

Historical Series No. 6
SUBJECT: Gold Rush
Courtesy, Union National Bank
New Albany, Indiana
(As related on Radio Station WLRP)

The Mexican War had been fought over the boundary line between Texas and Mexico. But one of the results of that conflict had been to add California to the United States. New Albany's veterans of the Mexican War had returned home and were settling down to daily life in the bustling river town when gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill in the new California Territory, and the course of American history took a new turn...

The year was 1850. A wagon train bound for California stopped for the night and put its oxen out to graze. Young James Abbey from New Albany sat down on an upturned bucket with a board on his knees and a guttering candle by his side. The cold night numbed his fingers, but he wrote an account of the day's journey to send to the *New Albany Ledger*, as he did every night.

Abbey's letters home, collected into a book and published at New Albany, have become one of the most famous accounts of the rush of fortune hunters to California after the magic word "gold" spread through the United States. It tells the story of over 100 New Albany adventurers who left the Hoosier state to seek gold more than 2,000 miles away across prairies, deserts, and mountains.

The rush to California started in 1849, but in 1850 it became a flood – a westward tide that almost overnight pushed the frontier all the way to the Pacific coast. New Albany contributed its share of gold seekers in 1849, but it was during the following year that the city felt the full impact of the westward rush.

The *Ledger* reported in March, 1850, that the California fever was greater in New Albany than anywhere else in Indiana. All over the city, wagons were being prepared for the long dangerous journey. Excitement was in the air.

Jerome Beers, who had gone to California in 1849 and then returned to New Albany, decided to go with the wagon train to act as guide. On March 21 an advance party loaded their wagons on the steamer *Telegraph* at the New Albany waterfront while nearby the whole city turned out to wave farewell and good luck. The next week the rest of the party boarded the steamer *Courtland* to begin the big adventure.

The two steamers carried the hopeful New Albany fortune seekers to St. Louis, and then up the wide Missouri River to St. Joseph, the "jumping-off" place where the hard wagon journey started. On April 8 the 20 or so New Albany wagons set out. Most of the time the group traveled alone, but for part of the journey it was in a wagon train 5 miles long.

On May 13 the New Albany train reached Fort Kearney in the Nebraska Territory. Through May and June the party rolled ahead, meeting herds of buffalo, passing Indian wigwams, floating its wagons across flood-swollen streams. In July the adventurers reached Salt Lake City and the desert. They were becoming travel-

worn and the oxen were tired, but they pushed on. They had come through without mishap so far, but they found the desert littered with cook stoves, trunks, and utensils that other wagon trains had been forced to leave behind.

Soon the New Albany group had to lighten its load. Heavy clothing was discarded first, then some tools, and then a wagon.

Finally, in the mountains, the weary oxen were too exhausted to pull the wagons any further. The Hoosiers unpacked and loaded what they could on the backs of the patient animals.

In late August the foot-sore group reached the gold fields to begin the back-breaking work of prospecting. Few of those who left New Albany found more than wet feet and aching bones for the long hours spent hunting gold, but many remained in California to become pioneers of the new state. Others returned home after a short stay. The California fever gradually subsided, but a new topic took its place – the growing rift between North and South over slavery. The Ohio River was the dividing line between slave and free states, and New Albany soon found itself in the middle of an amazing controversy caused by a runaway slave.