

Mr and Mrs Robinson at Kalgoorlie, 1896



Description

This is a black-and-white group photograph taken at Lake View Consuls Mine in Kalgoorlie in 1896, measuring 24 cm x 17 cm. It shows a group of gold prospectors and miners, including adventurous natural-geologist and pioneering prospector Robert ('Bobby') Robinson and his wife, Annie, standing at the right of the group.

Educational value

- This asset is an early posed photograph of prospectors on the eastern gold fields of Western Australia - the prospectors and their tools are arranged in front of their living quarters; the background shows that the area has not yet been completely cleared; all bush in this region was eventually used for building shelters to live in, and as props for mining or fuel for burning for the process of distilling water.
- It shows Bobby Robinson, a pioneering prospector - Robinson was the son of a Yorkshire coal dealer in England; he spent his early life working on family coal barges before he went to Queensland's Paradise Valley in 1889, where he followed a succession of Australian gold strikes; in 1892 he was in Geraldton, Western Australia en route to the Murchison finds and walked to Cue, a distance of over 225 km, nearly dying along the track from a swollen stomach as a result of living off dried apples and water.
- It shows a well-known gold-fields personality - Bobby was the underground manager at the Lake View Consolidated Mine, Kalgoorlie and later was probably the first to find and identify diamonds in the Kimberley region; when he was killed in a sulky accident near Leonora in 1919 he was buried in Leonora Cemetery but his wife, Annie, who moved to West Perth, was worried that Bobby would be 'lonely up there' and had his body re-buried at Karrakatta, Perth.
- It shows Annie Eliza Robinson, nee McKenzie, who was one of the first women to travel to the eastern gold fields - a farmer's daughter, she raised four children



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at various gold-fields centres after she married Bobby Robinson; Mrs Robinson also cared for dozens of ailing Indigenous and miners' children in Kalgoorlie's first air-conditioned house; Bobby Robinson designed the air-conditioning system to work like a giant Coolgardie safe, using water dribbling from the roof over coir matting blinds.

- It depicts clothing worn by women of the gold fields - women living in the remote areas were aware of the fashions of the time and wore these fashionable clothes even though summer temperatures might exceed 40 degrees Celsius; Annie would visit the Lake View Consolidated Mine in fashionable late Victorian dress (heavy skirts, long sleeves and a hat), more suitable for England than for Australia.
- It includes a collection of implements (a pick, an axe, panning dishes and a sieve) used in the search for alluvial gold - this equipment may have been pushed overland to the gold fields in a wheelbarrow like that shown, because the cost of transportation by camel or horse was exorbitantly high in Kalgoorlie; quartz, knocked off a reef with an axe or pick, was dollied (crushed) in a dolly-pot and sieved; in the absence of water, dry-blowing was common, 'pay-dirt' being poured from one panning dish held at shoulder height to another at the prospector's feet; dry panning and sieving used the wind to separate the heavier gold from the lighter earth.
- It shows men in the prospector's regular attire of long-sleeved shirts, moleskin trousers and hats - men's occupations on the fields were often evident from their clothing; Mr Robinson, on the right, is wearing a boater, a hat befitting his status as underground manager on a leading mine; the man directly to the right of Mrs Robinson, with a watch on a fob chain tucked into his waistcoat pocket, is also probably a mine manager; the others, in slouch hats, are probably employed as labourers in the mine; some are also wearing the (almost obligatory) waistcoats common at the end of the Victorian era.
- It portrays the uncomfortable living conditions in the earliest days on the gold fields - these fields were particularly dusty, waterless and hot; humpies made from the bush provided shade but little shelter from cold and rain; dust storms increased in intensity as more and more of the surrounding bush was cleared for camps and fuel; a waterbag hanging off the roof stayed relatively cool, since canvas allows for evaporation, but precious water was lost in the process; the man in the centre of the image is holding a candle, probably imported by camel from Southern Cross, which provided light but melted in the heat; lack of sanitary arrangements encouraged the spread of diseases.

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