



**Lewis "Harold Bell" LASSETER
And His Fabled GOLD REEF**

“Harry” Lasseter was born Lewis Hubert Lasseter in Bamganie Victoria on 27th September 1880. Bamganie is just west of the Midland Highway, between Geelong and Ballarat. The youngest of eight children he seems to have been self educated and was said to be well spoken

His mother died of sunstroke when Harry was a toddler. He and his siblings were cared for by his father’s sister who came out from England where she was working as one of Queen Victoria’s seamstresses, and she brought her own son with her. Eventually Harry’s father remarried, a widow with five daughters.

Lasseter ran away to sea “at an early age” and spent some time roaming the world including, he said, four years in the Royal Navy as a gunner on HMS Powerful. It was during this roaming period, just before, the turn of the century, he trekked from Cairns in Queensland to Geraldton in Western Australia (his intended destination was Kalgoorlie).

At the age of 23 he was in America where he met Florence Elizabeth Scott of Phelps, New York State. They were married on 29th December 1903 at Clifton Springs and honeymooned at Niagra Falls. They lived on a small farm owned by Florence’s mother, Eliza. There they had a daughter Lillian. When Eliza died in 1908, Lasseter persuaded his wife to sell the farm and move to Australia. They travelled via England and Belgium arriving in Adelaide for Christmas 1908 and staying with Lasseter’s sister Lily.

After a time in Sydney, the family took up land in Tabulam in Northern New South Wales, west of Casino. Tabulam is on the Bruxner Highway where it crosses the upper Clarence River. A second daughter, Beulah, was born at Tabulam (actually in Tenterfield) in 1911.

With The assistance of his wife and eldest daughter he built their house. He made a living as a road worker and agisting horses on their property. Some local landholders bred ‘walers’ a sturdy breed of horses favoured as remounts by the British Army in India. They employed Lasseter to accompany the horses to Sydney on the cattle boats out of Balina. His daughter, Lillian, accompanied him on these trips as she “had a way with horses”.

When war broke out in 1914, he again became restless. Selling the Tabulam property he loaded the family and their belongings on a buckboard taking them to Sydney via a cattle boat from Balina. From Sydney they drove the buckboard to Melbourne. At Euora, he sold the buckboard, put his family on the train and rode the horses himself to Melbourne. He eventually sold the

horses to the Victoria Police as remounts. After a brief period in Melbourne the family moved to Meridith, not far from Bamganie.

Although daughter Lillian said, in 1960, that he enlisted during WW1 other sources say he was rejected on medical grounds. It seems he started having numerous infidelities during this time.

After the war they moved to Gippsland where Lillian says he worked as a contractor. But money was short and he also wasted it on visits to lady friends in Melbourne. It was also at this time that he started telling the family that he knew of a cave with “gold sticking out all over” which would make them rich.

He eventually left the family, only visiting occasionally and sending small amounts of money to support the youngest daughter. His wife and eldest daughter were both working at this time.

As Lewis Harold Lasseter, bachelor, he married Louise Irene Lillywhite, nurse, at Middle Park Methodist Church in Melbourne in 1925. The happy couple settled in Kogarah in Sydney where Harold (Harry) worked on the Sydney Harbour Bridge and as a carpenter in Canberra. He also managed a pottery in Redfern and worked on a patent for pre-cast concrete, but didn't pursue it to completion. In September 1929 he laid claim to being “the original designer of an arch bridge for Sydney Harbour”. He failed in his claim for expenses for six months design work. Harry and Irene Lasseter had 2 children, Bobby (or Bob) and Betty.

In October 1929 Harry Lasseter wrote, from his home in Kogarah, to the Honourable Texas Green, MHR Member for Kalgoorlie and Minister for Defence. In his letter Lasseter said that “For the past 18 years I have known of a vast gold bearing reef in central Australia.” He went on to say that assays of the reef, which extended over 14 miles, revealed it would yield 3 ounces to the ton (that is, it was a very rich ore body). The only problem was water which Lasseter suggested could be piped across Western Australia from the Gascoyne River. Being a competent surveyor and prospector he could survey a route, of some 800 miles, for a pipeline for just 2,000 pounds. He further suggested that the Federal and Western Australian Governments fund the survey and he sent a copy of his letter to the Western Australian Minister for Mines.

This seemingly preposterous idea intrigued Minister Green for a couple of reasons. The Government needed major projects as the Great Depression

started to bite and there were always suggestions and proposals to make use of the water from northern Australia to make the inland productive. Of course 14 miles of gold would do wonders for the economy. So Texas Green referred the matter to the 'Consultant on Development to the Commonwealth Government,' Herbert Gepp. Gepp's first action was to talk to Lasseter, but he found this difficult to achieve. Finally he managed to arrange a meeting in Sydney. Lasseter refused to devolve the location of the reef until the Government agreed to finance a pipeline. Herbert Gepp told Lasseter that no consideration could be given to building a pipeline until the gold reserves had been proven as viable.

Gepp's report to the Federal Government was both cautious and keen to explore the possibility of a fabulously rich gold find. The first of his recommendations was that the area indicated by Harry Lasseter was worthy of scientific investigation. Prime Minister, Scullin, wrote to the State Premiers suggesting that they discuss the issue of a possible gold field in central Australia. But nothing developed.

In March 1930 Harry Lasseter approached the President of the Australian Workers Union (AWU) John (Jack) Bailey, in Sydney. Basically he said that back in the late 1890's, in Cairns Queensland, he decided to give up working on ships (he would have been in his late teens then). He bought two horses and supplies and set off across Australia for Kalgoorlie. West of Alice Springs one of his horses died and the other didn't last much longer. Now in a perilous state he stumbled upon an extremely rich gold reef and had the presence of mind to note various landmarks so he could relocate the reef later. He then continued further west on foot eventually collapsing but was found by an Afghan Camel Driver who took him to a survey camp on a Western Australian Stock Route where the surveyor, named Harding, nursed him back to health and took him on to Carnarvon.

After this near death experience he was reluctant to return to the Center. He went on and worked in Kalgoorlie. Three years later Harding finally convinced him to return to the reef. He had no trouble finding it and they took observations to fix the position of the reef and traced it for over 10 miles, taking samples that were assayed as high grade ore yielding 3 ounces to the ton. Unfortunately when they arrived back in Carnarvon they found that their watches were an hour and fifteen minutes out, so their position calculations were wrong. But Lasseter wasn't worried as he was certain that he could find the reef again from his landmarks. Because production from Kalgoorlie was going so well Lasseter and Harding were unable to find backers to exploit the reef. Then Harding died.

For whatever reason Jack Bailey decided to pursue Lasseters proposal and formed a syndicate, taking advantage of his position as AWU boss and his large circle of contacts. The syndicate was called the Central Australian Gold Exploration Company (CAGE) with Jack Bailey as honorary chairman and his son, Ernest (another AWU official) as honorary secretary. The CAGE Company began planning an expedition to find Lasseters Reef. The leader of the expedition was to be Fred Blakeley. Fred was an experienced bushman, prospector and long distance cyclist. He had cycled from White Cliffs in New South Wales to Darwin on one occasion, writing a book, called '*Hard Liberty*' about his experiences. He was also the brother of the Federal Minister of Home Affairs and the minister to whom the The Herbert Gipps report was referred. Jack Bailey also asked Fred Blakeley's opinion on Lasseter's story. Although he had some misgivings Fred was keen to investigate further.

The CAGE expedition was the most well equipped so far to venture into the outback. A six wheel drive truck was obtained due to the influence of one Charles Lexius-Burlington a well connected, ex RAF pilot and mechanic who said he had worked in parts of northern South Australia. Charles Lexius-Burlington had connections with the english motor company, Thornycroft, who agreed to supply the truck, free of charge for six months. Also, this time with the help of Charles Ulm, the Syndicate bought a Gipsy Moth biplane which the nominated pilot, Errol Coote, named the "Golden Quest". The Atlantic Union Oil Company agreed to provide fuel for the aircraft and vehicles (the Company also hired a local, Alice Springs, fellow Fred Colson, and his Chev. truck to help cart fuel and supplies).

Charles Lexius-Burlington, with his experience and abilities, seemed to be the ideal person to join the expedition but Lasseter objected to him (not giving any reason) and threatened to withdraw if he was included. So he was not.

The expedition members therefore numbered five - Fred Blakeley, Leader; Harold Lasseter, Guide; Errol Coote, Pilot; George Sutherland, Prospector & miner and Phillip Taylor, Mechanic. An aboriginal guide, Micky, and Captain Blakiston-Houston also joined the team for a short time. Captain Blakiston-Houston was the Governor General's Aide-de-Camp and, being on leave wanted to go to Central Australia to complete his surveying studies. His presence was thought to add "a touch of class" to the enterprise.

Sources vary, but sometime between the 21st and 24th July 1930 the CAGE Expedition left Alice Springs for Ilbilba. Ilbilba is a landing ground at the base of the Ehrenberg Range, about 400kms due west of Alice Springs and

between the present day communities of Mt. Liebig and Kintore. It was established earlier in 1930 by Donald Mackay to support his aerial survey expedition, looking for good pastoral country. There was a good water source at Ilbilba. When Errol Coote attempted to fly the "Golden Quest" out to Ilbilba he crashed and reduced the plane to rubble. Coote had to be taken back to Alice Springs for medical attention. The Company directors in Sydney decided to purchase another aircraft, "Golden Quest II" and had it flown out to Alice Springs by another pilot, Pat Hall. Hall and Coote then flew the new aircraft on to Ilbilba where a base camp had been established and the ground party had been exploring to the south west. Lasseter was taken up for a reconnaissance flight but didn't recognise any of his landmarks. It was soon realised that the new aircraft's range and power were insufficient for the task. So the two pilots returned to Alice Springs and then flew down to Adelaide to have long range fuel tanks and a more powerful engine fitted.

Meanwhile ground exploration, using the rather unwieldy Thornycroft, continued to the south west of Ilbilba. This was contrary to where Lasseter originally said the reef was located. Lasseter guided the expedition towards the Petermann Range, near the Northern Territory/Western Australia border.

Eventually Blakeley decided Lasseter didn't know where he was going and suspected he'd never been in the area. So he turned the party back to Ilbilba with the view of going back to Alice Springs to consult the CAGE Directors.

It was when they were back at Ilbilba that a dogger (dingo hunter) turned up in camp. He was a young German, Paul Johns. This same Paul Johns was arrested in England during WW2 and charged as being a Nazi spy!

As Lasseter demanded to continue the search, Blakeley hired Johns and his camels for two months to go with Lasseter. Blakeley and his men then headed for Alice Springs while Lasseter and Johns went south towards Mount Olga (now Kata Tjuta). From there they turned west to the Petermann Range and on to Malagura Rockholes, near Gill's Pinnacle, which is over the border into Western Australia. From here Lasseter went out searching on his own and returned five days later saying they would return to Ilbilba for more supplies. But Johns wanted to go to either Hermansburg or Alice Springs to replace some of the camels. Apparently there was a quarrel. But anyway they parted company, Johns heading to Alice Springs and Lasseter, with two camels, continued his search.

When Johns reached Alice Springs he carried several letters from Lasseter. One, addressed to the Government Resident (who was the Administrator of

the Northern Territory), said that he, Lasseter, had relocated his reef while away from Johns and that he was returning to peg the claim, collect samples and “take bearings”. This, of course, ensured interest in the reef was maintained.

Although the original expedition had been disbanded the Golden Quest II with Errol Coote as pilot, and as soon as it was serviceable, was sent to Ayres Rock (Uluru). This was now considered to be a better base than Ilbilba over 250kms to the north. Unfortunately Coote crashed (again) 8kms from the Rock and it took nine days to find and get to him. He was then instructed to return to Sydney where he was sacked. An ex RAF war time pilot, Les Pittendrigh, was hired to replace Coote. Pettendrigh flew the plane back to the Alice Springs accompanied by the CAGE mining engineer, S.J.Hamre. They then disappeared on a flight from Alice to Ilbilba on 20th December 1930. RAAF search planes found them 21 days later. The aircraft was also found some distance away from where the men were located, after another 6 days searching. This finished the use of aircraft.

By this time Lasseter had been out on his own for three months. The Company organised a rescue party with Philip Taylor as leader, but he became ill when near Hermannsburg. Pastor Albrecht, of Hermannsburg Mission, recommended a local bushman, Bob Buck, as a replacement. Bob Buck accompanied by a part aboriginal stockman and two aboriginal trackers left the station, MiddletonPonds, on 24th February 1931 and on 29th March they found Lasseter’s body at Winter’s Glen in the Petermann Ranges.

Does Lasseter’s Reef exist?

Expeditions have gone out (at least three at the same time as the CAGE Expedition) almost continually since 1930 and have not found the reef. There has also been a myriad of books and papers written on the subject, not to mention film and TV documentaries. Lasseter’s son, Bob, spent many years searching in his specially fitted out Landrover. The fit out included a scaffold that he could climb up to look over the surrounding country looking for landmarks. This Landrover is now housed in the National Road Transport Hall of Fame in Alice Springs. On a personal note, I was based at Giles Met. Station on one field trip during the 1980s and spent a whole 3 hours walking in the Rawlinson Range without finding any gold!

For this paper I have restricted myself to three books, a TV Documentary and several websites. Here’s a summary.

Lasseter’s Last Ride - Ion L. Idriess , Published 1931

Although first published in September 1931, my copy is the Thirteenth Edition dated August 1933. So a very popular book. It includes photographs of the CAGE Expedition and many of aborigines. Most commentators say this is mainly a work of fiction. I found it a great 'Boys Own' yarn.

Olof's Suitcase - Chris Clark, Published 2015

Chris Clark is a Canberra historian. In the early 1990's he was commissioned to write the history of the RAAF between the wars (1918-1939). This project involved documenting the RAAF's role in search and rescue of several Lasseter's Reef expeditions that got into trouble. '*Olof's Suitcase*' is the result of a 'phone call to Chris Clark's mother from a TV documentary maker, Luke Walker. It turned out that Chris's mother was the daughter of Olof Johanson, a one time miner and prospector in Kalgoorlie, who had links to Lasseter. The book summarises the Lasseter story well but it is mainly a family history. It is well worth reading even if the statement on the cover "Lasseter's Reef Mystery Solved" is somewhat misleading.

Lasseter's Gold - Warren Brown, Published 2015

Warren Brown is a cartoonist and writer for the Sydney Telegraph, as well as a TV and radio presenter. '*Lasseter's Gold*' is another excellent read. It concentrates on examining the character and motives of each of the people involved with the CAGE Expedition, particularly Lasseter. Fascinating!

Lasseter's Bones - A Luke Walker Documentary, Scribble Films, 2012

This documentary goes into some detail regarding Bob Lasseter's searches for his father's reef, since 1966. The documentary also leaves the viewer believing that the reef may very well exist.

Websites

www.lasseteria.com

www.adb.anu.edu.au - Lasseter, Lewis Herbert (1880-1931)

www.guides.nna.gov.au - Lewis Hubert (Harold Bell) Lasseter (1880-1931)

www.si.nsw.gov.au - Lasseter's Diary Fragments

www.en.wikipedia.org - Lewis Harold Bell Lasseter & Lasseter's Reef

Late news - My friend and former colleague at the Division of National Mapping (NATMAP), Paul Wise, has just completed a paper on "*Historical Locations connected with Lasseter's Grave*" for the xnatmap website. It is an extremely well researched paper and can be found at <http://www.xnatmap.org/adnm/docs/1genmap/LASSETER/LHLasseter.htm>