

GRAPEVINE CUTTINGS (October 2001)

By Rob Upson

S.T.GILL

There were several artists who depicted life on the goldfields during the early days of the gold rush in Victoria. Perhaps one of the most distinctive and recognisable styles of painting belonged to **S.T.Gill**. Samuel Thomas Gill was one of many people who flocked to the Bendigo and Mount Alexander diggings in 1852.

It was the labour of the diggings that attracted his attention. His sketches and watercolours concentrated on marking claims, fossicking for gold, nuggeting and puddling. Later, in Ballarat, his paintings are often more composed pictures of the social and cultural life on the goldfields, eg. a subscription ball, McLaren's boxing saloon.

Born in Devonshire in 1818, S.T.Gill was 21 when he arrived on the *Caroline* at Port Adelaide with his parents and younger brother and sister. His talent as an artist was developed and fostered at an early age back in England. The Gill family settled in the Coromandel Valley in the Adelaide Hills. He painted many scenes in and around Adelaide and between 1845 and 1850 he was painting on the silver, lead and copper mines at Kapunda and Burra. During this period he accompanied John Ainsworth Horrocks on an expedition to the interior of South Australia and Lake Torrens.

S.T.Gill went to Victoria in 1852 and with his brother John and friend James Thompson had moderate success on the Forest Creek, Mt. Alexander, Pennyweight Flat and Little Bendigo diggings. Gill simply drew and painted what he saw around him and by August 1852 his first published book of sketches, *The Victoria Gold Diggings and Diggers As They Are*, appeared in Melbourne.

By 1855, Gill was painting and sketching in Ballarat and by mid 1856 he had moved to Sydney. (A Mrs Gill went with him. Who she was and whether she was married to him, no one knows). In 1864 he returned to Melbourne, alone. He continued painting and took a studio in Lt. Collins Street. By the 1870s an excess of alcohol was taking its effect and on 27th October 1880 he collapsed and died on the steps of the Melbourne Post Office.

He was buried in the Melbourne General Cemetery in a common grave in obscurity. (The trial of Ned Kelly was capturing all the headlines at that time). In 1913 the Historical Society of Victoria raised a subscription to move Gill's body to a private grave and placed on it a headstone, which reads –

S.T.Gill
The Artist of the Gold-fields
Died in Melbourne, October 27th 1880
Aged 60 Years
Erected by the Historical Society of Victoria, October 1913

Today he remains, perhaps, the most well known artist of the Victoria goldfields. The Bendigo Art Gallery has, in its collection, quite a number of S.T.Gill's works, mainly original prints, and depicting, of course, life on the diggings. In November this year the Gallery is presenting an exhibition called **Golden Years: 1851 and Beyond** celebrating 150 years since the discovery of gold in Australia. No doubt some of the works of Samuel Thomas Gill will feature in this exhibition.

Reference :- *S.T.Gill's Australia* by Geoffrey Dutton
Artists of the Bendigo Goldfields by David Thomas and Bendigo Art Gallery