

A brief history of the Rocky River Gold Field

The Rocky River gold field was one of a number referred to collectively as the Northern Gold Fields, which included Bingera, Hanging Rock and fields on the Peel River. While not the first and slow to grow, the Rocky River gold field was one of the most productive in NSW at its peak and the longest lasting. In October 1851 the first claim for the discovery of gold was made at Rocky River but it was not until the end of 1852 that a 'community of diggers' was reported and 34 licences recorded. In March 1853 over 400 diggers were working at Rocky River, though numbers fluctuated, with many leaving that winter due to the cold.

The Rocky River Gold Fields continued on in a moderate manner until 1856 when a large rush began and it is at this time that gold diggers from China are first mentioned. Setting a tone of general hostility that would continue for many years, these first arrivals from China were described in April 1856 as 'a little horde of Chinamen'. By July the number of diggers (European and Chinese hordes together) was counted at 3,000, with many using a variety of sources of information to tell them this was the 'rush' worth getting to.

One such source of information was a letter written in mid-1856 from a Chinese miner at Rocky River to a friend working for wages elsewhere; the recipient quickly announced to his employer – "me off" - leaving the letter behind. Eager to know the news from Rocky River, a reader of Chinese characters was found and the contents of the letter were revealed to report that there was plenty of gold, work and rations at Rocky River, that his friend should come even if he had no money, but if he did, then he should bring some opium, for which the writer would give "£6 for 1-lb opium".

It did not take long for clashes to arise on the gold field and in September 1856 a major episode of violence resulted in a number of injuries for which three European miners were arrested and one sentenced to six months gaol. The numbers on the gold fields continued to fluctuate and by the end of the year it

was reported that many miners, including Chinese ones, were leaving for Hanging Rock or even the Victorian fields.

Violent incidents, however, continued on the Rocky River diggings, and one in January 1857 was between two major divisions within the Chinese miners, “Canton vs. Amoy”. The Amoy group (Fujian) was made up of those who had originally come to the colonies before the gold rushes to work under contract as shepherds and other occupations, and who had decided that gold digging was a better option. While the Canton group (Guangdong) had come specifically to make their fortunes by gold digging. Each was divided from the other by language and many cultural differences.

While a level of violence no doubt continued, European miners who persisted in wishing they did not have to compete with Chinese miners began to submit petitions to this effect. The first of these was in October 1857 and was in the context of the introduction the previous year of the first Chinese immigration restrictions by Victoria. This was a poll tax that saw many Chinese arrivals diverted to South Australia from which they walked into Victoria in order to avoid payment. NSW did not introduce restrictions until 1861, to avoid which, many Chinese miners made sure they arrived via Queensland.

By the time these restrictions on new arrivals were introduced, the presence of Chinese miners at Rocky River had been long established. In 1857 and 1858 there are references to women (‘fair dames’) accompanying the Chinese miners, including one described as a ‘Calcutta coolie’. Overall, the Chinese presence, including new arrivals, continued to attract hostile references in such newspapers as the *Armidale Express* where calls for expulsion or references to leprosy were not uncommon. In July 1858 another petition that they be removed from the gold field was got up, but as before, with no legal consequences. In September that year, a detailed description of a Chinese feast and a reference to attendance at a night school to learn English, reveals other aspects of the residence of Chinese people at the Rocky River diggings.

Like all gold fields in the Australian colonies, the police presence was strong and while this helped protect groups such as Chinese miners from stronger measures than petitions, it also meant a degree of police action regarding other activities. Action not always accepted meekly, as when in July 1859, a Sergeant Keegan found himself confronted by 100 Chinese members of the community when he attempted an arrest. The river at this time was described as “lined with Chinese encampments, which may be known by the bush fences around them.” A complex network of dams and races, including a “large Californian pump” worked with a kind of treadmill, assisted in the continuous search for gold.

By May of 1860 the number of Chinese miners on the Rocky River gold fields was reported to be much higher than non-Chinese (due in part to European miners leaving), and it was at this time that agitation for restrictions on new arrivals of Chinese people was reaching a peak in NSW. In June 1861 came the Laming Flat riots in which Chinese miners were temporarily driven from a gold field and the following month the European miners at Rocky River produced yet another petition, with the *Armidale Express* contributing with such arguments as that those who came to NSW were the “scum of China”. NSW did introduce a poll tax on Chinese people entering in 1861, which had no impact upon those already in the colony.

Paradoxically, just as the government was introducing restrictions the number of Chinese miners on Rocky River seemed to have dropped (operations at the Joss House were said to be minimal), due to a reduction in gold finds. However, in 1862 it was reported that numbers were rising again with a mixture of “old chums” returning from visits home to China, as well as new arrivals, all now preferring to come across the Queensland border to avoid the new tax. Many of these new arrivals subsequently moved onto other gold fields.

By this time, the high point of gold production on the Rocky River had passed but the presence of miners – both Chinese and European – would continue for many years. As would friction between those who continued to assert the pre-eminence of their claims to residence and way of life over that of the Chinese.

Thus in November 1863 the activities of Chinese on the burial ground, which included exhuming bones for return to China and letting off firecrackers, ultimately resulted in their being forced to use a separate burial ground. Though not all conflict was between Europeans and Chinese, and again in 1864 fighting occurred among Chinese themselves that resulted in at least one death. At this time the Chinese miners took a leaf from the book of those hostile to them and presented a petition of their own in 1866, requesting the continuation of Gold Commissioners at Rocky River that they affirmed they had great confidence in. This petition did not save the Gold Commissioners, which positions the government largely abolished on all goldfields at this time, and in November 1866 the Chinese miners on Rocky River presented departing Commissioner Addison with a 'gold hunting watch'. The inscription read in part, 'Presented' ... 'by Ah Why and 200 Chinese gold diggers'.

By the 1870s more and more gold mining was being undertaken by machines and mining companies, while at the same time tin mining gradually became a more fruitful source of income for individual miners, and the Chinese populations of places such as Tingha and Vegetable Creek to the north of Rocky River grew accordingly. Despite the dwindling population at Rocky River this did not prevent a new Chinese Temple being built and its opening celebrated with much feasting in 1880. It was this Joss House that burned down in 1912, by which time only a few aged miners were left at either the old Rocky River fields or in the nearby town of Uralla. Men such as Ah Yew, who in his 70s was well-known around Uralla before his body was found at the bottom of an old shaft in early 1893, the last perhaps of the Amoy men from the 1850s; or Sun Kai, who spent 70 years at Rocky River, having lost contact with his wife in China, and, aged 95, was still to be found in the district in 1930. While most of the Rocky River diggers (from Canton or Amoy) had long since returned to their homes and families in China, many had married in Australia, establishing families and businesses around the New England area and beyond.