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Extracts form the Experiences of a Well Digger

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Nature seems to hold her secrets for those who seek them. An investigation of the earth’s surface oftentimes reveals the unexpected. Even the experiences of the man who penetrates the earth by digging, by boring, or by drilling, whose object is to find a supply of water, may include incidents worthy of more than a mere passing notice.

The early settlers of this part of the state depended on dug wells for the supply of water for household use. During dry seasons these wells also supplied the livestock of the farm if located some distance from the larger streams. The well-auger came into use in this part of the state during the latter part of the seventies. The drill came into use during the nineties. The dug wells were walled with stone or rock, later by brick; the wells made by the auger were walled or encased at first by wooden curb, later by brick and still later by large tile; the drilled well was encased with iron casing.

Mr. Willis D. Skipton, a resident of Winfield, Iowa, has made it his business for the last thirty years to dig and bore wells in this part of the state. The following incidents are from his experience and observation.

The early settlers depended in a large measure on streams, springs and “spouty” places for water for their livestock. One of the most remarkable places of this character was located near the southwest part of the northeast quarter of section 2 in Scott township, Henry county, owned for many years by George E. Skipton. This property was in the names of M. A. Dougherty and J. H. D. Smith in 1870. Here was a shallow lake covering about ten or fifteen acres. When water was high this was connected with a small stream, known as Allen’s Run, which began in Louisa county and flowed southwestward into the South Branch of Crooked creek. John McCulley, who located in this region prior to 1840, has told that this lake came to his attention back in those early times. On an early spring morning, a light snow having fallen during the night, his dogs scented the trail of some animal and
started eastward from his home. He followed them to this lake, pond or marsh. There was a spot in this lake which seldom, if ever, froze. Near this spot, quite a large bunch or cluster of the preceding year’s cat-tails was still standing, and here the dogs stopped and began to bay fiercely. He “sicked” them, and they dived into the weeds and one of the fiercest battles he ever saw followed. When the battle was over, there lay one of the biggest beavers he had ever seen.

In early times, this lake was a great place for skating, according to I. Wesley Ross, who lived in its immediate neighborhood, and who has said that it covered ten or fifteen acres. The first school house built in this neighborhood was known as “Swamp College.” This lake has long since disappeared by reason of surface ditches and underground tiling. But there still remained one small spot that would not go dry. Here the stock seemed to be in danger of miring down, and this spot was kept fenced. One day, Willis D. Skipton took a fence board and thought he would examine this small pond of water and mud, and soon found a hole that allowed him to push his fourteen-foot board down as far as he could. This he did without striking bottom. As he probed the hole, he thought the board struck against rock now and then. His father suggested that they dig the hole out some and put a curbing into it. Soon after they began to dig and probably were down a couple of feet, they began to find bones. They dug out about forty or fifty buffalo skulls, not the entire head but only the frontal part; they brought out a large piece of an elk’s horn, and even horse bones. What at first were supposed to be rock, lining the inside of this hole, proved to be bones. Who had ever heard before this of a well walled with bones? This was, indeed, a gruesome find. Here was indisputable evidence that the buffalo and elk had once roamed this region. Here, too, was evidence that nature’s sepulchre had even received the domesticated animals of the white man.

About a mile or two northeast of the place previously described over in Louisa county a well was dug on a farm owned by Henry Moody. This was farther up the region tributary to Allen’s Run. Down about six or eight feet below the surface of the ground, we came to a layer of peat about three or four feet thick. The color of this peat was a light brown. Mr. Moody dried some of this peat and it burned quite readily. This well was east of his house, and toward the Cotter farm.

On the Scott Hewitt place about six miles east of Winfield, I bored a well with an auger having a diameter of eighteen inches.
Down about fifty feet, we struck a log. We bored through this log which was about three feet thick. The bark was firm, solid, dark brown in color, and nearly four inches in thickness. The wood was a little lighter in color.

About eighty rods south of the town of Wyman, in Louisa county, on a farm then owned by Knox Dunn, I found pieces of wood about thirty-five feet below the surface of the ground. Some of these pieces of wood were eight inches long and two or three inches in thickness. The bark looked more like pine bark than the specimen found on the Hewitt farm described in the preceding paragraph.

South and east of Mount Union, in Canaan township, Henry county, there is a region where pieces of wood are found in abundance at a depth of fifteen feet. At a depth of twelve or fifteen feet there is a layer of dark earth resembling the surface soil. It is possible that this stratum is composed largely of decayed wood. This condition was not found west of Mount Union.

In Wayne township in Henry county, on the farm of James Zickefoose, while digging a well, I found a bone at a depth of thirty feet below the surface. This bone was eight inches long. The find was really two bones united by a joint. The ends of the bones were broken, showing the fine network for the marrow very plainly. These bones were about two inches in diameter.

About three miles north of Yarmouth and one mile east, I bored a well on the Grant Stafford farm. When down about fifty feet, we struck gas which blew sand and water out of the top of the well. The well filled with water within two feet of the top in about twenty minutes. The gas bubbled up through the water for nearly an hour. Rather unfortunately no one was present at the time with a match, so, it was not learned whether the gas was inflammable or not.

About twenty or twenty-five years ago, I was boring a well here in town (Winfield) for John Rhine, and found, not bones or wood, but, supposedly, one of the precious metals. At a depth of twelve or fifteen feet, there is a layer of crumbly, ashy clay, a layer or stratum found around about this region for several miles. There was visiting here at this time an elderly man by the name of John Beall who had spent many years in Colorado as a gold miner. He came over where I was working and would examine with his magnifying glass the earth as it was brought to the surface. When this crumbly, ashy clay was found, he exclaimed, "Here it is, here it is; found at last." What he had found were very small, light-
yellowish particles which he pronounced to be gold. To the un­aided eye, these particles were mere specks; but under the magni­fying glass they appeared to be half as big as a pea. He said that gold was not found in paying quantities here. During that season, I bored several wells in and around Winfield, and always found this layer of crumbly ashy clay, usually at about the same depth. The old miner frequently visited my work and always found his gold. His explanation was that a glacier had brought this deposit of gold down from the north! Somewhere north of us gold might be found in considerable quantities. But who shall be the finder and when?

Winfield, Iowa.