

Early Collectors of Broken Hill

John Rankin

The history of mineral collecting at Broken Hill of course commences with the discovery of the deposit by Charles Rasp in 1883. Whilst it took a year or two for mining to be organised with labour arriving and a township starting to be built, by 1886 silver and lead was being produced in some quantity. The orebody was so large that from 1885 till 1887 only drives were being put in. By 1888 stoping of the ore had commenced. The upper oxidised zone of the deposit contained many fine mineral specimens. The miners would have been aware of this and no doubt found many good mineral specimens. Unfortunately labour disputes in the early years of the mine led to some turnover of personnel and caused miners to move away. This led to many such collections of the oxidised zone minerals being lost.

Gradually three men became significant major collectors at Broken Hill in the late 19th century. These were Edward Aldridge, George Smith and Thomas Hall. They all spent about ten years each at Broken Hill, all were in their early thirties and all arrived about the same time.

Edward Aldridge was the publican of the Duke of Cornwall Hotel in Broken Hill having arrived from Adelaide in 1888. He commenced collecting immediately forming the first major Broken Hill mineral specimen collection with the collection being amassed essentially over the three years from 1888 to 1891. The Duke of Cornwall Hotel was situated only about 200 meters from Block 11 so Aldridge was in a prime position to attract miners coming off their shifts and buy specimens from them. Aldridge also presumably had enough money from the Hotel receipts to fund his collecting. As a publican he was something of a showman and took the trouble to put his collection on public display in showcases upstairs in his Hotel. The collection and occasional visits by public figures to view it, were referred to on occasion in local newspapers.

Aldridge organised his collecting into several groups, his 'First' and 'Second' collections and what he called his 'A,B,C,D' groups. The first of about a thousand specimens were his showcase pieces, the second also of about a thousand were the less showy and the 'A,B,C,D' groups were his reference/duplicate collections comprising about 7,000 in total. In deciding after a few years to sell his collection, in 1892 Aldridge asked Charles W. Marsh - a mineralogist for whom marshite is named, to examine and catalogue the collection for him. Marsh spent four months living in Aldridge's hotel working on the collection, noting specimens of other rare minerals in the process although unfortunately for later researchers did not record localities for these. Since Aldridge was experiencing money problems at the time he refused to pay Marsh for the cataloguing work who took him to court over the payment dispute but Marsh was not successful.

The collection was then boxed up to be taken to the Chicago World Fair to be put on display to attract buyers with Aldridge trying to persuade the New South Wales Government to pay for the transport but this was turned down. He then contacted the British Museum to offer the collection for sale but was told that the Museum would not consider this without seeing it. Aldridge then had to transport 150 boxes to England himself to put it on display to try and sell it.

Since the British Museum was only prepared to buy some of the specimens but not the whole collection Aldridge had to come back to Australia with most of it. Eventually the collection was sold in 1908 to Sydney University for £7000 the money being provided by the benefactor Sir Hugh Dixon. £7000 was a great deal of money in those days but the sale and money received apparently did not help Edward Aldridge for long because only a year later in 1909 he died !.

The collection, now of 143 boxes of specimens and three boxes of photographs was transported to Sydney University by steamship from Adelaide in 1909. The boxes of photographs have unfortunately now vanished. The collection was by then being referred to as the Dixon Collection with all reference to Aldridge dropping away and it was broken up and split five ways. The Australian Museum received about 125 specimens, the Museum of Applied Arts And Sciences received about 200, the Geological and Mining Museum about 200 with about 500 being sent off to England with the majority and best specimens staying at Sydney University. Since the benefactor's bequest specified that the collection should be put on public display, these were displayed in glass cabinets in the Macleay museum at Sydney University. Unfortunately since the specimens included a large number of embolites and it was not appreciated that this mineral will darken under strong light, all of the embolite specimens became severely blackened.

The Sydney University specimens were on display for about thirty years but in 1948 the management decided to use the display area for another purpose and the specimens were placed into temporary storage with knowledgeable local collectors such as Albert Chapman and Laurie Lawrence allowed to acquire some of them. The remaining specimens were stored in the Geology Building until the building was demolished two years ago. A selection were then stored offsite for safekeeping. The only good specimens (unaffected by light) representative of the original collection are stored at the Australian Museum.

George Smith started his mining career in Port Adelaide then moved to Broken Hill to be sub-manager and then manager of the Consols Mine from 1890 to 1898. He then moved to Chillagoe for a few years then to Sydney in 1904 to work for the New South Wales Department of Mines as a mines inspector and eventually retired in 1925. He was very interested in and knowledgeable about minerals but was apparently more selective than E.W. Aldridge, cataloguing some 520 specimens from Broken Hill. Since George Smith also put together selections for museums and traded with other collectors including several from overseas, many more specimens would have passed through his hands. He was meticulous about recording information about his minerals and even today specimens are found in collections or on sale at major shows accompanied by George Smith labels. At the Tucson Show last year when the theme was 'Australian Minerals' several George Smith specimens were in a display case by the Smithsonian Institute. These were traded by George to Washington Roebling.

Not too much information has been locatable about Thomas Hall. He apparently went to Broken Hill in 1896 first as a miner and worked later as an auctioneer. Over the period 1895 to 1905 there were many auctions in Broken Hill with miners leaving and disposing of their mineral collections and Thomas Hall probably obtained choice specimens from this source. He gradually built up a substantial collection catalogued at some 1200 specimens which he sold to the South Australian Museum in 1909 for £600. In spite of a lack of much information on Thomas Hall he must have eventually established himself as an influential local personality in Broken Hill

because when he died in 1926 his funeral was reported by newspapers at the time to have been one of the largest that the town had seen. He had become fairly wealthy by the time of his death and left a substantial legacy to his son but unfortunately the son lost all of this within three years.

John Rankin finally mentioned a few other collectors from the early Broken Hill years whose smaller but often significant collections have mostly been sold or donated to Museums. These collectors included Phillip Charley who was one of the original shareholders of the Mount Gipps Station syndicate which became the B.H.P. Company and whose collection was auctioned in the 1930s with half going to the Australian Museum and half to the Mining Museum. George Blakemore was an assayer at the Central Mine from 1888 to 1895 and built up a small collection acquired by the Australian Museum. Other collectors were Richard Eustice, Arthur Savage, John Sully, John Dunstan and Professor Archibald Liversidge.

The lecture was extensively illustrated with photographs of the early collectors, views of the mine, workings and plant in the first decades of its operation, Broken Hill town scenes, newspaper reports of the period and of a number of the minerals.