

Coober Pedy's First Electric Drill

As told to Sue Britt by Bob del Tedesco

For 30 years or more, opal miners drilled holes for their gelignite explosive charges with hand augers - bit and brace. Then in 1961 Fiore del Tedesco and his partners Rudi Moro and Bruno di Guisto brought the first electric drill to Coober Pedy.

Fiore's previous mining experience had been in the Northern Territory during the 1940's where he and his family lived in tents 140 miles out of Alice Springs. He was involved in hard rock mining which required water. By 1950, the mica mining finished and the 200 Italian miners who had been working there moved south, many to Coober Pedy to try their hand at opal gouging. Fiore went to Adelaide where he set up as a market gardener.

He still kept in touch with the Italian miners, one of whom was Beppi Coro.

In December 1960 Fiore came to Coober Pedy to check out the opal scene. He thought with some improved equipment, he could make a go of it.

Because of his previous hard rock mining experience, Fiore thought he would need a 32-volt electric drill, which would be safer than 240 volt. Working with an auto electrician in Magil, he got a 24-volt generator from an aircraft. Speeding it up with a Villiers petrol motor he got 32-volt power for lights and his drill.

In those days the only augers (bits) available were short 12-inch ones used for drilling holes in fence posts. Fiore bought 6 of these, cut off the shanks and welded 3 augers together to make two yard-long bits.

Fiore and his partners also made their own hoist, copying the features of the Yorke hoist. It was an innovative time. Rudi Moro, working with the auto electrician, made a little carbon arc welder. They couldn't patent it. Soon after, a similar welder was being used by the Highways Department.

Fiore and his partners used the hoist and the electric drill for a couple of years on 7 Mile and 23 Mile, where they had some successful finds. Everybody else on the fields decided they needed 32-volt electric drills too, never realising that ordinary 240 volt equipment would have been safe enough in Coober Pedy's dry sandstone ground. Beppi Coro became the sole agent for the drills and the long augers so he probably profited more from the innovation than the men who first developed them.



Bob del Tedesco with his father's drill - the first electric auger on Coober Pedy's opal fields

