Swampers on the road, 1890s

Description

This is a posed black-and-white photograph showing ten men on a track and their various forms of transport to and around Western Australia's eastern gold fields. On the right are two camels, in the centre is a bicycle and in the background are laden horse-drawn wagons. The shadow of the photographer can be seen on the bare earth in the foreground.

Educational value

- This asset shows a number of ways that prospectors travelled to and within the WA gold fields centred around Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie in the mid-1890s - the routes used by thousands of hopeful prospectors were little more than tracks in the earliest days of WA's greatest gold rush; the richer and luckier prospectors came by coach, or riding horses, camels or bicycles; others came by foot, some carrying all their worldly possessions, pushing wheelbarrows or walking alongside horse-drawn wagons loaded with their swags.
- It shows the use of horses for transport of both goods and people - horses were the most common form of transport in Australia at the time but they were not suited to the desert-like conditions of the gold fields; the loaded coach gives an indication of the heavy loads horses were expected to pull over the difficult sandy terrain; many of them died from exhaustion and lack of water on the road.
- It prominently features a bicycle, which was a popular form of transport on the early gold fields - these machines needed neither food nor water; the invention of the 'Safety Cycle' and pneumatic tyres in the 1880s led to mass production of bicycles, which coincided with the gold discoveries in Western Australia; cyclists could travel quickly along 'camel pads' (smooth, hard tracks made by teams of camels).
- It shows camels, which were invaluable on the arid gold fields since they were partial to the native vegetation (unlike horses) and could travel long distances

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without water - one prospector noted in his diary that his camels had gone for more than 11 days without water and that they would get fat on anything, mulga, quandong and saltbush, 'even tinned dog' (as the prospectors called canned meat, whether it was beef or mutton); camels could also carry great loads of provisions, tools and water canteens; one 1895 diarist wrote that 'there are corners and recesses all over for tying on small things and water bags are hung on his neck, giving him the appearance of a walking caravan'.

- It depicts 'swampers', prospectors who paid for their goods and belongings to be carried by cart while they walked alongside the teamster's wagon - 'swamping' was cheaper than travelling by coach and saved a prospector having to carry all his equipment; a prospector had to take everything he needed in the early days before shops and supply lines were established; swampers usually had little money and hoped to make fortunes picking up alluvial gold, as they had neither the equipment nor the finance to exploit reef gold.
- It suggests that the population in the area was expanding - over 750 prospectors arrived on the field at Coolgardie within a week of the find; the first gold found in the Kalgoorlie region, by Hannan, Flanagan and Shea in 1893, led to an explosion of population in the area; over the following ten years it grew to more than 30,000 people; overall there was a fourfold increase in WA's population from 46,290 in 1890 to 184,124 in 1901.

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Creator J Dwyer, photographer, 1890s

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