

Family life on the gold fields, 1895



Description

This is a black-and-white photograph taken by Archibald Sanderson in 1895 on the eastern gold fields of Western Australia. The photograph shows two women and a child, dressed in colonial clothing, outside a tent dwelling. A man is shown sitting inside the tent flap. The tent is surrounded by a brushwood fence, and is sheltered by an additional flysheet that forms an awning. The ground within the fence is completely bare. Native eucalypts can be seen in the background. The photograph measures 8 cm x 10 cm.

Educational value

- This asset shows a family and their living conditions on the eastern gold fields in the early years of the Western Australian gold rush - a tent, surrounded by a brushwood fence, was typical of homes in the early days of the Coolgardie rush; the tent is made of canvas and is fitted over a wooden frame with a flysheet over the tent to give extra protection from both sun and rain; the tent poles and fence are made from local timber.
- It shows the family's efforts to improve comfort and hygiene, when water was very scarce - the bare ground in front of the house has been swept clear of leaves and rubbish; the brushwood fence around the tent gives privacy and protects from dust storms; hessian bags sewn together made a 'wogga' blanket, or bush carpet, for the dirt floors; bootscrapers, made from a small wooden pole or a piece of iron on supports, helped keep out winter mud.
- It is unusual as it depicts women and a child on these gold fields before the turn of the 20th century - very few families lived on the gold fields because the conditions were so hard; there was a poor supply of fresh water and food, the extremes of temperature made living uncomfortable and the death rate from disease was high; as miners and prospectors brought their families to the fields,



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the need for fresh water became more urgent, leading to the building of the Coolgardie Water Supply Scheme, later known as the Golden Pipeline, by 1903.

- It is an example of the work of Archibald Sanderson, who set out to make a fortune as a gold prospector but was more successful as a photographer and journalist - in 1895, Scottish-born Sanderson cycled to the gold fields with a camera and notebook to provide a valuable record of the region at that time; later in life he became a lawyer and politician, and lived in the hills outside Perth in an area known today as Lesmurdie, after the name of his home there.
- It gives an indication of why fires spread so rapidly in Coolgardie - hessian is a highly combustible material and a candle flame or upset kerosene lamp could easily set a tent alight; the lack of water to extinguish the flames meant that fire leapt from one building to the next.
- It shows the unsuitability of colonial dress for gold-fields life - the women are shown in long, heavy skirts, beneath which they would have worn petticoats; women's clothing in general was cumbersome, hot and restricting for Australian conditions and more suited to Britain; some people also wore white clothes despite the difficulties of keeping them clean in the red dust; there was also the problem of washing clothes, as water was either unavailable or expensive; Clara Saunders, one of the first women on the gold fields, wrote in her memoirs that she and a friend made 'bloomers' out of red twill because of the difficulty of keeping 'whites' white.
- It shows people dressed in the style of the era - the women have long skirts, leg-of-mutton sleeved blouses and belts done up tightly at the waist; they are wearing boots on their feet, even the young girl, which would have offered protection from rocks and snakes; the women's hair is tied back in a typical style of the period; the man seated in the tent is more casually dressed, although he is wearing a jacket and boots.

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Creator Archibald Sanderson, photographer, 1895

Identifier Battye Library number 009095D

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



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