NSW DPI
primefacts
PROFITABLE & SUSTAINABLE PRIMARY INDUSTRIES www.dpi.nsw.gov.au
FEBRUARY 2007 PRIMEFACT 557 (REPLACES MINFACT 40)

Children on the goldfields

Mineral Resources

For children living on the goldfields between 1851 and early in the twentieth century, life could seem like a great adventure one day, and very difficult and harsh the next.

Because their parents moved around a lot, looking for new and richer goldfields, children would have to change schools pretty often. It usually took a while before a school was established in a new area, so often there was no schooling at all. This might sound like fun, but it made it very hard to learn to read and write, and to do arithmetic. Besides, when they weren't in school, children were expected to help their parents with household chores such as minding the younger children, shopping, fetching water up from the creek, gathering firewood, washing clothes, cooking, or taking care of horses. Often they would also be expected to help look for gold at the diggings.

Mud pies with glitter

Most children could help find gold by using the puddling pan or dish. This meant collecting clay and gravel from the creek bed, carefully tipping off the stones and gravel with some water, and then mixing the wet clay with a stick, and allowing the heavy gold to sink to the bottom. More water was added and the clay carefully washed off over the sides of the pan. This process was repeated until the glittering gold could be picked out and put aside. It was sort of like making mud pies, but much more serious.

Rocking the golden cradle

The children could also ‘rock the cradle’. The older children would help by shovelling the clay and gravel into the Californian cradle, and adding water as they rocked the cradle to separate the gold. The method of using a cradle was brought back to Australia by prospectors who had learned the technique in California between 1848 and 1851. When gold was first discovered in payable quantities in Australia, firstly at Ophir, then at other goldfields along the Turon River, and then at even more sites in New South Wales and Victoria, the cradle was used for washing larger amounts of gold than could be won by using the simple pan alone.

Young miners at Box Ridge, about 1870

The gleaners of gold

A famous painting named 'The Gleaners' was painted by the French artist Jean-François Millet who lived in France between 1814 and 1875. It shows a group of poor peasants in a field, gathering or ‘gleaning’ wheat stalks that had fallen from the reaper's cart. In a similar way, on the goldfields the children would follow behind miners who were pushing wheelbarrows, picking up the bits of golden harvest, which fell to the ground. Also, the keen eyesight and patience of the children allowed them to pick through the old discarded mullock heaps, and in this way, they sometimes gleaned enough gold to do better than some of the diggers.

Schoolwork

Many parents were unable to teach their children, either because they hadn't had a good education themselves, or because they came from non-English speaking countries on the other side of the world, and didn't speak much English. They also worked very hard at gold digging and household

chores, and by the end of the day, they were too tired to do anything but try to relax.

However, there were some educated people at the diggings, including journalists or other freelance writers who kept diaries of life on the gold fields, and they would hold classes for the children in return for payment for their tuition. Classes might be held in the teacher's tent, or more often, in the open under a shady tree. Later, religious groups would set up schools.

Schools weren't set up by the government at new goldfield centres unless there were enough children to make the cost worthwhile, and until the government thought that the people were likely to stay. Because no one knew how long the gold would last, and the 'towns' were more like camping grounds with lots of canvas tents and some crude bark huts, the government simply didn't bother to build schools.

The first schools

Early churches, like the early houses were of very rough construction. They often doubled as schoolhouses. Until government schools were built, parents who wanted schooling for their children had to rely on those that were run by the various churches or private individuals.

The mining of alluvial gold was considered to be 'poor man's mining'. It was relatively easy to get to and mine, as long as it lay near the surface. Digging shafts several metres deep, and then tunnelling along the 'leads' or layers of rock, quartz and gold, was hard work and required at least two or three strong, healthy men working together in a cooperative partnership. Eventually, the gold could not be reached and extracted from the quartz veins without heavy machinery and a large amount of capital (investment money). Sooner or later the easy alluvial mining claims ran out, and the families would move on to the next gold rush site.

So schooling was erratic. The children would just get into the routine of a subject when they would have to leave to go with their parents to another gold field. It could be some time before they could continue their education. They might forget a lot of what they had learnt, or their new class might already have started a different subject.

The teachers

Teachers were often young and untrained, and they would have different ways of teaching. Some were very strict and others just couldn't keep control. One teacher at a school near Orange was only 14. Even though the school fees were very small, about 10c per child, many miners were still unable

'The zealous family' – a family at work on the goldfields, about 1851. From an engraving by Samuel T. Gill

to afford them. Fees were lowered in 1880, and it became compulsory for children to attend school 140 days per year. Even then, many families didn't send their children to school because they wanted the children to help them with prospecting. Inspectors were sent around the districts to chase up those children who weren't attending school.

Many of the buildings had no heating, so in cold weather the children would have been very cold, and in the hot weather, with the poor ventilation, and the roofs mostly made of galvanised iron, the rooms would have been like ovens. In those schools where a fireplace was provided, it was usually up to the children to bring the wood for the fire from home, strapped to their backs. They would have to walk to the schoolhouse, sometimes several kilometres in all kinds of weather, unless they were lucky enough to have a horse to ride.

The first school buses

Even as late as the 1920s, around Lucknow, a 'school bus' was organised to pick up children from home and take them to and from school. An Inspector had found that children were being kept home because it was snowing, it was too far to walk and the children had no shoes**. School buses**, which were usually **horse drawn carts**, became quite common at that time for children in outlying areas.

Have schoolbooks, will travel

There were several forms of schooling, which depended on the number of pupils. An unusual situation occurred when there were only a few children living in a sparsely populated area. A teacher would travel **house-to-house** to the various locations, teaching the children, usually in one of the homes, for one day a week. He would then leave work for them to do until his next visit. He often stayed overnight at the home before riding off

early the next day to go to the next location. He might visit five different locations each week.

If there were an average of 10 children at an area, a **half-time school** would be arranged, with the teacher spending a morning at one school, and the afternoon at another nearby. If the two schools were too far apart, then he would visit the schools on alternate days. Half-time schools were usually conducted in buildings erected by the local parents. These were usually very basic, and could be made of bags and bark, slab, or galvanised iron.

Provisional school

Where there were more than 20 children the government would erect a building and provide a full time teacher, usually with a sewing teacher for the girls. If the teacher was married, then his wife was expected to act as sewing teacher. Students at a school would range in ages and degrees of learning. The teacher would set some work for one or more groups to go on with while he concentrated on another group.

So it can be seen that in the mining communities, the classification of the school, and the degree of teaching was dependent on the number of children attending. If the gold ran out and many people left the area, then the school would be downgraded, or even closed. In many of the areas settlers came, established farms and became more permanent residents. It was often difficult for them when the mining families left because it meant the closure of services such as schools and post offices.

Even the government school buildings were very primitive, and the teachers very strict. Caning was a common form of punishment. At one school the teacher was particularly vicious. One little boy went home with his shirt blood stained after the dreadful caning he had received. His mother and several other mothers marched to the school with horsewhips, and the teacher felt what it was like to be beaten. There was never any trouble from him again. However, usually the parents didn't take things into their own hands but sent written complaints about the teacher to the Department of Education. An inspector would be sent out, and if he felt the complaints were genuine, then the teacher was censured, and if the problem continued he was moved to a school of lower standing and so demoted.

Teachers' accommodation

Not only were the school buildings primitive, but many of the teachers lived in very poor conditions. Accommodation was often simply a small room tacked on to the schoolroom. The room might be without a window, and even have no door. It might have no furniture, and no way of cooking meals.

First church and school in Burraga. Opened 14/11/1882; teacher, Mr Robert Evans; rented for 25 pounds per annum by Department of Public Instruction; 76 pupils enrolled

There would be no way of cooling the area in summer, and no heating in winter.

Fresh water was also a problem, as many of the schools didn't have a tank provided. Often the water in the creeks and rivers nearby would be unfit to drink, particularly if mining was being carried on further upstream, as this would make the water very muddy and polluted. One of the schools in the Wellington area had no tank, and when the teacher requested one he was told that the children would have to bring their own water from home!

A teacher could apply to the inspector for an allowance to stay at a nearby inn, and receive an additional allowance for meals, but it was very difficult to have these requests for allowances approved. In 1886, one teacher, Mr A Greville at Ophir put all his woes in writing to the Education Department, by way of the inspector. He listed all of the above deprivations, and explained that he had tried to follow the suggestion of the Inspector that he should arrange to obtain his meals from a neighbour. Poor Mr Greville admitted that he'd given up when he found that he had been obliged to walk 8 kilometres for each meal!

The inspector's reply was that Mr Greville was a newly appointed unclassified teacher, and that the inspector at the time would probably report that Mr Greville had “willingly taken Ophir with his eyes open to the circumstances of the place". He recommended that the application should be declined. Fortunately for Mr Greville, the Under-Secretary at the Department felt that the inspector was being too hard, and Mr Greville's application was approved.

Another teacher who was expected to live in terrible conditions as late as 1906 was Mr Henry Goonan, the teacher at Yarragal Public School (east of Wellington on the Macquarie River). The school opened in March 1905 and Mr Goonan put up with his atrocious conditions for 11 months before making a humble application for a living

allowance. He reported that during that time he had to lodge in a very uncomfortable bag hut. The floor was simply the ground. When there was any wind, it was impossible to keep a (candle or lamp) light burning. He stated that the rain beat in through the bags and during the cold weather he found it impossible to keep warm at night. He further stated, "My school house is a very poor structure, having been privately built by the residents out of old corn sacks, and lined with bran bags".

Having to work and live in such miserable conditions, it is hardly surprising that school teaching in the bush did not attract teachers of very high calibre, and that those who were there were not very happy, and would take it out on their students.

Acknowledgment

Prepared by Frances Jones 06/06/2000, based on a text by Kerrin Cook.

© State of New South Wales
through NSW Department of Primary Industries 2007

ISSN 1832-6668

Replaces Minfact 40

Check for updates of this Primefact at:
www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/primefacts

Disclaimer: The information contained in this publication is based on knowledge and understanding at the time of writing (February 2007). However, because of advances in knowledge, users are reminded of the need to ensure that information upon which they rely is up to date and to check currency of the information with the appropriate officer of New South Wales Department of Primary Industries or the user’s independent adviser.

Job number 7511