

From the Archives

of the Skowhegan History House

by Ruth F. Blood

Most local residents associate the name Bigelow only with Bigelow Hill in Skowhegan, but the Bigelow family name remains prominent in Australia. There is a link between the two: the Gold Rush. A letter in the archives confirms the connection between the early Bigelow Hill settlers and those who now bear the name in Australia.

In the early 1850's Gold Rush Fever had lured many local men to the gold fields in California and Australia—among them Joshua Cushman Bigelow. Born in Norridgewock in 1826 on Bigelow Hill near the Bloomfield line, he wrote from Spring Creek, Australia, to Levi Weston in Skowhegan on 8 December 1853 (Note: This article retains the original orthography, including punctuation):



John Cushman
Bigelow

Friend Levi

I am happy to take the opportunity to write you a few lines to let you know I am in the land of the living, but not in paradise. Levi I understand that you talk of coming to this Country. I will tell you what I think about it and you can do as you think best ... the best times have gone by here for making money, although I think that this place is better for [that] than in the State of Maine, Expeshly, [sic] for a



Levi Weston

young man that has no family to take care of ... for instance a Boy like me if he has his health but if he is sick this is the worst place that I ever was in. As for mining it is pretty dull for the present it is the poorest sight [sic] that I have seen since I have been here, and I have ben [sic] here about sixteen months ... If their [sic] is not any new [mine] found I think that it will be a hard show here for a man to make money fast and on the hole [sic] Levi I think that a man situated as you, had better stay at home where you are and

[get] something good to eat and be around folks... I have not even seen any society since I left home, but this place is ... much better ... then [sic] California ... if I was at home now and know as much about this Colony as I do now I would stay away from it ... This is the best Country to raise stock that I ever was in but it would be the poorest one if it was not for the gold to live in [sic] and it is not a very pleasant one now ... if I was going to live in either Country this or California I should prefer Cal ... by all ods [sic] but I think that I have done better here then [sic] I could in California At the

same time at any [sic] rate I am not sorry that I came to this place ... I suppose that you are having pretty cold weather down in old Maine and we here are having some pretty warm and the flies are dreadful bad I have to write with one hand & fight flies with the other & if I happen to open my mouth they will get into that & in my eyes and I think that if I was in the habit of swearing I should rip out now & then (para. 1).

Bigelow's assessment of the California prospects and conditions may have come from newspapers or from letters of his fellow townsmen, James Wood and Benjamin D. Dinsmore, who kept a diary of his disappointing experiences in the California mining camps, of his physical maladies, and of his longing to return to Maine (Palmer, 1947, p. 252).

And Bigelow's account of living conditions was mild compared to those in Australian history, which furnishes a dismal picture of the mining camps in the Spring Creek area:

It is estimated that by November 1852 there were as many as 8000 miners camped on Spring and Reid's Creek goldfields. . . . Living conditions were harsh, even by the standards of the day. Unsanitary conditions combined with the cold and wet winters made life hard and increased risk of illness and disease. . . . There were wet diggings, such as those at Spring Creek, worked by miners referred to as 'Monkeys' and dry diggings, worked by miners called 'Punchers'. Rivalry between the two groups gave the police considerable trouble (Discovery of gold in Beechworth, paras. 2-5).

Bigelow's letter continues:

Levi I think that some of the folks that has [sic] come out here lately from the states wish themselves back again, say for instance uncle Morse j's [probably Joseph] bigelow and Mr. Teego and several others. I have some fun with them about this Colony. Jo. sees that the church members swear out here, and he thinks that is rather hard to pay a license I tell him that he will get uset [sic] to that in the corse [sic] of a year or so. I should like this Country pretty well if it was not for the government [sic] they are bound to get all that a man can make if they can fetch them to their terms and they wont [sic] let a man cultivate any of the ground without he will by [sic] it and pay a big price for it (para. 1).

Certainly the miners had cause for complaint. Each miner was required to purchase a license in advance at 30 shilling a month; it allowed a digger to keep whatever gold he found on his claim— if he were fortunate to find any. Without the license, the miner was found to be stealing from Crown property and was liable to suffer criminal proceedings. . . . Failure to produce a license on demand could mean being chained to a log and fined (Taylor, 2006, para. 12).

The letter continues:

I dont [sic] know but you will think that I am sorry that I left home but I am not I am sorry I staid [sic] at home as long as I did but I should like to be at home verry [sic] well and I mean to some time if I live long enough I suppose that things have alterd [sic] ... since I left. I heard by the way of Mrs. Neals letter, the folks are to work on the Raill [sic] road. I hope they will get it done by the time I get home so I can ride up to Bloomfield in the cars My brother has started for home and since he left Benj K. Snow and I have been to work together You can tell his folks that he is well, he has gone to Melbourne with our horse team that is about two hindred [sic] miles from here he has gone after a load of goods. W. H. Pearson is here and well and finely [sic] all the rest of the Boys from that place they all send their respects to you. You tell Asher that I am the same old sixpence as ever. I don't know of eny [sic] more to write if I did I would write it I must draw to a close for am getting down towards the bottom of the page I don't know as you will thank me for writing to you I want you to write to me if you please when you receive this direct your letter to Post Phillop. You must excuse the bad writing and spelling give my respects to all of the inquiring friends if their [sic] may be eny [sic] and save a share for yourself & wife.

Respectfully yours.

From your friend Joshua C. Bigelow (para. 1).

To be continued—Part two will follow Joshua Bigelow's life in Australia, that of Benjamin K. Snow, and will include the names of other local gold seekers living in Australia at that time.

References

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