

# The legend of Lasseter's reef



Fact or fiction, history or myth? Award-winning author **Stephen Orr** explores the life and legend of Harold Lasseter and his ever-elusive reef of gold.

**I**N 1940 world famous Australian singer **Peter Dawson** published his setting of **Edward Harrington's** poem "Lasseter's Last Ride":

*Now Lasseter sleeps in the great North-west  
Where they say the dead sleep sound  
But what was the end of Lasseter's quest  
And where is the gold he found?*

Today, we know it's still in the ground, if anywhere. Fine specks of gold trapped in Palaeozoic quartz, thrown up in magmatic extrusions resembling sunbonnets and Quakers' hats. Of course, many believe the whole story is the work of

some long-dead illywhacker, but others, that the suburb-sized reef must exist.

When Lasseter died in 1931 he took his secrets to a desert grave, and no one's even sure of that. Some believe he lived, moved to San Francisco with his dirty mining money, and started a new life (or resumed an old one). Yes, a body was recovered, but whose?

In 1957, American journalist **Lowell Thomas** came to Australia hoping to solve the mystery. He dug up what might have been our great mythological hero, examined the skull, and declared the mystery solved. But life is rarely that simple. The beginning and end of this story mixes facts, half-truths, rumours, stories — adds a twist of drama, waits 80 years and serves up a story nearly as reliable as Ulysses, wandering his own Mediterranean desert. Between all this, the facts are elusive.

**Lewis Hubert (Harold Bell) Lasseter** was born in 1880 at Bamganie, Victoria. His mother died early and his father remarried. Adrift as a young man, Lasseter committed a robbery in October 1896 and was sent to a reformatory in Pakenham, Victoria. He escaped in October 1897, around the same time he later claimed to be walking from Alice Springs to the Western Australian goldfields; to have found his gold reef.

After making this discovery he stumbled through the desert, lost, before meeting an Afghan camel driver who took him to the camp of a government surveyor named Harding. Harding believed Lasseter's story. In 1900 both men returned to examine the reef and later, unsuccessfully, attempted to raise money for a full-scale expedition.

The timing seems difficult. Lasseter claimed to have spent four years in the Royal Navy before being discharged in 1901. Then he was off to the United States, where he married in December 1903. His early years, especially, are a jumble of beautiful lies. The dates are plastic, and very few sources agree on anything. Was this Lasseter, or history? According to **Fred Blakeley**, leader of the 1930 reef expedition, Lasseter 'lacked a credible story about anything in all his reminiscences.'

We do know that by 1911 Lasseter was living in Tabulam, New South

Wales. He worked a small farm, kept busy with odd jobs and wrote (the great yarn-spinner he was) occasional pieces for *The Tenterfield Star*. His 'Tabulam Tinklings' were a typically Lasseterian bag of gossip, trivia, social analysis and nation-building suggestions. He was smart, keen, scribbling ideas for everything from disc ploughs to an arch bridge to span Sydney Harbour. At the outbreak of war he sold his farm and moved to Melbourne. He tried to enlist, but was rejected, unfit for service. Never one to be put off, he tried again (claiming to be an engineer) in February 1916 and was accepted, but discharged on 17 October. And again. This time in Adelaide in August 1917; rejected in November of the same year.

During all this time Lasseter was, apparently, sitting on his 'find'. An enormous reef of gold that might have made his fortune, if he'd 'returned' to the desert to locate his 1897 discovery. This 'man of jumbled moods' waited more than 30 years to act on his revelation, a discovery that surely would have saved him years of struggle, scribbling and roaming the country in search of some sort of purpose.

In 1924 Lasseter married **Louise Irene (Rene) Lillywhite** in Melbourne. Over the next few years they lived in Sydney and Canberra where Lasseter worked as a carpenter, including time helping build the new parliament house. At the end of 1927 the family returned to Sydney where Lasseter, ironically, worked on the Sydney Harbour Bridge while continuing to register patents, including one for pre-cast concrete.

In 1929 the idea of gold returned. Nothing new. Ever since convict ▶

**Below** Loading up the trucks in Alice Springs for the Central Australian Gold Expedition (CAGE) in 1930. Harold Lasseter is on the truck in the background. Courtesy State Library of NSW, ID a2445053.

**Opposite** The CAGE party members, from left: Errol Coote, George Sutherland, Fred Colson, Fred Blakeley and Philip Taylor. Lasseter is the man in the front. Courtesy National Library of Australia, ID 731167.





**Above** Lewis (Harold) Lasseter in military uniform, c. 1915-17. He was discharged as unfit for service twice. Courtesy National Library of Australia, ID vn5126068.

**James Daley** claimed to have discovered the metal at Port Jackson in 1788 (our first forgery, fragments of gold guinea and belt buckle) Australians have seen gold as the shortcut to wealth, and the good life. Back in 1929, with the nation teetering on the edge of a depression, men's minds were starting to wander, and invent.

Lasseter approached the Western Australian government and explained that 18 years earlier he'd found an enormous gold-bearing reef. All that was needed to secure the gold was £5 million, and an adequate water supply. He offered to survey a route for a pipeline for a fee of £2,000 but, not surprisingly, was turned down.

Not to be beaten, he approached **John Bailey**, president of the Sydney branch of the Australian Workers' Union, with a modified story. Now he's 17 again, wandering the Western Australian-Northern Territory border region, looking for gold. Gets lost. Stumbles through the desert, low on supplies, when he comes across the reef. No water. Horse dead. Saved by a cameleer, who takes him to Harding,

who takes him to Carnarvon. Three years later they return to the reef. Decide on a course of action. Both spend years trying to find a backer for an expedition, with no success. Harding dies overseas while trying to raise the money.

Bailey listened attentively. Maybe there was something in it? He sought advice before agreeing to help Lasseter raise the money. Convinced, he formed the Central Australian Gold Exploration (CAGE) Company Limited and appointed himself director.

Perhaps Bailey believed Lasseter could be an economic saviour for the nation and its many unemployed workers. Either way, the idea appealed to hundreds of investors. Shares at £1 were sold, and £5,000 capital raised.

The expedition left Alice Springs on 21 July 1930. Six men, two trucks and a plane. Lasseter was hired for £5 per week as guide. Half a tonne of water, three months' fuel, instruments, maps and radio. The expedition headed west towards Ilbilla: Fred Blakeley, leader, **Philip Taylor**, mechanic and driver, **George Sutherland**, **Fred Colson**, **Captain Blakeston-Houston** and pilot, **Errol Coote**.

Almost straightaway, Lasseter and Blakeley fell out over directions. Morale dropped. The team wondered why Lasseter spent his time singing hymns and scribbling in his diary. Regardless, Lasseter told them they needed to find land formations resembling the outline of a child and a 'pharaoh's head'.

They headed towards the Warburton Ranges. Haasts Bluff, Putardi Springs, then Ilbilla waterhole, where they set up base camp and started preparing a landing strip, unaware their plane had already crashed. From here, towards Mount Marjorie, near the Western Australian border. Lasseter kept changing directions and Blakeley became furious. They climbed the mountain and Lasseter consulted his map. Now, he claimed, they had to find three hills that resembled women in sunbonnets, walking together. Blakeley reluctantly listened, and they changed direction, south.

Later, Taylor said that Lasseter was "more or less a crank, very aggressive, very self-opinionated and full of large,

**“** *I don't suppose I've an earthly chance of surviving ... what good a reef worth millions I would give it all for a loaf of bread.* **”**

hopeful visions". Perhaps Lasseter was acting, full of a feigned confidence to convince his followers. After all, they were expecting gold. What would happen when their faith ran out? Or was Lasseter right? Had he been in the desert as a 17-year-old in 1897?

September. Rough terrain. The expedition was forced back to Ilbilla. Waiting for them was dingo trapper, **Paul Johns**, and his camels. He offered his services but was turned down. Then, Coote arrived in a new aircraft. He took Lasseter up to survey the terrain. An hour in Lasseter became excited. After landing he told Coote he'd seen the 'three women in sunbonnets'.

The expedition set off again. The country was almost impassable. The mulga shredded the trucks' tyres. Blakeley no longer trusted Lasseter. He now believed he'd never set foot in Central Australia. Lewis, Harold, whatever he wanted to call himself, was a conman. He told Lasseter he intended returning to Hermannsburg Mission.

Lasseter told Johns he'd take up his offer. The pair set off into the desert. Lasseter called to Blakeley, "If I don't find the gold, I'm never coming back." Perhaps to save face? Or perhaps because he was convinced of his reef?

Lasseter and Johns continued, stopping to rest at a waterhole. Lasseter left his companion to scout ahead and when he returned two days later told him he'd found the reef, but refused to reveal the location. Johns wasn't convinced. The pair argued, after which Johns set off alone, convinced, as were the others, that Lasseter was delusional.

Lasseter walked towards Lake Christopher with two camels that soon bolted with his food. He was left wandering, starving, thirsty, close to death, when he was found by Aborigines.

They took him to *kulpi tjuntinya*, later known as Lasseter's Cave, where he stayed for most of January 1931. As he recovered he wrote in his diary that he'd found the reef (again) and pegged it out. It was close to a sacred site, so these indications might not last.

In late January he set off, with the help of an Aboriginal family, and with less than two litres of water, to walk the 130 kilometres to Mount Olga, where he hoped to meet the relief party. He wrote,

*'I don't suppose I've an earthly chance of surviving I can carry 2 gallons and 3 pints of water but that is hardly likely to take me the 80 miles to Mount Olga and on no food whatever I've brought this all on myself by going alone...'*

He soon succumbed. Lying, waiting for death, he still remembered his wife, Rene, and three children, **Bobby**, **Betty** and **Joy**. He recorded: *'Goodbye and God Bless you Rene darling wife of mine and may God Bless the children.'* He mentioned he'd like Bobby to become a civil engineer. Design bridges, perhaps. Like he had for Sydney (in 1929 he'd unsuccessfully tried ▶

**Below** The terrain was tough going in the CAGE vehicles. Courtesy State Library of NSW, ID a1809059h.

**Bottom** Last minute checks before the CAGE ground team sets off for Uluru by camel. Courtesy State Library of NSW, ID a2445053.



to solicit payment for the six months' work he'd put in designing 'the bridge'). He added:

*'I am sorry to finish out here and the worry of not knowing how you are faring and knowing how you must be in suspense as to my fate is simply the worst pain of all. Teach the children to believe the best you can of their father and soften the tale of my suffering here. I want relief and have saved one cartridge but will stick it out as long as possible.'*

Lasseter walked around 55 kilometres before dying at Shaw Creek in the Petermann Ranges around 28 January. In one of his last diary entries he wrote, *'... what good a reef worth millions I would give it all for a loaf of bread.'*

In early 1931 the Central Australian Gold Exploration Company sent experienced pastoralist **Bob Buck** to search for the lost prospector. In March, he found Lasseter's body and buried him (he was reinterred in the Alice Springs Pioneer Cemetery in 1958).

Years later, Buck seemed reluctant to confirm the body he'd found was Lasseter's. Sixteen years after Lasseter's death Jack Bailey wrote:

*'When Buck reported he had found Lasseter's body or what appeared to be Lasseter's body, the Directors [of CAGE] asked him to sign a declaration to this effect, but Buck refused to do this. He said he could not swear whether the skeleton was that of a white or black man.'*

Perhaps Buck was just unsure? The directors needed a death certificate to prove to the Bank of Australasia that Lasseter was dead, so they might access his papers. Fred Blakeley believed there was more to Buck than met the eye. He thought he'd assisted Lasseter out of the country, on his way to America.

In 1931 the *Barrier Miner* (Broken Hill) revealed: *'The discovery has just been made of the use of invisible ink by the late Mr LHB Lasseter to protect vital clues in the location of "Aladdin's Cave", the mysterious gold reef of reputedly fabulous wealth ... The document on*

*which the invisible writing was found was lodged by Lasseter with the Bank of Australasia before he left on his last trip to the interior ...'*

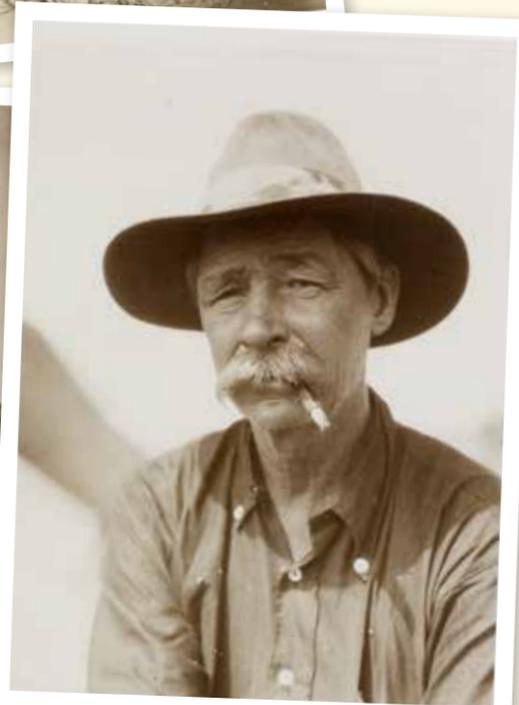
Lasseter had arranged with his wife, and the company, that in the event of his death or failure to return the map could be retrieved for 'further clues' to the reef's location. *'When the reef was being mapped from the document [after Lasseter's death] discrepancies were noticed and a close examination showed faint markings. Police experts were able to restore the writing and a second set of directions was brought to light.'*

These differences were attributed to differences in Lasseter's and Harding's compasses 30 years earlier. The new secret information was enough to persuade Bob Buck to lead a second expedition in search of the reef Lasseter had pegged out.

Eventually they too would return empty-handed (except for Lasseter's diary, found buried in his cave).

So who was Lasseter? An eternal optimist? A young man who'd found, but lost, the world's largest reef of gold? Someone who could convince himself, and others, of a fact, a notion, a lie? Years later, Fred Blakeley said, "Lasseter is a liar and a fraud." He had no doubts Lasseter didn't know where the gold was, because the reef didn't exist.

The myth of Lasseter didn't take long to set roots in the desert sands. Novels, songs, and decades of would-be prospectors following in his footsteps. The first expedition was organised in 1932. **Patrick Whelan** claimed to have located the reef, and registered 36 claims in the Livesey Range with the Western Australian mines department. A company was formed, £3,000 worth of shares sold, and an expedition



**Top** The search party approaching Uluru looking for Lasseter's body. ID a1808021;

**Above and right**

Bob Buck, the man who found Lasseter's body and who was

later reluctant to confirm the fact. ID a1808016 and a1808017; **Bottom**

**right** Lasseter's grave. ID a1808018. All courtesy State Library of NSW.

organised. Day one: 22 December 1932. A survey plane set off, but soon crashed, and this was the beginning of a series of misfortunes that beset this, and a dozen other, failed ventures.

And it continues to this day. In 2012 Lasseterians Jeff Harris and best mate Brendan Elliott set off on their fifth expedition. They first learned of Lasseter and his lost gold growing up in Wollongong. As 10 year olds they decided one day they'd go looking. They shook on it, as 100 others have, and probably will.

Does Lasseter get the last laugh? Did he really head overseas after his death, leaving his family, starting a new life? In his 1972 book *Dream Millions* Blakeley suggested this was the case. That Lewis Lasseter was a zelig, changing to suit the times, his circumstances.

Perhaps, today, little would be known of Lasseter if not for his journey into popular culture. He became a Phar Lap, Don Bradman, Nellie Melba fixture of the '30s. People chose to remember (and still do) the swash-buckling version of Lasseter, more than the complex man full of unrealised ambitions, struggling to

support wives, and children throughout the lean years of the Depression.

The 10 May 1931 edition of *The Truth* revealed more of the translucent myth, peeling back layers of the mythical man. John Bailey explained he'd received a letter from a Melbourne woman saying she was Lasseter's legal wife: *'She states that she married him in New York in 1903, and she quotes the number of the marriage certificate.'*

Lasseter's wife, Rene, was having none of it. *'I am the legal wife of Lewis Harold Bell Lasseter, having been married to him ... on January 28 1924.'* But Lasseter had lived in America from 1901 to 1908. Married **Florence Scott** on 29 December 1903. Had two children: **Ruby** and **Beulah**.

Reading and thinking about Lasseter raises many questions. If, as the evidence suggests, there was never a reef, and Lasseter never discovered it (and wasn't in the desert) in 1897, why did he continue the bluff? Why did he want to lead an expedition to find something he knew didn't exist? Did he intend withdrawing at a crucial moment? Was he planning on acting out his inability to relocate the reef? Did he, when the drama had gone too far, determine to finish his act in the most final way?

Bob Buck certainly made up his mind. When interviewed in 1939 he said, "Lasseter never found a reef of gold in Central Australia. As a matter of fact, Lasseter never visited the sand-hill country until I took [him] there for burial. Lasseter imagined the existence of a reef ... after he had read a copy of a novel, printed in 1912. The novel described a group of aborigines [sic] who carried spears with heads of rolled gold."

Entrepreneur and explorer Dick Smith summed it up this way: "This is Australia's El Dorado. We need to think there is a mysterious reef that someone has found and no one has rediscovered. It's part of our psyche." 🐉

✿ *Stephen Orr's latest book, The Hands (Wakefield Press, \$29.95), about the struggles of a close-knit farming family, is out now. Read Lasseter's 1930 diary — digitised by the State Library of NSW — at [bit.ly/1LudXvi](http://bit.ly/1LudXvi)*

