Aids to Prospective Prospectors:  
Guidebooks and Letters From Kansas Territory,  
1858-1860  

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As winter loosened its frigid grip on the High Plains and green grass for grazing began to appear in the spring of 1859, thousands of hopeful gold seekers hastened to the area around present-day Denver, Colo. In contrast to the prospectors involved in other gold rushes of the 1850’s, most of these individuals were not so-called “Old Californians”; that is, people who had participated in the California gold rush of 1849 and the early 1850’s and who, still infected by “gold fever” and thinking their mining experiences would be helpful, hurried to other regions as gold discoveries occurred there. Rather, most of the Pike’s Peak gold seekers of 1859 came from areas east of the gold fields and traveled through the Territories of Nebraska and Kansas en route to the Rockies. As was done in 1849 and on other occasions, various individuals, to aid inexperienced gold seekers, published guidebooks which purportedly described the best means to prepare for and to make the trip to the gold region.

Most of the so-called Pike’s Peak gold fields lay within the boundaries of the Territory of Kansas, which extended much farther west than the western boundary of the State of Kansas. Many residents of Kansas territory were cognizant that the gold region was within their territory and also were aware that a number of the prospectors would use eastern Kansas as a “jumping-off” point in their journey. Kansas residents (or former residents) wrote a large percentage of the guidebooks which supposedly provided needed information to gold seekers. Other Kansans wrote letters for the same purpose. The Pike’s Peak gold rush was clearly of significance not just for the immediate area where the gold strikes occurred, but also for a contiguous, jumping-off area such as eastern Kansas territory. The preparation of guidebooks by Kansans and writing of letters concerning the gold region are examples of the impact the rush made on Kansas.

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Although the guidebooks for prospectors were supposedly written for their benefit, serious questions arose at the time and subsequently regarding the validity of the books. LeRoy R. Hafen, an authority on the topic, stated: “Some of the guides were written by persons who had been to the country described.” However, he continued:

Most of the books . . . were written by men who had no personal knowledge of the purported mines, but were newspaper men, surveyors, travelers, etc., who assumed to speak with authority on the nature of the country and the mines, the trails to the far West, and the equipment and supplies needed for successful travel across the plains. . . . Some of the guidebooks were issued to further the interests of certain outfitting towns and win adherence [sic] to particular routes to the gold region.²

Kansans who wrote guidebooks undoubtedly believed their territory would prosper if prospectors passed through the area, but these Kansans must also have felt that they were providing accurate reports to help the gold seekers. An analysis of the guidebooks produced by Kansas residents might furnish additional information about the actual value of such books to people involved in gold rushes.

Kansas territory, established in 1854, was in the national limelight during much of its existence, and a considerable number of books were published in the early territorial years concerning the political troubles there. After 1857 interest in that aspect of Kansas life apparently waned, but in the period from 1858 to 1860 the territory again became the subject of several books. About 20 years ago an eminent Kansas historian stated: “The great book production stimulus of 1859 was the Pike’s Peak Gold Rush. Eleven books, mostly ‘guide books,’ of more than 24 pages, were issued, and several smaller ones.” In 1860, “the only important Kansas books were again the Pike’s Peak guides, three of them in excess of 24 pages.”³

A Kansan, William B. Parsons, was the author of one of the earliest Pike’s Peak gold rush guidebooks, published in December, 1858. Parsons was city attorney at Lawrence, and recommended that town as a jumping-off place for Pike’s Peakers. He could not be condemned as one who had no firsthand acquaintance with the gold region, since he had been one of the leading members of the Lawrence party which had explored the area in 1858. The Law-

². LeRoy R. Hafen, ed., Pike’s Peak Gold Rush Guidebooks of 1859 (Glendale, Cal., 1941), pp. 83-84. (Vol. 9 of the Southwest Historical Series.)
³. James C. Malin, “Notes on the Writing of General Histories of Kansas,” Kansas Historical Quarterly, v. 21 (Autumn, 1954), p. 187. Some of these guides were either written by Kansans or else received a certain amount of attention in Kansas newspapers. These are the only ones which will be discussed here.
NEW AND ENLARGED EDITION,

THE

NEW GOLD MINES

OF

WESTERN KANSAS:

BEING A COMPLETE

Description of the newly Discovered Gold Mines,

THE

DIFFERENT ROUTES, CAMPING PLACES, TOOLS AND OUTFIT,

AND CONTAINING

EVERYTHING IMPORTANT

FOR THE EMIGRANT AND MINER TO KNOW.

By WM. B. PARSONS,
Who passed the Summer of 1858 on the Plains and in the Mines.

CINCINNATI, OHIO:
GEO. S. BLANCHARD, 39 WEST FOURTH STREET.
1859.

The title page from the second (1859) edition of Wm. B. Parsons' guidebook.
rence party had left that town in May, 1858, and journeyed to the Pike's Peak area. After a summer of fruitless prospecting there and in New Mexico, the prospectors heard optimistic reports from farther north which prompted them to hurry to the mouth of Cherry creek, in present-day Denver. The group found gold there and some established claims, but Parsons and four others decided to winter in eastern Kansas. Parsons arrived in Lawrence late in October and apparently soon began work on his guidebook. Parsons' book came out in a first edition in late 1858 at Lawrence and was issued in a second edition in early 1859 in Cincinnati, Ohio.4

In his book Parsons listed the advantages of outfitting in Lawrence. Gold seekers could obtain guides there, and emigrants who had to wait for the trails to open could secure good pasture. In addition, Lawrence offered inexpensive goods and an abundance of corn and other grains for sale, plus the advantage that gold hunters who bought their goods in Lawrence would not have to haul them as far as goods bought farther east. Finally, from Lawrence a traveler could take one of several routes to the gold fields.5

Parsons discussed the three main routes to the mining regions, describing each as it would be if the emigrant used Lawrence as the starting point. These routes were the Santa Fe, the Smoky Hill, and the Platte. The Santa Fe trail was a well-worn one for part of its distance by 1859, but was a round about way to the gold fields since it led south to the Arkansas river and then required a swing north along the base of the mountains to reach Cherry creek. Likewise, the Platte route necessitated that parties leaving Kansas proceed in a northwestern direction for part of the trip and then curve back in a southwestern move to Cherry creek. The Smoky Hill trail, as it developed, was more direct, but was not as safe as the other two. Parsons had traveled over the Santa Fe and Platte routes, but not the Smoky Hill. He asserted that travelers departing from Lawrence could use any one of the three routes.6

Concerning the question of the amount of the precious metal in the gold region, Parsons and other guidebook writers were too optimistic. Parsons asserted: "... so many men of sound judg-

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...ment and well-known veracity have arrived from the gold mines, and, without exception, certified to their productiveness, that to doubt their value and importance, would be absurd. The existence of gold in California, and in paying quantities, was not so well attested eighteen months after its discovery, as it now is in Kansas, after less than six months.”

Parsons may have believed such enthusiastic statements were warranted, but they presented a distorted picture to his readers. The Lawrence Republican Book & Job Printing Office published the first edition of Parsons’ guidebook. The edition had 48 pages and cost 25 cents a copy. The Republican offered in December, 1858, to give each new yearly subscriber to the newspaper a free copy of Parsons’ book.

Parsons’ guidebook contained advertisements of various Lawrence businessmen. These included the Johnson House, which advertised special arrangements for Pike’s Peakers, William O’Donnell’s Pike’s Peak Package and Letter Express, B. F. Dalton & Co., and C. Stearns, outfitters, and others. Parsons’ book probably gained widespread distribution and may have persuaded some people to go to Lawrence to outfit. However, Parsons had been to the gold fields, had personally traveled over two of the three routes he suggested, and did state that each of the routes possessed advantages.

Another Kansan who published a guidebook was O. B. Gunn of Wyandotte, a civil engineer, a surveyor, and a land agent. Gunn had lived in Kansas since 1857, but he had not traveled to the gold region. He declared that he had prepared his book carefully from government plats in the surveyor general’s office. His volume consisted of a general discussion of Kansas of about 36 pages, a description of the gold mines of 10 pages, 23 pages of advertisements, and two maps, one of eastern Kansas and one of the routes to the gold fields.

Gunn discussed the Smoky Hill route in a favorable manner but urged use of the other routes until the Smoky Hill had been well established. He described Wyandotte as a town of 2,200 connected with the Santa Fe route by a bridge over the Kansas river, and he declared it an excellent outfitting point for emigrants. On the basis

8. Lawrence Republican, December 16, 1858.
10. Wyandotte Western Argus, June 3, 1858; O. B. Gunn, New Map and Hand-Book of Kansas & the Gold Mines . . . (Pittsburgh, 1859); “Introductory” and pp. 5-71; Hafen, Pike’s Peak Gold Rush Guidebooks of 1859, p. 235.
of letters from “reliable prospectors,” Gunn determined “that the miner can average five dollars per day.”

Gunn’s guidebook which was distributed in the spring of 1859 at the price of one dollar contained advertisements of Wyandotte and Leavenworth businesses primarily. Gunn advertised his book in most of the leading Kansas newspapers and established agencies to sell it in several Kansas towns.

Another guidebook prepared by a Kansan was the Emigrants’ Guide to Pike’s Peak published by L. J. Eastin, editor of the Leavenworth Weekly Herald. Eastin had not been in the gold fields. This guide was only a newspaper supplement or a special edition with pages 13 inches by 18½ inches in size. It favored Leavenworth as a starting point and the Smoky Hill route as the best route to the mines. The guide cost 10 cents for a single copy and six cents per copy if purchased in quantity. Reportedly, Eastin printed 30,000 copies of the guide.

Two “Free State” men who had gained some fame in Kansas territory earlier edited a guidebook which was published in New York early in 1859. James Redpath had been a special correspondent of Eastern newspapers in Kansas in its early years, as had Richard J. Hinton. Gold region information for their guide came from government reports and miners’ statements, rather than from the personal experiences of Redpath and Hinton in far western Kansas. Their guidebook did not seem to favor any particular town or route. Redpath inserted a card in the Topeka Tribune of December 23, 1858, asking his Kansas friends to send him information about Kansas. The editor of the Lawrence Republican received a copy of the guide in March, 1859, and declared, “From a hasty review of this work, we are inclined to think it the best, as it is the fullest, of its kind yet produced. Its authors are certainly familiar with Kansas. . . .”

Still another guidebook which a Kansas resident helped prepare

12. Lawrence Republican, March 3, April 14, 1859; Leavenworth Weekly Herald, February 26, 1859; Atchison Freedom’s Champion, March 5, 1859; Leompton Kansas National Democrat, April 14, 1859; Leavenworth Daily Times, February 26, 1859; Gunn, New Map and Hand-Book of Kansas & the Gold Mines, pp. 49-63.
Otis B. Gunn (1828-1901), Wyandotte, was the author of *New Map and Handbook of Kansas & the Gold Mines*, published in Pittsburgh in 1859.

Lucien J. Eastin (1814-1876), editor of the Leavenworth Weekly Herald, was the publisher of *Emigrants' Guide to Pike's Peak*. 
was that of Luke Tierney. Tierney was living near Leavenworth when he decided to join the Green Russell prospecting party in the spring of 1858. The Russell party was one of several, including the previously mentioned Lawrence party, which traveled to far western Kansas in 1858. Russell was a miner from the Auraria, Ga., gold region, who had participated in the California gold rush, but had returned to Georgia in 1852. Tierney, who was in the gold fields from mid-1858 until the mid-1860's, prepared a journal about "gold discoveries on the South Platte," which was taken back to Iowa by D. C. Oakes, who had met Tierney at Cherry creek. An acquaintance of Oakes named S. W. Smith published Tierney's work, to which was appended a "Guide of the Route" by Oakes and Smith. The book was published in 1859 in Pacific City, Iowa, and thus the route recommended was that via Pacific City (opposite the mouth of the Platte) and up the Platte river.\textsuperscript{15}

The author of the \textit{Guide to the New Gold Region of Western Kansas and Nebraska} is not known, but it was definitely written in the interests of Leavenworth. It may have been published by Russell, Majors & Waddell and Jones & Russell, transportation companies, and if not published by them, they probably sponsored it. This guide stated that the best starting point on the Missouri river for Pike's Peakers was Leavenworth and gave an extremely favorable description of that town. The guide asserted that the distances from Leavenworth to the gold fields over the various routes were: northern route, 780 miles; southern route, 705; Republican fork route, 678; and Smoky Hill fork route, 565. All the routes were discussed only in terms of going over them after starting from Leavenworth.\textsuperscript{16}

In January, 1859, the Atchison paper, \textit{Freedom's Champion}, announced that a man named Hunt would soon be in town to obtain advertisements of various Atchison merchants to insert in a handbook for gold seekers which was to be published in Chicago. On March 12, 1859, the \textit{Champion} stated that it had received a copy of this guidebook, written by Pratt and Hunt, who were identified as "Civil Engineers and Surveyors, K. T." The guidebook, which


\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Guide to the New Gold Region of Western Kansas and Nebraska} . . . (New York, 1859), introductory "Notes" (1851), by LoRoy R. Hafen, and pp. 16-21, 24, 26. Hafen believed Russell, Majors & Waddell and Jones & Russell had a close association with this guidebook, because the only advertisements in the book were of those companies, and because they also received attention in the text of the book.
gave no other identification of these two men, recommended Atchison as the best outfitting point. 17

Probably the best written of the guidebooks was that prepared by Henry Villard. Villard was in eastern Kansas briefly in the spring of 1859 and far western Kansas for most of the summer of that year, and while there he was a correspondent for the Cincinnati Daily Commercial and the Leavenworth Daily Times. Villard did not favor any particular Missouri river town, but wrote that emigrants could secure good outfits in several places. He warned that the Smoky Hill route was not well marked as yet (his work was published in the spring of 1860), and until it was, he recommended that emigrants use the northern or Platte route. He believed that a practicable road could be made over the Smoky Hill route though, and would be more than 100 miles shorter than the northern route. 18

In addition to those discussed above, several other guidebooks appeared, but the people who prepared them had apparently had little contact with Kansas. Two of these which Kansas newspapers noted briefly were Parker & Huyett's The Illustrated Miners' Handbook and Guide to Pike's Peak and O. Allen's Allen's Guide Book and Map to the Gold Fields of Kansas & Nebraska and Great Salt Lake City. 19

Approximately 20 Pike's Peak guidebooks appeared from 1858 through 1860, and individuals who resided in, or had resided in, Kansas territory wrote almost half of these guides. Three of these authors, William B. Parsons, Luke Tierney, and Henry Villard, had been in the gold fields before they prepared their guidebooks. Other guide writers, such as O. B. Gunn, James Redpath, and Richard J. Hinton, asserted that they had studied relevant documents and based their guides upon the information gleaned from those various reports and statements. But, how valid were the guidebooks? Parsons stated in the preface to the second edition of his work: "The author believes from personal observation that the book is correct and hopes that the work thus improved may prove acceptable to the emigrant and the miner."

The guidebooks written by Kansans varied considerably in length and detail, but in general they appeared to provide useful information concerning outfits would-be miners should purchase. Also, these guides, although somewhat biased, did furnish fairly correct descriptions of the routes to the gold region, but the authors should have been even more cautionary regarding the Smoky Hill route. The principal failing of the guides was that they were too confident about the richness of the Pike’s Peak gold fields. However, such optimism was a common feature of the American scene in the late 1850’s, since the California gold rush of 1849 had occurred so recently. If the authors favored a particular outfitting point in eastern Kansas, this position was understandable, but also not necessarily invalid, since all of the Kansas towns which were promoted were good jumping-off spots. On balance, then, the Kansas guidebooks were too laudatory regarding the potential amount of gold in the new gold rush area, but otherwise furnished prospective prospectors with a considerable quantity of reasonably accurate information about what to take and how to go to the gold region.

Another source of the impressions of Kansans about the gold rush was correspondence sent from Kansas to people in other parts of the United States. Individuals may have placed more reliance upon news in letters from acquaintances and relatives than upon that contained in more impersonal newspapers and guidebooks. For example, George W. Collamore of Lawrence received a letter in the early spring of 1859 from a man in Minnesota, stating that business was at a standstill in Minnesota and that many merchants had failed. He wished to secure information about the Kansas gold region, because he was thinking about going out there. He wrote to Collamore, because they were friends and because Collamore was so near to the mines. The Minnesotan wrote, “I wish for some information from you[.] that would be more satisfactory to me than all the storys [sic] that has [sic] been told[.]”

On March 25, 1859, Charles Robinson, governor of Kansas under the Topeka constitution, wrote to A. A. Lawrence, “Large numbers are going to Pikes peak but no gold is seen in our streets. Something is wrong. If there is gold as is claimed it should make its appearance before now in our cities. I am afraid ‘all is not gold that glistens’.”

A letter writer in Osawatomie, in April, 1859, stated, “there is no


doubt while some may make fortunes the majority would have been wiser if they had stayed at home.” In May this writer asserted, “I think not one in four have gone from this section who made up their mind to go at first. The reports and letters outside of the newspapers have not been sufficiently favorable. . . .” 22 A letter from Topeka in March, 1859, declared, “Thousands upon thousands are going to Pike’s Peak.” 23

John J. Ingalls, later a United States senator from Kansas, reported in the fall of 1858 that there was much talk of the gold diggings in eastern Kansas. Ingalls, who was writing from Sumner, noted in December, 1858, that while the Kansas newspapers included many reports from the mining area, probably most of them contained fabricated items. Although Ingalls had been very skeptical concerning the gold region in 1858 and 1859, by January, 1860, he wrote that he was undecided whether to stay in eastern Kansas or go to Denver the coming spring. 24

The Pike’s Peak gold rush most directly affected the area that now is the state of Colorado. However, the rush was definitely of significance to the people of Kansas since they were in the path of some of the emigrants to the gold fields and gained trade from these travelers, and since the gold region was in the far western portion of Kansas territory. That Kansas residents, or former residents, were the authors of a sizable number of the Pike’s Peak gold rush guidebooks was not unexpected. In addition, Kansans undoubtedly furnished a number of other people with impressions about the gold region by means of letters. Through both the letters and the guidebooks, Kansas received a considerable amount of publicity. The guidebooks generally provided helpful suggestions concerning outfitting points, outfits, and routes to the gold region, although they may have overstated the richness of the gold deposits in far western Kansas.

