

The Brothers Cohen — Unlauded Entrepreneurs

by Lynette Ramsay Silver.

As part of the historical research for my book *A Fool's Gold?*, it was imperative to establish the day to day life of the central character, a mineralogist William Tipple Smith, as well as reconstruct the mineral background of the time. Using old directories, maps, drawings, first hand recollections of individuals and personal advertisements placed in the newspapers of the period, it was possible to locate the businesses of some of the key figures in the story.

Two of W.T. Smith's contemporaries, the brothers Cohen, were such key figures.

We are told by several people of the period of the existence of a goldsmith/jeweller in Sydney's George Street North in the early 1840s. Provided that the time frame and address are accurate, the jeweller concerned must have been Mosely Moss Cohen, who first surfaced in the business sense in 1830, working from rented premises above a Sydney shop. Using silver dollars we are told he managed to create a silver salver which was presented to Major Innes after being displayed to the public.¹ In 1832, Mosely married Caroline Pendray² and then established himself at 3 Denmark Place, George Street, making and mending jewellery, repairing watches and musical boxes, and selling a choice selection of fashionable dress ornaments as well as the usual jewellery lines.³

The business was undoubtedly prosperous for Cohen accumulated property including an orchard at Burwood which he leased for the time being. In 1836 he moved his business into George Street North where he continued to both sell and repair all manner of jewellery items.⁴ Whilst M.M. Cohen was establishing the business on the new site, a fellow jeweller/mineralogist William Tipple Smith, was doing likewise. Although it has not been possible to ascertain whether the two men actually shared the same building, they must have been no more than two doors away from one another, since both described the location of the respective shops as being 'directly opposite the bank of Australasia'.⁵

This particular George Street site was just south of Bridge Street, adjoining the old lumber yard, where the Metropolitan Hotel now stands.

Smith's shop had been formerly occupied by James Tegg, the publisher, who had arrived aboard the 'James Craig' in 1832. In April 1986, the shops of Smith and Cohen were still standing, the sole survivor of Sydney's pre-1837 commercial buildings.⁶

By the 1830s Sydney had at last begun to take on the look of a substantial town — roads were properly laid out and buildings were of more solid construction, replacing the flimsy erections of the previous years. The shops of Smith and Cohen faced the impressive Bank of Australasia which stood on the western side of George Street. To the rear ran the Tank Stream, on its way to Sydney Harbour, spanned by a small bridge nearby which gave its name to the street. Further up Bridge Street was the Colonial Secretary's residence and beyond that stood several windmills interrupting the skyline. It was in this environment of change from the temporary to the more permanent that Smith and Cohen now sought to establish themselves. Cohen's relatively peaceful existence was apparently disturbed by the entry into the business world of Joel John Cohen, the widowed husband of Mosely's sister Rebecca.⁷ Shortly

after J.J. Cohen's appearance on the retail scene of 1839, Mosely Cohen began to have published the first of a series of advertisements in which he firmly dissociated himself from 'any other business in the colony'. Joel John, who ran 'The Temple of Fashion' in George Street at this time, also dabbled in the jewellery trade. Although Mosely had an ex convict brother starting up business also at this time, he seems to have led a trouble free life, which was not the case for Joel John. The unnamed undesirable with whom Mosely wanted no connection was possibly his brother-in-law, for Joel was evicted by his irate landlord in 1843 for the non payment of rent, or rather for the attempted payment using a dishonoured cheque, an action which was publicly denounced by Mr Gill in the newspaper.⁸ Mosely Moss Cohen, respected businessman, philanthropist and pillar of society, who expected even his gardener to have impeccable references attesting to his 'honesty, sobriety and capability', would hardly wish to be connected in any way with such a business or person.⁹

While both Mosely and W.T. Smith were busily engaged in the serious business of running a viable and respectable enterprise, far away on an isolated sheep run near Wellington a shepherd named McGregor was quietly occupied in the peaceful tending of his master's sheep. The life of a shepherd is a solitary one, with little excitement to break the day to day monotony. Idly watching the tranquilly grazing sheep, McGregor's attention was caught by the unmistakable glitter of gold in the quartz outcrops which abound in the area. He chipped off bits of the milky quartz and, whenever the opportunity presented itself, managed to transport them to Sydney.

Gold has an attraction which cuts across all lines of creed, colour and race, and the gold of McGregor was no exception. The shepherd, finding a ready market at the shop of Cohen the goldsmith and jeweller, promptly sold them whenever he had the chance, and soon became known as 'a gold-finder'.

By displaying the gold samples in the window of his shop, M.M. Cohen not only made himself a talking point but he also created an Australian 'first', for the exhibition of McGregor's gold is almost undoubtedly the first exhibition of Australian gold in its *natural* state.¹⁰

In 1844, Cohen closed down his business and retired to enjoy the life of a gentleman on his estate 'Caridale' at Burwood.

Meanwhile the plot thickened, for as M.M. Cohen faded into genteel obscurity, his brother Edward Daniel Cohen, the former convict, was set to play his part on the golden stage. A discussion with Mr Forbes, whose addendum appears at the foot of this article, enabled me only very recently to link M.M. Cohen with E.D. Cohen, providing the necessary information which sheds new light on the known activities of E.D. Cohen. On the assumption that it was most likely M.M. Cohen who first put McGregor's specimens in his shop window, the action taken by E.D. Cohen shortly afterwards seems very logical.

Edward Daniel, born in 1800 in Birmingham, was transported to New South Wales following his conviction in the Liverpool Court for stealing a watchcase. He arrived in the colony in 1830, on board the 'Burrell' to serve a life sentence, but obtained his ticket of leave in 1839,¹¹ setting up business as a watchmaker in Windsor by August 1840.¹² By June 1844 he had moved to Sydney, opening up an optical/watchmaking shop three doors south of the Royal Hotel in George Street.¹³ At about the same time that his brother Mosely retired, Edward Cohen took a great interest in the gold of McGregor, for in 1844 he was alerting the surveyor general to the presence of gold and placing some of McGregor's samples before him in an at-

tempt to stimulate some action from the government. Cohen even went so far as to personally escort McGregor on several occasions to the surveyor general's office for questioning, apparently without result, for there was no official action taken.¹⁴ By December 1845, after a fruitless campaign, lasting well over a year, to have the surveyor general, Sir Thomas Mitchell take an interest, he managed to have the newspapers stir up some publicity by reporting his gold activities in the press.¹⁵ The newspaper announced that Cohen had purchased gold from a shepherd and with the help of his young son Moses, had washed the specimen and melted the gold down, a job which earned the lad one shilling.¹⁶ Perhaps it was this gold which Edward used to fashion a ring for Queen Victoria, and which Sir Thomas Mitchell, home-ward hound for England, promised to deliver to Her Most Gracious Majesty, along with the information that it was the produce of the colony. What Queen Victoria thought of this gift is not known, for Cohen's generosity was never acknowledged.¹⁷

Cohen was persistent. His advice unheeded by Mitchell, he also tried to interest members of the Legislative Assembly in McGregor's gold and also tried to gain title to the land where it had been found, at Mitchell's Creek, near Wellington.¹⁸ He failed dismally. The Legislative Assembly had a vested interest in maintaining the status quo¹⁹ and the government eventually declared, at a much later date, the land Cohen sought a 'gold reserve'.²⁰ Despite petitions by his widow as late as 1851, the Cohen family benefited not one scrap from Edward's efforts. Cohen himself died in October 1847 and was never to know that his information would be proved correct in a matter of weeks.²¹

One hundred and fifty years have passed since Mosely Cohen, full of hope and enthusiasm, launched his successful business venture. In the normal course of history, such an ordinary event would have passed unnoticed and gone unrecorded. The more enterprising efforts of his brother to publicise gold are buried away in government files. Had Edward Cohen lived, he may have been able to have gained some benefit from his initiatives and attained a more prominent part in history. Mosely M. Cohen would undoubtedly have faded into almost total obscurity had he not possessed the quietly dignified entrepreneurial style to realise that the universal language of gold 'speaks', and speaks loud and long, with or without the help of man. The call was heeded by his fellow businessman, the mineralogist William Tipple Smith, who, putting a mineralogical two and two together, later went on to discover an enormous payable goldfield at Ophir in late 1847.

But that my friends, is quite another story.²²

NOTES

1. Newspaper accounts credit the salver to M.M. Cohen. However the historian Hawkins credits the making of the piece to H. Cohen; *Australian Silver*, 1800-1900, pp. 16, 18.
2. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22.11.1832
3. *Australian* 31.5.1833
4. *Ibid* 3.3.1842
5. *A Fool's Gold?* L.R. Silver footnote 30 Chapter 1.
6. Under demolition order 1986 to make way for a 31 storey office block.
7. *Sydney Morning Herald* 13.9.1832.
8. *Ibid* 22.6.1843
9. *Ibid* 11.7.1844
10. The first exhibition in a refined state was that of Lhotsky, vide Silver op. cit. p 3.
11. *The Forefathers*, J.S. Levi, pp.29-30.
12. *Sydney Morning Herald* 4.8.1840
13. *Ibid* 22.6.1844
14. A full account of the action taken by Cohen is in Colonial Secretary Letters, Esther D. Brocksalyn, July 5 1851.

15. *Cumberland Times & Western Advertiser*, 20 Dec. 1845
16. Mitchell Library, P1/C; Moses Cohen notes that this was the 'first' showing of Australian gold, a statement based allegedly on words spoken by McGregor to the lad, a mere boy at the time. However, this is at odds with the statement made by Mrs Brocksalyn *op cit.*, who puts the date at least 12 months before. Mrs Brocksalyn, an adult eyewitness of the events, recounted in great detail, would be the more reliable witness.
17. Brocksalyn *op. cit.*
18. *Ibid.*
19. Silver *op. cit.* p 13
20. Brocksalyn *op. cit.*
21. Silver *op. cit.* p 12
22. The entire account of the discoveries of W.T. Smith is found in Silver *op. cit.*

The writer is indebted to Mr M.Z. Forbes for kindly supplying the sources of the information referred to in footnotes 11, 15 and 16.



Ophir, 1851 (lithograph, George F. Angas, National Library).