Mount Isa –
A journey from 1924 to 2009

www.celebrateisa.com.au
With the establishment of Mount Isa Mines in January 1924, Mount Isa was transformed from a network of miner’s camps into a community. It was the year commerce began in earnest, and the year the community made important investments in infrastructure including accommodation, a general store, a school and a hospital.

In 2009, as we celebrate Mount Isa’s 85th anniversary of commerce and community and Queensland’s 150th anniversary, we reflect on the significant contribution Mount Isa has made to the growth and economic prosperity of this great State.

This special insert to Mine to Market was produced to commemorate the 85th anniversary of the incorporation of Mount Isa Mines Limited in 1924 and the formation of the city of Mount Isa. It is dedicated to those people who shared in the formation of Mount Isa Mines Limited, to the individuals and companies who invested in the venture in its early days and to the many people who believed in and nurtured Mount Isa Mines through the difficult years of its infancy.

In celebration, we look at some of the key events in our rich history and pay tribute to some of the people that have helped to put Mount Isa on the world map and build the thriving, prosperous city that it is today. Thank you to everyone who has contributed to this special insert.

This publication was written and compiled by the Xstrata Mount Isa Mines Community Relations department: Catherine Bryant (Editor), Melissa Trim, Danielle Slade, and Dannielle Ross.

Front cover image: Picnic at Lake Moondarra.
With the establishment of Mount Isa Mines Ltd a town and amenities were needed to attract men to work at the mine. To meet the immediate demand, the company built simple structures around the mining camp from iron and Hessian brought in from Camooweal.

In March 1924 a Progress Association was established to represent the interest of residents. A government surveyor visited the region in May 1924 and surveyed the town of Mount Isa to the east of the Leichhardt River. The first properties in the new town were sold in September 1924 and structures from the old mining town of Kuridala – including accommodation, a court house, a school building, a hospital and a pub – were moved into the town. The State Government and Cloncurry Council made little initial investment in infrastructure for the new town and the mining company acted as a surrogate local authority.

"Drinking water was scarce and conditions were primitive: floods washed away the railway line between Cloncurry and Duchess and held up the arrival of urgently needed equipment, tools and stores. The lodes were not so fantastically rich as first supposed and it was a great distance to the nearest deepwater port."

(MIMAG).

When John Campbell Miles discovered the Mount Isa lead-ore deposits in the early months of 1923 he was on his way to the infamous cattle trail, the Murranji Track in the NT to search for gold. The horse that carried him to the spot was named Hard Times.

Miles' prospected a low range of hills near the Leichhardt River which yielded dark, mineralised samples. Following the trail of galena he arrived at ore that contained the Black Star lode. During this initial fossick, Miles discovered the rich central lodes of what would become the Mount Isa mineral field: the Black Star, Racecourse and the Rio Grande (Mining Hall of Fame).

Miles was one of five children born to a Victorian gold miner. A man of simple means, Miles' first love was horses and he preferred a rough mug of tea and a quiet puff of his pipe to the loud company of a hotel bar. Revisiting Mount Isa in 1957 and 1962, Miles spent 'the best night of his life' watching dozens of merry-makers dancing their way through a hot night.

Miles lived to the age of 82. Shortly before he died in December 1965, members of his family credit him with saying 'If only I could go back to my country (Mount Isa) I would be alright.'

Shortly after his death, Miles' ashes were brought back to Mount Isa and buried under the clock tower which now stands in the centre of Miles Street.
In the early years Mount Isa Mines Ltd faced hardship in developing the mine and transporting ore to port in Townsville. Before the construction of a rail line, ore was transported 135km to Cloncurry on camel back and cart. The first train pulled into Mount Isa on 6 April 1929 and offered the town and the mine hope by providing an efficient method of transport for workers and ore. The locomotive was decorated with palms and colour streams. 'Progress and Prosper' was inscribed across its front and the words 'Much is expected of Mount Isa' was written on the side. This rail line went on to become the State’s most profitable and provided the State government with the capital to revitalise other rail lines throughout Queensland.

Mount Isa has a diverse population featuring significant migrant and Indigenous communities. During the post war era, a time of rising lead prices and expanding ore production, many immigrants crossed the dry plains to Mount Isa. By the 1970s, 52 different nationalities were represented in Mount Isa.

In the 1920s four percent of the Mount Isa Mines workforce was made up of Finns many of whom had drifted from the cane fields of North Queensland. The Finns were known for their skills in hard rock development.

"With a Finnish language newspaper, active social club and church services conducted in their native tongue, the Finnish population was the oldest, quietest, most clannish and most respected of the national groups." (Geoffrey Blainey, 1960 – Mines in the Spinifex)

Opening of the Duchess to Mount Isa Railway, 6 April 1929.

Mount Isa Country Women’s Association, 1950s.

Mount Isa Irish Club was built in 1956 and was believed to have been the largest Irish Club in Australia at the time.

Traditional Finnish Wedding, 1930s.


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The Mount Isa region is in the heartland of Kalkadoon country. To this day the Kalkadoons live in and hold strong links to the land. The Kalkadoon’s rich cultural heritage has been retained by the preservation of their traditional dances, songs, carvings and paintings.

When the pioneer settlers arrived on Kalkadoon country there was great hostility and years of fighting. However, when prospector Ernest Henry arrived in the region in 1866, and founded the Great Australia Mine, he developed strong links with the Kalkadoon and had Kalkadoon people working for him at the Argyle Mine and at Mount Oxide Mine.

The hostility between the settlers and the Kalkadoon came to a head in 1884 at the massacre of Battle Mountain. In their defeat, the Kalkadoon became the only Indigenous tribe to challenge an organised group of white men to open combat and fight to the very end.

Following the formation of Mount Isa Mines Limited, an Indigenous Land Use Agreement which covers an area around Mount Isa of just over 50,000 km² was negotiated with the Kalkadoon.

"When Xstrata took over Mount Isa Mines Limited in 2003, they continued to foster a good relationship with the Kalkadoon through consultation, acknowledgment and respect leading to meaningful benefits for both parties," said Warren King, Manager Kalkadoon Community Pty Ltd.
In May 1931 milling and smelting operations commenced in Mount Isa and the company enjoyed its first operating profit in 1937, 13 years after its establishment. The first lead block was poured on 8 June 1931.

In a region with a harsh climate and reputation for industrial unrest, the welfare of employees was always an essential investment. The region weathered the great depression of the 1930s, providing consistent work for 1,000 men while a quarter of the male population in major cities were faced with unemployment. By the late 1940s men working in the mines could earn three times the average wage of people in Brisbane or Melbourne.

World War II

A high demand for copper (for use in munitions) from 1942 saw the company convert the Mount Isa operation totally to copper production in early 1943.

Mount Isa was a depot for the road transport of military equipment and supplies to camps in the Northern Territory. Thousands of US soldiers were stationed at Mount Isa living in camps on the outskirts of town including the suburb known today as Soldiers Hill. The Racecourse became another military camp. The Australian Military Force occupied buildings with electricity and water including part of St Joseph’s Convent and the former Mines Hospital.

Mount Isa Greats

Julius Kruttschnitt

(1885–1974)

Yale University, Connecticut, is a long way from Mount Isa, yet both are places which Louisiana-born Julius Kruttschnitt called home.

Long before the days of air conditioning, Kruttschnitt arrived in Mount Isa in his trademark suit and tie. The year was 1930 and Kruttschnitt became General Manager of MIM Limited, starting a 37 year career with the company.

Kruttschnitt didn’t quite know what he was getting himself into, later writing:

‘To my consternation I found on my arrival, a condition bordering on bankruptcy ...’

With a lot of hard work and funding from the United States the first lead bullion was produced by July 1931, with the business showing a profit in 1937.

Kruttschnitt showed a great interest in the welfare of miners and their families. The unique Mount Isa tent house, a tent to which a corrugated iron wall was added, was one of the many developments of his time.

Fond memories of Mount Isa

Laura Matthews has many fond memories of her life in Mount Isa. Moving to Mount Isa 59 years ago with her husband Jack, she was surprised at how friendly and social the town was.

“One of my favourite memories is how openly and lovingly I was welcomed into the Mount Isa community by the wives of Jack’s friends who held a surprise wedding reception for us at the now demolished Hilton Hall,” she said.

“I also remember the house that Jack (who worked at Mount Isa Mines for 35 years) built at 6 Nash Street in Mineside in 1950.”

Now widowed, Laura lives in Mount Isa with her children, grandchildren and great, great grandchildren. Laura still speaks fondly of life in Mount Isa. “There is no hustle and bustle and the town has everything I need,” says Laura.

‘While being so isolated from larger Queensland communities, there was great camaraderie and loyalty in Mount Isa. In sickness or death or celebration it was a community, their entertainment was simple, but the whole town was always welcome.”
A Pub Culture

With the extreme heat and social atmosphere it is no wonder Mount Isa also held the record for the consumption of more beer than any other similar town in the commonwealth.

“I was born and bred in this town and I just love it. I love the people. When you make friends here, you make friends for life. Even if you don’t see someone for years you will always remain friends.”

Dawn Coghlan.

“Mateship is part of the Australian legend. It is a quality of this nation which is universally admired and often coveted. It is a relationship of great sincerity between individuals and draws no social, economic or ethnic barriers. It is a welding of people not ideologies. We now live and work in an environment where ‘Mateship’ is a tangible thing.”  Sir George Fisher – December 1969 (MIMAG).

The company paid its first dividend in 1947 which was to be the beginning of a boom period. Profits rose from £873,000 in 1947–1948 and escalated to £1,457,000 in 1949.

The price of lead rose in May 1947 allowing Mount Isa Mines to revert to lead production by June 1946. Both lead and copper began production in parallel in 1953.

A sustained population boom after World War Two increased demand for infrastructure and essential services. To provide water for the growing community, Mount Isa Mines Ltd completed the construction of Lake Moondarra in 1958. With a total capacity of 107,000ML and constructed 16km downstream from town on the Leichhardt River, it was the largest water scheme in Australia to be financed by private enterprise.

“I recall the Maypole dancing, the Queen’s visit, the marching girls and silver band, going to dances at the RSL, and the first plane to land at the Gliderport.”

Laura Matthews, Mount Isa resident of 59 years.

Leisure time – the Mount Isa Way

Families enjoy time out at the memorial pool.

Exploring the outback by 4WD.

Waterskiing on Lake Moondarra 1961.
Introducing daylight saving

During the summer of 1930/31, in the final months of preparation and construction, Isa Mines introduced daylight savings on the lease to maximise working hours. Railway time, by which the town works is three quarters of an hour behind the Mines time. At a meeting called for at 9am in the town, the Mines representatives were there before the others were actually out of bed. It was reported that ‘one can have dinner (midday) in the town and stroll over to the Mines in time for afternoon tea’. (Noreen Kirkman, 1998 – Mount Isa Oasis of the Outback).

The 50 year club

Few people can say they have achieved more than 50 years of service with Mount Isa Mines. A tradition started by Kruttschnitt, long service anniversary dinners are held each year to celebrate employees’ 20, 30, 40 and 50 year achievements with the company. Holding a wealth of knowledge and experience, Alf Cianetti and Ian Brown both say they love working for the Mines and have no intentions of retiring just yet!

Mount Isa Greats

Sir James Foots

One of the best known former heads of Mount Isa Mines, Sir James Foots’ 32 year career with the company began in 1955 with his appointment as a mining engineer. This was followed by a series of promotions to General Manager in 1956 and Managing Director in 1966, before his appointment to Chairman/CEO of MIM Holdings in 1970.

During this time Foots presided over a vast expansion program – growing MIM to be the third largest Australian company in 1993.

Foots has a long history of contributions to industry, community and charity organisations. In 1980 Foots was knighted for his contribution to the mining industry as well as to the general Australian business landscape. Sir James retired in 1987 and now lives in Brisbane.

Six Generations of Davidson

It was Dawn Coghlan’s grandfather, Walter Davidson, who was working the Lady Fanny mine near Duchess when John Campbell Miles discovered Mount Isa. “Walter hurried to the new field to stake a claim and then joined Mount Isa Mines when it was formed by William Corbould,” said Dawn.

“In 1952 the company sunk three shafts and Corbould informed Walter in a letter that one shaft would be named after him. It is fitting the shaft was named after Walter as the sixth generation of the family is now at school in Mount Isa while at least one of his descendants has been employed at the mine since MIM was formed.

Ironically Dawn’s husband Jim Coghlan was a shift boss at shafts and hoisting at the Davidson shaft! Today there are are three sixth-generation Davidsonts to call Mount Isa home.

By 1955 Mount Isa Mines Ltd was the largest mining company in Australia – it had weathered technical, financial and industrial difficulties to become Australia’s largest single creator of export income.
Life in the typing pool

Danielle Slade, a long serving employee of 23 years, started work in the typing pool in 1986. “The typing pool was the training grounds for stenographers and clerk/typists. It was strict, but just what we needed. We were taught that punctuality and personal presentation were just as important as what we did in our roles. We were also encouraged to all go and have a drink at the Irish Club every Friday after work.”

“I remember when e-mail first hit. At that time there were no policies on e-mail usage (mainly because I don’t think people realised its capabilities), so there were always lots of jokes e-mailed around.”
Danielle Slade

Mount Isa has a lot to offer the Hazles

Only intending to stay in Mount Isa for a couple of years, Henry Hazle and his wife have been here for 41 years.

“Because it was a great place to work and to bring up your family with lots of sporting opportunities, we decided to make Mount Isa home,” said Henry.

All three of Henry’s sons have worked at Mount Isa Mines: Michael, William (who completed his apprenticeship at the Mines), and Allan.

Mick has been with Mount Isa Mines for 22 years. “Mount Isa Mines has given me a lot of opportunities. The people are great, my boss is great and I’ve got a tremendous crew to work with.”

Mick’s wife Kathy is a born and bred Mount Isan. “I love Mount Isa, it gives a lot of people good opportunities, it’s a safe place to live, and there’s a lot of community spirit here,” she says.

Allan Hazle is a maintenance supervisor at the copper smelter.

“A lot of other places only offer you a chance to work in a few departments, but here you have a chance to learn all aspects of mining, from underground to the final product,” says Allan.

The Hazles: Allan, Kathy, Henry and Mick.
Mount Isa’s royal visit

In 1970 Mount Isa received a visit from Her Majesty the Queen and His Royal Highness Prince Phillip. During their stay in Mount Isa, they visited the mining operations and stayed in the now heritage listed building, Casa Grande. With well kept grounds and a tennis court, Casa Grande was home to many New Years Eve punch bowl parties and today is home to the social event of the year: Casa Grande Ball.

Mount Isa Greats

Sir George Fisher
(1903–2007)

Sir George Fisher was initially appointed Deputy Chairman of MIM Holdings in January 1952 and was promoted to Chairman soon after in 1953.

It was then that Fisher established himself as the driving force behind the company’s major and rapid expansion of copper and silver-lead-zinc production in the 1950s and 1960s.

Within four years of his chairmanship, total underground development had increased by 250 percent resulting in a boom to the township. With this came a period of rapid community expansion.

Fisher was a visionary and had a plan and a passion to see the local community prosper from a mining camp to a thriving community where opportunities should be equal to those in the regional cities.

George Fisher was made a companion of the Most Distinguished Order of St Michael and St George (CMG) in 1961 in recognition of his services to the Australian mining and metallurgical industries and for his outstanding contribution to decentralised industry in Queensland. George Fisher became Sir George in 1967 when he was further honoured receiving a knighthood in the Queens Birthday honours list.

Lead Smelter: A giant takes shape

Following completion of the 1,600 cubic-metre concrete foundation block, pouring of the main lead stack started on December 16, 1977 and the concrete work had reached its planned height of 270 metres by March 30, 1978 making it the tallest free-standing structure in the southern hemisphere. It was achieved with continuous pours of 10 days with three-day breaks in between.

In September 1964 the Australian Worker’s Union and lobbyist Pat Mackie led an almost eight-month industrial dispute against the mine after a disagreement on how the wealth of the very productive operations should be shared. As a result of this dispute the mine temporarily closed the copper smelter and the Queensland Government declared a state of emergency in the region. The dispute was settled in April 1965.

In 1966 the No 2 Concentrator was officially opened to treat silver-lead-zinc through milling and flotation.

The Hilton underground zinc-lead mine was opened in 1991, named after a former Mount Isa Mines General Manager, Charlie Hilton. Samplers began examining the site in 1948 following Chairman Julius Krutschnitt’s approval to peg out the leases ahead of competing companies.

“...will be a tragedy if it were allowed to remain only this."

A sporting culture
From cricket, rugby and netball, to hockey, water skiing and golf, nearly every sport in the calendar can be played at Mount Isa.

There has always been a strong sporting culture in Mount Isa and Mount Isa Mines has always been supportive of sporting activities. Even from as early as 1928 when Leslie Urquhart made a personal donation to improve the tennis court on the corner of Isa and Camooweal Streets.

“...would have a hell of a ding dong with friends over the local football, then after the game we’d all jump in the car and share a flask of tea. We’d all be vocal when the game was being played, but it was all forgotten as soon as the game was over.”

Kathy Swift, Mount Isa resident of 70 years.

Xstrata Mount Isa Mines
Xstrata plc acquired Mount Isa Mines in June 2003. Since then, Xstrata has invested more than $570 million in operational development. Xstrata Mount Isa Mines continues to deliver significant economic, social and infrastructural benefits to the Mount Isa community by generating employment opportunities, supporting local business, funding community projects and contributing to government taxes and charges.

Today Xstrata Mount Isa Mines directly employs approximately 3,400 staff and approximately 700 contractors. This makes up more than 20% of the total population of the city of Mount Isa. Residents not employed directly by the mine are largely employed by supporting business providing goods and services for the mine and the region.

Forming one of the largest mining operations in the world, Mount Isa Mines uses state-of-the-art mining and processing technology to produce copper anode, crude lead containing silver, and zinc concentrate. The Mount Isa copper operations comprises two underground copper mines: Enterprise and X41, a concentrator and smelter. The zinc operations comprises the George Fisher underground mine and Black Star open cut mine, a concentrator and smelter.

At around 1,900 metres the underground copper mine in Mount Isa is the deepest underground mine in Australia.

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Kathy Swift, Mount Isa resident of 70 years.
Mount Isa today

Mount Isa has grown into a thriving industrial and commercial centre renowned for its friendly and welcoming nature, while also offering modern metropolitan conveniences which add to the City’s increasingly cosmopolitan ambience.

Today Xstrata Mount Isa Mines’ underground mining tunnels extend to nearly 1,000 kilometres.

In June 2004 work began on the development of the Black Star Open Cut zinc-lead mine. This was followed by the closure of the Lead Mine in 2005 after more than 80 years of underground mining.

With a continued focus on trade training the Xstrata Skills Centre was opened in 2006. Xstrata now operates the largest apprenticeship program in North Queensland.

In November 2007 the $38 million Xstrata Power Station was officially opened.

The Xstrata Mount Isa Rotary Rodeo celebrated it’s 50th year in 2008.

In February 2009 Mount Isa was declared a ‘Safe Community’ by the World Health Organisation.

Today the Xstrata Community Partnership Program North Queensland continues to provide real benefits to the Mount Isa community including the opening of the Mount Isa Family Fun Park.

Mount Isa Mines pioneered some of the first mining and processing practices used in Australia. Today many of these technologies including the IsaMill™ and ISASMELT™ are regarded as world-class and have been adapted by numerous mining operations worldwide.

“Mount Isa is a great place to rear children, and there is every sporting opportunity for whatever code of sport you play (except for Ice-skating)” Ian Brown, Mount Isa Mines employee of 52 years.

Xstrata Mount Isa Rotary Rodeo

With a vision and a passion to put Mount Isa on the map, the Rotary Club of Mount Isa staged the first ever Isa Rodeo back in 1959.

Today the Xstrata Mount Isa Rotary Rodeo has grown into the largest rodeo event in the southern hemisphere, earning Mount Isa the title ‘Rodeo Capital of Australia’.

From its humble beginnings at Kalkadoon Park, a venue built with the very hands of the Mount Isa community, the Xstrata Mount Isa Rotary Rodeo is now Mount Isa’s flagship event and is held at the multi-million dollar Buchanan Park Complex.

On average, over 25,000 spectators attend the event each year and around 800 of the country’s and indeed the world’s top riders participate in the annual event.
“Wherever you go in the world you are never alone – you will always find a Mount Isa person there.”

Dawn Coghlan

“I think it’s fantastic that Mount Isa Mines has turned 85 years. Not many mines last this long. It takes special people to run a mine and I’ve been privileged to work with a lot of them.”

Ian Brown, Mount Isa Mines employee of 52 years.

“I was recently asked, what was the best part of my trip to Canada, I said coming over that rise on the Cloncurry Road and seeing that and seeing that stack – and knowing you’re home!”

Kathy Swift, Mount Isa resident of 70 years.