school children would stop along the way home and seek gold along the rocky bottom of each rill and stream and often found pieces worth 25 to 40 cents (in 1903). Much of this is found lodged in minute crevices at the bottoms of small waterfalls. Two boys, just east of Spearsville, had sold \$42 worth in a single season, which they had thus gathered along the smaller tributaries of the north Branch of Salt Creek.

One of the best known and most reliable gold hunters in Brown County was William J. Merriman, better



Uncle John Merriman, Veteran Gold Miner in 1903

pieces which ran as high \$1.00 to \$1.25 in value; but most of what he secures is in the form of 'colors' or minute flattish particles. He states that the coarsest gold in Brown County is found in what is known as 'Gosport Hollow,' a tributary of Bear Creek. He also estimates that the gravel beneath the soil of the lowlands will average 25 cents per cubic yard in gold. On two different occasions Mr. Merriman has kept a careful account of the results of a month's work - Sundays excluded. One month yielded him \$34; the other, \$40. He claims that he can average \$1.25 a day during the panning season, which runs from March to November, except in times of summer drought. During his panning he has found several diamonds."

Commercial mining attempts were made in 1875, 1898, 1901, and again in 1934. In Miscellaneous Book 1 in the County Recorder's office the Brown County Mining Company was incorporated by local individuals in 1875 for the purpose of mining gold and other minerals from northern Brown County streams. The corporation was set up with five officers, them being W. L. Wilson, James S. Hester, James B. Campbell, Eugene Culley, and R. L. Coffey. Other shareholders listed on the document were John C. Hester,

known as 'Uncle John' Merriman. According to Blatchley's 1903 Report, "he was 69 years of age, had panned gold more or less each year for 49 years, and had done little else for the past 20 years. He lived near a branch of Lick Creek, about six miles northwest of Georgetown [Bean Blossom], and had washed gold along every stream in northern Brown and part of Morgan counties. The largest 'nugget' he ever found was taken on Bear Creek and weighed 132 grains, valued at \$5.50. He has found a number of



Industrialized Gold Mining Operation in 1940



Winfield S. Richards, Veteran Gold Miner in 1927

Henderson of Martinsville, Winfield S. Richards of Richard's post office of Brown County, Everett T. Short of Huntington, William Hester of Indianapolis, and David E. Watson of Martinsville. In contrast no leases were filed by this company in this time period. As time went on items appeared in the newspapers infrequently which fueled another bit of gold fever.

In the Democrat of Sept. 6, 1901 an article appeared on the subject. "Colonel Calvert of Needmore on Bear Creek brought to this city a bit of

Walter H. Culley, Alfred J. Ralph, D. B. Wilson, W. L. Wilson, James McGray, Allen W. Procter, Luther H. Lucas, W. L. Cox, Silas McKee, J. M. McGee, Joseph M. Mount, Isaac Wade, Fletcher D. Wood, Scott Cochran, Alonzo Allison, W. W. Browning, H. C. Jordan, John Deist, William P. Taggart, George H. Barnhill, Martin E. Phillips, Lewis J. Tull, David W. Poling, W. S. Richards, and John Richards. All these men were from Needmore and Nashville with the exception of Joseph Mount who was from Austin, Indiana. Thirteen mining leases were also recorded that same day. The leases were recorded for the purpose of mining whatever gold and minerals that could be found on their land. The landowners were Andrew J. Lowe, Evan McNeely (etux), John O. Chitwood, Samuel Brandenburg (etal), Jene Cain (etux), William Goodman, John Richards (had 2 leases), Winfield Richards, William Rainwater, Stephen Richards, Luther A. Pool (etux), and David W. Poling. Several of the landowners were also recorded as shareholders in the mining company.

Again in 1898 a few business men got together and recorded another mining company in Brown County, the Indiana Gold Mining and Investment Company. These men were Eb



Anthony Satter and Winfield S. Richards Mining gold in 1890

quartz about an inch long in which gold was liberally distributed in it. The quartz was found on one of his farms near Needmore. Colonel Calvert will not reveal the location of the ledge where it was found until his machinery reaches here where he will mine on an extensive scale.”

“W. S. Richards, who claims to be the original discoverer of gold in this county, has brought to this city samples of both gold and silver. He owns a farm for which he has been offered very liberal prices, but he declines all offers. He has sent some samples to St. Louis where it was assayed at 56%.” He said that “there are millions of dollars in the Hills of Brown, and I have been working it for a long time. I believe I am now to be rewarded.”



Recreational Gold Panning 1940s

Now, gold panning in Brown County has become a recreational pastime. Maybe it is an obsession to a few, but nevertheless no large mining operations exist in Brown County anymore. The Indiana chapter of the Gold Prospectors Association of America meets regularly at Gatesville. They meet the second Saturday of each month from March through October at the Gatesville Country Store. I hear that you can buy a gold pan there and Bear Hardware keeps them in stock too. If you want to try your hand at it go check out their website. It states that “For most of us this is just a hobby and a way to get out of the house and into the creek. There are a few guys making money prospecting (in Indiana) but not me. They work a lot harder at it then I do, hobbies should be fun not work. But it’s a great hobby and a lot of fun for the family.” Their local chapter can be found on the web at: <http://www.southernindianagold.com/>

By 1903 the gold fever in Brown County even reached Chicago. The Daily Tribune of March 1 started off saying “Gold! Gold! Gold! The sirens song is throwing Indiana into a gold fever.” It reported that miners from California had come to Indiana to join the gold fever. Several old original gold miners are mentioned in the article. “W. S. Richards, the boss washer of Brown County, has been at it for forty years and has money in the bank.” Another familiar name, William J. [Uncle John] Merriman, is mentioned. “Bill Merriman is the patriarch of the section. He won’t permit a stranger to get within a half mile of him, so secretive is he concerning his operations.”