

Workers' camp at Mundaring Weir, c1900



Description

This is a black-and-white image showing part of the workers' camp at the construction site for the storage dam, or reservoir, for Western Australia's Coolgardie Water Supply Scheme in about 1900. Several men and children are posed in front of canvas timber-framed homes and a more substantial weatherboard home. Some of the men wear work clothes or have equipment relating to their work and one is holding the reins of a horse. The negative from which the print was made measures 17 cm x 11 cm.

Educational value

- The men shown are workers who were employed to build the storage dam for the Coolgardie Water Supply Scheme, intended to overcome the problems associated with shortages of fresh water in WA's eastern gold fields.
- Gold discoveries in the early 1890s had resulted in a rush to the arid interior and water was needed for the necessities of life and for developing mining operations on the gold fields. People died from dehydration and from diseases spread in the insanitary conditions. Attempts to obtain water from local underground sources and dams proved unsustainable and finally a scheme was developed to build a storage dam and pump water along a pipeline to the gold fields.
- The dam was a major WA Government project at a time when a shortage of funds was curtailing other activities, and unemployed workmen flocked to the site in the hope of getting a job. By June 1898 nearly 300 men were camped at the site.
- Children, along with the rest of their families, accompanied their fathers when they went to work on the wall for the Coolgardie Water Supply Scheme storage reservoir, later to become known as the Mundaring Weir. Families camping at the site campaigned for a school, claiming in letters they sent to the education department that between 70 and 100 school-aged children lived in the vicinity.
- By the time the photograph was taken the camp was organised, as indicated by



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the three framed canvas houses lined up in a row and the steps of another four houses that can be seen lined up on the far left. At first the camp was nothing more than an untidy collection of makeshift shelters.

- The encampment later grew to resemble a town, with shops, other businesses and street-like thoroughfares. There were boarding houses, a billiard saloon, a post office and a butcher. Entertainment included dances and concerts in a large barn-like structure known as 'Hart's Hall'.
- The large numbers on the site created health hazards. A sanitary inspector was appointed to enforce health regulations and a contractor carted away the 'nightsoil' (human excrement). The large number of men on the site created threats to law and order. During the early days of the camp, drunkenness and unruly behaviour were a problem. A police station under canvas was established in March 1898 and most of the early charges were for fighting or obscene language. At the time a man could be sentenced to hard labour for swearing.
- Some of the different types of professionals and other workers needed to build the storage weir, ranging from cooks to surveyors, are represented in the photograph. Many of the workers were from the eastern states of Australia and had been attracted to the west by the gold discoveries. The large house with the veranda in the centre of the photograph housed the engineer in charge. Three men with surveying equipment can be seen. Two are holding staffs and the third has a tripod.

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