

Starting the trek

A long walk of over 440 kilometres following bullocky trails and other tracks across farmland and through bush must have been a daunting proposition. The first Chinese had no idea of what lay before them. They were totally reliant on the Robe inhabitants for directions, and sought their services as guides to lead them to the goldfields. Some of the guides were Robe locals returning to the goldfields to prospect for gold or to sell provisions to the miners. Often these guides were bullockies who were familiar with and frequently travelling the routes. After leading their charges they returned to Robe via the Victorian sheep runs, where they loaded their Bullock drays with wool for export. Bullockies were popular choices as guides, as the Chinese were able to load their equipment and provisions onto the wagons, as well as the sick and lame amongst their number. However some of the guides were unscrupulous and did not deliver the prospectors to their destination. A Robe local recorded that *the coolies were landed on the beach and then left to their own devices. Some of the inhabitants of the little town offered to act as guides for a consideration, and although there were those who carried out their self-appointed task properly, taking the Chinese over the greater part of the journey to the goldfields, there were others who, having collected their fee, led them only a short distance and left the unfortunate celestials to find their way as best they could*¹. It is even said that some of the bullockies took the Chinese into the scrub, murdered them and kept their goods that were still piled high on the drays².

Risks and fortunes for guides

It was not at all easy for the guides. The bullockies put themselves at risk escorting the Chinese. Resentment flared against the Chinese at the goldfields once the surface gold had run out. When they arrived in Bendigo or Ballarat, exhausted from the trek, they were greeted by children throwing stones at them and they were dragged along the ground by their pigtailed³. For some guides, the abandonment of the Chinese as they drew close to their destination may have been prompted by the fear of violence. In addition, the majority of them travelled through the months of winter, crossing marshy floodplains for most of their trek. The man-made channels, known as the drains, which eventually drained the excess water, were not commenced until 1863. The bullock drays required floats above the axles and drainage holes in the floor to let the water drain out. A local observer reported that a bullocky guide's dray got stuck in a watercourse and his charged didn't help pull him out. The Bullocky became angry and he started throwing their belongings out of his wagon and into the water. The Chinese then worked together and pulled the wagon out very quickly⁴. It was reported in the South Australian Register on 25 March 1857, that a bullock driver from Adelaide who was acting as a guide conveying the Chinese overland from Guichen Bay *was drowned while bathing at Harrow in the Upper Glenelg last Saturday. The body was recovered after the accident, but the life was quite extinct. The property of the deceased was taken possession by the local authorities pending instructions from the Curator of Intestate Estates and the celestials left to find their own way to Ballarat as well as they could*⁵. However, the rewards for the guides were great. There were many tales of these guides who charged from 10 shillings to £4 a head, or £50 to lead the groups of 100 to 300 Chinese to the goldfields. The Chinese later stopped this opportunistic trade by marking the route. They barked rectangles, carved Chinese characters or attached coins on trees on the trees they passed. This was to show the way for

¹ *Our South Australian Past*, Book 1, 1958, page unknown

² Chandler, John; *Forty Years in the Wilderness*, 1990, Lochaven Press, Melbourne, page unknown

³ Rolls, Eric; *Sojourners; Flowers & the Wide Sea*, 1992, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Queensland, page 121

⁴ Unknown publication, Local History Collection, Robe Public Library, pages not numbered

⁵ South Australian Register, 25 March 1857, page 3a

their countrymen who followed later⁶. The bullockies' new found wealth did not go unnoticed by other locals. Robe's famous tom the Bosun, after whom Boatswain's Point is named, made a good amount of gold from the lucrative activity of ferrying the Chinese ashore from the Tall Ships and then guiding them to the goldfields. He was noted for fulfilling his obligations and guiding them all the way to the goldfields⁷. Local legend reports that Tom the Bosun wore his fold on his belt, and he was later believed to have been murdered as when he was found drowned at Nora Creina, his money bag was missing. His mate, with whom he was originally shipwrecked at Boatswains Point while escaping a misdemeanor in Adelaide, was rumoured to be the murderer.

Walking to Penola

The first few groups of Chinese goldseekers were guided through Naracoorte and Apsley to link up and follow the Tolmer Gold Route around the Northern Side of the Grampians through to Bendigo. This route was 474 kms long, and through dry and arid country. After the gold strike in Ballarat and later Ararat, this route became unpopular and a new route was adopted along the Southern side of the Grampians. The Chinese travelled from Robe to Kangaroo Inn. This walk took about two days and there are two wells, said to be dug and used by the Chinese, one at Water Cress springs about 15 kms out of Robe and another at Clay Wells about 40 kms out of Robe⁸. These wells may be seen at the turnoff to the Robe – Beachport Road off the Robe – Millicent Road and about 150 metres on the left back from the Clay Wells intersection on the Robe – Penola Road. There is also said to have been another well about 25 kms out of Robe on the right of the Robe – Millicent Road just past Ballantyne's Road and just before the Biscuit Flat Drain. The well is said to be located between the road and the property owner's boundary fence, although it is obscured by bulrushes and was possibly destroyed by quarrying. The Chinese would have originally lined these wells and sealed their openings with lids to prevent animals falling in and to keep the water fresh for later contingents of their countrymen⁹. Today none of the wells have retained their lids with the lid disappearing off the well at Clay Wells in the 1930's. Once the cavalcade reached the Kangaroo Inn, the bullockies would stop for two to three days to drink and socialize while the Chinese gambled. The ruins of the former Inn, which was so popular with travelers and bullockies, can still be seen. To preserve the ruins, in the last few years they have been stabilized by Roger and John Andre¹⁰. However, some Chinese did travel via Furner in winter due to the high water covering the undrained land that made the tracks impassable around the Kangaroo Inn. Locals recall that at one stage several hundred camped overnight near a local homestead. The cavalcades then travelled to Penola where the Bullocky guides again rested for a couple of days and spent some of the gold paid by the Chinese for their services as guides. Much wealth was brought into the town by the Penola based bullockies, Pat Black, John Hogg and Isaac Mepstead, who carried the Chinese camping and mining equipment on their return journey to Penola after dropping their wool load at Robe¹¹. Father Tenison Woods observed that *Penola was full of Chinamen on the day of my arrival and I am sorry to say I saw a good many drunken people*¹². Local legends include the story of Mrs. Mepstead

⁶ Cawthorne, Ellen Mary; *The Long Journey*, 1974, Hansen Print, Naracoorte, South Australia, page 11

⁷ Rolls, Eric; *Sojourners; Flowers & the Wide Sea*, 1992, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Queensland, page 134

⁸ Cawthorne, Ellen Mary; *The Long Journey*, 1974, Hansen Print, Naracoorte, South Australia, page 11

⁹ *ADHS Newsletter*, No. 190, March 2001, Avoca District Historical Society, Victoria, pages not numbered

¹⁰ *Heritage South Australia*, January 2003, Number 22, Heritage South Australia, Government of South Australia, page 3

¹¹ Rolls, Eric; *Sojourners; Flowers & the Wide Sea*, 1992, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Queensland, page 134

¹² Clifford, G & G; Lecture; *Ten Years in the Bush 1866 by Julian Tension Woods, Abridged Version*, Penola Historical Selections, Penola, South Australia, pages 40, 41

of Penola being very self-satisfied as she walked down Penola's main street jingling a hundred sovereigns in her purse¹³. It is reported by Annette Balnaves of Penola that one day in 1863 a total of 70 chinamen were seen in Penola¹⁴. Not all the Chinese continued their journey through to the goldfields, some stopped at Penola to establish market gardens.

¹³ Dean, Lois; *Robe's Chinese Connection: Portrait with Background*, Address for the Robe-Bendigo Walk Reenactment, pages not numbered

¹⁴ Balnaves, Annette; *Tour Guide to Penola and Coonawarra Past and Present*, 1990, page 5