

Life on the goldfields: living there

Mineral Resources

Oh, who would paint a goldfield,
And limn the picture right;
(from 'The Roaring Days' by Henry Lawson)

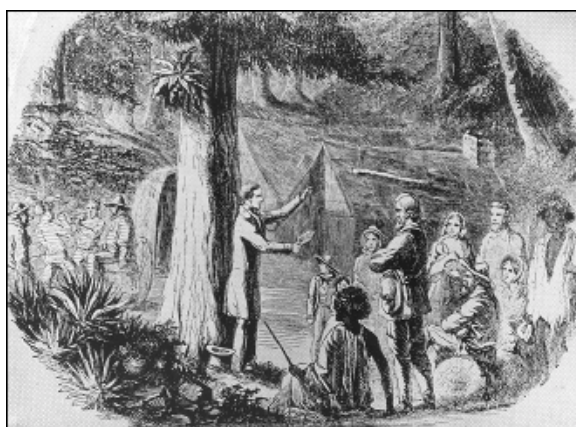
The gold diggings at first resembled tent camps. Even the Gold Commissioner began his career at Ophir in a large tent, as did his small police force. Commissioner Hardy measured out small claim areas for the diggers, issued licences at 30 shillings per month, arbitrated disputes and in general kept very good order.

The dwellings, whether tents or bark humpies had to be set up far enough above the banks of the creek or river to avoid being flooded when it rained heavily and the water rushed down the gullies. At first, it was not unusual to see tents and tarpaulin structures with additions of bark, galvanised iron, hessian bags and calico. A surprising feature was an imposing stone and iron fireplace with chimney, situated right at the rear entrance of some tents. Later, when the diggings became established and miners brought their families with them with the intention of staying for some time, slab huts were erected with either bark or galvanised iron roofs.

A popular style of dwelling was the 'wattle and daub' house. It consisted of dried mud slapped around a framework of logs, branches and twigs to form the walls with a roof of bark or galvanised iron. For the more house proud, the walls would finally be whitewashed, sometimes yearly as part of the annual 'spring cleaning'. A fireplace would be built, using either local stones or galvanised iron, and was used for both cooking and heating. Often the floor was just dirt, but rough timber flooring was laid in many of the more permanent cottages. Many shops, hotels and schools were also built in this fashion.

The inevitable hazards of open fires led to the custom of having the kitchen detached from the main house. What lighting there was came from candles, oil or kerosene lamps, used both at home and by the miners in the deeper shafts and tunnels. Although electric lighting was introduced in

Australia from the 1880s, it was not until well into the 20th Century that electricity became available to all city dwellers, and many country villages had to wait until after the Second World War.



Boxing (background) and divine service (foreground) on the early goldfields, about 1850

History caught in pictures

Thanks to the efforts of Beaufoy Merlin and his assistant Charles Bayliss, many photographs were taken on the diggings during the early 1870s. These photographs are now known as the Holtermann Collection, as Bernard Holtermann provided the finance for this work.

Another esteemed photographer who kept written and photographic records of the early goldfields was the Frenchman Antoine Fauchery. Fauchery was a Parisian, writer, artist, and friend of several of the best-known French artists and writers of his day. He was not afraid to try his hand at mining himself, and as a pioneer photographer, using the wet-plate process, he is celebrated both in Australia and overseas. The many excellent sketches done by S.T. Gill and others also help to gain an insight into the lives of these hardy pioneers, living as they did in a time when cameras were scarce.

Shopping at the corner store

General stores carried a great variety of goods, covering mining needs, food and clothing. They



sold such things as picks, shovels, puddling pans and dishes, spades, mining boots, clothing and bedding, tea, sugar, flour, fresh and salted meat, bacon and hams, tobacco, and forage for horses and cattle. Goods could be paid for in cash or gold. As with the innkeepers, the storekeepers became gold-buyers. Bacon and ham were considered a luxury and were too expensive for anyone but the more successful diggers. Chickens and eggs were particularly rare on the early goldfields. Stores were identified by flying a flag on their roof. Several stores, as well as hotels, offered refreshments and accommodation.

Butchers

Meat was sold to butchers by the local landowners. The meat was killed daily, and was hung outside the shop for all to see (and presumably for the flies to visit!). There was no means of keeping the meat cool, except in winter, so it would 'go off' very quickly. Sometimes the meat was sold to the butchers by bushrangers who had stolen the cattle. This practice of stealing cattle and disguising the brand before selling them was called 'duffing' cattle.

Cock-a-doodle-who?

On some of the goldfields, sun-up was greeted with a rather strange ritual. The first man to rise in the morning would stand outside his tent and crow like a rooster. Others would follow until the crowing chorus woke the whole camp.

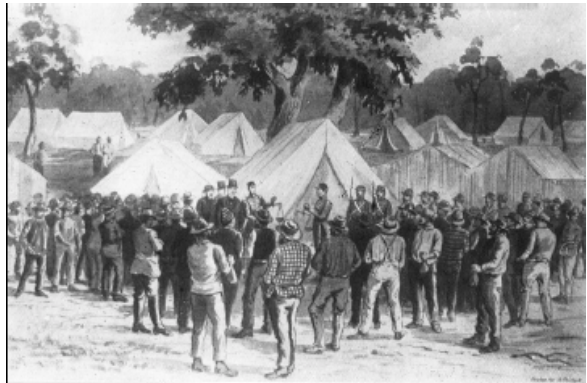
Fare nosh goldfields style

A hearty breakfast was desirable to build up strength for the hard work at the diggings. Steaks and chops were popular. For those still looking for their fortunes in the creeks, the tantalising aroma of bacon and ham sizzling on the grill must have inspired them on to greater efforts.

The staple food of the early goldfields was mutton stew and damper. Mutton is the meat of older sheep, somewhat tougher than the younger lamb meat that we enjoy today. Whether single or with a family, the amount of meat served in relation to the gravy and damper would depend on the digger's success. If a tired digger had the means, a decent mutton-and-damper meal could be had at the local inn or other place of refreshment. The mutton stew would include potatoes and onion, and the damper would be made with more care than the usual unleavened flour and water that the diggers might make for themselves. The usual basic flour and water mixture was kneaded into a scone-like shape, with or without salt, and cooked in a camp oven (tin can), on a green stick (spit style), or wrapped in leaves and covered over with hot coals

and ashes. If available, the damper could be served with honey. Tea was prepared over an open campfire by boiling the water in a tin can with a wire handle, called a billy, and was drunk from a tin mug called a pannikin.

Fruit and vegetables were rare and had to be brought in from the nearest large centre until the Chinese diggers produced market gardens. These provided not only variety to the meals, but also much needed vitamins and minerals for added nourishment. In time, the delicious aromas coming from the Chinese camps attracted the Europeans through curiosity, hunger, or sheer desperation for something other than the interminable mutton and damper. The Chinese set up 'Chinese Cafes' to cater for the demand.



Issuing mining licences or 'Miners' Rights', about 1850. Each person on the goldfields was required to hold a licence, which was issued monthly for a fee of 30 shillings, to be paid in cash or gold dust



Early days of Wyalong – the Police Station

New chums

People came from all over the world to the Australian goldfields. They spoke a variety of languages and often met up with and became partners or fellow-travellers with those from their native country, as well as others. They soon learned the rudiments of English, and were part of the development of 'strine', the unique Australian slang that was used by all. (The word 'strine' is a corruption of the word 'Australian', but is used only when referring to language.)

Those who had come to Australia via the Californian goldfields brought knowledge and skills

useful in gold mining. They also brought a kind of distinctive 'uniform' consisting of a brightly coloured red or blue serge shirt, a colourful kerchief, moleskin trousers, long boots, and a hat referred to as a wide-awake. 'Moleskin' was the name given to the hard-wearing cotton fabric of twill weave with a ribbed appearance. The hat was made of soft felt, with a wide brim, and often a high pointed crown. Cabbage tree hats made from the leaves of the native cabbage tree palm were also popular.

The Chinese camps were usually set apart from the other 'new chums', a fact which contributed to the resentments the European, American and 'native Australian' diggers built up against the Chinese. The Chinese also continued to wear their own traditional clothing, with loose blue shirts and trousers, and the distinctive cone-shaped straw hats. They did not bring women with them from China. Most of them intended to collect whatever gold they could and then return home, often not just to provide for their families, but also for 'masters' to whom they were contracted one way or another. Nevertheless, there was enough interaction among the diverse ethnic groups for some of the Chinese to find wives and settle in Australia for good. Of these, a number of men had already been in Australia for some time, working on the sugarcane farms in Queensland where they were known as 'coolies'.

It should be noted that when people of the second half of the nineteenth century used the term 'native' Australian, they were not referring to Aborigines, but to whites who were born and/or grew up in Australia. 'New chums' were those people we would now call New Australians. It was not necessary for people to have a visa to enter Australia in the gold rush days. Many who came here intending to make their fortunes on the goldfields and then go back 'home' found that working in the soil of Australia among our unique flora and fauna and beside the new chums of our multi-cultural society gave them a sense of belonging they had not expected. They might return to their native born country to visit, only to return here, ever after to call Australia 'home'.

Churches and community halls

The first religious services were often held in the open air until churches could be built. It was not unusual for a preacher to hold a service under a shady tree, with a boxing match going on in the background.

Ministers and priests of the various denominations would travel from a central town to the surrounding diggings, holding services and carrying out baptisms and weddings. As with the early houses and stores, early churches were of rather rough construction. They often doubled as schoolhouses.

If it was to be some time before a marriage celebrant was expected to visit, an informal 'marriage ceremony' was sometimes held, according to an ancient custom. The well-wishers would gather as usual, a wedding feast prepared, and the happy couple would exchange vows. The couple would then 'jump the broomstick', signifying their vows to be joined together in marriage. This informal arrangement would continue until the marriage could be formalised by a visiting Minister.

In sickness and in health

Influenza and pneumonia were common, and often a cause of death for miners of all ages and genders, who puddled about in water in all kinds of weather. Cuts, broken bones and other injuries could be serious and even fatal if left untreated. Snake and spider bites were also a worry in the warmer months. Many children suffered from Scarlet Fever and diphtheria, and many died, if not from the disease, as often as not from the treatments. Doctors were scarce and charged high fees, far out of proportion to their knowledge and expertise. Many of their 'cures' were poisons.

Social life

Social life in the mining villages was very active. Apart from the regular meetings, which took place after church services, dances and picnics were often held on Sundays. When there were not enough ladies to go around at a dance, some of the men, pipes smoking, beards and all, would dance with each other. Others would roll up their swags, also called 'Matildas', and literally 'waltz their Matildas'. Sporting functions such as boxing, football, cricket and tennis were well attended. Horse racing was particularly popular. A fine horse was highly valued (not least by the bushrangers). The nightly visits to the hotel, or drinks around the campfire were very much enjoyed, with patrons singing, telling yarns and reminiscing about life 'back home in the Old Country'. A travelling circus would sometimes visit some of the larger centres.

The hotels, or licensed inns, did a roaring trade, as did (unlicensed) sly grog shops until the authorities caught up with them. Alcohol could be a soothing and pleasant way of unwinding after a hard day digging for gold. But there would always be others who tended to drink in order to drown their sorrows and disappointments of the day. Hotels were also popular places to go just for company and entertainment. There was always someone who could whistle a tune or others who had a mouth-organ or fiddle, who would play while the diggers sang and told stories. On some goldfields there were Scots men with their bagpipes or someone with an accordion. Pianos were rare, but some hotels had one.

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