

The general theme of this year's ball centers on the golden decade of the Australian gold rushes, 1851-1861; with some emphasis on the events of the 'Lambing Flat' riots of June 1861.

The gold rushes of 1851-1861 were quite disruptive to the values and structure of colonial society; they created much concern and alarm for the colonial authorities of New South Wales and Victoria and caused much apprehension amongst certain influential members of colonial society. The gold rushes caused the authorities to over react, thus setting off a number of unfortunate and violent clashes between the miners and the enforcers of law and order, the military and police.

The gold seekers came mainly from Britain and nearby colonies; less than one in ten came from continental Europe or North America. About five percent of the diggers were Chinese; their presence and misunderstood customs created much unrest amongst the British and European miners, which eventually lead to a series of clashes between the races and ultimately to a restriction on Chinese immigration; a precursor of the 'White Australia Policy.'

The unrest, heady excitement and the new found riches of the diggings gave an impetus to the resurrection of the colonial bushranging profession; an activity which probably created, over a longer period, more disruption and loss of life and property than all of the unrest and disturbances on the gold fields.

Eureka Stockade aside, the largest gold fields disturbance of this decade, took place at the Burrangong diggings at 'Lambing Flat.' This hitherto peaceful spot was taken up by James White who 'squatted' there in 1826. In June of 1850, Alexander the Yankee found gold in the main Burrangong Creek and by September of that year, an influx of diggers had swarmed to 'Lambing Flat' and most were earning upwards of twelve to fifteen shillings a day.

The Chinese who came to Burrangong kept themselves apart from the European diggers - remembering well the ill fate of their countrymen at Uralla and the Buckland River some years previously. By March of 1861, European miners had formed a protective league and demanded better police protection, less taxation and cheap land. They also demanded exclusion of the moon faced, barbarian Mongolian locusts (the Chinese) from the diggings, because they polluted the water and were 'idolatrous miscreants' and 'sodomite idolaters.'