

Water rations for gold miners, 1894



Description

This is a sepia photograph, measuring 12 cm x 20 cm, that was taken at lease number 35E, North Boulder Mine at Kalgoorlie, Western Australia. It shows a large group of men in working dress posed waiting for their supply of water to be handed over. Among the containers are a large metal jug or 'dipper', a canvas water bag and several 4-gallon (18 L) steel drums.

Educational value

- This asset is typical of the scenes at many mines in WA's eastern gold fields at the time this photograph was taken - water rations were connected with employment conditions at many mines; workers on some gold fields were entitled to condensed water as part of their wages, receiving 2 or 4 gallons (9 or 18 L) per day or at least 'a water bag full', while others received extra money as a 'water allowance'; mines often had their own condensers to convert saline groundwater into fresh water; groundwater, which seeped in when shafts were sunk, could hinder mining operations, and the shortage of fresh water hindered processing, so condensing gave a double benefit.
- It shows miners queuing to collect their ration of condensed water - the condenser process involved the boiling of saline groundwater until it changed from a liquid to a gas; the steam rose through the pipe at the top of the boiler and, as it travelled through the pipe, further from the fire, it cooled and changed back into a liquid; the result was water pure enough to drink.
- It shows that men had to queue for whatever quantity of scarce (and expensive) fresh water was available - water was such an issue that it became the focus of industrial action; at one mine men went on strike when management gave them a gallon a day (4.5 L) instead of an allowance to buy water themselves (when water was cheap they profited from the allowance), and at another, miners demanded an increase to 2 gallons a day free; until a pipeline bringing supplies



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from a dam in the hills outside Perth was opened in January 1903 the cost and shortage of water continued to be a problem.

- It shows some men carrying steel ('tin') drums that could hold up to 4 gallons (18 L) of water - the tins were originally used to carry kerosene, a fuel used in lamps to provide light; for carrying water, the top of a tin was cut off and a wire handle fastened to it so it could be easily carried in one hand; the taste of kerosene was said to persist for a long time.
- It is evidence of the value of water in WA's eastern gold fields - without money or the regular supply of fresh water, people could die of thirst; in a letter dated 23 October 1893, J E Burbanks wrote about the situation after four months of no rain, 'God help the poor unfortunates who are without the means of purchasing the precious element [water]. Two men who were camped near me died of thirst, and two others went mad; one shot himself'.
- It is part of the historical record of the gold fields collected by George Spencer Compton who may have taken this photograph - he wrote the information about where the photograph was taken and details about the practice of paying miners with water in lieu of wages on the back of the photograph; Spencer Compton is sometimes described as the pioneer gold fields historian and writer.

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