

## **The Lake Phillipson Story as it relates to the discovery of Opal**

This story is all about James Reid Hutchison, a well educated man of derring-do qualities, perhaps typical of one brought up in the Victorian era in an affluent family. His grandmother, Mrs Margaret Hutchison after being widowed in 1841, sold her property at Moonee Ponds Vic, and in 1843 took up the 58 square mile pastoral run, 20 miles north of Robe, with her 5 daughters and baby son, William. She is referred to as “one of the pluckiest women pioneers of Australia” in Pastoral Pioneers. A friend, Andrew Dunn, who also sailed from Scotland in 1839, subsequently took up a nearby run and in 1850, he and Mrs Hutchison were married. Together, theirs became the biggest combination of pastoral interests in the South East.

William Hutchison in turn became the biggest owner of thoroughbred horses in SA and his 6 sons, as would be expected became expert judges and riders of horses.

The depression of the 1890's however changed everything. Misfortunes in the family shipping business and the financial depression put the partnership of Hutchison and Dunn into a position from which it did not recover and all properties were lost.

These were hard times, but booming WA gold fields offered excitement and a chance for recovering lost fortunes. In 1895, Andrew Hutchison, one of William's 6 sons, had already spent 12 months at Coolgardie where his party did fairly well.

Now James, another of William's sons, with a cousin, Jack Morris of Penola Station, decided to join the gold diggers. Also in the party were Mr C Mann of the Survey Dept, Mr S Blagg of Robe and Mr E Coates, stock manager of Narracoorte Station who had previously explored in northern SA and found some reefs” thickly studded with gold, as well as patches of alluvial.” This provided the impetus for the expedition. The party intended to prospect in this area and if not successful here, to push on in the direction of Coolgardie.

The party travelled on the Ghan, arriving at Anna Creek Station on 8<sup>th</sup> February 1895. Mr Warren at the station was keen for the party to take camels, but as they were all horsemen, they chose horses, which later proved to be one of their biggest blunders. They selected 12 horses, and sat off the next day, travelling only in the mornings and evenings, reaching Lake Phillipson on 19<sup>th</sup> Feb, then a “magnificent sheet of water” about 135 miles west of Anna Creek Station. In 1861, John McDouall Stuart had formed a provision depot somewhere on Longs Creek when on one of his explorations through the Interior.

James Hutchison did not write specifically of gold prospecting, more of their attempts to move toward WA which proved impossible due to the dry state of the country and the worsening condition of their horses. Fortunately, after each attempt, they were able to return to the Lake to spell the horses. They finally abandoned their plan to proceed west and instead headed south toward Wilgena Station, (close to where Tarcoola is today) intending to strike the coast at Fowler's Bay. They did reach Wilgena Station and then finally on 29<sup>th</sup> May, after many delays and changes in plans, Morris and Hutchison boarded a boat at Port Adelaide and sailed for Esperance. Hutchison writes of his time on the WA goldfields culminating in the sale of a mine he developed, followed by the subsequent purchase of a property in the Bordertown district and then his marriage on 27<sup>th</sup> January 1897 to Polly Sutton.

Move to 14<sup>th</sup> December 1914.

James Hutchison apparently never lost his interest in prospecting and the knowledge of a rich, unworked gold reef would have burned in his memory. The New Colorado Prospecting Syndicate, an Adelaide venture arranged to prospect the country between Lake Phillipson and the WA border and James was appointed as leader.

16<sup>th</sup> December 1914

The New Colorado Syndicate is floated with a capital of £3,000 divided into 640 £5 shares. Hutchison and Philip Winch, a Chemist of Melbourne) are issued with fully paid up shares in the Company. Preparations are made by Jim Hutchison as party leader for camels and supplies to be ready at Hergott Springs (Marree). Other members of the party are Jim's son Will and Mel McKenzie of Pt Augusta. All 4 were to ride camels with 2 extra camels to carry water tanks, one pair of 40 gallons each and one pair of 30 gallons each.

Saturday 19<sup>th</sup> December 1914

The party is farewelled by a big crowd of Hergott Springs people on a hot and dusty day. During the next week they travelled through drought stricken country seeing hundreds of dead and dying cattle.

Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> December 1914

Arrived at Stuart Creek Station where they camped by a creek full of fresh water. Jack Paxton, the manager of the station told how he had lost 4,000 head of stock and was looking for water further north for his stock.

Monday 28<sup>th</sup> December 1914

Left Stuart Creek Station, travelling west across the dry tablelands toward Lake Phillipson, the camels having no water to drink for 6 days until they reached North Creek where they found a good watering place on Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1915. To their surprise, a Mr Cliffe from Crown Well Station drove up in a car, looking for water for his stock.

4<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> January 1915

A long dry run with no water for the camels until they finally struck Long's Creek with a fairly good supply of water, but the Lake was dry. A depot is made at Long's Creek and from there they prospected to the NW, west and north, for water as well as for gold reefs. The country was in a deplorable state and the condition of the camels, worsening. They did find some reefs south of Lake Woorong, but now the main concern was the fast diminishing supply of water.

25<sup>th</sup> January 1915

After filling water tanks, the party headed toward Carringallana Creek, on the way to the Stuart Range where they hoped they might find some waterholes. The heat was severe, between 115 to 125 °F in the shade day after day.

28<sup>th</sup> January 1915

A thunderstorm resulted in enough rainwater for the camels to get a good drink, but the heat after the storm almost unbearable.

31<sup>st</sup> January 1915

Party camped at the foot of Stuart Range where they found a small supply of good water but heat and flies terrible.

Monday 1<sup>st</sup> February 1915

The 3 men set out on camels in search of water, leaving Will at camp. Returning at dusk they found Will gone and guessed that he had been gone for hours as the camp fire ashes were cold. They were just about to light a large fire to guide the boy home when he strolled up with a smile. He threw down a half a sugar bag of opal, saying "Have a look at that Dad, I think you will find some good stuff there." He had also found some water which he considered more important than finding the opal.

9<sup>th</sup> February 1915

This water only lasted for 8 days so they were forced to leave the search for opal to once again look for water which they found about 8 miles away. During this time the first claim of one square mile was pegged in the name of J.R. Hutchison for the NCS.