THE GOLD ERA IN ALBURY DISTRICT

An article by John Mollison and members of the Publications and Research sub-committee of A&DHS Inc, 1989.

It is hard for us, far more than a century later, to envisage the transformation which gold brought to Australia in the 1850s, Already various pressures had ended convict transportation to the eastern colonies and begun a strong movement for self-government. Now not only were those changes completed but Australia's image in the world was entirely altered. Instead of a remote convict settlement it became a land of great opportunity for those with a spirit of adventure. Inevitably Albury was involved in this transformation.

GOLD DISCOVERIES

Earlier, small gold discoveries had been frowned on by authorities as having a disturbing effect on land settlement; but times changed.

Edward Hargraves, who had joined the 1849 gold rush in California, returned to Sydney in January 1851 determined that he could find gold and in February claimed credit for having done so at Ophir Creek, near Bathurst In June there was a discovery at Clunes, near Ballarat. Other finds followed, with those from 1852 at Beechworth the richest in our area. Gold fever set in and continued for the rest of the century, with rushes in many places, but it was at its peak in the early days of alluvial mining – men left their jobs in town and country; even sailors jumped ship to search for gold.

IMMEDIATE EFFECTS

The steady development of the Squatting Era of the 1830s and 1840s was suddenly interrupted. Immigration helped to double New South Wales' population in the next ten years; but in the same period the new colony of Victoria, which separated from New South Wales in 1851, had a sixfold increase. Albury was strategically placed on the main route between those colonies.

Albury's small population was soon temporarily reduced by the attraction of the goldfields. Beechworth took most but others were drawn to the Ovens Valley, Chiltern, Barnawartha and Rutherglen, and even as far away as Castlemaine. Labour became scarce and wages climbed steeply. The miners needed food and many other goods and were ready to pay. Transport from ports was difficult and expensive; demand exceeded supply and prices shot up.

Mr Hanrahan, in charge of Albury's National School, left for the diggings in September 1852 and was succeeded by Mr and Mrs Loveday, whose troubles illustrate the effect of the gold rushes on those who stayed. Mr Loveday's income was derived partly from a fixed stipend paid by the National Board and partly from the fees paid by pupils; his total remuneration dropped as children moved with their parents to the goldfields or were withdrawn to work at home because labour was so scarce. Some parents may not have been able to afford the fees. Loveday complained to the National Board, showing that the price of basic commodities had risen steeply, as much as 50% in some cases. Labourers earned £1 a day, tradesmen £2, while Loveday was probably not clearing £100 per annum. The National Board sympathised and granted him an allowance to tide him over this difficult period.

ALBURY'S SEARCH FOR GOLD

Naturally there were hopes of finding gold close to Albury and as early as 1852 Richard Heaver, a flour miller, his wife and James Dennison, a plasterer, found 26 grains of gold while fossicking

in the region of Darkies' Hill (Black Range). A meeting held on their return from the bush attracted 150 people, including Mr Townsend, the resident surveyor. The great news was given and Heaver and Dennison were hailed as "the Hargraves of Albury." There was a minor rush to Bungambrawatha Creek, but it was probably six years before payable gold was found.

Heaver in 1852 mentioned a reward fund but gave no details. However, in 1857 the Gold Reward Fund was established with the considerable sum of £1550 offered for the discovery of a new gold field within 15 miles of Albury, on the New South Wales side of the Murray, capable of employing at least 500 diggers, collectively for three months.

The reward was never claimed, but gold fever was enough to ensure that mining continued for many years. During the early Fifties a rush of diggers arrived from the Burra silver and copper mines in South Australia, attracted by the more precious metal. Many of these miners were Cornish, the Polkinghornes being the best known. Descendants of this large band, with their Cornish prefixes of Tre-, Pol- and Pen-, are still to be found in Albury and Wodonga. So it was not surprising that by 1860 the Black Range diggings were flourishing, with over 200 Chinese as well as many Europeans at work, and they found enough gold to encourage them to go on. Some Chinese camped on what is still known as Chinaman's Flat (north end of Prune Street) and others at the south end of Townsend Street.

HOPES AND DISAPPOINTMENTS
In 1863 the Black Range goldfield was gazetted, while the Nailcan rush had some who struck it lucky, reporting 32 pennyweights (1.6 ounces troy) to the load. But without permanent water the Nailcan miners had to setup their battery at Horseshoe Lagoon on the Murray. It is true that in 1865 it was reported that "there was in excess of 600 working on the field" and the Lavington Quartz Mill Company had a great ceremonial occasion when the Mayoress, Mrs Blackmore, named a crusher 'The Lavington' and luncheon was supplied by the Lavington Hotel. However, Black Range too was without permanent water, a major handicap for any large operation.

 In 1869 the Black Range goldfield permits were revoked and the Miner's Right system was substituted. There were no important alluvial finds and efforts were increasingly directed to quartz. Annual reports of the NSW Department of Mines show fluctuating fortunes. Whereas in 1878 the summary from the Albury Division included "Mining all but died out," in 1880 there was the far more optimistic note: "Gold mining is only in its infancy." In 1881 "Mining progressing, Hawksview opened up," and by 1886 there was "Marked change for the better." That was probably the best year up till that time; but the amount of gold recovered totalled only 650 ounces with a value of £2502. In fact the 1890s saw the most successful efforts, with a peak in 1895 of 2322 ounces worth £8860. Then there was a rapid decline and mining petered out in the early years of this century, though people continued to fossick with occasional small successes.

ALBURY'S GAINS FROM GOLD
Although the story of actual goldmining near the town is really one of failure, Albury benefited greatly from the Gold Era.

First, it was able to supply the needs of miners at Beechworth and other successful fields – though not without some risk. James Mitchell of Table Top, an accomplished bushman, often had to use his skill and knowledge to return by different routes from Beechworth to evade hold-ups after selling fat cattle. Surveyor Townsend was unlucky – he was set upon by bushrangers looking for gold, who stripped him and left him naked on an ant bed.

Secondly, the very difficulty of bringing supplies inland helped Albury. In wet weather the roads became impassable for horse and bullock transport. The rate from Melbourne rose from £20 a ton in summer to £80 in winter. Fortunately in the 1850s paddlesteamers began to ply the Murray and in 1855 there was a great welcome for Captain Johnston when he brought the first steamer, appropriately named "Albury," to a mooring near the Hovell Tree.

Albury then became the eastern terminus for river traffic, to its great advantage – when the river was deep enough, though often the paddlesteamers could come no further than Wahgunyah. With transport so much more comfortable for passengers and, more importantly, so much cheaper and better for goods, Albury had far more contact with the outside world. For a number of years that contact was mainly via Goolwa and Adelaide rather than Melbourne. Not only did stores arrive and local products depart more quickly and in better condition but a whole new range of products became available, from corrugated iron to fashion gowns. Paris was only 60 days from Adelaide by clipper and the river journey added another 30 days. The reign of the paddlesteamers was comparatively short, being ended by the railways, but not before they had greatly helped Albury's development.

POPULATION
The third advantage which the Gold Era brought to Albury Was the most important: the population not only grew but became far more diverse, providing new stimulus for many activities. Initially goldmining was significant in slowing the drift of Albury's inhabitants to other fields. Very soon there was immigration, and of those who came, most engaged in supplying the needs of their fellows rather than in mining themselves.

As early as 1851 Frauenfelder, Rau and Schubach had planted vines near Guinea Street and soon after Joseph Box established an orchard of citrus and nuts in the Centaur Road area, and named his holding Lavington. Developments of the Fifties included the founding of Albury's first newspaper, "The Border Post" (1856), the establishment of a branch of the Bank of New South Wales (1856), the first Albury Show (1858), the building of Catholic (1858), Anglican and Presbyterian churches (both 1859) and the inauguration of one of New South Wales' first boroughs under the Municipalities Act of 1858. Such signs of progress were to be expected as the town developed but gold accelerated them; they were typical of a decade when the newly found wealth benefited .so many others in addition to the miners themselves. The census of 1861 shows the Albury Police District as having 2116 inhabitants, an increase of 1600 in 10 years, as Dr Andrews records.

DIVERSITY
Groups of newcomers of the Gold Era naturally made diverse contributions. Many of the Chinese turned to market gardening in South Albury, still largely used for that purpose between the wars, as our older inhabitants remember. In 1868 about 70 covered wagons, each with a family of German Lutherans, arrived from South Australia to settle round Jindera and Walla Walla and soon began to supply fresh food and grain to the growing population of the Albury district. Near Black Range excellent orchards were established, while of the former miners several became pillars of the community, which from 1909 took the name of Lavington; and the Anglican parish of St James recalls with gratitude such names as Polkinghorne and Carstens.

THE GOLD ERA COMMEMORATED
Albury's coat of arms rightly includes both a river boat and the crossed pick and shovel of the gold diggers. Though the reign of the riverboats ended a century ago, they had brought Albury for the first time into convenient touch with the outside world and it is fitting that today a new

paddlesteamer, the second "Cumberoona," reminds us of the important part played by river transport in our history. While mining contributed little directly to the town's wealth, indirectly it transformed Albury.

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