Mining the Southwest

It was not the rich prairie soils of the southeast that attracted the first settlers, but the rugged uplands of the southwest. They came as miners rather than farmers, and they arrived long before the Indian title was extinguished. Throughout the region, from the mouth of the Rock River to the mouth of the Wisconsin, veins of lead could be found in limestone crevices at or near the surface of the land. The Indians had begun mining it at least by the middle of the 18th century. They either sold lead to the Spanish in St. Louis or made it into shot themselves once they acquired firearms. Jonathan Carver reported seeing large quantities of lead in a Sauk village on the Wisconsin River in 1766, noting that it came from somewhere in the vicinity of the Blue Mound. The Sauk, other travelers noted, had their women do the digging.

In 1788 Julien Dubuque, a French trader, obtained from the Indians a permit to dig lead on the west side of the Mississippi in a district that included the present-day city of Dubuque. He employed Indians to work the mines and smelted the lead in crude limestone furnaces with wood fires. He shipped the product to St. Louis and continued his trade uninterrupted until the United States acquired the city (including Dubuque's diggings) by the Louisiana Purchase of 1803.

Following the Purchase, the United States government took possession of the rich Missouri mines, and it began a system of leasing mining districts to prospectors. In 1822 the government extended the leasing system to the upper Mississippi and began what can only be called a "lead rush." By 1825 69 permits had been issued, and by 1829 there were 4,253 miners and 52 licensed smelting works in the region. That year more than 13 million pounds of

refined lead were sent downriver to St. Louis or east to Lake Michigan. Although the Indians still owned the land, their rights were ignored. The miners simply "squatted" on the land and exploited its mineral wealth. The government endorsed this practice by refusing to enforce the Indians' claims. The early miners lived in their pits, particularly in winter weather, and, likened to a tenacious, burrowing animal that resided in the vicinity, they became known as "badgers."

Among the flotsam of migrants was a Baptist preacher who settled in 1827 on the high ridge that separated waterways flowing north into the Wisconsin River from those flowing southwest into the Mississippi. The site he selected was an ever-flowing watercourse, which gained the name, derived from the preacher's hymns, Jerusalem Spring. Later that year Henry Dodge, who had gained experience in the Missouri mines, came north with his wife, nine children and assorted slaves and built a cabin a few miles away. The following summer prospectors struck lead ore in outcroppings a short distance to the east of the Jerusalem Spring. They found chunks of lead that, when broken open, revealed cubes of silvery mineral known as galena, the purest form of lead ore. News of the strike spread quickly, and before long there were log huts at Jerusalem Spring and along a pathway a half mile away that would soon become known as Shake Rag Street—the name derived from the practice of women who would shake a cloth to signal their miner husbands to come home for the noontime dinner. More deposits were found on the hill adjacent to the two settlements, and because two branches of the Pecatonica River curled around the hill and came together below the mining settlement, the community became known as Mineral Point.

By 1830 the settlement boasted 500 inhabitants, a third of the population of the entire lead region, which itself contained half of all the white population of what is now Wisconsin. It was by then the seat of a new county laid off in the southwestern extremity of the Michigan Territory, named Iowa County. Four years later, when the Indian title was extinguished in the lead region, the government set up a land office, and town lots went up for sale. In the mid-

1830s miners from Cornwall began to arrive in significant numbers. The lead mines of this county in far southwestern England had been worked since Roman times, and when the pits gave out the miners came to America to ply their occupation. Landing at New York or New Orleans, they came by boat up the Mississippi to Galena, Illinois, and by wagon 35 miles overland to Mineral Point.

The same huge land schooners, drawn by teams of oxen, that brought the Cornish in carried the lead out. Some of the finished lead went overland to the newly founded lake ports, Milwaukee and Racine, but most of it went downriver to New Orleans. From there it was shipped to the East Coast where it was made into shot, pipes, sheeting and paint. By 1840 the United States produced annually some 31 million pounds of lead, more than half of which was credited to the Wisconsin Territory.

James Duane Doty, Town Builder

The opening of public land offices at Green Bay and Mineral Point in 1834 triggered a buying frenzy in Wisconsin lands. First in line, quite often, were pioneers from New York, Ohio and Indiana who had squatted on Indian lands awaiting the government's purchase and survey. Having cleared their lands, erected fences, and built log houses, these squatters did not want to have to buy their lands at public auction, for the improvements made the lands more attractive to other bidders. Congress accommodated these people with a land act of 1836 that allowed them to "preempt" the auction by purchasing their farms at the minimum price of $1.25 an acre.

Joining the elbowing and pushing squatters in the land office lines were speculators who sought to buy up large tracts of land at the minimum price and hold them for future sale. The government demanded cash for the public lands; thus the speculators functioned as middlemen, who could offer credit to penniless farmers. Few of these middlemen got rich, however, for land was so abundant that prices rose only very slowly. The speculators who did make money were those who could spot likely sites for towns and cities. And no one was more successful at this game than James Duane Doty.

Although he grew up in western New York, Doty could trace ancestry to the Pilgrims of the Mayflower. After studying law, traveled west to Detroit in search of opportunity. Blessed with extraordinary talent for self-promotion, became a partner of the most promine attorney in the settlement. In 18 President James Monroe named t 24-year-old Doty a federal jud for the district of western Mic igan, making him, in effect, t law west of the lake. By canoe traversed his jurisdiction fro Mackinac to Green Bay Prairie du Chien, eventually se tling on the Fox River a few mil from Green Bay. He remained judge for nine years, during whic he came to know intimately th Wisconsin landscape, and with an ey to future profit he made note of every sit with commercial possibilities.

James Duane Doty.

Access to transportation not only dictated the location of town sites, it was fundamental to the development of the entire territor The Fox-Wisconsin canoe route had sufficed the fur traders, but i would not accommodate the transport of grain, flour, lumber o lead. Canals were a possibility, especially after the successful open ing of New York's Erie Canal in 1825. Doty toyed with the idea (h promoted, for instance, a canal linking Lake Winnebago with th Rock River), but he ultimately decided that the amount of capital required exceeded the benefit. Roads were the cheapest avenues o communication to construct, and, until the railroads came along the most efficient to use. As early as 1826 Doty was urging the gov ernment to build a road connecting Green Bay with Chicago.

In the summer of 1829 Doty set out on horseback to find a land route between Green Bay and Prairie du Chien. With two circuit riding attorneys as guides, Doty followed the high ground of the