

10TH NATIONAL OPAL SYMPOSIUM

Cooper Pedy 31st March – 1st April 2021

DON BARTRAM PRESENTATION PREVIEW for

Writing an Opal Book – the Slippery Slides and Shafts

Part 2

Opal books are strange creatures. They exist somewhere in the Never Never between Reference, Historical and a damn good read categories. Or these days they may often be just a series of photographs with limited text.

Opal Hunters: The Bartrams on the Opal Fields 1936 – 2021 took 15 years to bring to fruition. Then the marketing began, and that has taken the last 12 months. Grants, internet sites, book reviews, libraries, and much more.

As for my book, a massive mobilisation of the extended Bartram family was needed. Location of old letters, photographs, newspaper items, magazines – boxes of letters were found in old caravans, sheds, under houses, and in old cabinets. And these discoveries did not happen in any particularly helpful order, or all at once. Often a chapter of the book was written, only needing to be totally re-written following discovery of new information. And in some cases this occurred on a number of occasions for the same text.

Then there was the selection of material for various chapters. Should the early days be followed by more recent days, or individual opal fields, one at a time to the present?

Could we enhance old black and white photos, or early letters? And how can we compress hundreds of letters into one or two chapters? How do we confirm information so that it was clearly accurate, and make sure we have the correct spelling of old names? Where did the mining activity occur exactly, and where did people camp or have dugouts?

All of this took thousands of hours. A lot of the early letters were written on the opal fields and sent back to the family, and often the writer had left school at 12 years old, so their writing skills were limited, and the letters were often written on paper of varying quality, using a pencil and tilley lamp, and often when the miner was weary after a long week of very tiring physical mining.

Then there are the questions of why family members went mining on the opal fields in the first place? Was it after the Depression, the War, poor farming conditions including extended drought and low prices? Was it the result of seeing opals and hearing about the fields from people already mining that created the interest and desire?

And how did they manage their families, wives, and children? How did they get food and water to the fields?

What about medical supplies, and selling the opal that they found? Was selling rough opal better than processing the stones? Were solids or doublets a better choice? And the creation of business opportunities – should I set up a business buying and selling opals rather than just mining?

What sort of equipment do I need for the ground I am mining? When do I move to a new field? How do I develop discreet contacts with other miners so that I hear about new opportunities before others? And what about the maintenance of personal reputation particularly when buying opal?

And then there was the longer business view? How often do I need to go to the fields? Will miners be prepared to come to my premises in the city to sell me their opal?

A good book needs to transmit these concepts, concerns, ideas, and worries and allow the reader to feel that they are there, down a shaft, living in a dugout, looking after young children, trying to survive and make money as well as running a business.

Hopefully people will enjoy reading this book, which I personally feel is a treasure.

Launch of Opal Hunters on 17th March at Pacific Gallery
Adelaide Museum

OPAL BOOK WRITING 101

Part 3

(Part 1 SA Museum book launch is on you tube, and Part 2 is a Presentation Preview)

Some more things you should know in order to write a successful opal book

1. WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS?

- Is it for your ego? The ancient Greeks said that it is no use being famous if nobody knows.
- Do you wish to let the whole family know how tough it is to be an opal miner? Is the book going to be a test? Will interest in your book by the family individuals result in changes to your Will.
- Is it to make money?
- Is it a gesture for future generations to appreciate their ancestors and the cost really doesn't matter?

2. WRITING THE BOOK

- How many pages?
- What are the stories that you have? Large finds of opals/disasters like floods or machinery issues/things that make people cringe/did you use explosives/were you ever robbed/people you have met or known/where did you live on the fields/have you ever travelled to overseas opal fields or other fields in Australia/have you ever eaten an emu egg omelette or cake, goat, snake, roo.
- You must keep a daily diary of everything you do on the fields, with plenty of photos, particularly when beginning in a new area.
- Take photos of opal found, specimens, fossils, cut stones.
- Get all of the available records from other opal mining members of the family, including old letters and photos. Interview family members.
- Talk to people who have mined in your area before – get depths of levels, opal found, colour.
- Record why you went to a field and why you left it.
- Separate your material into individual fields, or different people you were mining with.
- Print off important emails for your records.
- Choose an attractive cover design
- In your book tell people about opals and the opal fields. Very few people know anything much about the opal fields.

- Get a good publisher.

3. WHAT ARE THE COSTS?

- What do you want your book to look like, and how many can you sell?
- Will it be hardback or soft-back (limp)? B5 size?
- Work out how many books you think you can sell and then halve the number to get a more accurate estimate.
- If you get your book published and printed overseas, the cost for 1000 books will be around \$16,500. i.e. around **\$16** per book. If you only get 100 or 200 copies printed, the cost for each copy will move into a much higher bracket - even up to around **\$30**. If they are printed in Australia, the cost will be substantially higher again.
- How much can you sell your book for? I decided to sell mine for \$50. It probably could have been higher, given that it is both a reference and historical book, but \$50 was my final decision.
- So let us look at a printing run of 200 (at \$30 cost per book = \$6000). This is your starting cost. If you sell every book, you can potentially make a profit of \$20 per book. This is only possible if you sell to your friends and family for cash or EFT transfer of the \$50 with few other costs. You need to sell 120 books to break even.
- As soon as you move outside this approach and decide to sell your book using bookshops, as a standard business position they will ask for a number of your books on **consignment** and will take **40%** of the retail price of all books sold. For a \$50 book, that is \$20.
- So if your publishing/printing cost per book is \$30, and your selling cost in a bookshop is \$20, you are now into a negative situation financially, without adding any other further costs.
- At the other end of the scale, if you have 1000 books printed, you need to sell about 400 to 500 to cover all of your costs and then you may make some money if you can sell all of your books. This is, of course, after freebies to libraries, bookshops, media and so on. And this requires as large an amount of sales as possible to family and friends, and as small an amount through bookshops.
- If your book receives a lot of positive publicity, with resultant much higher sales numbers, then book shops have more of a role to play.
- So are you still interested in writing a book? Can you make a profit, or cover costs, and does it actually matter to you if you cannot?

4. HERE ARE SOME EXTRA COSTS

- Website \$600
- Square \$100
- Business cards

- Launch venue/tea & coffee/food
- Invitations
- Publicity/free books
- Book covers for posting
- Paypal/square – approximately 2% per transaction
- Postage

5. OTHER EXPOSURE THAT HELPS SALES

- Join the Australian Historical Mining Association. Send them a copy of your book to review/they will mention your book in their newsletter/you can advertise your book on their website
- Forget grants
- Become a member of organisations on the opal fields – Historical Society/Mine Rescue/Gun Club/Tourist Association
- Meet the Author days at libraries

6. STRESS

- Adopt various relaxation techniques to help reduce stress.
- Be prepared to spend a lot of time on your book before/during/after you get your book published.
- Make sure you take time off for a regular walk along the beach or elsewhere.

There are not enough good opal books available today. We need books to be written about opal mining now, before the numbers of original miners begin to decline.