

Camels pulling pipes, c1900



Description

This is a black-and-white photograph showing ten camels in harness pulling a wagonload of pipes destined for the Coolgardie Water Supply Scheme along a well-travelled route in the eastern gold fields. Two lengths of 8.5-m pipe are joined with a collar and in total the camels are pulling 12 pipes on the load. The photograph measures 6.2 cm x 3.6 cm

Educational value

- The photograph shows pipes being distributed for the world's longest freshwater delivery pipeline, a 560-km conduit built to take water from a dam on the outskirts of Perth to gold fields in Western Australia's arid interior. The Scheme required 60,000 pipes, which were assembled in two Perth factories from steel plate imported from Germany and the USA. The pipeline was officially opened on 24 January 1903 and operates to this day. About 30,000 of the original pipes are still in use, now lined with concrete to prevent internal corrosion, and welded rather than joined with rings.
- This is a rare photograph in that it shows camels pulling a load of pipes, when camels were usually a last choice for transporting pipes for the Coolgardie Water Supply Scheme. Pipes were normally distributed from the factories by train to the pipeline construction sites, it having been decided early in the planning to lay the pipeline next to the railway line to simplify pipe delivery. Only where the pipeline deviated from the railway line was animal transport used. In these situations, pipes were railed to the nearest siding or station and transported from there in specially constructed carts, usually drawn by horses and sometimes by camels.
- The situation depicted is unusual in that the lengths of pipe had already been joined before delivery to the pipeline construction site, as they were normally transported as individual lengths and joined in the trench in which they were laid and buried. The joint between two lengths of pipe is visible in the photograph.



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The pipes have been butted together and a ring placed around the join. Pre-jointing was possibly the practice where horse- or camel-drawn carts were needed to transport the pipes. Many pipes stacked on top of each other would have been less stable, particularly over the sandy terrain where camels were used.

- The pipes in the photograph were made with a unique rivetless clamping mechanism in which two locking bars run the length of the individual completed pipe, locking the two pipe halves together. Individual pipes are then joined to other pipes with their locking-bars lined up. This design does not slow down the rate of water flow within the pipes to the same extent as riveted pipes. More than half of the original pipe laid between 1900 and 1902 is still in use today, and travellers following the Golden Pipeline Trail between Perth and Kalgoorlie can easily identify original pipes by the presence of the locking bars.
- The photograph provides evidence of the use of camels for transport in the desert environment of the eastern gold fields and of their ability to carry huge loads, an important consideration here since every pipe length weighed a tonne. The spongy pads on their feet enabled camels to cross the large sandy plains easily and they could survive better than horses or bullocks in the harsh environment. Their ability to travel long distances without needing water and their partiality to the native vegetation, including the aptly named saltbush, made them invaluable and they were used extensively.
- Even before work started on laying the pipes, it became obvious that the pipeline would need to be extended, the Coolgardie Water Supply Scheme having been planned and named at a time when Coolgardie was the centre of gold-mining operations. However, by the time the necessary money was raised and construction began, Kalgoorlie had taken its place. This photograph would have been taken between Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie, a section where the pipeline route deviated from the railway line. It was an arid area where camels would be particularly useful in distributing the pipes.

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