

GRAPEVINE CUTTINGS (August 2004)

By Rob Upson

THE ROAD TO THE DIGGINGS (Part 1)

Towards the end of 1851, a young man in his early twenties, (I shall call him James), was employed as a coal porter in the east end of London. It was physically demanding work and poorly paid. One evening, while drinking in his local pub, he begins to hear amazing stories of the riches being unearthed from the goldfields on the other side of the world in the colony of Victoria. Within a few weeks he has quit his job and bought a one-way ticket on a clipper bound for Port Phillip. On board, James made friends with three other young men who had similar ideas of adventure and riches. After a sea voyage of nearly three months, in cramped and unhygienic conditions they sailed through The Heads into Port Phillip Bay.

Port Phillip Bay was crowded with ships, as thousands of potential diggers had arrived from all over the world. Wharves for shipping had not yet been constructed so ships had to moor several hundred yards offshore and passengers and goods ferried to Liardet's Beach. (now Port Melbourne) Much to his surprise and dismay, James discovered the cost of the ferry trip to the beach and then the journey via horse and dray into Melbourne, was exorbitant. Indeed, food and supplies were also very costly. James and his three friends decided to team up and pool their resources.

On arriving in Melbourne they found a large tent city had been established on the banks of the Yarra River. Hundreds of potential diggers were camped there, in Canvas Town as it was called, prior to heading off to the goldfields. Our quartet bought themselves a suitable tent, found a space in Canvas Town and over several days gathered the necessary equipment and supplies they would need. They quickly established that the goldfield with the most potential was one hundred miles away. The thought of buying a horse and dray was soon dismissed, as the cost was way beyond their means. In fact, looking after and feeding a horse was also going to be expensive. There was no alternative but to walk the distance as most other diggers were doing.

It was late on a cool April morning when James and his mates left Melbourne and headed north. They each carried their equipment and supplies on their backs and took it in turns to push the barrow that carried the axe, picks, shovels, tent etc. What is now Mt. Alexander Road in Flemington was the commencement of the road to the Mt. Alexander and Bendigo diggings. They joined a long line of diggers, horse and bullock drays, wheelbarrow trundlers and carts. The summer of 1851/52 had been hot with little rain and the roads were deep in dust making the journey even more difficult. If they had made their journey a few weeks later, conditions would have been far worse. Heavy rains came in May, creeks became flooded and the tracks became quagmires. The line of drays and carts slowed right down and becoming bogged was common. Days were added to the length of the journey.

The first stop they made was at William Wright's Lincolnshire Arms public house at Five-Mile Creek. Here they quenched their thirst and set up camp for the first night on the road to the diggings. Most diggers camped out, as the cost of accommodation at the various inns was beyond their means. The following day they crossed the open Keilor Plains and twenty miles from Melbourne they came to the spot that became known as Digger's Rest.

(To be continued)

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The Road to the Diggings (Part 2)

From Digger's Rest, the travellers then proceeded to the Gap where the road passed between Mount Holden and Mount Aitken. The downhill stretch into Gisborne was known as Breakneck Hill, so named as many bullocks were killed there when heavy drays lost control. At the 36 mile post at Gisborne was the Bush Inn, a very busy place where diggers prepared themselves for the next stage through the Black Forest. James and his mates set up camp nearby and treated themselves to an expensive but uninspiring meal at the Bush Inn. Here they heard stories about the danger of bushrangers in the Black Forest. To enhance their safety, they decided to join a large group of diggers who were heading off through the Forest the next day. If groups of diggers were going to camp a night in the Black Forest then there were sufficient numbers to allow shifts to keep watch. Some kept on going through the Forest in one day, which is what James's group did. The Black Forest was probably so named because of its charred appearance following the bush fires of the summer of 1851.

The track emerged from the Forest at a place to be known as Woodend. As it was evening, our party of diggers were able to camp here for the night in relative safety. The next stage took them on through Carlsruhe to Kyneton and the Campaspe River for an overnight stop. Kyneton, 58 miles from Melbourne, was soon to become a prosperous little town on the road to the diggings. Other overnight stops were to be found at Malmsbury and Taradale, but James and his mates decided to travel from Kyneton to Saw Pit Gully in one day. At the 73-mile mark, Saw Pit Gully, later to become Elphinstone, was once a sawyer's camp. A small weatherboard inn, called The Columbine, was the nearest place to the Mt. Alexander diggings where spirits could be sold. The sale of liquor on the diggings was prohibited. It was here that diggers heading north came ... *face to face with diggers just in from the Mount and Bendigo Creek – unshaven, rough looking characters in moleskins stiff with clay, with cabbage-tree hats and red, sun-blistered arms, short clay pipes stuck in their mouths and bowie-knives in their belts. They talked a diggers' jargon and shouted each other nobblers of rum or brandy paid for with pinches of gold dust.*¹

From Saw Pit Gully one track headed north west to Forest Creek (now Chewton) and the other continued on, passing to the west of Mount Alexander. Our party took the latter, until, at the 85-mile mark they came to the Porcupine Inn. The Porcupine was the only inn, closest to the Bendigo Diggings, which was licensed to sell liquor and consequently was a pretty rowdy place. They camped their last night on the road a couple of miles further on, in anticipation of the final stage into The Bendigo. One track headed eastwards, through the paddocks of the Ravenswood Run, around the hills and entering the Bendigo valley via Sheepwash Creek. Another track avoided Mt. Herbert and the higher parts of Big Hill and entered the valley from the west. Most diggers, including our party, took the more direct and rougher track over Big Hill.

*On the crest of the Big Hill rose a ridge of ironbarks, straight and tall, with sculptured trunks as black as jet. The diggers threw off their swags and swigged at their billycans and clambered down from their carts to stretch tired legs and rest their horses. As they filled their pipes they could catch the sound of axes and the distant murmur of cradles drifting up from below.*²

The spirits of James and his three mates rose in anticipated excitement as they descended into the Bendigo valley. After eight days on the road, the New Chums had arrived.

¹ 'Bendigo A History' by Frank Cusack

² Ibid
