

Buying water at Dunnville, c1894



Description

This is a black-and-white photograph, measuring 13.5 cm x 8.5 cm, that shows a woman, some small children and a group of men queuing to buy water from a store at the Dunnville gold prospecting camp, approximately 600 km from Perth, on the eastern gold fields of Western Australia. The ground around the store has been well trodden by many queues. The store itself is a typical canvas or hessian-clad building. Around the store are low, rocky hills and sandy flats covered with low scrub and scattered small trees.

Educational value

- This asset depicts part of a small settlement in the Coolgardie gold fields that was first called Dunnville after prospector James ('John') Dunn; the name was changed to Dunnsville when it was declared a township in December 1897, one of eight new town sites declared that year within the Coolgardie field.
- It provides an example of the type of store found in outlying centres - storekeepers were frequently among the first to arrive at new rushes, setting up shop in tents, acting as post offices and often making more money than the diggers; they sold mainly tinned food, as before refrigeration this was the only way of preserving food in such climates; the woman in the photograph is probably the shopkeeper's wife; not many miners took their wives prospecting with them but shopkeepers had a relatively more settled existence.
- It features a horse-drawn cart, which is delivering a supply of water - there was almost no drinkable water on the eastern gold fields of WA; supplies had to be brought in at great expense from other places or processed from nearby brackish water; in the cart is a 500-gallon (2,270-L) galvanised iron tank; the water would probably have come from a nearby condensing plant; these were sometimes set up at the foot of a granite outcrop, where run-off would accumulate in the soil, or they were erected on the shores of a salt lake.



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- It suggests that water was bought in small amounts, usually by the gallon (approximately 4.5 L) - the men have containers with them, ranging from waterbags to buckets; the woman has a funnel in her hand for decanting water from the tank into these containers; the price of water would fluctuate according to how much rain had fallen recently; during dry, hot summers the price would be four times greater than in winter; successful prospectors would sometimes shout their friends a bath rather than a beer.
- It includes a woman and small children - there were not many families on the Coolgardie gold fields in the earliest days because the conditions were not conducive to family life; there were no facilities or fresh food and many small children died from dehydration or from drinking polluted water; this tragic situation was not resolved until the opening of a supply pipeline bringing water from a dam near Perth in January 1903.
- It was taken at one of the outlying mining centres visited by Premier John Forrest during a tour of the gold fields in November 1895 covering approximately 1,600 km - Forrest received deputations from local inhabitants, whose chief want was a reliable fresh water supply; Forrest drew heavily on this visit when convincing parliament to approve money for a pipeline to the gold fields; parliament heard that water was needed for ordinary consumption, mining purposes and the railway; the lack of water meant that men were as 'dirty as ever they could be', their families were unable to join them, fresh meat, vegetables and fruit were unobtainable locally and gold output was threatened.

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Identifier Battye Library number 009070D

Source National Trust of Australia (Western Australia) <http://valuingheritage.com.au/>



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