

Building the lock and weir system along the Murray River was arguably the most significant development of inland Australian settlement. But it hasn't really been given the attention it deserves - until now, following a Mildura historian's exhaustive research

Book planned on Murray River lock and weir history

By ALAN ERSKINE



EVER since she was a young girl, Mildura's Helen Stagg has had a fascination for all things historical...the mystery of the pyramids...gold rush days...ancient civilisation... British settlement - and our own Murray River history.

Especially the Murray, considering her family history and connection to the great waterway, being the grand-daughter of one of the first men to work on the mammoth task of installing the lock and weir systems, which have an influence on three states, Victoria, NSW and SA.

It's fast approaching 100 years since the foundation stone for Lock Number One at Blanchetown, SA, was laid - June 5, 1915 - and Helen is in a race against time to document the journey in book form in time for the centenary.

It's been a huge job, starting five years ago, but with patience, methodical research, dogged determination and a willingness to travel anywhere, any time to any place, Helen is at last starting to make inroads, and has the basis for a book that is long overdue, documenting an engineering feat that almost rivals the great Snowy Mountains scheme of roughly the same era.

Fresh from achieving her Masters of History at the University of New England, based on early lock research, Helen is now expanding her research material to work on her book project, in memory of her lock worker grandfather, and to honour her mother Evelyn May Rains, who spent her childhood at Locks One, Five, Six and Seven between 1919 and 1934. Evelyn died in 2001, but not before she had passed on many exciting, interesting and intriguing stories of early lock life.

"I was always fascinated by the story of the mammoth engineering feat of taming the River Murray, and the construction of locks and weirs to ensure a reliable supply of water for irrigation and navigation," Helen said.

"The SA Government's role in this scheme was enormous, being responsible not only for locks one to six within its borders, but also for the interstate locks seven, eight and nine, and the barrages at the Murray Mouth at Goolwa."

After a slow start to her research, Helen concentrated on accident records of the day, the only work 'diary' that had been faithfully documented. It was obvious that construction work was difficult and dangerous, with workers facing huge challenges with basic equipment, often under harsh conditions, involving tough physical labour for many hours on end with no protective gear or safety guidelines.

Mishaps were common, and Helen pored over more than 500 accident reports, getting the names of workers who had been injured, and a few who suffered permanent disabilities or were killed, and traced some family members. She managed to interview seven elderly people who were children of lock workers, documented her mother's early recollections, and also obtained other valuable historical data from the Public Records offices of Victoria and SA, and Engineering and Water Supply Department records.



• Mildura's Helen Stagg at Lock 11. That's her mother, Evelyn Rains as a young girl, LEFT, and BELOW, Lock One at Blanchetown.

ria and SA, and Engineering and Water Supply Department records.

Other research has involved the analysis of personal letters, photos and newspaper reports, as well as site visits to each of the locks. Helen found the lock history fascinating, starting when investigations by various State authorities over many years resulted in the Murray Waters Act of 1914. (The River Murray Waters Agreement was signed by NSW, Victoria, and SA, and established the River Murray

moved to work in the construction of the barrages at the Murray mouth at the completion of locks seven and eight, a group of others moved with their families to Mildura. They included Arthur and Ernest Rains, Charles Adams, Ernest Glen, Herbert Hubbard, George Boseley, Thomas Cawley, John Mullane and Les Dadds, most of whom moved to homes in Eaglesham Street.

Her patient research turned up stories from young school students, including her

Helen's book will tell the story of the construction of the locks and weirs by the SA Engineering and Water Supply Department between 1915 and 1935, with a focus on the lives of the men who built the massive structures, and the many hundreds of wives and children who lived in the temporary townships that sprang up as each Lock was started.



Commission, which later became the Murray-Darling Basin Commission. 2014.)

Noted river authority Captain George Ritchie, a member of the SA Parliament at the time, suggested the order they should be built, not necessarily in sequence, thus allowing build-up of water over many kilometres of river, for irrigation, diversions, catchments and navigation.

Helen's grandfather Arthur Rains worked on the first of the massive structures, lock one at Blanchetown, before moving on to locks five, six and seven. He and other workers had to continually re-locate their families from temporary riverbank townships, along with facilities that included a Post Office and school.

Helen found that while many of the men

Mum, who had many of their experiences documented in one of the river newspapers of the day, in the popular 'Mopoke' column. The Rains kids were among the main contributors over an 18-month period.

Evelyn Rains, one of the six Rains kids, recalled crossing the river at Paringa and walking into town with her Dad to go to the pictures, a matinee, but normally, the 'lock people' didn't have to go to Renmark for social occasions such as sporting events and dances. They organised their own, and many Renmark people went to lock five to attend such events. Movies were also shown at the lock camps.

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'Going Blue for Stroke' fund-raiser

CHILDHOOD stroke survivor Emma Clarke, 27, is committed to making a difference in the Sunraysia community, so much so that she is organising a special event tomorrow night aimed at helping to raise money and support for the National Stroke Foundation.

Called 'Going Blue for Stoke in Mildura', the event is aimed at raising awareness about childhood stroke, while also raising funds to help aid the recovery of stroke victims.

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• SuniTAFE employees Kelly Vale, left, and Brittany Carr, right, are pictured with Going Blue for Stroke organiser Emma Clarke. Emma is a childhood stroke survivor, and all the funds raised through the event will go to the National Stroke Foundation.

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