

Coober Pedy REGIONAL TIMES

YOUR OUTBACK COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER

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Happy Anniversary!

Willie Hutchison, the man who started it all...



W.J.S. Hutchinson taken when he was 19, four years after his discovery of Coober Pedy Opal

This year's Opal Festival marks a milestone. As we reflect upon the man who discovered opal here ninety years ago, his life and those of his contemporaries, the forebears who built and established the community we now live in and the generations that have passed in between, it is interesting to ponder upon what they in turn might have imagined of the future.

1915 MEETS 2005

(A ninety year affair)

Almost young enough to be able to still reach back to its beginnings, yet just old enough to be interesting—ninety years. Yes, Coober Pedy is now ninety years old, so we need to celebrate!

Let's take that reach back through the years to bring some of the people from the past into the present as part of our celebrations of Coober Pedy's ninetieth birthday. Come along with us then to share some enlightening moments.

But before we start with Coober Pedy's beginnings, the first invitation is respectfully offered to those **Aboriginal elders** who were dispossessed of their land. I would like to take them out to nearby station properties to see how their descendants have gained ownership of the land that was so sacred to those earlier people.

Then I would like to invite **Willie Hutchison** to join us for a stroll to have a look down the main street. He's the fourteen-year-old lad after whom that street was appropriately named because he gave us our beginning in 1915. As water was what he was desperately looking for on the day he found the opal,

let's take him for a drink from our public drinking fountain, there on Hutchison Street, near Post Office Hill Road. The number of opal shops he would see on that street might give him a tiny indication of the effect of his discovery.

My next invitation would be to our trail-blazing pioneers in 1915, brothers **Jim and Dick O'Neill**. They were the first miners, and they also sold goods from their dugout. You and I could take them down the aisles of the IGA Supermarket to see the huge variety of items in stock to suit our very multicultural population. Then, because these blokes must have suffered more than a few hot, thirsty moments, I wouldn't waste time before shouting* them a few drinks with the miners at the saloon bar of the Opal Inn. You too might feel obliged to buy a round. We all probably owe a lot to them, their hard-earned accomplishments being the foundations for our successes today.

Charlie Crowder must be invited along to visit his old dugout and adjoining mine from 1916 on Crowder's Gully Road. Both his mine and dugout are now a tourist

venue called The Old Timer's Mine, one of the destinations on the Coober Pedy Heritage Trail. We would give Charlie a hard hat to wear and take him through his old mine to see the displays and mannequins that show us how he used to work there. I wonder if he wants to see the opal he missed, that was uncovered when a new entrance was opened up?

The two young men who brought the first car here in 1919 deserve an invitation too—**Jack Norton** and **Arch Burnett**. They started the first transport service by picking up miners from the William Creek train station and driving them to the opal field without the help of a made

road. These boys also won the first contract for mail delivery, and built the first post office, underground.

Let's send them on the Oodnadatta Mail Run tour, the four-wheel-drive mail delivery that takes tourists along. On the tour they would travel from Coober Pedy to William Creek, Oodnadatta, and return to Coober Pedy, all in one day.

George Burford, our first Justice of the Peace, might be interested to see his old dugout in Bolshevik Gully (that Hutchison Street runs through) that is listed on the State Heritage Register. This dugout was once the Commonwealth Bank Agency. Later it was a Polish

opal miner's residence for nearly fifty years. Let's show George the photo of himself on the Heritage Trail interpretive sign, there in front of his old dugout. A story is told of George Burford hearing something outside his dugout back in February 1921. He rushed outside to become the first to greet the man who had pushed his gear in a wheelbarrow from Tarcoola (300km away)—**The Iron Man, Jim Shaw**. I would like to introduce Jim to our somewhat faster alternate means of travel, Rex Airlines. Next on the list would be a visit to the first aboveground building (1921) which miraculously still stands to the left of the entrance to Umoona

Continued on back page



Tully Woolaston (SECOND FROM LEFT) was shown the first opals from Coober Pedy, and pioneered the promotion of opals overseas
PHOTO: Woolaston Family, CPHS

Covering the far north region of South Australia

Continued from front page

Coober Pedy's Ninetieth Anniversary—History special

George Burford, miner, buyer, our first JP, at his dugout entrance (in front of Umoona Mine/Museum) circa 1920. PHOTO: Coober Pedy Historical Society



Standing alongside was their camp consisting of two tents, where they conducted police duties and doubled as representatives of the Department of Mines. After letting them have a prowl around their old camp, which is now being restored as a heritage site, we'd take them up to see the new, impressive police facility on Wright Road that has eight cells and about eleven officers on the job.

Our next guest would be a successful miner from the late 1920s, **Minnie Berrington**. Her tools consisted of a pick, shovel, a hand windlass and buckets. You and I could take her out on the field to see the mining drills, tunnelling machines, blowers, and noodling machines at work. We might point out to her that one mining tool she may have used, the screwdriver, has never been superseded—it's still an effective, basic tool.

Frank and Win Wright and Penryn Goldman might enjoy a return visit to Coober Pedy. They drove through here in 1929, when there were no facilities for visitors. There was an unwritten law on the field that opal buyers were to look after travellers, so George Burford, unofficial mayor, was the buyer who took them in. He fed them on steak, gave them

store, carting the supplies by truck herself. One of her children, Bert, was the first European baby born in Coober Pedy. He was born in 1932 and has spent a good deal of his life here in pursuit of the elusive gemstone.

We'd have to go out of town some kilometres to catch up with our next busy personage. While shepherding a few sheep with her dog one day back in 1946, she kicked over a stone and saw opal. **Tottie Bryant** had made the important opal discovery that became the lucrative Eight-Mile Field. Let's show her the old dugout she and Charlie lived in, much changed now, near the old water tank. But then we could introduce her around to the drilling program where she could be trained by a professional operator in the particulars of Auger Drilling, which might be great for kicking out stones, particularly ones covering opal.

A flight over our extensive opal fields for an aerial view is what I would like to share with the man to whom the Hutchisons sent those first opals. The Hutchisons sought the opinion and advice of **Tullie**

C. Wollaston, as he was the eminent expert on opal in 1915. While surveying these vast opal fields from the air, I would tell him the Department of Mines and Energy 'guessimates' that of the opal-bearing ground within the field, only two to three percent has been worked out.

It was Wollaston who pioneered the marketing of Australian opal overseas, so let's show him the Chinese buyers who knock on our doors begging for rough opal to buy. Perhaps this is one measure of the effects of his marketing success.

When the postmaster went off to fight in World War II, he left our underground post office in charge of his father, **Alf North Sr.** Not only did the postmaster cope with the difficulties of mail delivery via the dirt road, but a library had been organised at the post office with books solicited from everywhere. After a look-in at the old post office dugout on Post Office Hill Road that is now a residence, you and I could show him our modern post office and school-community library, both of which are computerised.

This time let's travel east to get together with our next guest. He could be out in the sand hills there, driving his camels with their heavy loads of water or goods for the miners (that is, if he too isn't out mining). We'd most likely catch up with **Bert Paxton** camping at one of the waterholes or wells between Coober Pedy and William Creek.

If our luck holds, we could even find our present cameleers, Phil and Ifeta Gee, off to the east there too. Bert Paxton could meet Phil and Ifeta, whose camel treks take them and their paying guests 'out bush' for an eco-tourism experience, to learn about how camel drivers like himself lived and worked, and where they travelled and died.

Everybody has a story to tell; these have only been a few of them. I've saved the last important invitation for another V.I.P.—yourself! We're all part of the history here, so have a good look around at our heritage in Coober Pedy. After all, you're part of its history now too. HAPPY NINETIETH EVERYBODY!

Anne Johnson
Coober Pedy Historical Society

a place to sleep, showed them around, and even gave them some opal.

For their return visit, you and I could first take them for a peek at Burford's old dugout to see the changes in it. Then we'd go around the fence, next door into the four-star Desert Cave Hotel that has a pool, restaurant, bar, shops and a gym. We would have to explain to them, however, that Coober Pedy hospitality is no longer necessarily free of charge.

Ethel 'Ma' Wilson should be invited along to see the very fine child care facility, next to the school. Mrs. Wilson had ten children, but also ran a



FAR LEFT: Minnie Berrington, a successful woman miner from the 1920s—an awesome chick who could swing a pick!
Among her tools were basic items such as a shovel, hand windlass and buckets

LEFT: Minnie Berrington working in the field

SPORTS

SPEEDWAY SEASON STARTS

COOBER PEDY MOTOR CLUB will be holding its first speedway meeting on Easter Sunday, 27 March. It will be great to see all the old speedway fans and new fans out at the track supporting the Motor Club.

This year welcomes the new President of the club Mr Mark East, whose main goal is to see the club improve in all aspects. We also welcome Phil Van Poorten and Peter McBain as the club's new bar managers who will surely bring their own touch to the bar.

This year also finally sees some members of the community giving their free time to work in the food van which means any profit will be going back to the club. The new staff has also started giving the food van a makeover with more improvements to come, as well as a new food menu that is sure to please everyone.

The Motor Club's food van, bar and novelty stall will be on the Town Oval for the Easter Opal Festival so why not come down and support the local Motor Club. Don't forget Sunday night with all the frills and spills of speedway including the first demo derby for the year, it's surely to be a blast.

Kyra-Jay Cartwright

2005 Coober Pedy Motor Club Race Calendar

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