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Article Summary: The discovery of gold in the Dakota Territory produced the last gold rush in the continental United States. That transformed the trail leading from Sidney, Nebraska, to the Black Hills into a major thoroughfare. By the 1880s new railroad lines were drawing most traffic away from that frontier highway.

Scroll down for complete article.

Cataloging Information:

Names: George A Custer, Red Cloud, Henry T Clark, Luke Voorhees

Freighting Companies: Pratt and Ferris; A S Van Tassell; D T McCann and Company; Kennard and Simpson; Daugherty, Kelley and Company; Jewett and Dickenson; Merchants Freighters

Mail Carriers: Seymour and Utter Express, Centennial Express (Henry T Clark), Marsh and Stephenson

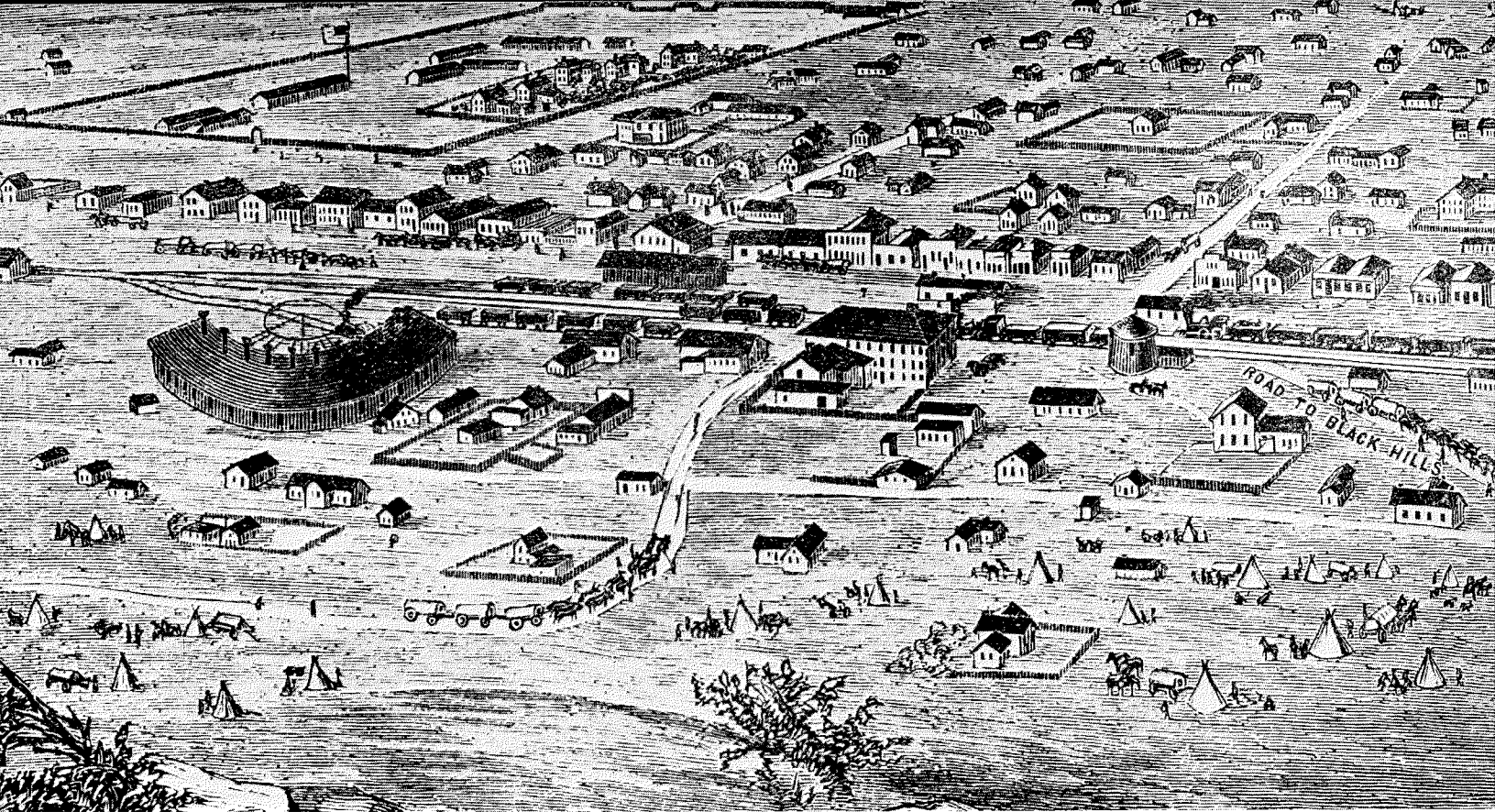
Stage Coach Lines: J W Dear, Marsh and Stephenson, Gilmer and Salisbury

Coach Builders: Abbot and Downing; Studebaker, Murphy, and Kern

Place Names: Sidney, Fort Sidney, Camp Robinson and Fort Clark, Nebraska; Pierre and Deadwood, South Dakota; Bismarck, North Dakota

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Photographs / Images: "Birdseye view of Sidney," sketch by Lt J E Foster; map of the Sidney-Black Hills Trail



“BIRDSEYE VIEW OF SIDNEY”

(Sketch by Lt. J. E. Foster, USA, in illustrated supplement, “The New ‘Short Cut’ to the Black Hills,” *Omaha Daily Bee*, May 13, 1876.)

The Sidney-Black Hills Trail

By Norbert R. Mahnken

GOLD in the Black Hills"—that was the exciting phrase flashed over the wires on August 9, 1874. This news first fell from the lips of "Lonesome Charlie" Reynolds as he wearily tumbled out of his saddle at Fort Laramie that day.¹ The famed scout had been sent by General George A. Custer to report that miners in his expedition to the Black Hills had found the precious yellow metal in that Dakota stronghold of the Sioux Indians. "Gold in the Black Hills"—only a few words, yet they were to generate the fever that produced the last gold rush within the limits of the United States. They sent men on a long stampede over strange and perilous trails that for some led to riches, but for many more brought only disappointments and disaster. One of these trails, from Sidney, Nebraska, to the Black Hills, became a major thoroughfare. Along this route, over sandy plains and rolling hills tramped hopeful prospectors, and also the disillusioned ones who were returning after losing, not finding, a fortune in the diggings. Before the railroad diverted most of the traffic in 1881, bull trains, mule wagons, and stage coaches kept a constant haze of dust hanging over this major artery of trade—the trail from Sidney to the Black Hills.

The definite discovery of gold in the Black Hills put an end to speculation which for years had been the chief topic of discussion around western campfires. Old

¹Frazier Hunt, ed., *I Fought with Custer* (New York, 1947), p. 44. The Chicago *Inter Ocean*, August 27, 1874, carried the first detailed account, which had been sent out by Charles E. Curtis, its correspondent who accompanied the expedition.

trappers and hunters had long insisted that the precious metal abounded in that area. Occasionally a Cheyenne or Sioux brave would present a nugget at some trading post or sutler's store, and when questioned about it would hint mysteriously that it had come from *Pa Sapa*—the Hills. Until the Custer expedition of 1874, however, there was no definite proof of the presence of a new El Dorado. For the majestic and strangely beautiful Black Hills were Sioux country, and by the treaty of 1868 the federal government had promised that no white man should "ever be permitted to pass over, settle upon, or reside in the territory."² Several expeditions, usually launched at the urging of Charles Collins of the *Sioux City Times*, had attempted to penetrate the Dakota country, had been halted by military forces, under orders from Generals Hancock and Sheridan. It had been partly in hope of easing the pressure on the Sioux country and producing a final answer to the question of the extent of the supposed gold deposits that the Custer expedition was sent out. The official object of the expedition, however, was to "explore routes and locate sites for future posts." General Sheridan had for two years mulled over the idea of establishing a post in the Hills to control the tribes more easily.³ In his mind this was the major motive which induced him to order the expedition of some 1,200 troops, teamsters, and drovers, accompanied by a sprinkling of geologists, newspapermen, and miners to move southward from Fort Abraham Lincoln on July 2, 1874.⁴ From the area around Harney's Peak, Custer sent out a steady stream of reports on his expedition and its findings. The official dispatches were more restrained than the headlines

²Charles J. Kappler, ed., *Indian Laws and Treaties* (Washington, 1904), II, 998.

³C. C. O'Harra, "Custer's Black Hills Expedition of 1874," *Black Hills Engineer*, XVII (November 1929), 226.

⁴Hunt, *op. cit.*, p. 33. Fort Abraham Lincoln was on the upper Missouri River, across from Bismarck, North Dakota.

which were splashed on the front pages of the western newspapers. Custer admitted that, "gold has been found in several places [apparently by Horatio Nelson Ross about July 30] . . . veins of lead and strong indications of the existence of silver have been found." The public generally overlooked his word of caution that, "until further examination is made regarding the richness of the gold, no opinion should be formed."⁵ Neither was the average westerner much disturbed by General George Crook's⁶ warning that this was Sioux country, and that gold-seekers would be speedily removed by troops. Warnings and threats meant little to frontiersmen lured onward by the golden glitter.

Several parties of prospectors made their way into the area around French Creek during the winter of 1874-75. A small but bustling community was launched at Custer City. The Army's emphatic order to leave their holdings came as a shock to these groups, and it was a sullen and disgruntled collection of miners that Col. F. W. Benteen's troop of the Seventh Cavalry escorted back to the Missouri River settlements in August, 1875.

Meanwhile, the Interior Department had sent out a second expedition, this time made up predominantly of miners and scientists headed by Professor W. P. Jenney of the Columbia School of Mines, to obtain more specific information as to the extent of the gold deposits. The report of this group contained all the vagueness and verbosity which characterizes the report of many governmental agencies, but served to keep alive the popular idea of limitless wealth.

The principal barrier during 1875 to the occupancy of the Black Hills country was the refusal of the Sioux chiefs to sign away their rights to the region. During May, 1875, agents of the government attempted without success to induce a group of Sioux leaders who had

⁵O'Harra, *op. cit.*, p. 280.

⁶Crook was in command of the District of the Platte.

been brought to Washington to sell the area. The proposal was rejected with cold contempt on the grounds that before such action could be taken the tribesmen must be convened in a gigantic council. In September the Allison Commission, specially appointed for this task by the Secretary of the Interior, met with the Sioux at a point on the White River in a second attempt to agree on a purchase price, or negotiate a lease on the mining rights. Again agreement was impossible. The Sioux spokesman, Red Cloud, demanded \$600,000,000 plus annuities for the Sioux for seven generations—this was quite distant from the government's offer of \$6,000,000 as a purchase price and \$400,000 a year lease of the mining rights.⁷ The Allison Commission, to cover its miserable failure, reported unfavorably on the "uncooperative" attitude of the Sioux.

The failure of the government's purchase program was immediately followed by the "unofficial" opening of the new gold fields. After the collapse of negotiations with Red Cloud and his allies, the military leaders apparently decided to forget the treaty of 1868 and call a halt to their campaign against trespassing prospectors. The word soon spread to Nebraska and Iowa frontier communities that goldseekers venturing into the new fields during the winter and spring of 1875-76 need not fear any interference from the military forces. The stage had been set for the great rush of 1876, first to Custer City, then to Deadwood and the diggings in the northern hills.⁸

From the moment the first good news of the findings of the Custer expedition became general knowledge, the gold fever mounted rapidly throughout the West. The times produced more than average interest in the new diggings. The financial panic and depression

⁷George E. Hyde, *Red Cloud's Folk* (Norman, 1937), p. 245.

⁸A formal treaty of cession providing for the legal opening of the Black Hills was not signed until February 28, 1877.

of 1873 had left men idle and penniless—nowhere more so than on the frontier. Grasshopper invasions in 1874 and 1875 had consumed the crops of many Kansas and Nebraska farmers and left them anxious to try their luck elsewhere. By the summer of 1875 virtually every Nebraska community found its restless souls busily organizing a proposed expedition to the Black Hills.

Papillion, West Point, Stanton, Fremont, Lincoln and Fairmont among others reported the formation of parties leaving for the fabled lands. Typical of the arrangements were those of the party from Fremont:

Mr. A. M. Blakesley, the Pacific House landlord, longs for the nomadic life in the new Eldorado. The route to the Black Hills country is well known to him, and he says he will start from Fremont as soon as there is grass for his mules. He wants company and is making arrangements to supply board and haul baggage for 100 men, which he offers to do for \$30 each. Twenty-three names are now on his list of gold-seekers and the cry is "still they come." Uncle Sam will have his hands full when he undertakes to stop western miners from hunting gold.⁹

Other frontier groups realized that not all profits were to be made in the diggings. They saw the bonanza that might result from developing their community into a major outfitting and supply point for groups leaving on the westward trek. All along the western fringe of settlement, merchants, newspapermen and self-appointed publicists began shouting the advantages of their respective towns as outfitting points. Bismarck and Yankton in Dakota Territory, Sioux City, Iowa, and Cheyenne, Wyoming Territory, were the first and most aggressive in advancing their claims. The prospecting miner was informed that in each of these localities he could purchase his supplies cheaper than anywhere else on the frontier. He was assured that from each of these communities he could make his way to the gold fields over the "best roads"—roads which frequently existed only on the map

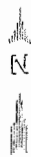
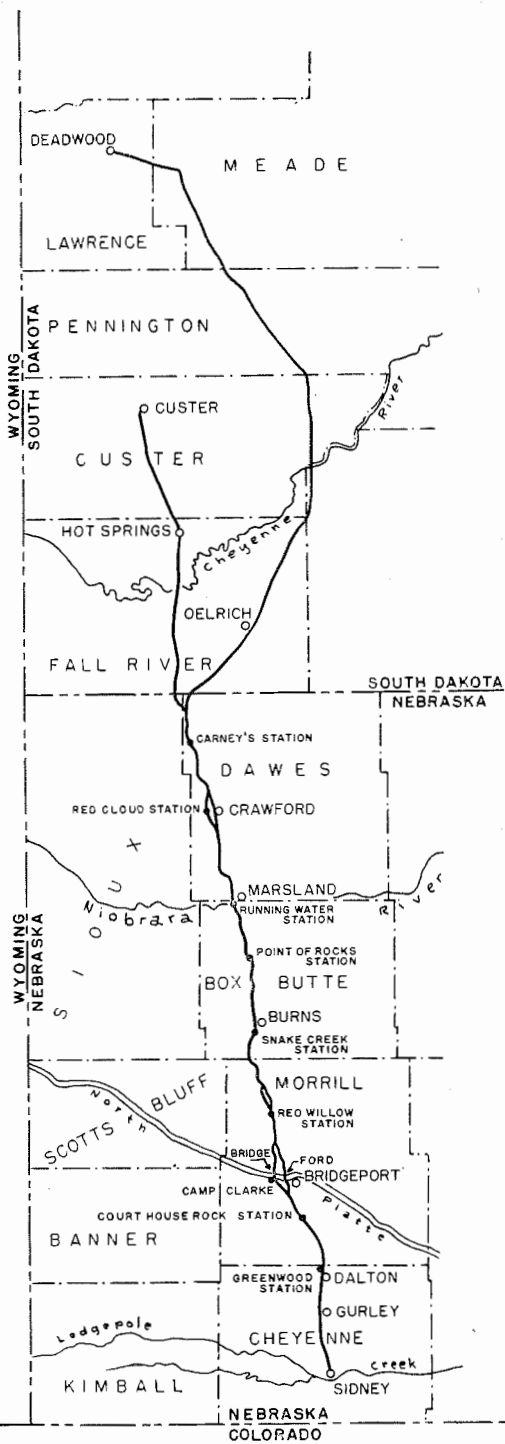
⁹*Omaha Weekly Bee*, March 31, 1875.

handed the venturesome soul, or which at best consisted of two ruts winding across the plains. Competition between outfitting points was bitter and ruthless, and supposed advantages were extravagantly portrayed, while the dangers and tribulations which threatened anyone foolish enough to start from any other point were pictured in the darkest colors. Cheyenne and Sidney boosters spoke of Sioux City as a "nest of humbugs" and warned travellers against the "siren song of the Sioux City scalpers and the Yankton gin-mill operators."¹⁰ Supporters of the Missouri River towns were just as bitter in their criticism of Cheyenne, Sidney, and the "Great American Desert Route."

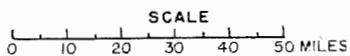
Numerous Nebraska communities began to think of themselves during 1875 as ideal jumping-off points. Niobrara, Kearney, Wahoo, Columbus, Grand Island, and Central City either planned to organize regular stage lines to the new gold fields or pressed their claims as the best outfitting points with considerable vigor. "Low prices," the presence of "plenty of water," "ample grazing," an "easy and well-marked trail" were claimed by each of them. Except for the towns in western Nebraska, however, most of these communities soon lost faith in their own future. Grand Island, North Platte, and Kearney continued to believe during 1876 that they might become major supply points, but during the next year the hard facts of geography convinced them that they too must abandon that hope. Sidney alone of all the Nebraska settlements was to develop a lasting trade with the Black Hills area. For five years it was to share with Cheyenne, Pierre, and Bismarck the honors of channelling the largest percentage of passengers and freight to the new gold fields.

As a starting point for the Black Hills, Sidney possessed certain notable advantages in 1876. A widely-known trail from Fort Sidney northward had already

¹⁰Omaha *Weekly Bee*, March 17, 24, 1875.



SIDNEY-BLACK HILLS TRAIL



been marked out. Since 1873, when the Oglala and Brule Sioux had been moved to the Red Cloud and Spotted Tail agencies, government contractors furnishing supplies had regularly followed this trail. Over it they had driven longhorn steers or creaking bull trains from the railroad to the agencies. Troops stationed at both ends of the trail, Fort Sidney on the south and Camp Robinson on the north, insured the safety of this route when once the military opposition to white invaders had been removed. A "well-marked trail," military protection, and a short and not too difficult route were the chief advantages of the Sidney Trail.

Until the summer of 1876, however, Sidney did not figure prominently in the plans of most gold seekers. For the town was still at this time small and comparatively unknown.¹¹ Fort Sidney had been established and the town located while the Union Pacific was being built through western Nebraska in 1867. During the next eight years the rate of growth was slow, and Sidney remained largely a feeble appendage of the military post and the railroad. A few bars and gambling houses catering to the soldier trade, a small roundhouse, a few homes and two or three stores—these were all the visitor found.

In 1874, Pratt and Ferris, who freighted the greater share of Indian supplies into northwestern Nebraska began to pick up their freight at Sidney. A lively competition for this Indian trade had developed between Cheyenne and Sidney, with honors equally divided until late in the year, when the Nebraska community began to win most of the traffic.¹² The tempo of life in the town began to quicken, but over the nation as a whole it attracted no attention.

Nor were the cattlemen and military figures who dominated the community vitally concerned with the pos-

¹¹The population for 1876 was given as 476 in the state census. (*Nebraska Senate Journal*, 1877, p. 877.)

¹²*Omaha Weekly Bee*, January 6, 1875.

sibility of making Sidney a supply point for the Black Hills. Except for Joseph B. Gossage, the editor of the infant but aggressively hopeful Sidney *Telegraph*, and one or two railroad men and freighters, few people seemed to sense the possibilities of the times. Apathy was the first barrier to growth.

A further hindrance to the early development of the Sidney Trail was the North Platte River. The few venturesome parties who had moved northward in the direction of the hills, and the freighters as well all agreed that the spring rise made the North Platte River virtually impassable during the first five months of the year. An attempt had been launched by several Sidney outfitters to provide ferry service across the Platte, but it proved unsatisfactory.¹³ Even when the waters subsided, crossing the Platte with its soft and shifting sands was considered a major undertaking, and discouraged many. For that reason, those parties leaving for the Hills during 1875 had as a rule made their way to Fort Laramie, where a government-operated ferry provided an easy crossing.

Several important steps toward the improvement of the Sidney Trail were taken in the spring of 1876. First the North Platte River was tamed. Under the leadership of Henry T. Clarke of Bellevue, a toll-bridge was constructed across the Platte River about three miles west of present day Bridgeport. Clarke who had built bridges all along the Union Pacific lines, received assistance in his project from the railroad and from a group of Omaha merchants and jobbers who hoped to develop the Black Hills trade. A few of the interested leaders at Sidney tried to raise \$6,000 to aid the project and finally succeeded in collecting half that sum.¹⁴ The Union Pacific transported free of charge lumber from yards at Moline, Illinois, and Davenport, Iowa. The leading freighting

¹³Omaha *Weekly Bee*, May 12, 1875.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, March 10, 31, 1876.

firms, Pratt and Ferris, Van Tassell, and McCanns, hauled the materials from Sidney to the North Platte River without charge. Construction of the bridge moved ahead at a feverish pace during the spring months, and on May 10, 1876, the bridge was opened for public use.¹⁵

Clarke's Bridge first popularized the Sidney Trail. Across it were to go most of the gold seekers and virtually all of the freight leaving western Nebraska rail points during the late 1870's. It was a masterpiece of solid construction—a sixty-one span truss bridge about 2,000 feet in length, built of sturdy timbers—and it withstood heavy loads, ice, and floods for twenty-five years.¹⁶

The War Department, approving this attempt to provide easier access to the Indian agencies, and to the northern plains where operations were being conducted against Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, provided ample protection for the bridge. Fort Clarke, a two-story blockhouse, thirty-two feet long on each side, was erected at the north end of the bridge for protection against brigands, white as well as red. At the south end of the bridge Clarke set up a supply store and post office, and a feed and livery barn. Here, too, the Army frequently stationed a small group of bluecoats for protective purposes.

The opening of Clarke's Bridge created new interest in the Sidney route all along the line of the Union Pacific. In Omaha the local newspapers, the *Bee* in particular, began publicizing the unique safety and convenience of the Sidney Trail. Pamphlets proclaiming the glories of the Black Hills and the approach of the Union Pacific lines were carefully prepared and distributed by agents of the railroad throughout the country. In Sidney itself

¹⁵Sidney *Telegraph*, May 13, 1876. Rather interestingly, the first group to cross the bridge was the Rothrock and Gallant party—a group of forty-five men not going to the Hills, but returning in disgust from them.

¹⁶Henry T. Clarke, "Freighting, Denver and the Black Hills," *Proceedings and Collections*, Nebraska State Historical Society, 2nd Series, V, 306.

the infection caught hold of the citizenry and a feverish building boom set in as freighters and wholesalers began to re-examine the possibilities of the Black Hills trade.

The restless energy of H. T. Clarke placed him in the vanguard of this movement. The bridge, a store at the south end of the bridge, a warehouse in Sidney, and a projected freight line to the hills were a few of the interests that took up his time. Perhaps the most intriguing of Clarke's many ventures was his pony express route. No demand was more insistently made by the miners in the Hills than that mail service with the outside world be speeded up. For beneath their rugged exterior the miners concealed a longing for news from home as real as any in the world. Until such time as the Hills were officially opened, the government would furnish no mail service. Government mail service ended at Fort Laramie and the towns along the Union Pacific. Beyond these points individual enterprise must carry the mail. In response to this demand two pony express routes out of the Hills appeared during 1876. A short-lived route, the Seymour and Utter Express, was opened from Custer City to Fort Laramie but soon was abandoned because of Indian troubles. The more durable service was furnished by Clarke's Centennial Express. Clarke first signed a contract with the Omaha headquarters of the Army to deliver all mail from Fort Sidney to Camp Robinson. Next he printed special envelopes for distribution in the Black Hills gold camps and at various eastern points. Messages enclosed in these envelopes would be delivered by Clarke's riders. The charge for carrying a letter between Sidney and the Black Hills was ten cents, paid when the special envelope was purchased. All the color and thrills of the old transcontinental pony express of the 1860's was revived for a last brief moment of glory. Stations were set up along the trail, riders hired, and the service launched in June, 1876. Northern terminal offices were opened in Custer City and Deadwood. Business on the line was brisk, but never profitable. Costs

of hiring riders and station tenders, and collecting hay and grains for the stock were prohibitive, and the venture, though colorful and exciting, was a profitless one. The volume of mail became so heavy after several months that Clarke contracted with the firm of Marsh and Stephenson to carry the mail in four-horse coaches at \$4,000 per year. But this service was soon abandoned, for after the treaty opening the area was signed, the government drew up new contracts for the mail service. Yet while the pounding hooves of Clarke's Centennial Express thundered over the plains they carried with them definite proof that Sidney was to be a frontier outpost of major importance.

The volume of travel over the Sidney Trail increased tremendously during 1876. Tolls collected by Clarke at his bridge—the rates were \$2 per wagon and driver and 50c for additional man or beast—accumulated rapidly.¹⁷ They more than balanced any losses incurred by the mail route, and within a year were providing Clarke a sizeable return on his investment.

As the number of travellers moving toward the gold fields increased, the problem of transportation became a difficult one. To meet the demand for improved passenger transportation to Deadwood, several attempts were made during 1876 to open a stage line from Sidney northward. J. W. Dear, post trader at the Red Cloud Agency, first offered in the spring of the year to carry passengers from Sidney to Red Cloud Indian Agency. The "first-class" fare as he announced it was \$12.50.¹⁸ From the agency to the mines the travellers had to find their own transportation. It was a weekly service, with coaches leaving Sidney every Tuesday morning. After the military forces lost interest in excluding white settlers from the Black Hills, various projects for extended service were launched. When the mail business became too

¹⁷Clarke, *op. cit.*, p. 309.

¹⁸Omaha *Weekly Bee*, February 2, 1876.

heavy for Clarke's Pony Express he signed an agreement with two Omaha men, Captain Marsh and Jim Stephenson, to carry the mails for him in Concord coaches. After September, 1876, passengers also were carried by the new stage line, and the firm of Marsh and Stephenson came to be widely known in western Nebraska and in the new settlements up north.¹⁹ Stations were built by the firm at regular intervals along the trail, and a tri-weekly service was announced for 1877. This proved inadequate to meet the heavy demand for transportation, and in March, 1877 a daily service was announced.²⁰

Another stage line also opened in this area during 1876. Gilmer and Salisbury, who had been the leading figures in the western stage coach business from Utah to Montana since 1869 extended their activities to this region. They, together with Matt Patrick of Omaha, brought in ten Concord coaches and organized a stage line to run from Cheyenne to Deadwood.²¹ During 1876 they confined their activity to the Cheyenne line, but as it became apparent that Sidney was becoming the favorite point of departure for most of the migrants, they launched a second line from Sidney to Deadwood in April, 1877. During the spring and summer of that year there was no shortage of passengers. Rather, the travellers lodged loud and angry protests over the delays in getting passage at Sidney.²²

There were other means of reaching the gold fields. Those who left Sidney in their own mule wagons would frequently agree to take passengers for \$15 each, which was about \$10 less than the fare demanded by the stage coach line. Then too, those individuals for whom economy rather than speed was the prime consideration could always ride with the Pratt and Ferris bull trains. It was

¹⁹*Omaha Weekly Bee*, September 27, 1876.

²⁰*Ibid.*, April 18, 1877.

²¹*Omaha Weekly Herald*, March 3, 1876.

²²*Omaha Weekly Bee*, March 7, 1877.

a slow journey, but the fare of \$10 was reasonable enough, and the trip was pleasant, too, for the company was plentiful, if somewhat rough.

By stage coach, wagon, and bull train, then, a steady stream of prospectors poured into the new communities of Deadwood and Lead. By the summer of 1876 perhaps 10,000 frontiersmen had taken up residence in this area. Isolated as they were from accessible supply points, they immediately began to look to the railroad communities for their needs. Foodstuffs, clothing, and mining equipment all had to be brought from remote towns. Freight routes of importance were opened up from Sidney, Pierre, and Bismarck, and several large-scale freighting firms soon were operating over the Sidney-Deadwood route. The most important of these was the firm of Pratt and Ferris. Originally a cattle firm, this partnership entered the freighting field in 1873 at the time of the Sioux removals to the White River country. Thereafter Pratt and Ferris had transported the greater share of the annuity goods sent to the Red Cloud and Spotted Tail agencies. Agents of this firm and military scouts had laid out the trail to the agencies. When the new market opened up in South Dakota it was only natural that Pratt and Ferris should at once extend their lines to Deadwood and the surrounding camps. From the warehouse at Sidney their bull trains plodded steadily northward loaded down with the goods so badly needed by the isolated miners.²³

Several other Sidney freighting firms were active during 1876, notably that of D. T. McCann. McCann also had done much freighting for the Indian agencies until the Red Cloud investigating commission accused him of some unduly sharp dealings with the government. His trains to the gold fields were large, numerous, and profitable. A third important company was that of A. S. Van Tassel, another old cattleman who had extended his range

²³Omaha *Weekly Bee*, March 7, 1877.

of interests to include transportation and merchandising.

In addition to these large freighting firms, there were any number of small scale operators—"shotgun freighters" they were called. At one of the Sidney outfitting houses they would load a wagon or two with the goods they considered most in demand in Deadwood. Some of them hoped only to pay their way to the Hills. Others who successfully disposed of their freight at a good profit, turned southward over the trail to stock up once again at Sidney. Commodities of every type were scarce in the Dakota towns during 1876 and prices, while fluctuating wildly, generally were very high.²⁴

Stage coach and wagon train thus marked out, hardened, deepened, and widened the Sidney Trail during 1876. So many travellers have left records of the trail, and so widely was it publicized in pamphlet and newspaper that locating it even today is a relatively simple matter.

From Sidney the trail led virtually straight north for fourteen miles to a "Water Hole." Then the trail turned to the northwest, leading west for five and one-half miles while angling toward the north for two miles. Another drive of seven miles straight north brought the traveller to Greenwood Station. Ten miles to the northwest was the Court House Rock Station (one mile south, and one mile west of Court House Rock). From there it was a nine mile ride to Camp Clarke and the bridge over the North Platte. North of the river the trail first led straight north for twelve miles to Red Willow Station, then eighteen miles northwest to Snake Creek Station, thirteen miles north to Point of Rocks Station, and fourteen miles north and slightly west to the Niobrara River and the Running Water Station (about two miles west of present-day Marsland). A drive of twenty-two miles

²⁴Flour frequently sold for \$60 per hundred pounds, potatoes at 15c per pound, and whiskey, most plentiful of all commodities, at 25c per drink.

led to the next stop at the Red Cloud Agency Station. Thirteen miles north and two west of the Indian agency was Carney's Station. Nine miles beyond this point (three miles below the state line) the trail forked—one branch angling off to the northwest and leading to Custer and the southern communities; the other, the trail to Deadwood, turned northeastward in order to skirt the worst of the southern hills, before swinging northward once again to reach the northern towns. The total length of the trail was generally listed as 267 miles.²⁵ The stage lines maintained stations approximately every fifteen miles. Here fresh horses were harnessed to the Concord coaches while the passengers could wet their dusty throats and perhaps get a bite to eat.

During the fall and winter months the tide of traffic turned southward. Many of the less fortunate and more pessimistic prospectors returned to Sidney, grumbling that the mines were "played out" and that no hope remained for further strikes. However, in spite of winter snow and cold the freighters kept urging their bull trains northward, since the demand from the miners for food and clothing remained insatiable, and the northern trails from Bismarck and the Missouri River points were frequently closed by heavy snows.

The spring of 1877 witnessed a veritable avalanche of prospectors heading northward from Sidney. News of the phenomenal richness of the Deadwood placers had reached the East, and created an enthusiasm which was not tempered by the knowledge that most of the desirable claims had been taken. The publicity of the Union Pacific began to pay dividends, and a large percentage of the pilgrims went by way of Sidney. As was to be expected, Sidney boomed and its growth in population and number of business establishments was spectacular.

²⁵Robert E. Strahorn, *To the Rockies and Beyond* (Omaha, 1878), p. 13.

Merchants, blacksmiths, confectioners, saloons and dance halls appeared as if by magic in flimsy wooden shacks, in sod dugouts and in hastily pitched tents. The two stage lines, Marsh and Stevenson, and Gilmer and Salisbury, were never able to meet the demand for travel accommodations. Two or three coaches daily were sent out, but even so there were long lines at the ticket windows of both companies. Numbers were assigned to those waiting for transit as the stage companies imposed their own priority system. Local publicists carefully chronicled the daily departures from Sidney and the figures of those leaving the town each day—the number varied from thirty to eighty—offered proof enough that the Concord coaches which rolled over the Sidney Trail that spring were certain to have passengers occupying every possible inch of seat and roof space. From fifty to seventy-five freight wagons rolled out of Sidney on days when the weather was favorable, and in this field, too, it was frequently alleged that the service was inadequate to the need.²⁶

The observer by the side of the Sidney Trail at Running Water Station would have seen an interesting and colorful panorama pass before him. First there would be the Concord coach of Gilmer and Salisbury's new line. It always came rolling into the station at a gallop, for the driver never failed to urge on his teams as they approached the station. Things of beauty were these new Concord coaches, just delivered from Abbot and Downing's New Hampshire works; with their brilliant yellow wheels, bright red panels and new leather curtains they were the pride of the west. Pulling his horses to a stop before the station the driver would shout "All out"—an invitation which never needed to be given twice to the travel-weary passengers. Out of the coach they would tumble, nine well cramped "first-class" passengers. Three to seven more "second-class" travelers would scramble down from the roof. All were in bad humor after the

²⁶*Omaha Weekly Bee*, March 14, 21, May 2, 1877.

all night ride, cursing the dust, cursing the cramped quarters, and cursing the driver who seemed to find every bump and rut in the trail. A quick stop for sour-dough pancakes and bacon, served up by the inexperienced hand of the station tender, and the weary travelers would crowd back into the coach, heartened only by the thought that another twenty-four hours would see them in Deadwood.

Scarcely had the coach rolled away in a cloud of dust before the first of many "shotgun freighters" rolled past the station. Their equipment was varied, but usually included a sturdy Studebaker wagon, drawn by mules or oxen, and loaded with every imaginable product—miner's picks, hardware, clothing, flour, bacon, butter, live poultry and eggs. One enterprising "shotgunner" left Sidney with a cargo which caused even the jaded citizens of that community to raise an eyebrow. From various sources he collected 138 cats and with this spitting, unhappy feline cargo he left for Deadwood. The miners snapped up his entire shipment. There was no end to the products which an imaginative individual might take with him on his northward trek.

Next, our observer might meet one of Pratt and Ferris' freight trains. This was big business. Twenty to twenty-five wagons, each carrying 7,500 to 8,000 pounds of freight, and each drawn by seven or eight yoke of oxen made up the train.²⁷ Ruggedness and durability rather than beauty characterized this outfit. Everything about it breathed the word "strength." First there was the browned and weatherbeaten teamster, with his inseparable companion, the long bull whip he could so skillfully manipulate, and the prized collection of oaths he delighted to use at the slightest excuse. Then the oxen, multicolored cross-breeds in whose veins flowed longhorn blood mixed with that of northern native breeds. Long-

²⁷There might be as many as ten yoke of oxen, in which case the wagon had another "trailer" back of it.

legged and cantankerous, they were dependable enough when once they had been put under the yoke. Overtowering all, however, were the rugged wagons made by Studebaker, Murphy, and Kern. Wheels three feet in diameter in front, and five feet in the rear, topped by a high double box, and covered with canvas strung over high ribs, raised the wagon above everything else in the train. Seldom did the bull train halt at Running Water Station, for frequently the leader had directed that the overnight camp be pitched along the Niobrara River, where grass and water were available.

Over on the horizon our observer might notice a low cloud of dust moving slowly, almost imperceptibly northward. Beneath it moved a trail herd of cattle being driven either to the Indian agencies or to the hungry miners. Drovers generally preferred to stay close to the trail, for there were still a few lawless bands of Sioux who delighted in stampeding herds and stealing a few head.

Aside from the travelers moving in groups there were venturesome souls traveling alone on horseback. Occasionally even someone on foot, victim of an unruly cayuse or a skillful horse thief. All these were part of the stream of humanity flowing northward over the trail.

Men who lived by their wits rather than by their labor began to infest the trail in 1877. The temptations were great. Sizeable amounts of gold already were being shipped out of the Black Hills. From Sidney alone sums varying from \$9,000 to \$12,000 were being shipped east daily,²⁸ and perhaps the same amount was being brought to Cheyenne. Coaches carrying this bullion from Deadwood to the towns on the Union Pacific were robbed with discouraging regularity after March, 1877.²⁹ Several bands of brigands, one headed by Sam Bass and Joel Collins,

²⁸Omaha *Weekly Bee*, March 14, 1877.

²⁹Jesse Brown, old-time stage coach guard, said the first successful robbery occurred on March 25, 1877.—Jesse Brown and A. M. Willard, *The Black Hills Trails* (Rapid City, S. D., 1924), p. 245.

another by Blackburn and Wall, other by leaders still anonymous, halted and searched at least one of the south-bound stages every week. The attacks usually were made in the country between Deadwood and Camp Robinson, where the rugged terrain and timbered hills provided opportunities for escape. The procedure was always the same—a bend in the road, a log or rock dragged across the trail, a masked rider with a shotgun resting in the crook of his arm, confederates clambering from behind bushes and trees at the side of the road, a quick disarming and a search of passengers and coach, and the robber crew melted away into the hills.

The regularity of the attacks on the stage lines was irritating to everyone concerned. The problem became so serious that during the late summer months of 1877 a large share of the gold came out of the mining centers by Pratt and Ferris bull trains rather than by stage coach. Any bandit crew would think twice before swooping down on a large group of tough bullwhackers.

To the officials of the stage lines the attacks were more than disturbing. While the robbers frequently found slim pickings during their hold-ups, they occasionally would seize a sizeable shipment of gold. The losses in these instances had to be carried by the companies themselves. The result was strenuous action on their part to deal with the outlaws. Luke Voorhees, the Sidney manager for Gilmer and Salisbury's lines, assumed the leadership in this movement. First he offered rewards of \$1,000 or more for the capture of the road agents who succeeded in carrying off sizeable amounts of treasure. Next he employed a new group of guards to accompany the coaches, among them being Jesse Brown, Scott Davis, Boone May, and Billy Sample. Utterly fearless, dead shots, with lengthy frontier experience and enviable reputations behind them, these men were enough to scare off some of the more timid would-be stage robbers.

Voorhees soon collected a "wanted" list of individuals whose actions or sudden affluence aroused suspicion.

During the late winter and spring of 1878 Voorhees, several deputy marshalls, including M. F. Leech of Ogalala and Seth Bullock of Deadwood, and troop detachments made available by the commander at Camp Robinson began a series of raids on hide-outs in the hills. As a result, some fifteen suspects were eventually rounded up, and fourteen convicted and sent to prison for long terms. Others, discovered in "Robbers Roost" during March, 1878, either hurriedly left the country or "stretched hemp."³⁰

The most interesting measure to counteract the wave of robberies was the introduction of an armored bullion coach. "Old Ironsides" was put into service by Gilmer and Salisbury in June, 1878. It was a special product of Abbot and Downing's works. The entire body of the coach was lined with one-half inch steel, and the openings for air and light were much smaller than in the ordinary coach. Windows became virtual portholes only, and a section of the roof could be opened or tightly bolted down from the inside as need dictated.

Inside the coach rested about an 800 pound safe, sturdy enough to resist the attacks of most robbers. Announcing the new service, the stage line promised that the coach would be accompanied at all times by six to eight armed guards—the group that Voorhees had brought in the previous year. Gold would be carried from Deadwood to Sidney at the rate of \$1 for each \$100 transported. Shippers were eager to employ the new service, and "Old Ironsides" was soon rolling down the trail with cargoes that ran from \$100,000 to \$200,000.³² In three years of service over the Sidney Trail the armored coach was successfully robbed only once. This was on September 28, 1878, when driver and guards

³⁰Harold E. Briggs, *Frontiers of the Northwest* (New York, 1940), p. 121.

³¹Omaha *Weekly Bee*, May 22, 1878.

³²The most precious cargo was one of \$350,000.—Alvin F. Harlow, *Old Waybills* (New York, 1934), p. 368.

became careless after pulling into Cold Springs Canyon Station.³³ Forty-five thousand dollars was the sum stolen, but virtually all of it was later recovered and the bandits captured and sent to the penitentiary. Good times were over for the members of the bandit fraternity. Another roundup of outlaws was carried out by Dakota territorial officials in October, 1878, and thereafter the problem was rather definitely solved.

During 1878 the number of travelers journeying northward over the Sidney Trail began to taper off, and never again reached the figure set during the previous summer. In 1879 the stage line from Cheyenne was consolidated with that from Sidney, thereby giving the Nebraska town a monopoly of the passenger traffic northward.³⁴ The bonanza days, however, were over. The desirable claims in the Black Hills had all been staked and the placer wealth was rapidly being exhausted. Already large corporations were buying up claims and turning independent prospectors into company employees. Mining in this area was becoming a corporate venture. As a result, the cry "Off to the Black Hills" had lost some of its appeal, and the number of passengers leaving Sidney gradually came to average 300 to 400 per month.

During these years, however, the volume of freight actually increased. There was the same demand for clothing, food, and other commodities as in previous years. Pratt and Ferris enlarged their warehouse at Sidney to take care of their needs. McCann and Company shipped as much as 300,000 pounds of freight daily.³⁵ The columns of the regional press mention two new freighting firms—Kennard and Simpson, and Daugherty, Kelley and Company. Several freighters who previously had operated out of Cheyenne moved their headquarters to

³³Brown and Willard, *op. cit.* p. 263.

³⁴Clipping from *New York Weekly Tribune*, August 18, 1879, in Chubbuck Scrapbook, Nebraska State Historical Society.

³⁵*Omaha Weekly Bee*, March 7, 1878.

Sidney. Small bands of Indians had been causing some trouble in the Hat Creek area, and these raids, plus the fact that the road from Sidney was admittedly shorter induced these men to make the move.

A total of approximately 22,000,000 to 25,000,000 pounds of freight was moved over the Sidney Trail during 1878 and 1879.³⁶ One new bulky commodity entered into the traffic. Mining companies such as the Homestake Company had ordered heavy stamp mills from various eastern points. Pratt and Ferris contracted to haul several of these mills (some of them weighing 400,000 pounds) to Deadwood.³⁷ Handling this weighty and bulky freight posed a major problem for the concern, but the bill submitted to the Homestake Company by Pratt and Ferris for transporting an eighty-stamp mill—total charges were \$33,000—indicates how profitable the trade could be.³⁸

For the next two years the freighters conducted their business with little disturbance or difficulty. By this time the freighting business had become stereotyped. The various concerns sent out their trains, usually numbering twenty-five wagons sometimes with trailers. Thus a train might carry up to 300,000 pounds of freight. Two weeks was the standard duration of the trip to the Dakota towns. Freight charges for most commodities were generally two cents per pound during most of the year. However, during the winter months and the rainy season of late spring the rates would be raised to five or six cents per pound.³⁹ That commodity prices in the mining communities fluctuated wildly is not surprising. On the return trip the wagons could be brought back empty, though occasionally loads of lumber might be returned for the local trade of the towns along the Union Pacific.

³⁶Undated clipping in Chubbuck Scrapbook, p. 4.

³⁷Omaha *Weekly Bee*, July 31, 1878.

³⁸R. Blackstone, "The Homestake Mine," *Pahasapha Quarterly*, V (Number 4), 20.

³⁹Omaha *Weekly Bee*, December 26, 1877.

Business, which had been slumping slightly, picked up noticeably in September, 1879, after a fire had destroyed over a hundred buildings in Deadwood. The unnatural demand was of brief duration, however.

The Sidney freighters were living on borrowed time during 1880. The completion of the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad to Pierre, S. D., in October, 1880, foreshadowed the shift of the freighting business to the Pierre route. One of the freighting firms operating out of Sidney, Jewett and Dickenson's, consolidated with the Merchants Freighters and did the bulk of its business out of Pierre. Others soon followed. Only during the winter months, when the snows were deep along the Dakota route, did the Sidney Trail enjoy a revival of its flagging traffic. After 1881 the treasure also was taken to the Missouri River points rather than to the Platte River area. What had been a major frontier highway gradually deteriorated into a secondary road. Grass began to grow over the Sidney Trail.