

## Sunday morning in camp, Coolgardie, 1895



### Description

This is a sepia photo print, measuring 16 cm x 21 cm, taken at Coolgardie, Western Australia in 1895. One gold miner or prospector is having a wash in a panning dish. Two other miners are sitting on wooden boxes, while two other men give them a haircut and a shave. The miners are outside a shelter made of brushwood, which consists of thin sticks of wood and leafy branches interwoven. Their furniture has been improvised from wooden boxes and packing cases. The title, 'Sunday morning in camp', is handwritten at the bottom left of the photograph.

### Educational value

- This asset depicts a typical Sunday scene in Coolgardie's earliest days - Sunday was the weekly washday for both clothes and people on the gold fields; from early in the morning miners would head down the track to the government bore on the outskirts of town with buckets, kerosene tins, billies and any other available containers; the bore water was unfit for human consumption, but was suitable for stock, and for bathing and washing clothes.
- It suggests that water was valuable to the prospectors - a group of men would usually share one small container, all washing and shaving in the same water; the price of water fluctuated according to the amount of recent rainfall and deliveries from outlying sources; water prices were known to increase by as much as 300 per cent in one week; it wasn't until 1903, when a pipeline bringing water from a dam near Perth was completed, that the problem of fluctuating water prices and supplies was overcome; photographs taken at the time show that many men wore beards, because to shave off their facial hair regularly required excess use of this scarce resource.
- It shows the clothing worn by miners - these clothes were probably washed in the same water that the men used to wash themselves, and then draped on bushes to dry; when water was very expensive the rich would throw away their



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dirty clothes and buy new ones, as this was cheaper than buying the water to wash their clothes; the poor would 'dry-clean' their clothes, draping them over bushes and beating the dirt out with shovels; prospector John Aspinall recorded on 1 April 1895, 'I spent yesterday morning washing some of my clothes, which with water at four shillings is rather an event. The dry process consists of hanging your shirt on a bush for a fortnight and beating it occasionally with a club'.

- It provides an example of typical living conditions and homes on the gold fields - miners would camp out for many months while they were searching for gold; improvised furniture was made from wooden boxes and resources from the natural environment were used to build shelters; the shelters provided little protection from heat, cold, flies and dust and had no sanitation, which led to widespread disease among the population.
- It depicts the natural surroundings of the waterless gold fields - dry-blowing was a dusty, dirty occupation; it is said that before their weekly wash the men were a uniform colour but after washing, black, brown, grey and blonde heads and beards emerged and only a few genuine red heads and beards remained.
- It suggests that a gold fields Sunday was different from other days of the week - prospectors took time off from dry-blowing, went to church, did their chores and took some recreation; in his 1895 diary, prospector John Aspinall mentions attending a church service (adding that most of the men were in their working clothes) in the new Wesleyan church, made of hessian and with no floor; he noted that the singing was bad but the preaching deserved more than the threepences he put in the plate; he did not attend a football match due to religious scruples but 'all the youth and beauty of Coolgardie turned out in their Sunday best', some travelling by buggy to the ground, 'leaving the town in possession of the Salvation Army'.

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