

ROBYN ANNEAR

The Monster Meeting Interviews #1 Robyn Annear interviewed by Jan 'Yarn' Wositzky

Approximate running time: 69 minutes

Written & co-produced by Jan 'Yarn' Wositzky
Filmed, edited & co-produced by Davide Michielin
Lighting & sound: Denise Martin
Executive producer for Chewton Domain Society: John Ellis

Filmed at the Castlemaine Art Gallery, 2012, with thanks to Peter Perry.

Funded by **Ballarat Reform League** with assistance from the **Vera Moore Foundation** & the Australian Government's **Your Community Heritage Program** (Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities).

Robyn Annear

Writer and historian, Robyn Annear has written books such as *Bearbrass; Imagining early Melbourne* (Mandarin 1995), *Nothing But Gold: The Diggers of 1852* (Text 1999) and *A City Lost and Found: Whelan the Wrecker's Melbourne* (Black Inc. 2005). Robyn is also a regular contributor to *The Monthly* and a very entertaining speaker, as you will see in this interview. For more wit and information go to robynannear.com.

Overview of Interview

A gifted storyteller, Robyn paints a vivid and humorous picture of the goldfields, the characters, the political issues, the meeting itself and the meaning of it all.

Part 1 Introduction

0:00 Introduction of Robyn Annear (RA) by Jan 'Yarn' Wositzky and RA story of her family coming to the goldfields.

Part 2 The Mount Alexander / Forest Creek Gold Rush, 1851

2:24 A vivid description of the Forest Creek/Mount Alexander gold rush in 1851: the people, the sights, the cacophony and the smell, the madness and the rush of it all, and how Forest Creek was a domestic gold rush and the "big one" - the rush that inflamed Europe. By December 1851, when the rush was six weeks old, there were an estimated 25,000 diggers on the creek.

Part 3 The Gold License

13:08 Story of how in September 1851, when the Colony of Victoria was just a few months old, Lieutenant Governor Charles Joseph La Trobe introduced a Gold License of 30 shillings per month for each digger, payable up front whether you found any gold or not.

How the purpose of the Gold License was to deter workers leaving their jobs, so as to maintain the machinery of government and keep the established class system in place.

Earlier, the good burghers of Melbourne had offered a reward for discovery of gold, to prevent workers leaving for gold rushes in New South Wales.

The Masters & Servants Act already provided penalties for anyone quitting a job without the employer's permission.

With 25,000 diggers on Forest Creek, the Gold License had failed.

Part 3 Gold License Doubled

23:50 La Trobe's reaction to the failure of the Gold License was to double it to £3 per month.

RA thinks this move "strange". La Trobe, a "gentle soul" was panicked: he'd lost control of the colony; there were no labourers to harvest crops or shear sheep; he could have gone for a fairer system, such as a royalty, but didn't; communication with his superiors in London was difficult as it took months for letters to cross the oceans, and so he was on his own.

La Trobe also applied the License to tent and shop keepers, and attached the regulations to serious vagrancy laws. The diggers, predictably, were against the doubling of the License, especially as many were not making money from gold.

Part 4 The Monster Meeting: 15 December, 1851

32:09 The history of monster meetings in England and Ireland.

The placards for the Forest Creek Monster Meeting proclaimed "Fellow diggers meet and agitate", and how such meetings were entertainment, with a band and great language such as "Fie on Pusillanimity" (cowardice), with much audience participation as the speakers addressed the diggers from a dray.

There were 15,000 diggers at the meeting, so how did they hear the speakers? (comparisons with the Occupy movement), and the role of newspapers in the meeting itself and in publishing the speeches.

A discussion of what was reported to have been said: that the diggers were to conduct themselves "as men"; the Chartist rhetoric leading the diggers to imagine democracy; that they saw themselves as "citizens" (when in England they were "subjects") united in bonds of friendship.

Discussion whether this spirit later made it's way into Australian society as the 'fair go'.

Reflection that at this early stage of the gold rush, before police brutality became a feature, that the diggers respected the authorities and the law and were advocating moral force, not violence; that they were "proud Britons" who will not be slaves, but the government had better beware lest they lose Australia as they lost the American colonies (Tea Party talk?); how the government, for whom the diggers did not have a vote, represented only the interests of the squattocracy and provided nothing in return for the Gold License; and that the digger's dreams of democracy became reality.

Part 5 After the Monster Meeting

1:05:53 Everybody retires to their campfires and a few days later learn that La Trobe has backed down - that two days before the Monster Meeting he decided to keep the license at 30 shillings per month.

But La Trobe institutes a system of paid informers and, to entice men to join the force instead of becoming a gold digger, he puts police on fifty percent of every five pound fine they collect from an unlicensed digger, and that begins the police corruption that leads to Eureka.

Conclusion of how the men at the Monster Meeting harnessed a sense of freedom that led, after Eureka, to democracy.