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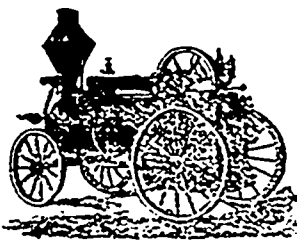
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Chemical Laboratory, Dalhousie College,
Halifax, N. S., July 31st 1891.

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GEORGE LAWSON, PH. D., L. I. D.
Fellow of the Institute of Chemistry of Great Britain and Ireland.

MINING.

THE DISCOVERY OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN DIAMOND FIELDS.

By J. THORBURN.

The little instances I have to relate are connected with an epoch in South African history—the discovery of diamonds. Previously to the year 1870 the interior of South Africa was indeed a land of mysteries. Vague reports of hidden wealth were from time to time circulated, but were, even at Cape Town and other mercantile centres, hardly credited; and none but a few trek-Boers and adventurous traders and hunters ever desired to become acquainted with the land beyond the Vaal. But no sooner did the news of the discovery of diamonds in the interior reach the outside world than all thoughts of risk and danger were thrown aside, and men of every class and every nation joined in a rush which populated the banks of the Vaal river, and served to initiate the people of Europe into a due appreciation of the resources of South Africa.

Mr John O'Reilly, an interior trader, was the discoverer of diamonds in South Africa, and to him the honor is due of proving that the precious stones were to be found in the district of the Vaal. O'Reilly was an old friend of mine, and I learned from his own lips the circumstances under which the first diamond was brought to light. In the winter of 1867 O'Reilly stopped at the house of a Dutch farmer, Van Niekerk by name, who lived close to the river, in the district of Griqualand West. While there engaged in bartering goods for the skins of game, he noticed, in a casual way, a game which the daughter of Van Niekerk and two little native children were playing. The children were throwing pebbles into the air and catching them as they fell—a species of the old English infantile pastime euphoniouly known as knucklebones. While looking on, O'Reilly's attention was attracted by the peculiar clearness and transparency of one of the pebbles in use. He took it up, examined it, and was immediately satisfied that it was a stone of some value. He brought the stone over to where Van Niekerk was standing, and expressed his willingness to buy it. Van Niekerk laughingly replied that he could keep it if he wished, for he could find plenty like it in the river. O'Reilly answered that he believed the stone to be of value, and he would take it; should it turn out what he thought it was, and he succeeded in selling it, he would place half of what he received to the credit of the girl, and Van Niekerk would then be able to fulfil one of his greatest desires, and have her properly educated. Van Niekerk smiled at the probabilities of such fortune in a pebble, and the next day O'Reilly left on his homeward journey.

On arriving at Hope Town, then a frontier post in the old colony, he produced his stone, which he had carefully preserved throughout his travels, and his friends were consulted as to the identity of the specimen. O'Reilly himself believed it to be a diamond, but no one supported him in his belief. Most people laughed at the thought, their argument being based on the premises that a stone so large could not be precious. It was finally decided that the pebble should be sent to Dr. Atherstone, of Grahamstown, and this most capable authority immediately pronounced it to be a diamond of about 22 carats. The stone was shortly afterwards bought by the then Governor of the Cape, Sir Philip Wodehouse, who paid for it the sum of £500.

O'Reilly at once made preparations to return to the Vaal, where, on his arrival, honest man that he was, he faithfully fulfilled his promise to Van Niekerk, and handed over one-half of the proceeds of the sale of the stone to the little girl through whose instrumentality the first diamond was discovered. O'Reilly then employed natives in the district to collect for him all the transparent pebbles they could find on the river banks. He carefully examined eachful after eachful, but only secured a 4-carat stone—the second diamond found on the Vaal river. The news of the second discovery quickly spread, and hundreds of white men were soon travelling toward the Vaal to assist in the search for diamonds. The river's banks continued to attract diggers for some three years. Thousands of men were engaged in washing the banks for diamonds; some were successful, but the majority (myself among the number) were ill-requited for their labors. The finding of some diamonds in the mud walls of a Hartbeeste hut led to the opening up of the dry diggings, and soon the majority of the diggers were engaged in a more profitable search on hard ground, where now stand the famous mines of Du Toits Pan, De Beers, and Kimberley. In June, 1871, Captain Findlayson and I measured off the Kimberley mine, which was divided into claims of 30 ft. square (Dutch measure.) It was principally due to the foresight of Captain Findlayson that the working facilities of the mine were so complete, and through the medium of his road plans that the property was opened up so rapidly.

The De Beers and Kimberley mines were discovered in 1870 and 1871 respectively, and were situated on the farm of an old Dutch stock breeder named Johannes N. de Beer, and lying some 12 miles to the east of the Vaal River. De Beer was a hard-working, honest old fellow, who would undoubtedly have rested much more contentedly had the grass on his farm been left undisturbed, and the diamonds below permitted to lie in their earthly bed. For some time he endeavored to cope with the influx of miners on his farm, and rented out claims, receiving very substantial financial returns, but ultimately the ever-increasing white population proved too much for the old stock farmer, who decided to trek to less lively pastures. The result was that he agreed to part with all right and title in the Kimberley and De Beer mines, with the farm, to Messrs. Dunell and Ebdon, of Port Elizabeth, for the sum of £6,500. De Beer did not even wait for the payment of the money. He gathered his flocks and herds together, and with his household goods, struck away Free State-wards. On the road he was overtaken by the agent of the purchasers, and on the box of his wagon received the first instalment of the purchase money for