

Gold Diggers

"I would like to know," volunteered Elder Hawks, "why so many stories have been told about

²¹Ibid., 128:20-21.

²²Ibid., 77:8.

²³Ibid., 27:16.

²⁴Ibid., 27:5.

Joseph Smith being a 'gold digger' and having spent years searching for buried treasure. For more than a hundred miles from here I have been shown holes in the earth where, it is said, Joseph dug for hidden treasure. Do you know how these silly stories originated?"

"It was a popular fancy," replied the President, "for people in that day to be seeking buried treasure, hoping to become suddenly wealthy by locating such deposits by means of 'peep stones.' I was utterly amazed when I learned of the vast number of 'peep stone gazers' that abounded in this region in the days of Joseph Smith. It was a popular fad for people to find strange stones that could be used as 'peep stones,' and every person finding such a stone at once set out in search of hidden treasure.

"Just two years after Joseph Smith saw the gold plates the following article was printed in several papers in western New York, appearing in the *Wayne Sentinel*, December 27, 1825. This article is likely responsible for the popular tradition that Joseph Smith was a 'gold digger.' It reads:

TREASURE DIGGING

Dear Mr. Armstrong:—Please insert the following and oblige one of your readers.

WONDERFUL DISCOVERY,—A few days since was discovered in this town, by help of a mineral stone, which becomes transparent when placed in a hat and the light excluded by the face of him who looks into it, provided he is fortune's favorite, a monstrous POTASH KETTLE in the bowels of Mother Earth, filled with the purest bullion. Some attempts have been made to dig it up, but without success. His Satanic Majesty, or some other unseen agent, appears to keep it under marching orders, for no sooner is it dug onto in one place, than it moves off like 'false delusive hope' only to re-appear in some remote place.

But its pursuers are now sanguine of success. They have entrenched the kettle all around, and driven a steel ram-rod into the ground immediately over it, to break the enchantment. Nothing now remains but to raise its ponderous weight and establish a mint that it may be coined into federal money.—Good news indeed for these hard times. By rust on the kettle, and the color of the silver, it is supposed to have been deposited where it now lies, prior to the flood.²⁵

“Another story that attracted much attention was the following account concerning a stone a certain Jack Belcher was using as a ‘peep stone.’ We quote:

Belcher bought it because it was said to be a seeing stone. I have often seen it. It was a green stone, with brown, irregular spots on it. It was a little longer than a goose’s egg and about the same thickness. When he brought it home and covered it with a hat, Belcher’s little boy was one of the first to look into the hat, and, as he did so, he said he saw a candle. The second time he looked in he exclaimed, ‘I’ve found my hatchet!’ (It had been lost two years.) He immediately ran for it to the spot shown him through the stone, and it was there. The boy was soon beset by neighbors far and near to reveal to them hidden things, and he succeeded marvelously. Even the wanderings of a lost child were traced by him. The distracted parents came to him three times for directions, and in each case found signs that the child had been in the places he designated, but at last it was found starved to death. Joe Smith conceiving the idea of making a fortune through a similar process of ‘seeing,’ bought the stone of Belcher and then began his operations in directing where hidden treasure could be found.

“I have read a score of accounts like these which tell of the popularity of ‘peep stones’ and ‘gold diggers.’ It is well known that Oliver Cowdery and Hiram Page were deceived by such means even after they had seen the gold plates.

“The *Broome County Courier*, December 27,

²⁵Willard Bean, A. B. C. History of Palmyra, p. 39.

1831, said of this subject and Sidney Rigdon's connection with the movement:

These excavations are still to be seen in many places. The diggers continued their labors until at length one of the party, tired of a laborious and unsuccessful search, spoke of a person in Ohio, near Painesville, on Lake Erie, who had a wonderful facility in finding the spot where money was to be found. 'Can we get that man here?' asked the infatuated Smiths. 'I guess as how we can by going after him, and if I had a little change for expenses, I would go myself.' The desired change was soon forthcoming and the famous money dreamer, Rigdon of Ohio, made his appearance. He had been a preacher of various religions, and a teacher of almost all kinds of morals. He was experienced in all sorts of camp meetings, anxious meetings and revivals, or four day meetings. He knew every turn of the human mind, relative to these matters. He had considerable talent and great plausibility. He partly united with the money diggers in making an excavation in what has since been called the 'Gold Bible Hill.' In such times and under such circumstances was born the Mormon Religion.

In this age of wonders, the cunning ex-preacher, Sidney Rigdon, from Ohio suggested to the money diggers to turn their digging concern into a religious plot. It was, therefore, given out that a vision had appeared to Joe Smith, that there was deposited in the hill I have mentioned, an iron chest containing Golden Plates on which was engraved the 'Book of Mormon.'

"This is likely the first mention in the press that Sidney Rigdon was connected with the rise of the new movement. This was three years before the Spaulding theory was given widespread publicity. For months after this time an editor in Palmyra printed a series of articles about the origin of the Book of Mormon, yet he never once mentioned the name of Sidney Rigdon. No one in Palmyra had heard his name suggested in this connection or the prejudiced

Obadiah Dogberry would have told about it in his bitter attack upon the strange book.²⁶

“Thus when Joseph Smith told that He had been shown gold plates that had long been concealed in the Hill Cumorah he was at once considered one of the regular ‘gold diggers’ who were employing ‘peep stones’ to enable them to find some type of hidden treasure. The chief difference is that Joseph Smith had never spent a moment seeking for treasure, nor did he have a ‘peep stone’ of any kind until the gold plates had been revealed to him.

“Moreover, he was successful in finding a treasure of great value, while all others failed in their efforts. In view of the ‘peep stone,’ fad of that day it is only reasonable to see that his enemies sought to explain the mystery of the Book of Mormon in that manner.”

Metal Plates

“What evidence is there,” inquired Sister Jarvis, “that metal plates were used to write upon in ancient times? I have heard it said that if the Nephites used such records they were the only people who ever developed such permanent methods of preserving their history.”

“It has long been argued,” the President responded, “that it was utterly ridiculous to believe that any kinsmen of the American Indians could make sheets of metal and inscribe their history upon them. Soon after the Book of Mormon was published many editors jokingly spoke of the gold plates as the ‘brazen plates.’²⁷

²⁶These articles were reprinted in *The Deseret News*, February 10, 1940.

²⁷*Millennial Harbinger*, February, 1831.