

David and Isaac Daniel and the Mt Wells Tin Mine

By TIMOTHY JONES

For over 30 years, the Daniels brothers, David and Isaac, were prominent and respected citizens of the Northern Territory. Both were miners but David was also something of an agriculturist. Their story is closely tied to that of the Mt Wells tin mine. During its life up until 1930 almost all the workforce was Chinese. The story that follows will trace the history of the Daniels brothers, the mine and the Chinese workforce and through their activities will also illustrate the versatility of many Northern Territory miners.

David Daniels was born in Wales about 1838 and Isaac about 1841.¹ In that latter year they were brought to Australia, though the details of their formative years are a mystery. Their early working ventures consisted of contracting work at Port Douglas where they erected among other buildings a number of Customs cottages. They also prospected in far north Queensland. Little else is known about their activities before the early 1880s when they were noted as being among the original tin miners in the Herberton - Irvinebank area of Queensland. According to Ruth Kerr they scoured the Walsh Valley near Herberton where they competed for claims and battery sites. By January 1882, Robert Philp (later of Burns Philp), Samuel Denny and Isaac Daniels had secured the Nigger Creek site five miles south of Herberton near the Deep Leads and also the Monarch mine which they owned with a gentleman named Baker.² To work the mine, the Monarch Tin Mining Company was floated in Sydney and Isaac Daniels was appointed as Managing Director. At the time it was reported that 'Mr Daniels' who represented the proprietors of the mine had offered to guarantee dividends of 20 per cent and to deposit 20,000 shares with the directors for the purpose of securing the option if necessary.³

By September 1882, the Daniels brothers had interests in the Syndicate mine with Baker and another miner by the name of Mullins and the Leviathan mine with Baker. Ore from the latter was crushed at the battery of the Herberton Tin Company.⁴ James Burns and Robert Philp both large shareholders in the Monarch Company, became dissatisfied with the management of the Daniels brothers.⁵ Opportunely, possibly influenced by an item in the *Queenslander* about promising tin deposits in the

Northern Territory and in response to an invitation by V.L. Solomon, an established Northern Territory entrepreneur, they decided to move to that location.⁶ Selling their local holdings at Herberton no doubt resulted in a goodly capital sum of money to help them in their new ventures.

Early days in the Northern Territory

Towards the end of 1881, V.L. Solomon joined D.B. Tennant and [?] Quirk, the original discoverers of a tin mining field at Mt Wells, a large hill rising about 200metres above the surrounding countryside and not far from the then township of Burrundie. Together they formed the Pioneer Tin Company that provided employment for about 80 Chinese. On behalf of the company, Solomon asked the Daniels brothers to manage the mine. The result was that David Daniels arrived at Port Darwin on the steamer *Tannadice* on 9 August 1882 and wasted no time before he made an inspection of the country believed to be stanniferous (tin-bearing).⁷ Deciding that the claims at Mt Wells were valuable, David bought out the shares of Tennant and Quirk. Tennant also had claims at Snaddens Creek some ten miles⁸ from Mt Wells, which appear to have been absorbed in the Pioneer Company. The first shipment of tin concentrates took place in November 1882, comprising 27 tons estimated to be worth 1,600 to 1,700 pounds.⁹

David Daniels decided to make his wet season camp at Mt Wells and to test the tin lodes. He sent in orders for building materials, tools, powder and provisions. In January 1883 his quarterly report stated that 20 lodes and leaders had been discovered at Mt Wells, adding that besides the lodes, 1,000 tons of boulders could be collected on the surface of the mount at low cost which with good machinery would yield a payable percentage of tin. Of Snaddens Creek he said that contractors (almost certainly Chinese) were busy sluicing. Dams had been repaired but the ground sopped up water like a sponge. In addition to managing these claims Daniels looked at other prospects in the Howley District, ten miles west of the telegraph line. In June he was reported to be putting up large huts and had applied for a site for a battery.¹⁰

A few months later Solomon sold his half interest in Mt Wells and Snaddens Creek to the Daniels brothers. David carried on recovering tin in a primitive way with Chinese labour. At the same time they purchased a steam engine and ten head battery from the Howley mine.

In July 1883 David's brother Isaac arrived by steamer. He promptly viewed Mt Wells and expressed himself as satisfied with its prospects.¹¹ From this point on there are many references in the *Northern Territory Times* to 'Daniels' but with no identification of which particular brother was involved. It is clear, however that from that point on Isaac took over the management of Mt Wells with David assisting, and in January 1884 there is a report of David Daniels busy sluicing tin and enlarging the dam. During that year, the Daniels brothers tried to interest John Moffat, the well-known Queensland mining entrepreneur, in their Mt Wells Mine. Moffat sent his cousin Peter Moffat and Edward Giblet, both well known in connection with Herberton in Queensland and Mt Bischoff in Tasmania to investigate. They both toured the mining districts but were apparently not impressed for Moffat showed no further interest in the property.¹² However, at the latter end of the year the brothers did succeed in interesting Sydney capitalists in their property, the result being the floating of the Port Darwin Tin Co. with capital of £120,000, with shares paid up to 15 shillings. The property comprised 1,100 acres held partly by mineral licence and partly by lease. W.H. Matthews was appointed Manager with George Baker as Superintendent.¹³

February 1885 proved very busy. There were good rains at Mt Wells and the dam that the brothers had constructed the previous September overflowed. Following the successful repair of a leak in the dam, it was reported that good returns were expected from working a large heap of stream tin at Snaddens Creek with aid of the John Bull and Priscilla batteries and two powerful engines purchased by David Daniels. The result was 20-head of stampers. In addition, with Isaac Daniels scheduled to arrive from the south with a complete ore-dressing plant and a staff of workmen to erect the machinery, it was expected that large exports of tin would shortly begin to flow.¹⁴

Civic and other responsibilities

But David Daniel also had other interests and in September 1885, he left Mt Wells and set himself up in business in Burrundie as Auctioneer, Mining and Commission Agent. His advertisement indicated that he would undertake examination of mining properties and to report thereon.¹⁵ Just over a year later, in October 1886, he accompanied 'Christoe and Roberts'

<p>DAVID DANIELS, LAND, MINING, and Commission Agent, Cavenagh-st., Palmerston.</p> <hr/> <p>All kind of General Produce Bought, Sold, or Stored.</p> <hr/> <p><i>Agent for the Selwyn Stone, Lime Co., near Burrundie.</i></p> <p>—(:o:o)—</p> <p>Mining Claims Inspected and Reported upon personally.</p>
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to the Finnis River to assess tin claims for an Adelaide gentleman. At the site a lode almost seven-metres wide existed and there was talk of floating the property in London. Unfortunately, in August 1887, he contracted smallpox while on duty as an officer of Customs on one of the China steamers. He was moved to the Quarantine Station on Goat Island, where his house was guarded day and night by members of the police force. This isolation was not only a hardship for David but also for the seven others in the house, for no communication was allowed between them and the outside public.¹⁶ On recovering some time later, David resumed his previous activities as commission agent though his headquarters was shifted from Burrundie to Port Darwin where he had a shop, which might have been a bakehouse, and a residence in Cavanagh Street. There were two cottages of wood and iron on the residential block and being a man of many parts he also had a wharf and sawmill on lot 984A (a town lot off Fort Hill).¹⁷ He was also the owner of a ketch, the *Good Intent*.

David Daniels later became interested in agriculture. He planted a grove of coconut palms near Fannie Bay and then applied for a 640-acre selection with the intention of establishing himself as a farmer. However, a Chinaman occupied 50 acres of the selection and despite earlier advice from the Lands Office that this was not a problem as the Chinese did not have a lease, the Lands Office said that the Chinese were genuine farmers and should not be dispossessed.¹⁸ The 50 acres farmed by the Chinaman was the best part of the land causing Daniels to refuse to proceed. At a later date he continued with his agricultural interests when he sought permission from the government to render assistance in importing sisal hemp plants but this was refused. As a consequence and after a lengthy process he relinquished the one square mile block he had acquired. The coconut trees planted some years previously were doing well - one had set fruit and others gave promise of following suit.¹⁹ On his selection near Nightcliff, David was disgusted to find a large percentage of his young coconut palms in the nursery had been uprooted. Malicious damage or kangaroos? Investigation by the police resulted in the arrest of two Chinese but the police had red faces when said Chinese turned out to be employees of Mr Daniels and were proved innocent.²⁰ Later, his agricultural pursuits appear to have proved more successful, in 1898 it being reported that:

In response to an invitation from Mr Daniels we paid a visit to his farm situated about five miles from Palmerston directly behind the local racecourse ... Some of the mango trees of which there are a great many were literally loaded down to

the ground, as many as a dozen mangoes being clustered on one twig ... Besides the fruit already mentioned Mr Daniels has growing oranges, mandarins, pomomes etc, all of which look remarkably well.²¹

David also had other interests and in Palmerston, having been a member of the District Council of that town for some years, he was elected Chairman, a position he held for many years. In 1895 he was elected President of the recently formed Northern Territory Agricultural Association of which his brother was also a foundation member. David presided over the first AGM of the Association but due to a clash with an 'interesting social occasion elsewhere' only nine members were present. Nevertheless, a set of working rules was approved.²² In-between times David returned to seek his fortune in mining.

It was not only David who looked to other outlets besides mining for some time during the 1880s Isaac Daniels purchased the Pioneer Hotel at Burrundie, which a press report stated he proposed to move in due course, it being of flimsy construction and thus transportable (it is not clear to where, though probably to Pine Creek). Like his brother, Isaac was also involved in civic affairs and in March 1893 there is evidence that he chaired a meeting at Burrundie where Solomon, the new Member for the Northern Territory in the Parliament of South Australia was present.

Further mining developments and problems

In 1888 the brothers took over the John Bull mine and let a contract for sinking a shaft. Isaac Daniels, with Corbett and party had earlier taken up the old Fountainhead prospecting claim and began to sink a shaft, the intention being to raise a trial crushing which would be sent to the Howley mill. Having satisfactory results, they erected a battery on the ground, with the first crushing taking place in 1888. Early the following year, David Daniels purchased the whole of the machinery and plant of the defunct Delissa Sugar Company with the intention of using the engines, pumping gear etc for his mining developments.²³

The Port Darwin Tin Co went through a succession of managers and problems. A new design of rollers was installed but proved totally unsuitable as the hard ore wore them out in ten days. Water was a major problem, shortages for months on end resulting in only one shift being worked. Immense sums had been spent on dams but the enormous degree of evaporation during the dry season and the porous nature of the country resulted in unacceptable shortages. In mid 1889 Isaac Daniels returned to Mt

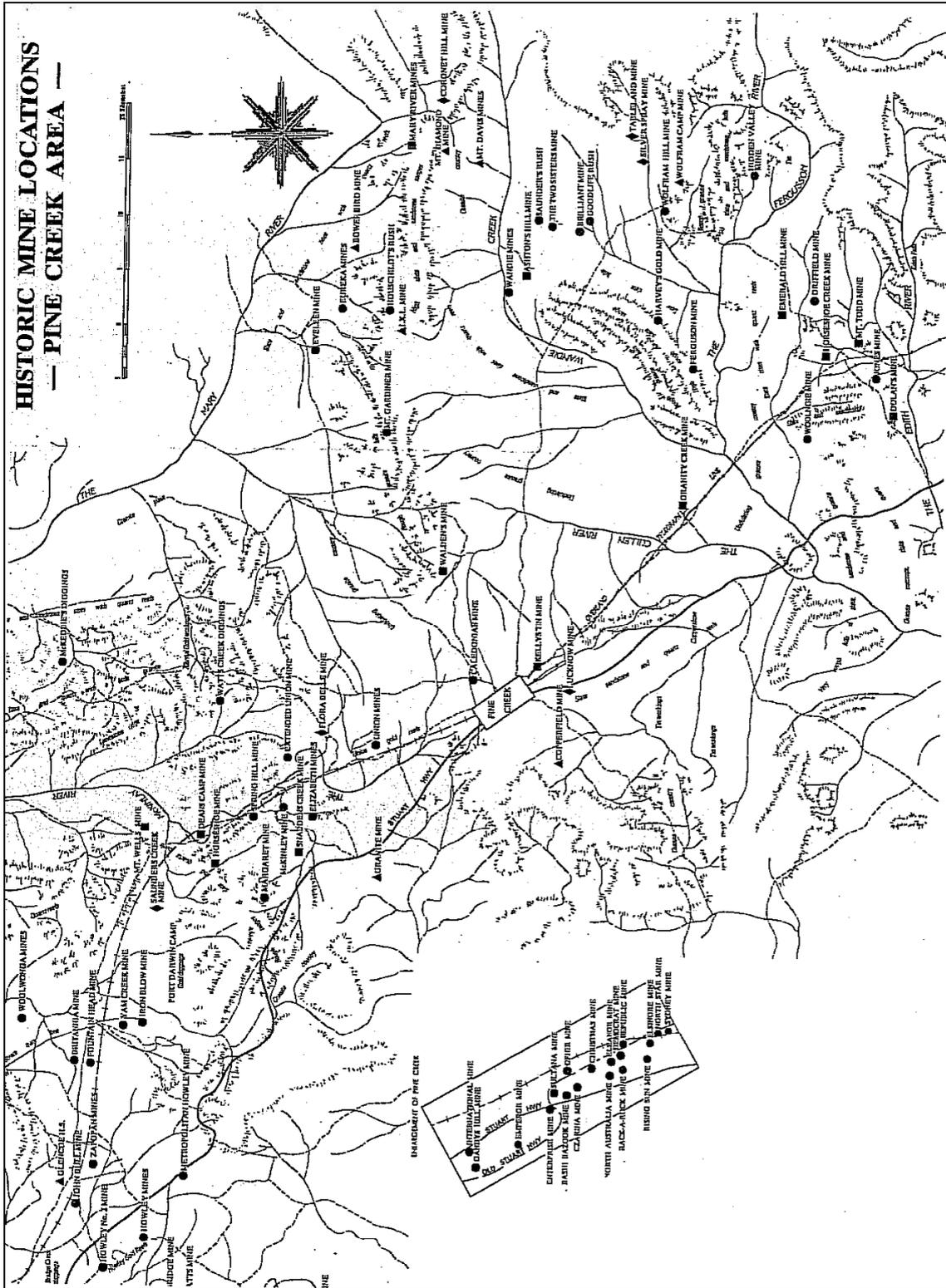
Wells as manager. He immediately went back to the old but tried and true Cornish stamps. At the ten head battery 100 tons of ore a week were crushed for two tons of tin concentrates but it was believed that by increasing crushing power to 30 or 40 head the property could be payable. Despite further development work, progress was then disrupted by an unusually dry year. Funds ran short and under its policy of assistance the government granted the company a small subsidy. It appears as if once again Isaac Daniels left the Mt Wells operation for a new manager, a Mr Ord, arrived, condemned all the work done by his predecessor and then went back south.²⁴

In August 1891 the two brothers negotiated with the Chinese for the erection of a battery at the Woolwonga field in opposition to other Chinese who had purchased the battery at Spring Hill. They then decided to erect their own battery at Brocks Creek. The site chosen was some miles from the John Bull claim (now owned by the Daniels brothers). The position was central to the best reefing ground and commanded a large amount of public crushings and also meant that should their John Bull claim turn out well their cartage costs would be low.²⁵ [See Map, top left hand corner].

In 1894 Isaac was again at Mt Wells though a press report in May of that year stated that a Mr Bensusar had taken over management of the Port Darwin Tin Company from Isaac Daniels and that it was doubtful if any of the original shareholders were left to see the spending of £2,000 the State had guaranteed the concern. It further commented that this had been an expensive speculation for the Daniels brothers as between them they had lost £8,000 and now did not hold a pennyworth of interest in the mine. That there were problems had earlier been indicated in October 1886 by the Rev. Tenison Woods, a noted geologist, who noted:

There have been some hitches in the management of this mine which have led to much delay and expense ...Whatever may be the cause it is not the fault of the mine; that is good enough if skilfully and economically managed ...When the railway is opened the Mt Wells Mine ought to pay good dividends.²⁶

This observation was reinforced by the Government Geologist in 1894 when reviewing the subsidy to the Port Darwin Tin Company, as he reported that for several reasons, including poor plant layout and siting (resulting in expensive mining) and frequent changes of managers the mine showed no hope of paying. The subsidy was withdrawn, all work ceased and the battery was taken over by the government. This was later to prove a stroke of good fortune for the Daniels brothers.²⁷



Source: Timothy G. Jones, *The Chinese in the Northern Territory*, Northern Territory University Press, Darwin, 1997, Appendix.

In April 1895, P.R. Allen & Co. called for tenders to work the New Port Darwin Tin Company's mine and plant at Mt Wells on tribute. The applicants were asked to stipulate the return of metal to the Company and what guarantee they could make to properly work the mine and plant.²⁸ The tribute was obtained by a party of Chinese. The Daniels brothers watched this with interest as they had hopes of themselves securing the Mt Wells mine again.

Over the next few years Isaac Daniels persisted with operations at the John Bull Mine, apparently with assistance from brother David. They had a ten head battery with gold recovery running between ten pennyweights to two ounces to the ton. One rich patch yielded about eight ounces to the ton. There were five shafts in work.

In January 1897 Port Darwin was struck by a severe hurricane. The block of buildings occupied by David Daniels was a complete wreck. A most unfortunate result of the exposure to which she was subjected during the hurricane was the death of the Daniels brothers' mother, Anne, a lady nearly ninety years of age.²⁹

Further acquisitions and developments

During 1897 the Daniels brothers succeeded in acquiring the leases and some machinery of the defunct Port Darwin Tin Company at Mt Wells but due to the low price of tin the mining operations were not taken up. It is unclear as to just what machinery was acquired as in the previous year a group called the Anglo-French Company obtained a boiler and ten head of stamps from the Mt Wells mine and carted them to the Wandie field.³⁰ In 1900 when the price of tin improved the Daniels brothers entered into a tribute agreement with the Chinese at Mt Wells. Paying a tribute fee of ten percent of tin concentrates recovered, the Chinese carted tin ore down the mountain in baskets, 65 kilograms at a time, to stockpile and as water became available, to crush it with a foot dolly.

Isaac Daniels continued his operations at the John Bull mine until 1901 but through lack of capital to sink to deeper levels, closed down. A press report said 'here were two genuine hard working men who could not obtain a cent of government assistance, yet the South Australian Government subsidised the wealthy Northern Territory Goldfields £5 a foot for sinking over one hundred feet'.³¹ It was also pointed out that there was a subsidy scheme but it carried a fair element of risk. For example, if the brothers applied for assistance and it was granted they had to give the government a

mortgage over the mine. If they sank say 190 feet and then found that through want of capital they could not comply with the conditions the government would foreclose and the brothers would lose a valuable property.³²

The Government Resident's report for 1900 stated that it was understood that the Mt Wells property was on offer to an English syndicate. However, a sale did not eventuate.³³ The following year there was pressure from the mining community for the government to supply a smelter. In support the brothers stated that 'on their 24 selections at Brocks Creek they ...[had] an unlimited supply of silver and lead ores. From Mt Wells they could supply at least 50 tons of copper a month.' A smelter did result from the community overtures but a reverberatory one instead of the water jacket furnace originally proposed.³⁴

With the exception of a few years in the early 1900's metal prices were low, consequently there was little mining except for gold and some of the Territory's experienced miners took jobs with the Bottomley companies (an English concern the activities of which cast a stigma on the Territory from which it did not recover for many years.³⁵ Isaac Daniels managed the Great Northern for them.

David Daniels also continued his interests in mining as witnessed by the proceedings he took against the Chief Clerk of the Lands Office in 1903 when giving evidence that he had paid renewal fees on leases but these and other payments had not been entered in the books. The said clerk was committed for trial.

The Brock's Creek Company (an English concern which owned the Zapopan mine) was in financial difficulty in 1902. According to a government report, being unable to pay its debts its leases, plant and machinery were sold under warrants of execution at a ruinous price. In fact V.V. Brown, the local auctioneer, knocked down the whole of the plant, believed to have cost twenty to £30,000,³⁶ to a local syndicate headed by the Daniels brothers for the trivial sum of £2,205. Some months later the leases were sold for £1,986 to the same people who bought the machinery whilst the two heaps of tailings went for £130. Tenders were immediately called for driving, development and 1,000 cords of firewood. A new shaft was sunk and the main drive intersected two reefs, one assaying one ounce of gold and the other three ounces to the ton.³⁷ A big 16-inch Cornish Lift Pump was installed. By then the syndicate's funds were low so it let several tributes in the hope of getting some revenue until the mine was productive.

The syndicate then floated the New Zapopan Company with £30,000 capital,³⁸ the vendors receiving £20,000 in fully paid shares as payment. The resultant capital sum was expected to be enough to deepen the shaft, prove the mine and make it a payable concern. This float failed, so a new float was made with the no-liability company reducing the capital to 10,000 one-pound shares with the vendors taking 7,200. This time the float was successful.³⁹ Isaac Daniels was the mine manager. By March 1909 the fifteen head battery was going day and night but results were well below expectations - 700 tons crushed during the month for only 300 ounces of gold, the poor recovery being due to the highly refractory nature of the ore. The owners incurred very heavy expenditure on development - the main shaft was deepened to 70metres, driving and crosscutting was done as well as other work but this almost exhausted the capital. As a result in July 1905 the mine was let to Chinese tributors who undertook to meet all expenses in connection with mining and pumping whilst the manager, Isaac Daniels, retained control of the battery, crushing for the tributors at a fixed rate and taking fifty percent of gold won. A new manager took over early in 1906 but after struggling, albeit on a reduced scale, the mine closed down in 1907. The Chinese made handsome profits because the company had used up its capital on development work and had no funds left to finance actual mining operations. In 1910 the New Zapopan Co. was auctioned by Brown Bros. Bidding started at £800 and ran up to the reserve figure of just under £2,000 when it was knocked down to Mr Justice Mitchell as representative of the South Australian Government. The amount was barely sufficient to pay off the mortgages and the shareholders consequently lost every penny of their capital.

Low Dep Chitt and Chinese tributors

In 1905 Le Hunte, the Governor of South Australia, visited Mt Wells and noted that the mill had been idle for several years and was tumbling to pieces. He also noted that about one hundred Chinese were working on tribute and this was how the Daniels had managed to retain the leases. The Governor also observed, 'there was a large Chinese town and store kept by Ah Kie, the "boss" Chinaman who appeared to be a man of substance'⁴⁰.

It was in 1905 that Low Dep Chitt, at 17 years of age, arrived at Mt Wells where he was to be employed for many years. Before he immigrated to Australia in 1878 he had been a farm labourer and a 'Mr Fixit' man of his village in Southern China. As the

eldest of three sons it was his responsibility to support the family so when his uncle returned from California Low Dep Chitt was inspired to try his luck in America. With financial assistance from the uncle he set off but when he arrived in that country he was appalled to see gangs of hooligans beating Chinese as they disembarked and stealing their few possessions. He decided America was not for him and stayed on the ship, which happened to be going to Port Darwin, where he disembarked.⁴¹ Low Dep Chitt found work on the railway that was being built from Port Darwin to Pine Creek. During this period he became a competent self-taught blacksmith and boilermaker. Being honest, hardworking and competent he quickly gained the respect of fellow Chinese workers as well as the European bosses. In 1894 he married Lie Shi, a maid in the establishment of Wing Cheong Sing, a tailor and general merchant in Port Darwin since 1882. The Low family then lived in various isolated shanty towns in Chinese communities in the Pine Creek District. Low Dep Chitt was employed on several mines as blacksmith and battery operator in the Pine Creek District.

In 1905 the family moved to Mt Wells where Low worked for Isaac Daniels for many years, as blacksmith and second battery engineer. The only known description of living conditions for a Chinese family at Mt Wells appears in a family history written by Dr Lyn Fong in conjunction with her mother. There were 12 children in the Low family, seven of them being born at Mt Wells in the family's shanty home.

Low family's house was a roughly constructed shelter of old corrugated iron sheeted walls and roof. The beams were made of logs. The floors were dirt and compressed termite mounds. The 'doors' were made of hessian. Low Dep Chitt built their house. When they moved from mine to mine he dismantled the iron sheets for their next home. They had no electricity, only hurricane lamps which they used sparingly. The stove was fuelled by the wood collected by the children. The water came from the nearby stream or well. They kept chickens in a pen and grew vegetables near the house. At Mt Wells they lived on the side of a hill, perhaps a kilometer from the mine and a distance from other miners' huts...My mother, Mary, was only 7 years old when she left Mt Wells and has only vague recollections of their family life at Mt Wells. There was no school for the children and she does not recall any community facilities. The older daughters helped their mother with housework, carrying water, looking after the vegetable patch, chickens and pigs. The girls were allowed to go and play when they were small children but as soon as they were about ten or eleven, they stayed at home. Their parents warned the girls of the dangers from men around the mines. The boys were allowed out to collect wood, feed the chickens and pigs, bring water from the creek for the house and garden. The family lived at Mt Wells for the next twenty years.⁴²

During the year 1905 the price of tin rose substantially and by then the Daniels brothers had accumulated enough money to buy the buildings and machinery of the old Port Darwin Tin Company previously taken over by the government.⁴³ During that year they erected the Mt Wells ten head battery, frue vanners, jiggers and classifiers and treated 500 tons of tailings left by the Chinese for a return of 5 tons of tin concentrates, also 184 tons of tribute stone for twelve tons of concentrate. From the tin lodes, tributors obtained 52 tons of concentrates from some 600 tons of material by foot dollying and sluicing, in places working rich shoots of stone at a depth of 130metres. As at that time Isaac was managing the Zapopan, it is clear that David resumed the management of Mt Wells and under his direction improvements to the plant continued with a new boiler, Wilfley tables and ten more stamp heads on the battery being installed. In addition, 200metres of tramlines were laid to connect the mine with the battery and three tunnels driven into the mountain.⁴⁴ Sixty Chinese tributors were employed as well as Chinese miners on wages. The Mt Wells plant now had the most complete and up-to-date plant in the Territory and results were pleasing, 133 tons of concentrates being recovered in 1908 with similar or better results in subsequent years.

A press report in 1908 noted that Mr Daniels now had twenty head of stamps constantly at work treating ore raised by Chinese tributors under Que Noy whose men carried ore in baskets up to a mile. The plant overall was turning out one ton of concentrates a day [probably a gross exaggeration]. The report went on to say: 'The Daniels brothers spent a fortune on this mine in years gone by and it is only now fortune's wheel has so good a prospect of getting some of that money back.'⁴⁵ The Government Resident's report for 1908 said, inter alia:

The Messrs Daniels have a valuable property in the Mt Wells mine and it would seem that the courage and energy which they have always brought to bear in their various mining ventures in the Territory are in a fair way of being adequately rewarded ... This mine is another of the many in this Territory which have been previously worked and discarded after much expenditure and little development by former owners and have in consequence been condemned without adequate reason.⁴⁶

In 1910 and 1911, David Daniels made two trips south for health reasons (he suffered from malaria) and it is logical to conclude that Isaac was back at Mt Wells during those years. In 1910, 7,000 tons of ore were stoped for a return of 499 tons of concentrates. The plant also treated parcels of ore sent in from Umbrawarra and Mary

River by other mine owners. The brothers had always improved their plant to the extent their funds would allow and in 1911 Mt Wells became the first mine in the Territory to be powered by a suction gas engine. Of this the Government Resident said:

A large suction gas plant capable of driving 50 head of stamps is being installed to replace the old steam power and provision is being made for an assured water supply throughout the whole year.⁴⁷

Figure 1: *Mt Wells Tin Mine c.1916*



Source: *Northern Territory Bulletin*, No. 10, November 1916

Note: The Low family home was just below the lowest dip of the mountain to the right, not far from the mining shed where the Chinese miners lived in huts and shanties.

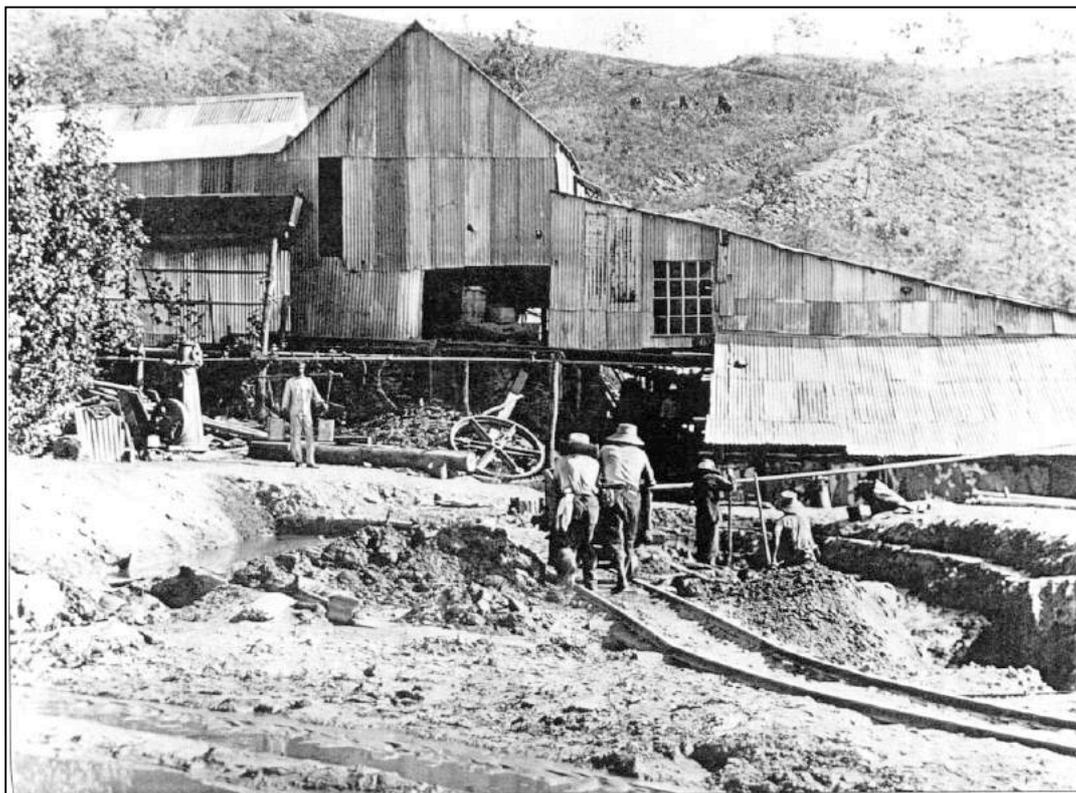
The Acting Administrator referring to Mt Wells in his report for 1912, stated:

This mine has now for more than twelve years been in the hands of the Daniels brothers and has been worked mainly by Chinese tributors. To-day about 60 miners, all Asiatics are employed; the battery hands excepting the owners Messrs Daniels brothers and another white man are Asiatics. The system on which the mine is worked is far from perfect, the Daniels brothers not having the requisite capital to develop the mine on proper lines while to-day it can only

keep a horde of Chinese miners in condition of abject poverty. I understand negotiations are proceeding for the sale of Mt Wells to a larger company.⁴⁸

The alleged sale did not eventuate.

Figure 2: Daniels Battery Mt Wells Tin Mine ca.1918.



Source: Photo in possession of author.

The Daniels brothers had bad luck with their Mt Wells mine in 1913. An extensive landslide on the side of the mount immediately above the mine workings resulted in the mine being filled with mullock and poor ore from the large open cut but that did not stop improvements and soon afterwards an electric light plant was installed.⁴⁹ The following year David Daniels was admitted to hospital on 17 September 1914 and died two days later on 19 September. His brother was with him at the time. David was 76 years of age and left an estate of £4,400, his brother executor and sole beneficiary. He apparently did not marry.⁵⁰ Prior to his admission to hospital he had been residing with his brother at Mt Wells. His obituary appeared in the *Northern Territory Times* on 24 September 1914. All this misfortune but also the low price of tin forced suspension of operations at Mt Wells that year. However, Isaac Daniels battled on hoping for recovery by overhauling plant and machinery during the shut-down. In

1916/17 he let the entire mine and plant on tribute to a party of Chinese. About twenty were employed in and about the mine and five at the battery.⁵¹

Isaac Daniels died on 4 October 1919, a highly respected citizen. According to his published obituary he was 'a man of sterling honesty and integrity and a lifelong 'abstainer'. He also had the reputation as being the best tin dresser in the Territory, his prosperity a tribute to this as he left an estate of £11,200 - in those days quite a large amount. In his will Isaac made provision for a missing son, William Henry, and left a bequest to Nellie Warren of Sydney, perhaps the mother of the boy.⁵² He was buried in the Goyder Road cemetery. The funeral was well attended, a good number of prominent government officials and townspeople being present, including H.E. Carey, Director of the Northern Territory and R.J. Evans, Government Secretary. Isaac Daniels' obituary appeared in the *Northern Territory Times* of 4 October 1919.

Mining operations continued at Mt Wells by a party of tribute Chinese until 1919/20 when a local syndicate took over ownership of the mine and proceeded with mining operations. Apparently they had no success as the Administrator's report for 1920/21 stated that the European camp at Mt Wells was deserted. Then in 1923/24 a Chinese tribute party worked old stopes in the mine for the recovery of 27 tons of tin concentrates.

According to Dr Fong, in about 1924 Low Dep Chitt was given notice that the mine at Mt Wells was going to close down and he would lose his job at the battery. The family therefore began a transition to living in Port Darwin. In about 1926 Low Dep Chitt finished work at Mt Wells and joined his family in Darwin where he built a house for the family on a farm at the Gardens area. The children settled into Darwin, the girls marrying into merchant families. The third daughter married George Fong Lim whose son Alec was elected Lord Mayor of Darwin in 1983.

At the Mt Wells mine in 1925/26, 25 aged Chinese worked under Mee Wah who tributed the mine from the lessees and who both mined and milled the ore which was crushed at the lessees' battery. No development work of consequence was carried out.⁵³ At end of the 1927/28 year there were only 15 Chinese, all old men, working in the mine and mill. The tributor gave notice that through insufficiency of labour he would be unable to continue working the mine. All mine and battery work at this property ceased early in 1928/29. This mining property was consistently worked for over 20 years prior to its closing down, the highest yearly yield being in 1910 when 7,339 tons of ore were treated for a return of 137 tons of 65 per cent concentrate valued at £11,859.⁵⁴

Late history

Mt Wells was silent from 1929 until World War II, when according to Stan Chegwidden, Manager of the Mt Wells Battery from 1963 to 1970 and a historian of the area:

The Army took it over to establish a convalescent depot for Australian troops. It was probably selected because of the protection of the mountain from aircraft, its proximity to the railway and the abundant water supply from the huge dam on the Mt Wells Creek which had been built in past years by the Chinese. From memory the dam held 2 to 3 acre feet of water. The main dam wall was about 200 metres from the Mt Wells government battery with a primary wall about a mile or so upstream which fed the main dam from a large flat area of water. The original treatment plant operated by the Daniels was built on or near the main dam wall and an old engine was on the wall of the dam. The scars of bombs dropped by the Japanese were still evident in the 1960's but no real damage was done. The Army camp appears to have been built in the area near the present staff houses. The parade ground was on the flat area, south of the houses and in the 1960's was covered with saplings of regrowth from the clearing.⁵⁵

Figure 3: *Mt Wells Government Battery 1995*



Source: Courtesy Mr. S. Chegwidden

In 1944 W.H. Grant, the last surviving executor of the Isaac Daniels Estate lodged a claim for war damage and looting at Mt Wells. A reasonable conclusion is that

Army personnel removed everything not screwed down. No final decision appears on the Archives file but the general tenor of reports is that the value of the plant and equipment was insignificant.⁵⁶

Tin mining within about 20 miles of Mt Wells continued in the 1950's and largely as a result of political pressure by 'Tiger' Brennan the Commonwealth Cabinet approved the construction of a battery at Mt Wells.⁵⁷ It was designed by Colin Adams, Director of Mines and became operational in 1962. As well as crushing prospectors' ores Mt Wells became a centre for mining development in the district with a magazine for the holding and sale of gelignite by the battery manager. A diamond drilling team was based there and there was a helicopter landing pad to assist geologists to move around the country during the wet season.⁵⁸

The battery was leased to a mining company in 1975 but when the author visited the plant in 1990 it had reverted to government control. It finally closed down in 1993. Of life at the Mt Wells community Chegwiddden said, *inter alia*:

The nearest medical help was a nurse at Pine Creek. My wife Rosemary was a registered nurse and with the help of the Flying Doctor radio service and their medical kit, saved several lives and helped a fairly large number of sick and injured people. The dam wall burst in 2001 and all the water was lost down to the McKinlay River, washing out the road and creek bed on the way. The entire dam wall was lost along with most of the history of the original plant but no damage was done to the government battery. There, the stamp battery boxes had been replaced with a tube mill and the stampers and other parts of the mill lie at the railway yard at Pine Creek waiting for funding to re-erect them for historical purposes.⁵⁹

Endnotes

¹ Pioneer Register Genealogical Society Northern Territory Records Service 789, no. 4.

² Ruth Kerr; *John Moffat of Irvinebank*, St Lucia, Queensland, 2000, p. 53.

³ *Queenslander*, 21 January 1882.

⁴ Jack Robert Logan, *Report on the tin mines of Herberton, Western and Thompsons Creek*, Government Printer Brisbane, 1883.

⁵ Ruth Kerr, personal correspondence.

⁶ *Queenslander*, 29 October 1881.

⁷ *Northern Territory Times* [hereafter *NTT*], 12 August 1882.

⁸ The following conversion tables should be used where required:

1 foot	=	0.305 metres.	1 mile	=	1.608 kilometres
0.621 miles	=	1 kilometre	1 ton	=	1.016 tonnes
1 pound	=	0.4536 kilograms	1 horsepower	=	0.746 kilowatts
1 acre	=	0.405 hectares	1 square mile	=	259 hectares or 2.59 sq km

- ⁹ *NTT*, 6 January 1883.
¹⁰ *NTT*, 30 September 1882.
¹¹ *NTT*, 7 July 1883.
¹² South Australian Parliamentary Papers [hereafter SAPP], 53A/1884.
¹³ *NTT*, 16 January 1886.
¹⁴ *NTT*, 19 February 1885.
¹⁵ *NTT*, 26 September 1885.
¹⁶ *NTT*, 27 August 1887.
¹⁷ *Northern Territory Grant Titles*, Northern Territory Archives Service; *NTT*, 4 August 1888.
¹⁸ *NTT*, 0 July 1891.
¹⁹ *NTT*, 3 March 1893.
²⁰ *NTT*, 8 December 1893.
²¹ *NTT*, 16 December 1898.
²² *NTT*, 5 July 1895.
²³ *NTT*, 26 January 1889.
²⁴ Commonwealth Parliamentary Papers [hereafter CPP], 13/1914
²⁵ *NTT*, 14 August 1891.
²⁶ *NTT*, 16 October 1886.
²⁷ *NTT*, 18 May 1894.
²⁸ *NTT*, 4 April 1895.
²⁹ *NTT*, 25 January 1897.
³⁰ SAPP, 45/1897.
³¹ *NTT*, 5 September 1899.
³² *NTT*, 5 September 1899.
³³ SAPP, 45/1901.
³⁴ *NTT*, 15 February 1901.
³⁵ Timothy G. Jones, *Pegging the Northern Territory*, Government Printer, Darwin, 1987, ch. 5.
³⁶ SAPP, 45/1903.
³⁷ SAPP, 45/1904.
³⁸ *NTT*, 11 September 1903.
³⁹ *Ibid.*
⁴⁰ SAPP, 49/1905.
⁴¹ Lyn and Barbara Fong Low, Family History Manuscript, unpublished.
⁴² *Ibid.*
⁴³ SAPP, 45/1907.
⁴⁴ SAPP, 45/1908.
⁴⁵ *NTT*, 3 July 1908.
⁴⁶ SAPP, 42/1909.
⁴⁷ CPP, 54/1912.
⁴⁸ CPP 45/1913.
⁴⁹ CPP 45/1913.
⁵⁰ *Estate D. Daniels*, Northern Territory Archives Service [hereafter *Estate DD*], E106/88, E96/33.
⁵¹ CPP, 240/1915 & *ibid.*, 31/1918
⁵² *Estate DD*, E106/306, E97/337.
⁵³ CPP, 101/1927.
⁵⁴ CPP, 50/1930.
⁵⁵ Stan Chegwidden – personal correspondence
⁵⁶ Australian Archives, Canberra, F10 1942/407B
⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, A4940 C3081
⁵⁸ Stan Chegwidden – Personal Correspondence
⁵⁹ *Ibid.*