

## **Life of Johann Heinrich Mahnken** **by Julie Mahnken, great-great granddaughter. 8 July, 2018**

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Johann Heinrich Mahnken sailed across the world in 1857 in a ship called the Mohamed. He was our great-great grandfather, coming to Australia to seek his fortune on the famous Bendigo gold fields. Only the California rushes had been bigger than this. When Johann arrived, people were flooding into the colony of Victoria from all over the world. Johann was just 22 years old when he left Hanover, Germany. Thousands like him were escaping poverty, poor prospects and the wars in which common men were pressed into deadly conflicts for Europe's kingdoms and governments that overthrew kings. They emigrated en masse around the world. Johann's only brother took his chances in America. 1

The year before Johann arrived in Australia, 1856, the colony had experienced its greatest yield of gold so far, earning Bendigo the title of world's most famous gold field. For a time, Australia was the richest country in the world. 2 The first big discovery of alluvial gold at Bendigo Creek happened in 1851. It was made by two women living on the Ravenswood Run sheep station where their husbands were overseers. Settlers often panned in the shallow creeks of Victoria looking for gold. Their discoveries had resulted in numerous rushes over the preceding two decades (*Fig 1: Women panning*). In December that year an article by Frencham in the *Argus* newspaper alerted the world to the Bendigo find. Within days of publication a wild rush of humanity began from Melbourne to Sandhurst, as Bendigo was then known. The diggings were quickly declared an official goldfield and a Government Camp was set up. All gold was owned by the Crown and miners had to pay a steep licence fee to dig it. Over the next year, the Bendigo Creek district turned from sheep station with isolated shepherds huts into a tent city of thousands.

By the time Johann arrived in 1857, there was a burgeoning city in the making. So much gold had been found at Bendigo that a city with wide streets and boulevards had been laid out and a town hall, banks, civic and commercial buildings built. Australia was still one of Britain's dependent colonies, so the extracted gold went 'home'. It was enough to pay off Britain's considerable debts as well as fund other Commonwealth expansion. Johann's first steps on Australian soil might have been at Port Phillip Bay in Melbourne, disembarking at the newly built Station Pier. He would have encountered a cosmopolitan city brimming with men, women and children of different nationalities and languages, including Europeans, British, American, Chinese, African and other nationalities.

The first job that Johann took up in Bendigo was that of 'puddler'. In photographs of the diggings, taken at the time by early American photographer Batchelder, 3 (*Fig 2: Puddler*) a

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- 1 Mahnken, Phillip. *Johann Heinrich Mahnken and Lilydale district history*. Personal communication, research, images.
  - 2 Butcher, Mike & Collins, Yolande, *An American on the Goldfields: the Bendigo photographs of Benjamin Pierce Batchelder*. Strathdale, Vic : Holland House, for the City of Greater Bendigo and the State Library of Victoria. 2001
  - 3 Butcher, Mike & Collins, Yolande, *An American on the Goldfields: the Bendigo photographs of Benjamin Pierce Batchelder*. Strathdale, Vic : Holland House. 2001

man is shown on the gold fields working a puddling machine. A horse walks continuously around a circular, wooden trough, tethered to a frame that supports a stone grinding wheel. Drays bring the up washdirt to be loaded into the trough. The puddler drives the horse and channels water in. A sluicer washes the mud off and the gravel goes into a wooden cradle and is rocked to expose the gold. These were improved methods by Johann's time as hand digging, barrowing and washing was giving way to large scale designs from California. Quartz crushing machines for hard rock hammering were being installed, increasing the costs and size of operations.

Fig 1. Bush scene, women panning for gold. c.1840.  
Courtesy of the La Trobe Picture Collection,



State Library of Victoria.

Fig 2. Mining scene, Puddlers .1850.  
Courtesy of Sovereign Hill archives



Fig 3. The emerging city of Sandhurst (Bendigo).  
Batchelder. c.1860

An even earlier rush had taken place before the first miners came. The Dja Dja Wurrung tribe, who were the traditional owners of the land, had witnessed a rush by colonial squatters to claim the land for grazing runs. The Indigenous people were dispossessed after 1837 when the Colonial Government surveyed central Victoria for pastoral enterprises. In 1857, Johann would have seen only the remnants of the tribes who had been decimated by war, disease and hunger.

Clark describes how they moved through the goldfields, working and seeking food or goods to aid their rations. <sup>4</sup> Most survivors now worked and lived on the huge sheep stations or

<sup>4</sup> Clarke, F. McKenzie, *Early Days on Bendigo*. Edited by Frank Cusack. Carlton,

had been removed to missions. The onslaught of the early gold days changed the physical and cultural landscape completely. So rapid and vast was it that 'new chums' arriving over Mt Alexander were incredulous at the sight that spread out before them: 'Never shall I forget that scene' wrote a young Ellen Clacy, travelling from England, 'It well repaid a journey of sixteen thousand miles'.<sup>5</sup> She describes how the noise, people, tumult, colour, tents and huts, stores and grog shanties with flags flying, shafts, windlasses, puddling machines and great mounds of yellow clay, spread as far down the valley as the eye could see. The sound of the sheer mass of people could be heard for miles before the enormous enterprise came into sight. Estimates vary from between 20,000 to 40,000 people. Despite the extreme privations of living in canvas huts in the heat and mud, it was a wild time. Cusack says 'being on Bendigo or Ballarat in '52 was to have realised the ultimate in romance the world had to offer'.<sup>6</sup> New yields kept surpassing existing ones as each successive gully opened up throughout the 1850's.

Initially Johann tried his luck at mining and staked a claim of his own in the Wade Gully diggings area. He probably worked in partnership as it was usual to work in shifts and protect the claim at all times. Alluvial deposits and shallow quartz reefs could still be worked with hand equipment into the late 1850s. Wives and children worked on the diggings too, often operating the windlass and sluicing pans alongside the men. By the late 50's, the first tents and canvas-walled huts had been replaced with wooden slab huts, miner's cottages and dirt roads. The different nationalities had clustered into identifiable groups, Irish, Welsh, English, American, other Europeans and Chinese, all forming their own neighbourhoods around the growing city. The German people were well represented on Bendigo and several were prominent as architects and merchants, as the new city needed civic construction and wholesale suppliers. Larger mining operations now required thousands of men and women to provide labour and ancillary services. Tall timber mastheads for hoisting up the deeper wash-dirt were seen all across the goldfields. The trees had been cut down, gullies excavated, mullock heaps piled up, and creeks silted. The land itself was like a lunar landscape, the wood from above had been taken underground and all the earth underneath disgorged above. Mullock heaps are still all around central Victorian goldfield towns and under our houses now, some 170 years later.

For the next four years on Bendigo up to the early 1860s, the gold fields grew, tripling the population of Australia in the 10 years since 1851. At its peak, two tonnes of gold a week were going into the treasury in Melbourne, making Bendigo the highest yielding goldfield of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However the creek and city were beset with sludge from the ceaseless puddling operations fouling the water and flooding into the commercial area, now called Pall Mall. Johann would have witnessed the major civic works that diverted the creek and remodelled the centre of Bendigo. Batchelder captured images of these works as they happened in his photographs of View Point (*Fig 3: Emerging city*). Lack of water, especially for drinking, was a serious problem for the inland metropolis set in the plains above the Great Divide. The water had to be carted in at great expense and remained a problem for decades in the little city.

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Vic: Queensberry Hill Press, 1979

5 Clacy, Ellen. *A Lady's Visit to the Gold Diggings in 1852-53*. Thompson, Patricia (ed), Lansdowne Press Pty Ltd, 1963.

6 Cusack, Frank. *Bendigo: A History*. Heinemann Publishing: Melbourne. 1973

Johann was the beneficiary of changes a few years earlier to the mining laws, earned at the cost of many lives in armed civil conflict in Ballarat, 70 miles from Bendigo. He was spared the bloodshed ensuing from the miners' reform movement. A Ballarat Reform League had been formed by men who had been part of the Chartist movement in Britain and were politically educated. They presented a Charter of demands to the Colonial Government on behalf of miners across the goldfields, including: abolition of licenses; the right to political representation; and the franchise in exchange for taxes. They would no longer be 'slaves' or endure tyranny without redress. Resistance escalated against the crippling taxes and the brutal hounding and humiliation of miners by police troopers. 'Digger hunting' was a favourite pursuit of corrupt police as civil unrest and armed resistance grew across the Victorian goldfields. In Ballarat, military reinforcement increased in the city. After a series of 'monster meetings', a meeting of 10,000 people vowed to take a stand and swore allegiance under a new flag which they had stitched themselves, naming it the 'Southern Cross'. By December 1854, they had built a stockade in the Eureka Lead diggings area, raised their revolutionary flag, and were armed to defend themselves. The Colonial government, declaring it illegal and citing insurrection, ordered a police attack, reinforced with infantry detachments from Melbourne and the district. Police and military ambushed just before dawn, opening fire on the miners and families in tents and swarming their stockade.<sup>7</sup> The attack was brutal and over 30 people were killed. More were wounded and slashed in the aftermath. At least four police officers were killed. In Ballarat where we live there is now a democracy centre that tells the story of the people's fight for justice at the Eureka Stockade. The original flag is now carefully restored and preserved. The resistance meant that miners like our great, great grandfather experienced the reforms ensuing from that day, but the process of political representation and civil rights was still in its infancy in the Colony.

When he was 26, Johann met Ellen Rourke, an Irish woman from Kilkenny in Kilkenny County. Ellen had arrived on the ship Kent in 1854. In 1861, on November 18th, Johann and Ellen married in the Catholic church of St Kilian's, Bendigo. The wedding was noted in the Bendigo Advertiser on 20 November 1861. By then Johann had anglicised his name to John Henry. In his wedding photograph, he is a smiling man with an outward, confident gaze. He has a broad, high forehead and wide mouth (*Fig 4: Ellen and Johann wedding*). There is an adventurous air about him, a genial person who is enjoying the challenges and good fortune his moment in history has brought.



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<sup>7</sup> Macfarlane, Ian (Ed). *Eureka: From the Official Records*. Melbourne: Public Record Office Victoria. 1995

In the Wade Gully mining enterprise, the licences to be bought every month by miners were exorbitant, making it difficult to cover costs. Competition was fierce for small squares of ground. Many people had no luck at all and of those that did, every sort of rogue, conman and criminal was waiting in town to fleece them. Success in mining may not have been great for Johann as he tried several other occupations and is cited in correspondence of the time as a business manager. At one stage he also ran a restaurant or food house. Many people on the goldfields became a boniface, that is, a proprietor of a public establishment. It was said that the real fortunes were to be made in providing the food, grog and entertainments for the city's inhabitants. Shop holders brought stock in from all over the world and put up opulent displays of luxuries and curios for the newly rich to splurge on. There was also great freedom and independence for many women who came to find their fortunes. On the goldfields there was an enormous need for the small businesses and services that women established. Wright, in her book *The Forgotten Rebels*, describes enterprises such as dressmaking and tailoring, clothes laundries, restaurants, guest houses, licenced hotels, general stores and even gas-lit theatres. <sup>8</sup> Women were prominent in both civic and business life and worked for the advancement of the city.

By the 1860's Johann and Ellen's town had expanded into commercial mining, banking, manufacturing and agriculture and had all the service industries in place. It had an elected council, a hospital, a prison, theatres, dance halls, hotels, supply stores, plus numerous imposing banks and commercial premises. However streets were still rough and good housing was scarce. The extraordinary riches from the alluvial seams were beginning to wane, but there was still plenty of gold deeper underground. Wealthy Melbourne capitalists now began to invest in large quartz mines. This time thousands of acres were staked out and an investor's boom was on its way.

At the time that Johann and Ellen married everyone was talking about the Burke and Wills Expedition into the interior. No Europeans had yet traversed the continent from South to North and the colony had high hopes for the explorers. The project of 'nation-building' was a race to open up the Australian interior to European development. However, only one person survived the disastrous trip, John King. He was brought back to Victoria in a hero's welcome. When his entourage passed through Bendigo on 21st May 1861, he was borne along in a great procession in an open-top vehicle, accompanied by the city officials in regalia, with a marching musical band, mounted police and lines of horse riders in a long train behind. The populace cheered loudly as the hero entered the city. Johann and Ellen would surely have been there in the big crowd gathered in front of the Shamrock Hotel, cheering and clapping as the famous explorer came into their midst.

Around 1871, the town was declared a city. The military police government was transferred to civil administration. The large Police Camp behind the main street of Pall Mall was turned into public gardens, called Rosalind Park, giving the citizens an elegant community space to meet and stroll. Besides church groups, friendly and benevolent societies such as the Buffalo Lodge, Masons, Oddfellows and Druids provided important social cohesion in the community, active in holding dances and balls, sporting events, competitions and fairs.

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<sup>8</sup> Clare Wright, *Forgotten Rebels of Eureka*, Melbourne: Text Publishing. 2013





Johann joined the Ancient Order of Forresters, a benevolent society formed to assist miners and their families during difficulties. He is pictured wearing the sash of the order (*Fig 5: Johann in Ancient Order of Forrester's uniform*). He looks more serious. His beard is full and elaborately brushed outwards and his jacket is of a finer cloth. Though he looks very upstanding and serious, his eyes still have a broad smile behind them. On 4 February 1862, Johann had been naturalised as an Australian citizen. This enabled him to purchase property in the Sandhurst municipality (Bendigo). It was here that all of his and Ellen's six children were born.

Records indicate that the location of their residence is mostly likely to have been the corner of Rose Street and High Street, the old Main Road, near Wade's Gully where his claim was sited. <sup>9</sup>, <sup>10</sup>. When we visited the location in 2015, there was a Federation style house on the site (*Fig 6: The author at Rose Street*). Several original Victorian miners cottages from the late 1800s survive in the surrounding area from Rose Street to Wade Street.



Miners cottages are still numerous throughout the Victorian goldfield towns and cities today and the Rourke - Mahnken home may have been similar to these. Across the road from Rose Street there is a small park with a memorial to the first gold discovery site in Bendigo Creek.

By 1866 Johann was working in the Whipstick area, as Saunders and Snook indicate (citing Cusack and court documents), he had claims with the companies Moffat & Co and Bismarck and Co. However, that year the Argus also listed John Henry Mahnken amongst its temporary insolvents in court, describing him as mine manager and also formerly a restaurant-keeper. He had liabilities at that time for losses in mining and in trade. <sup>11</sup> During

- 9 Ferguson, Kathleen, personal communication, family history research documents, maps.
- 10 Brown, Lorna, personal communication, family history research documents, maps, 2014 and earlier.
- 11 Saunders, Patsy and Snook, Marie, family history research shared by Phillip Mahnken. Cusack's book contains a chapter on 'Bendigo, The German Chapter'.

the next decade he worked as a business manager for Bendigo companies. Ferguson cites correspondence by him in the Bendigo Advertiser, 9 November, 1869. As a manager for the Bismarck company, he placed notices advising stakeholders of a meeting in two days time with their obligations to attend.<sup>12</sup>

By 1877 he was in a position to leave Bendigo for the Lisle goldfields in Tasmania. These new diggings had been opened with a rush when gold bearing, alluvial flats were found at Mt Arthur by the Bessell brothers. The Lisle diggings were to yield up to 1/2 million ounces of gold in total, however paydirt was 2 -12 feet deep, requiring pick and shovels as it was too deep for sluicing. <sup>13</sup> A year later, Johann was joined at the mines by his oldest son Henry (known as Harry) born 1865. Harry was aged around 12 years old when he travelled unaccompanied across Bass Strait to Tasmania to join his father.

Johann and Harry prospered enough by 1882 to purchase two blocks of heavily wooded land in the North Lilydale area (near Upper Piper, renamed Lilydale in 1887) and become the first generations of Mahnken farmers. These properties became known as Green Hills and Summerlea. Johann and Harry worked at clearing the Green Hills property for the first cottage. At that time, the bush was thick with trees 8 to 10 feet in diameter. Wenzel (Hill) describes how the men felled the trees with axes and cross-cut saws, using hand-spikes and turns to get the stumps out. Some stumps took 3 days to grub. They burnt the wood in great fire heaps. <sup>14</sup>

They continued working at the Lisle mine, making the regular crossing on a pack-horse track over the north face of Mt Arthur, a distance of 9 miles through the rainforest. Johann set up a provision supply business to the Lisle diggings and he and Harry undertook regular journeys by pack-horse across the track. Elaine Wenzel (Hill) describes this service as including staples such as meat, butter, tea, sugar, eggs. The supply service is described in archives notes at the Launceston Library, citing the help it brought to those mining at Lisle, as the trip to Launceston in the opposite direction was 25 miles by rough track. The journey had to be made on foot for any families not able to keep a horse.

Approximately 2000 people were living on Lisle diggings during the rush, with some accounts estimating up to 6000. Amid their surface mines and underground shafts, they constructed a township of slab buildings and paling cottages in the rainforest, one of which is seen in the photograph of Collins Cottage (*Fig 7: Collins Cottage*) <sup>15</sup>.



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- 12 Ferguson, Kathleen, family history research shared by Phillip Mahnken  
13 Launceston library archives, Lilydale history files. 2014  
14 Wenzel, Elaine. *A Mahnken-McCarthy History*. Shared from Lorna Brown. Original copy from Elaine Wenzel (Hill), family collection.  
15 Greg Dickins, Mining, The Companion to Tasmanian History. Online: [http://www.utas.edu.au/library/companion\\_to\\_tasmanian\\_history/M/Mining.htm](http://www.utas.edu.au/library/companion_to_tasmanian_history/M/Mining.htm)  
Caption Miners often lived in harsh conditions: a mining homestead in the bush at Lisle, where the Collins family lived in about 1900 (AOT, PH30/1/3816)

Ellen along with the two younger children, John (Jack) and Maria, left Bendigo and joined the father and oldest son in Tasmania in 1879 or 1880, at first at Lisle and, after about 1883, in the cottage in the clearing at Green Hills in the area later named North Lilydale. The two older girls stayed in Victoria and later married men in Bendigo and Ballarat. The Mahnkens were one of many German families to settle in the Upper Piper area. These families included the Millers, Dornaufs, Erbs, Staubis, Kelps, Sulzbergers and Bardenhagens. 16, 17 A new life and new challenges had begun. The next chapter of this story explores Ellen's history and the passing of the first migrant generation.

*(Fig 1: Women panning)*

*(Fig 2: Puddler)*

*(Fig 3: Emerging city)*

*(Fig 4: Ellen and Johann wedding).*

*(Fig 5: Johann in Ancient Order of Forrester's uniform)*

*(Fig 6: The author, Wade's Gully, 2015 )*

*(Fig 7: Collins Cottage, Lisle)*

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16 Mahnken, Phillip. *Johann Heinrich Mahnken and Lilydale district history*, personal communications, family history research documents, images.

17 Bardenhagen, Marita. *Lilydale: A German Legacy*. Launceston: University of Tasmania. 1987