

THE RUSH OF '86

In February 1995, historian Cathie Clement spoke to Kimberley Society about the 1886 gold rush to Halls Creek, tracing its origins to 1879 when a geologist with Alexander Forrest's expedition suggested that the headwaters of the Fitzroy River might be gold-bearing. In 1882, Philip Saunders, a prospector from Pine Creek in the Northern Territory, found traces of gold around the upper Ord River. The government then sent Edward Hardman, an Irish geologist, to the Ord watershed with a survey party and he reported it promising. More prospecting occurred in this area but finds weren't broadcast until Charles Hall and John Slattery announced in Derby that they had found 10 ozs of nuggetty gold in 4-6 days at Halls Creek (named after Hall) on 14 July 1885. The government had offered a reward of £5,000 to anyone who discovered a workable goldfield within 300 miles of any declared port in the colony. For various reasons this reward was never paid, but word spread on the bush telegraph and other prospectors made their way to the Kimberley.

At this time Derby was a tiny town, with a police post, resident magistrate and some tents. Pastoralists were already in the area. Nat Buchanan had delivered cattle to Ord River station in June 1884, and the Duracks and Tom Kilfoyle had arrived. "Black Pat" Durack and August Lucanus foresaw the gold rush and each set up a store in Cambridge Gulf to supply the prospectors. Colonial newspapers cautioned people against rushing Halls Creek but, by January 1886, Derby people were taking steps to cope with a rush. By the end of February, there were 36 prospectors on the field. They came overland from the Northern Territory, by sea through Cambridge Gulf, or in through Derby, travelling 100 miles further than the Gulf route.

Charles Carlisle brought 56 ozs of gold into Derby on 26 March 1886, and 6 parties reported 150 ozs on 3rd April. The catalyst for the rush was a telegram sent from Derby, via Cossack, the following day by Thomas Henry Lovegrove, the Resident Magistrate. It was published in eastern colonial papers, reaching shipping circles as far afield as New Zealand. This started the rush that shouldn't have happened! Wyndham didn't exist at this time, so people booked for King Sound. Many were dumped on the mud there.

The Executive Council declared the existence of a goldfield on 12 May 1886 and on the same day *The Melbourne Argus* described the rush and the area. By June, hundreds of people, called Kimberley Diggers, were on board ships with no idea of what was in store for them, including the rugged terrain.

Already there was trouble in the Halls Creek goldfields. There were no police, and camps were small and scattered through men following new finds. At Spear Gully on Macphee's Camp, Aboriginal warriors fatally speared Fred Marriott and wounded one of his mates. The prospectors followed their tracks to the Mary River area and wiped out all the people they found.

The SS *Triumph* arrived off Derby from New Zealand full of diggers who, because they had a case of Scarlet Fever on board, were not allowed to leave the ship. This incensed them, causing much drama, and eventually they all went ashore anxious to be up and away to make

their fortunes; so they thought. Some 10,000 people are believed to have joined the rush, but no more than 2,000 were on the field at any given time. By September 1886 there was an exodus and prospectors were fleeing. Few profited from going there. Neither Derby nor Wyndham had a bank and currency was in short supply. People had to use shin plasters, similar to money orders or cheques, instead of money.

Some of the characters Cathie mentioned were Tom Nugent, head of the Ragged Thirteen who came as opportunists and reputedly butchered stolen cattle for the passing diggers. Among the very few women were an alcoholic prostitute, known as the "Mountain Maid", and Sarah O'Neill, known as "Mother Dead Finish". She came over with her husband and, after his death, worked as midwife and washerwoman. Legend says she was killed over some gold sovereigns she kept in her bodice. Paddy the Flat, an illiterate Irishman, set up as a storekeeper and publican in the area. Russian Jack is known for pushing his sick mate part way from Derby to Halls Creek in a wheelbarrow.

The Kimberley had no newspapers at this time and Cathie's talk was based on snippets gleaned over the years from outside papers, police journals, private diaries and reminiscences. The rush to Halls Creek, although largely a disaster for those who took part, opened up the trail that ultimately led to the sustainable finds at Kalgoorlie and Coolgardie. People are still looking for gold around Halls Creek, some with success. The town was moved from the original site, however, and today there are few signs of the feverish activity that once enlivened the area.

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