

## **“ROMANCING THE STONES – FROM CAPRICORNIA TO WALTZING MATILDA”**

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### **Working paper:**

"From Capricornia to Waltzing Matilda" will capture some stories of communities on sapphire and opal miners with their families. 'Romancing the stones' is located on the Tropic of Capricorn in Central and Western Queensland. Millions of years ago the opal fields from Yowah to Winton were part of an inland sea and home to terrestrial dinosaurs whose fossils were only discovered in 1963 and lately discoveries have been near Winton. Boulder opal was first discovered by Paddy O'Reilly at 'Listowel Downs', Blackall, in 1869. Sapphires were first discovered at the Gemfields near Emerald in 1890. These significant places are still 'frontier country' and an important part of this region's cultural heritage.

One major theme which does underwrite the outback and Western Queensland is its vastness and the dominance of the untamed landscape. Larks Quarry, situated a hundred kilometres south of Winton on the Old Cork Station road, is a huge desert panorama focusing on a natural amphitheatre, bordered by jump-ups, spinifex and bulldust. This is where opal miners found myriads of dinosaur footprints, and this amphitheatre, attended by rangers from the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA), has become the nucleus of a popular tourist industry. This immense national park and natural museum of dinosaur antiquity has been appropriated and managed by the Queensland State Museum. This could become a problem for gemstone miners today. As the EPA protects hundreds of ancient fossilised dinosaur footprints, the park is in danger of becoming a typical exclusion zone.

Will the government take over this sacred site, turn it into a typical exclusion zone and with it, destroy opportunities to mine opal? The long term ownership of this country and who holds rites of passage over this territory, is a long term concern for local Aboriginal people as well as European communities. Ownership and conservation of our sacred sites is a very complex issue.

Advances in technology has changed the opal and sapphire industries from the 70's with machinery overtaking hand mining and Global Positioning System (GPS) equipment replacing the use of surveyors plotting mining leases(O'Leary, 1994). Now most miners use GPS equipment to locate prospective mine sites and map the geological location for mining documentation to be lodged at the local Mining Registrar in that district. Improvement in machinery and mining techniques has advanced the mining of opal and sapphires fast tracking the gemstone process. The changes to mining regulations and tenure of land has restricted some areas to hand mining and large bonds are held as security deposits by the Department of Natural Resources & Mines (NRM)to enforce correct Health & Safety practices and land restoration.

The Gemfield sapphires in central Queensland were discovered in 1894 by surveyors constructing the railway line to western Queensland. The fields included Anakie, Sapphire,

Rubyvale, The Willows and the Drummond Range. Nearby to the fields was the gold rush town of Clermont. John Richardson, surveyor was the first miner in this area. Peter's great-great grand parents May & Henry Richardson, moved from Barcaldine by horse & dray to establish the first washing plant for the recovery of sapphires. They also carted dirt to the wash plant for clients. The families lived in tents or shacks made of bags or kerosene tins flattened out. The markets for the gemstones were only local and maybe the odd interstate buyer took the gemstones overseas to market into jewellery.

Australia's first women commercial pilot came from the Gemfields. Mary Bradford was an excellent horsewoman and became a gem expert and a good friend of Nancy Bird Walton. It was at the time of Amy Johnson's flight to Australia when she heard some English women remark that no Australian would have the nerve to do what Amy has done. With her mind made up she returned to the Anakie gemfields and became a buyer of 'breakers' conundrum. From the stones she crushed herself, she released myriad bits of blue sapphire which she sold to help her cause. She also disposed of her beautiful sapphire jewellery and her goal came in sight. Mary Bradford obtained her license in 1931 after a few months flying, and she was the only woman to hold at that time a commercial pilot's license. She also became Australia's only woman aircraft oxy-welder, as she helped to build her own plane 'the Golden Eagle' at the Kingsford Smith aerodrome, Mascot (Nix, 1994).

From my research and my husband's family long involvement with the sapphire and boulder opal industry, we hope to reclaim a small piece of history before regulations, hi-technology and economics see its demise. In 1984 I came to Rockhampton, Central Queensland to live. This paper will discuss some of the journey I have experienced with my husband who is involved in the mining industries of sapphires at the Central Queensland Gemfields and opal fields of western Queensland. In the past 20 years I have experienced the joys, tribulations and bush life, extreme hardship of mining in the opal and sapphire industries. All I knew about opal was the white milky opal from Cooper Pedy which had never taken my fancy and sapphires only came in blue colour from somewhere overseas.

Our research data is collected by interviewing people, researching and collating material to write a book and possible short film on the industries. Researching the history of the opal and sapphire industries in the Capricornia region that were discovered over one hundred years ago created the interest to capture events of the mining industry and families. Meeting some of the current legends who re-discovered these frontiers in the 70's has been enjoyable. Hearing their stories of how they started in the industry, the desire at first to seek the quick buck, which in many cases never came to fruition and why they are still involved with the mining love affair (Cram, 1999). Long after they migrated to the fields their life was captured with the dream of finding the BIG one, admiring the quality of gemstone and sharing their find sometimes with local mines.

The discovery of boulder opal in Queensland has attracted many tourists to venture in the trails of our early discoverers and Cobb & Co. During the many trips to western Queensland, one of the questions that I frequently asked myself was how did the families survive in such harsh conditions. I discovered that they all loved the environment and the elements can second. There is something mystical about bush life, it mesmerizes you, then the yearning to discover more about its history and its families who lived there and why drives the soul seeking answers (Bach, 1997).

Opal mines in Jundah, Yowah, Eromanga, Opalton and Quilpie were linked by the Cobb & Co stage coach route and the small towns flourish with would be miners and families. Many big mines are located in these areas being where early miners started their dream to find opal in this opal bearing belt (Krosch & Blight, 1978). Then you travel to Banjo Paterson country, Winton area and the lifestyle is different and the people live in harsh conditions driving hours over rough terrain and dirt roads to the local towns or stores.

In the good times the landscape is green and abundant with wildlife, flowers and birds. In the dry times everything vanishes to the nearest waterholes for survival. After prospecting or mining for opal and sapphires the new waterholes create a stable area to sustain the native wildlife during droughts and dry seasons. Now these waterholes are considered a hazard by the EPA and must be backfilled to original land condition or the miners face penalties. Most miners have struggled with the many changes that Native Title Act and the Federal & State Government have implemented in the mining industry without consultation. It has taken years to correct the fast approval of Exploration Permit for Mining (EPM) or mining leases (NRM, 2005). The EPA, the State Government and Department of NRM have enforced new regulations where the regulation for mining in coal mines applies to large fields of opal mines (NMR, 2005).

My husband is a real bushy and since an early age of eight years he had traveled to Listowel Downs, Blackall to mine opal by hand with his father camping in the back of the car. This experience later influenced him to try his luck again mining for opal in the late 80's as mining was in his blood and he always dreams of making it rich. We moved permanently to western Queensland in 1988 to live the dream of finding vast quantities of opal. We met Cecil (Banjo) Hunt who had driven his backhoe from Longreach to Cooper Pedy in the 70's just to mine opal however returned to mine locally.

We traveled to Eromanga to view some opal mines that Banjo owned in that district where boulder opal was discovered in the late 1890's. With the opal rush came Cobb & Co delivering prospective miners to these remote areas (O'Leary, 1997). The landscape here was vast and a vivid memory of grave sites dated 1901 where several families were buried in this remote area. The harsh weather conditions, especially during hot summers, would not support families as only limited water and food suppliers available. I wish now that I'd taken photos of this eerie site where young children as young as 1 & 2 years were buried in family graves next to a huge hill that miners had tunneled by hand under the cap rock to locate boulder opal.

After mining for two years in Longreach- Opalton areas, Peter with little success he moved the machinery to Yaraka- Highlands area where opal had been mined since the 80's. He met the Bauer's, Les Ramsey, the legendary prospector Gerry Dochter, Frank Tyne lease holder, Jack and Robyn Smith (the caretakers) from Mt Tighe, Yaraka. This lease was located 30 kms from town and took one hour to drive into town on the dirt road and close property gates. Jack and Robyn hailed from Dubbo area and loved the simplicity of bush life. Peter's first impression of Jack was a memory of AIDS. Jack's standard joke was to say he had AIDS, kiss the person on the cheek then people thought he had it. However he would then show the person his wooden leg.

My passion for starting this journey came from a visit to the Hall of Fame in Longreach viewing the display of women who played a part in opening up the outback with their families in the early

twentieth century. I began to question who our modern day outback women and men are, whether they have access to technology, money and support for their families to develop innovative ideas and income. Mining and wishing to get rich quick are the main objects for living on these fields. However once located in isolation, living the simple life diminishes the quick rich dream to nostalgia to question why families or men live in these conditions but still enjoyed the simplicity with little income. "Why did people settle in such remote places for 150 years ago and why do people continue to love living in these areas when local towns and population are dying?"

The Capricornia and Western Queensland fields were our last frontier not conquered by technology as the elements of weather and money impact on mining families (AHC, 1981). The people we have met in this industry are hooked totally on finding that dream stone and not worried about its monetary value. The magic of different colours of opal and sapphires, shapes and beauty, fascinates you with its unique natural structure to see the process to a manufactured jewellery item. My memories of bush are the flies, the clear night skies, campfire, burning the spinner fix grass in some locations that we have mined to view the landscape and clear the land to look for gemstone bearing clues.

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