

Entertainment on the Goldfields

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POWERHOUSE MUSEUM



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Glossary words

When a word is printed in bold, click on it to find its meaning.

The Australian gold rushes

In 2001, Australia celebrated the 150th anniversary of the official discovery of gold near Bathurst in New South Wales. On 12 February 1851, Edward Hargraves found five grains of gold in mud washed from Lewis Ponds Creek.

Gold was such a valuable and desired material that for a while, the whole country was caught up in 'gold fever'. Men left their jobs, homes and families to rush to the goldfields in New South Wales and Victoria. The fever spread to Queensland, and then finally to all the colonies of Australia. Within 10 years, the population had more than doubled, as eager gold diggers from Europe, America and Asia sailed to Australia in the hope of making their fortune. Australia was never the same again.

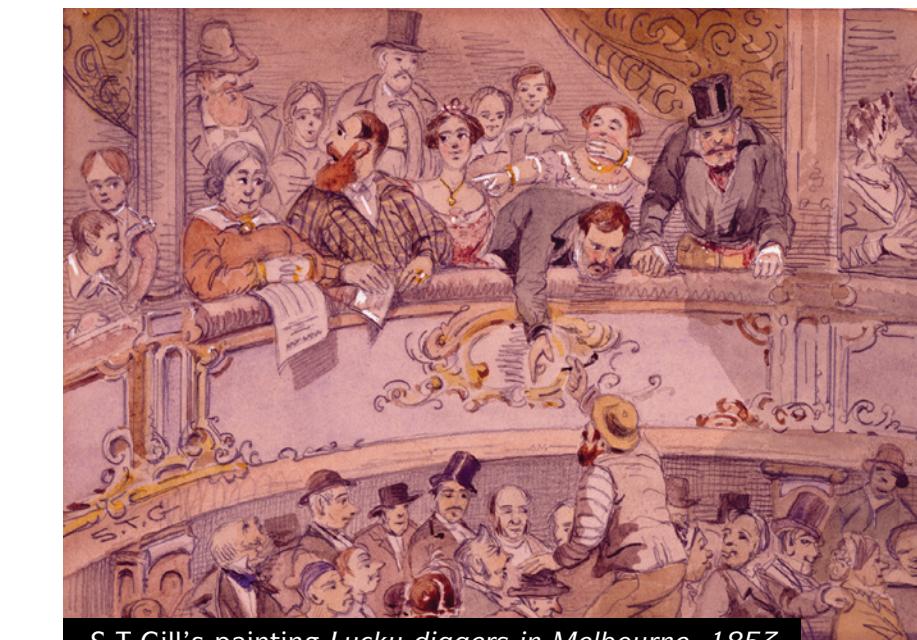
New towns and cities grew quickly with the increase in population. More farming land was taken up to feed the diggers and their families. New industries developed to provide them with building materials, furniture, clothes and food, and equipment for the mines. But gold did not bring prosperity for all. As settlement spread, more and more Aboriginal people were forced off their traditional lands.

Entertainment on the Goldfields is one in a series of six books that celebrates 150 years of gold in Australia, from the excitement of its official discovery in 1851, to the large scale mines of today. Each book looks at how the discovery of those tiny grains of gold changed Australia forever.

Entertainment on the goldfields

Entertainment was very important on all the goldfields. After a long hard day of digging, carting soil and rock, and washing it in pans and cradles, diggers were keen to enjoy themselves. Sitting around the fire telling stories, singing and playing music, they celebrated their successes and forgot about their disappointments. Once goldfields became more established, diggers went to theatres and music halls. On Sundays and holidays, there were sports like cricket and football, horse racing and boxing matches.

Today, we still enjoy some of the games and entertainments that were first seen on the Australian goldfields.



S.T.Gill's painting *Lucky diggers in Melbourne, 1853*

Theatre entertainment was very popular on the goldfields, but the audience seems to be doing everything but looking at the stage. Some are talking and laughing, while one man hands a pipe to another. Goldfields artist, S.T.Gill travelled to the Victorian diggings from South Australia. He made a living by drawing scenes of the life he saw around him.

In this book you can:

- SEE how diggers entertained themselves with stories, music and games
- READ about the success of theatres and music halls, and stars like Charles Thatcher and Lola Montez
- FIND OUT about the diggers' love of sport
- LEARN about the problems with drinking and gambling
- DISCOVER the variety of entertainment in diggers' homes
- SEE the types of children's games and toys
- FIND OUT about special days and events.

Around the camp fire

Story telling

After long days looking for gold, diggers were happy to spend evenings sitting with their mates around a camp fire, smoking pipes, and telling stories. Some told stories about their adventures getting to the diggings, while others told tales of bushrangers.

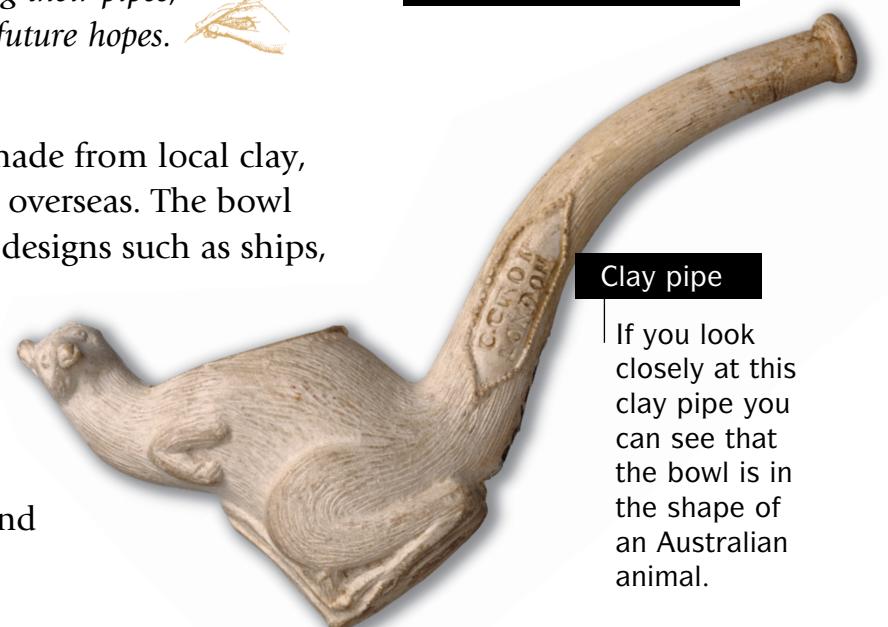
Pipe smoking

Diggers loved to relax around a camp fire and they usually smoked a pipe. Tobacco was introduced to Europe from America. People copied the way American Indians smoked using pipes filled with tobacco leaves. On the Victorian diggings, Fred Brogden's camp fire was a particularly popular gathering place in the evenings and one digger wrote:

We generally had ten or a dozen old familiar faces around our ingle-nook enjoying their pipes, and chatting of past days and future hopes.

(ingle-nook – a cosy corner by the fire)

In Australia, some pipes were made from local clay, but most were brought in from overseas. The bowl of the pipe was decorated with designs such as ships, heads of famous people and skulls. They were easily broken, but were very cheap to buy, and often given away by publicans. People digging around goldfields' sites often find broken clay pipes buried in old rubbish tips.



Clay pipe

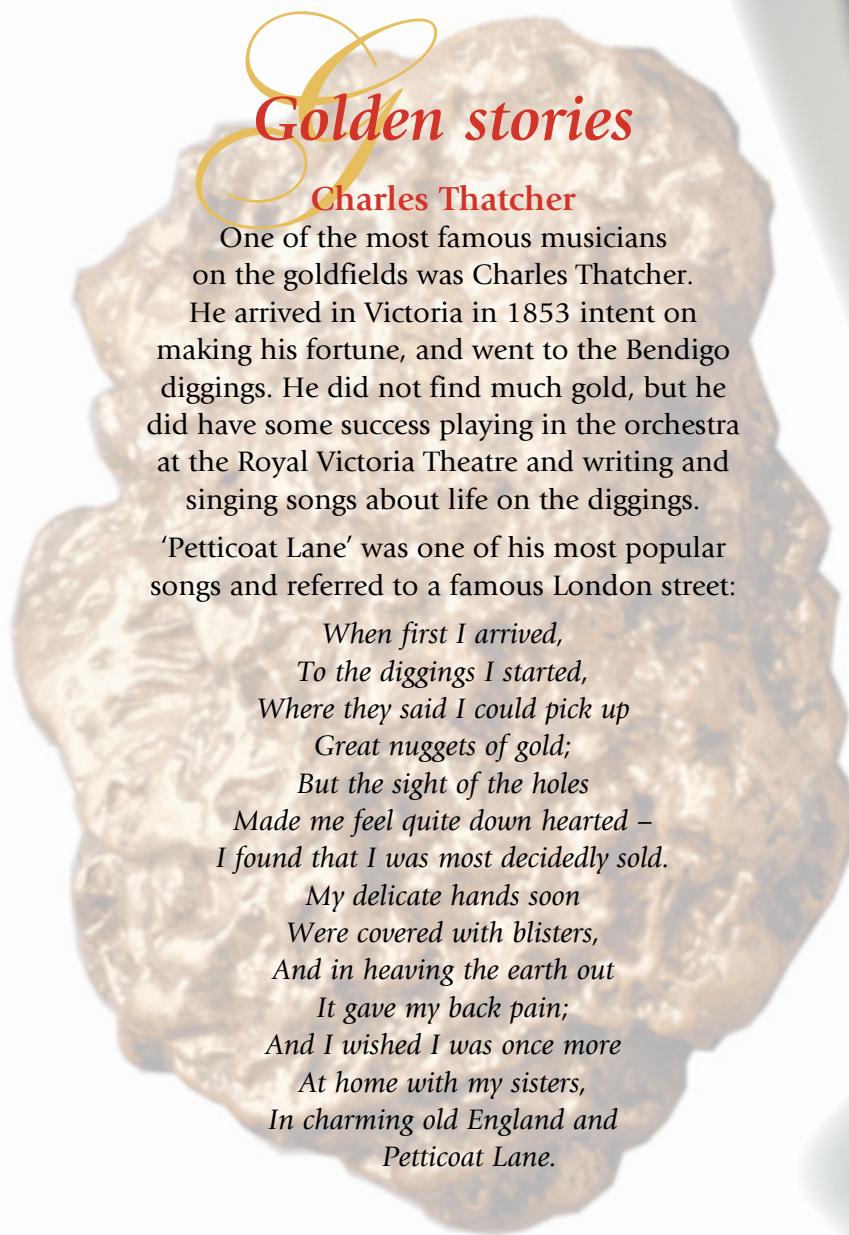
If you look closely at this clay pipe you can see that the bowl is in the shape of an Australian animal.



'The miner's dream of home' was a typical sentimental song of the diggings

Music making and singing

Many of the diggers brought musical instruments from home. Sitting around the fire they played popular tunes on the flute, violin or concertina. Favourite songs were about home, family and sweethearts and about fortunes won and lost. Good musicians were very popular, and some diggers made more money as performers than they ever made from gold.



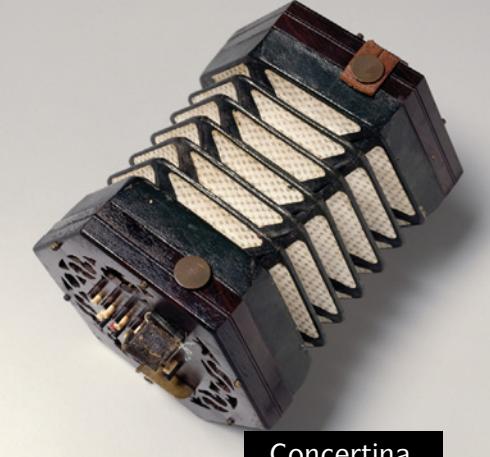
Charles Thatcher

One of the most famous musicians on the goldfields was Charles Thatcher. He arrived in Victoria in 1853 intent on making his fortune, and went to the Bendigo diggings. He did not find much gold, but he did have some success playing in the orchestra at the Royal Victoria Theatre and writing and singing songs about life on the diggings.

'Petticoat Lane' was one of his most popular songs and referred to a famous London street:

When first I arrived,
To the diggings I started,
Where they said I could pick up
Great nuggets of gold;
But the sight of the holes
Made me feel quite down hearted –
I found that I was most decidedly sold.

My delicate hands soon
Were covered with blisters,
And in heaving the earth out
It gave my back pain;
And I wished I was once more
At home with my sisters,
In charming old England and
Petticoat Lane.



Concertina

This is a wind instrument played by pumping a bellows in and out.



Guitar

The most common instruments were the ones that were easiest to carry



Violin

Popular activities

Dancing

Diggers enjoyed sitting around a camp fire, but they also liked to get away from cramped and cold tents. Dancing was extremely popular. Dances could be held almost anywhere and at any time. All that was needed was a large tent and a few musicians. In the early years of the diggings, there were never enough women, so the men danced with each other.

At the time of the gold rushes, dancing was changing. Traditional folk dances were being replaced with more formal dances such as **quadrilles** and dances for couples. As a result, dancing was more popular than ever. In 1859, Richard Horne, a visitor to the Victorian goldfields described:

The general mania for dancing ... from which scarcely anyone who can dance is exempt.



Dressing up for a ball

Women wore their best clothes and jewellery to balls. Some women had brooches like this made from their husbands' gold finds.

Brass bands

Men who could play trumpets, horns and other brass instruments formed bands. These were very popular, and on Sundays they marched around the diggings playing religious **hymns** and popular tunes. At other times they performed in concerts and at dances. As goldfields' towns became more established, and the number of brass bands increased, the bands started competing against each other.



Brass band

Members of this brass band stand proudly holding their musical instruments.



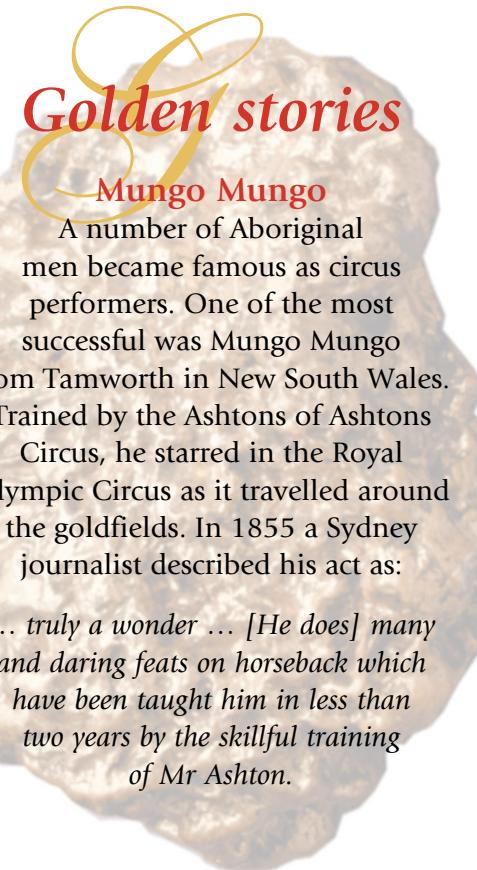
Raising money in Ballarat

In *Subscription Ball Ballarat 1854*, artist S.T. Gill made fun of the guests by painting the women as badly dressed and the men as drinking too much.

Travelling circuses

Circuses were also quick to take advantage of the diggers' enthusiasm for entertainment. Not long after gold was discovered on the Truron River in New South Wales, Burton's Circus arrived. Setting up their tent, the performers played for six months at Sofala and Bathurst.

A night at the circus offered trick acts done on horseback, acrobatics, wire-walking and clowns. At the Bendigo diggings, one of the acts in Brown's Circus was a performance by a horse wearing golden horseshoes.



Golden stories

Mungo Mungo

A number of Aboriginal men became famous as circus performers. One of the most successful was Mungo Mungo from Tamworth in New South Wales. Trained by the Ashtons of Ashtons Circus, he starred in the Royal Olympic Circus as it travelled around the goldfields. In 1855 a Sydney journalist described his act as:

... truly a wonder ... [He does] many and daring feats on horseback which have been taught him in less than two years by the skillful training of Mr Ashton.



A famous acrobat

Circus performer Mungo Mungo effortlessly leaps from his horse, jumps over a length of cloth and lands back on the horse as it circles the ring.

Public entertainment

Theatres

Theatres were some of the first major buildings to appear on the goldfields. Most were large tents with a simple stage at one end and benches to sit on. Diggers were happy to get away from cramped tents into a dry, warm place with entertainers to make them laugh or cry, feel sentimental, shocked or horrified.

Stars from overseas

The stars of the day were attracted to the wealth and excitement of the goldfields and eagerly came from Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and even Europe, America and China.

Often the first entertainers arrived shortly after the diggers. Within weeks of gold being discovered at Gympie in Queensland, the Theatre Royal opened and offered a different production every night.

Actors, singers, acrobats and musicians flocked to the goldfields. Even Chinese opera companies joined the rush. The American actors, James and Sarah Stark took £20 000 home to San Francisco after they toured the goldfields performing *Shakespeare*.

The Irish actor, Gustavus Brooke, was famous for his role of *Othello*. In 1856, after his final performance at Ballarat's Victoria Theatre, he was presented with a gold nugget weighing two pounds (0.9 kilogram). The French dancer, Thérèse Strebinger was so popular that tickets to her show had to be auctioned by the theatre.

Once towns became more established, fortunes were spent building lavish theatres and opera houses. Ballarat's first theatre opened in 1853, and by the end of 1854, there were five theatres. The owner of Bendigo's Shamrock Hotel spent £8000 building the Theatre Royal.

Theatre tokens

Some theatres gave out tokens like these, which showed where you could sit. The cheapest seats were immediately in front of the stage.



What is it worth now?

Today, £20 000 would buy as much as almost \$2.5 million, and £8000 would be equal to \$992 000.



Ballarat's Victoria Theatre

Theatre audiences

Theatre audiences did not sit quietly in their seats throughout a performance. They walked around, came in and out of the theatre, called out and offered loud opinions about the play and the actors. One visitor to a goldfield theatre described the experience:

*T*here was a thunderous uproar all the time, punctuated by exchanges of pleasantries, the popping of corks, and the shouting of compliments to members of the cast.

Children's shows

Sometimes theatres put on special shows for children. Pantomimes and puppet shows such as 'Punch and Judy' were great favourites. One or two puppeteers hid behind the stage, and using different voices for each character, acted out a play with the puppets. Mr Punch always ended up in trouble. He fought with his wife Judy, with the policeman and the doctor.

Like their parents, children did not sit quietly through a performance. They called out, interrupted, laughed and cried at the puppets' antics.

Did you know?

A favourite entertainment was a dance called the 'cancan'. Pretty young women would dance in a way that showed as much leg as possible. At a time when only women's ankles were to be seen, this was thought very daring.



Popular puppets

The fun of 'Punch and Judy' delighted children for many years. These puppets were made by a Newcastle entertainer, Rex Sinclair, in about 1932.

At Sovereign Hill, in Victoria, they have recreated a theatre. Here you can see actors performing in a favourite pantomime of the gold rush years, *Red Riding Hood*.

Golden stories
A gold reward
In Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, a particularly important scene takes place in a graveyard. At one goldfield's performance, the audience of diggers kept interrupting the actors. They offered advice about how to dig, the best tools to use and how deep to go. The actors' patience was rewarded with a shower of gold nuggets when they came out for their final bow.

Music halls

Music halls were another popular form of entertainment. Less formal than the theatre, there was often no charge for the evening's concert. The owners made their money by selling food and drink to the audience.

Diggers and their families who went to Ballarat's Charles Napier Hotel in the 1850s saw dancing horses and monkeys, a man walking across the ceiling, parts of plays and ballets, and a group of Tyroleans yodelling in their national costume.

The minstrel show

One of the most popular music hall entertainments was the minstrel show. White men blackened their faces and sang, told jokes, danced and gave speeches. Much of their act made fun of the way African Americans talked and walked. Goldfields' audiences particularly enjoyed this type of humour and minstrel shows from California toured the New South Wales and Victorian diggings. One of the largest, the Backus Minstrels, was very successful. At the end of its 1855 tour, the audience covered the stage with a shower of gold dust.



When you turn the key on this minstrel doll, he beats the drum and crashes the cymbals



Golden stories

Sarah Barnes

Sarah Barnes and her husband, David, owned the Leonora Hotel on the Kalgoorlie goldfields in Western Australia.

Sarah sewed labels from beer bottles onto her dress and wore it for her performances in the hotel's music hall.



The beer label dress that belonged to Sarah Barnes

A famous music hall star

One of the great stars of the New South Wales and Victorian goldfields was the dancer and actress Lola Montez. Born in Ireland, her real name was Delores Gilbert. After an unhappy marriage, she ran away to London and became an entertainer on the stage. She came to Australia from the Californian goldfields to perform her famous act, the 'Spanish spider dance'.

Protests about the 'spider dance'

Lola Montez danced frantically around the stage during this dance. Pretending a spider had bitten her, she shook her skirts searching for it and showed the largely male audience her legs. This was thought shocking. People wrote letters to the papers and protested outside the theatre. One journalist described it as:

*T*he most ... indelicate performance that could ever be given on a public stage.

A Frenchwoman saw her act in Melbourne and although she did not object, pointed out that all the other female members of the audience walked out. The police banned a second performance.

The reason it was so shocking and why Lola Montez became so famous was that at the time, women's legs were never seen in public. Dresses went down to the ground and even if a woman picked up her skirt, only petticoats and **pantaloons** could be seen. The 'Spanish spider dance' showed off Lola Montez's thighs and appreciative diggers threw gold dust and nuggets onto the stage.

Lola Montez



Lola's gift

In December 1855, this magnificent brooch was given to Lola Montez by her 'friends in Victoria'. Can you find the tiny gold nugget?



Sport

Team sports

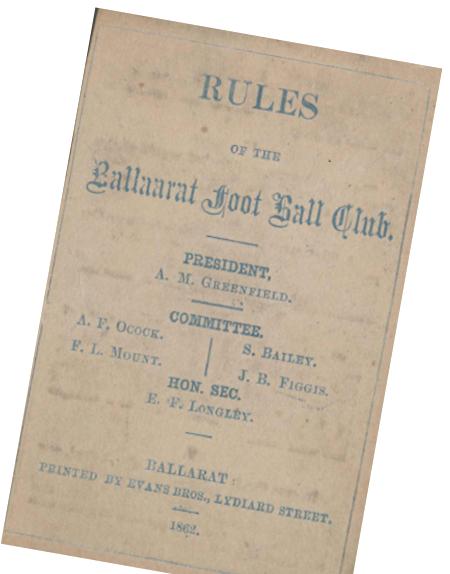
Diggers were very keen on sport. Although everyone worked long hours from Monday to Saturday, no one worked on Sundays. Games such as cricket and football were particularly popular, and every goldfield had its own team and an open piece of ground for a playing field. On Sundays they challenged each other to matches. Huge crowds gathered, gambling fortunes on the results.

Competitive sports

Large fairs took place on holidays such as Boxing Day, the Queen's Birthday and Easter. There were plenty of competitive sports such as running, jumping, weight throwing and tug-of-war. Individual mines formed their own teams. There were also fun activities such as contests to see who could be quickest to eat a treacle bun hung on a string.



The Britannia Gold Mine tug-of-war team stand proudly behind their rope after winning the championship at Ballarat's 1899 Easter Carnival



By 1862, Ballarat had its first football club

This set of rules was produced in 1866. Up to 40 men played on each side. Trees served as goal posts and the first team to kick two goals was the winner.

Golden stories

Playing cricket

It was sometimes hard to find a flat piece of ground for a cricket field. At Wood's Point in Victoria, keen cricketers built a cover over the river for the cricket pitch and trained a dog to fetch the ball when it missed the pitch and landed in the water.

Prize fighting

Prize fighting was another popular activity for Sundays. Diggers standing in a circle formed a temporary ring and shouted encouragement to their favourite fighter. On a June Sunday in 1852, the digger Alec Finlay wrote in his diary about some fighting near his tent:

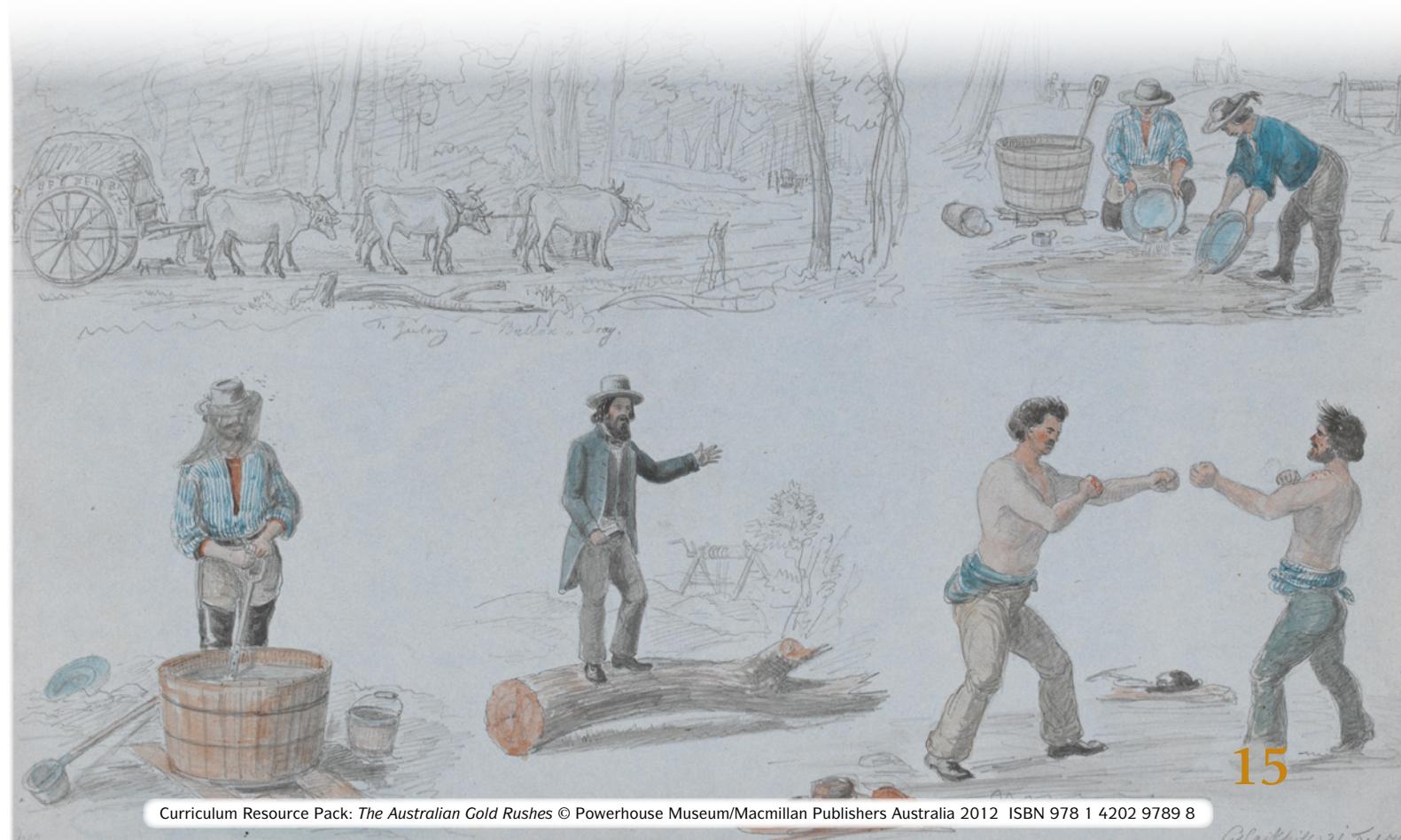
*Did not hear of any preaching near our tent today ...
Several men-fights relieved at times by dog fights etc.*

Competitors did not wear boxing gloves. They fought bare-fisted, and could be badly hurt. If successful though, they could win large prizes. Local champions made more money from boxing than they ever did from gold.

Attempts to ban it

Government officials tried to ban prize fighting, but this was very difficult because a fight could start anywhere. Large crowds gathered quickly at news of a possible fight, and disappeared just as fast when the police arrived.

Artist Eugène von Guérard sketched scenes on the Victorian diggings. The activities shown here include a man preaching on a fallen log and two men boxing bare-fisted



Horse racing

Many of the diggers had horses so it was easy to organise race meetings. They were keen to show off their riding skills and their horses' abilities. No sooner had a goldfield been established than a racetrack was cleared. Towns like Ballarat, Bendigo and Charters Towers had their own race meetings. By 1896, the Coolgardie races were so well established that prize money amounted to £1000.

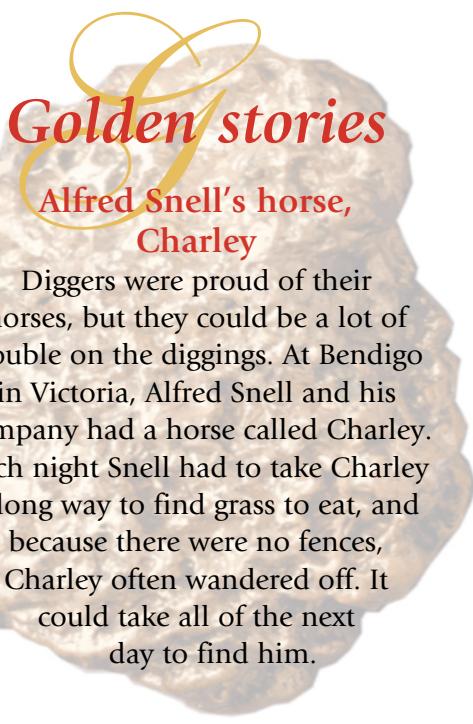
Dangers on the track

Gold had not long been discovered at Gympie when the bush was cleared for a racetrack. Stalls were set up with games, alcohol and food to amuse the crowds. However, the track had tree stumps sticking out of the ground and was uneven, making it very dangerous. Many diggers fell off their horses during the races and broke arms and legs.



Mermaid's cup win

The gold cup pictured on the right was awarded to Mermaid, the winning horse of the 1871 Sydney Cup. The horse's owner, Edward Twomey, and trainer, J. Wilson, have been painted standing proudly next to Mermaid.



Golden stories

Alfred Snell's horse, Charley

Diggers were proud of their horses, but they could be a lot of trouble on the diggings. At Bendigo in Victoria, Alfred Snell and his company had a horse called Charley. Each night Snell had to take Charley a long way to find grass to eat, and because there were no fences, Charley often wandered off. It could take all of the next day to find him.

What is it worth now?

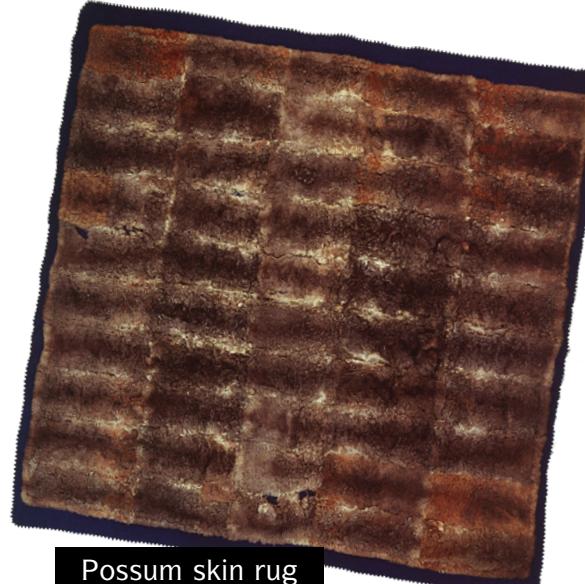
Today £1000 would buy goods worth about \$124 000.



Hunting

In Britain, hunting was a sport for the very rich. In Australia, the fact that most diggers had guns and many had horses, made it a sport for everyone. Some diggers went on organised hunts. Others went hunting when they wanted a bit of excitement or something different for the cooking pot. All sorts of birds and animals were hunted. William Kelly wrote about a day's hunting:

We commenced our sport ... by smoking out some of those prettily-spotted wild cats which overbound in the Australian bush ... and then we had a number of short but sharp courses after the kangaroo rat ... then we took a spell at swan and wild-duck shooting on a very large lake ... After dinner ... we sprang five kangaroos in a cluster ... some time before I could see them I heard the quick thump, thump, thump, following their bounds ... We killed two fine ones.

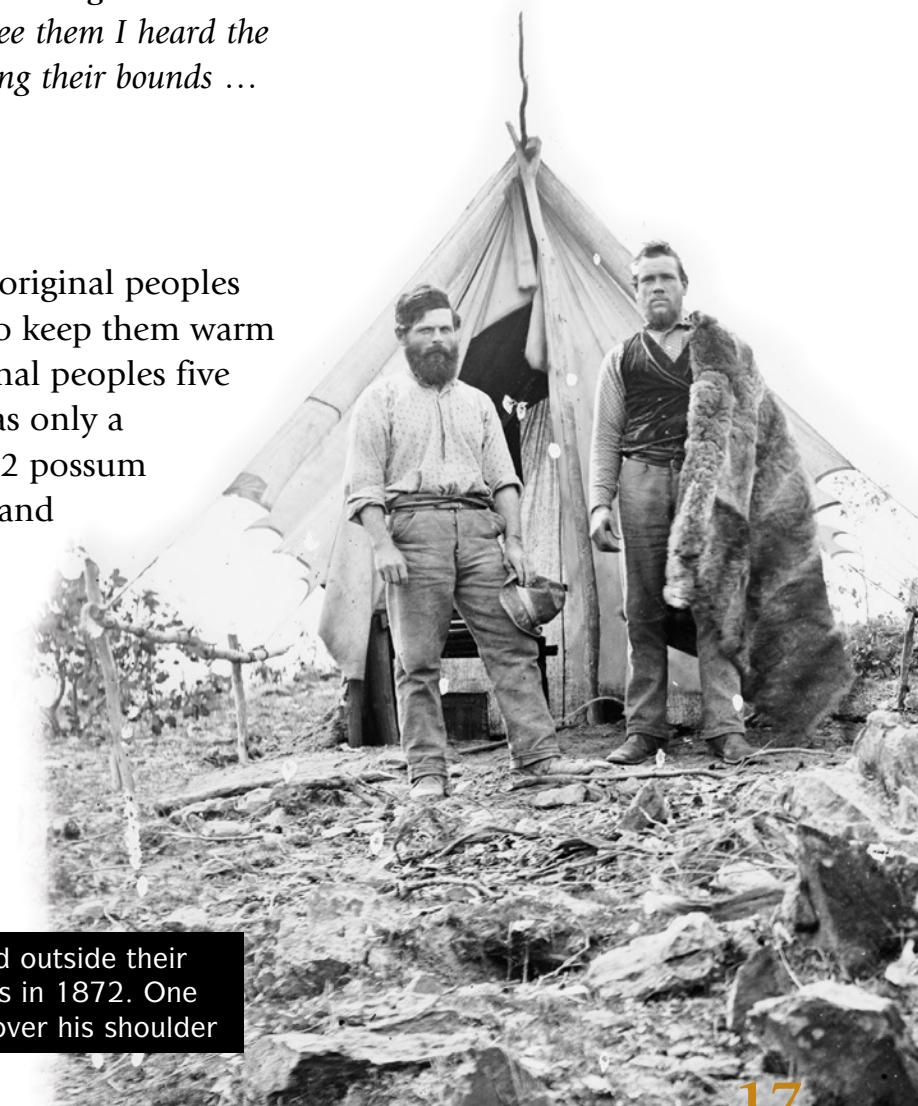


Possum skin rug

A possum skin rug like this could be used as a sleeping bag, a bed cover or as a cloak to keep diggers warm and dry.

Possum skin rugs

Possums were killed for their fur. Aboriginal peoples made possum skin rugs and cloaks to keep them warm in winter. Diggers paid local Aboriginal peoples five to 10 shillings for the rugs, which was only a fraction of their worth. As many as 72 possum skins were needed to make up a rug and it would take many months to hunt, skin, tan and stitch them together. A possum skin rug was equal in warmth to about 12 blankets and particularly prized by the diggers. It kept out the cold and damp and made sleeping on the ground more comfortable.



These diggers were photographed outside their tent at Hill End, New South Wales in 1872. One has his possum skin rug draped over his shoulder

Problems with drinking and gambling

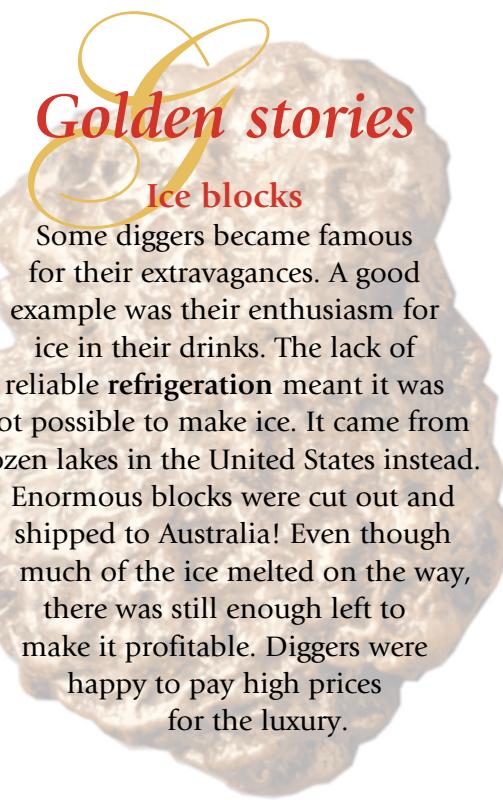
Drinking alcohol caused a great deal of misery and unhappiness on the goldfields. Alcohol was not legally sold on the goldfields until 1853, but there were lots of illegal places to buy it, called 'sly grog' tents. Diggers could buy brandy, rum, gin or beer. After a day working in the dust, mud and cold, many diggers wanted a bit of relief and thought alcohol would provide it. One digger described his thirst for alcohol in this way:

Now, if people in Melbourne, with comfortable houses, good water, and exposed to no hardships, find that the dryness of the climate compels them to drink, how much more necessary must grog be to the diggers, who toil in the hot sun, oftentimes compelled to drink foul water, are continually wet through, and live and sleep under canvas ...

(grog – alcohol)
(foul – disgusting)

Since laws forbidding alcohol did not work, the government soon decided to make selling it legal. Hotels quickly sprang up all over the goldfields. As well as selling alcohol, they provided meals, accommodation and entertainment.

At Sovereign Hill's recreated United States Hotel in Ballarat, Victoria, diggers meet for a drink at the end of the day. Diggers who struck it lucky would sometimes buy fine clothes, like those worn here



Some diggers became famous for their extravagances. A good example was their enthusiasm for ice in their drinks. The lack of reliable refrigeration meant it was not possible to make ice. It came from frozen lakes in the United States instead. Enormous blocks were cut out and shipped to Australia! Even though much of the ice melted on the way, there was still enough left to make it profitable. Diggers were happy to pay high prices for the luxury.

Gambling

Many diggers spent their nights gambling away what gold they had found during the day. Card games, 'two-up', dog fights and cock fights took place on every goldfield. Diggers also gambled on the results of cricket and football matches and on horse races. Gambling on the goldfields was often accompanied by fights, arguments and heavy drinking.

'Two-up'

'Two-up' was very popular. Men stood around in a circle watching a man toss two or three coins in the air. They bet on which side up (heads or tails) the coins would land.

'Pea and thimble'

Another game was 'pea and thimble'. Three thimbles were arranged in a row. A pea was put under one of them and the thimbles moved around. People bet on where the pea was hidden. It was very easy to cheat at such games.

Cock fighting

Two very cruel games that diggers enjoyed were cock fighting and dog fighting. Specially trained male chickens (cocks) were put into a ring to fight to the death and diggers gambled on the result. They did the same with dogs.

The government tried to ban gambling just like it tried to ban alcohol, but had little success. The English journalist, Frank Fowler described the stupidity of men who had worked hard to make money and then:

Came to Melbourne with their belts full of nuggets and squander all, in the course of a few days.

(squander – to waste money or time)



'Crown and Anchor'

Kalgoorlie diggers in Western Australia played a game called 'Crown and Anchor'. Similar to roulette, players gambled on where the pointer would stop. As gambling was illegal, this box was made so that it could be picked up easily and carried away if the police came near.

A game of chance

The Chinese on the goldfields kept to themselves, worked hard and did not drink alcohol. Their main form of relaxation was gambling, and most often they played a game of chance called 'fan tan'. Players gambled on how many coins would be left at the end of a game, and some lost thousands of pounds in a single game.

A government official on the north Queensland goldfields found gambling a particular problem and wrote:

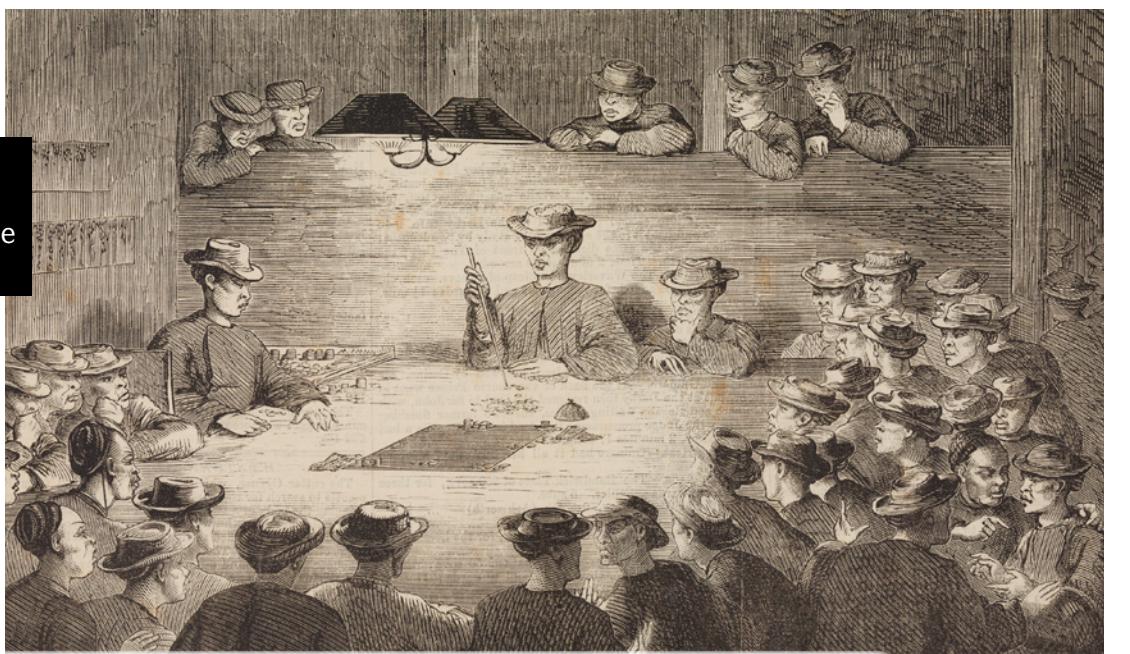
Chinamen would be fleeced to their last penny, and then have to resort to crime. We did our best to stop it, and made several very exciting raids on the gambling houses.

(fleeced – to have everything taken from you)

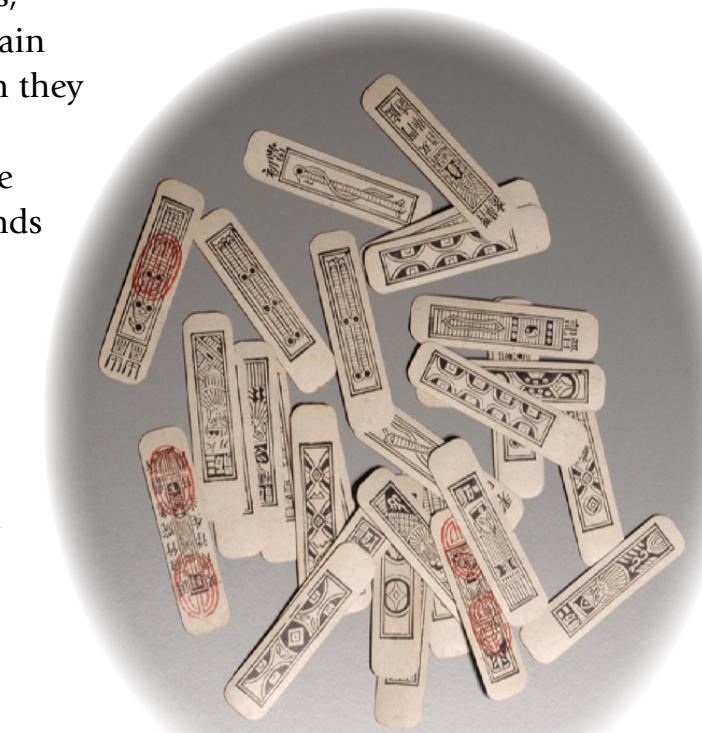
The *Illustrated Sydney News* published a sketch of Chinese men gambling in 1868. The journalist described the men as:

Eager and hopeful ... some happy and laughing, others mournful and depressed as the chances of the game made or marred their fortunes.

(marred – damaged)



The Illustrated Sydney News
sketch of a Chinese
gambling house



Chinese playing cards
from the 1880s

Family entertainment

Clubs and societies

As the goldfields became more established, diggers and their families found all sorts of other pastimes. They formed clubs and societies and built fine public buildings for libraries and art galleries. There was something for everyone. By the 1880s and 1890s, many goldfields' towns had:

- public parks and gardens, often with lakes for boating and fishing
- art galleries and libraries
- roller-skating rinks
- musical societies that organised performances by members and professional musicians
- clubs for most sports and for hunting and fishing.

A visitor to Ballarat in 1884 was surprised at the local enthusiasm for music:

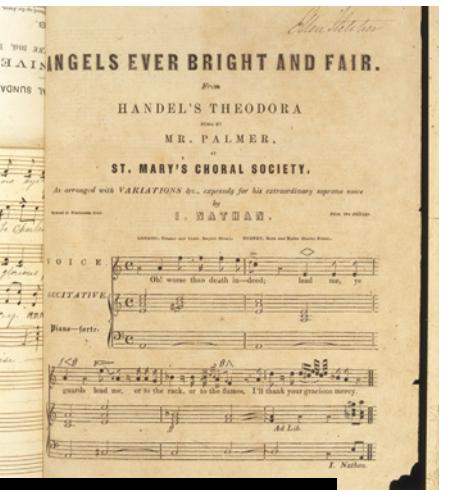
This is a great place for musical societies of all sorts, there are several amateur bands, a *lieder tafel*, choral societies etc. etc., and sometimes there are two or three concerts in the same evening. The *Salvation Army* is popular ... I think that the love of music is at the root of its success ... It gives the untrained an opportunity of trying to produce a melody.

(*lieder tafel* – a group of singers)

(*Salvation Army* – a religious organisation known for its work with the poor and needy)

Indoor bowling

Indoor bowls was another popular pastime for men at the diggings. Bowling saloons were built of canvas and wood. They had a long alley for the wooden balls to be rolled along and there were nine or 10 pins. The winner was the person who knocked down the most pins.



Songs like this were popular with choirs and musical societies



Indoor bowling

At Sovereign Hill, Ballarat, Victoria, they have recreated the Empire Bowling Saloon. It once stood in Main Street, Ballarat. Here boys are setting up the pins for the next game.

Entertainment at home

Once the first gold rush was over, diggers looked for more permanent homes. With families joining them, they built houses and bought or made furniture. They now had homes that kept out the rain and wind and most of the insects. They had chairs to sit on and oil or kerosene lamps to read by. They did not need to go out to be made comfortable and to be entertained. At home, they could make their own amusements.

Music making

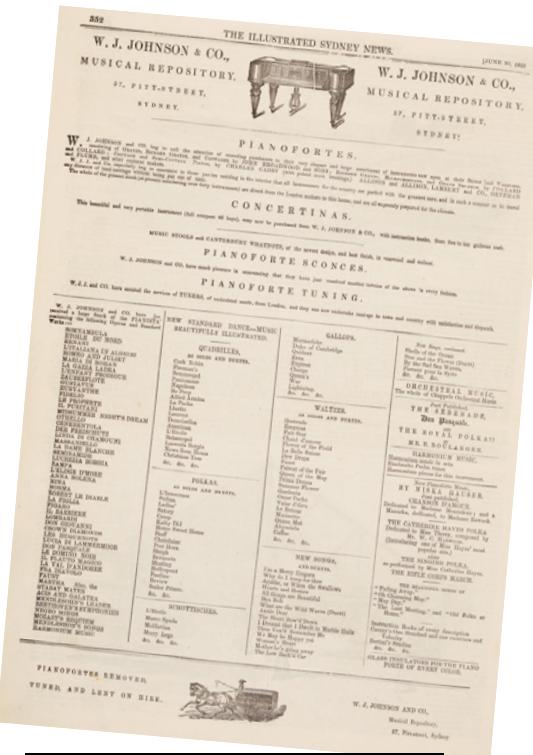
Reading, writing, drawing, playing cards, chess and backgammon all helped pass the time. Music making was especially popular. Sometimes it was classical music, but more often it was a popular song about the hard life of the digger or the loved ones left behind. Someone would play the piano while others gathered around to sing. In some households, people rolled up the carpet to dance.

In 1868, Louise Dearmer had just arrived in Australia. She wrote home to England about the local 'mania for music':

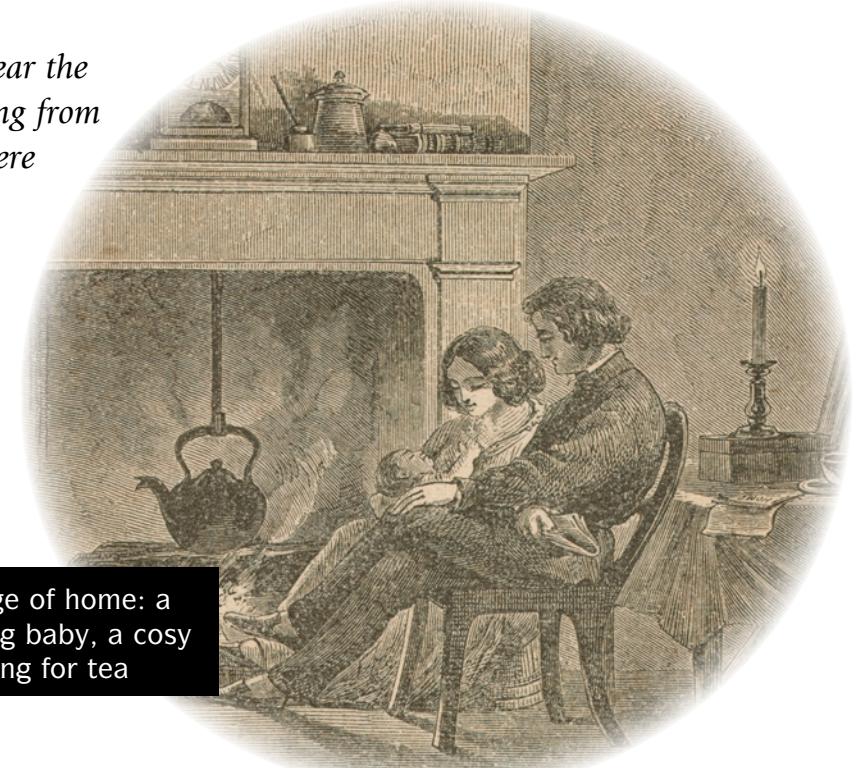
I have been very much amused to hear the tones of a really tolerable Piano issuing from a little cottage, one could wonder where they could find room for it. Passing through the streets in the evening music seems to come from every house ... I must add that in many cases it is a libel to call it music, but I think they are not very particular as long as it is a noise.

(libel – a lie)

The digger's ideal image of home: a pretty wife and sleeping baby, a cosy fire and the kettle boiling for tea



Diggers could order pianos from shops in the city. This advertisement says the pianos could be shipped any distance without being put out of tune. It also lists the types of sheet music you could buy



Reading

On evenings at home when nobody could be persuaded to play a musical instrument, reading aloud was another popular pastime. Visitors to the goldfields remarked on the number of books that diggers often had.

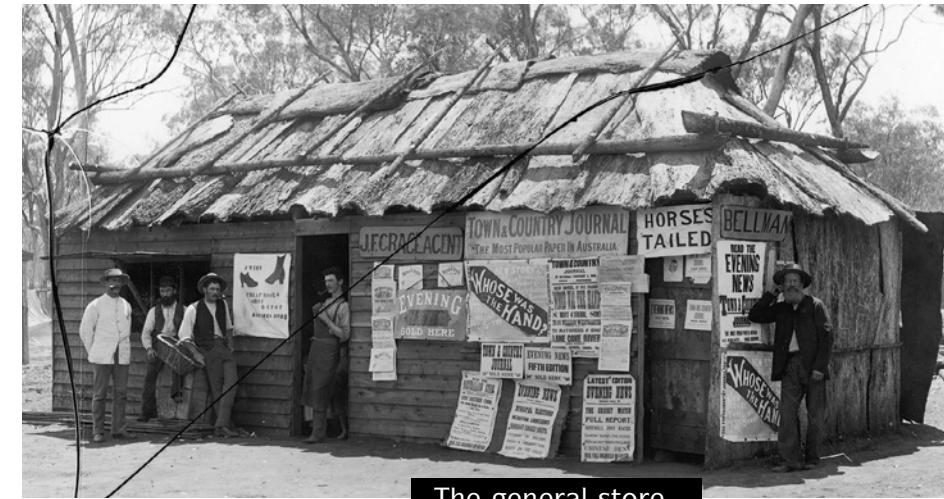
Even simple tents had shelves filled with a mix of practical books on gold mining, the Bible, novels and old magazines. The novels of Charles Dickens were very popular. This enthusiasm for books was unusual because they were expensive, and in Britain, the majority of people could not read. However, diggers were often young, adventurous men, better educated than the average person and with a love of books and reading.

Newspapers

Like everything else, books, newspapers and magazines could be in short supply. Everyone wanted to buy them and stores soon ran out. It could be many weeks before fresh supplies arrived from Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane or Perth. On the Western Australian goldfields in July 1895, John Aspinall was thrilled to get half a Coolgardie newspaper and thought it a 'real treat' since it was only a week old. On the Victorian goldfields in 1855, the South Australian digger, Edward Snell, was just as pleased to buy a six-week-old Adelaide newspaper.

The lending library

Diggers could join a lending library and, for a small fee, borrow books to read. They could also become members of the local Mechanics Institute. These were set up to encourage working people to educate themselves.



The general store

The 'flyers' or notices stuck to the walls of this goldfields' general store show how many different papers and magazines were available. The headlines tell the news of the day: cricket results, the Rosehill races, disastrous weather and dramatic shipwrecks.



Reading was a popular pastime in the evenings. This is a page from a popular children's book

Sewing and needlework

After dinner, families would often spend the evening sitting together with a candle or kerosene lamp to see by. While other family members read, played music or card games, women always had some sewing to do, whether it was making new clothes for the family or repairing old ones.

'Fancy work'

Women also enjoyed what was called 'fancy work'. These activities were much more creative. Magazines were full of ideas for making things for the home. There was everything from useful letter holders made out of string to waste paper baskets made from cardboard painted to look like metal. Patchwork bedcovers sewn from scraps of material were also popular. Some women filled their homes with such 'fancy work'.

Woolwork 'craze'

During the gold rush years, there was a 'craze' for what was called Berlin woolwork. Women bought paper picture patterns marked with coloured squares. If these were copied by sewing stitches in coloured wool onto canvas the same picture would appear. All sorts of things could be made in Berlin woolwork: pictures, purses, slippers, and even men's braces.



This is a completed pair of slippers. Although their maker finished the embroidery, she never cut them out or made them up by sewing on the soles



An 1882 *Young Ladies Journal* paper pattern for Berlin woolwork slippers

Letter writing

The mail was very important. The only way people kept in touch was by writing letters to each other. As many diggers had left parents, wives and children behind in Europe, America, China or other parts of Australia, they were always anxious to read the latest news of home. Writing letters and reading and re-reading the ones that arrived, took a lot of time.

In the early years of the gold rushes, it was hard to keep in touch as there was no regular mail service. Diggers had often moved on by the time letters arrived. Mail was not delivered, but had to be collected from the post office. When the mail coach arrived, diggers stood in line for hours to see if there was anything for them.

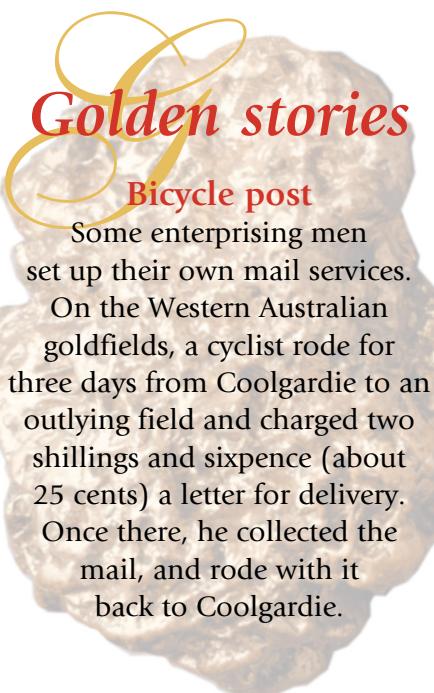
Stamps

Stamps and the gold rush arrived in Australia at about the same time. Until then, the person receiving the letter had to pay for the postage. This was not very efficient as people could refuse to pay once the letter had arrived. As Victoria and Queensland separated from New South Wales, each produced its own stamps.

These letters show some of the types of mail at the diggings. Diggers could buy stamps or they could simply have their letters stamped 'postage paid' as these letters have been. The cost depended on the letter's weight. To save money, diggers carefully folded the letter to form an envelope, sealed it with red wax and put the address on the front.



The bicycle post had its own stamps, which cost more than the regular mail



Toys and games for children

Children were expected to amuse themselves when not at school, helping their parents or working. Most had only a few toys. Instead, they had gardens, streets and fields to play in and a lot of imagination.

There were stories to tell and songs to sing. Boys were keen on marbles and jacks, while girls would organise elaborate tea parties for their dolls. Both enjoyed chasing a hoop down the street, flying kites and playing street cricket, leap frog and hopscotch.



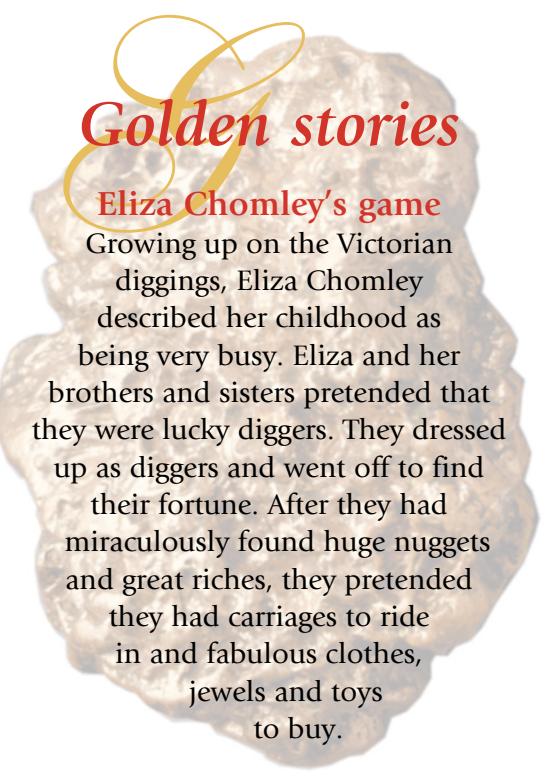
Schoolyard games

These children are at the recreated Red Hill National School at Sovereign Hill in Ballarat. For two days they wear the same clothes as children did in the 1850s, learn the same things at school and play the same games. In the schoolyard, the girls skip and play cup and ball, while the boys play marbles.



Books for children

This detail from a children's book called *Amy Grant* shows a mother reading to her two children.



Eliza Chomley's game

Growing up on the Victorian diggings, Eliza Chomley described her childhood as being very busy. Eliza and her brothers and sisters pretended that they were lucky diggers. They dressed up as diggers and went off to find their fortune. After they had miraculously found huge nuggets and great riches, they pretended they had carriages to ride in and fabulous clothes, jewels and toys to buy.

Children's toys

Store-bought toys were mainly for the rich, or for the children of diggers who had found their fortune. Most children had homemade toys. Mrs Dyall wrote about the dolls she and her sisters made from apples that had fallen off a tree:

We used to put bits of charcoal in for the eyes, a splinter for a nose and a cut for a mouth. A large dandelion flower upturned and stuck on with another splinter made a hat for it. The apple was the head, and another, slightly larger, was joined to it by a thin bit of stick for the body. And the arms and legs were more sticks. We called these our children and made families of them.



Toy blocks

These toy blocks could be put together to make different scenes from the puppet show, 'Punch and Judy'.

Different toys for boys and girls

If there was money for store-bought toys, children could have wonderful things. They could dress paper dolls, act in toy theatres, build castles from blocks or play with toy soldiers or farm animals. Girls were encouraged to play with dolls and develop an interest in domestic life. Boys' toys were more about the world where they were expected to find work. Construction toys, soldiers and horses and carriages were thought suitable for boys.

With her face made of wax and her fine clothes, this doll was a favourite.

Hours would have been spent dressing and undressing such a doll and taking her out to tea.



A favourite toy

Sundays and special days

From the earliest days of the gold rushes, Sunday was the one day that the diggers rested from work and their search for riches. This was the only day they had time to cook a proper meal and get organised for the week ahead.

While on the Victorian diggings, Edward Snell described a typical Sunday in his diary:

Washed a lot of socks, cleaned out the tent, and in the afternoon went to a field preaching on the hill at the back of our tent. The preacher was a Cornish Methodist ... His sermon was plain but well adapted to the circumstances of his audience who though few, were very attentive.

For diggers like Snell, their Christian religion was important. The first churches on the diggings were tents, but money was soon raised for proper buildings.

Best clothes for Sunday

Sunday was also the day men, women and children put on their best clothes. Traditionally, it was the day for families to go to church and to eat together. This meant that Saturday night was bath night so the whole family would be clean for Sunday. Dressed in their best, they walked around the diggings, talking to friends and listening to the band playing.

Sunday preaching

Ministers of religion travelled around the goldfields. If there was no church building, they preached in the open air. Although this minister has an attentive audience, in the background, diggers have their minds on other things. They are watching two men box and probably betting on the result.



Washstand

During the week, most people made do with a quick wash of their face and hands. Homes did not have running water so they would have a jug of water and a basin to wash in. This washstand was made for a doll.

Christmas Day

Christmas Day was an important holiday on the goldfields. European and American diggers found it odd to be celebrating in summer and tried to preserve as many of their traditions as possible.

Christmas pudding

No matter how hard they were working or how unlucky they had been, diggers still cooked special meats and puddings for Christmas Day. One story told of how a particularly successful digger celebrated by stirring gold nuggets into his Christmas pudding as a happy surprise for his guests.

On the Victorian diggings in 1852, one group of diggers built a shelter out of trees. They built a long table, covered it with calico and laid out their feast:

*T*here were chickens, geese, soups, roast beef, a gigantic ham baked for the occasion, and last, though not least, a magnificent pudding.



Christmas Day

These children are thrilled to receive their Christmas presents. How many presents can you see?



Christmas card

Diggers continued to celebrate Christmas in a European way even after they had been here for many years. This Christmas card has two things that were never seen on the diggings in December: snow and holly berries.

Golden stories
Emily Skinner's
traditional Christmas

On the Victorian goldfields, Emily Skinner was keen to celebrate Christmas in a traditional way, despite the heat. She later wrote:

The first Christmas in Australia how strange it seemed. Instead of frost and snow, blazing fires and dear friends around cosy hearths, it was blazing sunshine and intense heat, and worse still, the absence of the dear friends at 'Home'. I was determined though, that we should observe the sacred duty of eating a real Christmas pudding, and succeeded in making a show of liking it, though in truth we were wishing for something lighter and appropriate to the season.

Parades and festivals

With the hardships of the early years behind them, diggers looked for opportunities to enjoy themselves. Goldfields' towns had regular parades and festivals to mark events such as Boxing Day and Easter. Chinese diggers added an exotic element to these parades. Fun Ho, a Chinese vegetable merchant, wrote a letter to a friend in China describing Beechworth's parade in 1872:

*F*irst came the members of the colleges and those who served in the armies of the Emperor, arrayed in costumes as prescribed by the great Imperial Court; the braves wore their [pony]tails coiled, as if about to enter into battle ... Meanwhile the gongs resounded; the hills echoed with the sound of cannon ... Handkerchiefs were waved, and followed by countless thousands, the procession moved towards the place, where at times these people meet to see horses run.

(colleges – government departments)

(Imperial Court – the people surrounding the Emperor of China)

In 1867, Prince Alfred, the second son of Queen Victoria, visited the goldfields. This was the first visit by a member of the Royal Family to Australia and Prince Alfred was greeted with great enthusiasm wherever he went. At Ballarat, more than 30 000 people lined the roadside to see the Prince. Buildings were specially decorated with huge flags and banners saying 'Welcome'.

Another popular parade was for the 'eight-hour' day. This celebrated the shortening of some people's working day from 10 hours to eight hours. Each trade had a special banner made to carry in the parade. This banner was made around 1910 for the Kalgoorlie Tailors and Tailoresses Society.

Trade union banner

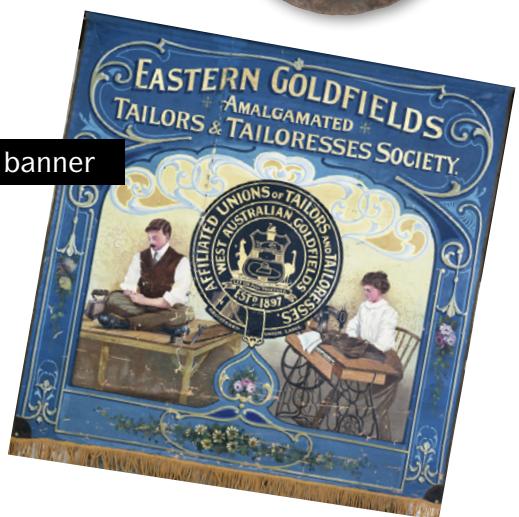


Prince Alfred medal

A commemorative medal from Prince Alfred's visit to Australia. On one side is the Prince's head and on the other, the ship that bought him out, the *Galatea*.



Eight-hour day badge



Glossary

<i>auctioned</i>	when something is sold to the highest bidder at a public sale
<i>backgammon</i>	a game for two players who throw a dice and move pieces around a board
<i>bellows</i>	a tool used for blowing air
<i>cancan</i>	a dance where young women kick their legs high in the air
<i>colonies</i>	the six British settlements of New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania, Queensland, South Australia (including the Northern Territory) and Western Australia
<i>hoop</i>	a circular ring made from metal or bamboo
<i>hopscotch</i>	a game where players hop between marked squares
<i>hymns</i>	songs praising God
<i>kerosene</i>	a liquid that creates a steady flame when used in lamps or heaters
<i>leap frog</i>	a game in which one player leaps over another who is bent down like a frog
<i>Othello</i>	a character in Shakespeare's play of the same name
<i>pantaloons</i>	long underwear that reaches to the ankles
<i>£ (pounds)</i>	currency introduced to Australia from Britain and used until 1966 when pounds, shillings and pence were replaced with dollars and cents
<i>publican</i>	a person in charge of a bar or hotel that sells alcohol
<i>quadrille</i>	a square dance for four couples
<i>refrigeration</i>	the process of reducing the temperature to keep things cool
<i>Shakespeare</i>	a famous English playwright who lived in the 1500s
<i>sly grog</i>	illegally sold alcohol
<i>subscription balls</i>	dances organised to raise money
<i>tan</i>	a method of turning animal hide into leather
<i>Tyroleans</i>	people from a mountainous area in western Austria

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Waterhouse, Richard, 1995, *Private pleasures, public leisure: A history of Australian popular culture since 1788*, Longman, Melbourne

The calculation used in this book to convert 1850s pounds to today's dollars is only approximate as prices fluctuated wildly during the gold rushes.

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