

Mount Charlotte Demonstration Day, 1903



Description

This is a black-and-white photograph measuring 13 cm x 18 cm that shows an awning and a number of small, coloured, triangular flags, or bunting, set up for the opening ceremony of the Coolgardie Water Supply Scheme at Mount Charlotte Reservoir in Kalgoorlie on 24 January 1903. People are walking to the summit from various directions and the trenches containing the pipelines that deliver the water to the Reservoir are visible. The caption below the photograph (not visible) reads 'Mount Charlotte, Demonstration Day'.

Educational value

- The photograph shows preparations for the opening of the Coolgardie Water Supply Scheme, a scheme to pump water from a dam near Perth to Mount Charlotte Reservoir, a distance of about 560 km, with the Scheme's pipeline the longest freshwater pipeline in the world. Now known as the Golden Pipeline, it operates to this day.
- The Scheme was an ambitious engineering feat built by the Western Australian Government to overcome shortages of fresh water in the state's eastern gold fields. When rich gold discoveries in the early 1890s resulted in a rush to the arid interior, water was needed for the necessities of life as well as for developing the gold fields. People died from dehydration, diseases spread in the insanitary conditions and water shortages hindered mining operations. A pipeline was the only viable solution.
- Mount Charlotte in Kalgoorlie was chosen as the terminus for the water pipeline from Mundaring Weir to Kalgoorlie because of its height of 419 m above sea level. The height allows the water stored in the Reservoir to gravitate downwards to supply homes, business and mines. The top of Mount Charlotte was excavated by pick and shovel to accommodate a 9-million-L water tank. Spoil from the excavation was carefully placed to form an external mound to support



Categories: Political Issues and Celebrations

the Reservoir's reinforced concrete walls. Originally the Reservoir was unroofed but it was later covered to prevent evaporation and keep the tank and water clean.

- The photograph indicates the number of people who braved the temperature of 40 degrees Celsius to witness this momentous occasion. One of them was William de Mole, a Victorian mining engineer who came to WA because of discoveries on the eastern gold fields. He wrote to his wife in Melbourne 'I subsequently walked to see the turning on of the Water ... one could see swarming crowds clambering up the steep slopes of Mt. Charlotte - there was a fence round the outer edge of the bank and another against the tank, there were hundreds of fluttering flags ...'.
- Extensive celebrations surrounded the opening and were attended by interstate visitors as well as those who lived in the gold fields surrounding Kalgoorlie. Federal politicians from Australia's eastern states were entertained by lavish banquets and tours of underground mines. In a letter to his wife in Melbourne, de Mole complained about the 'great speechifying' but wrote 'The town was gaily decorated and lit with innumerable electric lights, the cars [tramcars] were a blaze of lights and brought great crowds to see the sights. Webber had a big band under his conductorship and played lovely music in the street, it was a wonderful gala night ...'.
- For weeks before the opening there was discussion in the newspapers over the details of the celebrations. Issues included the cost of the events and who should pay, what sort of catering should be provided and who should carry it out. Leading federal politician Sir George Reid quipped at one of the lavish banquets, where champagne flowed freely to celebrate the opening, 'Never have I seen so much enthusiasm for water - and so little of it drunk'.
- The inlet pipe (not visible), which delivers water to the Reservoir, was completed only just in time for the opening ceremony so the pipes had not yet been buried in their trenches. The rush to get the water through to Kalgoorlie as quickly as possible was so great that the line was linked up without scour valves at low points. (The scour is an outlet pipe that allows for cleaning of accumulated sediment.) In the photograph a hoist for lowering pipes into the trench can be seen still on site to the right (south) of the hill.
- Mount Charlotte has strong associations with gold and gold-mining, not only because of the water supply pipeline but also because it is the site at which, in June 1893, Paddy Hannan, Dan O'Shea and Tom Flanagan picked up the gold nuggets that sparked the gold rush. From the foot of this hill a mining camp spread west, known first as Hannans, then as Kalgoorlie. Some prospectors mined the hill for gold, dry-blowing and sinking shafts, at least one almost 52 m deep. Spoil from gold-mining operations is evident in the picture.
- Sir John Forrest, who as former premier of WA was responsible for obtaining parliamentary approval and raising a loan for the Coolgardie Water Supply Scheme, was given the honour of officially opening the pipeline although at the time he was a member of the Australian Parliament.

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