

## AUSTRALIAN MINING HISTORY ASSOCIATION BOOK REVIEW

### *Bullfinch and the Yilgarn Goldfield*

**Gilbert Ralph, 2007.** Hesperian Press, Victoria Park, Western Australia, xvi +265pp.

Gilbert Ralph's history of Bullfinch centres on the 1950s, the decade when Western Mining Corporation's subsidiary, Great Western Consolidated NL, set out to revive the Yilgarn goldfield and indeed goldmining in Western Australia. The book is a product of his friendship with Laurence Brodie-Hall and Arvi Parbo, two giants of Western Mining Corporation who were leaders in Great Western's Yilgarn venture and who encouraged him to write it, promising that they would contribute their memoirs. Brodie-Hall described his time at Bullfinch (1951–58) as 'the busiest and happiest years of my life' and Parbo had an equally 'exciting' if 'demanding' time at Marvel Loch (1956–60). Ralph's book has certainly been enriched with their memories but also with the reminiscences and personal photographs of many 1950s Bullfinch residents. Their recall pictures Bullfinch in the terms Brodie-Hall describes: 'a happy and proud community' with 'a spirit of getting things done, people looked after themselves and each other and entertained themselves', basically 'a contented community'. Mid-twentieth century Bullfinch was a planned mining town with new housing, adequate essential services, and lively and well-supported community amenities. In so far as isolation allowed, it was a modern town. Ralph provides a valuable insight into the aims and activities of a mining company building a new town and, through that process, building community with the goal of creating a venture 'free of industrial trouble on site', in Brodie-Hall's words. Great Western seems to have succeeded in this social goal. No doubt some people did not like the place and left as soon as they could but, for those who stayed, their Bullfinch years were as memorable and golden as Brodie-Hall's.

Ralph's book is more than a social history of Bullfinch, interesting as that is. Most importantly, it draws effectively on Western Mining Company archives to construct a mining and company history of Great Western Consolidated, its aims and activities, leaders, struggles and eventual failure. Lindesay Clarke's decision to move Western Mining Corporation into the Yilgarn in 1946 resulted in extensive exploration and sampling, and the pegging of more than one hundred leases in an area stretching from north of Bullfinch to south of Southern Cross. Great Western Consolidated NL was incorporated in 1948. Buildings and plant were acquired from inactive ventures around Western Australia's goldfields, and Great Western's centrepieces – Bullfinch's Copperhead deep mine, open cut and large treatment plant – were developed. The new plant was designed to process ore not only from the Bullfinch mines but also from the company's mines across the Yilgarn where test results had been promising. The workforce followed the work from Wiluna, Big Bell and other declining ventures to the new enterprise. With what must have been industry best practice (or close to it) in all areas, the venture seemed set for great success. Yet it proved an uphill struggle from the start with shortages of money, materials and ore to keep the mill working at full capacity. Great Western reached further south to Marvel Loch for more ore, using large road trains for ore transport to Bullfinch. Despite this wide reach, none of these re-opened Yilgarn ore bodies lived up to expectations and gold recovery (3.4dwt/ton) remained lower than anticipated (4.3dwt/ton). To the embarrassment of board members, a Great Western gold

bonanza with an anticipated £800,000/yr profit did not eventuate. Inflation ate away at profit margins and much of the modest profit of the mid-1950s resulted from a gold mining subsidy provided by a sympathetic state Labor government keen to see postwar revival come to the goldfields and by the federal government's Gold Mining Industry Subsidy Scheme. By 1960 Great Western was failing. Operating at a loss, the company ceased all development work. The treatment plant closed in 1963 and equipment began to be sold off or moved to other Western Mining ventures. W.S. Robinson's 'sting in the tail' of a letter he wrote to Brodie-Hall said it all: 'Never have I seen £3½ million lost with greater efficiency'! And Bullfinch resumed the precarious continuing existence to which it had clung prior to Great Western's arrival.

The earlier and later histories of the Yilgarn goldfield bookend Ralph's account of Great Western's postwar venture. Appendix II graphs the fourfold rise and fall of gold production on the field in the 1910s, 1930s–1940s, 1950s–1960s and 1990s–2000s. By far the greatest gold production, by a factor of four, occurred in the most recent period when the price of gold rose, ore transport costs declined, and mining and ore treatment technologies improved, most notably with the introduction of the Carbon in Leach process. The Yilgarn goldfield flourished as previously unprofitable deposits and old workings were given renewed attention. Then decline began again. Ralph presents these mining cycles with an insider's optimism as well as a sense of the inevitability of it all. Companies, syndicates and individual prospectors 'pass into oblivion. Such is the way of mining. But others follow'. In the history of the Yilgarn goldfield, however, Great Western Consolidated's 1950s venture is unlikely to be forgotten. Ralph's account is both authoritative and interesting, and the book is one to be recommended.

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