

Sovereign Hill Education

Life on the Goldfields

Research Notes for Secondary Schools



Before the discovery of gold (Dunlop and Reagan, between 21 and 24 August 1851 at Poverty Point), the Ballarat district had already been established as a pastoral area. Ballarat was known by the squatters as a good camping spot. Wool growing and cattle breeding had become the main pursuits in the area. Sheep and cattle browsed over the surrounding grassy plains, drinking from the three permanent water holes found in the area.

The transformation began, from a tranquil squatting environment to a noisy accumulation of diggers scouring the ground in search of gold.

Creeks that for so long had flowed through a peaceful, verdant land were almost obliterated with tailings and sludge, bereft of a clear channel in wet weather flood waters, rushed in all directions. Great havoc was caused among the mass of tents and business premises that had appeared along the low-lying flats.

The discovery of gold made great changes in the life of the Australian colonies. Many of the men, women and children who flocked to the goldfields were hardly suited to the rigours of the journey to Australia, the conditions encountered on arrival, or the week's journey to the diggings.

Within a few weeks of the discovery of gold, 2,500 men were furiously digging at Ballarat, and the population was increasing by 100 a day. Men worked harder than ever before, enduring the hardships of the rough life.

On 20 September 1851, the Goldfields Commissioner arrived to issue a monthly licence of one pound, ten shillings (two dollars, ten cents) to dig for gold on a claim eight feet square for one month. It was also accepted that no work was to be done on the Sabbath (Sunday). On some diggings a gun was fired each evening from the Commissioner's tent to signal that work must finish for the day. The government gold escort was established on 21 September of the same year to take gold to Melbourne.

By mid October, there were 2,000 tents near Golden Point, 10,000 men at work and 10,000 pounds (\$20,000) earned daily, but very unequally divided.

By the end of 1851, Ballarat was almost deserted as gold was more easily obtained at places such as Mt Alexander (Castlemaine). When the news of gold discovery reached England early in 1852 many skilled tin and coal miners from Cornwall, Scotland and Wales decided to set out on the six or seven month journey to Victoria. These men were wise in the ways of mining and realised that gold was being found at ever-increasing depths. And so shafts were dug to depths of 100 feet (over 30 metres) through wet, waterlogged ground to reach rich "wash dirt". Many men became unexpectedly wealthy. This started the second rush to Ballarat.

In the rush for gold, many men left their jobs and headed for the diggings. When gold was first discovered there were no roads to the goldfields and when the people arrived there were no towns, houses or shops. Everything they needed had to be carried by

horses, bullocks or by the people walking or pushing wheelbarrows holding belongings. Life on the goldfields was not easy. People had to be prepared to suffer every conceivable hardship. Heat, dust, rain, cold and outdoor exposure, bodily fatigue and muscular exhaustion were part of diggings life.

Men, women and children lived in tents or shanty huts made from canvas, wood and bark. Food and other goods had to be brought in by cart and were expensive. Overcrowding also meant that contagious diseases spread quickly.

Because so many people rushed to the goldfields, all the necessities such as food, clothes, tools and horses were scarce. The merchants who sold these things could charge high prices. A few diggers were lucky and became rich quickly, but most remained as poor as they were before.

The people who did become rich during the Gold Rush were tradesmen and merchants who sold food and equipment to the diggers; or they were landowners who sold property to diggers who wanted to build houses when the gold rushes were over.

The population of the goldfields was almost exclusively male. In 1854, there was one woman to every four men. As Ballarat began to become more established, women and children came to join their men, but there was still an imbalance in the population.

During the goldrush decade, people swarmed into Australia. However, many of them did not see themselves as immigrants. Their intention was to make their fortune by finding gold and then return to their own countries as wealthy citizens. The journey to the colony took up to 7 months. At the port of embarkation, emigrants were exposed to a great variety of infections, from whooping cough, cholera and measles to typhus. A compulsory but inadequate medical inspection overlooked many illnesses. In an effort to stop bed bugs and lice, it was forbidden to bring bedding on board. Occasionally epidemics spread through the ship amongst both passengers and crew – sometimes resulting in many deaths. Those passengers who survived the journey often arrived, sick, exhausted and unfit for life on the goldfields.

Although life on the goldfields was difficult, the diggers still found time for entertainment. Horse-racing and fighting were popular. Often in the evenings the diggers told yarns or played musical instruments around a camp fire. Other goldfields entertainment included singers, actors and dancers. They performed in tents, hotels and theatres.

Check our photo gallery for early images of Ballarat.

Bibliography

Keesing, Nancy (edit), *History of the Australian Gold Rushes*, Melbourne, Angus and Robertson, 1981. (First published as *Gold Fever*, 1967.)

Korzelski, Seweryn (translated and edited by Stanley Robe), *Life on the goldfields – Memoirs of a Polish Migrant*, Melbourne, Mentone Educational Centre, 1994.

Serle, Geoffrey, *The Golden Age: A History of the Colony of Victoria 1851-1861*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1977.

Strange, A. W. (Bert), *Ballarat, The Formative Years*, B. Strange, 1982.

