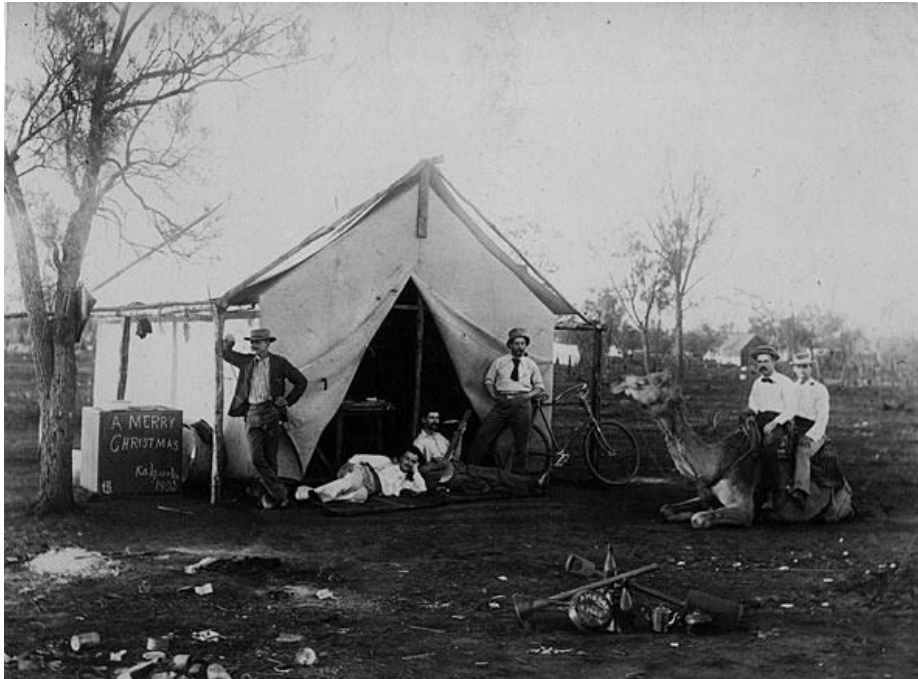


Christmas in Kalgoorlie, 1895



Description

This is a black-and-white photograph of a scene set up and photographed in 1895 to send to friends and family for Christmas. Six gold prospectors are positioned around a tent at Kalgoorlie, Western Australia. They have written 'A MERRY CHRISTMAS Kalgoorlie 1895' on a container - possibly their water storage tank. In the foreground some items (a crossed pick and shovel, teapot and beer bottle) have been arranged and 'A Merry Xmas' has been written on a frying pan. In the background there are other tents positioned among the trees to get as much shade as possible.

Educational value

- This asset gives an impression of how prospectors who remained on the gold fields spent Christmas on the Western Australian eastern gold fields in 1895 - most retreated to the established towns because of the harsh conditions; temperatures in Kalgoorlie at this time could have risen to over 40 degrees Celsius and may have continued for long periods, exacerbating the serious shortage of water; an exemption granted during the hot summer months allowed men to leave their claims without forfeiting them, so they could head for the cooler coast or family Christmas in the eastern states.
- It shows the forms of transport used by prospectors - the camel, seen here wearing its leather saddle with reins, can survive in the desert for long periods without fresh water, whereas a horse needs to drink regularly; the bicycle leaning against the tent is a faster means of transport than walking and is cheaper than a coach, which would also have set routes that did not necessarily suit the prospectors.
- It provides a view of the region now known as Kalgoorlie in its earliest days of settlement - tents and humpies provided the only shelter before buildings and infrastructure were established to support the prospectors and, later, their families; the image shows that the sparse vegetation of the bush has been



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cleared by the prospectors to use in building and for fuel and props for mine shafts.

- It illustrates that the prospectors found their own forms of entertainment - the man leaning against the centre tent pole appears to be playing a banjo; he would probably have learnt many of the songs written at the time either about the place and the men who searched for gold or popular songs from other places; prospectors would sometimes recite poetry about the region and the plight of their fellow men.
- It shows old food tins to the left of the picture - they are the containers of the meals that made up the prospectors' staple diet; as fresh meat and vegetables were unobtainable or very expensive, most miners subsisted on tins of food, tea and damper, many of which would lose their labels before they were opened; the prospectors referred to all tinned meat as 'tinned dog', as they said it all tasted the same.
- It depicts the men dressed especially for the occasion of the photograph, wearing their best clothes and hats and smoking their pipes - they would not have worn their ties or clean white shirts for everyday work because of the difficulty of keeping these clothes clean when there was so much dust and dirt around and so little water.
- It shows the tent in which the six prospectors lived - it is about 5 m x 5 m x 3 m high and is made of canvas stretched over a frame made from tree saplings or branches; it has an extra cover to provide protection from rain and insulation against the heat of the sun; there is no in-built floor; this type of shelter provided little protection from the weather, flies and dust and had no sanitation, which led to widespread disease among the population.
- It depicts the basic equipment used by alluvial miners - picks, shovels and pans could be used to search for surface or near-surface gold but would be inadequate to follow reefs of gold-bearing quartz underground; prospectors hoped to pick up whatever nuggets they could and sell their claims to syndicates with the finance to invest in sophisticated mining equipment, as did Bayley and Ford, who found gold at Coolgardie in 1892.

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Creator E W Henderson, photographer, 1895

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