

South Coast History Society Inc.

# Recollections

Issue 2, May 2017



Central Tilba in 1917 as photographed by Joseph Check. See story page 11.

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## The First Word

‘History belongs to everyone,’ we asserted in the last issue of *Recollections* ... and we boasted that the South Coast History Society’s aim is ‘to share the intriguing history of the NSW South Coast with as many people as possible.’

Oh, how we failed! Printed copies of *Recollections* were exhausted within days (but it is still available as a PDF file – simply email ‘Send issue 1’ to southcoasthistory@yahoo.com and you’ll receive a copy) and available places at our recent *2017 South Coast History Day* seminar were filled well before the event. We’ll learn!

There is clearly much more interest from our community in our local history than we had ever imagined.

Well, issue 2 of *Recollections* is here – containing some more fascinating insights into our area’s colourful past.

*South Coast History Day* touched on the question of ‘what is history?’ So I was particularly interested in biographer Carol Rosenhain’s (see page 16) conclusion that “*stories of the past are our inheritance. They not only tell us who we are and where we belong, they are also an accumulation of the emotional and physical journeys of our forebears. Such stories are central to every culture as the lives and experiences of our ancestors innately shape us and determine what we value. Time and technology undoubtedly alter the way we live our lives, but the constants of family and community continue to make us human.*”

Through *Recollections* we are pleased to be sharing some of those stories from our past, from our ancestors, from our community.

**Peter Lacey**

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## Community Feedback

We probably received 100 emails or phone calls congratulating us on the quality and the content of the first issue of *Recollections* and enquiring when this issue 2 would be available. That response has, to say the least, been most gratifying. So thank you all.

Our entire print run was exhausted within two weeks – meaning we had to partially disappoint some schools who wanted copies for their students (several topics in issue 1 are topics related to the school history syllabus), and meaning we were unable to re-supply some libraries and other outlets that were helping to distribute it. We’ve learned from that!

Several people asked that we include articles relating to Aboriginal history and women’s history. We had been promised a piece on Aboriginal history for this issue – but it didn’t materialise (so we are now looking elsewhere) – and we are seeking contributors qualified/able to provide interesting pieces about the contribution of women on the South Coast. Please contact us if you can help with either.

Garry Moorhead, Vice-President of the Merimbula-Imlay Historical Society kindly provided additional information relating to the sinking of the *Cumberland* off the NSW South Coast in World War I:

One of the first ships to respond when the *Cumberland* called for assistance was the Japanese

light cruiser *Chikuma*, which had been asked to protect the Australian coastline because Australia’s navy was engaged elsewhere. A Japanese diver inspected the damage to the hull of the *Cumberland* and a report by Japanese Admiral Jameji emphasised that an internal explosion has caused the damage to the hull. Garry suggests that part of the explanation for that false report may have been an intention by the Japanese to save face after the action had occurred in an area they had been tasked to protect.

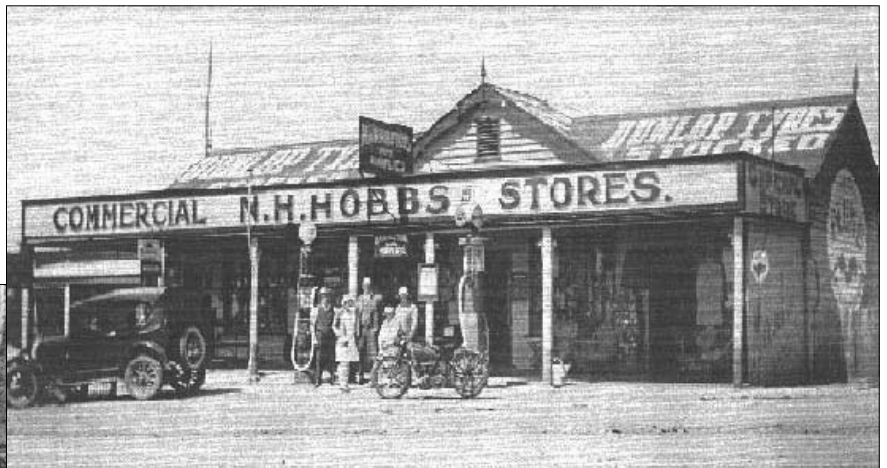
Some weeks after the sinking of the *Cumberland*, minesweepers were sent to the area to clear it of mines.

One of the mines not swept up was snagged by the S.S. *Kilbaha* on the 12th August 1918. The incident is described in the diary of the Twofold Bay Pilot Station of that date.

The Lighthouse Keeper at Green Cape had noticed the *Kilbaha* with a mine in tow and notified boatman Davidson. He telephoned the Naval Officer in Charge at Edgecliffe in Sydney and was instructed to signal the *Kilbaha* to proceed north until it could be met by a naval ship. Davidson was unable to contact the ship so he borrowed a launch from a Mr Logan and boarded the *Kilbaha* at 8am. He then exploded the mine by rifle fire and the vessel proceeded unharmed.

Peter Evans of Nimmitabel advised that the boulder

beside the road down Brown Mountain, featured on the front cover of the last issue of *Recollections*, is called Hobbs Rock. “It once had a big mural on it advertising N.H.Hobbs and Sons store in Bemboka. Hobbs’ store was an icon on the South Coast and the Monaro for



Above: Photo from the cover of issue number 1. Note Hobbs Rock in this photo and the one below.

generations. If you couldn’t buy it at Hobbs’ it was not available – be it anything from parts for a T-model Ford to ladies’ lingerie.” Peter believes that Nick Hobbs was a Gallipoli veteran and that his son Jack was a Lancaster crew member in the Battle of Britain.

And Greg Watts from Narooma contacted us, indicating “your story on the Clarke brothers retells the ‘official’ history. If you talk with the Clarke descendants, they vehemently deny the official history and present facts that it was a concoction to justify the Clarkes’ hanging.”

Many thanks to Garry, Peter and Greg and the several other people who provided us with other valued feedback.



The photograph of Brown Mountain that featured on the front cover of the last issue of *Recollections* attracted considerable comment. This is another photograph of the same spot on the same road, taken in 1902 when Senators were visiting potential sites for Australia’s national capital. Photo E.T. Luke, 1902, National Library of Australia, nla.obj-140787601

## A Railway ... and a Lunatic Asylum

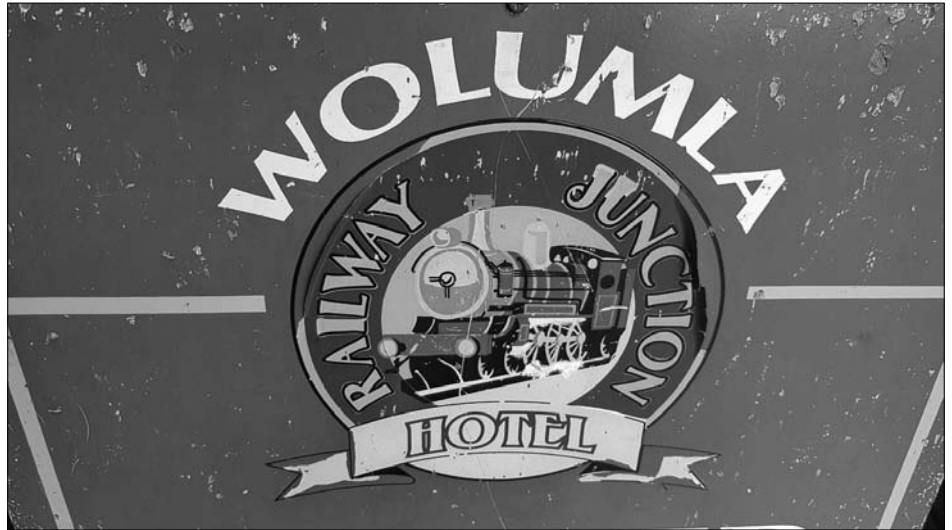
The hotel at Wolumla (north-west of Merimbula) is the 'Railway Junction Hotel'. A strange choice of name, it might appear, especially as there is not and has never been a railway line anywhere near the town!

However, there have been several concerted efforts over the years to have a railway line constructed from Bega to Eden, and to join this proposed railway to another proposed line running from Wolumla up the mountains to connect with the Bombala-Cooma-Queanbeyan rail line. So the Wolumla Hotel was named in (optimistic) anticipation of the construction of these lines, this (also optimistically) ensuring that Wolumla would become a significant rail centre.

The argument in favour of a Bega to Eden railway was basically that Bega was a rich and significant agricultural region but needed access to a good port (which Eden potentially provided) so that its produce could be quickly and reliably transported to Sydney, Melbourne and other markets. Similarly, "*it had timber of the most magnificent character, and in great abundance, but by reason of the absence of cheap carriage it was impossible to send the timber to market at a paying price. The railway would open up the country and make its great resources available.*" (Sydney Morning Herald, 4.2.1892).

It seems the NSW Government had resolved to build a Bega to Eden railway in 1884, or possibly

even earlier, and at that time had included provision for its funding in a loan bill. In early 1885 the *Cooma Mercury and Cooma & Bombala Advertiser* reported "*that at the present time there was an officer in the district making a thorough exploration, in order to*

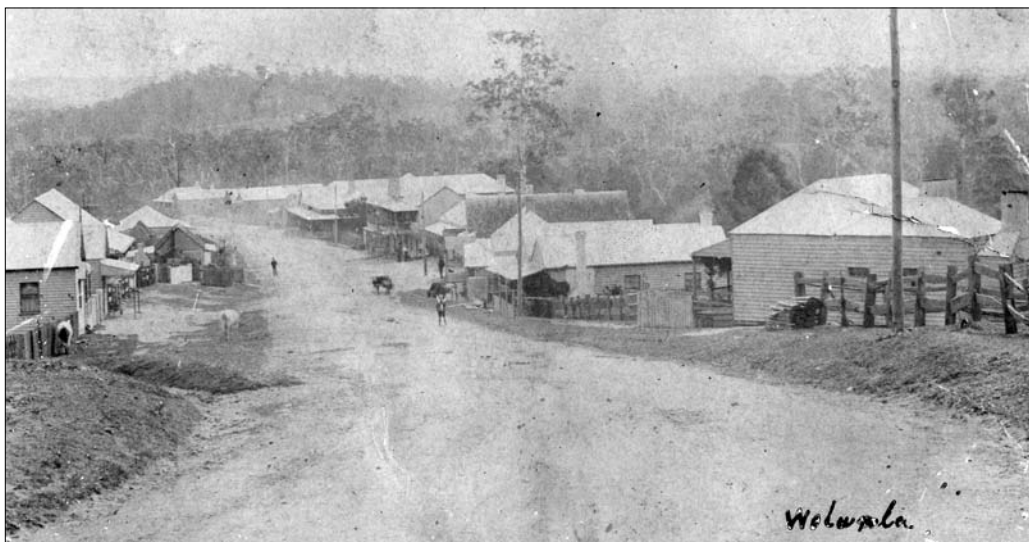


*find out the best route (for the railway); and until that officer presented his report it would be premature, to consider any route. The Government had only one desire, and that was to confer the greatest benefit to the greatest number.*"

A survey of the route was completed by early the following year, after some consideration of the best route for it to follow and the gauge of railway that should be installed. It was estimated the total cost would be £663,000, or £19,500 per mile. In 1892 another estimate was made, which totalled £564,000 or about £15,000 per mile – although this estimate was based on a line that was about 3½ miles longer than the originally recommended route.

The proposal then went nowhere – despite continuing strong agitation from the local community.

The NSW Public Works Committee was concerned about the costs of land acquisition and construction of the railway, and was convinced that the railway would run at a loss. In 1892 "*the Commissioners reported*



Wolumla in 1907 when the Bega to Eden and the Cooma to Wolumla railway lines were still being considered. Photo courtesy Bega Valley Historical Society.

*that the estimate of expenditure and revenue showed a net annual loss of £18,827" ... and this was at a time when they were very concerned that other rail lines, notably the one south to Kiama, were not as profitable as had been originally expected [does this sound familiar??]. They were also being strongly lobbied to extend other lines, on the South Coast, for example, to construct the line from Kiama to Jervis Bay.*

It also indicated the project had little appeal "*seeing the line was isolated and will not contribute any traffic to the parent line*" (i.e., the established NSW rail network) and because the favoured proposal advocated construction of a narrow-gauge railway.

The local advocates for the railway were, if nothing else, persistent – suggesting, for example, in 1886 "*that having regard to the present depression in the labour market through the protracted drought that the present is a favourable time for the commencement of the work, and that the Government be requested to call for tenders*"; in 1887 suggesting that "*a very large portion of the area which would be traversed by the railway was well adapted for agricultural purposes, and when greater facilities for transit were available, a very considerable quantity of hay, potatoes, &c, would be raised which did not now pay for cultivation, owing to the large cost of land and sea carriage*"; and in 1892 suggesting (if an additional rail link from Cooma to Bombala to Wolumla was also to be constructed!) "*the line would bring the whole of the Monaro Tableland in connection with one of the best natural ports of the colony.*"

It also seems from newspaper reports of the time that "*the district had already paid to the Treasury a sum equal to £500,000 for the purchase of lands. Large sums had also been paid by miners.*"

At times, local frustration with the government's inaction was very evident:

*"The Mayor, who presided (at a meeting in Bega in July 1889), considered that the district had been disgracefully treated by the Government. A resolution was unanimously carried, indignantly protesting against the action of the Ministry in ignoring the just claims of the Eden-Bega district in not submitting the line to the Public Works Committee. Another resolution was earned impugning the accuracy of the report of the Railway Commissioners, who, it was averred, did not allow themselves time on their recent visit to become acquainted with the district,"* and another meeting in Wolumla the same month passed a resolution "*that it be placed on record that this meeting wishes to express its just indignation at the way in which the district has been treated by the Railway Commissioners.*" That meeting also resolved

to ask the government, if it was unwilling to construct the Bega to Eden railway line, "*to introduce a bill to obtain leave for a private company to construct it, as a gentleman now in Bega representing an English syndicate is willing to construct the line.*"

A suggestion was even made in 1887 that, if the NSW government did not quickly construct the Bega to Eden railway, that the area should secede and become part of Victoria, providing that state with the valuable Twofold Bay harbour.

*"The comfortable village inn (at Wolumla) rejoices in the title of "The Railway Junction," but, as the nearest station-master is at Cooma, some seventy miles away, one has an idea that it might just as appropriately have been named "The Ship," since the sea is not so far away as all that. More than a generation ago, it seems, the late Sir Henry Parkes promised the district a railway – and so the pub was optimistically christened. Since that time the people of Wolumla have lost all faith in the promises of Premiers." (The World's News, 24.4.1929)*

Representatives from the Public Works Department and the Government seemed to regularly visit the area to assess the feasibility of the line – each visit no doubt increasing the optimism of locals that the line might be built. And on one occasion, in 1887, the Minister for Works, Mr Sutherland, "*promised them (a deputation from the South Coast) that if he could get-out of the purgatory of his office he would visit the district and see for himself ... but remarked that he had heard nothing very new from them in favour of the railway, excepting their fears for what would become of New South Wales if the railway were not made.*"

Speculation about the location of the site for Australia's capital during the first decade of the twentieth century rekindled interest in and agitation for a Bega to Eden rail line.

In 1900 Justice Alexander Oliver headed an enquiry that recommended the national capital be sited in the Bombala area, with its port located on Twofold Bay. Had this recommendation been accepted, it is likely a Bombala to Eden (or perhaps Bombala to Wolumla) railway line would have been constructed, raising the likelihood of it connecting with a Bega to Eden railway line.

But that was not to be.

In 1908 Canberra was chosen as the site of Australia's capital and the possibility of a Bombala to Eden rail link suddenly became pitted against other alternatives, including a 165-mile line from Yass to Canberra to

Queanbeyan to Jervis Bay (which was surveyed) and a Tarago to Braidwood to Bateman's Bay line linking with a Jervis Bay to Moruya line.

In some ways, the provision of land on Jervis Bay to the new Federal Government on 1st January 1911, to provide Canberra with a sea port, drove the final nail in the coffin of hopes for a Bombala to Eden and a Bega to Eden railway.

Not that local proponents of the Bega to Eden railway were ready yet to concede defeat.



Sir Henry Parkes GCMG, (1815–1896), five times Premier of New South Wales, photographed in San Francisco with his daughter, Miss Annie Parkes. National Library of Australia. nla.obj-136672958

The waters had been muddied somewhat by another proposal in 1908 to build a tramway from Bega to Tathra – this proposal being supported by the Illawarra Steam Navigation Company, which ran a steamer service to Tathra – so local proponents of the Bega to Eden railway then found it necessary to not only lobby for construction of the railway, but to simultaneously protest against the construction of the possible Bega to Tathra tramway!

New arguments in favour of a Bega to Eden railway were advanced at every opportunity: *“The work is of national importance for defence purposes”*, *“the district has an altogether unsatisfactory steam (shipping) service by which alone produce finds access to the Sydney market. Apart from the disruption occasioned by the late strike, and by which this district was a loser*

*by many thousands of pounds, rough weather has intervened to make the disorganisation more marked ... Look at (the facilities and the steamship service provided) from Tathra. We had lately the incident of the foundering of the (steamship) Bega. The company said she was sound, yet she went down before she got to Bermagui. We could get a better class of boat from Eden and get our stuff to market cheaper”* ... and even an argument that *“we ought to go to our proper port. The proper port of this district is Eden. The Almighty placed it there to serve this district which is equal in area to three German principalities. We are blocked from using it because of the bit of country between”*!! (All of these arguments were advanced in 1908.)

All along, surveys continued to be undertaken and public hearings continued to be regularly conducted by the Public Works Department into the feasibility of the line ... and the local Eden-Bega Railway League was increasingly encountering competing proposals that were being submitted by other community lobby groups such as the Eden-Bombala Railway League.

An editorial in the Sydney *Australian Star* ultimately summed-up a situation that was becoming laughable:

*“How much more evidence does the Public Works Committee propose to take with respect to the Bega-Eden Railway? Its craving for further information is seemingly insatiable ... But still the Committee, with exemplary perseverance, continues its task – the latest report with respect to this remarkable inquiry is in keeping with previous ones. These spun-out procedures are really becoming too farcical. The gentlemen of the Committee may perhaps imagine that they are making an edifying exhibition of diligence and zeal. All that the public will be able to recognise however is zeal for the acquisition of the sufficiently fat fees associated with the sittings of the Committee. When other expenditures are added to the fees, the total cost will amount to a pretty penny. And for what? Practically there are no results at all to be attained which will be of the slightest advantage to the public ... What however the Works Committee is very successfully demonstrating is that it is itself rapidly becoming as superfluous as the scheme over which it has been so unconscionably long a time in making up its mind.”*

Or, as one wag in the *Cobargo Chronicle* in 1909 put it:

*Sing a song of addled pates  
With pockets full of tracts  
Well-primed with data for debates  
And lacking nought but facts.*

*The Bega-Eden Railwayites  
Are prowling round the Shire  
Bamboozling the gullible  
With tongues that never tire.*

*They build that railway in your ear  
And give its opening date,  
But, bless my soul, I'd like to hear  
What they will use for freight.*

*The local dairymen now sell  
Their last four-footed pet  
And think they're doing very well  
If cat's meat price they get.*

*No butter, cheese, no cows to feed,  
Come chuckle-head define  
Just why we now so solely need  
A costly railway line.*

*Since we by farming nought can earn,  
And credit's flown away,  
We'll to the primitive return  
And hunt for feed each day.*

*The noxious rodent just now finds  
Life more` unhappy still.  
For human beings of all kinds  
Have aching voids to fill.*

*So for a time electors dear,  
Let's let the railway rest,  
While philanthropically we  
Destroy the rabbit pest.*

It is, perhaps, fitting that Sir Henry Parkes, five-times Premier of New South Wales and a man with a connection to the Bega area (his daughter married Rev. Tonge, Bega's first resident Presbyterian Minister), finally announced that money originally earmarked for the Bega to Eden railway would instead be used to build a lunatic asylum at The Springs (now Springvale) just across the river from Bega. 1,000 acres adjoining the promised lunatic asylum site had been subdivided into smaller 25 to 48 acre Labour Settlement farmlets in 1893 to provide some long-term relief to the unemployed. Construction and running of the lunatic asylum was intended to provide these local residents with additional employment opportunities and a cash income.

But, like the railway, the asylum was never built!

**Do you have additional information about the proposed Bega to Eden Railway? Some decades ago, survey marks could still be seen from the proposed Bega to Eden railway – do any of these survive today? Share any information you may have with us at [southcoasthistory@yahoo.com](mailto:southcoasthistory@yahoo.com).**

## **SOUTH COAST HISTORY SOCIETY INC.**

**[southcoasthistory@yahoo.com](mailto:southcoasthistory@yahoo.com)    0448 160 852**

**Who are we?** South Coast History Society, quite simply, aims to share the intriguing history of the NSW south coast with as many people as possible. We're doing this through our magazine/newsletter 'Recollections', through seminars, and through other innovative means.

We're also encouraging research and writing of local histories, and are supporting the efforts of local history societies, local genealogical societies and local museums.

**You want to be involved?** We hope so!

The easiest way is to email [southcoasthistory@yahoo.com](mailto:southcoasthistory@yahoo.com) with the message 'send me details'. We'll do that, and then keep you updated on what's happening.

There is no cost, no obligation.

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## The Moruya Stone Age

Significant quantities of gold and silver were taken from mines in and around Moruya, but the town is today more often remembered (and promotes itself) for its recovery of another resource – granite.

Enormous volumes of granite were extracted from a substantial deposit, east of the town, that extends over both sides of the Moruya River.

One of the earliest, if not the earliest, granite quarry in the area was established on 25 acres of land purchased by Joseph Louttit in 1858. Joseph had (unsuccessfully) tried his luck on the Victorian goldfields. When making his way to Sydney he found himself compelled by the gold rushes at Araluen, north-west of Moruya, to remain in the Moruya area. He became committed to a number of commercial opportunities in the area including the quarrying of granite which was first used for general building and construction work.

With help from his brother John and profits from supplying gold miners in Araluen, Louttit financed the development of a quarry on the south side of Moruya

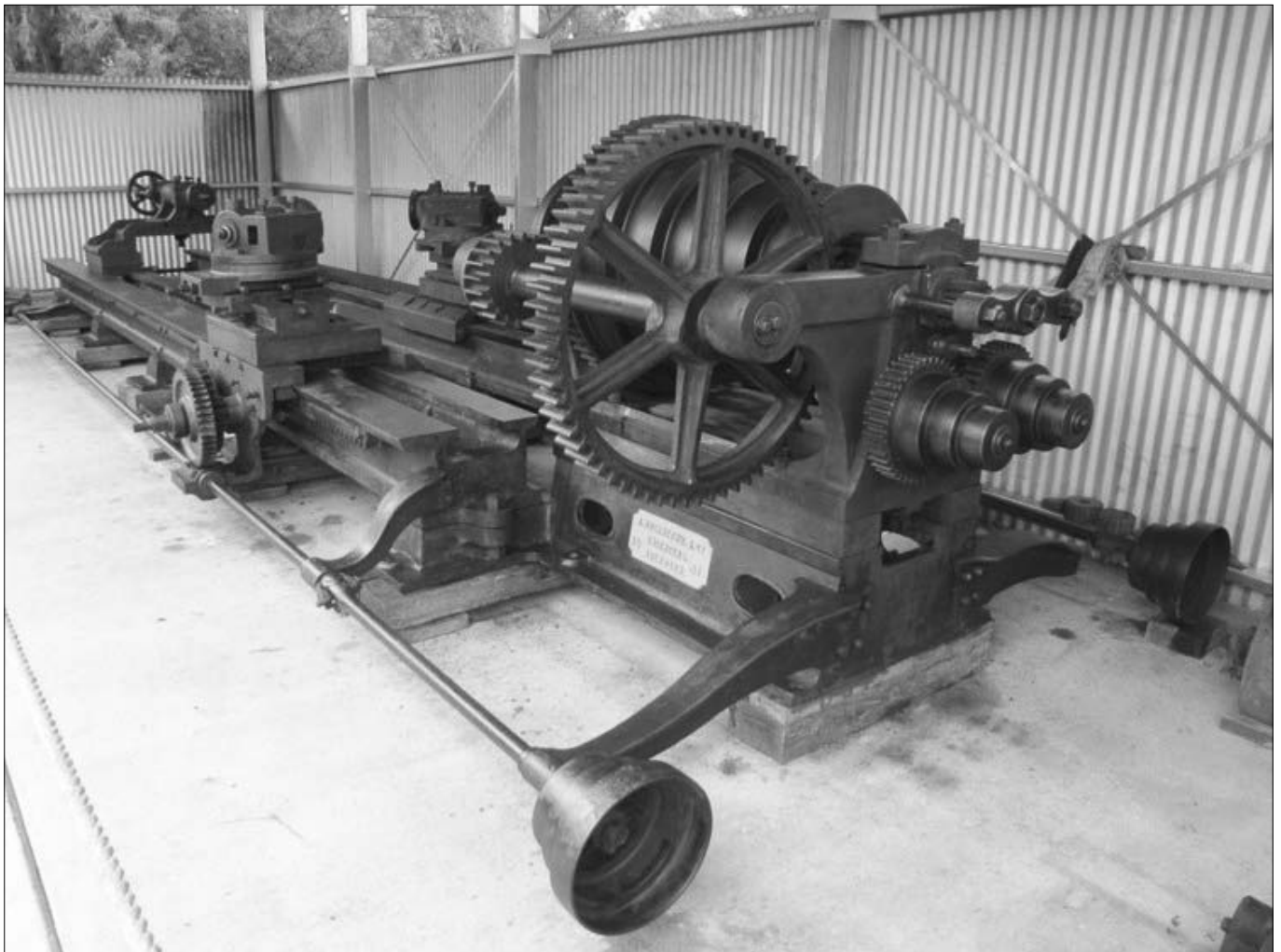
River near what today is known as The Anchorage.

The granite was transported by horse-drawn tramway 300-or-so metres from the quarry to the river.

In 1868 the Louttit Quarry was leased by John Young, a Sydney building contractor.

Granite for the pillars for the first stage of the building of the Sydney GPO came from the Louttit Quarry. Later, granite from Moruya was used elsewhere in Sydney: for the pillars inside St Mary's Cathedral, for the columns on the exterior of Customs House at Circular Quay, on the façade of the Bank of New South Wales building in Martin Place, and for the base and pedestal of the Queen Victoria statue now in Queen's Square.

Perhaps the largest block of stone from the Louttit Quarry is one that became the pedestal of the Captain Cook statue, located just down from the State Library of NSW in the Botanic Gardens, Sydney. It was a 14' x 12' x 10' block that weighed 28 tons – and even after shaping it still weighed in excess of 15 tons. It, in turn, stands on at least 9 blocks of Moruya granite which



The granite lathe on display at the Moruya and District Historical Society Museum.



enclose a time-capsule from 1869.

This pedestal block was too heavy to be moved using the tramway, so was rolled end-over-end to the wharf on the River – a move that took 6 days.

While it was being loaded on board a (small) 80-ton schooner, the *Settlers Friend*, a support pole of a shear leg gave way and John Louttit was severely injured. The local doctor indicated he was unlikely to survive – but he did, with constant care given by his brother Joseph's wife.

It is somewhat surprising that this granite block ever reached Sydney! The *Settlers Friend* collided off Jervis Bay with a 400-ton barque, the *Golden Age*, with the jib boom of the barque passing through the mainsail of the *Settlers Friend*. The sail and rigging had to be cut away to separate the two vessels, enabling the *Settlers Friend* to limp into Sydney 3 days later.

The Captain Cook statue is, in itself, interesting. It was designed to suit the granite pedestal, rather than the more-usual practice of fashioning the pedestal to suit the statue. As a result “the great size of the pedestal makes it necessary that the statue be of an unusual height – about 13 feet, including the bronze platform on which it should stand. Were it smaller than this, the statue – which is an important part of the monument – would appear insignificant and would be dwarfed by

the ponderous stone below.”

The foundation stone was laid in March 1869 by Prince Alfred, the Duke of Edinburgh and the second son of Queen Victoria.

The statue of Captain James Cook was designed by Thomas Woolner, a Professor of Sculpture at the Royal Academy in London. He had travelled to Australia hoping to strike it rich on the Ovens Valley goldfields in Victoria. He then spent six months in Sydney hoping to obtain a commission to design a statue of William Charles Wentworth (he was unsuccessful), but he met with the influential politician Henry Parkes (later Sir Henry Parkes) who recommended him to the Colonial Secretary (and five-times Premier of NSW) John Robertson (after whom the Southern Highlands town of Robertson and the Commonwealth electorate of Robertson is named).

“I could ‘execute’ a statue for this size for £4,000,” Woolner indicated. This £4,000 was increased to £5,000 when he received the measurements of the granite!

The statue was cast in England and was paid-for by public subscription and government grants. It was unveiled in 1879, the centenary of the death of Captain Cook, by NSW Governor Sir Hercules Robinson.

*Continued on page 10*

## SOUTH COAST HISTORY SOCIETY INC.

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**You want to be even more involved?** Wonderful.

Tell us how you'd like to help – for example:

- Help us put 'Recollections' together** – perhaps writing articles or doing research. Even simply by suggesting topics you'd like to see us include in 'Recollections'.
- Become a Member of the Society** – it's just \$10 a year. Deposit your \$10 in South Coast History Society's account BSB 633-000 Number 158877472 AND email a confirmation that you have done so, along with your contact details, to southcoasthistory@yahoo.com. (If you'd prefer to mail a cheque, first phone 0448 160 852).
- Help us with fundraising ...** or simply send us a donation to help fund our community-oriented activities.
- And particularly, tell your family, tell your friends** about South Coast History Society. The more people who are interested, the harder we will work to share our fascinating history of the NSW South Coast!

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*Continued from page 9*

12,000 people attended the unveiling and, as the day had been declared a public holiday, another 100,000 watched a parade along Sydney streets.

John Young's lease on the Louttit Quarry ran until 1875 and the quarry was worked until 1880, by which time Joseph Louttit's eyesight had deteriorated significantly, and the quarry was closed.

\* \* \*

The Moruya Quarry on the north side of the river, provided stone for local river works and, from 1924 to 1932, provided the granite for the pylons of Sydney Harbour Bridge and the Sydney Cenotaph. It is better remembered than is the Louttit Quarry, or other local quarries such as Zieglers and McCredies Quarries, which were adjacent to and eventually absorbed into the Moruya Quarry. Information about the Moruya Quarry, and the nearby workers' village, Granite Town, is displayed in Historic Quarry Park on the northern banks of the Moruya River.

Locally, granite was used in the construction of the Wesleyan (now Uniting) Church in 1864, Sacred Heart Catholic Church (1889), the Moruya Post Office (1887), and St John's Anglican Church (1891). A small

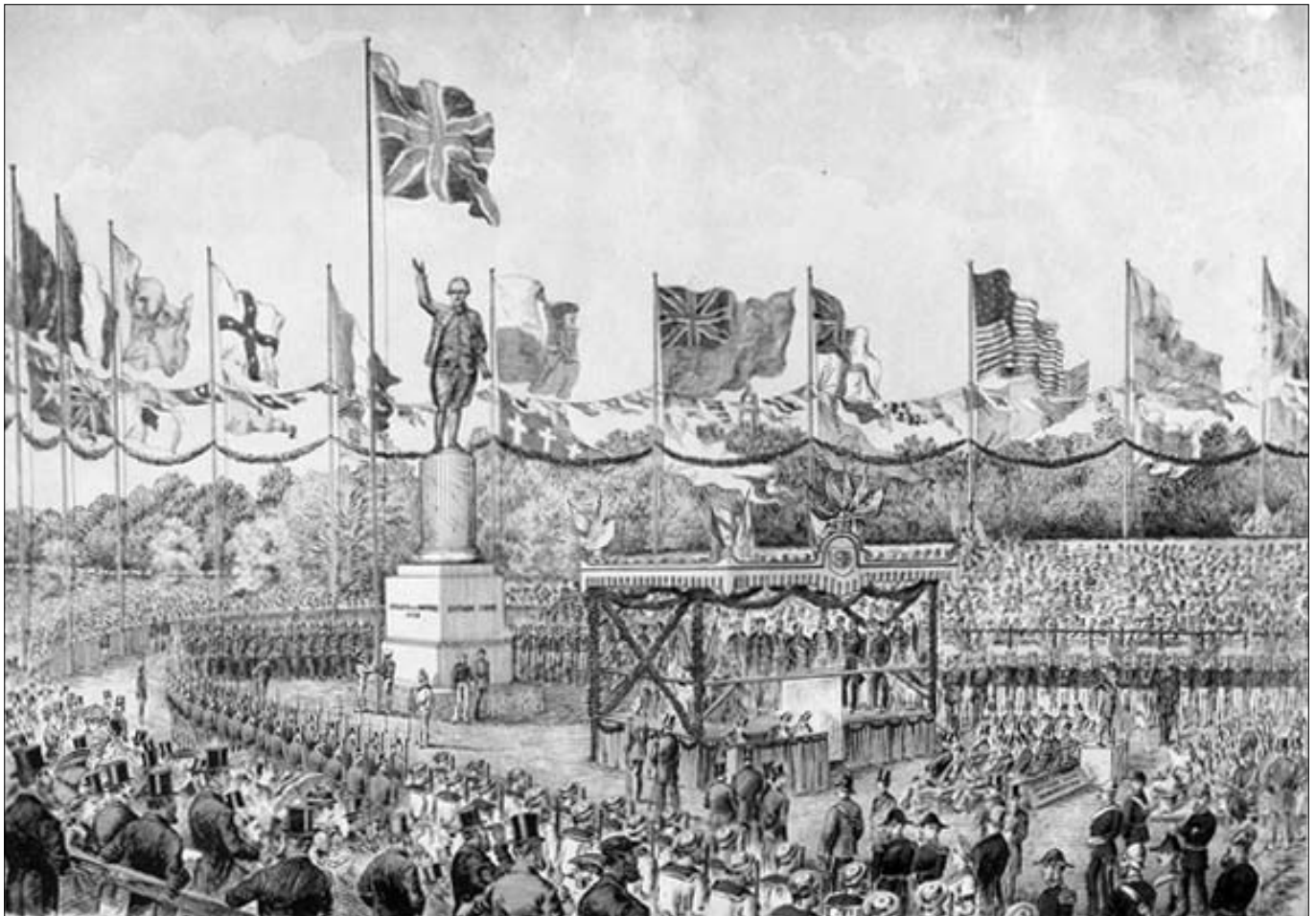
shop and house in Campbell Street (almost opposite the Moruya and District Historical Society's Museum) features granite transported from the Louttit Quarry by horse and dray in the years before that quarry supplied stone to the Sydney GPO.

Many artefacts associated with the Louttit (and other) quarries have survived and are scattered in various locations around Moruya. A lathe, used to turn columns from Moruya granite, has survived, was restored several years ago by the Moruya Antique Tractor & Machinery Association, and is today on display within the grounds of the Moruya & District Historical Society Museum.

Local historian Norm Moore is one of a number of locals who suggest it would be appropriate for the Louttit Quarry site to be preserved as a public park, to have appropriate information boards erected there, and to become a site where relevant artefacts can most properly be preserved and displayed.

Largely compiled from information provided by Norm Moore.

**Can you add to this information about the Louttit Quarry? Email details to [southcoasthistory@yahoo.com](mailto:southcoasthistory@yahoo.com)**



**Unveiling the statue of Captain Cook standing on the Louttit Quarry granite pedestal, 25 March 1879.** Illustration: Australian War Memorial, ART19819, from Illustrated Sydney News.

## A Photo Check

Do you have, or know the whereabouts of, any photographs of the South Coast taken by a professional photographer named Joseph Check in the late 19th or early 20th century?

Who was Joseph Check? His obituary in the *Richmond River Herald & Northern District Advertiser* on 28th May 1937 tells this about him:

*“Old Joe Check has made his last journey. In his will, probate of which was granted last week, he directed that the following inscription be put on his headstone: ‘Here lies old Joe Check, aged 80, a traveller since babyhood, but anchored at last. Born in Bohemia, 1856.’ Check, who died at Gunning, left an estate of £597. He was a photographer and travelled the countryside in a caravan. ‘I bequeath my caravan containing my travelling home, photographic plant, and materials to my friend, Edward Baker,’ said the old man in his will. The residue of the estate he divided amongst a number of beneficiaries. He directed that he was to be buried in the Gunning cemetery, the grave and headstone to cost not less than £50.*

*In the '80s and '90s there was no better known or more widely respected man in the State, which he travelled from end to end, as a photographer and*

*showman. A man of the highest principle, the acme of courtesy and consideration, and never known to say a word out of place, he was the friend of everyone, and it is doubtful if in the '90s there was a home in any North Coast town that was not graced by one or more of “Honest Joe’s” specimens of the photographic art.*

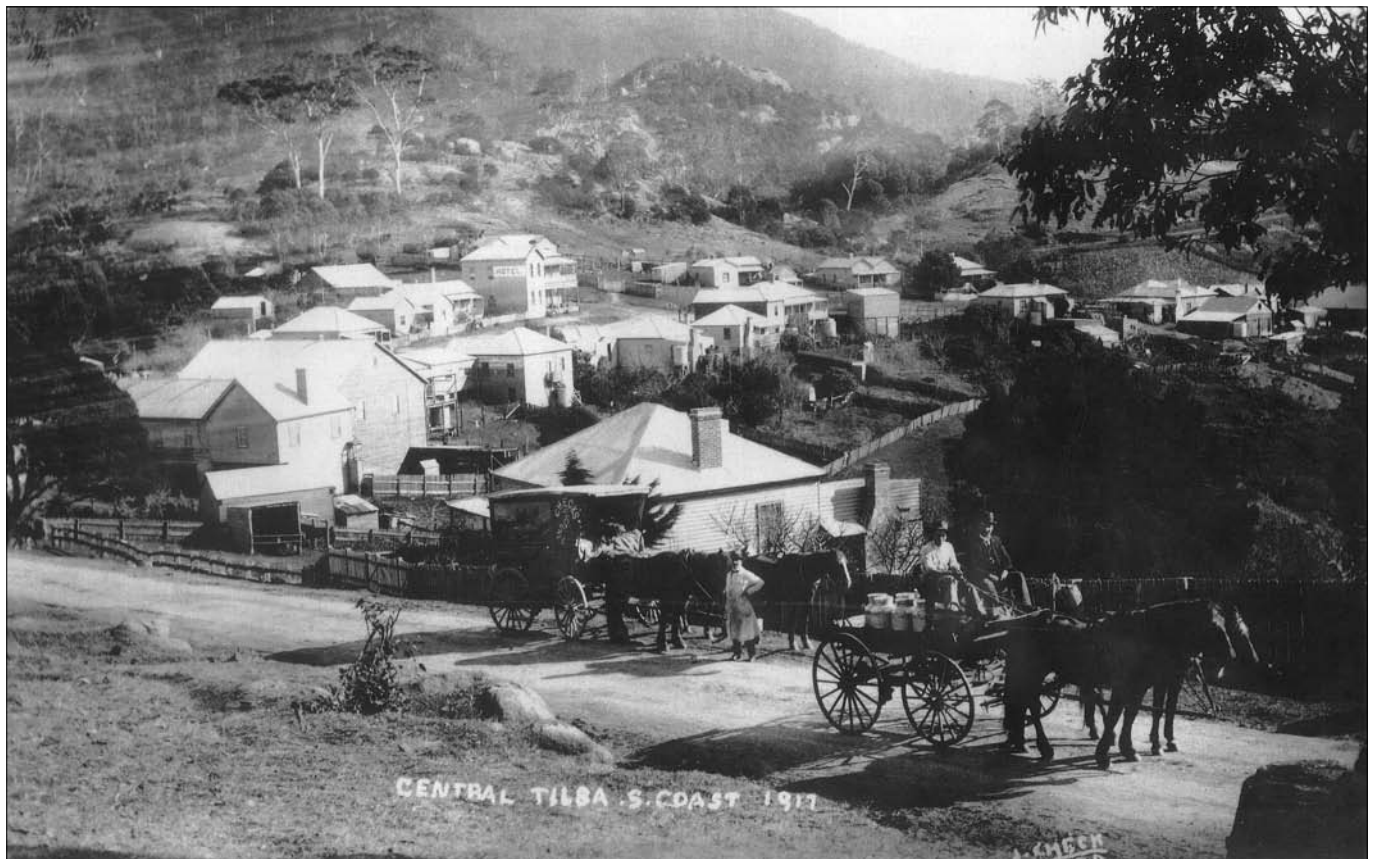
*His life was truly an example to all who knew him. Incidentally, Australia never had a more loyal citizen, or one imbued with a greater sense of appreciation of its people.*

*Vale, Joe Check!”*



Above: Self portrait of Joseph Check. National Library of Australia, nla.obj-133333368.jpg

*Continued on page 12*



Central Tilba in 1917. The milk wagon on the right is from Henkley Farm and the two drivers are Fred McFaul and his father John McFaul. The wagon on the left is Joseph Check’s travelling photography wagon (signage on its cover reads ‘Check’s Pictures’) and Joe Check is standing in front of his three-horse team.

He clearly visited the South Coast on a number of occasions, at least in 1901 or 1902, in 1904 and in 1917.

One of the long-established dairy farming families from the Tilba area owns two photographs taken by Joe Check – one of Central Tilba in 1917 and one of a Tilba Tilba Cricketers Ball taken in 1904 – as well as two photographs of family members taken earlier when they were living in Burragate. We'd love to learn of any of his other photographs of the area that may have been taken by this remarkable photographer and that have survived.

The State Library of NSW has a small collection of his works – mostly taken in the New England and Richmond River areas where he was clearly very well-known: *“There is no need to explain who Joe Check is, or what brings him here. Practically everyone is acquainted with the genial showman and his wonderful moving pictures.”*<sup>1</sup> These ‘wonderful moving pictures’ included *“plenty of comic scenes, fairy scenes, views of Irish scenery, love scenes,*

*scenes from the [Oberammergau] Passion Play, Indian and cowboy, fishing scenes, sea scenes, rowing scenes, railway scenes, and dozens of others all fresh and well worth viewing.”*<sup>2</sup> Additionally, over 1,400 of his photographs were simultaneously displayed by him on this occasion at the Lismore School of Arts Hall.

Joseph Check may well have been one of the last of Australia's travelling ‘picture show men,’ because *“when picture-show plants had become installed in most towns, Mr. Check resumed his artistic and photographic work.”*<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Richmond River Express 11.2.1910

<sup>2</sup> Northern Star 13.7.1907

<sup>3</sup> Goulburn Evening Penny Post 9.12.1936

**Do you have any information about Joseph Check and his connections with the NSW South Coast or know where any of his other South Coast photographs are held? If so, please email details to [southcoasthistory@yahoo.com](mailto:southcoasthistory@yahoo.com).**

## Looking for Sponsors

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**Phone 0448 160 852 and let's discuss how ‘Recollections’ can benefit your business and how you can simultaneously help us.**



The 1904 Tilba Tilba Cricketer's Ball. Photographs are displayed on the side and rear walls. These may be photographs taken by Check, in the same manner that he displayed 1,400 of his photographs at his Lismore School of Arts Hall movie screenings in 1907.

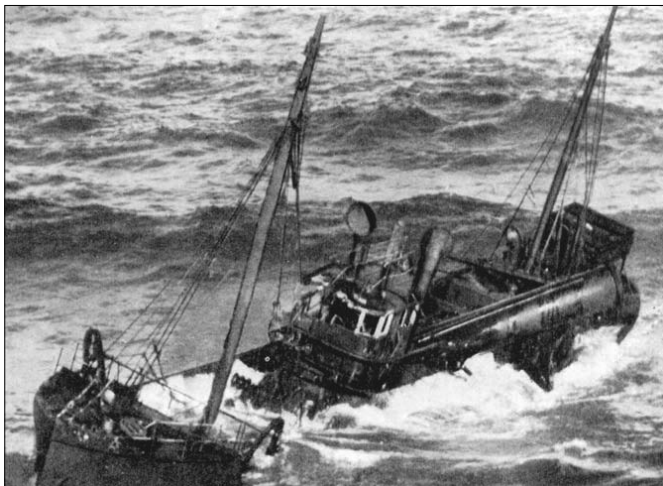
### CONTRIBUTIONS WELCOME

- \* Can you research and write an article for *‘Recollections’*?
  - \* Do you have information about an interesting aspect of South Coast History?
  - \* What stories would you like us to include in future issues of *‘Recollections’*?
- We'd love to hear from you: [southcoasthistory@yahoo.com](mailto:southcoasthistory@yahoo.com) or phone 0448 160 852.

## South Coast World War II Shipping Losses

The last issue of *Recollections* included the story of the sinking of the *Cumberland* off the NSW south coast during World War I. Since World War I, other significant wartime maritime losses have occurred in the same area.

In World War II, seven vessels were sunk by Japanese submarines in the area between Jervis Bay and the Victorian border – the *Geroge S Livanos* and the *Coast Farmer* off Jervis Bay, the *Dureenbee* off Moruya, the *Iron Knight* off Montague Island, the *Robert J. Walker* off Begamui, the *William Dawes* off Tathra Head, and the *Iron Crown* off Gabo Island. In total, 19 vessels were sunk during World War II off the NSW coast, 17 being hit by torpedoes or shells and two from hitting sea-mines; another 10 vessels were damaged but were able to reach a port to be repaired.



The *Dureenbee* wrecked after being attacked by a Japanese submarine. Photo: RAN, PIAMA 15

Three of these ships were sunk on successive days by the one Japanese submarine, the *I-11*: a Greek freighter, the *George S Livanos* which was sunk on 20th July 1942, the *Coast Farmer* which was sunk on 21st July 1942, and the *William Dawes*, which was sunk on 22nd July 1942. A fourth ship, the *SS Coolana*, escaped after being shelled by the *I-11* on 26th July 1942.

The details about the sinking of the *William Dawes* are perhaps more widely-known than the details about the losses of the other ships because its sinking was witnessed from the shoreline, and because the wreck was subsequently located and has been explored (it was discovered in 2004 lying in 135 metres of water; the wreck of the *Robert J. Walker*, for example, has still to be found).

The *William Dawes*—like the *Robert J. Walker* which (a bit of trivia!) was the only ship sunk by a

German U-boat in the Pacific in World War II—was an American ‘liberty ship’ (see information below). It was transporting over 7,000 tons of war materiel from Adelaide to Brisbane, including 82 Jeeps, 33 CPRs\*, 72 Pickup Trucks, 14 larger Trucks, 12 Ambulances, 12 Half-track Vehicles, and other sundry Army stores. The ship was manned by 39 Merchant crew, 15 Naval Armed Guard and 3 American soldiers.

A torpedo hit the stern of the *William Dawes*, then

### Liberty Ships

So-called ‘liberty ships’ were mass-produced bulk cargo freighters that were constructed in a number of American purpose-built yards during WWII. They were simple in design, were conceived to be built quickly to provide much-needed replacements to British merchant shipping that had been sunk by German submarines, mines and aircraft and, when conceived, were designed to just have a five-year life (although many operated for much longer than that).

In total, 2,751 Liberty ships were built between 1941 and 1945 – the fastest in under five days!

The *William Dawes* was built in 3 months and 12 days and registered in Portland, Oregon, by the Oregon Shipbuilding Corporation. It was a two-decked vessel 126.8 metres (416 feet) in length. It was powered by a triple expansion engine and was operated as a United States Army Transport.

Liberty ships were usually named after important US citizens. *William Dawes* was an American War of Independence patriot who rode, as did the more famous Paul Revere, in 1775 to warn the Americans of approaching British militia.

Liberty ships were assembled from standardised components produced by numerous factories throughout the United States. Sections of the ships were welded together, rather than being assembled by the then more-usual shipbuilding practice of riveting. Many previously unskilled workers were employed during construction including – because of the enormous numbers of men who had enlisted in the armed forces – a significant number of women.

Their engines were a basic (and a then-obsolete) design and were adapted to their intended use – for example the liberty ships destined to be English-based were fuelled by coal, because England had large coal supplies but no local oil supplies.

Liberty ships became the iconic symbol of U.S. World War II industrial output ... and provided the Allies forces in World War II with much desperately-needed shipping capacity.

about 12 miles off the coast, about 5.30am, causing that part of the ship to separate and sink. Five of the crew were killed instantly or subsequently drowned. The explosion was heard and noted by the duty Volunteer Air Observer Corps observer on Tathra headland.

Some time later a second explosion occurred on the still-floating forward section of the ship, causing a massive fire that engulfed the ship and its cargo, and was visible from Tathra.

17 year-old Lorna Stafford, from nearby Kalaru, had just started duty as air observer when the scene started to unfold. She reported details by phone to local VAOC headquarters in Moruya and made a number of time-sequence sketches of what she was observing. These sketches are today displayed on an information board on Tathra headland.

Lorna's actions are credited with the rapid rescue of the surviving crew – but not before they witnessed the *I-11* surface nearby, to watch the destruction of the *William Dawes*, and to then submerge again.

An Air Force aircraft, probably from Nowra, was despatched to the scene and reported seeing 12-15 persons in each of the four lifeboats and the vessel on fire. The aircrew also reported sighting a submarine at 10.15 am, three miles south of the stricken vessel moving southeast, which they attempted to bomb. This could have been the *I-11* (however, official Japanese records indicate no attack on the *I-11 that day*) or a whale that was mistaken for a submarine.

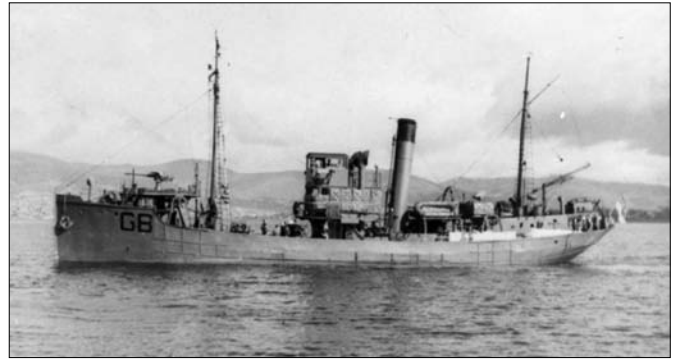
### The VAOC

The Volunteer Air Observers Corps (VAOC) was a World War II Australian air defence organisation. It was formed in 1941 to provide the Australian Air Force with information about aircraft sighted near and above Australia and, later in the war, also assumed coast watching and weather reporting duties.

VAOC observation posts (like the one on Tathra headland) were established throughout Australia. By 1944 the VAOC employed 24,000 civilian volunteers at 2,656 observation posts.

When an aircraft was spotted, the observer would note the direction, number of engines and the altitude of the aircraft, and where possible, would attempt to identify it. They would then ring their local telephone exchange and ask for "Air Flash". The Operator would, where necessary, disconnect other calls to give priority to the observer's call to their local VAOC headquarters—which, in Tathra's case, was situated in Moruya.

The VAOC is credited with having 'definitely' saved 78 aircraft, 'substantially' aided 710, and 'assisted' a further 1,098 between January 1943 and August 1945.



HMAS Goonambee, a sister ship of the Dureenbee, was built by NSW State Dockyards in 1919. Many small vessels such as this were pressed into service as part of the war effort.

The vessel ultimately sank about 4.30pm that afternoon.

The crew of the *William Dawes* was taken by fishing vessel to Merimbula. The wounded were treated in Pambula Hospital and the other crew members were accommodated in private homes in Merimbula.

Wartime restrictions meant that official news of the sinking of the *William Dawes* was withheld for some considerable time – as the accompanying extract from the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 14th November 1942 (almost 4 months after the sinking of the *William Dawes*) illustrates.

Seven days after the sinking of the *William Dawes*, the *I-11* was sighted on the surface about 22 miles north-east of Gabo Island. It was bombed by Beaufort bombers, but escaped. In 1943 it damaged the Australian light cruiser HMAS *Hobart* off the New Hebrides, and was eventually sunk with all hands, in the Marshall Islands area in February 1944.

\* Details of this cargo were attributed to Australian War Memorial records, so we asked the Australian War Memorial the meaning of 'CPR'. Their response read "*We have searched for something which might match this abbreviation but have been unable to find it. It appears that it is probably specific to American terminology. Our Military Heraldry and Technology section came up with possibly "Canadian Pattern..." Terms which might fit the initials are "combat, carrier, cargo", "personnel", "recovery". However, the exact combination has proved elusive. In fact, I did wonder whether it's possible that the "CPR" has been incorrectly deciphered and it should have read "CMP" (Canadian Military Pattern (vehicles).)*"

Further information:

'*William Dawes Shipwreck 1942*' Information Sheet, NSW Heritage Office

*Naval Historical Review*, September 2005

## ANTI-RUMOUR DRIVE Fantastic Stories Cause Concern

MELBOURNE, Friday – A National Security Regulation is to be gazetted to enable the effective prosecution of rumour-mongers.

The Prime Minister, Mr. Curtin, said to-night that War Cabinet had decided this after having to-day considered examples where prosecutions could not have been successfully launched under existing regulations.

“The proper authorities have found it difficult to take any effective steps to check the spread of subversive rumours which tended to lower public morale,” Mr. Curtin said.

“The spreading of rumours and false statements is a weapon regularly employed by the enemy, but there are unfortunately very many persons who are always ready to communicate these rumours and to create and communicate others.

“In spite of warnings issued in the Press, rumour-mongering is still rife and the circulation of rumours had increased more particularly in parts of

Australia which are nearest to operational areas.”

Among examples of rumours, all without foundation, quoted to War Cabinet from reports by the Security Service were:

Rumours in March, 1942, that the crew of H.M.A.S. Sydney were in Japanese hands.

Rumours that the Queen Mary had been sunk.

Rumours in August, 1942, that a large number of merchant ships had been sunk around the Australian coast. Example: “The reason for the scarcity of potatoes in Sydney is that ships bringing supplies from Tasmania have been torpedoed off the New South Wales coast.”

### Landing Rumour

Rumours after the entry of Japanese submarines into Sydney Harbour that Japanese submarines were sending landing parties ashore at Tathra to get supplies for the submarines and residents were frightened to go out at night.

Rumours in April, 1942, of the murder of a girl by soldiers at the rear

of Marcus Clark’s building, Crown Street, Wollongong.

Exaggerated stories of fights between United States and Australian troops.

Rumours imputing unchastity to members of the W.A.A.A.F., causing a serious diminution in recruiting. (Extracts from a letter were quoted in this connection: “Lucy, if you have any ideas about joining the W.A.A.A.F. or any women’s organization, for Heaven’s sake don’t! They are awful girls, and it’s a rotten life for them ... They’re in all the hotels, drunk every night, and all seem to be tarred with the one brush.”)

Rumours exaggerating damage done by air raids. Example: “2,000 persons were killed by one bombing of Townsville.”

Rumours of the Internment of prominent citizens.

Rumours of arrests of Japanese spies. (In one case it was claimed that two Japanese disguised as nuns had been arrested at a railway station near Newcastle.)

(Sydney Morning Herald, Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> November 1942)

## Trivia

This issue’s fun history quiz focuses on assassins and failed assassination attempts that might have significantly changed word history:

- What are the names of the people who assassinated:
  - John F Kennedy
  - Abraham Lincoln
  - Julius Caesar
  - Archduke Franz Ferdinand
  - John Lennon?
- What subsequently happened to each of those assassins?
- How many:
  - British Prime Ministers have been assassinated?
  - American Presidents have been assassinated?
  - Popes have been assassinated?
  - Australian Prime Ministers have been assassinated?
- What is the link between one of Julius Caesar’s assassins and Abraham Lincoln’s assassin?
- How did disaffected French Air Force Officer, John-Marie Bastien-Thiry, attempt to assassinate President De Gaulle of France in 1962 (subsequently fictionalized in *The Day of the Jackal*)?
- How did Army Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg attempt to assassinate Adolf Hitler in July 1944?
- How did Guiseppe Zangara attempt to assassinate President-elect Franklin D Roosevelt in February 1933?
- How many assassination attempts were made on Italian Fascist leader, Benito Mussolini, in 1926?

Answers to this quiz are on page 20. How did you do?

## BOOK REVIEW

## ‘The Man Who Carried the Nation’s Grief’ by Carol Rosenhain

There are legions of unsung heroes in Australian history.

James Lean is one of them. (In fact, he is so unsung that he does not yet have an entry in Wikipedia!)

Anyone who has examined World War I service records (on line at [www.naa.gov.au](http://www.naa.gov.au)) will be familiar with Lean’s name. All correspondence from Australia’s military “Base Records” to the relatives and friends of those who were serving, and who had served, in Australia’s armed forces during the war was signed “J. M. Lean.”

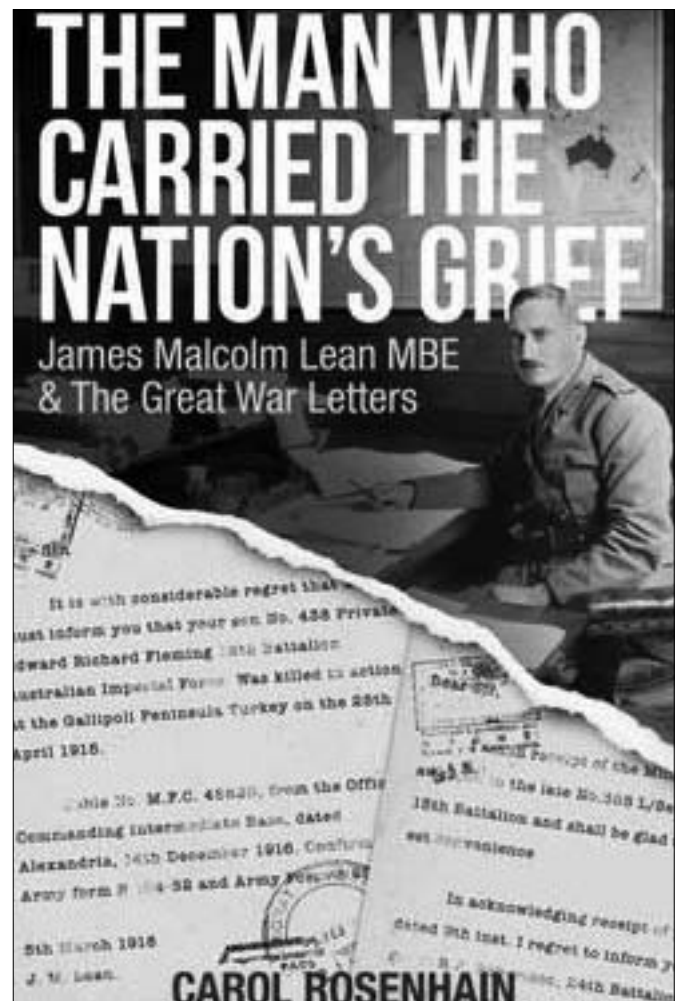
“Base Records,” situated in Victoria Barracks in Melbourne, was the link in Australia between the Australian military and the relatives and friends of servicemen. It kept all the records of Australian servicemen, it had the responsibility for advising the next-of-kin of deaths, woundings, and of crimes committed by Australian servicemen, it handled all correspondence from family and friends (and occasionally others – such as “unmarried mothers in France asking them to locate the soldiers who had fathered their child so that they could be made accountable”) about Australians serving overseas, it returned any possessions of those who were killed to their next-of-kin and, both during the war and for years afterwards, it distributed honours and war medals to those who had served.

James Malcolm Lean was the Officer-in-Charge at Base Records. He established the corps, saw it grow rapidly (and unexpectedly) during the war, and he supervised the sympathetic and efficient way that it maintained records on every enlisted man and handled any (and every possible) enquiry about these men.

‘*The Man Who Carried the Nation’s Grief*’ by Carol Rosenhain is part biography of James Lean, part a history of Base Records, and part a record of how the Army interacted with those who remained back home in Australia.

It is an amazingly engrossing, an amazingly emotional read.

The Australian Army and the Australian Government went into World War I with absolutely no inkling about how big this conflict was to become. They had no established structure for keeping records of those who enlisted, for passing on information about the troops who were fighting, or for handling any enquiry about those who had enlisted. So when the first Australian troops left for overseas, Base Records comprised just one officer (Acting Captain J M Lean) and two clerks.



*The Man Who Carried the Nation’s Grief* is available in paperback from around \$25.

By 1917 it had grown to have a staff of 328 including 7 permanent staff, 145 home service soldiers (those who could not serve overseas because of their age or some medical condition), 43 civilian males and 133 female clerks and in 1918 it grew further to have a staff of 377. Such were the demands on their time, the male staff typically worked a 12-hour day, six – often seven – days a week. The many girls employed there, however, were sent home at 6pm – because there was then no street lighting along St Kilda Road!

It is impossible not to applaud the efficiency of Base Records staff. They were maintaining 421,800 individual service records (including 331,800 of servicemen who were sent overseas), needed to update these service records and cross-file information from around 2,000 sheets of data they received each day (each page typically including information relating to 12 to 40 individual soldiers), received and answered an average of more than 1,000 letters per day, and



operated an information counter (often visited by emotional and distraught relatives of soldiers serving overseas, which by September 1915 was being visited by an average of 660 callers per day) at Victoria Barracks in Melbourne.

They prided themselves that they could locate any individual service record within minutes, and every report to next-of-kin of a death or casualty was sent within 24 hours of receipt of the information at Base Records. And all this was at a time when only manual typewriters (not even memory typewriters – which, at least, would have enabled automatic typing of some standard, repetitive information) were available!

Rosenhain provides numerous examples of correspondence received by and sent from Base Records. All are interesting, some are quite quirky (see accompanying “Information About My Cousin”). These provide a fascinating insight into Australian World War I society ... and illustrate how sympathetically, tactfully and efficiently every enquiry was handled at Base Records.

And they were sending more than just a few letters. In 1921 (by which time war medals were being issued) Base Records despatched a total of “2,222,700 letters, parcels, cables, telegrams, books, scrolls upon which postage had been paid by the Government.”!!

Lean is, as might be expected, the hero of the book – even if Rosenhain, at times, appears to be slightly over-awed by the man and what he achieved.

The Australian government and the Military hierarchy are the villains. Lean’s efforts – as well as those of all who worked at Base Records – seem to have been largely taken for granted. He (and his staff) were never properly recompensed with adequate pay increases or with formal military recognition:

Lean’s requests to serve overseas (where he almost certainly would have been rewarded with a higher rank) were refused – “*Permission cannot be granted for your enlistment as your services in the Defence Department cannot at present be spared and it is considered that your retention in your present position is in the best interests of the service.*”

### Information About My Cousin

Dear Sirs

Could you give me any information re my cousin Private R.J. Robertson, C. Coy. 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion, 6<sup>th</sup> A.I.F? His Melbourne address when he enlisted was Irene Place, Prahran ...

J. Gates (of West Leederville WA)

Dear Sir

In reply to yours of the 19<sup>th</sup> instant ... The following are his Regimental Number and Postal Address ...

Yours faithfully  
J.M. Lean

Dear Sir

Your letter No. 29872 dated 27<sup>th</sup> November and addressed to Mr. J. Gates, 64 St Leonards Grove, West Leederville WA. It reached my hands today. It was not meant for me but by an error of which I do not complain, it was addressed to Mr. rather than Mrs. The letter was intended for my wife and through the error in addressing, it fell into my possession instead. In the first place the Robert John Robertson in whom my wife shows such interest, is not and never was her cousin. All that I can ask of you in this personal request, for I regard it somewhat of a personal matter, is for you to supply her with no information whatsoever. I do not think there is any necessity for further explanation on my part ...

Yours respectfully  
F. Gates

(6 months later Mrs Gates contacted Base Records again, using a pseudonym and gave the address as c/- The Loco Dept. W.A. Railways, Fremantle. Their reply:)

Dear Sir

I have to acknowledge receipt of your communication of the 15<sup>th</sup> instant and to state the only information concerning No. 5090 Sergeant Robert John Robertson 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion was ...

The following is suggested as his present Postal Address ...

Yours faithfully  
J.M. Lean

(Two days after this letter was sent, Mr F. Gates wrote to Base Records:)

Dear Sir

... I am now making a further request and hope I am not worrying you too much. My wife, I have discovered (again quite accidentally), is making another attempt to get in touch with Robertson using her youngest brother. By the same mail that this will reach you I expect you will receive a letter asking for Robertson’s address. It will be signed by G.S. Mackie and the address for your reply will be c/- The Loco Sheds, Western Australian

Railways, Fremantle. I am appealing to you again to withhold the address as my anxiety to stop the matter is very real. I must give you a little explanation. My wife and our little family were given a trip east by me in February 1914. They returned here in August two or three days before war was declared. She had five months in Melbourne and when she returned she was a completely altered woman ... My sole idea is to nip any trouble in the bud if I can do so, and you can generously assist me ... I hope I am not asking too much and that you will help me by declining G.S. Mackie’s sneaky request ...

Yours faithfully  
F. Gates

Dear Sir

I have to acknowledge receipt of your communication of the 28<sup>th</sup> ult, which, however, arrived too late for your request to be complied with ... Needless to say, had your letter been received in time, your wishes would have been given effect to.

Yours faithfully  
J.M. Lean

(G.S. Mackie wrote to Base Records again 4 months later. J. M. Lean replied advising Sergeant R. J. Robertson had been Killed in Action on 26<sup>th</sup> August 1916, no further particulars being yet available.)

- Regular requests for increase in rank and salary for staff at Base Records were continually rebuffed. One typical reply reads: *“I do not consider that any comparison can be made between the work of the Pay Office and that of Base Records. In the Pay Office, the organisation focuses on the ultimate payment of money and accounting, and the duties of the great majority of clerks contain inherent possibilities of serious monetary loss to the Commonwealth ... the work of the Base Records is not so closely and vitally allied to the finances of the country and the administration thereof ...”* (a sad reflection, indeed, on government priorities!)
- At the end of the War, Lean’s requests to be given standard-issue war medals (particularly the General Service and Victory Medals) were refused – because he had not served overseas, even though these medals were issued to many far less-deserving servicemen! (One correspondent, aware of the situation, sardonically observed *“I note from the Press that the Right Honourable the Prime Minister of England has had the three war decorations conferred upon him and he cannot be considered a member of the fighting force any more than yourself”*). And, then to rub real salt into a wound, he was appointed to, as Rosenhain writes, a “five-member Standing Medals Board, ‘whose task it was to enquire into and report from time to time on such matters affecting the grant of war medals as are placed before it.’ While being elected to the Board was certainly a source of satisfaction, it may have been galling to Lean to subsequently award medals to men of dubious character and those whose service had been peripheral to the war effort when his own contribution had been so central.”
- He was also denied a War Gratuity (an additional payment of one shilling per day for each day of service that was given to soldiers after the War) ... along with the curt advice *“cases of this kind were fully considered by the War Cabinet, but it was decided they should not be included in the bill.”*
- Even the citation for his award of an MBE, which he received in October 1920, referred to the recipient as “Temporary Major James Malcolm Lean” which Rosenhain concludes was *“a humiliating reminder of his failure to achieve his substantive majority.”* Lean had been serving as Temporary Major since January 1916, and was

only finally confirmed as a substantive Major in December 1922, after he had left Base Records.

Lean’s service at Base Records had a severe effect on his health. He died, in ill health, at the age of 53 and, in stark contrast to photographs of a fit, healthy-looking man taken at Base Records, there is are photographs in Rosenhain’s book of him at age 52 or 53 looking as if he was a frail old man of 80+ years. [And after reading ‘*The Man Who Carried the Nation’s Grief*,’ it occurs to me that one small, but very appropriate, gesture to mark the centenary of the end of World War I next year would be for the Australian government to, somehow, posthumously award those General Service and Victory Medals to James Malcolm Lean.]

Those well-catalogued, incredibly complete Australian service records from World War I that are today freely accessible from the Australian Archives – and which are so valuable to both researchers and those interested in family history – are testimony to the diligence and devotion of James Lean and his staff at Base Records.

Rosenhain’s concluding words to her book, however, best sum up James Lean’s real legacy:

*“He created and bequeathed a window into the lives of both the soldiers and families who endured the unimaginable a century ago. James Lean truly carried the grief of the nation through the war years and beyond. The stories told in his meticulous files describe a period almost lost to time, and an event that shaped the national consciousness. Every family was touched in some way by the First World War. James Lean ensured that the enormous extent of that national grief was captured and recorded so that later generations would understand the true impact of that calamitous event. As such, Major James Lean’s legacy is extraordinary in its significance and one for which this nation should be deeply grateful.”*

— — —

Australia is fortunate that its World War I war records have survived intact. Many British First World War records, for example, were lost in the Blitz during World War II. Accessing Australian war records is extraordinarily easy (available online at [www.naa.gov.au](http://www.naa.gov.au)) although there are a few unexpected traps for new researchers. For example, servicemen were asked to name their county of birth, which for those born on the south coast south of Brogo is the County of Auckland. At some time (maybe during World War I, maybe since) someone has altered many of those records reading ‘Auckland’ to read ‘New Zealand’ (some New Zealanders did actually enlist in Australia), which can sometimes result in difficulties identifying all servicemen from the area.

## South Coast Women in WWI

Most of the research & most that has been written about World War I has focused on the soldiers who fought in the War. Our perception is they were the 'heroes.'

But the role played by the women and children these soldiers left behind, and the larger community that stayed behind (with the possible exception of the politicians!), suggest they are equally 'heroes'.

In WWI there were really only two roles for women in the army – as nurses (at this time it was still felt that it was inappropriate for women to become doctors) and as clerical assistants.

There were few, if any, clerical assistants employed by the army locally. Many hundred were employed, for example, at places like Victoria Barracks in Melbourne

maintained 'there are no positions wherein the services of your Corps could be at present utilised.' So, thankyou but no thankyou ladies – but what the formation of this Australian Women's Service Corps illustrated was that women WANTED to serve in the 'front line' as much as the men did.

In World War I, 330,000 Australian men served abroad. The one area in which women could do so was as nurses, but only about 2,500 to 3,000 were accepted into the Australian Army Nursing Service (so for every woman accepted, about 120 Australian men served abroad in the army) – so there was fierce competition for these few available places.

At least two locals succeeded in becoming nurses in the AANS: Sister Pearl Corkhill of Tilba, who was



Candelo, home to the remarkable Candelo Knitting Class in World War I. Photo: Bega Valley Historical Society

where the service records in Australian soldiers were kept – updating records, corresponding with families and friends (see accompanying Book Review).

Perhaps even these few women clerical assistants were accepted by the army very reluctantly. After the first conscription referendum an 'Australian Women's Service Corps' was formed by some enthusiastic ladies on the principle that 'If the men won't serve, then I will'. The aim of this Corps was to free up all the uniformed soldiers in places such as Victoria Barracks so they could serve overseas. Despite a great deal of pressure, the Defence Department consistently

awarded the Military Medal (one of only 7 Australian nurses to receive this honour) and Sister Lilian Walter of Candelo. Sisters Corkhill and Walter actually worked in extremely dangerous situations; they were certainly 'heroes'.

A number of others worked in military hospitals in Australia. For example, Matron Cope and Nurse Lonnegan from 'Alwyn' Private Hospital in Bega did so, their departure resulting in the closure of that hospital for a time ... depriving the town of its maternity hospital (maternity at public hospitals was only introduced in the 1920s or 1930s).

The rest of the women on the South Coast played several major roles in WWI:

1. They took over much of the work that the men who enlisted would normally do;
2. They played a major role in fundraising and organising things like 'comfort' packages to be assembled and sent to the troops;
3. And they knitted!

Some of the tasks assumed by local women in World War I involved very heavy work – for example the Cobargo Chronicle had a paragraph reading '*A young man employed at Dry River [Quaama], who is shortly making another try to get to the front, is busily engaged in teaching a couple of young ladies to plough. "It is be-yu-tiful," he says "to see the way they are profiting by the lessons."*' The area was predominantly a dairying area and many farm workers enlisted (perhaps up to half the locals who enlisted were farmers or farm workers), so women and children necessarily took over tasks such as milking, and in some cases total farm management.

In other jobs, women stepped in. The Cobargo Chronicle noted *Miss P Arguimbau has been appointed to the staff of the Commercial Bank, Pambula. The banks generally are starting to employ women since the outbreak of the war.*

Many teachers enlisted and, for the first time, schools were forced to reemploy married female teachers who had been forced out of the profession when they married.

The long-term benefits of employment of women were, however, few. After the war, the men returned and wanted their old jobs back. Society generally felt they deserved to have them back. In fact, whereas 17.2% of females were employed in 1911 (before the war) this dropped to 16.3% by 1921 – although there were some significant changes in the sort of work performed with, for example, domestic servants largely disappearing.

The activity that most frequently involved women in World War I – on a voluntary, unpaid basis – was fund-raising and organising 'comforts' for the men who were away. Numerous local groups emerged. On a national scale organisations such as the Red Cross were set up. In fact, 632 branches of the Red Cross were set up in NSW during the war.

Many of these organisations were, as was usual at that time, headed by men – the President, Treasurer and often the Secretary being males. But the females did most of the grunt work – as can be seen in newspaper reports of the time that listed not only who gave what to 'Patriotic Funds', but exactly how much they gave, and who collected the money or the goods from each donor. So, for example, we know that Misses C Leplaw and P Johnson in Candelo collected the following for an appeal by a Patriotic Group called the Candelo Knitting Class in April 1917: from Mr Thomas 10 skeins of wool, Mrs Snowden 2/6, Mrs Taylor 5/-, H Holzhauser 2/-, A Holzhauser 2/-. J Collins snr 2/-, I Lazarus 5/-, Mrs Hammond 5/-. Mrs Schafer 5/-, E A

## Trivia Answers

These are the answers to our trivia quiz on page 15.

**1a.** Lee Harvey Oswald; **1b.** John Wilkes Booth; **1c.** Senators Brutus and his brother-in-law Cassius and a group of about 58 other Senators stabbed Caesar to death on the Ides of March in 44BC outside the Theatre of Pompey; **1d.** Gavrilo Princip, thus sparking World War I; **1e.** Mark David Chapman

**2a.** He was assassinated two days later by Dallas nightclub owner Jack Ruby while being transferred from the city jail to the county jail; **2b.** He was shot by soldier Boston Corbett 12 days later, having fled to a farm in northern Virginia; **2c.** Brutus and Cassius built a huge army in Greece which was defeated by a Roman army led by Mark Antony at Philippi in 42 BC. Brutus committed suicide in 42 BC. Cassius also committed suicide, stabbing himself with the same dagger he had used when he attacked Julius Caesar; **2d.** He died of tuberculosis in prison, having been sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment; **2e.** He is still in prison.

**3a.** 1 – Spencer Perceval, shot by John Bellingham in the lobby of the House of Commons in May 1812;

**3b.** 4 – Presidents Abraham Lincoln (the 16th President), James A Garfield (20th), William McKinley (25th) and John F Kennedy (35th). And an attempt has been made on the life of every President since Kennedy; **3c.** 5 – Stephen VI (in 897), Stephen VIII (942), John XII (964), Benedict VI (974), John XIV (985), Gregory V (999). Other Popes have been rumoured to have been murdered – the most recent being John Paul I in 1978; **3d.** None

**4.** John Wilkes Booth, an actor, claimed to have been inspired by Brutus' assassination of Julius Caesar.

**5.** He opened fire with a machine gun while Charles De Gaulle was being driven, at 70 mph, along the Avenue de la Liberation, Paris

**6.** He placed a bomb under Hitler's briefing table

**7.** He fired five shots at the President-elect, who was giving a speech from the back of an open car in Miami, Florida. The Mayor of Chicago, Anton Cermak, was killed.

**8.** Four, between April 7th and October 31st.

Blomfield 5/-, etc ... these two collectors collecting a total of 19 skeins of wool, 1 pair of socks and £5/3/- on this occasion.

One newspaper report, again referring to this Candelo Knitting Class which had organised a 'gift evening' reads: *The ladies, of course had everything 'just so' and they almost convinced the writer (a mere male) that they can run a show 'middling well' with but trifling assistance from mere men. They 'door-keeped' their own doors, and announced their own items, and generally managed their own business successfully.* Perhaps this is a male-chauvinist view, or perhaps it is simply a reflection of social attitudes of the day!

These same ladies regularly packed and despatched 'comforts' parcels to those serving overseas. In August 1917, for example, the Candelo Knitting Class posted 53 parcels to local soldiers – all of whom were named in the local paper – each containing two pair of socks, and most of them a tussore silk shirt, handkerchiefs, cigarettes, tobacco, soap, sweets, etc..

Their efforts were obviously appreciated, the local newspaper reporting one returned soldier saying *the extent of our appreciation for the club's efforts is beyond words. I am sure your members would feel well repaid if you were able to witness the opening of one of the club parcels and see how very welcome and acceptable they are. I can safely speak for all recipients, for I know from experience of this section how keen the boys are on real 'Aussie comforts'.*

(This Candelo Knitting Class was actually a remarkably interesting group of women and, has a whole chapter devoted to it in *'The Unreal Story of World War I and the NSW South Coast'*. Despite it being extraordinarily successful, and its work being clearly valued, the government – incredibly – closed it down. And the reason, indirectly, was the Red Cross. The government wanted fund raising efforts to focus on support of national needs, not to benefit local patriotic causes, so closed down the Candelo Knitting Class and suggested its remaining funds be given to the Red Cross.

The fiercely independent ladies of Candelo would have none of that, so they gave the money to the local Repatriation Fund, which incidentally the government also – but unsuccessfully – tried to close down, and not to the Red Cross!)

One of the defining features of World War I was it was a static war, primarily fought from trenches – those trenches were full of mud and water, a new medical condition trench foot emerged, and the best way to avoid it was to keep the feet dry ... which in practice meant wearing as many clean, dry socks as possible.

Soldiers often wrote home asking for more socks

to be sent. Over 1 million pairs were knitted and sent from Australia. There would have been few females at the time who didn't knit – and that even extended to school age children. Hand-knitted socks are probably also the most symbolic contribution that local women made to WWI – and socks were possibly as symbolic to local women as the Flanders Poppy was to the men who fought!!

### To the Sock Knitters

*This tale is of socks—all kinds of socks,  
Socks that have been to the war.  
Many have passed the first bloom of youth,  
And cannot be worn any more;  
Socks that were knitted with coarse wool and fine,  
And woven so tidy and neat;  
Socks for the Colonel and Corporal alike,  
Socks for all kinds of feet.*

*Some have been knitted by wee little tots,  
Who could scarce read the 'knit' and the 'purl';  
Others were made by the sweetheart at home,  
And contained a lock or a curl;  
Then there's the socks which the mothers would send,  
With a promise of plenty more,  
Each stitch bore a blessing, a tear, and a sigh,  
And a prayer for their boys at the war.*

*There's no doubt about it, the socks at the war  
Have played an important part;  
Why, even the sight of a nice new pair  
Would gladden the soldier's heart.  
At the end of a damp and dreary day,  
After marching in snow and sleet,  
What better would suit a soldier's need  
Than warm, dry socks for his feet.*

*So mothers, and sisters, and sweethearts,  
Be glad that you learned to knit.  
In knitting and purling those socks for the boys  
You were helping to do your 'bit'.  
But now that the war is over,  
Do not lay your needles aside,  
Won't you make some things for the orphans,  
To brighten their Xmas tide?*

(Written just days after the World War I Armistice had been signed, this appeared in Candelo's *Southern Record and Advertiser* newspaper on 14th December 1918.)

Local women played other, perhaps less major, roles during the war.

They were a powerful aid to recruiting. Young girls were encouraged to kiss those in uniform ... and certainly there was some encouragement in local newspapers for young lasses not to associate with young men who had not joined up.

The role that women played as army recruiters is illustrated by a report from Berry, when the

Waratahs recruiting march arrived in that town and a recruiting meeting was held. *No recruits seemed to be forthcoming until one of the orators made this electric appeal – “here, all the women who would enlist if they were men, step up on the platform” All the women stepped up lively. The men at once got a thrill which warmed their feet, and ten were enrolled.*

The lads who enlisted, regrettably, didn't always show similar loyalty to local lasses.

A number found other girls and married whilst overseas – which is probably hardly surprising considering that it took almost a year to organise shipping to bring all Australian soldiers home after the war, so by 1919 marriages of Australian men in Britain were averaging 300 per month – and some interesting stories are included in local newspapers. For example, *Among a recent consignment of ‘pommy’ brides coming to Australia were two young women, one 20, the other 24; one married an Anzac six months ago, and the other was duly wedded to an Anzac 11 months ago. The two got chummy on the trip out, and began to compare notes. Eventually they compared photos of hubbies, and were slightly disturbed to find them precisely the same. Of course the noble Anzac wasn't there to meet either of them.* And another newspaper report reads: *One of the war brides who recently arrived from England is looking for a husband who gave his address as ‘Sydney Domain’.*

But taking away many of the young men did cause some genuine social problems locally, as the Cobargo Chronicle noted in a letter they had received from ‘a prepossessing young lady’: *My chance, along with the chances of scores of other girls, was wrecked when the pick of the boys went to the front. Then it was wrecked some more when the A.I.F. lads (who used to write home and in the light of recent events ironically signed themselves ‘Always in Fondness’) began to marry girls across the water. If that was not enough, there is now keen competition for the boys who are left, and we have to contest with kids in very short frocks who are hardly old enough to be trusted to ‘wipe up’ the kitchen crockery, and are certainly not yet past their merry-go round days or their first blouse.*

In fact, the number of marriages in Australia dropped 23.5% between 1914 and 1918 (which is hardly surprising when one remembers that 38.7% of males age 18 to 44 enlisted in the AIF), so this ‘prepossessing young lady’ was highlighting a seismic social shift that resulted from the war – that had an effect for several generations afterwards.

(Prime Minister Billy Hughes tried to introduce marriage by proxy on two occasions, so that men serving overseas in the Australian Imperial Force

could marry Australian girls left at home without being physically present at a ceremony. He hoped this would solve three problems – first, the problems associated with unmarried girls discovering they were pregnant after their soldier-boy had departed for Europe, and were therefore unable to arrange a quick marriage to retain their respectability; second, to provide some relief and solace to Australian sweethearts who were suffering from a very long, unanticipated separation – caused by the war – from the man who they might normally have married; and third, he hoped that marriage by proxy might reduce the very high rate of VD among Australian troops, reasoning that married soldiers would be less likely to risk catching VD that would unmarried soldiers.

His proposals were howled down by the Churches and by groups normally promoting the interests of soldiers, their main arguments being that it would increase promiscuity among young ladies who were associating with lads about to leave for overseas, and that it would encourage ‘gold diggers’ – girls who realised they could receive a pension if their husband-by-proxy was not to return to Australia.)

In something of the same way that young women were encouraged to kiss those in uniform, mothers and wives of those who enlisted were given medals, which they proudly wore, to signify their sons or husbands were doing their duty, their family was supporting the war, and simultaneously to shame other mothers and wives who were not wearing similar medals. These medals had bars on them – one bar for each additional lad who enlisted ... and stars were later added to these badges to signify that their lad or lads had been killed serving King and country.

Those unfortunate enough to be a woman with a German sounding name had an added cross to bear.

Australians of German descent were vilified during WWI. The government made things worse by disseminating quite scurrilous, deliberately false and deliberately inflammatory anti-German propaganda ... which resulted in many locals – because the south coast had a significant population of German heritage – having to change their names. Holzhausers became Kingstons, other Holzhausers became Johnsons, Rheinbergers became Ryans. There are several cases reported in newspapers of the time of local Australian women with German-sounding names prosecuting – successfully – other local women for vilifying them.

So local women in World War I played an interesting part in our history and certainly had some interesting stories to tell – but really the war experiences of women during WWI confirmed, rather than challenged, their existing place in society.

## South Coast History 101 : A Land of 'Droughts and Flooding Rains'

The South Coast has a recurring history of devastating bushfires and floods. Local conditions influenced how severe these events were in any particular area, but, as an example, the Bega Valley suffered from major floods in the following years. Bega Valley also averages 60 bushfires per year, the most severe being in 1952:

- |      |   |      |   |
|------|---|------|---|
| 1851 | Severe flood. 17 lives lost. Many others were saved by Aboriginals in bark canoes. The old Bega town site was covered by 20' to 30' of water. | 1878 | 2 floods.   |
| 1852 | 2 Floods.   | 1891 | Flood.  |
| 1857 | Flood.  | 1893 | Severe flood, almost as big as 1851. 8 bridges washed away.   |
| 1860 | Several floods.   | 1898 | After 28" of rain the whole district was covered in flood water. The punt at the mouth of the Bega River sank and it took 3 weeks for it to be recovered. |
| 1870 | Severe flood following 18" of rain. Aboriginal boys swam to save young calves in the Tarraganda area.   | 1900 | Flood. Double Creek Bridge (north of Bega) was destroyed.   |
| 1873 | 2 Floods.   | 1908 | Flood. The Mail coach from Cobargo was washed down Auckland Street, Bega, and one horse drowned.  |
| 1874 | Flood. 3 people drowned.  | 1913 | Flood, after 11" of rain fell in 35 hours. "A bad stench hung over the town for weeks."   |
|      |   | 1914 | 25" of rain caused the river to rise to 23'. The bridge to North Bega was undermined (importantly, this was the only access to the butter factory).       |



Bega Flood, 1914.

- 1919 A long-remembered flood. The river rose to 27' 9". The bridge over Gowing's Creek at Jellat Jellat (the flat area to the east of Bega) was swept away. "The whole of Mr. W.W. Wren's dairy herd was drowned."
- 1922 A big flood after 12" of rain in 1 week.
- 1925 2 floods after the area received 32" of rain in 2 months. Two Yarranung (north east of Bega on the other side of the river) farmers were drowned whilst trying to get their cream to the butter factory. In Moruya (which received over 19" of rain over 4 days) the SS *Bermagui* was washed over the river retaining wall into the town swimming pool.
- 1926 Bushfires described as a "calamitous conflagration" extended from south of Eden to Candelo and Bega. "At one time it looked as if the whole town (Eden) would be swept away – the Eden wharf was set alight several times and the Boydtown Church lost its shingle roof."
- 1928 Flood, following 10" of rain in 48 hours. Mr Robertson of Dr. George Mountain drowned whilst trying to cross Jellat Jellat flats. The punt at the mouth of the Bega River was carried downstream.
- 1934 'A disaster'. A bigger flood than that of 1919. This was one of Bega's wettest years (72" 19', compared to the district annual average of just over 33") and the district was actually flooded six times. Moran's Crossing bridge was washed away in June (having just been repaired after receiving damage in February). Brogo Bridge was washed away, so a flying fox had to be erected over the river to enable people and goods to pass. The judges' box at Bega Racecourse was washed downstream to Tathra Beach. The piles of Cuttagee Bridge were undermined. The river pumping station at Bega was flooded.
- 1948 Floods. Princes Hwy was covered in a number of places and 2½' of water covered the Snowy Mountains Highway.
- 1950 Flood in February.
- 1952 The worst fire then known in Bega.
- 1952 Flood in June, with one man drowned in heavy seas at Tathra.
- 1952 Bushfire described as "the worst disaster that has ever hit a country area of N.S.W." Much of the "countryside exploded" from just south of Tilba Tilba to the Victorian border. 3 people were killed, including two sisters from Upper Brogo. About £2 million in property damage resulted.
- 1956 Floods in February and May. 63" of rain was received up to May, including 13" of rain received in 2 days in May. The Princes Hwy collapsed at Frog's Hollow, the business centre of Bega was inundated.
- 1957 Flood.
- 1957 "Holocaust" bushfires around Eden.
- 1959 Flood in February and a bigger one in October.
- 1963 Major flood.
- 1966 Flood. The main street of Bega was covered by flood waters and there was 1' of water over the Snowy Mountains Hwy.
- 1971 Flood broke all records. The Bega River rose to 9.78metres, 1 to 1.5m above previous records. 2 people lost their lives and 50 bridges were destroyed including Handcock Bridge at Tathra, which lost 9 of its 15 spans. Tathra was without power for a week. Moruya Head was isolated for 4 days.
- 1974 Flooding at Jellat Jellat flats. One man was drowned.
- 1975 Major flood, peaking at 7.40 metres.
- 1978 Three floods in 10 weeks. One peaked at 7.20 metres.
- 1992 Two major floods, one in February peaking at 7.40 metres and another in December peaking at 7.15 metres.
- 1998 Major flood peaking at 7.00 metres.
- 2011 Major flood, peaking at 8.47 metres, the highest since 1971.

Further information:

*History of Bega Floods 1851–1978* by Bernice E Smith.

*Floods of February 1971 on the South Coast* by Water Resources Commission of NSW.

*Bega and Brogo Rivers Flood Study at Bega* by Bega Valley Shire Council, 2014

*The Bega Bushfires of 1952* by Sandra Florance.