

Sovereign Hill Education

Eureka

Research Notes for Secondary Schools



Gold was first discovered in the creeks of Ballarat in August 1851. In the early years of the Gold Rush, diggers were continually harassed by police who were checking that they carried a gold licence. Those who did not have a licence had to pay a heavy fine (O'Brien p. 54). There were no excuses ...

"Five of these fellows were fined ... £ 5 ... There the clumsy fellow stands, faltering out an awkward apology, 'my licence is only just expired, sir' - 'I've only been one day from town, sir' - 'I've no money, sir, for I had to borrow half a bag of sugar the other day, for my wife and children'. 'Hem', says His Worship, the law makes no distinctions - fined \$5 ... There has scarcely been a day this week that five or more diggers have not been fined for being without licences ... But our reporter fails to see any cases of thieving, burglary or horse-stealing brought before the immaculate bench, although these crimes are notoriously present."

From "The Ballarat Times" – "Buninyong and Creswick Advertiser", "Hunting the Digger" (as quoted in O'Brien p. 55)

By 1854, much of the surface gold had been found and groups of men were digging deep shafts in Ballarat East to find the precious metal. Numerous shafts crowded the Eureka Lead where many Irish diggers lived and worked. (Bate p. 51)

All diggers had to pay the dreaded licence fee and most hated what they believed to be the unjust administration of the goldfields. They had many grievances. The unfair

licence system, blatant corruption amongst government officials and the lack of representation in the Parliament of Victoria (most diggers could not even vote) were the main causes of the diggers' anger. But they were also concerned about the poor returns from digging and the fact that unsuccessful miners could not turn to farming as there was no land for sale. (Bate p. 64)

On 6 October 1854, a young digger, James Scobie, was murdered outside the Eureka Hotel. Suspicion fell on the publican, James Bentley, but he was cleared of any involvement at the inquest. The presiding magistrate at the inquest was John Dewes, a friend and a rumoured business partner of Bentley. This verdict further convinced the diggers of corruption in high places, and their mood turned ugly. An estimated 5,000 gathered near the Eureka Hotel. Bentley escaped and, within minutes, the building was engulfed in a roaring blaze of fire. (O'Brien p. 48)

After such violence, Gold Commissioner Rede, in the Government Camp high on the hill, feared that the diggers would rush the camp in open rebellion. He requested reinforcements of British soldiers from Melbourne. When reinforcements arrived, marching to the military drum, they took the wrong road to the camp and blundered onto the Eureka Diggings. Shots were fired and soon the drummer-boy lay wounded. (O'Brien p. 79) Now the anger of the military was rising.

Strengthened in their resolve, the diggers held several "monster meetings" to air their grievances. They warned

the authorities that they wanted changes urgently made to the regulations then governing the goldfields. The Ballarat Reform League called for ...

"... fair representation for the goldfields in the Legislative Council, the abolition of the licence tax, the disbanding of the Gold Commission (that policed the tax) and the opening up of land. ... the League's program ... also included manhood suffrage (votes for all men) and payment of members of parliament." (Bate p. 64)

At a monster meeting held on Bakery Hill late in November, the diggers raised the flag of the Southern Cross and the crowd burned their gold licences in defiance of the law. On 30 November 1854, more than 500 (some say up to 10,000) men gathered at another meeting on Bakery Hill. They murmured "Amen" as Peter Lalor, their Commander-in-Chief, swore allegiance to the flag of the Southern Cross and pledged that they would fight to defend their rights and liberties. (Bate p. 67)

By Friday 1 December, expecting a clash with the authorities, the diggers were quickly building a flimsy stockade behind which to defend themselves. Up to 1,500 men were in the stockade (Lawlor (sic), Peter, *A Statement to the Colonists of Victoria*, "The Argus", 10 April, 1855. Quoted in O'Brien pp.102-105) but, on Saturday evening most returned to their homes believing there would not be an attack on a Sunday, the Sabbath.

At dawn, on Sunday 3 December 1854, 276 military and police men attacked the Eureka Stockade. The 150 or so miners in the stockade were over-run in 20 minutes. Three soldiers and 22 diggers were killed in the battle and others, like Captain Wise, died later of their wounds. Thirteen men were eventually taken to Melbourne to be tried for treason. By 1 April 1855, all thirteen had been freed as no jury was willing to convict them. (Note: Estimates of casualties vary. O'Brien suggests over 30 diggers and four military and Strange suggests 22 diggers and six military)

Although the diggers lost the battle at the stockade on that fateful December morning, they eventually emerged victorious. By June 1855, new laws abolished the gold licence system, allowed miners to frame their own mining laws and gave them a vote and representation in the parliament.

Many say that this was the beginning of democracy for all Australians.

Bibliography

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