

CHASING OPAL AT COOBER PEDY 1940'S STYLE

By J.E. Grund

It was September 15, 1946, when a letter arrived from my brother, Max, who was at the Coober Pedy opal fields. He suggested I take his place on the claim, as the opal had cut out and he wanted a spell. His instructions were for me to borrow dad's 1928 Buick and meet him at Port Augusta. I was to catch the East-West train that night and make my way to Coober Pedy via Kingoonya, and the weekly mail truck.

These instructions were followed, and we exchanged positions at Port Augusta, my brother Max to return to the farm and me to become an opal gouger. The rest of my journey was played by ear as I had no idea what lay ahead. I waited all that Sunday for the train to leave Port Augusta at 7pm, and I arrived at Kingoonya at 3am Monday morning.

As the lights at the station went out, I realised I had no idea where the hotel, run by Jack Crosby, was situated. The stationmaster took me past the tennis court, and pointing at the Southern Cross, said, "If you go that way for about 400 yards you will see the pub light."

The first 300 yards over bare soil and loose gibbers seemed to

take a lifetime. There was no sign of a light and I had thoughts of walking completely out of existence, disappearing God knows where into the darkness. It was with great relief that I saw the glimmer of the weak light and found the pub. After peeping into a few occupied rooms I found an empty bed and collapsed into it.

Next morning when I apologised to Jack he quickly dismissed it and said everyone was expected to do exactly what I had done.

STUCK AT KONGOONYA FOR A FULL WEEK

The mail truck from Kingoonya to Coober Pedy left on Saturday mornings so I was stuck at Kingoonya for a full week. The road from Port Augusta to Alice Springs had not been developed during the war as the rail system had sufficed for troop movements. The mail truck stopped at every station homestead, overnights at Mt. Eba, and continued to Coober Pedy the next day.

I struck up quite a friendship with Jake Santing, the bloke with the crook spine who operated the mail run. We had on board, in addition to supplies for Coober Pedy, two Aborigines and an opal buyer, Bill Francis. Bill's father was a buyer of White Cliffs fame

Entrance to old post office
and bank at Coober Pedy





Left: Bob Koska, one of the original gougers, in his dugout near Government Tank

Above: Operating a windlass at Coober Pedy, 1946

and Bill had been brought up the hard way, being made to buy opal when he was only 13 years of age.

The arrival of the mail truck was the weekly event at Coober Pedy. Arriving late Saturday evening, it was greeted by most of the 110 residents of the fields. Personal parcels were collected as the truck was unloaded and then it was around to Bill Oliver's post office hill to collect the mail as soon as it was sorted.

My partner, Walter Bartram, and his son, Harry, met me and later we made our way to the Eight Mile where they had two army tents with the floors dug out a couple of feet for extra head room. The rear tent was for sleeping and the front one for living and eating. Cooking was done in a camp oven out in the open and a kerosene primus stove was used for casual cooking. This system was augmented by an old Adelaide No. 2 wood-stove later on, and Keith Wright's father, old Pop, an ex-pastrycook, used to perform miracles with it.

Provisions were kept in boxes and a safe. Beer was bought by the case, four dozen at a time, with each bottle in its own little straw jacket. These jacketed beers along with our butter were stored in a pit and the straw was kept wet. The cold night air would settle into the hole, and the beer and butter would remain cool. When two shafts were connected, the beer would be placed in a wet bag as there was always a draught down the hole.

CUT IT UP AS YOU ASKED FOR IT

Alf Turner of Mabel Creek would kill a bullock and Saturday morning was the day he delivered it to Coober Pedy. He would cut it up as you asked for it and anything left at the end of the day would be given to the Aborigines.

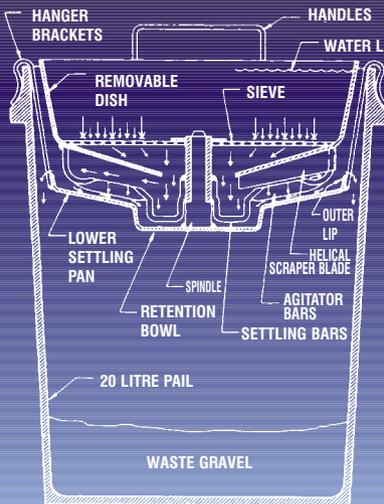
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This meat was supplemented by wild turkey and an occasional chunk of red 'roo, cooked in the beef fat in the camp oven, and just as good as beef. We all took turns making bread, using dry yeast, and regardless of whether it rose or not, it was always eaten.

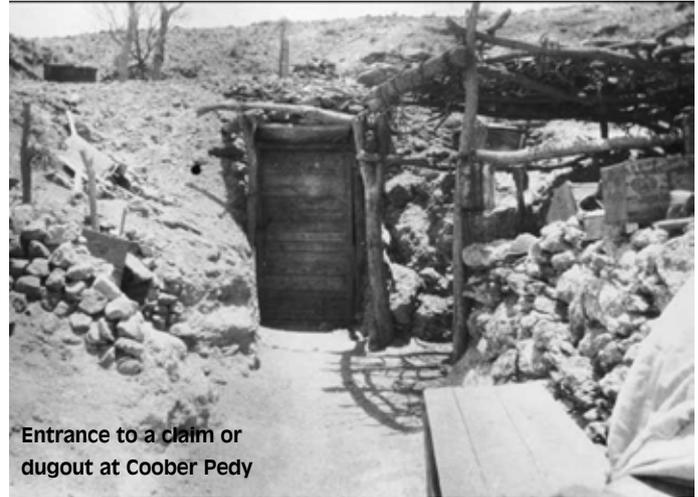
We never worked on Saturday or Sunday. These days were used to clean up properly and wash our clothes. On Saturday afternoons the two 44-gallon drums were filled from the 250,000 gallon government underground tank, the water being raised by hand pump. Provisions were obtained from the underground general store. Sometimes we visited friends, and if we had opal, arrangements were made for a buyer to pay a visit. The mail truck was always met, whether you had anything on it or not. It was a link with the world, Kingoonya being the nearest pub down a two wheel-mark track 200 miles south. It was a very slow tortuous track threading its way through the mulga.

We went for a trip to the crater, 27 miles north of Coober Pedy, where a neighbour had picked up a buckboard load of large red and white floaters. The colour of this magnificent opal was still visible in the bleached and cracked specimens and upon breaking them they remained weathered to the very centre.

The field had been worked for 20 years before us and costeans were all over the half-square mile sunken area. Clear blue potch was in evidence in most of them, and we dug some of it from the banks for doublet backs.

COMPLETELY ERODED AWAY

Never a trace of colour was found; evidently the opal level of the floaters had been completely eroded away. A mile or so



Entrance to a claim or dugout at Coober Pedy

from here in the Stuart Ranges, are the most beautiful coloured displays of eroded sandstone hills in the world, aptly named by my cousin, Vince Wake, as the Christmas Pudding, the Castle, and the Sleeping Camel. He had a pleasant two-mile walk from one vantage viewing point to another.

All shaft sinking and gouging was done by pick and shovel. I can recall only twice when a plug of 'gelly' (gelnite) was used. The handles of the pick and shovel were shortened to save space while sinking. None of the holes I worked was deeper than 12 feet and with practice the mullock could be landed on top with hardly any falling back. Footholes were cut into the side of the shaft and this method was used to considerable depths. A completed hole looked like an inverted mushroom as gouging



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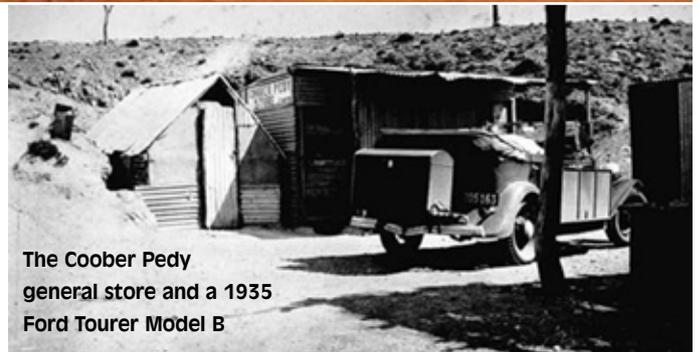
Coober Pedy as it is today

extended six feet all round, then a new hole was sunk in line with the run.

The opal in the Bartram claim was mainly bar vertical running about three feet wide, making and breaking all the time. It continued for well over 120 yards. Occasionally the verticals ran octopus-like into blobs, and the king stones of these deposits were truly magnificent, weighing many ounces.

This remarkable claim produced very little potch, and no 'trace' at all. A few side shoots missed originally were worked by later diggers.

Opal was found at the Eight Mile when Aboriginal women saw it cast out by rabbits. This claim was worked by Barney Leonard, a station hand who married an Aboriginal woman. Below the Bartram open cut, two claims were worked by King Billy John



The Coober Pedy general store and a 1935 Ford Tourer Model B

and his kinfolk. Other successful claims were worked by Frank Hillman, Levi Robins, Keith and Pop Wright, and Bert Wilson and his family. In total about 10 of the claims were successful.

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 A close-up photograph of a hand holding a green TurboPan, a specialized gold panning tool, over a stream of water. The pan has a distinctive spiral design.

A TRUE AUSTRALIAN BUSHMAN

Bert Wilson, a true Australian bushman, overlanded from Queensland direct to Coober Pedy in an army 4x4 truck. When within a few miles of Coober Pedy, a tyre gave out completely so Bert laboriously stuffed the casing with cane grass and completed his journey. He then walked the eight miles to the new field, finishing with his boots in his hand as rain prevented any movement of vehicles.

The opal used to run horizontally at about the 10-foot level and in places inclined at about 45 degrees to the surface.

The opal I eventually found surfaced in this manner. Sick of finding nothing, I decided I was picking the easy places, so I started in an ornery crab hole covered with spear grass and old man salt bush. It was also covered with the grey billy jasper common to Coober Pedy. While trying to penetrate the hard,

brick-red crust which capped the kopi, my pick bounced off a potch vertical two inches thick. Alongside it was the true red opal, and next to that the blue-green vertical. When this small run cut out 20 yards later at a depth of 10 feet, I broke into Walter Bartram's prospect hole. He had missed the trace by less than an inch.

My partner had long since gone to Adelaide because our camp, along with the rest of the field, had been decimated by a type of tropical dysentery. Unable to throw it off, Walter Bartram had been flown to Adelaide via Mt. Eba Aerial Service. The Flying Doctor Service provided us with the new drug, Sulphaguanadine, which eventually slowed us down to a walk again.

TIPPED IT OUT OF MY BOOT

I am not superstitious but I believe in coincidence. A big, green praying mantis had taken over our tent and each day he would be over somebody's bed. That person would then come home with his little opal bag full. The day I found my strike I tipped it out of my boot. I had long since given up carrying an opal bag and, having nothing to put the opal in, filled up my boots. About three weeks or so later, after my mates had gone home for Christmas, on the day I broke into Pop Bartram's hole I found the mantis dead, crushed under my blankets. I had found my last stone.

Opal buyers of those days were Phil Sherman, father of Greg; Harold Brady, a gold blender who suffered continuously from stomach ulcers; and Leo Boygan, an American from 48th Street, New York, who brought with him 200 pounds in two-shilling pieces to trade with the Aborigines. Old Tom Brady, Harold's

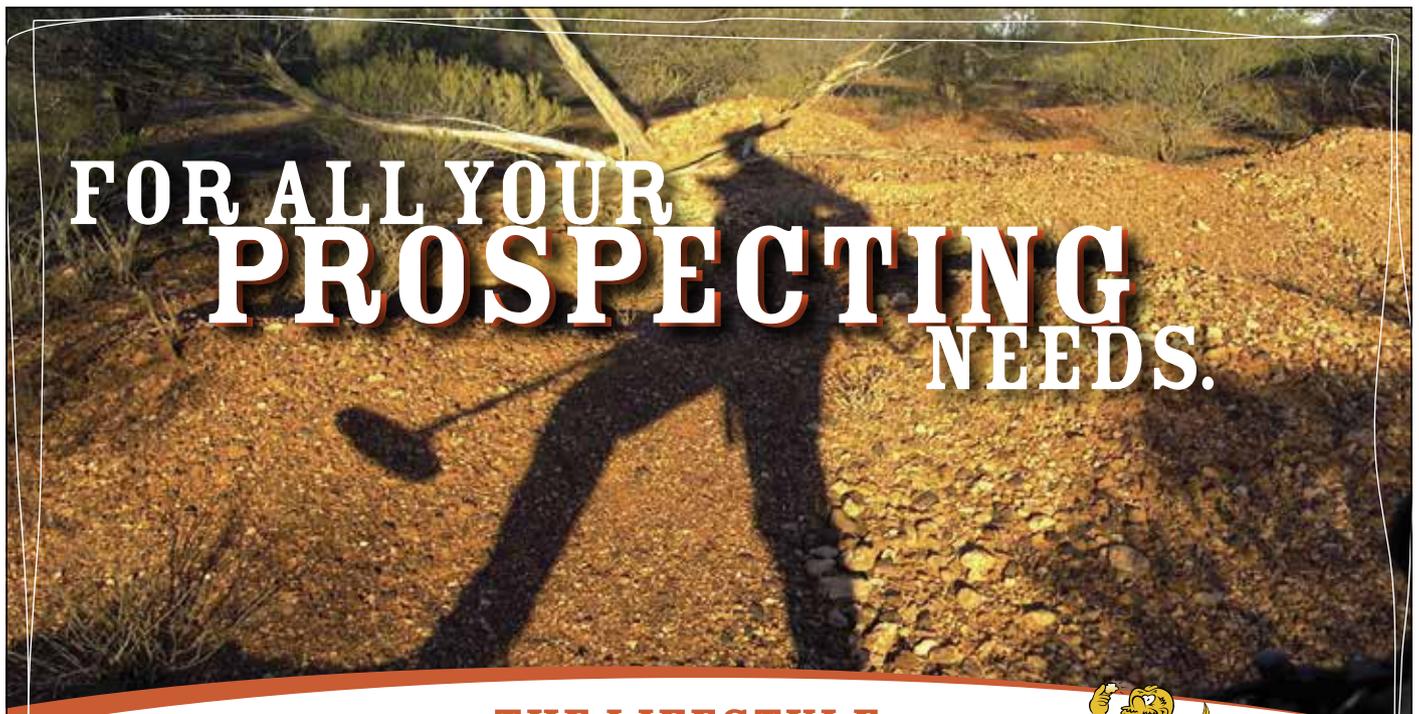


It even has a golf course!

uncle, was the pick of them all. Trained at White Cliffs, he always wore a tie. He would sit at the top of our shallow holes, sucking on a roll-your-own and spitting occasionally. The spittle would always land on his tie and drip off the bottom. He would carry anything up to £20,000 in King George V ten-pound notes stuffed inside his shirt, held there only by his trouser belt. He had no fear of being robbed and no one ever tried.

Tom would get the Aborigines to throw their stones up and he would throw them down the money. When he was sick with the dysentery, I nursed him in our tent and stuffed our valuable sulphur drugs down his gullet. Tom died in his Adelaide home in 1952, an old man. His overseas contacts were taken over by Vince Wake, author of The Opal Men.

There is nothing like success to make one contemptuous of money. Soon are forgotten the weeks and months of failure when opal rolls in at 'X' thousands of pounds a day. 



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