
To the Black Hills Gold Fields: The Letters of Samuel M. Zent, Hoosier Prospector, 1875–1876

*Edited by Jeffrey L. Patrick**

In July, 1874, legendary Indian fighter Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer led his Seventh United States Cavalry Regiment on a mission into the Black Hills of the Dakotas, ostensibly to find a site for a new military post. A second assignment of this expedition, however, was to confirm or deny long existing rumors, never formally investigated, of rich gold deposits in the region. Within a few weeks the release of Custer's reports on his findings supported the belief that gold indeed existed in the Black Hills, and a nation caught in an economic depression was swept with gold-hunting hysteria.

Unfortunately for would-be white adventurers, federal officials recognized the claims of Lakotas, Yanktons, Yanktonais, and a number of neighboring tribes to some 60,000,000 acres in the Black Hills region, including all of modern South Dakota west of the Missouri River, by the terms of the Fort Laramie Treaty negotiated in 1868 and ratified the following year. Legally, the military was bound by the provisions of the treaty to keep all whites out of this "Great Sioux Reservation." The stage was thus set for confrontation between American soldiers and civilians as the army faced the overwhelming task of preventing large numbers of prospectors, men determined to take their chances by challenging the military, from invading the Black Hills.

One of those who ventured into the Hills during 1875 and 1876 was Hoosier Samuel Zent. In early 1875 Zent joined the Gordon Expedition, a group that left Sioux City, Iowa, for the gold fields, was intercepted by United States troops on the way, and was roughly handled by the soldiers. Turned back but undaunted, Zent journeyed to the Dakota Territory in 1876 and actually did pan for gold, only to give up a few months later when he failed to find substantial deposits.

Fortunately for historians, Zent sent to his hometown Indiana newspaper, the *Ligonier National Banner*, several letters that

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detailed his experiences with the Gordon Expedition and his subsequent adventures as an independent prospector. In two letters written while he was a member of the Gordon party, Zent recounted the trials of the trek and the harsh treatment at the hands of American troops, thus documenting a virtually forgotten episode of western history. Writing subsequent letters from various points during his second trip west, Zent related the difficulties experienced by green miners and detailed the rapidly changing environment of the Dakota Territory in the mid-1870s. He left a rare contemporary record of the experiences of a tenderfoot Hoosier correspondent seeking his fortune in an alien land.¹

In early 1875 various army generals and their superiors in Washington, D.C., were determined to honor the Indian treaty and prevent prospectors from entering the Black Hills. The military made an effort to dissuade miners by issuing less than glowing reports on the existence of gold in the region. General Philip H. Sheridan, for instance, reported that Custer's tests for gold deposits were "not sufficient to establish their existence in large quantities." Unfortunately, in many cases this tactic failed. In addition, Custer himself did not help the army's efforts. At first he wrote much the same as Sheridan, noting that until further tests were done "no opinion should be formed" regarding the richness of the gold.² Later, he trumpeted that the gold reports "are not exaggerated in the least; the prospects are even better than represented."³ Despite such contradictory information many newspapers and the public firmly believed the Black Hills area was a "New Eldorado."

Not every newspaper, however, was convinced that the rewards were worth the risks. One northeastern Indiana paper, the *Ligonier National Banner*, jokingly called the Black Hills the area "where gold grows on bushes." The editor went on to warn readers that the region must be covered with snow almost half the year, that the nearest supplies were hundreds of miles away, and that miners would have to resist the attacks of hundreds, even thousands, of Sioux warriors. Furthermore, the area that contained gold rocks was small, benefiting few miners, and after exhausting the gold in streams, miners would have to abandon the endeavor or find machinery, which was an impossibility. All these factors combined

¹ For another valuable account of Black Hills gold hunting, see Annie D. Tallent, *The Black Hills; or, the Last Hunting Ground of the Dakotahs* . . . (1899; Sioux Falls, S. D., 1974). Tallent was said to be the first white woman to enter the Black Hills. In 1874-1875 she traveled with her husband in the Collins-Russell party, the first organized expedition to leave Sioux City, Iowa, for the gold fields following the Custer exploration. Watson Parker, *Gold in the Black Hills* (Norman, Okla., 1966), 28-37; M. Lisle Reese, *South Dakota: A Guide to the State* (New York, 1952), 277.

² Erik McKinley Eriksson, "Sioux City and the Black Hills Gold Rush, 1874-77," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, XX (July, 1922), 322-23.

³ Quoted in Robert M. Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin: George Armstrong Custer and the Western Military Frontier* (Norman, Okla., 1988), 140.

to make the Black Hills "not as desirable as those afflicted with the gold fever would persuade . . . only the persons who are called 'far sighted,' out of compliment we suppose, can pass judgement as to the exact date" when gold could be expected from the region. The paper urged "serious consideration" by any wishing to go there.⁴ The *New York Times* echoed these sentiments, stating that less gold could be found in the Black Hills than in the mountains of Virginia or Vermont, "where there is known to be a little."⁵

With efforts to minimize the presence of gold in large quantities unsuccessful in many instances, the military turned to a threat of force, clearly stating its intention to block physically the attempts of whites to enter the Sioux region. The commanding general of the army, William Tecumseh Sherman, told a reporter in St. Louis on March 11, 1875, that all miners would be kept out and that those who happened to slip through would be driven out. These instructions to his troops would be "carried out by force of arms if necessary," for, he said, the "integrity of the treaty with the Sioux will be maintained at all hazards."⁶ Sherman further explained to the reporter that the miners had no more right to enter Sioux lands than to "make a descent upon the property of you or me, and carry off what they find of value." He threatened that the miners, once driven off, would forfeit all their equipment.⁷

The Gordon expedition that challenged Sherman and the United States Army came into being on March 5, 1875. On that date the Sioux City and Black Hills Transportation Company was formed and hired John Gordon (veteran of a successful gold foray into the Hills the year before) as guide. Slated for departure from Sioux City, Iowa, on April 5, the first "train" of gold seekers was to be followed by others at regular intervals. The expeditions' route was to take them west from Sioux City, across northern Nebraska, to the Niobrara River, about seventy-five miles from its mouth. There they would turn northwest to the yet-to-be-established town of Gordon City, in present-day Sheridan County, Nebraska, about fifty miles southeast of the Black Hills. Heavy rains delayed the departure of the Gordon column until April 13, but on that day about 150 men, 47 wagons, and between 70 and 80 teams headed west under John Gordon.⁸

⁴ Ligonier, Indiana, *National Banner*, September 10, 1874.

⁵ *New York Times*, April 19, 1875.

⁶ *Ibid.*, March 13, 1875.

⁷ Grant K. Anderson, "The Black Hills Exclusion Policy: Judicial Challenges," *Nebraska History*, LVIII (Spring, 1977), 3-4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2-4. Sioux City was touted as "the great natural route to the Northwest" and the nearest base of supplies to the gold fields, with good country existing between the town and the Black Hills. Eriksson, "Sioux City and the Black Hills Gold Rush," 324. Sources disagree as to the starting date of the Gordon party. One source states that they were ferried across the Missouri River on April 25 and got under way the following day. The April 13 date is more probably correct. Eriksson, "Sioux City and the Black Hills Gold Rush," 333.

Traveling with the party was Colonel Samuel M. Zent, a likely candidate for an adventurous foray into the untamed Black Hills. A native of Stark County, Ohio, he was born in December, 1834. The Zent family then moved to Richland County, Ohio, probably by the early 1840s. At an undetermined early age Zent went to Mansfield, Ohio, to learn the trade of tinsmith. Sources differ regarding his moves in the next few years. He may have stayed in Ohio when his parents migrated to Indiana about 1852, then joined them shortly afterward at their newly established farm near Roanoke, Huntington County, Indiana. It is more likely that Zent traveled with his family and was present at the founding of the Indiana homestead. He then married Sarah A. Price in 1858 and worked for the Pittsburgh, Fort Wayne and Chicago Railroad until the Civil War began.⁹ In 1861 he enlisted in the 13th Indiana Volunteer Infantry Regiment as a private but rose to the rank of lieutenant colonel by 1865, participating in a number of battles, skirmishes, and marches from West Virginia to Florida.¹⁰ Following the war, Zent returned to Roanoke and operated a hardware and tinware business. Seized once again with a desire to roam, he moved his family to Fort Wayne in 1871, stayed a year and a half, then went to Ligonier, Noble County, Indiana.¹¹ In 1875 the Black Hills gold fields beckoned him to depart that city as well. Despite Zent's short residency in Ligonier, the local *National Banner* regretfully noted "the genial Colonel's departure" but added that "since he has so willed, we can only hope that his fondest expectations may be amply realized."¹² At what point Zent joined his fellow miners is difficult to determine, but it seems reasonable to believe that he either left Sioux City with Gordon's men or joined them soon after the beginning of their journey.

The United States Army was as interested in the Gordon party as was Colonel Zent, albeit for far different reasons. The expedition was to provide an early test of the Black Hills exclusion policy. On March 17, just a few weeks before Gordon and the miners left Sioux City, Sherman codified his verbal threats with the issuance of General Order Number 2, which officially banned gold-hunting expeditions from the Black Hills. The military was further officially authorized to destroy wagon trains and outfits that they captured

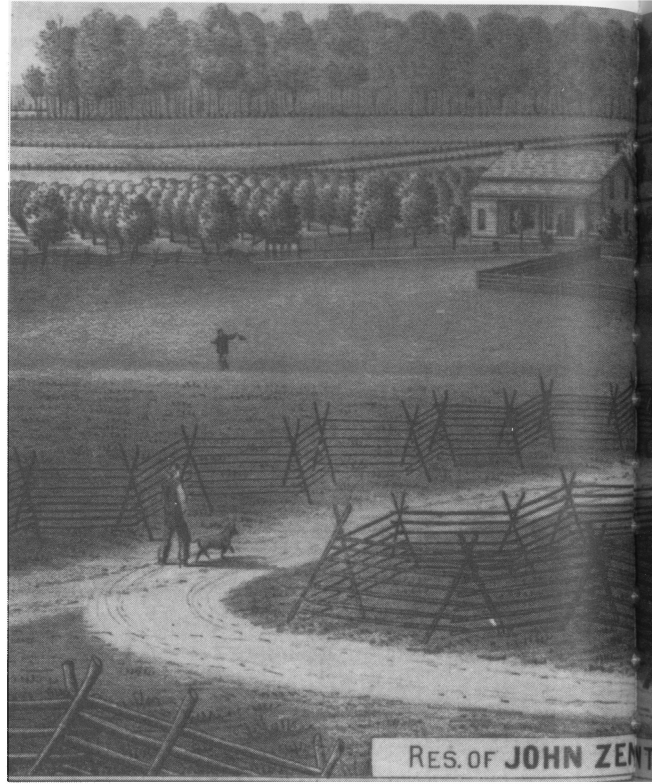
⁹ Huntington, Indiana, *Herald*, March 19, 1897; Huntington, Indiana, *Daily Democrat*, March 17, 1897; Zent grave marker, Glenwood I.O.O.F. Cemetery, Roanoke, Indiana; F. A. Battey & Co., pubs., *Counties of La Grange and Noble, Indiana* (Chicago, 1882), 353-54; Zent Family File, Huntington Public Library, Huntington, Indiana; Robert J. Zent, interview with author, Roanoke, Indiana, March 26, 1994.

¹⁰ [William H. H. Terrell], *Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Indiana* (8 vols., Indianapolis, 1866-1869), II, 99-111. Technically, President Abraham Lincoln appointed Zent a brevet colonel of volunteers in March, 1865, but he resigned the following month.

¹¹ *Counties of La Grange and Noble*, 353-54.

¹² *Ligonier National Banner*, April 8, 1875.

THE JOHN ZENT FAMILY FARM WHERE
SAMUEL M. ZENT LIVED IN THE 1850S

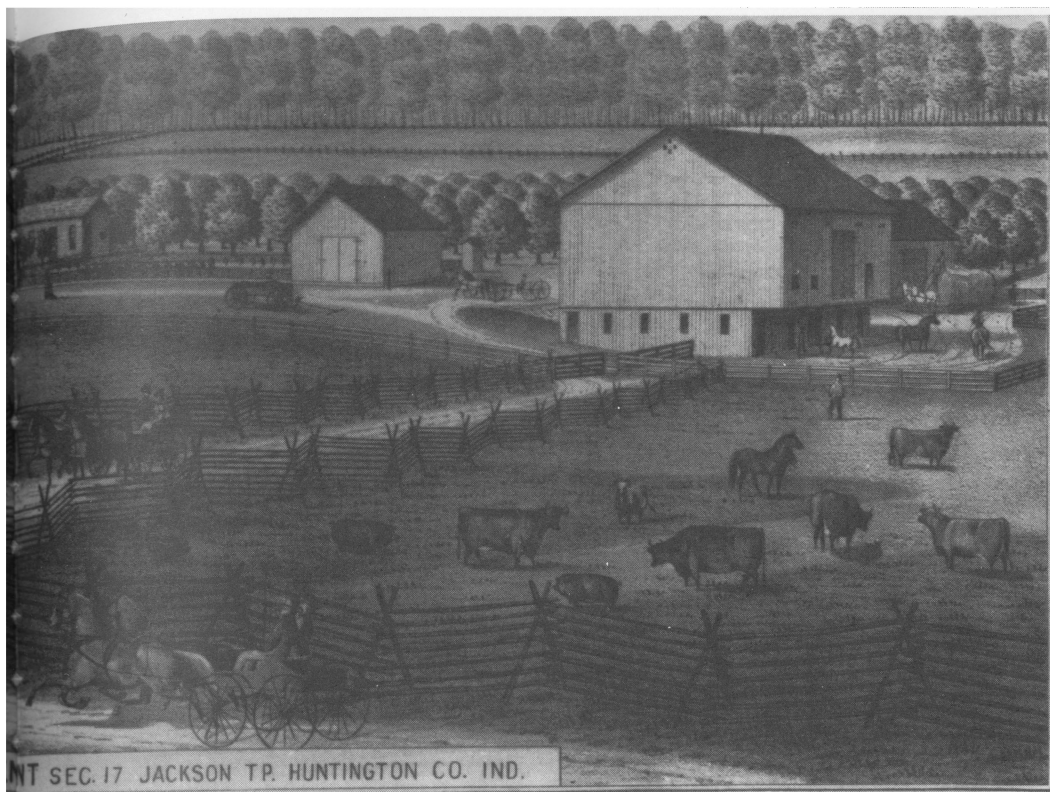


and to arrest and confine the miners' leaders at military posts.¹³ As if to reiterate the government's threat, a New York *Times* article warned, "Indian runners will be constantly employed, who will give prompt notice of the approach of parties."¹⁴ Despite the questionable nature of the latter claim, the *Times* did accurately predict the outcome of the Black Hills gold rush. The paper noted that with the enormous interest in gold hunting people would not wait for further exploration of the region. With the arrival of spring, the newspaper predicted, parties would "push ahead at any cost and in the face of any peril . . . The Government will do all it can to keep back the parties, but will not, unfortunately, be able to stop all." The result would be Indian attacks and "numerous conflicts," with gold seekers as the victims.¹⁵ Not every newspaper, however, was as convinced of the army's sincerity as was the *Times*. The Sioux City, Iowa, *Journal* noted that if Custer and his men had kept out of the

¹³ Anderson, "The Black Hills Exclusion Policy," 3-4.

¹⁴ New York *Times*, March 13, 1875.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, April 19, 1875.



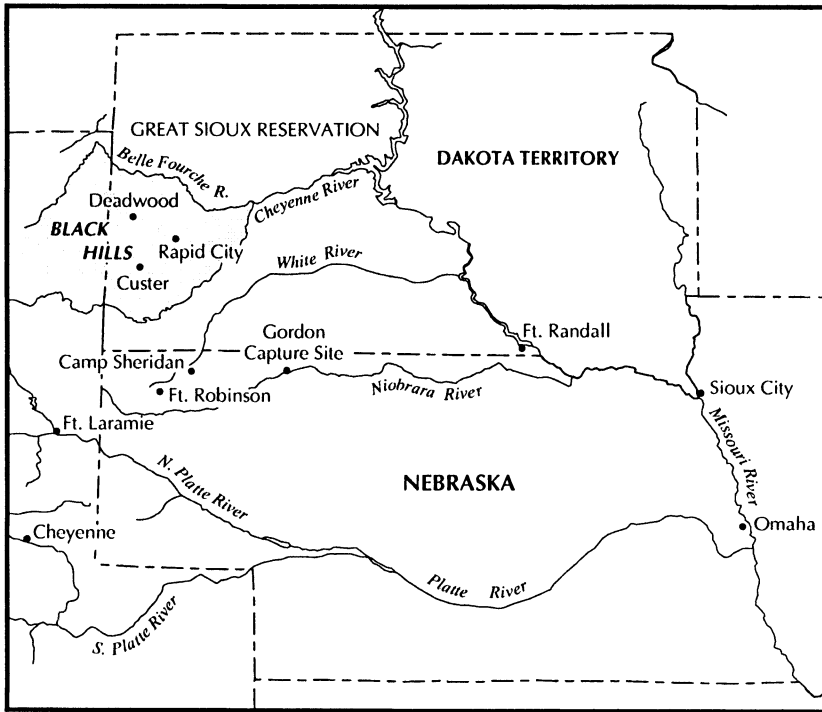
Courtesy Robert J. Zent, Roanoke, Indiana.

Black Hills, "there would have been no other movement, at present at least, in that direction." The editors believed that if Custer's expedition was not intended as "an opening wedge to that country, then it was an inexcusably wicked thing" on the part of the government, and the paper doubted the military's desire to enforce the treaty.¹⁶

A chance for the army to carry out its threats and perform its duty arose even before the Gordon party headed west. On April 6 one of Gordon's rivals led a group of gold hunters out of Sioux City for the Black Hills, and the army immediately went into action. Captain Fergus Walker¹⁷ of the First United States Infantry Regi-

¹⁶ Quoted in Eriksson, "Sioux City and the Black Hills Gold Rush," 325.

¹⁷ Fergus Walker (?-1882) was born in Ireland but served with a New York regiment and the United States Veteran Reserve Corps during the Civil War. He rose to the rank of captain before being mustered out in 1866. In 1867 Walker received a brevet major's promotion for meritorious service at Chancellorsville. After his service in the Civil War, he joined the regular army and in 1869 was transferred to the First United States Infantry Regiment, the unit in which he served until his death. U. S. War Department, *Official Army Register for January, 1880* (Washington, D.C., January 1, 1880), 171; and U.S. War Department, *Official Army Register for January, 1883* (Washington, D.C., January 1, 1883), 357.



The Black Hills and Vicinity during the 1870s Gold Rush.

Map prepared by Graphic Services, Indiana University, Bloomington, based on information supplied by Jeffrey L. Patrick.

ment led a column from Fort Randall,¹⁸ Dakota Territory, “to watch them & prevent any infraction of the Indian treaties.” Exactly one month later Walker succeeded in capturing the party “& sent them under a strong guard . . . to Ft. Randall.” Flushed with success, his next target was the Gordon Expedition despite the fact that the absence of the soldiers he sent back to Fort Randall with his gold-hunting captives had “greatly weakened” his force. Walker’s scouts told him that Gordon was already to his south with 150 persons “well armed” and with a train of twenty-eight wagons “proceeding in the direction of the Black Hills, with the intention of entering them.” Walker pursued with his small command of thirty men and overtook the Gordon column near Reunion Creek, Nebraska.¹⁹

¹⁸ Fort Randall was established in 1856 about sixty miles west of the present-day city of Yankton in modern Gregory County, South Dakota, near the Missouri River and the Nebraska state line. It was rebuilt in 1870–1872 slightly downstream from the original site. The fort was built to keep peace among the Sioux and other warlike tribes and to protect white settlement. It was abandoned in 1892. Robert W. Frazer, *Forts of the West* . . . (Norman, Okla., 1965), 136–37.

¹⁹ Captain Fergus Walker to Commanding Officer, Camp Sheridan, Nebraska, May 15, 1875, Letters Received, Records of the Adjutant General’s Office, 17802–1917, Record Group 94 (National Archives, Washington, D.C.).

At this point Colonel Zent began a narrative of his journey and subsequent confrontation with the army in a letter home to the *Ligonier National Banner*, dated May 17, 1875:

THE BLACK HILLS.

CAPTURE OF GORDON'S EXPEDITION.

Interesting Letter from Col. Zent.

CAMP ON NIOBRARA RIVER, NEAR THE MOUTH OF ANTELOPE CREEK, NEB., May 17th, 1875.

To Mr. James Hoxworth, Ligonier, Ind.:

ESTEEMED FRIEND:—* *When I left Ligonier I supposed that long ere this I should be delving in the gold mines among the Black Hills, but as yet I have not even been permitted to view the promised land. Our trip thus far has been a long and tedious one, full of fun and adventure, often wishing that you could be with us. Our course has been rather deviating in order to avoid the military, but about two weeks since we learned by capturing a soldier scout that we were being closely watched; but that the military did not intend to interfere with us until we should cross over into Dakota Territory. Consequently we felt entirely secure from military interference as we moved up on the south side of the Nebraska, enjoying the beautiful scenery that lies along this river, surpassing anything I had ever before seen. Our feeling of security was, however, of short duration. On last Wednesday morning, just as we were getting ready to move, a body of mounted soldiers commanded by Major Walker, from Fort Randall, pounced upon us and before we knew what they were about had placed a line of guards around our camp. Walker then informed us that we would be taken to Fort Randall, distant about 180 miles. Against this outrage we protested, but to no avail. Each member of our party appeared to be trying to argue his own case and considerable confusion prevailed. Some one spoke of resisting the outrage, when Major Walker turned to one of his subordinates and in a pompous manner ordered him to get his men ready for action. Our "Dutch was up," but rather than fight the guardians of our liberties—God save the mark!—we concluded that it was best to submit. We were formed into line and numbered, then we were inrenformed [*sic*] that we would have to surrender our arms. Against this we again protested. But to no purpose. Several of the boys finally gave up their arms. For my part, I would not so much as give up a cartridge. After Major Walker had got all the arms he could from the boys we were started back for Fort Randall. As yet our captors had failed to learn who was John Gordon, although no attempt at concealment was made on his part, and so anxious were they to get hold of him that they offered \$50 to any one who would point out John Gordon. But the love the boys

entertain for their leader was too strong and the offer was not accepted. During the following night Gordon, with three faithful followers, succeeded in passing through the soldiers' pickets. The next day was spent in marching over the same road where we had marched only a few days before; then full of life and hope, now as woe-begone and chop-fallen a set of fellows as it has ever been my lot to be associated with. During the succeeding night I resolved to cut loose and join Gordon, but in attempting to do so I brought up against a picket post and was sent back to camp in anything but a pleasant mood I assure you.²⁰ Friday morning it was found that the bars on the wagon wheels had been stolen during the previous night, consequently we could not move.²¹ This gave the boys an opportunity to discuss the legality of troops to arrest parties in Nebraska going to the Black Hills in Dakota. So in the afternoon we informed the Major that we would go no farther, and that if he had any authority for taking us he could have an opportunity of exercising it. This Walker did not wish to do, and finally gave his consent to our departure, provided we would not invade the Hills at present, or until after the Indian title thereto shall have expired. But as I formed no part or party in this compromise, I intend to exercise my own pleasure about staying out of the Hills.²²

No doubt you will hear of the capture of Gordon's party, as Major Walker sent a carrier to Fort Randall as soon as he had us arrested. There were a few independent wagons moving with Gordon's party who were nearly out of provisions. These concluded to go with Walker. Gordon's party is stronger to-day than ever before, notwithstanding the fact that about forty of the boys are without arms, Major Walker refusing to give them up. When "respectfully" requested to return our arms, Walker said those guns were eighty miles from us, on the way to Fort Randall. The boys feel this indignity more than all the rest, as these arms were their own private property and invaluable as a means of defense in this Indian country. The boys intend to appeal to the Governor of Nebraska for redress in this matter, for it is certain that if Major Walker had no right to take us by force to Fort Randall, he had no right to take our arms.

On Friday afternoon we took our leave of Major Walker and again started westward, traveling at the rate of about thirty miles

²⁰ According to Captain Walker, the party claimed that their stock was too tired to cross the Niobrara River, so they stopped for the night. Zent was apparently one of a "large number" who attempted to escape. Walker to Commanding Officer, May 15, 1875, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, Record Group 94 (National Archives).

²¹ Captain Walker reported that the miners removed the greater part of the wagon bars during the night. *Ibid.*

²² Walker cited the small number of men under his command and his wish to avoid bloodshed as reasons for his release of the Gordon party. He confirmed Zent's information that he received a written pledge from the miners that they would stay out of the Black Hills until all restrictions were removed. *Ibid.*

per day. Yesterday we found John Gordon and his followers, and three rousing cheers broke the morning stillness in honor of the event. We have gone into camp on the Niobrara river, on about the same meridian as Sidney on the Union Pacific railroad, where the party will remain to see what action the Governor will take in regard to the abrogation of this Indian treaty.

The boys are all in good health and in good spirits. We have not found game as plenty as we had anticipated, however we have had all the venison that we could dispose of. Gordon, while out on a scout, one week ago, saw forty elk in one flock; so we may look for plenty of fun ahead. The only stream in which we found fish worth catching was the Elk Horn.

I tell you, James, I have seen enough of Northern Nebraska and could not be induced to take a home here as a gift. When I get into the Hills I will write you again. Yours in haste,

S. M. ZENT.²³

Walker had won a tenuous victory in the first round of the Gordon party's fight to go to the Black Hills. Nonetheless, situated nearly on the western border of Nebraska and far from his base at Fort Randall and immediate instructions, he was in a precarious position. In fact, he had passed from his home Department of Dakota into the Department of the Platte.²⁴ On the night of May 15, believing that the commander of nearby Camp Sheridan would already have received "later and more definite instructions," Walker sent his report to Camp Sheridan and asked for cooperation and communications. According to his prior instructions, wrote Walker, his superiors in Washington believed that it was not necessary for a mining party physically to enter the Black Hills in order to be turned back by the army, "as the simple fact of organizing an expedition, if well authenticated, is as much a violation of the law as if they had actually invaded the territory . . ." In the meantime, Gordon moved his party to a new campsite authorized by Walker, one located near the confluence of Antelope Creek and the Niobrara River.²⁵ Thus situated, Gordon could undoubtedly ready his men for another strike at the Hills despite his pledge to Walker not to do so. For his part, Walker and his troops kept near the party until he received definite orders as to his future course. When and if reinforced, Walker could strike the miners again, this time with the

²³ Ligonier *National Banner*, June 3, 1875.

²⁴ The Military Division of the Missouri encompassed primarily four departments, including the Department of Dakota (Montana, the Dakotas, and Minnesota) and the Department of the Platte (Nebraska, Iowa, Wyoming, Utah, and part of Idaho). Paul Andrew Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and His Army* (Lincoln, Nebr., 1985), 116-21.

²⁵ Walker to Commanding Officer, May 15, 1875, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, Record Group 94 (National Archives).

intention of permanently crippling their ability to make future treks to Sioux territory.

Walker's report, carried by "John," a Yankton Sioux scout in the service of the government, reached the hand of Captain Anson Mills at Camp Sheridan, Nebraska, on the morning of May 17.²⁶ Mills noted that Walker was "greatly embarrassed by a weak force and a determination on the part of the miners to harass him in every way and perhaps resist even to the shedding of blood which they might readily do with success" because of Walker's inferior numbers (30 versus 150). Accordingly, Mills left early the next morning with a mixed force of cavalry and infantry numbering over 60 men, along with a Gatling gun, to assist Walker. Their march was not easy—along the way the troops experienced "a remarkable and severe rain and hail storm" from a small cloud which seemed to hover over the men while "the sun was shining in almost every direction" To make matters worse, in the early part of the storm lightning bolts struck the earth near the soldiers, "throwing the dirt and dust to great heights, resembling artillery scenes during the [Civil] War" Mills noted this "remarkable phenomenon," something he had never before witnessed or heard of, in his report. After making slow progress in the soft ground, Mills camped for the night. The following day the detachment pushed rapidly ahead; and after a halt was called to establish camp, Mills sent a party of two men forward to try to find Walker and propose to him that the miners be handled "without gloves" by executing General Order Number 2. One of Mills's messengers, dressed in civilian clothes, stole into camp and found the captain without raising the suspicions of the miners. The soldier returned early the next morning with Walker's favorable reply.²⁷

Mills quickly prepared for action. He put his men in the saddle and led them off, taking the Gatling gun but leaving behind his ambulances and wagons. At 5:45 a.m., the troop charged into the Gordon camp, taking care to "prevent the possibility of escape of the leaders, the secreting of the property, annoyance by stampede and possible show of resistance by intrenchment" Mills recorded that Gordon's men were as surprised "as tho' we had dropped from

²⁶ Anson Mills (1834–1924), a native of Indiana, resigned after two years as a cadet at West Point. He served throughout the Civil War and was made a brevet lieutenant colonel in 1864. He joined the 3rd United States Cavalry Regiment in 1870 and fought in a number of campaigns in the Indian wars in the 1870s and 1880s. Major William H. Powell and Edward Shippen, *Officers of the Army and Navy (Regular) who served in the Civil War* (Philadelphia, 1892), 277. Mills continued to serve in the army until he retired in June, 1897, with the rank of brigadier general. He won great fame and amassed a fortune by developing the Mills web cartridge belt for the American military. U. S. War Department, *Official Army Register for 1898* (Washington, D.C., December 1, 1897), 179.

²⁷ Captain Anson Mills to General George D. Ruggles, Camp Sheridan, Nebraska, May 23, 1875, Letters Received, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1780s–1917, Record Group 94 (National Archives).

the sky." After a short conference with Walker, he decided that the Gordon party's conduct had made them "subjects for the most rigid execution of G.O. 2."²⁸ Mills was pleased to note that Walker had encircled the miners with his pickets even before the arrival of the reinforcements from Camp Sheridan and to discover that the party had been "greatly reduced" because six wagons had left for Sioux City the day before with "many of the men abandoning the party." Mills convened a board of officers to witness what occurred next, then sent for J. W. Brockett, who "represented himself as the leader" of the miners. Mills suspected that Gordon himself was among them but had not yet been discovered. Brockett was ordered to parade his men but soon returned and stated that he was only director of the Sioux City and Black Hills Transportation Company; John Gordon was the leader of the expedition. Brockett then brought Gordon to Mills at the captain's request.

A few days later Colonel Zent reported on the ordeal to his friends in Ligonier.

GORDON'S BLACK HILLS EXPEDITION.

ITS CAPTURE BY THE TYRANT WALKER.

Interesting Narrative by Colonel S. M. Zent, a Member of that Ill-Fated Expedition.

LIGONIER, IND., June 21, 1875.

To the Editor of The National Banner:

DEAR SIR:—In compliance with your request, I have prepared a written statement of the facts in connection with the burning of the train of the Gordon Black Hills expedition, on the 21st of last month, while encamped on the south side of the Nebraska river, in Nebraska, by U.S. troops from Forts Randall and Laramie, under command of Major Walker and Captains Mills and Fisdale.²⁹

In my letter of the 17th ult., published in your paper, I made mention of our having been arrested by U.S. troops and marched about fifty miles back toward Fort Randal [*sic*], when seventy-two

²⁸ *Ibid.* In reporting this incident in his 1918 autobiography, Mills added details that he had left out of his official report. He noted, for example, that the miners were hopelessly encamped "in a river bend, between precipitous bluffs, with only a few hundred yards' space for entrance or exit." Mills also claimed that a shot was fired by one of the miners, to which he told them they "might have fired the first shot, but we would have the last . . ." Anson Mills, *My Story*, ed. C. H. Claudy (Washington, D.C., 1918), 156-57.

²⁹ Here Zent probably refers to William N. Tisdall, a Pennsylvania native who joined the United States Regulars as a second lieutenant in 1861 and was promoted to captain in 1869. He was assigned to the First Infantry Regiment in 1871 and retired in 1895. U. S. War Department, *Official Army Register for January, 1878* (Washington, D.C., January 1, 1878), 97; U.S. War Department, *Official Army Register for 1898*, p. 244.

members of the expedition refused to go any further, concluding that United States troops had no right to interfere with us as long as we were within the State of Nebraska. So, after the major portion of the said seventy-two had signed a parole—in compliance with Walker's request—not to enter the Sioux reservation until thrown open by the Government, we again took up our march westward over the same road we had already twice traveled.

Our parole gave us permission to encamp within a radius of twenty miles from the mouth of Antelope creek. So, finding a suitable spot for our camp on the Niobrara river, thirteen miles this side of Antelope creek, we pitched our tents on Monday evening, May 17. On the following Wednesday evening Major Walker with his command hove in sight and encamped on an eminence, overlooking our camp, distant about half a mile. This elicited but little comment from the boys, as Major Walker had informed us that he should keep watch over us and "see that the Indians did not gobble us up."

Feeling perfectly secure, little did we dream of the fearful storm that was gathering in the heart of this dastardly coward and villain, Walker, and that would so soon sweep down upon us like a besom of destruction. This lying sneak, as I afterwards learned, sent an Indian runner to Fort Laramie for reinforcements, stating that we were three hundred strong; that we had two Gatlin [*sic*] guns; were fortifying ourselves and defying the Government.

It was Friday morning, May 21st. The sun had just made his appearance above the horizon. Not more than half the boys were up, when Walker with his command, supported by a cavalry force and a Gatlin gun from Ft. Laramie, made a dash upon our camp, and in less time than I can write it threw a guard around us. Walker, with a body of soldiers, then passed through our quarters and ordered us into line, remarking that he was "now running this thing," and to intimidate us the more, pointed to the Gatlin gun, which had been loaded and placed in a commanding position near our camp. After some little delay, the boys quietly marched out about twenty rods from our quarters to a place indicated by our captors.

It was at this stage of the game that I thought to take refuge behind my rights as a citizen of the United States, while within the free State of Nebraska, and refused to move. But after receiving a rather free application of boot leather from the pedal extremity of an overgrown orderly sergeant, we concluded the refuge a little too thin and quietly succumbed. A heavy guard was placed around us, and for six long hours we were compelled to stand and witness the wanton

DESTRUCTION OF OUR PROPERTY.

At first these vandals, with their officers at their head, proceeded to help themselves to our breakfast, which had been left

untouched by us. Having glutted their greed, ransacked our quarters, broken open valises and stolen every valuable article of clothing that they could find, the general destruction of property was commenced. A fire was built in a ravine close by, into which wagon after wagon, with their contents, were rolled. After they had destroyed our provisions and ammunition [*sic*], they broke and burned our rifles and revolvers. Many of the rifles were of the latest improved breech-loaders.³⁰

During all this time scarcely a murmur was heard among the boys, as they stood with clinched fists and knitted brows watching the destruction of their property by this Sheridan banditti.³¹

For fear of becoming tedious, I will pass our long and tiresome march to Fort Randal, a distance of about two hundred and fifty miles. When we arrived at the Fort (June 1st) Walker wished to turn us over to the commander of the post, but that officer positively refused to have anything to do with us, "for," said he, "this arrest has been made without my sanction."

On the morning of the 3d inst. we were placed across the Missouri river and told to "skip!" which in Hoosier parlance means to "skin out."

Many of the members of this unfortunate expedition were of the poorer class, who, with the hope of bettering their condition, had invested their last dollar in procuring the necessary outfit. Several of these started out on foot for Yankton, distant about eighty miles. Six of us constructed a thing—scarcely deserving the name of boat—in which we started for Sioux City, distant about two hundred and fifty miles, following the meanderings of the Missouri. The river was high and the current rapid. The first night we encamped just below the mouth of the Niobrara river, having made a run of about sixty miles.

Early next morning found us afloat and feeling first-rate. During the previous day we had strictly observed the old Franklin

³⁰ Mills proudly noted that despite this "most disagreeable and thankless duty," his men behaved with "alacrity and zeal" and displayed "perfect discipline," for even with so much "valuable and desirable property" destroyed, the soldiers appropriated nothing for themselves. He paid tribute to Walker for "the discretion and forbearance" he exercised while being harassed by "such unkind conduct" in a foreign military department. Mills to Ruggles, May 23, 1875, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, Record Group 94 (National Archives).

³¹ Mills, of course, failed to note many of these details in his official report. He did take a list of names of the party and recorded a total of seventy-six miners, one woman, and one boy (J. W. Brockett's family) in the group. In addition, he listed twelve wagons, twenty-eight stand of arms, eighteen revolvers, and a large quantity of ammunition and mining implements. He estimated the value of the property destroyed at two to three thousand dollars. Mills remembered the operation's being completed by 10:00 a.m., far less time than the six hours Zent recalled. Mills to Ruggles, May 23, 1875, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, Record Group 94 (National Archives). One source reported that much of Brockett's merchandise was not destroyed, as Mrs. Brockett sat upon the goods, and the soldiers were too gallant to remove her. William S. Greever, *The Bonanza West: The Story of Western Mining Rushes, 1848-1900* (Norman, Okla., 1963), 293.

maxim: "Little boats should keep near shore." But this morning, being Captain of the "Black Hills Clipper," I thought it best to cross to the opposite side of the river. Unfortunately, when near the middle of the stream, we came in contact with one of those fearful eddies so numerous in the Missouri, and our "barque went down amid the howling of" as frightened a set of fellows as you ever witnessed. Things looked mighty blue for a while, and could we have found a purchaser just then, we would have sold out pretty cheaply. Fortunately, we succeeded in keeping our heads above water until we drifted to a sand-bar, some distance down stream. The boys lost about everything, except what they had on their backs. I was more fortunate, having saved my valise. We succeeded in securing our craft, but four of the party would rather walk to Yankton than take any more chances in the "Clipper." So, Samuel Wilson, from Mississippi, and myself boarded her once more and were soon gliding down the turbid waters of the Missouri. We arrived at Sioux City on the following Tuesday, perfectly disgusted with everything pertaining to the Black Hills.

Yours, S. M. ZENT.

Zent returned home in June, 1875, his desire for gold temporarily stifled as a result of his encounter with the military.³² The whole matter of the capture of the Gordon party was not so easily settled for all of its members, however. Gordon himself was separated from the others at the capture site, taken by Mills to Camp Sheridan, and kept in confinement by the government, officially charged with violating General Order No. 2. In late August Gordon appeared in court in Omaha, and all charges against him were dismissed.³³ Despite the failure of the Gordon Expedition, Sioux City newspapers continued to encourage violations of the treaty and General Order No. 2. Even before Gordon's capture the *Sioux City Times* had encouraged private expeditions or parties to make a run for the Black Hills. Realistically, the newspaper pointed out, an army equal to that raised in the Civil War would be necessary to close off all lands surrounding the gold region.³⁴ To compound the government's problems, a second geological expedition, led by Walter Jenney and finished by October, 1875, confirmed that gold could be found in the area in paying quantities.³⁵

³² Ligonier *National Banner*, June 24, 1875.

³³ Anderson, "The Black Hills Exclusion Policy," 11-21.

³⁴ Eriksson, "Sioux City and the Black Hills Gold Rush," 335. General George Crook was able to score a brief triumph when he convinced many miners to withdraw from the region at a meeting on August 10 at the future site of Custer, South Dakota. This meeting, however, did not include *all* miners in the Black Hills, and those who voluntarily left only stayed out *temporarily*. Greever, *The Bonanza West*, 293.

³⁵ Eriksson, "Sioux City and the Black Hills Gold Rush," 337.

Faced with the impossibility of barring the miners, the government attempted a legal settlement with the Indians regarding the Black Hills. A frustrated government commission met with the Sioux in an attempt to buy the region, but by late September, 1875, the conference ended as the Indians could not agree on whether to sell or retain their sacred ground. Consequently, in a White House meeting of high military and civilian leaders in November, it was agreed that the army would no longer enforce General Order No. 2 and that the Black Hills would be seized. Bands of roaming, non-reservation Sioux, not tied to government agencies and rations, had frustrated the purchasing negotiations and were supposedly raiding outside the Great Sioux Reservation. These Indians would be forced onto the reservation, an action that would allow for the uninhibited settlement of the Black Hills by whites and bring the troublesome Sioux under tighter government control. If the increased ties to the federal government failed to influence the Sioux to sell the region, the army would launch a campaign against them and so have an excuse for taking the Black Hills.³⁶ The Indians had until January 31, 1876, to report to their agencies. Many of them ignored the deadline, and the army sent three converging columns against the Indians in southeastern Montana the following summer. That campaign resulted in the annihilation of part of the Seventh United States Cavalry Regiment and the death of its commander, Colonel Custer, on June 25, 1876. Ultimately, however, the military triumphed in its mission.³⁷

Undeterred by the growing potential for armed conflict in the region in 1876, Zent determined to try again for the Black Hills. In early March his hometown newspaper wrote:

We regret to learn that our esteemed and worthy townsman, Col. S. M. Zent, has determined to again seek his fortune in the Black Hills. The favorable reports from that region have induced the gallant Colonel to try his luck for a second time. We can only express the hope that his anticipations may be realized to a more satisfactory extent than heretofore, and that he may return to our midst with ample supplies of the precious metal. He will leave next week.³⁸

Zent was certainly not alone in wanting to travel to the Black Hills in the spring of America's centennial year. In the words of one writer, "Representatives of every trade and profession under the sun came rushing along, figuratively, tumbling over each other in their headlong haste to be the first to reach the New Eldorado"

³⁶ Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and His Army*, 294-99; Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin*, 145-47.

³⁷ Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin*, 155-56. For an excellent account of military operations during this period, see Robert M. Utley, *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian, 1866-1891* (New York, 1973). For a Native American perspective see Utley's *The Lance and the Shield: The Life and Times of Sitting Bull* (New York, 1993).

³⁸ *Ligonier National Banner*, March 2, 1876.

Even Gordon led yet another party from Sioux City, part of a resurrected Sioux City and Black Hills Transportation Company venture. Naturally, Sioux City newspapers continued to urge miners to journey there "in large bodies and well armed," *i.e.*, in company-sponsored expeditions.³⁹

The Hoosier Zent decided on a different route and mode of transportation for his second outing to the Hills. This time it was not by wagon train but by the far safer railroad and not from Sioux City but from Cheyenne, Wyoming Territory. Zent wrote of the first leg of his journey in March, 1876, to the *National Banner*:

THE BLACK HILLS.

INTERESTING LETTER FROM COL. ZENT.

CHEYENNE, March 12, 1876.

EDITOR BANNER:—Before leaving Ligonier, quite a number of my acquaintances requested me to write to them. Much as I would like to oblige them, it will be almost impossible for me to do so, except through the columns of your valuable paper, and with your permission I will endeavor to keep your readers informed as to the facts in connection with the Black Hills.

The cheapest and most practical route to the Black Hills of Dakota [*sic*] is undoubtedly by the way of Cheyenne. The Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific Railroad is now selling special rate tickets through from Chicago to Cheyenne for \$25.50—distance about eleven hundred miles—requiring seventy-two hours to make the trip on these special rate tickets, which allows you to ride in first-class cars as far as Omaha, and from thence to Cheyenne in immigrant cars.

I left Ligonier on the morning of March 6th, in company with "Oregon" Smith. At Chicago we were joined by a party of six Black Hillers. We reached Omaha at 10 p.m. March 7th. Here I had the pleasure of meeting my old friend "Dick" Kenwill, with whom I had messed in the Gordon outfit last spring. We remained in Omaha until 4 p.m. next day, when we started on the immigrant train, with about fifty Black Hillers, for Cheyenne. The weather was quite pleasant and we all enjoyed the trip. As we approached the North Platte country, deer appeared to be plenty, seeing as high as twenty-three in one drove. About ten miles from Cheyenne we passed through the midst of a prairie dog town, embracing several hundred acres within its limits. The train slackened speed as we approached the town, and as we entered it a general fusilade was opened by the boys upon the peaceable inhabitants, who had turned out in force and were manifesting their appreciation of the sport by kicking up

³⁹ Eriksson, "Sioux City and the Black Hills Gold Rush," 340-42.

their heels and running from hole to hole. Although a large number of shots were fired, I do not think that one citizen of this commonwealth received a scratch. A German who was sitting next to me declared that he had knocked one over, and that the little thing was "youst kickum its last;" but upon looking I found that the little fellow was all right and barking most lustily, accompanying each bark with a vigorous jerk of the tail, which my German friend had mistaken for a hind leg.

We found Cheyenne pleasantly located in an open plain, containing a population of about 6,000, and enjoying a splendid trade at present on account of the Black Hills immigration. As a place for outfitting it is far ahead of Sioux City or Yankton; even superior to Chicago in many respects.⁴⁰

"Oregon" Smith, Dick Kenwill and myself have formed a mess, and intend to stick together through thick and thin. We bought our outfit yesterday, and were surprised to find prices so low. Good smoked ham sells at 16 cents per pound; bacon, 14½ cents; flour, \$5.00 to \$8.50 per hundred; sugar, 11 to 13 cents; butter, 20 cents, and everything else at about the same rates. To those who contemplate going to the Hills I would say, buy your outfit in Cheyenne. The party of six from Chicago who came with us, bought their outfits in Chicago at a very little less than they could have bought them here, and had to pay 2½ cents per pound for transportation from there to this city. One can get good board and lodging here for \$8.00 per week. I find the Key City a very good house to stop at.

Black Hillers are arriving here at the rate of about fifty per day. They generally spend about one day in Cheyenne outfitting, and then renew their journey in wagons for Custer City, in the Black Hills, paying for transportation at the rate of 7 cents per 100 pounds. Several parties started to-day, one consisting of six Chinamen. We start to-morrow morning. I will write again as soon as we arrive in the Hills. Yours respectfully,

S. M. ZENT.⁴¹

Zent and his companions then successfully completed the next step of their trek. Arriving at Custer City, Dakota Territory, they found a rapidly growing community and at least one former Ligonier resident, albeit a recent arrival of a few weeks before. John C. Miller wrote his own letter to the *National Banner* in February, 1876, describing Custer as "a nice little city; the town plat is one mile square. There are about three hundred buildings here at pre-

⁴⁰ Zent overestimated the size of Cheyenne. According to the 1870 census, the city had a population of only 1,450, while in 1880 the population had increased to 3,456. Francis A. Walker, *The Statistics of the Population of the United States* (Washington, D.C., 1872), 295; Charles W. Seaton, *Statistics of the Population of the United States at the Tenth Census* (Washington, D.C., 1883), 375.

⁴¹ Ligonier *National Banner*, March 23, 1876.

sent. I can only compare it to the rebuilding of the city of Chicago." Miller noted that each man was entitled to "a lot 50x150 for the small sum of 50 cents, the recorder's fee." He pointed out proudly that the first city elections were held February 14, for a city justice, marshal, and recorder, with three hundred votes cast. He continued to promote the area in his letter, commenting on the climate and mining and contradicting many of the earlier unfavorable comments made by the *National Banner* regarding the Black Hills:

The climate is fine; we go about in our shirt sleeves most of the time. There is some fine farming country here; the water is good. The mines are very rich in quartz; the placer mines are also very rich. I think this is a good country for a poor man. But few mines have been developed as yet; nearly all of them, however, are known to be very rich. There is not much money in the Hills yet, but men are coming in daily with some. Lots are selling at from \$25 to \$1,000. I have located a lot and am building a house on it. We have one saw-mill in operation and two more will soon be ready. Lumber is worth from \$30 to \$50 per thousand . . . we also have some wild fruits, such as plums, gooseberries, currants and raspberries.⁴²

Zent described his journey to Custer and his own impressions of the city in a letter to the *National Banner*, confirming some of Miller's observations while disagreeing with a few details:

THE BLACK HILLS.

Letter from Colonel Zent.

CUSTER CITY, D.T., April 5, '76.

ED. BANNER:—Well, I have at last succeeded in reaching the Black Hills, and consequently feel as happy as a "big sunflower." We left Cheyenne March 16th, and after a tedious journey of twenty days reached Custer City. Our trip here was a very unpleasant one on account of the cold and disagreeable weather and the frequent snow storms that we encountered while crossing the Laramie plains. We frequently had to shovel our way through snow drifts several feet deep. We also learned by sad experience that this route, instead of being only 200 miles, is all of 300, and a very rough one at that. The country is principally a barren waste, except along the water courses. Between Cheyenne and Fort Laramie these valleys are nearly all taken up by ranchmen. Between Fort Laramie and Custer City, a distance of 200 miles, there are only three ranches.

A constant stream of Black Hillers is pouring into Custer, the major portion coming via Cheyenne. These Black Hillers are divid-

⁴² *Ibid.* Custer City had other signs of "civilization." In March, 1876, a group of 125 men were organized as Minute Men to drive off Indians who appeared near the city, while a Provisional Black Hills Superior Court was established to deal with all judicial matters until regular courts were opened. In the summer of 1876 the first public school in the Black Hills was opened in Custer. Greever, *The Bonanza West*, 316.

ed into two distinct classes—"old miners" and "tender feet." The former, of course, know everything pertaining to mining, while the latter are not supposed to know "beans when the bag is open."

Everyone arriving here expresses surprise at the flourishing condition of Custer City, which now has all of 500 buildings within her corporation. Business of all kinds is represented here. The city is teeming with miners from all parts of the country, and are patiently waiting for the opening up of spring. March was the severest month of the winter here. At present the weather is moderating rapidly.

Nothing has been done here this spring in the way of mining. I have been shown several fine specimens of gold that were taken out last fall. At present I cannot advise anyone to come here. I think a few months later will be better. At this time all is jam and confusion. Many who came here with rather exalted ideas as to the mineral wealth of the Hills, and failing to find gold nuggets lying around waiting to be picked up, are becoming disgusted and returning home.

Although scores of buildings are in course of construction, yet the supply of carpenters is far above the demand. Three saw-mills are in full blast here, and lumber is selling at \$30 per thousand. Flour sells at \$11 per hundred pounds; bacon, 35 cents; ham, 40 cents; butter, 50 cents; sauer kraut, 20 cents; sugar, 30 cents; eggs, 50 cents per dozen; potatoes, 12¼ cents per pound; clothing, boots and shoes, about 100 per cent. higher than in the States; shaving, 25 cents, and hair cutting 75. More anon.

S. M. ZENT⁴³

Zent was finally able to begin his long awaited search for gold as he moved north from Custer City toward the town of Deadwood, Dakota Territory. He moved into the area of the first Black Hills gold discoveries, a region that stretched from the first mining district established in May, 1875, on French Creek (near Custer) on the south to Whitewood Creek (near Deadwood) on the north, a distance of fifty miles which contained thirty-eight gulches and creek valleys. Some gold deposits in this area were considerable, but with the large number of miners present, the profits were small. As historian William S. Greever has written, "From no claim anywhere in the Black Hills did a prospector make a large fortune." Zent's success, like that of many others, was very limited.⁴⁴

Zent eventually landed in colorful Deadwood, a surprisingly well developed area in 1876 and the center of Black Hills gold mining. The initial gold find was made in Deadwood in August, 1875, and in the early spring of 1876 the rush there began. Claims were

⁴³ Ligonier *National Banner*, April 27, 1876.

⁴⁴ Greever, *The Bonanza West*, 302.

rich but not extensive, and good claims were quickly staked out by the end of January. Gradually, hundreds of disappointed miners either extended claims into neighboring gulches, returned to other Black Hills areas, or abandoned the region altogether. Although the site of the town of Deadwood was laid out in April of 1876, by autumn of the same year the population had soared to seven thousand. By the last part of September the town had a newspaper, bakeries, billiard establishments, dance halls, gambling houses, and practically every other conceivable business.⁴⁵ One author wrote that in Deadwood "could be found representatives of every prominent mining district of the west, as well as 'tenderfeet' from every state of the Union. In the throng the buckskin clad hunter jostled the dandified gambler and the pilgrim from New England. On every side was heard the sound of the hammer and saw, in the construction of new buildings . . . On one hand could be heard the impassioned call of an itinerant minister of the Gospel . . . In close proximity would be a loud-voiced gambler crying his game."⁴⁶ Zent continued the narrative of his adventures to the *National Banner*:

THE BLACK HILLS.

An Interesting Letter from Col. S. M. Zent.

DEAD WOOD CITY, BLACK HILLS

May 28th, 1876.

To the Editor of The National Banner:

DEAR SIR:—Having a few leisure hours this afternoon, I will improve them by writing to the readers of THE BANNER. My last letter was written at Custer City, April 6th. Since then Smith, "Dick" and I have spent most of our time in prospecting.

Having formed rather a poor opinion of French Creek (on which Custer City is located), we moved about fifteen miles north, on Spring Creek, near Hill City, and located some claims. But failing to find anything more than plenty of boulders and gravel, we concluded to strike further north. April 29th found us encamped on Bear Butte Creek, a tributary of the north fork of the Cheyenne. Here we toiled like beavers in digging a ditch and building a dam, in order to change the channel of the creek to prospect its old bed. But, after all our toil and sweat, we failed to find the object of our search.

We next prospected on Fir Creek, a tributary to Bear Butte. Here we found fair prospects, but water insufficient for sluicing. (I herewith enclose twenty cents' worth of the gold we found on this

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 300-303, 316-18.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Rodman Wilson Paul, *Mining Frontiers of the Far West, 1848-1880* (New York, 1963), 178.

creek.) Hearing of rich diggings about eight miles to the north-west of us, we struck tent and pulled out for White Wood Creek. On reaching here, we were utterly surprised at finding White Wood Gulch teeming with busy miners, and the banks of the creek lined with cabins and tents, for miles. The principal tributary to the White Wood is Dead Wood. This gulch, if possible, presents a more lively appearance than White Wood. Some of the richest mines yet discovered in the Black Hills, or anywhere else, since the discovery of the famous Alder Gulch, in Montana, have been found on White Wood and its tributaries.

Miners from all parts of the Hills are flocking to this place. These discoveries have given a new impetus to the mining interests of the Black Hills, and many who were on the point of returning home have taken new courage. Cities are springing up like magic in this new eldorado. Crook City, at the mouth of White Wood, Elizabeth City, twelve miles up White Wood, Dead Wood City, at the mouth of Dead Wood Creek and half a mile above Elizabeth (the two are now blended in one). Gayville (the only town in the Hills which makes no pretensions toward being a "city"), is quite a thriving place, two miles above Dead Wood City. Centennial City, one mile above Crook, is yet an embryo, but big things are anticipated by its projectors.

Rapid Hill and Custer City, in the southern part of the Hills, are about "piked out," and unless something better is found there than has yet been discovered, these monuments of architectural skill, like Thebes and Athens, will have reached the zenith of their glory.

The mining ground on White Wood and its tributaries has all been taken up, and the only chance now is to buy a claim. Some idea may be formed of the richness of these mines when I tell you that over two thousand dollars have been taken out of one claim in a day, worked by eight miners. How is this for \$14 a day for hands? Smith says: "Let the man in the brick saloon by the Ligonier House answer." Wages in the mines range from \$4 to \$6 per day, boarding not included. At present I would not advise any one to come to the Hills, unless they have a few spare hundred dollars or wish to work in the mines, and which, I can assure my readers, is not pleasant by any means.

The Indians have committed several depredations, mostly in the southern part of the Hills and on the Cheyenne and Yankton routes. We anticipate no trouble from them here. Some scouts have been employed, however, to keep a sharp look-out, in case they should see fit to make an attack.

Before closing, I will endeavor to give your readers a brief description of the Black Hills, as far as my observation extends: The Black Hills are a clear cut, well defined mountain mass, thrown up in the midst of an almost boundless plain. Their flank,

for the most part is very abrupt, presenting an almost perfect wall. On entering them, the mind is filled with wonder and amazement, as it contemplates these might upheavals, especially in the vicinity of Harney's Peak. Here strata of rock, hundreds of feet in thickness, have been thrown up, until they stand almost vertical. Is this the result of one mighty instantaneous upheaval, or is it the gradual work of ages? But what is more pleasing to the eye than all else pertaining to the Hills, especially after having spent several days upon the open plains, are the beautiful pine forests that greet you on all sides. These forests of pine, with their peculiar, dark green foliage, cover the major portion of the hills.

Game, such as deer and elk, are quite plentiful, and Smith, with his unerring "Betsey," succeeds in keeping our larder well supplied with venison. Pheasants, too, are numerous, and afford up many a delicious repast. Fish, I am sorry to say, are scarce. The largest I have yet found were a species of small suckers, and I think I may safely say that there is not a man in the Black Hills that has an eye more to fishing than I have.

Our mails are very uncertain, those blasted "red skins" having taken it in several times.

S. M. ZENT.⁴⁷

Ironically, at the same time that Zent was struggling in the gold fields, his hometown newspaper was still printing doubtful columns regarding the gold rush. Explaining that it was difficult to form any accurate opinion on gold in the Black Hills, the *National Banner*, in its "Washington Letter," admitted that although the Jenney expedition had found that gold could not be picked up by the shovelful there, the precious substance could be found in paying quantities in certain parts of the region. Based on this evidence, however, "hundreds and perhaps thousands" had gone there supposing they would be able to make "their 'eternal fortins' in a few weeks, and have been grievously disappointed," the paper reported. Such fortune seekers had also been forced to run a gauntlet of large bands of hostile Sioux seeking scalps, who had already killed hundreds of miners, and hundreds more would be killed trying to leave the area "which they once imagined was an Eldorado."⁴⁸

Zent finally abandoned his prospecting dream in August and returned home to Ligonier. The *National Banner* noted the return of its informal correspondent: "Col. S.M. Zent arrived at his home yesterday from the Black Hills. He reports that gold-hunting in that region is at present an exceedingly hazardous undertaking, and expresses a determination to spend the future with his family

⁴⁷ Ligonier *National Banner*, June 29, 1876.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, June 22, 1876.



SAMUEL M. ZENT

PROBABLY TAKEN IN THE 1880S AFTER HIS RETURN
FROM THE BLACK HILLS

Courtesy Robert J. Zent, Roanoke, Indiana.

in a land of civilization rather than live neighbor to Sitting Bull.”⁴⁹ Zent’s exact profits from gold mining are unknown.

Although Colonel Zent and countless others failed to find their fortune in the Black Hills, some eventually did. In 1877 it was estimated that the gold mined from quartz in the region amounted to \$1.5 million while that from placers (washing or dredging sand or gravel containing gold) totaled \$1 million. The personal fortune lost by the Indian population with the seizure of their sacred Black Hills is incalculable. The issue of the Black Hills was finally settled to white satisfaction in September and October, 1876. A treaty

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, August 24, 1876. It may have been between late May, when his final letter was written, and August, 1876, when he returned home, that Zent was confined “helpless in a tent” for six weeks with inflammatory rheumatism, expecting his career to end either from the effects of the disease or from Indian attack. *Huntington Herald*, March 19, 1897.

negotiated at that time paid \$4.5 million to the Indians and authorized the region to be officially opened for settlement in February, 1877. To date, the selling of the Black Hills is still disputed by Native Americans and remains their most protracted legal battle with the federal government and the largest claim by native tribes against the United States.⁵⁰

Even after his return from the failed Black Hills expedition, Zent's determination to stay in a "land of civilization" did not last. He had left Ligonier and returned to Huntington County by 1884. In 1892 he resigned his office as township trustee and sought relief for troubling rheumatism in a more southern climate, namely the Indian Territory (present day Oklahoma). Unable to find a land claim, Zent started a tinsmith business in the town of Okarche, near Oklahoma City, but apparently stayed only a few months there, for in September of that year he returned to Roanoke. Still in need of relief from his ailment, in November, 1893, Zent returned to the territory, settling in the town of Blackwell in Kay County, directly north of Oklahoma City near the Kansas border. He established another tinsmithing business and "fited [*sic*] up a nice comfortable room over my shop in which I have been Batchting it to my hearts content" There Zent spent most of his leisure time reading from his personal library and finding "no body to scold me if I happened to be late to meals and no one to find fault with the cooking." Zent's second stay in the Indian Territory was short-lived as well. Soon he decided that he liked Roanoke better than Blackwell and begrudgingly admitted that he had a "sneaking notion" that his wife's "head was about level or the head of any body else, that was contented to leave well enough alone and remain where they are." He became determined to return to Indiana and stay there for the remainder of his days, for at the age of sixty he was getting too old "to rough it much longer out here on the frontier." While he was away in the Indian Territory, Zent's wife, daughter, and son-in-law remained in Indiana, lived in the family home, and worked his sixty-acre Huntington County farm.⁵¹

Zent returned to Roanoke in 1895 and was confined to his home as an invalid until his death from heart disease on March 17, 1897, at the age of sixty-two. Members of his old Civil War regiment, the 13th Indiana, attended the funeral and served as pallbearers. The

⁵⁰ Eriksson, "Sioux City and the Black Hills Gold Rush," 347, 339. For more information on the Black Hills legal debate, see Herbert T. Hoover, "The Sioux Agreement of 1889 and Its Aftermath," *South Dakota History*, XIX (Spring, 1989), 56-94.

⁵¹ Colonel Samuel Zent, Blackwell, Indian Territory, to P. A. Joray, February 3, 1895, original in the possession of Robert Zent. A local newspaper claimed that Samuel Zent went to Oklahoma not only for his health but also for business opportunities in the new territory. *Huntington Herald*, March 19, 1897.

officer delivering the eulogy noted, "His name is written indelibly on life's history and now he sleeps well."⁵²

Shortly before his death Colonel Samuel Zent seemed to summarize his life's travels in a letter to a friend in Ligonier: "My roaming restless disposition and innate [*sic*] love of adventure has made it a hard matter for me to hold myself in any one place long"⁵³ Indeed, Zent was like thousands of others who hoped to escape economic depression by finding riches in the Black Hills gold rush of the mid-1870s. Like most, he failed to find his fortune there. Nonetheless, he left historians with riches of a different kind, for he documented his adventures with the Gordon party and as an independent miner, giving a glimpse into the life of a tenderfoot prospector during one of America's greatest periods of gold-hunting fever.

⁵² Huntington *Daily Democrat*, March 17, 1897; Zent scrapbook, Huntington Public Library.

⁵³ Zent to P. A. Joray, February 3, 1895.