

# Aboriginal Involvement in Mining at Arltunga



Arltunga Historical Reserve was traditionally occupied by the Eastern Arrernte people. The Reserve formed part of a larger area known as Ulmere (*oolb-mud-ah*). The name refers to the dry and dusty conditions associated with the East MacDonnell Ranges.

When miners came to Arltunga they quickly learnt that Aboriginal knowledge of the country was invaluable and they saw them as both guides and a possible source of labour and domestic help. Many Aboriginal people believed that helping the prospectors find new gold mines would help them retain some form of independence in the face of the expanding pastoral industry.

## Guides

During the mining days Aboriginal people instructed many of the miners on safe travelling routes and how to read the country to locate water sources.

David Lindsay was following Aboriginal directions when he found the little red stones he believed to be rubies in what is now known as Ruby Gap Nature Park.

Similarly the local police would rely on Aboriginal trackers when investigating claims of cattle stealing.

## Labourers

Although their role is poorly documented, the labour of Aboriginal people helped sustain mining in Arltunga until well into the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Aboriginal people often prepared the ore dug by the miners for further treatment via a process known as stone dressing. This involved crushing the rock, usually by dollying, sifting it through quarter inch mesh screening, rejecting all solid white quartz and selecting gold bearing quartz for further treatment.

During the false ruby rush at Glen Annie Gorge the miners would rely on local Aboriginal people to distinguish the high quality stones from the poorer quality stones. Much of this work fell to Aboriginal women, as digging was traditionally regarded as women's work in the Eastern Arrernte community.

## Domestic Helpers

Although discouraged by the rest of the community, it was not uncommon for Aboriginal women to live with miners and for mining families to adopt Aboriginal children. They performed a wide variety of domestic tasks including cooking, cleaning and acting as messengers.

Horses were the main form of transportation during the mining days and many of the children

became expert at tracking and returning horses back to the miners.

The local Aboriginal men were often supplied with guns, which gave them a greater chance of hunting their preferred food source - Red Kangaroos and Euros. In return for the guns the men would provide mining families with skins from which rugs and mats could be made.

## Reference for Aboriginal Involvement

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