A miner's life: living on the goldfields

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Music, theatre and dancing were some of the pastimes that the diggers and their families indulged in when not mining for their fortunes.

Musical diggers travelled with their portable instruments to the goldfields. They brought with them assortments of homemade instruments created out of locally found objects, such as penny tin-whistles, dish-bottom drums and even a primitive set of triangles fashioned from a meat-hook, a horse-shoe and a spoon.

At the time of the Ballarat rush, there were bands of roving musicians, including a brass band, led by a Mr Hore which set out from Geelong in 1852 playing 'The Girls we left behind us'. These travelling bands of local musicians were not always as popular as they imagined themselves to be. Their limited repertoire often failed to satisfy a demanding audience who preferred professional international entertainers.

As goldfield towns were established, theatres and concert halls were built, often under canvas. Professional entertainers, such as Charles Thatcher and Lola Montez toured the goldfields to great acclaim and in Lola's case, consternation.

**Thatcher's Colonial Minstrel**

A flautist in London orchestras, Charles Thatcher arrived in Melbourne in 1852 keen to try his luck on the Bendigo diggings. Not finding much success as a miner, he returned to his original profession of entertainer.

He wrote lyrics to popular tunes which described life on the diggings. His songs became so popular that many were published in newspapers and broadsides.

"Big Poll the grog seller gets up every day,
And her small rowdy tent sweeps out,
She's turning in plenty of tin, people say,
For she knows what she's about,
For she knows what she's about.
Polly's good looking, and Polly is young,
And Polly's possessed of a smooth oily tongue;
She's an innocent face and a good head of hair,
And a lot of young fellows will often go there…"

*Poll the grog seller - Charles Thatcher*

One of Thatcher's song was called, ‘Poll the grog seller’, which memorialised the women on the gold fields who surreptitiously sold illicit alcohol to diggers. His song seems to suggest that grog selling was just one form of income for these women. Prostitution also seems to have been linked with the female grog sellers.

Women were involved in the transport and provision of grog on the gold diggings, sometimes concealing under their clothes a bulky tin container of grog.

The tin belly, the size of a family bible, was originally designed to be filled with hot water and applied to the chest.
for treatment of lung infections. Instead, this was filled with grog. The wearer would waddle along the gullies
dispensing serves costing a shilling each via a tube poking out the side pocket of her dress.

The alcohol that was sold was highly potent. A Victorian government inquiry in 1853 into the sly-grog industry heard
that the grog, sold as brandy, was concocted from cheap liquor with additives such as tobacco and pharmaceutical
spirits. A cocktail called ‘Blow my head off’ was found to contain Cocculus indicus (poisonous Indian berries), spirits
of wine, Turkey opium, Cayenne Pepper, rum and water.

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Lola Montez

Lola Montez was one of the most famous international entertainers to visit the goldfields. Thought to be of Spanish, Cuban, Indian or Turkish origins, she was born Elizabeth Rosanna Gilbert in 1821 in County Sligo, Ireland.

The stage name Lola Montez was adopted after four months’ dance tuition and a visit to Spain. She made her stage debut in 1843 where she performed dances during intervals of opera performances.

She displayed some talent for dancing, but her beauty and her celebrity were her major successes. She cultivated a dedicated following across Europe, performing for King Friedrich Wilhelm IV in Berlin. She had countless lovers, including composer Franz Liszt.

By the time she reached Australia in 1855, she had appeared in dramas, burlesques and light comedies in cities such as Dresden, Berlin, Warsaw, St Petersburg, Paris, Munich and San Francisco.

She arrived in Sydney from California in August 1855 and opened at the Royal Victoria Theatre, Sydney – the oldest and most popular theatre in the city which held around 3,000 people. Audience numbers were not particularly strong until she advertised the performance of her famous Spider Dance.

One newspaper article described the dance in detail:

‘The full perfection of her frame was revealed as she swung gracefully to the centre of the stage, and paused for a moment.
She made it appear evident that she was entangled in the filaments of a spider’s web.'
Victoria Theatre, Ballarat.

This New and Elegant Theatre will open
On Saturday, Feb. 16, 1856, under the management of
Mr. James Crosby,
Late Manager of the Victoria Theatre, Sydney.

The opening will be marked by the appearance of the Best Company ever assembled on Ballarat!

Added by New Scenery, scenery, and Appointments.

To Mr. F. Folland,

The popular American Comedian, whose company will include the following distinguished Artists:

Mr. Joseph Bayard,
The popular Tragedian, from the London Standard Theatre.

Mr. Alfred Nelson,

Miss Carry Nelson,
The grand Nellson Family,

Mr. Charles Walsh,
From the famous Paris Opera.

Mr. E. Ramsey,
The Erastian Comedian, from the Theatre Royal.

Mr. Frank Varley,
From the famous Theatre Royal.

Mr. Douglas,
Of the Principal Colombo Theatres.

Miss P. Wernham,
From the Queen's Theatre, Melbourne.

Mrs. Crosby

After the Comedy Mr. Hoskins will deliver an address.

ON SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 1856.

The performance will commence with the Erastian and Roaring Comedy of

MORNING CALL!

Sir Edward Ashton,

Mrs. Chillington - Madame Lola Montes.

Overture

By the Orchestra.

The Spitalfields Weaver!

With a new arrangement of the Erastian and Roaring Comedy of

ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA!

Antony - Mr. F. Folland

Cleopatra - Madame Lola Montes.

With a new arrangement of the Erastian and Roaring Comedy of

Prices of admission - boxes, 10s.; pit, 5s.

No half price. No smoking allowed.

Boxes open at 6pm, at 7pm at half past, and treatises at your own time as possible.
In a dance step, she portrayed that she was more and more confused as the fibres wrapped themselves about her ankles. The music slowed as she discovered a spider in her petticoat, which she attempted to shake loose; then she discovered other spiders, and examining her skirts, she shook them to reveal even more spiders.

The fight against the spiders became more and more hectic, as she danced with abandon and fire, and at the conclusion she had succeeded in shaking them out upon the floor, where she stamped them to death … the audience was held spellbound, and somewhat horror struck, but when the dance ended, the applause was thunderous; and as Lola Montes addressed her audience after numerous curtain calls, bouquets were showered at her feet …'

Although almost solely remembered for her Spider Dance which the *Sydney Morning Herald* described as 'the most libertinish and indelicate performance that could be given on the public stage', she also appeared in comedy pieces such as *Morning Call* and the dramas such as *Maidens Beware*.

Lola enjoyed heckling her audiences if they criticised her. In Castlemaine, Victoria, she informed her audience one night that she was too tired to do the Spider Dance and was promptly hissed at and jeered and called a coward. She responded immediately saying that she was worth 70,000 pounds and 'did not care a pin' for the audience.

Incredibly popular with the miners, Lola impressed them with her courage by travelling down a mine shaft by putting her foot in a rope noose and, with only a glass of champagne in her hand, went down the shaft to wild applause.

She sailed from Sydney to San Francisco in May of 1856. Four years later, she died in Brooklyn, New York. She was reputed to be only in her early 40's.
Subscription Balls

A ball or concert such as those depicted by artist, S.T. Gill, were seen as exciting events on the goldfields. These occasions were an excuse to enjoy and display new found wealth. Subscription balls were often held to raise money for the local hospital or fire brigade. There were expectations from those attending that there would be good food, an orchestra and an opportunity to wear their best clothes.

English author and visitor to the gold diggings, Elizabeth Ramsay-Laye visited a ball at Barker’s Creek, near Castlemaine in Victoria. She and her husband joined friends and hired an omnibus which transported all the ladies comfortably, 'without tumbling or tossing their dresses about'. A large canvas house had been erected for a ball room, smaller tents for refreshments and ladies’ dressing rooms.
This ballroom surprised and impressed the English visitors. Elizabeth described it as being beautifully decorated with artificial flowers, the walls covered in pink and white calico and the pillars which supported the roof adorned with garlands intermixed with pink and white. She writes,

"the effect was charming. The adjoining tents were lit with Chinese lamps and fitted up quite luxuriously with carpets, divans and sofas. The band was excellent and dancing was kept up with great spirit until daylight."

Social life and manners in Australia: being the notes of eight years' experience by a resident, by Elizabeth Ramsay-Laye.
The first subscription ball, Ballarat, 1854 / Samuel Thomas Gill,
We would like to acknowledge the generosity of St Barbara Ltd.


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