

'Opening ceremony of the 1st State School Coolgardie', 1894



Description

This is a black-and-white photograph taken by Roy Millar with the caption 'Opening ceremony of the 1st State School Coolgardie by James Shaw Esq. Mayor, November 1894'. It shows a group of children and adults in colonial dress standing in front of the school buildings. These comprise two large tents with wooden walls, and canvas roofs stretched over wooden frames. Additional canvas flies are attached above the roof and solid timbers support the sides. The foreground is level and bare. The photograph measures 15 cm x 20 cm.

Educational value

- This asset is a scene taken at the opening of the first state government school on the Western Australian gold fields in November 1894, with George Crabbe as 'schoolmaster' - these tent schools were typical of the gold fields and show that many children were living in the region.
- It shows the original tents provided by the Education Department - although intended as temporary accommodation, tents continued to be used for years; by 1896, two large 6 m x 9 m tents were in use; the WA Government decided not to call for tenders for a school building until the railway came under its jurisdiction on 1 January 1897.
- It shows the tent stretched over a wooden gabled frame - the tent is made of canvas; it has a tent fly over the top to give extra protection from the sun or rain and a frame secured by rope to a pole some metres in front to prevent the wind from capsizing it; light and air would have been a problem, with the students sweltering in summer and shivering in winter.
- It shows the first government school on the Western Australian gold fields - in the earliest days on the gold fields, nursing and schooling were largely under the auspices of the churches; Salvation Army officers conducted a day school, and a Catholic school opened a month before the state school.



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- It suggests that the population in the area was expanding - in 1892, just before gold was discovered, Coolgardie was a watering-hole known only to the local Indigenous peoples; as early as 24 August 1893, when Coolgardie was declared a townsite, there were an estimated 4,000 people living on the new field; this resulted in a demand, not only for a school, but also for other government-funded community facilities, such as a police station, a decent post office, telegraph communication and a reliable water supply for the growing number of miners, prospectors and their families.
- It gives the impression that the 19 boys and 14 girls who first enrolled in the state school were all at school that day - typhoid and dysentery, spread by unsanitary conditions resulting from a lack of fresh water, often kept many children away from school and some had to care for younger siblings if their parents were ill or dead; by 1896, the two overworked teachers had an average daily attendance of 160 out of an enrolment of more than 300 children.
- It shows that the children, aged between 6 and 14 years, are not wearing a uniform but are all dressed in their best clothes and wearing hats for the photograph - the adults, comprising teachers, parents and the School Board, are also dressed in their best clothes for the occasion; the people standing in the shade of the tent and the long shadows show that the photograph was taken early in the day, possibly to show them at their best.

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Creator Roy (William Roy) Millar, photographer, 1894

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