

## Prologue

Sub titled “Bone pointers and prospectors”, the story begins in 1972 when gold exploration in Australia had been in decline for 35 years and was virtually non-existent. When the US suspended dollar convertibility into gold as a short term measure to protect the run on gold reserves, one of the first companies to see a golden opportunity opening up was Minad, a small Queensland based exploration company. Minad, guided by Bob Bryan, chose Robert Pyper<sup>1</sup> as their exploration geologist and Meekatharra in Western Australia as their exploration centre.

From 1972 to 1976 the company tapped into the practical knowledge of a remarkable gold prospector to eventually control ground from which in excess of \$3 billion in gold had been extracted by 2015, although none of it would be extracted by Minad. Gold dust turned to bull dust, for Minad was beaten by the economics of the day and a board more interested in oil and coal exploration.

“Meekatharra – a journey from Gold Dust to Bull dust” is an autobiographical account of this period by veteran geologist Robert Pyper. In it we meet the characters who were still supplying the Meekatharra State Battery with gold ore from their mines and gouger shows dating back to the thirties and we experience Minad’s perilous journey to establish a gold mine, “assisted” by the many entrepreneurs and bushrangers keen to rifle Minad’s exploration budget with false claims and shonky deals.

They are described in between drilling out the major gold project at Meekatharra and include:

- John K Dixon, the messianic salesman who transferred his amazing skill at selling cars to selling mines and made a fortune without actually producing anything.
- Harry "I was among 'em!" Peters, who never was really among the old gold miners, but liked to talk as though he had.
- Nullagine Bill, whose shack held gold specimens that should have been on display in a museum.
- Parkey, who kept the outback roads clear of traffic.
- The “Golden Arc” syndicate who knew how to fleece simple geologists.
- The hard working Ottey. "No gold mind you, of course." Content to spend his years happily mining a barren quartz reef.
- Green, the master of dissimilitude and exaggeration, who learnt his trade searching for Lasseter's lost alluvials and after meeting the Minad team, used this new-found knowledge of gold to look for Lasseter's lost reef, with similar end result.

(1) Referred to as Don in the book to avoid two Roberts

## Chapter 1, Gold Dust

The year 1972 was a desperate time for geologists. The nickel boom finally died and ‘lifetime’ jobs vanished, throwing many out of work. Some drove taxis, but this had little appeal to explorationists used to the freedom and excitement of the outback. The smoky confines of the cab, the hassles of traffic, the indignity of accepting tips, were a poor alternative to the search for multi-million dollar orebodies and the dole was a frightful disgrace for those of independent mind brought up on the work ethic that handouts were strictly for those with no resources to fall back on.

Caught up in this downturn was Don Pyper. He’d worked the last three years for a Perth consultant group that at the peak of the nickel boom had nearly 30 geologists on the books. Funding began to dry up from late 1971, clients vanished and geologists found their contract terminated on one month’s notice. By March 1972 it was Don’s turn.

Don and his wife Judith had a mortgage on their Perth house, a two-year-old daughter and a baby due that year, so after three months of unemployment they were delighted to find that Minad, a small Queensland based company, had put Don on the short list for a job based in Western Australia. He was to meet exploration manager for Minad, Bob Bryan, in Ansett's Gateway Hotel in Perth to discuss the job over an evening meal.

The Gateway Hotel was designed with utility rather than luxury in mind, including spacious bedrooms and sensible lighting. It was especially attractive to those in the full bloom of youthful ambition, keen to make the dollar stretch further. Business clientele flying in from east coast cities often took the cheaper Ansett shuttle bus from the airport and started work immediately on arrival. Although such men enhanced shareholder value as their careers blossomed, their prime purpose in life was to ensure that every dollar spent went into furthering their own particular empire-building venture. They were ambitious for personal success and begrudged money spent that did not immediately reflect this aim. The Gateway had been designed with men such as Bob Bryan in mind.

Don turned up punctually. He'd spent the week brushing up on copper and nickel exploration in W.A., as this was what he assumed would be Minad's interest. His research also showed that Bob, at 37, was only a few years older than himself. They probably had similar career paths and interests. Maybe the interview would be a breeze. He was soon to revise his opinion.

After a drink at the bar, during which Bob held sway with a political commentary at the State and Federal level, which was entirely beyond Don's limited knowledge, they moved to the dining room. So far Don had not had to say much. He was an excellent listener and he quickly formed an assessment of his possible future boss.

Bob was of average height but he radiated an energy that added an extra dimension to muscles and sinew, and his rugged appearance and thinning blond hair added ten years to his age. His political commentary and strong opinions were those of a man who thrived on conflict and confrontation and who was supremely confident in his own abilities.

Bob finally wound down from some acrimonious comments on our current PM, Whitlam and turned his attention to the geologist. "I got you here to talk about mineral exploration," he said after they ordered from the menu. "Collapsing nickel prices, Poseidon and other scandals and rip-offs have ruined the investment market in the short term. Exploration funds have dried up and a lot of small mining companies are heading for oblivion. Too many investors have been betrayed by slick operators and caught out by their own greed."

Don nodded agreement, mentally figuring out how to get his ideas on copper exploration across in a way that would knock out any competition. "They're sure hurting," he said.

"Damn right. And they're hanging onto whatever money they've got left in the belief that no one's going to play them for fools again. 1972 is shaping up as a tough year for us, with more to follow."

Don pushed his glasses back and cleared his throat. He looked young for his age with an unlined face that expressed sincerity rather than experience. In Bob's presence he sensed these qualities were a disadvantage. "Yes," he said, his brow furrowed. He was uncertain as to whether Bob was drawing breath to continue or expected him to contribute. "What's needed is a new commodity to replace nickel and take their minds off their losses."

Bob chuckled, immediately lifting Don's spirits. "Exactly; those investors probably don't realise how quickly their minds can be changed and their wallets opened for a second milking." He leant across the silver plated cutlery as he developed this theme. Bob had started in the ranks of the Bureau of Mineral Resources but, after nearly fifteen years correlating oil logs and staring down a microscope, he'd resigned. The nine to five job, the

superannuation and long service leave, the security and seniority all vanished when he joined private industry. He was a new man, a Don Quixote with a holy endeavour; intent on making up the time he'd lost in the bureaucracy. His goal was to be president of his own vast mineral empire.

"I see from Minad's Annual Report that they have nickel properties near Kalgoorlie," Don said.

Bob's expression hardened. "If you're successful, your first job will be to wind up those nickel projects." A finger jabbed the table. "Minad wasted a million dollars looking for nickel and they've got nothing to show for it. Fortunately it was before my time. Gold's the future, Don. I see an opportunity for Minad to become a major player. Almost no one is looking for it and Western Australia has to be the best place to start. What do you know about it?"

Don experienced the hollow feeling that accompanies a life-threatening revelation, for he could see his job prospects had vanished. He knew nothing about gold. Its low price had deleted it from most exploration programs for thirty years. As he cast about for a means to conceal his ignorance he became acutely aware that Bob's eyes were a vivid blue and that they'd settled on him in a penetrating and unblinking manner. He had the uncomfortable feeling he'd just been found out as an impostor, for Bob's smile, such as it was, was a poor cover for a certain ruthlessness that had become evident as he talked. It induced nervousness that had to be overcome quickly if a convincing front was to be maintained. He decided to bluff his response. "I ..." he began, but Bob broke in.

"That's why I'm here tonight, Don. I want to start afresh and I intend to ..." The wine waiter appeared at that moment, interrupting his train of thought.

"How about a Swan Valley Claret," Don said, hoping Bob would be side tracked long enough for him to work out a convincing response. The discussion fortunately was put on hold as Bob selected a wine and their meal appeared.

"The current two-tier price is temporary," Bob said as they started on the entree. "The US can't keep gold at \$35 an ounce; it's heading into a free market. I want to get set before the price rises. I expect a repeat of the thirties. That's when Roosevelt raised it from \$20 to \$35 and triggered a world-wide mining boom that lasted seven years." Bob skewered a prawn and shook it at Don. "Minad needs to start exploration now before everyone else starts looking too."

"Yes. Before drillers put up their prices and ground is in short supply."

"Exactly." Bob drained and then re-filled his glass after topping up Don's. "Boots, Don; big boots." His voice boomed out, making other diners look around. "That's what's needed to find the stuff. I need men prepared to get out and tramp the hills. The old prospectors had the technique. We want to build on what they did, look at the old workings, sniff out the best prospects and do some early drilling."

"Yes." Don said again. "Those old prospectors must have walked over every square yard of Australia to find gold in such remote areas. Today it's hard to understand how strongly motivational it was. Personal safety was secondary to finding gold. Many died as a result."

The older man chuckled. "It's called greed, and it will set the mining industry afire again, just as nickel did. We'll do the same as those old prospectors, but I don't want to re-invent the wheel. I'm a man in a hurry. I've wasted too many years." He brushed the thinning strands of blond hair on his head and eyed Don's light brown thatch with a look that could have been envy. "I've already made some interesting gold contacts in Perth. Minad is small and flexible. It gives us a great advantage over bigger companies. Decisions can be made on the spot."

"I have a good contact in gold, a Lou Rinaldi," Don offered, in sudden inspiration. "He's a prospector. He showed me over the old gold workings at Meekatharra once."

Bob leant forward, instantly alert. "If we're going to be successful we want good practical advice. I don't mind admitting I'm ignorant about gold. Tell me about him."

Don gave an inner groan. The wine had made him careless. Although he'd only drunk a glass, two was all it took to get him laughing at poor jokes and three had him looking for a place to sleep. He wished now that he'd kept the conversation more general, for he knew little of Lou's current gold activities. "Well ... I remember a court case in Meekatharra, over a tax problem that involved Lou."

"Over gold?"

"Over nickel. The solicitor referred to Lou as a pegger and flogger of mineral claims. Lou must have made close to a million dollars pegging and flogging nickel properties in the last three years but he rose to his feet at this character assassination. When he wants to get a point across he can sound like a school principal who's got a recalcitrant pupil by the ear and he's got a voice like a ball mill grinding clinker. It now rasped out full of injury and injustice. 'Your honour. I object strongly to that remark. I do not peg and flog claims. I'm a genuine prospector and I can supply this court with mint returns from my gold leases for the last ten years to prove it.'"

"Mint returns?"

"Documents from the Perth Mint, showing how much gold the mint has refined from your gold mine. It's the ultimate proof that a prospector knows what he's doing."

"Good for him." Bob filled both glasses again. "Sort of like a degree in geology, but better eh? So what happened?"

Don continued. "'Well then Mr Rinaldi', the Magistrate said 'Perhaps you could enlighten the court concerning the relevance of your gold activities to the pegging and flogging of nickel prospects.'" Don chuckled. "He emphasised pegging and flogging just to needle Lou. Lou put up a very good argument. Mind you, he had good reason to. If he'd failed he would have been up for thousands in unpaid taxes. There were a lot of tax perks if you were regarded as a genuine prospector and Lou was a genius when it came to making money. He's even better at hanging on to it."

"How did he know what nickel ground to take up?"

"He had the 1916 Government Geologist's report on the Meekatharra Goldfield. It showed all the nickel bearing rocks. Lou had pegged most of them before others even got started. A single mineral claim covering genuine nickel rocks could be sold for about \$10,000 in 1970."

Bob's eyes lit up with admiration. "But what about his gold?"

Don cast his mind back, seeking inspiration. The numerous shafts and gold dumps Lou had once shown him were just a vague memory, originally filed away as being of no future interest. He dredged up what he could recall. "The Meekatharra gold workings are on Paddy's Flat on the edge of town. He was working a gold mine there and putting the ore through the State run mill."

"That's what we want Don, practical contacts. Follow him up. We need to acknowledge that we know nothing about gold and need help. Good work."

Don, in the success of the moment, foolishly emptied his glass, which Bob immediately filled. Don had rarely felt such strong success vibes. It was almost as if he'd already found Minad a mine, the ultimate dream of every geologist. "What sort of gold budget will Minad have?" he asked, stifling a yawn. Although he'd drunk only half as much as Bob the excitement of the moment was all that kept him from nodding off.

Bob's expression hardened. "What we want we'll get. You find the project, I'll find the money."

Bob finished the second bottle of red mostly on his own and although he'd given no indication of Don's likely success in claiming the job they shook hands in the foyer in a warm haze of mateship, built from expectations of great things to come and much red wine. "I don't think I asked about your thoughts on gold exploration."

"Boots." Don said, remembering Bob's earlier comment and shaking his head at the simplicity of gold exploration. "Big boots."

Bob hailed a taxi with one hand and slapped him on the back with the other, impressing with his balancing skill. "My thoughts exactly, my friend. Get in contact with that prospector. Find out what he's doing. I'll be back in a week or two when I've finished these interviews."

\* \* \*

Don found Judith waiting up for him. "Did you get the job?" she asked, her eyes mirroring her concern for the future.

"I think I'm close. I need to come up with a gold exploration program."

"Gold? I thought you were going to be looking for nickel or copper?"

"So did I."

"Is the job based in Perth?"

Don shook his head. "Minad has a house and office in Kalgoorlie. If I get the job we'd probably have to move there."

Don knew Judith wouldn't object. In the six years they'd been married his work had taken them around the world. Their Perth house was their first real home but she enjoyed adventure and new lifestyles. "It depends on Lou Rinaldi," he continued.

"Lou?" Judith laughed. "I remember he used to bring you lots of rocks, most of which you threw away."

Don had been based in Meekatharra a few years ago, searching for nickel and copper. Lou and his prospecting partners, the Brown brothers, would bring him sackfuls of rocks for identification, hoping they were nickel indicators. It wasn't easy to throw most of them away because Lou would look more and more disappointed as the heap of reject stones grew.

"What's Bob like?" Judith asked.

"Powerful. I'd say he's the sort of boss you either get along with or you find another job. He has a way of looking at you that makes you think of all the half truths you've been telling."

"And you think you can work with him?"

"Yes. Talking with him I felt as if I'd already found a gold mine."

Judith smiled. "Well that's a good sign. You've always been on about finding a mine."

"It's why we become geologists. I'll give Lou a ring first thing in the morning and start writing a report on how to explore for gold in Western Australia. I feel a major new gold mine coming on."

"We might have to shift back to Meekatharra if you find one up there."

Don grimaced. They had lived there for two years during the nickel boom, when they were just starting a family. They'd moved to Meekatharra in 1969, after a three-year

stint in Canada, and going from a Canadian winter to a Meekatharra summer was something they would never forget, especially after moving into one of Jack Spencer's five star corrugated iron rentals.

Jack was the friendly Meekatharra garage owner who also dabbled in real estate. He'd rented them a cottage complete with kero fridge and outside loo. In summer, the water pipes got so hot the shower could only be used at night and the outside corrugated iron dunny was a natural sauna. But like other towns they'd lived in over the years it was a great place to meet people. It also had an Olympic sized swimming pool.

\* \* \*

Don remembered that Lou was an early riser so he rang Lou's Meekatharra number at 5.30 am and caught him just as he finished breakfast—a mug of coffee laced with whisky. He rang Bob that afternoon and gave him the good news. Lou had a gold mine, he was working it with a bulldozer and front-end loader and he was making a stack of money.

"Great work," Bob's voice boomed down the line. "Maybe this is our first mine. Get up there and have a look. I'll put it on my itinerary when I come back to Perth in a couple of weeks."