

## **Canooka Gold Field – Boom to Bust in 66 days**

Finding new gold fields in 1857 was a priority of the N.S.W. Government. One man on that trail was Mr W.C. O'Connell who was the then Commissioner of Crown Lands. He was based in Port Curtis. He left Gladstone on the 11<sup>th</sup> October 1857 to do an extended tour to the most northern portion of his district. He took with him "a competent practical miner". They reached the very last station on the 17<sup>th</sup> November 1847.

From here they researched an area of four to five miles, testing beds of creeks, washing surface soil and digging holes, with each dish finding colour. In total half a penny weight of fine gold. This news was brought back to Gladstone and the people of the town raised a subscription of 50 pound and fitted out a party to prosecute a search. In December 1857, due to unforeseen circumstances this party was unsuccessful. (Mr O'Connell in his report to the Legislative Assembly said, "The four were disturbed and brought back a heavier gold from a more southern locality".) The people needed a goldfield.

By February of 1858, Mr W.C. Chapple, a gentleman with much goldfield experience, set out at the instigation of Mr W.C. O'Connell Esq, the original discoverer of gold in this area. He was to give the ground a minute examination. Although Mr Chapple was searching under difficult circumstances, news again reached Gladstone of his successful find of gold bearing ground. Another resident of Gladstone, Mr A.C. Robertson, formally Resident Government Surgeon, set out to ascertain the reliability of the news.

On their return from their endeavours, a public meeting was held in "a large room of the Gladstone Hotel on the 9<sup>th</sup> July 1858. The people of Gladstone were informed of the two men's finds and were shown samples of the gold from the new field. How gold was gained was also of interest. The cradle that they had taken with them was useless. All specimens were obtained by washing the soil in tin pans or pots.

Mr Chapple said that he had found the gold in various parts of the district but he found the first lot on the Fitzroy River near Canooka. The find averaged out of two pans of earth was 7 pennyweight and four grains. Mr Danker had just returned from this area and concurred with the meeting that this was definitely a paying field..

It was agreed unanimously that the results of this meeting should be communicated to the Sydney and Morton Bay papers. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported on the 26<sup>th</sup> July from the correspondent of the *Morton Bay Courier* " that gold has been found on the Fitzroy River". This note was dated 21<sup>st</sup> July 1858. This news did not attract the attentions of the Editors of either newspapers.

The letter to the Newspapers went via the Schooner Jennyhind that left Port Curtis on the 15<sup>th</sup> July 1858, therefore alerting Captains of vessels to the new gold field. Adverts to the Fitzroy River were bigger than the notice of the finding of gold bearing ground.

Advertisements, letters from readers and the *Morton Bay's Correspondent* appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald* daily, until the end of August. From the time of the first advertisement on the 26<sup>th</sup> July to the 5<sup>th</sup> September nine vessels had left Sydney for Morton Bay. Five vessels had left for Port Curtis and the first vessel to go directly to the Fitzroy River was the *Swan*, a Brigantine with 77 passengers (159 pass to Morton Bay, 92 to Port Curtis) (328 persons to 6/9 out of Sydney)

First report in the *Morton Bay Courier* was 1<sup>st</sup> September, and the first vessel advertised was the *Sarah*. Sydney took to the “rush” fast and furiously while Brisbanites were very slow to move. The *Morton Bay Correspondent* had no gold news of their own, they were repeating the reports from the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

The New South Wales Government thought the most northern gold field of their territory was a way of “cleaning” the streets of Sydney. From the beginning the unemployed were transported to the new field free of charge and fully kitted out with provisions.

The diggings were situated on a wide flat of about 70 to 80 acres formed by a bend of Canoona Creek. By the 27<sup>th</sup> September 1856, 50 acres had been dug over by surfacing. Water filled holes dug to 12 feet and there were no pumps on the ground to clear them.

Stores were short on the diggings as there was no way of procuring transport for the goods that were arriving daily in Rockhampton. Cartage from Rockhampton 40 miles away cost up to 25 pound per ton if drays could be found. Boats could only come within 12 miles of the diggings. There were only two carts and they were used for “washing stuff”. Twelve horses carried “washing stuff” in bags slung across their saddles. It cost 5 to 7 shillings per load to get this “stuff” to water.

The most reliable reports from the Canoona digging came from those who worked there and the first most reliable account came from a Mr Henry Friend, who until recently, was a storekeeper at Gladstone. He had just returned from the field on 7<sup>th</sup> August 1858 escorting the first quantity of gold, weighing over 40 ozs and including a nugget. Mr Friend returned to the digging to open a general store. Other stores had opened, Messrs R. Hetherington and Company of Gladstone, Mr Ramsay and Gaden of Canoona Station supplied provisions for cash only. Mr McCartney and Mr Ramsay were in partnership as butchers. There was a blacksmith and a number of grog shops. Mr J.B.P. Ramsay Esq ran mail into Rockhampton once a fortnight to meet the *Jennyhind* a schooner belonging to the Archers. Living quarters were four men to a tent.

Mr W.H. Wiseman, Commissioner of Crown Lands reported on his visit to the Fitzroy Digging on the 26<sup>th</sup> August 1858 that there were 200 persons finding gold in satisfactory quantities on the field. Gladstone was deserted and all produce was landed at Rockhampton. It was necessary for official supervision at the diggings. There was uncontrolled drunkenness, complaints from masters about their absconding men and the Chinese had caused a bit of trouble by jumping a claim belonging to some Englishmen. The Chinese came armed, but were disarmed by the Europeans and their weapons given to the storekeeper for custody, and the crisis averted.

There was still no official report in either the *Sydney Morning Herald* or *Morton Bay Correspondent* re the Fitzroy field, but people kept coming, some to go to the diggings and others to barter supplies. During the 30 days of September, 3,537 people arrived on vessels to Keppel Bay or Rockhampton. There were mishaps along the way, but no great loss of life.

Those that were going to the field were quite unprepared for the trek that they had to take. Those with money took the ship *Canoona* from above the rocks to within 12 miles of the diggings. Those that had to walk carrying their swag and provisions, lightened the load along the way. Others tried to sell what they had to no avail, as there was no money to be made on this field. The gold that was there was nearly

gone. Some were disheartened and left only to pass the new chum who didn't believe what he was told. Many had come on a one way ticket and had few provisions. The track was littered with cast offs that had become a burden.

The 21<sup>st</sup> September 1858 was the start of the return for those who had not been able to make a living on the Fitzroy goldfield. Provisions were still scarce. "Water was 6 pence per gallon, the carrying of goods to the field was now 50 pound per ton. Picks and shovels 7 shillings and 6 pence each, flour 8 pence per pound, meat 3 pence to 5 pence per pound. Horses, carts, tents and cradles were scarce." In the week from the 30 September, 1500 people had arrived in Rockhampton. Letters were sent out to anyone who would listen. "Dissuade by all means anybody from coming here." Great numbers were returning from the diggings desperate and heartsick. Those with the funds returned from whence they came. There were 2575 of them. Goods and passengers leaving Sydney returned without disembarking at Rockhampton. People on shore discouraging every new arrival.

Although visiting government officials reported that official supervision was needed on the field, by way of policemen, customs, medical men and gold escorts, it wasn't until the first two weeks of October that officials and buildings were dispatched from Sydney. The "officials" arrived on the *City of Sydney* on the 1<sup>st</sup> October 1858 and the buildings arrived in the *Wonga Wonga* on the 14 October 1858. There was one iron building, three wooden buildings, bricks and lime, emergency provisions for the six carpenters and one labourer under the supervision of Mr James Moore, Clerk of Works. Within five weeks the carpenters were on strike.

By the 6<sup>th</sup> October there were five troopers on the field led by Inspector W.R. Read. Inspector Detective of Police Chas E Harrison accompanied by Captain Hunter and two constables, arrived a few days later on the small steamer *Adelaide*, to within 10 miles of the diggings. There were a few disorderly characters. There were 268 tents housing about 1200 diggers and one sly grog shop. There was not a single act of robbery or violence. Apathy had struck the diggers. One indignant digger was heard to say "If they had told us the kind of work we had, we'd have brought brooms with us instead of picks and shovels."

By the end of October the citizens of Sydney were blaming the Government for the unemployment problem caused by the destitute diggers returning from Canoona. Concerned citizens started up a diggers employment fund asking for public subscriptions. Each bona fide digger arriving back at Sydney's port had his luggage conveyed, and was provided with usual rations while on the road and for a reasonable time after arrival at his chosen destination, and travelled by dray or steamer as might be arranged, to whatever gold field was chosen.

The Victorian Government conveyed their diggers back to Victoria giving each man a promissory note, at three months, of five pound for his passage. Others stayed on the field hoping, 150 others went to the Gracemere goldfield and the Archers, others waited for help from family and friends.

*Sydney Morning Herald* Correspondent reported as he left Rockhampton on the 26<sup>th</sup> November 1858. "The township is in a state of rapid collapse. Storekeepers are winding up as quickly as possible. Disconsolate diggers are waiting the only means of transport. More than 200 persons in the township are awaiting the *Eagle* in anticipation of leaving (18<sup>th</sup> December 1858). Fifty persons have secured passage on the *Amherst*. Four or five hundred remain on the diggings with neither the means to support themselves in Rockhampton or the return passage to Sydney."

Between the above date and that of the 18<sup>th</sup> December 1858, thirteen vessels had called into Rockhampton conveying the stragglers southwards.

Although "estimates" had been bandied about the quantity of gold taken from the Fitzroy diggings (Canoona), to the end of December of 1858, ships captains from Rockhampton had declared 1324 oz. Customs through Port Curtis, by the end of 1858 had declared 1053 oz totalling 2377 oz. The Sydney branch of the Royal mint saw less than one quarter of this amount for the same period.

*The above information was taken from the Sydney Morning Herald and the Morton Bay Courier in an endeavour to find Rockhampton's missing years, December 1858 to June 1861.*

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*I'm doing ongoing research into Canoona, Rockhampton's missing years and Rockhampton's School of Arts. 2003*