Australia Day 2016 Red Cliffs: The Construction of Locks 1 to 9 on the River Murray: Some insights into the life and times of the people involved 1915-1935

When invited to give this talk for Australia Day, I paused to reflect on my experience of being Australian. Having spent my childhood on a block and many of my adult years here in Sunraysia, I found a key ingredient for me is my enduring family connections with the Mighty Murray River. Therefore, I will share with you today, some stories of our predecessors whose toils have contributed to the well-being of all who live along the Murray, that is stories of the men who worked to build the Murray River's series of locks and weirs, without which towns like Red Cliffs and Mildura would struggle for survival.

2015 marked one hundred years, not only of the Anzacs' arrival at Gallipoli but also of the locks and weirs of the Murray River. This history is not well-known and in 2015 I launched a book titled 'Harnessing the River Murray,' the culmination of over five years of archival research plus interviews with the elderly who had spent their childhood years on the river lock construction camps from as early as 1915. My book honours the memory of these brave, hard-working people who displayed characteristics which we still value as part of our Australian identity: friendship, mutual support, hard work and resilience sprinkled with a good dose of fun, laughter and hope for the future.

When the lockworks came to an end, the lock-worker families dispersed and their descendants are now members of our communities.

In 2010, I interviewed Henry Milne's brother, the late Max Milne from the Nangiloc/Colignan area. His father, Stuart, had worked for a short time at the Lock 2 construction before the family moved to Sunraysia. Max Milne told me how his father worked as a steam-engine driver, on the pump which continually drained the coffer dam which enclosed the work area. Working the night shift under carbide lights, this was a lonely job, but Stuart Milne enjoyed watching the stars. Max Milne recalled some of the hard work his mother also did. Like many women, she baked their bread, and she would cut down his father's clothes to make outfits for the children. He told me how exciting it would be for the lock residents when the sound of the paddlesteamer's whistle heralded the arrival of supplies and the people keenly gathered in anticipation on the river bank.

Another Red Cliffs resident, Gaye Krake is the grand-daughter of a lock worker. Her grandfather, John Mullane was also a steam engineman as was her great

grandfather, Robert Hawkes. Together they worked at various locks including Locks 4, 7, 9, 10 and 15. Gaye's mother, Marjorie Francis, who grew up at the locks, shared some wonderful memories of her childhood. She recalled her mother and grandmother stitching calico bags together with twine to form the walls of their simple bush homes. She noted too, the spirit of cooperation which prevailed in each of the lock camps; people shared their resources with others. With the river always close, swimming was an essential skill and Marjorie told me the amusing story of her aunt Nancy, just a few years older than herself, being taught to swim. Robert Hawkes, Nancy's father, who reportedly 'could swim like a fish' would tie a rope around her middle, the other end of which was attached to his boat and he would then row across the river: needless to say, Nancy learnt to swim!

Local Red Cliffs identity, Tom Keating's late wife Norma, was the granddaughter of Ernest Rains, who with his brother, Arthur, my grandfather, laboured for almost twenty years at various lock sites before settling in Mildura at the completion of works. Jenny Gowers is Ernest Rains Great-grand-daughter. We are among the thousands of descendants of the lock-builders who are now spread throughout the country.

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A small insight into the background history before I explore a few other stories of the lock workers, The Murray Darling Basin has supported human activity for over 40,000 years with many Aboriginal Nations enjoying a long and strong connection with its rivers and landscapes. The inevitable exploration which occurred after the arrival of the first Europeans to Australia led amongst other things, to the spread of agriculture, with rivers providing an essential and sustaining resource.

From the 1850s, the Murray River became an inland 'highway' for the transportation by paddle-steamer of perishable goods to inland pastoralists and for the return of wool to ocean ports for export.

The first irrigation settlements on the Murray River were established at Mildura and Renmark in the 1880s by the Chaffey brothers for the production of fresh

and dried fruit and wine. The earliest settlers pumped water directly from the river for their crops and their town water supply systems.

In the drought of 1902-1903, the Murray in many places, became little more than a series of stagnant waterholes, rendering irrigation and navigation impossible. Farmers literally left high and dry during this searing drought, protested loudly about better water supplies and their cries were heard along the Murray Valley. Solutions to these problems took decades as fierce interstate rivalries led to ongoing debate and indecision about the regulation and control of the river's flow. It was not until 1914 that the River Murray Waters Agreement was made, paving the way for lock and weir construction. In 1915, the agreement was ratified by Acts of Parliament passed simultaneously by the Commonwealth and the states of Victoria, NSW and SA granting approval for lock and weir and storage construction.

Just a few years earlier than the birth of Red Cliffs, South Australia led the way and a start was made on 5 June, 1915 with the laying of the foundation stone at Lock 1, Blanchetown in SA.

Just as in the Gold Rushes of the 1850s, people came from far and wide seeking work on the lockworks; many came from the mines in Broken Hill and Wallaroo, and even from the battlefields of Europe and Gallipoli, bringing with them various trades and skills.

On the locks in South Australia, small townships sprang up where the men, women and children forged relationships founded on hard work and mutual support. These townships were temporary and on the completion of work at each site, on average after about four years, the 'town' would literally pull up stumps, move to a new patch of bush and begin again. These communities formed all the way along the river from Blanchetown to Yarrawonga, and also at the Hume Dam, Lake Victoria and the barrages at the Murray Mouth.

The lock work-sites were dangerous. Alongside the distinct absence of the Occupational Health and Safety Standards we are accustomed to today, a drained riverbed, walled off by a temporary coffer dam, with heavy materials, including rocks, cement, mountains of timber, steam-driven derrick cranes and heavy loads passing overhead via a flying fox --created hazards. Over many

years of research, I discovered over 500 accident reports, many of them serious and some of them fatal.

One accident which I found particularly intriguing since it took me six months to track down the official archival report for it, was one I was told about by one of my interviewees. Max Pearson, who was in his 90s when he told me the story, recalled the severe accident which happened in 1923 at Lock 9 near Lake Cullulleraine, to his father Bertie. Bertie Pearson was working as a foreman supervising a group of men on the pile frame. They were preparing the floor of the lock chamber, driving wooden piles between 30 and 40 feet into the riverbed when a large spanner fell from the top of the pile-frame on to his head.

Max was only a youngster at the time, but he vividly recalled the accident's aftermath. He said: It is… imprinted in my mind and is one of the most tragic things that happened in our family.… The workmen carried my father up home and put him on the bed. By that time, they had phoned through to the doctor at Wentworth, Dr Chenery. He came out as soon as he could and after examining my father, he took my mother aside and said, 'I'm sorry Mrs Pearson to tell you this but I don't think your husband will see the morning.'

Max remembered that in the morning, his mother was sitting down and crying and wondering how she would cope with her seven children including her 6-month old baby. Max said: "I can remember that very, very clearly and I guess I will till the end of my days."

Bertie did survive but was unable to return to work for four months, during which time, the family struggled to make ends meet. Although Dr Chenery's initial prognosis proved untrue, Bertie suffered pain and headaches for the rest of his life. He had further time off work due to his injuries nine years later at Lock 7, when he was sent to the Adelaide Hospital for specialist attention. When Bertie died aged 54 in 1937 whilst working at the Goolwa Barrages, his doctor believed the original work injury contributed to his early death.

On top of the regular trials of eking out an existence in these remote and harsh conditions, the Great Depression was a time of extreme hardship for everyone. The Basic Wage was cut by 10 per cent and from September 1930, drastic cuts

were made to the lock-workers' hours with married men receiving just two-thirds of their regular hours and wages.

Added to these hardships, the huge 1931 flood, interrupted work for six months at Locks 7 and 8, both near Lake Victoria, and the men's hours were further cut. 130 married men were put on half-time and the remaining single men were put onto one-quarter time. The financial constraints led to the Lock 7 and 8 residents requested a suspension of the rent paid on their tiny tin homes.

In 1930 at Lock 7, my grandmother, Florence Rains, was struggling to feed her family of 6. Half-time wages were about £2 and 6d per week, and Florence found herself in dire straits. My mother, who was aged about 11 years old at the time, recalled, "Mum decided to raffle her sewing machine for threepence a ticket, and I had to go door to door in the tiny town selling the tickets." The sewing machine was a well-used tool in a woman's household and the forced sale of such a precious commodity indicates the degree of Florence's financial distress. People everywhere during the Depression were going without proper meals and as Charlie Adams, another lock-child who shared his family story with me, said, if it wasn't for fish and rabbits, many would have starved.

In these isolated areas away from quick access to good hospital care, serious illness posed great challenges and deaths resulted which may have been preventable in more settled areas. Returned AIF soldier, Chas Bottrill, a lad from Wilcannia, had met the love of his life in England whilst on leave. He married Annie Paddy in December 1917 before bringing her back to Australia where he finally found work as a labourer at Lock 7. It was there in the early 1930s, with two school aged sons, that appendicitis claimed Annie's life so far from her homeland, in the Australian bush. Annie's final resting place is the Wentworth cemetery, and when I visit her grave, I ponder on the impact of her death on the people at Lock 7.

In March 1928, another tragic case involved champion swimmer Billy Magnay, who drowned at Lock 4, while saving the life of the daughter of a fellow lock worker. Magnay had been enjoying a picnic on a bend in the river with several families when the tragedy occurred. Over 100 lock workers gave up a day's pay to help drag the river, and most of them also attended his funeral in Loxton. Aged just 36, Magnay left a wife and young family and in a very short time, a

collection amongst the men, raised the sum of £132 10s to assist them. In addition, the men organised a working bee to erect a tombstone on Magnay's grave with a large marble scroll bearing the words, "Greater love hath no man than this." Later that year, William Magnay was awarded a posthumous bravery award.

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These lock-building communities shaped and re-shaped as they followed the work along the river. Geographical isolation failed to prevent them from hurling themselves into life at full throttle. Through working bees, they established town facilities including tennis courts, football ovals, cricket pitches and even horse-racing tracks. Social committees organised regular sports, movies, dances and celebrations of every description. Fundraising activities provided extras like furniture for the cottage hospital as well as pianos, wireless equipment and movie projectors for entertainment. When services like schools or health care were lacking, they signed petitions and used the strength of their collective action to make things happen and when a doctor was finally provided at the remote Lock 7 site, the men dipped into their pay packets to contribute towards his salary. The people stood side by side through the inevitable difficulties they faced: accidents, work reductions, floods, illness and tragedies.

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The Murray which streams by the brick-red cliffs of this town and which provides not only water for our lives and our livelihoods and for much of our recreation as well, could not reliably meet our needs without the efforts of the hard-working lock-builders. Today, as we congratulate and welcome many new Australian citizens, in ceremonies such as this across the nation, I trust that these stories of hard work, friendship, community, courage, hope and tenacity inspire them. I put it to you this Australia day, that the second verse of our National anthem can be well applied to the men, women and children of the lock and weir construction.

Beneath our radiant Southern Cross, We'll toil with hearts and hands,

To make this Commonwealth of ours, Renowned of all the lands.