The Lure of Gold

Australian has a long mining history, rich in folklore that not only reflects the times, customs, views and ideas of a culture, it has also created unique myths and legends that persist to this day.

Regardless of their veracity or lack of real evidence, the stories of lost gold mines, undiscovered iron ore mountains or diamond sites have attracted many optimistic prospectors since the 1800’s. Undoubtedly inspired by tales of immense riches just waiting to be discovered. Prospectors and geologists never seem discouraged by stories of people succumbing to thirst, hunger while searching for these legendary treasures. In fact it seems to add to the authenticity of a lot of these stories if someone has mysteriously vanished or died. The lack of tangible proof of the existence will not discourage diligent searchers either. There must always be a challenge, not too obvious, because if it was easy, someone else would have found it already. Just like searching for a needle in a haystack or solving a mystery. If whispered stories fail to spike your curiosity, then numerous TV, radio, newspaper articles and books, very popular among the local prospectors, will.

None of these lost fortune stories are greater than Lasseter’s lost gold Mine.

Lasseter and the reef of gold

‘To die a lonely horrible death is bad, but not to know why is even worse.’

So reads a diary note believed to have been written by Harold Bell Lasseter as he lay dying in an outback cave, waiting for rescuers to take him back to civilisation.

The rescuers never came and Lasseter is believed to have died in the bush in his futile attempt to rediscover a reef of gold he had first found some thirty years previously. That is the generally accepted theory, although there are some schools of thought which say he in fact found the legendary reef and perhaps changed his name and identity to protect it. Whatever happened, the legend of Lasseter still inspires gold fanatics to load up four-wheel drives and aircraft and set off in search of the reef which he claimed was about sixteen kilometres long. However, no one has ever found the reef although Lasseter’s diaries indicate fairly specific areas where he believed it to be.

But the biggest questions that hang over this mystery are why Lasseter himself could not find the reef again and what went so wrong in his search that it cost him his life. Fred Blakeley, the leader of the 1930s expedition to find the reef, has argued cogently that the answer is simple. Lasseter was self-deluded and the reef never existed. There are, however, other ways of explaining the puzzle. The legend goes back to 1897 when Lasseter, an Australian by birth and a naturalised American, decided to search for rubies in the western MacDonnell Ranges in the south of the Northern Territory. Lasseter had very little experience of the bush and wandered about aimlessly until he finally realised he was hopelessly lost. With one of his horses dead and the remaining horse close to death, Lasseter chanced upon a reef of gold which he estimated was eleven kilometres long and about three and a half metres wide, somewhere near the Western Australian/Northern Territory border. There was a later popular story that Lasseter had described the gold in the reef as being as ‘thick as plums in a pudding’. What he really claimed was that an assay of samples showed the gold to be around three ounces (about 85 grams) to the ton.

![Image of Lasseter's death notice](image.png)
Lasseter collected samples and then wandered for several days before collapsing from lack of water. By remote chance, a camel driver came across the unconscious Lasseter and took him to a nearby surveyors' camp where he was nursed back to life.

One of the surveyors was a West Australian named Harding who was greatly excited by Lasseter's samples. Harding took Lasseter to Carnarvon where they planned to set out and find the reef again.

Two years later they finally got under way and after four torturous months during which they searched for landmarks indicating the presence of the reef, they apparently found it and collected more samples which they took back to Carnarvon. Here they registered their find but their watches were faulty so no exact location of the reef was ever documented.

In Carnarvon their enthusiasm for their find was not matched by investor interest. The goldfields of Kalgoorlie and Coolgardie were in full swing and no one wanted to take a chance with an expedition which involved travelling over vast distances into the unknown interior of Australia. Harding even went to Europe to try to find backers but failed and returned to Australia where he died shortly afterwards.

Lasseter, for reasons which have never been explained, left to live in America and nothing was heard of him until May 1930 when, at the height of the Depression, he walked into the Pitt Street offices of the Australian Workers' Union in Sydney and asked to see the union's president, John Bailey.
At that time, union offices were besieged by out-of-work people looking for jobs or hand-outs. But Lasseter did not fit the usual image and was not shown the door. In fact, after an hour or so he was shown into Bailey's office. The first impression Bailey had of Lasseter was that he was of a well-dressed worker. But he did not talk like a worker and as Bailey listened he became more and more interested in the tale of the gold reef.

Lasseter was convinced the mining of his reef would cure the country's economic problems and at the assayed amounts Lasseter claimed for his find, the reef itself was valued at around 60 million pounds in 1930 or more than 2 billion dollars in today's monetary terms.

But Bailey was a cautious man, particularly as tall story tellers were not unusual in the Depression. He assembled a group of miners and unionists who questioned Lasseter closely about the reef. No one could shake him from his story and even though he had not been back to the reef for thirty years, Lasseter was convinced he could find the reef again.

Bailey even spoke to Arthur Blakeley, who as federal Minister for Home Affairs had responsibility for the Northern Territory. He could find nothing to dispute or contradict Lasseter's story.

Bailey acknowledged there were risks involved but decided it was worth the union's while to back an expedition to rediscover the reef. Public company called the Central Australian Gold Exploration Company (CAGEC) was floated and the $5000 available scrip was sold out in twenty-four hours - a remarkable event in the middle of the Depression.

Now preparation for the expedition got under way in earnest but here the first seeds of later trouble were planted. In their enthusiasm for the project, the planners virtually ignored Lasseter and set up a large expedition which included an aircraft for surveillance work. Lasseter wanted a small party using camels and fought against the plane, arguing that there was nowhere it could land. The city-born planners were more interested in Errol Coote, a journalist and pilot, who convinced them to overtook such trivial details as how the plane would refuel, of indeed he could get it down in one piece in the middle of the scrub.

Lasseter wanted to use camels but when a heavy, six-wheel drive truck became available the company jumped at the chance of using it and once again Lasseter's wishes were ignored or overruled.

By June the expedition was ready and the seven-man party arrived at Alice Springs to set off on what was hailed as the best-equipped exploration into the centre of Australia.

The company had chosen Alice Springs because it assumed it was the closest rail link to the reef. Again the lack of communication with Lasseter was to have fatal consequences. Lasseter, in all his meetings, had expressed great confidence in finding his reef again if he travelled from the west, the same direction he and Harding had gone when they had rediscovered it thirty years previously.

Travelling from the west he knew the landmarks and the lay of the land. but travelling into the bush from the east was a different proposition, and one which Lasseter was not happy about. Nevertheless, the company decided to start at Alice Springs and why a man of Lasseter's verbal ability (he had, after all, talked everyone into the expedition in the first place) did not protest more is just one of the mysteries surrounding the Lasseter legend.
And so on 21 July 1930 the CAGEC expedition headed out of Alice Springs under the direction of Fred Blakeley, Arthur Blakeley's brother, with Lasseter himself being given the somewhat demeaning title of guide.

Travelling in the heavy truck the expedition headed west with Blakeley keeping close to the MacDonnell ranges so that the travelling was not too rough and the team could get water.

Only 200 kilometres out of Alice Springs Lasseter's uneasiness with the expedition erupted into the open confrontation with Blakeley.

Lasseter wanted to go south-west but the leader insisted on continuing on a due west course.

This led the team into the mulga and a track had to be cut for the truck, slowing the progress of the expedition down to a crawl.

Meanwhile Coote and his plane had landed at Yai Yai where the expedition had cleared a strip in the rough terrain. He had gone there so Lasseter could be taken up for an aerial view of the area but while testing the airstrip the plane nicked a tree and the flight was postponed.

The expedition then pushed on towards the township of Ilbilla while Coote repaired the plane so he could join them later. With the plane ready, Coote set off again but the airstrip was again too much for him and this time the plane's contact with a tree was much more serious - the plane was destroyed and Coote was lucky to escape with his life.

When the plane failed to arrive for the rendezvous at Ilbilla, Blakeley drove back to the airstrip to investigate for none of the expedition's radios was working. He found the wrecked plane and a note from Coote who had set off back to try to get another plane. Blakeley decided he could not wait for this and set off in the truck due west towards the Kintore /Range near the Western Australian border.

Now the animosity between Lasseter and Blakeley became even more obvious with Lasseter claiming that his sights showed they were some 240 kilometres from where he believed the reef to be. Blakeley retorted with a claim that Lasseter did not know how to use navigating devices. He then proceeded to punch Lasseter to the ground.
The two men continued to argue and finally it was decided to return to Ilbilla where Coote arrived in August with another plane.

Lasseter was at last taken aloft to view the land they were in. He believed he had found the area and the expedition set off again but was thwarted as much by the constant arguing between the two men as by the huge sand dunes, the result of of a long drought, which blocked their path.

Again the team turned back and at Ilbilla.

**Blakeley decided enough was enough and called the expedition off.**

Lasseter, however, decided to continue the search - this time more on his terms.

He teamed up with Paul Johns, a cameleer who had wandered into the expedition's camp and befriended the CAGEC team.

The new arrangement suited Lasseter because camels were his preferred mode of desert transport and he had always wanted a small expedition which could move quickly rather than a large unwieldy one.

In mid-September the two men set off for the Petermann Ranges but the continuing drought slowed the progress by forcing them to divert to waterholes.

Nevertheless, they travelled about 32 kilometres a day, good progress compared with the truck.

But still the drought beat them and with the camels suffering from heat and thirst they returned to Ilbilla. From here Johns set off to get fresh camels and supplies from Alice Springs while Lasseter decided to set out on his own.

Aware of the dangers of the outback, he gave Johns letters to the CAGEC detailing the route he was going to take.

From here on Lasseter's movements are a mystery although a number of people claimed to have seen him.

One of these witnesses said that Lasseter had arrived in the Rawlinson Ranges and had failed to tether his camels which had all his supplies on their backs. The camels fled and although he realised it was impossible to catch them, Lasseter followed them.

He found supplies which had fallen from their backs and, using these as his only food base, sought shelter in a nearby cave where he could see any search party sent to look for him.

And a search party of sorts there was. The CAGEC had ordered Coote and his new plane to hunt for Lasseter but by early January the plane was reported missing and after a ten day search by Air Force planes it was located a wreck, but with no loss of life. The CAGEC, which had ploughed so much into the search for Lasseter's reef, now made no attempt to ask the Air Force to extend its search and look for the lost man after the wrecked plane had been found. It could be argued that the company was counting its losses, although the animosity between Blakeley and Lasseter could suggest other explanations.

And so towards the end of January, the world had given Lasseter up as dead. In fact it seems he was still living, but only just, sheltering in a cave and hoping his rescuers would arrive. It is believed that by this stage he was so weak he could not look after himself and was surviving only because Aborigines nearby took pity on him. By the end of the month he realised help was not coming and decided to make one last attempt to save himself by setting out with his Aboriginal helpers to crawl to Mt Olga. But two days later he collapsed and died on the bank of a creek and was buried by his helpers.

There were some, however, who questioned that he had died but believed that he had found his reef and, rather than share its huge wealth, had disappeared. But the evidenced seems to suggest that the diary found in the cave where he had spent many days was written by Lasseter and that he died a few days after leaving the cave.

In fact a grave was found, although some experts say the body in it was not his. The claims in the diary fragments that he had rediscovered the reef are almost certain, if genuinely written by him, to be no more than a dying man's attempt to justify himself.

No gold has ever been discovered at the fairly specifically described site. What is undisputed is that Lasseter disappeared at this time and that the attempt to rediscover the reef was a failure.
So what is the answer?

Was there never a reef at all, as Fred Blakely believed?

This is increasingly the accepted explanation but it is just as logical to point to the defects of the search expedition, and to factors of age and geographical conditions.

Firstly, Lasseter was travelling in a different direction from that which he had been following some thirty years previously when he had found the reef.
In addition, landmarks in the desert change constantly and in thirty years most of the vegetation would have completely changed, as would have the sand dunes. Another factor was that the expedition was led by a city person who clashed constantly with Lasseter, probably exacerbating his confusion over not being able to locate landmarks or other distinguishing features.

When he set off alone he had to face problems of age and weakness. He was now more than fifty, and he had been travelling in the desert on the expedition, with Johns and by himself, for months. He weakened quickly and it is believed towards the end he was beset with dysentery.

Whether or not the despairing diary entry about approaching death is genuine, it is unlikely that Lasseter came to a happy end.

Well I’m off to find Lasseter’s lost reef, which, a friend, of a friend, who said a friend of theirs had seen a map, told me that I could find the deposit next to an old black stump, north of the New South Wales border but west of the Queensland border, he thinks!