

From big cats and Crateman to missing people and strange lights in the sky, **SARAH HARRIS** explores the many myths, mysteries and legends of the Goldfields.

In a rich tapestry of the Goldfields history there are many stories both tall and true, but it seems few foment the imagination like a Big Cat.

John Higgins, the former editor of the Maryborough Advertiser, famously kept hunks of raw meat in the office fridge to bait his traps after becoming convinced of a big cat's existence in the 1980s.

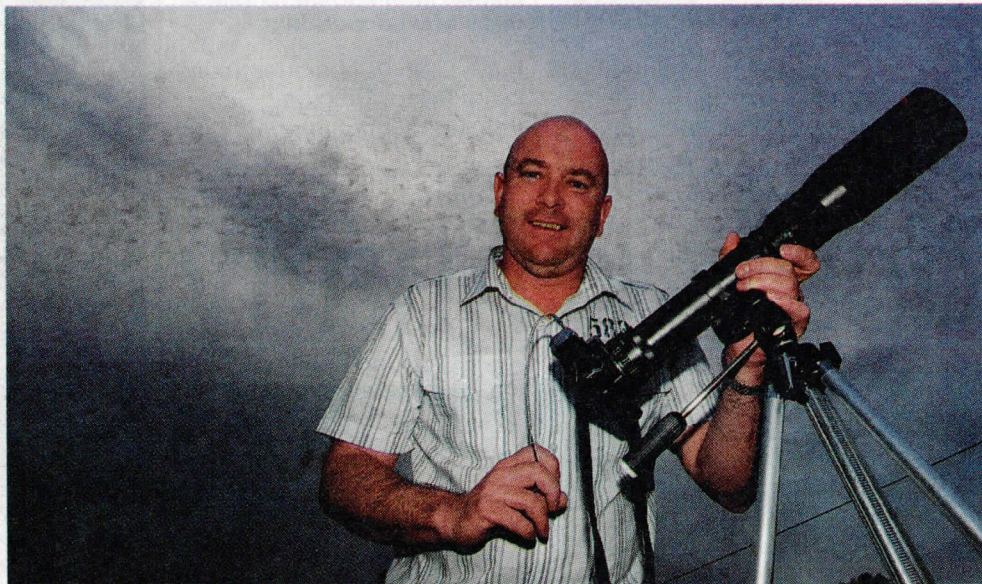
A former colleague recalled he would spend hours in the bush trying to stalk them and kept casts of footprints in the office.

The ex-newspaper man is far from alone. Since its inception in 1984, the Australian Rare Fauna Research Association — an organisation dedicated to investigating unusual animal reports — has recorded more than 4500 sightings in Victoria alone.

Paul Clacher recalls his first encounter with the Big Cat of Tarnagulla.

"I was walking up Jones Creek with my metal detector and I saw this huge cat print in the soft brown clay-type mud in the creek.

"The footprint was about 6 to 7 inches (15 to 17 cm) in diameter and was that of a large cat.



FREEZE FRAME: Russel Henthorn with the camera gear he used for the UFO photo in 1983.

"My instant reaction was to go into a cold sweat and to reach down to unclip the holder on the machete hanging from my belt.

"Then I thought to myself, 'don't be so stupid, there are no lions in Australia'.

"I knelt down and examined the footprint. It was an exact imprint of a very big cat."

He remains convinced to this day that there is not just one Big Cat in Tarnagulla, but at least three or perhaps

four ranging between there and St Arnaud.

"There is at least a big Black Panther and a sandy coloured Puma. You can take it from me, they are there and they are real. People really need to be very careful in those areas."

Theories about the origins of the Big Cats are myriad.

Explanations range from escaped zoo/circus animals and mountain lion mascots released into the wild by American servicemen at the

end of World War II to supposedly extinct Thylacoleo or Australian Marsupial Lion.

No less elusive than the Big Cats, but just as widely reported are the many ghosts of the Goldfields from the Camp Hill Primary School and Castlemaine's Theatre Royal and almost every pub in between.

The best known are perhaps those resident in the historic Fortuna Villa with a cast including that of

"George" being George Lansell, his first wife, Bedillia, a girl in her teens and a boy in a sailor suit.

The building occupied by the Department of Defence Imagery and Geospatial Organisation mapping unit is, unfortunately, off limits to ghost hunters, but army personal and civilians working in the building have reported a number of strange incidents over the years.

In 1987, Woman's Day reported the following account by an unnamed sergeant in 1982.

"I was performing a security check of the main building of Fortuna and as part of my duties I was to check incoming telex messages.

"I checked the door to the telex room and found it to be locked as would be expected.

"I then proceeded to the main keyboard located in the switchboard room, and, as I was removing the telex room key, I heard a woman's voice say softly: 'What are you doing here?'

"I was extremely frightened as I had carried out a full check of the doors and windows of the building and knew it to be secure.

"I then hurried to the telex room (a distance of some six

metres). I approached the locked door and just as I was about to insert the key, the door slowly opened.

"I had not touched the door at this time and there were no strong draughts that could have caused this movement."

An earlier account attributed to a Captain J. Bloor made reference to an apparition "like a shroud" about 1.8 metres tall near the doors of the Fortuna kitchen.

"The apparition was moving very slowly and moved through the outer door of the kitchen and stopped by the inner door.

"The top half of it could be seen. It stayed there for some time and then turned around and returned to its original position.

"Once again it rotated slowly from left to right and then suddenly stopped. I got the impression that it had suddenly sensed my presence.

"It then moved about six metres to the east but, because of the building's corner between us, put it out of my view.

"I moved back to the centre of the road to a position where I could see the apparition beneath the window of the kitchen.