

# Public entertainment

## Theatres

Theatres were some of the first major buildings to appear on the goldfields. Most were large tents with a simple stage at one end and benches to sit on. Diggers were happy to get away from cramped tents into a dry, warm place with entertainers to make them laugh or cry, feel sentimental, shocked or horrified.

## Stars from overseas

The stars of the day were attracted to the wealth and excitement of the goldfields and eagerly came from Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and even Europe, America and China.

Often the first entertainers arrived shortly after the diggers. Within weeks of gold being discovered at Gympie in Queensland, the Theatre Royal opened and offered a different production every night.

Actors, singers, acrobats and musicians flocked to the goldfields. Even Chinese opera companies joined the rush. The American actors, James and Sarah Stark took £20 000 home to San Francisco after they toured the goldfields performing **Shakespeare**.

The Irish actor, Gustavus Brooke, was famous for his role of **Othello**. In 1856, after his final performance at Ballarat's Victoria Theatre, he was presented with a gold nugget weighing two pounds (0.9 kilogram). The French dancer, Thérèse Strebinger was so popular that tickets to her show had to be **auctioned** by the theatre.

Once towns became more established, fortunes were spent building lavish theatres and opera houses. Ballarat's first theatre opened in 1853, and by the end of 1854, there were five theatres. The owner of Bendigo's Shamrock Hotel spent £8000 building the Theatre Royal.

### Theatre tokens

Some theatres gave out tokens like these, which showed where you could sit. The cheapest seats were immediately in front of the stage.



### What is it worth now?

Today, £20 000 would buy as much as almost \$2.5 million, and £8000 would be equal to \$992 000.



## Theatre audiences

Theatre audiences did not sit quietly in their seats throughout a performance. They walked around, came in and out of the theatre, called out and offered loud opinions about the play and the actors. One visitor to a goldfield theatre described the experience:

*There was a thunderous uproar all the time, punctuated by exchanges of pleasantries, the popping of corks, and the shouting of compliments to members of the cast.*

## Children's shows

Sometimes theatres put on special shows for children. Pantomimes and puppet shows such as 'Punch and Judy' were great favourites. One or two puppeteers hid behind the stage, and using different voices for each character, acted out a play with the puppets. Mr Punch always ended up in trouble. He fought with his wife Judy, with the policeman and the doctor.

Like their parents, children did not sit quietly through a performance. They called out, interrupted, laughed and cried at the puppets' antics.

### Did you know?

A favourite entertainment was a dance called the 'cancan'. Pretty young women would dance in a way that showed as much leg as possible. At a time when only women's ankles were to be seen, this was thought very daring.

### Ballarat's Victoria Theatre

At Sovereign Hill, in Victoria, they have recreated a theatre. Here you can see actors performing in a favourite pantomime of the gold rush years, *Red Riding Hood*.

## Golden stories

### A gold reward

In Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, a particularly important scene takes place in a graveyard. At one goldfield's performance, the audience of diggers kept interrupting the actors. They offered advice about how to dig, the best tools to use and how deep to go. The actors' patience was rewarded with a shower of gold nuggets when they came out for their final bow.



### Popular puppets

The fun of 'Punch and Judy' delighted children for many years. These puppets were made by a Newcastle entertainer, Rex Sinclair, in about 1932.





## Music halls

Music halls were another popular form of entertainment. Less formal than the theatre, there was often no charge for the evening's concert. The owners made their money by selling food and drink to the audience.

Diggers and their families who went to Ballarat's Charles Napier Hotel in the 1850s saw dancing horses and monkeys, a man walking across the ceiling, parts of plays and ballets, and a group of Tyroleans yodelling in their national costume.

## The minstrel show

One of the most popular music hall entertainments was the minstrel show. White men blackened their faces and sang, told jokes, danced and gave speeches. Much of their act made fun of the way African Americans talked and walked. Goldfields' audiences particularly enjoyed this type of humour and minstrel shows from California toured the New South Wales and Victorian diggings. One of the largest, the Backus Minstrels, was very successful. At the end of its 1855 tour, the audience covered the stage with a shower of gold dust.



When you turn the key on this minstrel doll, he beats the drum and crashes the cymbals

## Golden stories

### Sarah Barnes

Sarah Barnes and her husband, David, owned the Leonora Hotel on the Kalgoorlie goldfields in Western Australia.

Sarah sewed labels from beer bottles onto her dress and wore it for her performances in the hotel's music hall.



The beer label dress that belonged to Sarah Barnes

## A famous music hall star

One of the great stars of the New South Wales and Victorian goldfields was the dancer and actress Lola Montez. Born in Ireland, her real name was Delores Gilbert. After an unhappy marriage, she ran away to London and became an entertainer on the stage. She came to Australia from the Californian goldfields to perform her famous act, the 'Spanish spider dance'.

## Protests about the 'spider dance'

Lola Montez danced frantically around the stage during this dance. Pretending a spider had bitten her, she shook her skirts searching for it and showed the largely male audience her legs. This was thought shocking. People wrote letters to the papers and protested outside the theatre. One journalist described it as:

*The most ... indelicate performance that could ever be given on a public stage.*

A Frenchwoman saw her act in Melbourne and although she did not object, pointed out that all the other female members of the audience walked out. The police banned a second performance.

The reason it was so shocking and why Lola Montez became so famous was that at the time, women's legs were never seen in public. Dresses went down to the ground and even if a woman picked up her skirt, only petticoats and **pantaloons** could be seen. The 'Spanish spider dance' showed off Lola Montez's thighs and appreciative diggers threw gold dust and nuggets onto the stage.



Lola's gift

In December 1855, this magnificent brooch was given to Lola Montez by her 'friends in Victoria'. Can you find the tiny gold nugget?



Lola Montez



# Sport

## Team sports

Diggers were very keen on sport. Although everyone worked long hours from Monday to Saturday, no one worked on Sundays. Games such as cricket and football were particularly popular, and every goldfield had its own team and an open piece of ground for a playing field. On Sundays they challenged each other to matches. Huge crowds gathered, gambling fortunes on the results.

## Competitive sports

Large fairs took place on holidays such as Boxing Day, the Queen's Birthday and Easter. There were plenty of competitive sports such as running, jumping, weight throwing and tug-of-war. Individual mines formed their own teams. There were also fun activities such as contests to see who could be quickest to eat a treacle bun hung on a string.



The Britannia Gold Mine tug-of-war team stand proudly behind their rope after winning the championship at Ballarat's 1899 Easter Carnival



By 1862, Ballarat had its first football club

This set of rules was produced in 1866. Up to 40 men played on each side. Trees served as goal posts and the first team to kick two goals was the winner.

## Golden stories

### Playing cricket

It was sometimes hard to find a flat piece of ground for a cricket field. At Wood's Point in Victoria, keen cricketers built a cover over the river for the cricket pitch and trained a dog to fetch the ball when it missed the pitch and landed in the water.

## Prize fighting

Prize fighting was another popular activity for Sundays. Diggers standing in a circle formed a temporary ring and shouted encouragement to their favourite fighter. On a June Sunday in 1852, the digger Alec Finlay wrote in his diary about some fighting near his tent:

*Did not hear of any preaching near our tent today ...  
Several men-fights relieved at times by dog fights etc.*

Competitors did not wear boxing gloves. They fought bare-fisted, and could be badly hurt. If successful though, they could win large prizes. Local champions made more money from boxing than they ever did from gold.

## Attempts to ban it

Government officials tried to ban prize fighting, but this was very difficult because a fight could start anywhere. Large crowds gathered quickly at news of a possible fight, and disappeared just as fast when the police arrived.

Artist Eugène von Guérard sketched scenes on the Victorian diggings. The activities shown here include a man preaching on a fallen log and two men boxing bare-fisted

