



WARRANDYTE HISTORICAL SOCIETY Inc.

Incorporation No. 13313L

POST OFFICE BOX 67
WARRANDYTE
VIC 3113

Phone 9844 4176

THE FIRST GOLD-FIELD IN VICTORIA - HOW I DISCOVERED IT,

by

LOUIS JOHN MICHEL.

[Some personal recollections of Louis John Michel, written some 44 years after the events which he described, in "The Argus", No. 15,443, Saturday 28th December 1895, Page 9, Column 4 (all), and reprinted in "The Evelyn Observer and South and East Bourke Record", Vol. 23, No. 1158, Friday 3rd January 1896, Page 3, Columns 1 (all) and 2 (at the top).]

Statements having appeared in print on various occasions as to who first discovered gold in Victoria, most of which have either been wrong or misleading, I have decided to make public the true story of my discovery, for which I afterwards received the Government reward of £1,000, in order to get the matter finally at rest. Most of the facts I am about to relate can be found in the evidence given on oath before the Parliamentary Royal Commission, or in the columns of *The Argus* of date contemporary with the event; but as they are scattered and difficult to find, my personal narrative may prove of some little use to future historians of the Colony.

The report of Mr. Hargreaves's discovery in New South Wales reached Melbourne in February, 1851, and caused much excitement and unrest in our small community. Our people were leaving for Sydney by every possible means, even the small lime craft which usually traded to the heads being pressed into service. It became evident that unless we made a similar discovery in Victoria a great portion of the adult population would migrate to the parent Colony. People in business began to feel the loss of trade, and several parties were formed to prospect for gold. At the time I held the license of the Rainbow Hotel in Swanston-Street, and like others felt the diminution of business, so I determined to get five others to join me in searching the Dandenong and Upper Yarra Ranges. This was known as "Michel's Party". Twice we returned to Melbourne without success, although on the last trip we brought in some pieces of quartz and slate, in which, however, no gold was visible. The party being unwilling to continue the search, we separated, and were not associated together again.

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A day or two afterwards I proposed to a friend of mine, William Habberlin, who had been in the first party, that he and I should continue to prosecute our search, all expenses being borne by me. Having agreed to my offer, we left the Rainbow together, carrying our tools, provisions for a week, and a tent. This was in the depth of winter, and so that we should not be seen or followed by other prospectors we started in the dark at 4 o'clock in the morning. We made direct for the Ranges by way of the Barkers-Road, keeping nearer the River than we had done on previous journeys. After trying the gullies and water-courses several days, our stock of supplies being about done and there being no chance of purchasing more, we faced to town. Not knowing exactly our position we determined to follow some creek down to the Yarra, and in doing so a peculiar bend under a steep range led me to think that the creek had not always run in its then present course. If gold were to be found this seemed a likely place - our burdens (now considerably lighter) were flung down. Taking the spade and pick I crossed the creek into the bend, Habberlin in the meantime lighting a fire and slinging the billy. I proceeded to remove the surface from about 4 feet square, and having got into the second "spit" I called to Habberlin to bring the dish, and I gave him some earth to wash. Neither of us even having seen gold obtained, I gave him strict injunctions to wash the earth carefully away until the very last few grains were left in the dish - this having been the course adopted in Sydney according to the accounts I had read. "Do you see anything, Bill?" said I. After once or twice saying "No," he suddenly exclaimed, "Your Worship, here's the clickerty!" Eagerly examining the residue, we found it to contain ten small grains of gold. We consulted together, and decided to cover up the hole with brushwood, follow the creek down, ascertain its name, and our distance from town.

When we reached the river (the Yarra) it was sundown, so having pitched camp we stretched ourselves on the grass to examine our find at leisure. I had wrapped it in a small piece of blue paper (which had formerly contained a Seidlitz powder), and while we were looking at it a puff of wind off the river capsized the precious grains among the grass roots, much to our chagrin. However, by carefully washing the turf we recovered six of the grains. We slept little, and during the night heard a cock crow - sure sign of adjacent settlement. At break of day we went in the direction of the sound, and soon came on a hut occupied by a man whose name was Ginger. He told us the place was called Anderson's Creek, named after a former poundkeeper there; the distance from town was 18 miles. From our rough dress and appearance after transversing the Ranges for days, he concluded we were runaway sailors, and told us we had made a mistake coming that way for work, and advised us to make for Brighton, where we should be sure to find employment with a market-gardener. With the usual hospitality then customary in the bush he gave us some damper and hot coffee; and, wishing us luck, we left.

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Having thus ascertained our whereabouts, we made a wide detour, and returned to the hole for more gold. We washed several dishes, and found gold in each. We then picked up our traps, and reached town about 8 o'clock the same night. As soon as we had cleaned ourselves up, we went to Dr. Greeves, who lived close by in Little Collins-Street, and inquired of him if any news of gold had reached town. On his replying in the negative, I showed him the result of our search. He came with us round to John Hood's (father of the present Mr. Justice Hood), the chemist in Collins-Street, where he tested it, weighed it, and said it was gold of very high quality. He gave me a certificate to that effect, with the hour and date I had brought it to him endorsed.

On the Monday following we went to the Government offices, showed that gold and certificate to Mr. La Trobe, and inquired whether any other discovery had been made known to the Government or any claim sent in. He said nothing of the kind had taken place. I expressed a wish that my discovery should be made public, and offered to conduct any party that he might appoint to the spot where I had found the gold. He wrote down the particulars, and on the following Wednesday sent his Private Secretary to Mr. Edward Bell, and Mr. Nicholas Fenwick, the Commissioner of Crown Lands, to go with us to the place. Several other persons accompanied us at my invitation, including Mr. de Boos, from *The Argus* office, whose report of the trip and success of everyone of the party in finding gold may be found in *The Argus* for July, 1851. Numbers of diggers soon appeared on the Creek, and I had the pleasure of assisting Mr. Fenwick to measure off the first legal claim. Licenses to dig were issued on the 1st August, 1851.

In 1853 the Legislative Council appointed a Royal Commission to inquire into the particulars of the gold discovery, to invite the attendance of claimants and others, and to take evidence on oath. The Report was Ordered to be Printed on 10th March, 1854. I made my claim before the Commission on behalf of myself and Habberlin, and gave all particulars on oath. Habberlin was called, and in the same way testified to the truth of my statement. I may here state that Dr. Greeves (to whom I had first taken the gold) was Chairman of the Commission, and the Hon. James Graham, who is still living among us, was one of the members. The result of the inquiry was the voting of £5,000 to Mr. Hargreaves for his discovery in New South Wales, £1,000 to the Rev. W.B. Clark, of Sydney, in appreciation of his researches into the mineral wealth of the country, and £1,000 to Michel and Party, who were adjudged to have clearly established their claim to be the first to discover and make known to the public an available gold-field in Victoria. Permit me to add that it was the immediate publication of my discovery that stemmed the tide of emigration to New South Wales. In a pleasant day's walk anyone in doubt was able to satisfy himself of the truth, and many hundreds did so.

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It is impossible to estimate the quantity of gold obtained at Anderson's Creek and the Upper Yarra, but men have been working on the field ever since the day it was opened, and only last week favourable reports appeared in the mining news column of *The Argus*.

In conclusion, I may add a few lines as to the Chapman-Brentani-Duchenne episode, particulars of which have been published on various occasions. I shall therefore only refer to it by saying that in 1850 a youth named Chapman, staying at the Waterman's Arms, showed the landlord, Mr. Clark, a nugget of gold. Many of Mr. Clark's friends went to see it, myself among the number, and found it to be a rough piece of gold about 2 in. by 3 in., of irregular form. An agreement was made by Chapman to take Brentani and Duchenne to the place where he found it. Chapman, hearing his companions speaking in a foreign language became alarmed, and during the first night of the journey gave them the slip, and was not heard of again until Mr. Hordern met him accidentally in Sydney four years later.

Many old colonists will doubtless remember the facts I have stated above, and I shall be pleased to think that my little narrative may prove of interest to the many readers of *The Argus* who are desirous of learning something of the early history of this Colony.