

Clara Saunders - a pioneer of Coolgardie, 1894



Description

This is a black-and-white portrait photograph of a young girl named Clara Saunders. It was taken about 1894 at the Exchange Hotel in Coolgardie, where she was working.. She rests her arm on a book placed on a table in front of a photographic studio backdrop. She is dressed in a formal gown with lace on the yoke and sleeves. She has her hair up in a roll and is wearing several items of jewellery, including a miniature portrait on a chain, a pearl choker and a brooch at her throat. The photograph measures 14 cm x 20 cm.

Educational value

- This asset is a portrait of Clara Saunders, one of the first European females to live on Western Australia's harsh eastern gold fields - in April 1893, at the age of 15, she was engaged to work at the Exchange Hotel in Coolgardie; in her reminiscences she recalls getting a resounding welcome from a big crowd of men as she stepped out of the coach that had brought her from Southern Cross.
- It features a woman who was an eye-witness to the historic event that sparked WA's greatest gold rush - Clara Saunders was living in Southern Cross in September 1892 when Arthur Bayley rode in to register a claim at what became Coolgardie; she recalled the 'magnificent sight' of 554 ounces of gold on display to the public in the Commercial Bank on 17 September; she later reported 'Activity started in all directions, every man was anxious to be first on the Field, every available horse in the district was rounded up, vehicles of every description from wheelbarrows to wagons were made ready for the road ... finally there were very few men left. After a few days it [Southern Cross] was really a women's town ...'.
- It provides an example of a person who went to the gold fields despite having prior knowledge of the water situation - many ignored newspaper articles published in Western Australia as well as in the eastern states about the acute shortage of fresh water; Clara Saunders was warned by Jack Raeside not to go; as a teamster and the son of the water supply officer on the gold fields, he had seen the situation for himself and was privy to the latest dire reports and longer term forecasts; the opening of the gold-fields water supply in 1903, bringing piped water from a dam more than 500 km away in Perth, overcame the problem of water shortages.



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- It is a portrait of the first European woman to be married in Coolgardie - Saunders was 16 when, on 4 July 1894, she married Arthur Williams, who ran the billiard room at the Exchange Hotel; her age at the time may be indicative of the shortage of eligible women on the fields; men from the surrounding camps lined Bayley Street after the ceremony and dancing continued late into the night; the 'Coolgardie Miner' reported the wedding in geological terms suitable to a mining town, describing the bride's dress as 'creamy quartz coloured silk, with orange blossom outcrops' while one of her bridesmaids 'was dressed in a reddish substance with sandstone coloured leaders running around the main body'.
- It features a brooch said to include the first nugget found by Paddy Hannan at Kalgoorlie - he gave the nugget to Clara Saunders in gratitude for saving his life after he contracted typhoid from polluted water shortly after the June 1893 discovery; Saunders gave him her room and cared for him, recalling in her reminiscences that she gave him plain boiled rice, food to check the dysentery and medicine from the chemist; he gave her a small piece of gold, saying that it was the first he picked up at the new find of Hannans and hoped it would bring her luck; Saunders's fiancé had the nugget mounted and made into a brooch as a wedding gift.
- It depicts a woman who recorded her experiences of life on the gold fields in the first few months of the gold rush - she recalls the difficulty of having to wash clothes in 'hard' water that did not lather; women's underwear, being white, was particularly difficult to keep looking fresh in dusty Coolgardie so Saunders and a fellow worker at the Exchange Hotel each made a pair of drawers (underwear) from red twill (they washed them prior to wearing them, but the next morning they were no longer hanging in the hotel's shed because a joker had put them on a goat, much to the amusement of the crowd in the town's main street).
- It is an example of a professional photographer's studio portrait - the set is dressed with a classical backdrop that would have been used in other portraits from this studio; the background, living plant to her right and table set with appropriate 'props', is typical of studio portraits of the period; this could be the studio of Hemus and Hall, among the earliest photographers on the field, whose surviving photographs are an invaluable record of Coolgardie in the 1890s.
- It portrays a Coolgardie resident dressed in the style expected at the time - European-style clothes and elaborate crimped hairstyles were fashionable, despite being inappropriate in dusty and hot Coolgardie; this photograph is thought to show Clara Saunders's wedding dress, imported from England, where the groom's family lived; the dress would have been sent by sailing or steam ship to Perth (taking about 90-100 days to arrive), before being sent onto Southern Cross by rail, which was far as the train line went at the time; the black bows on her gown may be in memory of her first love, Jack Raeside, who died in a shooting accident in Coolgardie; the man she married comforted her after Jack's tragic death.

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