

Sovereign Hill Education

Women of the Goldfields

Research Notes for Secondary Schools



When gold was first discovered in Victoria, in 1851, thousands of men left families and jobs to seek their fortune on the goldfields. It was thought by many that respectable women would not be able to endure the goldfields lifestyle and that the goldfields were “no place for a lady”.

However, while the majority of women stayed back in the towns with their families, it was not long before some began arriving on the goldfields. As early as 1851, there were women who worked side by side with their husbands searching for gold. Some women even worked independently as diggers, but unlike their male counterparts, were not required to purchase a licence.

By 1854, there were 4,023 women on the Ballarat goldfields, (compared to 12,660 men), and 208 women were in paid employment. The majority of these were domestic servants, 8% were storekeepers and others were needlewomen, dressmakers, milliners and shoebinders. Only 5% of all women were single and there were between 3,000 and 4,000 children. Figures from the 1861 Victorian census show the population of the Ballarat goldfields had grown to 12,726 men, 9,135 women and 7,838 children – the city was now beginning to settle into a more normal ratio of men to women. At that time, 136 women in Ballarat listed their occupation as gold mining, compared to 78,919 men.

One woman who ran a successful store on the Ballarat goldfields was Martha Clendinning. Her husband, George, was a doctor who brought his wife to Victoria

from England in 1852. He travelled to the goldfields with his brother-in-law to look for gold, leaving Martha with her sister in Melbourne. However, Martha and her sister decided to follow their husbands and walk the ninety-five miles to Ballarat. They brought with them bedsteads, mattresses, blankets, chairs and cooking utensils on a bullock dray and planned to set up a store on the diggings. This idea was met with ridicule from their husbands as it was not considered normal behaviour for respectable women of the time to operate businesses. Despite the men’s objections, the sisters opened a store in the front of their tent selling tea, coffee, sugar, candles, tobacco, jam, bottled fruit, cheese, dress materials and baby clothes. Margaret and her sister were very proud of their store which, unlike many others on the diggings, did not sell sly grog. They were required to pay £40 (\$80) a year for a storekeeper’s licence.

After her sister returned to Melbourne, Martha continued to run the store on her own until 1855. She then decided to close her small store because it was facing competition from larger businesses and the storekeeper’s licence was becoming too expensive. Also, Martha’s husband could now support the family and social attitudes towards middle class women were quickly changing as Ballarat became a more settled, conservative community. Middle class women were expected to be wives and mothers – not businesswomen.

For many women, life on the goldfields was very difficult. They often had to face living in cramped dirty conditions

in small tents with few comforts. Obtaining fresh water was a constant worry. The creeks and streams that were once clear and suitable for drinking were now muddied by alluvial mining and in summer fresh water had to be carted to the diggings where it could be purchased by the bucketful. Cooking a balanced meal was difficult because of the scarcity of fresh fruit and vegetables, and prices for goods fluctuated. For most women on the goldfields, their daily life revolved around the routine of minding children, cooking, washing, and ironing as well as making bread, butter, jams, soap and candles, and mending and making clothes for the family. Primitive sewerage facilities created extra health hazards.

Women also had to face the hardships of childbirth – usually without trained medical assistance. At this time most women relied on the help of other women or midwives. Infections were common and many women and their children died during childbirth. Diseases such as whooping cough, measles, diphtheria, and scarlet fever were easily spread in the crowded unsanitary conditions of the goldfields and led to a high infant mortality rate. In the early 1850s, one quarter of all the recorded deaths in Ballarat were children under five.

There were no widow's pensions or child support and often women found themselves in desperate poverty. Sometimes diggers consumed by gold fever deserted their families. In Ballarat, there were 42 widows in 1854, 271 in 1857 and 595 in 1861. In 1867, a small female refuge was established to offer help to homeless women.

Apart from women in "respectable" occupations there were also the "fallen angels" or prostitutes. The brothels and hotels of Esmond Street were very much a part of the nightlife of Ballarat East in the 1850s. Some young girls turned to prostitution in desperation after being lured to the colony of Victoria with false hopes of employment as domestic servants.

Despite the hardships facing women on the goldfields, their arrival helped contribute to the end of the disorganized, dirty tent town and the beginning of a building boom that turned Ballarat into an elegant city.

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For photos of Women on the corner of Sturt and Errard Streets and Women tributers of the North Woah Hawp Mine go to www.sovereignhill.com.au/education

