

Donald Bartram, *Opal Hunters: The Bartrams On The Opal Fields 1936-2021*, Peacock Publications, Adelaide, 2021, ISBN 978-1-925263-54-1

This is a very readable book that describes how a prominent South Australian family, the Bartrams - as well as the extended family members Grund and Wake - made a significant contribution to the Australian opal industry. Over eight decades the extended Bartram family worked across the major South Australian opal fields of Andamooka and Coober Pedy, as well as the New South Wales fields, Glengarry, White Cliffs and Purnanga. They were influential in all facets of the opal industry, as miners, classers, valuers, buyers, retailers, exporters, as well as promoting the industry and helping to develop new markets.

Opal Hunters draws extensively from the Bartram family archives compiled by the author which contain hundreds of letters and photographs. Letters cited in *Opal Hunters* highlight the innovative nature and good humour of family members in very trying conditions on the opal fields, and greatly enhance this book. It also contains many excellent photographs from the archives and has a useful historical timeline of family members involved in the opal industry, as well as a brief glossary. The author has tertiary qualifications in dentistry, acupuncture and medical law, and spent many years in the health sector, including a decade in England, before retiring in 2017. In his earlier days he mined at White Cliffs, Purnanga, and briefly at Andamooka, and post-retirement has actively resumed opal mining at Coober Pedy.

Bartram takes the reader through a chronologically arranged account of the family's involvement in the opal industry. Beginning with Andamooka, the author describes how his grandfather 'Pop' Bartram drove to this relatively new opal field in 1936 to become one of only 14 miners there at the time. In one of his early letters home, 'Pop' described life there in the 1930s as something of a 'holiday camp' when in reality living conditions were very rough. People lived in tents, humpies, and dugout in the sides of ridges or hills, and there was no electricity, water, fuel or schooling. Bern Grund, an extended family member left the depression and drought affected Eyre Peninsula farm in 1938, and became a prominent miner on the Andamooka fields: other family members soon followed.

Opal was discovered in Coober Pedy in 1915 which soon became a thriving field, but by the 1940s was dormant. The discovery of opal by an Aboriginal woman named Tottie Bryant at the nearby Eight Mile field in 1946 helped revive the regions fortunes. 'Snow' Bartram who had recently returned to Adelaide following military service overheard a conversation in a local hotel about the opal finds at the Eight Mile, and within a week members of the Bartram and Grund families travelled there, and soon enjoyed success. Commenting on one of the largest parcels of opal he had ever seen, the noted artist and author Jack Absalom, described how "[s]ome miners by the name of Bartram made a big strike at Coober Pedy. They were taking the opal out like pounds of butter. After they'd sold a few thousand pounds' worth they shovelled the rest into fruit cases and nailed down the lids. They took away twenty-seven fruit cases".¹

Significantly, the author describes the positive relationships his family had with Aboriginal people they purchased opal from. During the 1940s, they were buying most of the opal found by Aboriginal people at the Eight Mile field and paying fair prices for it, at a time when others exploited them. This relationship was further enhanced by 'Snow' Bartram taking Aboriginal people out hunting in his utility, as well as carting firewood for them. When 'Snow' became seriously ill, it was an Aboriginal man named Billy John who gave him some traditional herbs which one doctor suggested may have saved his life. He also noted how in earlier times "there was a bit more time for talking" between miners, as well as Aboriginal people, and this often resulted in the discovery of new opal bearing areas.(p 86). Bartram also points out that while some miners struck good opal, the harsh reality was that most left the fields broke.

Although the Glengarry opal field west of Lightning Ridge in New South Wales was discovered in 1928 its fortunes fluctuated until serious interest was rekindled in 1970, after two farmer and a drover found traces of opal there. They were about to temporarily return to their farms just as 'Snow' Bartram and Ken Miller arrived from Coober Pedy, but showed them where they had found some colour before departing. Members of the Bartram family successfully mined in this area where millions of dollars worth of opal would be found, and were known to take 44 gallon drum of black opal back home with them. According to the author, 'Snow' Bartram was instrumental in the rush to these fields following his discoveries, and it was suggested that he "had the ability to almost feel where the opal was". (p.117).

While mining at White Cliffs the author recounts an interesting tale about the family tradition with huntsman spiders, or 'Bartram Spiders', as they were referred to, and how their presence was a sign that finding opal was imminent. On several occasions good opal was discovered just after a spider was seen in their accommodation, and they were never harmed, or handled gently if they had to be removed. Donald Bartram joined family members at Purnanga in 1984, and their presence there prompted renewed interests in these fields which had remained un-prospected for many years.

Bartram also briefly describes several short trips to separate overseas opal fields he and his brother Alan made in the late 1980s. In a remote mountainous Mexican town the author described as a scene from the film 'The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly', he recalled how armed men with fast-action shotguns patrolled the streets. While trying to bargain with a local woman over three jars of cheap opal, negotiations became vocal and intense, however, the sight of an armed man walking by suddenly made "the opal look... a lot better".(p.159). Bartram 'happily' paid the asking price of thirty dollars to ensure his safety. Alan Bartram's day trip to an opal mine in West Java was less eventful.

Acknowledging that those who made the most money on the opal fields were the buyers, several members of the extended Bartram family established themselves as buyers, becoming adept in cutting, grinding, shaping and polishing opal jewellery, while continuing to visit the opal fields A flourishing business in Adelaide was run by the author's father Harry Bartram, who had an excellent reputation with miners and dealers as "his word was his bond, and

everyone trusted him”. (p.94). Sadly he was murdered in an armed robbery at his office in 1977.

Alan Bartram then restructured the family business. Known as ‘The Opal Mine’ and initially an international tourist shop, it went ‘up market’ in 1995, retailing high quality jewellery which attracted a good local and international client base that “proved a good turning point” for the business.(p.97). Famous visitors to the business included Liberace and Carrie Fisher. It won a major South Australian tourism industry award in 1999, as well as a number of other accolades, and organised a number of national and international exhibitions. Alan Bartram served as President and Vice-President of the Australian Opal and Gem Industry Association for 20 years, and on relinquishing the position was made a life member for his services to the industry.

Harry Bartram discovered ‘The Fire of Australia’ at the Coober Pedy Eight Mile field in 1946. Renowned as “the most valuable piece of light opal for its size in the world”, it remained in the family’s possession for 70 years (p.76). It was initially exhibited at the South Australian Museum in 2015-2016, before it was sold to them at well below the valued price so that it would remain intact forever. Acknowledging its national importance, the Federal Government also contributed towards the costs, thus ensuring the Museum housed the best opal collection in the world. In 2020, Alan Bartram donated an opal ‘pineapple’ to the Museum’s collection.

Opal Hunters is an important contribution to the history of the Australian opal industry. The author acknowledges at the outset that this book was influenced by the loss of many old time opal miners in recent years. I sincerely hope that *Opal Hunters* will encourage other people involved in the opal industry to record and document their experiences before an important part of mining history is lost.

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Endnote

ⁱ John Mabey, *Absalom’s Outback*, Sydney: The Australian Broadcasting Commission in association with Rigby Publishers Ltd, 1980, p.31.