

ORBOST & DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY Inc.

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ORBOST'S WATERWHEEL & STAMPERS

- relics from our gold mining history, Combienbar

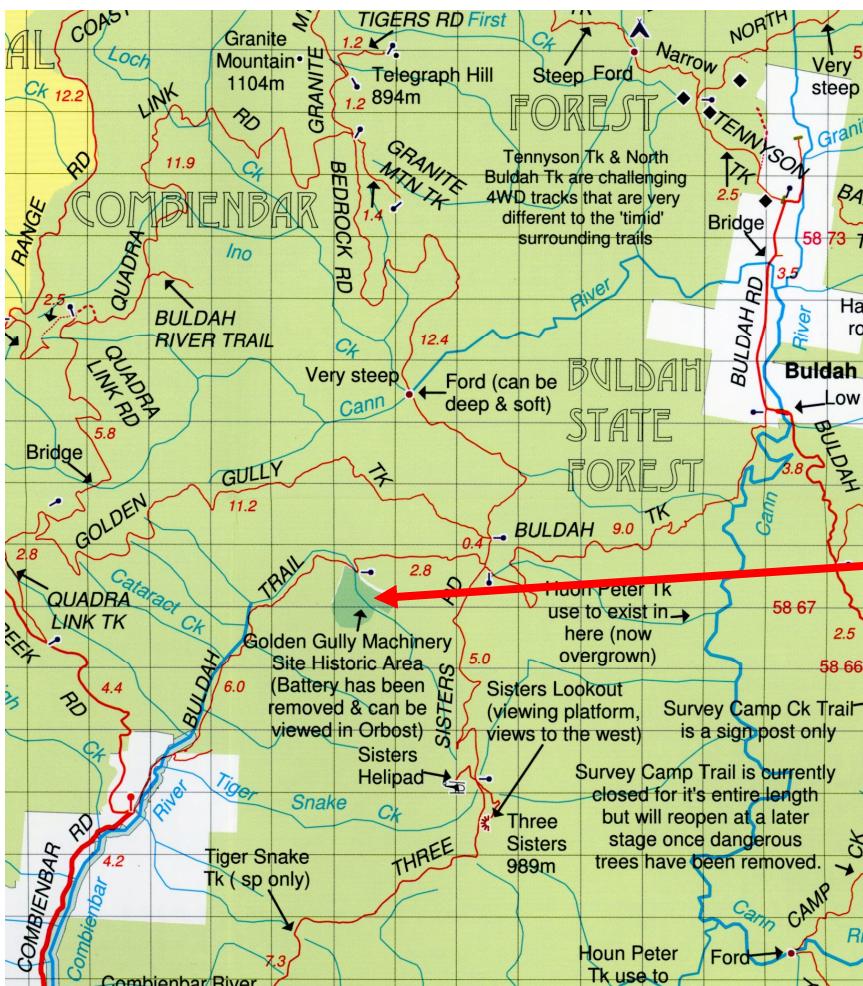


Visitors to Orbost since 1988 have been intrigued to see a waterwheel and a six-head of stampers located near the Slab Hut (now Visitor Information Centre) and Forest Park. How do these relics of our gold-mining history happen to be in Orbost? Where did they come from?

The Search for gold

From the 1860s, gold-seekers fanned out across Victoria. Many had come to Victoria in the 1850s to the first gold rushes at Ballarat, and then followed the lure elsewhere. In 1873, prospectors came from the Bombala and Bendoc direction into the remote and unexplored region called Combiénbar. They travelled by foot or on horse, making rough tracks as they came. Some gold was found and other diggers followed, and camps developed on Combiénbar Creek. A more permanent track was gradually opened up from Bendoc in the 1890s (a distance of about 22 miles through very rough country). It wasn't until 1898 that a rough pack-horse track from the Orbost direction via the gold-mining town of Club Terrace was established and miners came from both directions.

This was rugged, mountainous country, but the lure of gold was enough to overcome any hardship. Every creek offering a trace of gold was prospected.



The story of our stampers and waterwheel began in 1912 with the Rozynski brothers, Oscar and Charlie. (Snowy River Mail, 12 December 1912).

The Rozynski family came from Towamba (near Eden in NSW), where Oscar was born in 1868, then moving to Bendoc and Buldah where the family settled and prospected for gold.

Oscar married Ellen Sturgiss from Club Terrace in 1905.

The brothers also prospected at Club Terrace and Combiénbar. Golden Gully at the top of Combiénbar was a promising site for them.

In 1912, they decided to transport a six head battery of stampers on the tray of a horse wagon from Buldah to their gold mine at Combiénbar.

Following is how Graham Dyce describes the trip in his 1982 book 'Combiénbar, The Valley of Contentment'.

"Owing to the rough terrain and steep sidings, it was necessary to have two large wheels on the bottom side [of the wagon] and two smaller ones for the top side to level the load. During the journey, the wagon broke loose and careered backwards out of control until it slammed into a large tree, bending the main drive shaft. It required approx. three weeks, using block and tackle, to winch the wagon and its load back up the hill to the track. The whole operation, from Buldah to Combiénbar took six weeks to complete."

After reaching its destination, the crusher was lowered carefully down a steep slope by tree winches into the middle of the Combiénbar Creek. Here it was set up below the main workings on two heavy wooden beams. The crusher was quite unique from the normal rock crushing batteries with its ability to be driven by water power.

Operating the crusher involved making [a water wheel] of about 14 buckets, each one-foot square and with capacity to hold 2 or 3 gallons of water. These were made from tongue and groove boards and then attached at one end to separate pieces of timber 5 foot long whilst the other end was

fastened to the hub of the water wheel. By placing the buckets two feet apart, the pieces of timber radiated outwards like spokes to form a waterwheel ten feet in diameter. A flat circular band of steel held all buckets arms securely in position.

The volume of water in the River [creek] at the mine site was inadequate to drive the crusher and required a small dam to be built forty feet upstream. During the night, the dam would fill and by using a wooden gate valve, enough water could be released to turn the water wheel and operate the crusher for several hours.

Gold bearing stone from the Rozynski mine 80 yards away was brought down the hill in two moderate sized boxes. Wire ropes together with pulleys were set up in such a way that when each loaded box was taken down to the crusher, an empty box travelled back to the mine.

No doubt this method took much of the drudgery out of the job and I understand that altogether 32 ounces of gold were taken from 60 tons of stone. Nevertheless, the men received little reward for their efforts."

Graham Dyce does not record when Oscar & Charlie abandoned their mine in Golden Gully, but it seems that Oscar had selected 100 ac. of land in 1910 at the top of the Combienbar Valley where he built a log cabin for his wife and family of two girls and five boys. He later also built a school to educate the children.

At Combienbar, particularly because of the transport difficulties, farming was largely subsistence, with vegetables, pigs, cattle, and turkeys. A report in a 1915 Bairnsdale newspaper is of a 'turkey drive' of 120 birds from the Rozynski property at Combienbar to Orbost enroute to Melbourne. About 30 turkeys were lost on the trek, maybe taken by foxes or dingoes.

In 1928 Oscar, Ellen and their younger children shifted to Noorinbee North (Cann River) and became dairy farmers there.

The crusher laid idle until 1938 when it was purchased by Fred Mann who seems to have abandoned the mine shortly afterwards.



These photos, copied from Graham Dyce's 'Combienbar, Valley of Contentment', 1982)
show the remains of the Rozynski waterwheel and stampers in the early 1980s.

Graham had a particular interest in our gold-mining history and in the early settlers of our more remote areas like Club Terrace and Combienbar.

He also worked as a Ranger for Orbost Shire Council. In 1983, the Council was successful in obtaining \$36,014 for an employment project for local men. This involved the restoration of what remained of the

waterwheel, stampers, and the dam and wooden water race.

Three men were employed on this project which began in early 1983: Bob McIlroy, Greg Hardy and Robert Sporer. Graham Dyce supervised the project.

The plan was to restore the wheel, stampers, dam, and wooden water race on this site. Another part of the plan was the eventual upgrade of a track by the Forestry Dept. to provide tourist access.

In early 1983, a fire had swept through the site and cleared the surrounding bush to some extent. Bob McIlroy recalls that their first job was to make a 600 metre track to get in to the site.

"Nothing remained of the wheel except the iron pieces, no woodwork at all. We had to figure out



Robert Sporer stands proudly on the wall of the dam which consists of over 1,000 barrow loads of soil.



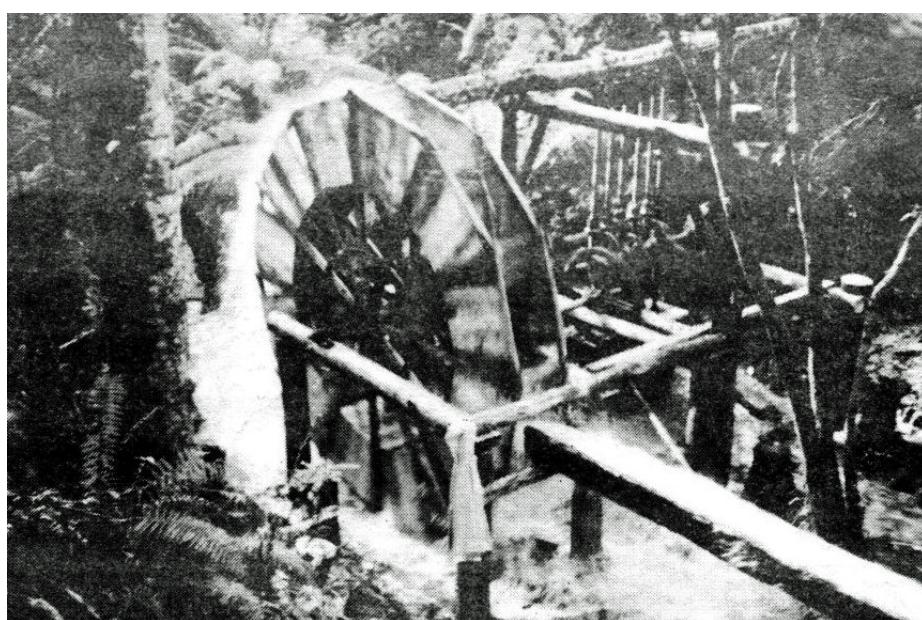
Graham Dyce, supervisor of the project, and Greg Hardy removing stampers to prepare for painting.

how it would have looked and worked originally, how many buckets & how they were set, how many spokes etc. This was quite a challenge since there were no designs. We camping at Combiénbar Hall and drove out to the site every day," Bob recalled.

After building the track, these three men had to reconstruct the dam wall across the Creek. They also picked up, cleaned and painted all the metal pieces from the wheel and stampers and put them back into their original positions.

The next task was to rebuild the waterwheel to a dimension of 14ft. 6 ins. in height and 2ft. 6 ins. wide. It was Bob McIlroy's job to figure it out.

Gradually, the various pieces from the original Rozynski mine were resurrected on site.



After about 3 months effort, the wheel and stampers were ready for a test.

The photo at left is from 'The Sapphire Sun' No. 28, 1983 and shows the water wheel and stampers in action for possibly the first time since the 1930s.

A wonderful achievement.

Fast forward to 1987/88 when, after a long debate and many objections, a decision was made by Orbost Shire Council to move the waterwheel and stampers to Orbost. The argument centred around whether historic relics should remain on their original site, or, as in this case, be made more accessible to the public. There is no doubt that the original site at Upper Combiénbar was very remote and vulnerable to fire, with poor access.

The plan was for them to be re-constructed on a small gully adjacent to the Slab Hut to become part of a historic precinct and a drawcard for visitors to Orbost. This coincided with the bi-centenary of British settlement in Australia and a time of elevated awareness of all things 'historical'.

In Orbost, the wheel and stampers have settled well into their new site, complete with a small dug-out 'mine', a small dam, and the original wooden chute to channel the water, complete with silhouettes of miners etc. Here it sits as an important installation amongst old wagons and other bits of machinery from yesteryear.