

OSMIRIDIUM MINING AT MOUNT STEWART, NINETEEN MILE AND BALD HILL

INTRODUCTION -

Owing to the present demand for osmiridium for war purposes, an investigation of the osmiridium fields west of Waratah was undertaken to determine the productive possibilities, the requirements for stimulating production, and the factors controlling the rehabilitation of osmiridium mining in these parts.

The recorded production from these fields and including the Wilson River production is 15,526 ounces valued at £350,845.

MOUNT STEWART -

The presence of osmiridium in the Mount Stewart area had been known for many years but it was not until 1914 that any production was recorded, when 17 dwt. of osmiridium was recorded from the creek near the old Mount Stewart silver-lead mine. In 1917 Stanton and Loughnan were granted a reward claim for discovering alluvial osmiridium in Loughnan creek in such quantity as to start a mild "rush" and the annual output of osmiridium from the North-Western Division for the next few years was trebled.

The Mount Stewart osmiridium field lies to the west and south of the old Mount Stewart silver-lead mine, which is three miles due south of the Waratah-Corinna road near the 15 mile peg, from which point all means of communication to the field commences. Access was, at first, by means of a pack-track, but from 1905 to 1912, a wooden tramway, five and a half miles in length, provided cheaper transport. Since the mine closed in 1912, the tramway has fallen into a state of disrepair and was again used as a pack-track until about ten years ago when conditions became so bad, due to fall-timber and overgrowth of scrub, as to prevent even this use. The only means of access to the old Mount Stewart silver-lead mine and adjacent osmiridium field is provided by this track and when we travelled it in June, last, progress was difficult and slow, but after the heavy falls of snow the following month, so much scrub had been broken down over the track that to travel along it was almost impossible and we were forced to abandon all attempts to reach the Mount Stewart area. The track will require clearing, before it can be used again, and, if heavy traffic is anticipated, attention must be given to reconditioning both bridges.

This field possesses the same general features which appear to be the essential factors associated with the occurrence of osmiridium in Tasmania, namely the intrusion of ultra basic rocks accompanied by certain mineralogical changes. The distribution of the osmiridium deposits indicates that the osmiridium must have been derived from some source within the basin-shaped depression towards the head of Loughnan Creek.

For the most part, the alluvium and detritus is exceedingly shallow and it is not until Loughnan creek approaches the Castra River that alluvial flats of any consequence exist. Most of the easily accessible shallow deposits in the smaller channels were worked out when Reid (1920) visited the area.

Although only very primitive methods of mining have been used on this field, it is doubtful, with the exception of the Castra Flats, whether the deposits are of sufficient magnitude to warrant any scheme involving power handling.

There has been no active mining on this field for over ten years and if the production of osmiridium is to be resumed, the disability of transport from the Corinna road must be overcome. Only men of advanced years are engaged in mining osmiridium at the present time and these prefer to remain at the present site of their camps near the Nineteen Mile on the Corinna road where supplies are delivered to the door once a week rather than shift to the Stewart where it would be necessary to man-pack supplies, even if the track were reopened.

These men are unanimous in their opinion that the Stewart area offers the most encouraging prospects of any of the osmiridium fields in the Savage River district.

Apart from the metal that could be obtained by reworking the old ground, a process that has been responsible for most of the metal won at the Nineteen Mile for many years past, there is the possibility that rigorous prospecting of the Castra Flats may reveal concentrates of sufficient grade and magnitude to justify some scheme of hydraulic sluicing.

The sluicing of these Flats would not only yield osmiridium, for the concentrate would contain other associated minerals such as gold, tin and monazite, which collectively may make the proposition an economic one.

NINETEEN MILE AND BALD HILL -

Bald Hill - The distribution of the known deposits of osmiridium is confined almost exclusively to the north-western fall of the hill. Bald Hill is covered with button grass, with the exception of a few isolated clumps of peppermint. There are numerous limonitic outcrops and much opaline silica distributed over the surface. Where exposed by sluicing, the bed-rock is seen to be a bluish-green serpentinised rock.

The detrital material is very shallow and is covered by black peaty soil up to a foot thick.

The main difficulty in this area appears to be the inadequate water supply. There is only a limited season when conditions are at all favourable. There are very few locations suitable for building small storm water dams which would permit ground sluicing for a number of hours.

One man controls the two existing small storm-water dams and is working the edges of old ground. Below this claim, two other men use, in successive stages, the water from the above tail race for working the edges of old ground. In the summer time, there is insufficient water for workings purposes and in the winter time, conditions are so wet that the cleaning up of ground worked, is only possible after a spell of fine weather.

The rich concentrations of osmiridium in the detritus are so narrow that it is quite reasonable to anticipate that undisclosed enrichments exist, and, when located, all that would be necessary for their successful exploitation is the provision of an adequate water supply at sufficient elevation. A gravity scheme is not feasible.

The total area from which osmiridium has been won is exceedingly small and probably not more than a few hundred acres in extent.

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Apart from small scale test operations of rock-mining for osmiridium at Caudry's mine, no serious attempts to develop the primary deposits have been made, because the erratic and limited distribution of the osmiridium has discouraged the operators.

Nineteen Mile Creek - The wash in the lower end of the Nineteen Mile Creek has been worked and reworked so many times that there appears to be little hope of locating any ground that offers a chance of profitable mining with the exception of a small amount of terrace fringing.

Only two men are working in this area, one, after fruitless attempts at reworking old places in the Nineteen Mile Creek, in the vicinity of Caudry's Prospect, and the other on the terrace fringes along the south side of the creek.

SAVAGE RIVER -

The Savage River terrace gravels most probably offer the best prospects for sustained mining, but unfortunately, the mining of these gravels would be subject to seasonal control as the frequency of flooding in the winter would seriously hamper operations.

These terraces have been prospected but little, and mined only in a very primitive manner. Before the productive possibilities of these terrace gravels can be determined, it will be necessary to undertake a vigorous prospecting campaign. Systematic prospecting has always been beyond the financial resources of the average digger and consequently, the true nature and mineral content of these gravels has never been reasonably estimated.

CINNABAR -

Cinnabar is reported to be present in the vicinity of Jones' Creek at the head of the Nineteen Mile Creek and J. Davidson has undertaken to prospect the area next summer if he were granted a sustenance allowance.

As the distribution of this strategic mineral is much more widespread than was suspected previously prospecting for it should be encouraged and we recommend that J. Davidson be granted some measure of assistance.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS -

From the above it will be seen that the mining of osmiridium in the osmiridial fields west of Waratah is at a very low ebb and strong remedial action will be necessary if the rehabilitation of osmiridium is to be achieved.

Regarding the primary deposits, no serious attempt to mine has been made owing to the notorious capriciousness of the distribution of osmiridium which discouraged operators all too soon. Detailed geological mapping would be a pre-requisite to any attempt at exploitation of the primary deposits by quarrying methods.

Most of the easily accessible, shallow alluvial and detrital deposits are apparently worked out and attention will have to be turned to the prospecting of such places as the Castra Flats and the Savage River terraces.

To encourage men to return to the Stewart field, it will be necessary to provide adequate transport facilities for delivery of food supplies direct to the field, and accommodation in the form of huts.

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