

ORBOST & DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY INC.

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NEWSLETTER

No. 132 OCTOBER, 2016

THREE SCHOOL BUILDINGS AT BEMM RIVER

The first school building at Lower Bemm River, School No. 4594, opened on 2nd June 1941 and, according to *Vision and Realisation*, closed on 18th August 1942. A second school building, School No. 4909, opened in February 1962 and served until December 1963. This building, replaced in February 1964 by a conventional school and located closer to the Bemm River township, serviced the educational needs of the locality until December 1981, when the building was moved to form part of the Primary School at Nungurner, west of Lakes Entrance.

Two former head teachers who taught at the school in the 1960s have provided anecdotes of their time at Bemm River for inclusion in this Newsletter.

Marilyn Morgan, our vice president, was the initiator of the Newsletter, providing a copy of the notes written by Bob Brady, the first teacher at the Bemm River State School, Term 1, 1962. A phone call to Di Cunningham provided additional information written by Bob, as well as the photographs of Bob.

Mandy Forrester and Lois Crisp assisted in making contact with David Wright who taught at Bemm River from 1963 to 1965. David had earlier attended Orbost High School and was Rowe House captain in 1959. David kindly provided notes and photographs and gave permission for information from his history of *Schools in the Bemm River Area* published in the 1965 *The Gap School Magazine* to be used.

Bronwyn Van der Velden, the current Principal at Nungurner Primary School, gave permission for photographs of the former Bemm River school building; and the photograph of the Bemm River School sign is by courtesy of Ray Kleinitz.

A trip to Bemm River provided much of the additional information and photographs used in the Newsletter. Historical information is from the History Shelter at Bemm River, located on the site of the former Bemm River School.



The first Lower Bemm River School No. 4594

Marilyn Morgan and John Phillips

SCHOOLS IN THE BEMM RIVER AREA

An earlier school, No. 3997 Upper Bemm River, which is listed in the Education Department's *Vision and Realisation*, states that it operated in the early 1920s. The precise location of this school is not known, and little information is available, except that it operated on a part-time basis with other schools such as No. 3843 Glen Arte and No. 3813 Boulder Flat. The Sans Souci Hotel was located at Upper Bemm River so it is assumed this school was located in that area. It is not included here as this newsletter is confined to the Lower Bemm River schools.

SCHOOLS AT LOWER BEMM RIVER

Set amidst natural surroundings, Bemm River from 1941 to 1964 saw the opening of three different schools, to cater for the educational needs of the growing community.

In 1941 the late Sir Albert Lind officially opened S.S. 4594, Lower Bemm River State School, the first educational centre for Bemm River. It was a 20ft x 12ft one-room wooden building constructed on the site of the Blackwood Sawmilling Company. At the time of opening on 2nd June 1941 there were eight children in attendance with Miss Alma Pederson as head teacher.

Later on Miss Poynter took over as head teacher, but with attendance numbers decreasing, the school was closed on 18th August 1942. It is understood that the building was later moved down to the Bemm River township where it served as a holiday house for many years.

'Snowy River Mail', Wednesday, June 18, 1941

NEW SCHOOL OPENED AT LOWER BEMM

Great was the rejoicing at Lower Bemm on the evening of the 7th inst. when a social was held in honor of the opening of the new State School. Opportunity was taken to welcome the new teacher, Miss A. Pederson and a pleasant time was spent. The school supplies an urgent need and opens with ten scholars.

A euchre tournament occupied the first part of the evening. Trophies donated by Mrs. Browne and Mr. D. Morgan, were won by Miss B. Morgan and Major Green.

In calling upon Major Green to officially open the school, Mr. J. Hanson, chairman of the school committee, extended a cordial welcome to all present. Major Green, in the course of his speech, referred to the trend of present day affairs and said that, in his opinion, schools could and should play a major part in the training of the children along the right lines, patriotism being one of the chief things at which to aim. He considered a flag a necessity in the school, and said that Mr. D. Morgan had offered to set the ball rolling with £1. (Voices: Good old Dinny). Other subscriptions came in freely, with the result that nearly £6 was raised.

Mr. Hurst, a visitor at the hotel, very generously offered the school a gramophone, with a number of records.

In thanking Major Green, Mr. Hanson took the opportunity to say that he hoped Miss Pederson would be happy for the duration of her stay at Bemm River.

Supper was served by the ladies, and was greatly enjoyed by all.

The prizes were presented by Mr. D. Morgan, after which the evening was brought to a close with the singing of the National Anthem.

SCHOOL No. 1 - 1941



This school, No. 4594, which opened in 1941, was on the site of the Blackwood Timber Mill about two miles up the river from the Bemm River township.



Miss Alma Pederson the first teacher with — Back row: Colin Wilson, Peter Hansen, Edna Wilson, Norma Wilson. Front row: Maurice White, Robert White, Annie Peachey, George Peachey.

'Snowy River Mail', Wednesday, May 27, 1942

LOWER BEMM SCHOOL

The Empire week appeal at this school was a great success. Only 5 children in attendance held a bazaar, their takings were £5; two euchre parties and a donation from Mr. G. Morriss and Mr. Dinny Morgan brought the total to £7/18/-.

There were races for the children and adults. Mr. Cadwallader 87, won the old-buffers' race, Mrs. Peachy the married ladies' race and Miss Norma Wilson won the single ladies' race.

Thanks must be given to the teacher, Miss Poynter, and all the community who helped to make this function such a success.

SCHOOL BUILDING No. 2

As the township grew with the construction of another timber mill and more farmers settling in the district, it became more apparent of the need for a school once more.

At the time fourteen children were being driven 30km daily to Cabbage Tree Creek Primary School, while three others were struggling through their lessons by correspondence.

With no school building available in 1961, the Blackwood Sawmill Company made a mill hut available as temporary accommodation until the Education Department could provide a proper building.

In February 1962, Mr Robert (Bob) Brady was appointed as the first head teacher. Conditions were not ideal and Mr Brady transferred at the end of Term 1, making way for Mr Ian Stapleton who stayed for the remainder of that year.

Teaching and learning conditions were very poor with circular saws screaming throughout the day only 100 metres away, as well as large trucks and machinery working nearby.

With no playground, limited washing, drinking, and toilet facilities, the children found enjoyment in using the saw dust and log piles for play equipment.

As pupil numbers continued to increase more submissions were drawn up for a new school location.



Shelter Shed which remains at the former Bemm River Road school site after the school was moved.



Left: Bemm River School students when David Wright was head-teacher.

SCHOOL No. 2 - 1962



This school building was also on the site of the Blackwood Timber Mill. The rectangular front section was the school room, and the rear section (the Nissen Hut) was the teacher's residence. The Mini Minor belonged to the teacher, Mr David Wright.

SCHOOL BUILDING No. 3

In 1963 a new site was chosen on Crown Land about 1km from the township. In August 1963 a bulldozer moved in to begin clearing the block.

By February 1964, a new 24ft x 24ft building, along conventional lines, was ready for occupation. After a great deal of work had been completed, including tree removal and the establishment of gardens and lawns, with much of the preparatory work being carried out by the students, the official opening of the new Bemm River School, No. 4909, took place on 28th November 1964.

The twenty-four enrolled students, together with their teacher, Mr. David Wright, attended the official opening. Some of the official party included Cyril Bowden (District Inspector), Bert May (M.L.C.), Charlie Truscott (Orbost Shire President), and E. A. (Ted) Smith (Orbost Shire Councillor).

For over almost 20 years the Bemm River School remained open, often with limited staff and, on some occasions, students receiving their education by correspondence, or from a parent in the local community.

In 1981 the school finally closed due to a lack of student enrolments and teaching staff. In 1982 the students moved to nearby Cabbage Tree Creek Primary School or to Orbost High School to continue their education, while the building was removed to Nungurner Primary School.

The school site then returned to Crown Land until 1990, when the Bemm River Recreation Reserve took it over and formed a committee of management.

Since then work has been undertaken to provide facilities such as tennis courts, toilets, shelter shed, BBQ facilities and an information Slab Hut for local residents and visitors to the area to use.

In February 1985 the school bus service from Cabbage Tree Creek to Orbost was extended to Bemm River to cater for the educational needs of both primary and secondary school students. The primary school children were bussed to Cabbage Tree Creek Primary School, then after its closure in December 1993, to the Orbost Primary School, a round trip of 110 kms each day.

'Snowy River Mail'
Wednesday,
February 26, 1964

New School In Use at Bemm

The new school is now in use and is occupied by 20 pupils. The building was completed during the holidays and is a very fine addition to the Bemm community.

A working bee was held on Sunday last when some members of the committee began the arduous task of clearing and levelling the playing area.

A decorative fence has been purchased for erection round the garden and £100 worth of playground equipment is on order.

NATURE STUDY

Several red back spiders have been found on the school block, together with their egg sacks. Local resident, Mr. Frank Morgan brought along a Pigmy Alider, a very small member of the possum family, which he found inside his gum-boot. This was the first to be found in the area for some time. Unfortunately Mr. Morgan's big foot was too much for the Pigmy Alider, which was dead on arrival.

BEMM RIVER SCHOOL

YEAR	ENROLMENT	TEACHER
1941	8	Alma Pederson
1942	5	Miss Poynter
1962	17	Robert (Bob) Brady Ian Stapleton
1963		David B. Wright
1964	24	David B. Wright
1965	14	David B. Wright
1966	16	James R. Gunn
1967	23	-
1968	14	-
1969	14	Jamie C. Hutton Lorraine J. White
1970	7	Adam Korab
1971	4	Noel R. Fuller Ralph T. Dugins
1972	14	Geoffrey F. Ginnivan
1973	14	P. G. Douglas
1974	10	Peter W. Young Brian P. Coe
1975	17	Kay M. Nichols
1976	10	Lesley Robertson
1977	12	J. Shere
1978	11	J. Shere
1979	7	Glen Orchard
1980	11	Glen Orchard
1981	6	Chris Eales

'Snowy River Mail'
Wednesday,
December 2, 1964

First School 25 Years Ago

The first school at Bemm River was a small building erected some 25 years ago, on what is now the site of the Blackwood Timber Mill — two miles up the river from the township.

The building was eventually closed through lack of pupils.

From that date until 1962, Bemm's nearest school was at Cabbage Tree, 17 miles away, to which centre up to 14 children of the district were taken by private car in the morning and called for in the afternoon.

This totalled a daily trip of 68 miles.

Further difficulty was encountered as time went on as some of the children had to attend Orbost High, which necessitated leaving early enough to allow these pupils time to catch the school bus to travel the further 22 miles to Orbost. This, with the wait for the school bus in the evening, meant leaving home in the winter before daybreak and returning after dark.

During these years repeated requests were made to the Education Department for a school without success.

Then in 1962, following petitions through parliamentary representatives, a teacher was provided and a temporary school set up.

Later the present school was erected and occupied this year. [1964]

SCHOOL No. 3 - 1964

Below: The former Bemm River School building after its removal to Nungurner P.S. in 1982. The school room was added to the Nungurner Primary School building.

Below Right: The Bemm River School sign removed from building after its arrival at Nungurner.



Bemm River State School by Bob Brady, Head Teacher, Term 1, 1962

The Bemm River Primary School opened in February 1962. I was the first head teacher (age 19 years, straight out of Teachers' College).

The school building was a rectangular timber structure added to the front of a Nissen Hut. The school room was in this structure and I lived in the Nissen Hut part.

The school was situated in the Blackwood Saw Mill operated by the Keenan and Melrose families. The Keenan family lived on site in the mill as did several families and singles, all connected with working at the saw mill. The Melrose family lived at Paynesville with Mr Melrose staying at the mill through the week.

It was a tough start to the school year as there were no desks, tables, or chairs, no books, pens, pencils, etc. I purchased some of the latter in Orbost, got some blackboard paint and chalk, painted a wall with the Blackboard paint and we got things up and running.

We started with 17 children, most of whom lived on the sawmill. The Keenan family and Bell family each had several children attending and an aboriginal family also attended. The Sergent family lived nearer the town and had 2 children attending and the Morgan family had a farm near the town and had 2 children in attendance.

The Blackwood Sawmill was just across the Bemm River about a mile or so short of the township. There was another sawmill a little closer to the town.

The township consisted of a Post Office (my only source of a phone), a hotel and a general store which also sold petrol (I think). There was also a service station on the corner of the Bemm River Road and the Princes Highway (at Manorina).

Huge black snakes, kangaroos and wombats were plentiful, the latter two making the drive in quite dangerous at times.

The school had a can system toilet and the weekly hole dig and empty was not one of my most pleasant jobs.

I got to know the Bell family quite well. They had come out from Scotland and Jock and Mary had 8 children. They lived in a house (?), two up from the school building - it was called the "Boarding House" - you could not stay there but you could get meals there. I dined there quite often and used to light the fires in the two stoves early most mornings. This resulted in quite a few free feeds.

There was no power in the school building or the Nissen Hut. I had two kerosene lamps, a small kerosene stove and a kerosene fridge. A couple of good torches also came in very handy.

I slept on a mattress on the kitchen table. I showered and laundered down in the mill. Late each afternoon the mill would heat a huge tank on a tall stand with a steam hose. There was a tap and shower-head under the tank surrounded by temporary walls and a door. Quite a few of the single workers also used this facility.

I stayed at the school for all of Term 1 and during the May holidays I was transferred to the Caulfield Primary School.

It was tough initiation to teaching but one I treasure to this day. The school children were terrific - well behaved and keen to learn, and the parents were very friendly, co-operative and helpful.

The sawmill owners gave great support. When our furniture arrived at the Orbost railway station they arranged the trucks to collect it and deliver it to the school.



Bob Brady just prior to his appointment to Bemm River School.

My parents took out an insurance policy when I was young to provide me with a car after I completed university. We went for a test drive in a front drive mini minor.

I arrived home one day, and there was the blue mini in the driveway. It was the third mini minor ever sold in Victoria. The car was purchased in 1961, and had a floor mounted starter button. The wires used to scrub out on the rough roads into the Bemm as the mini was so low to the ground.

One day I had to be pushed down the hill from the mill site to start the car. I called at the service station at Manorina on my way home to Melbourne, and the owner kindly relocated the starter button onto the dash.

It used to take me at least seven hours to drive to Melbourne, and on one trip the highway was flooded at Warragul. I was held up and can't remember how long it took me to get home.



A recent photograph of Bob Brady.

Bemm River State School by David Wright, Head Teacher, 1963-65

In 1963 the school was a hut on the Blackwood Timber Mill site. The front section was the school room, the rear was the teachers residence.

The hut was about 100 metres from the saws so noise was a major problem.

The pupils were mainly mill workers' children and were very itinerant. I think I had approximately 65 students in my first year but never more than about 30 at any one time.

When the new school was built I moved and boarded with the Morgan family.

When the new school was built the playing area was a major problem, however, a group of Country Roads Board men were working on the local roads and staying at the Bemm River Hotel. The local publican (Mr Jock Joughin) convinced the workers he would look after them if they would grade the school grounds and they did a wonderful job.

The entrance at the Bemm closes regularly and the level of the lake causes local flooding. This meant the school had to close because the teacher couldn't get to school. The teacher then became part of the working group to help dig out the channel which really was a great experience.

The school dentist would arrive once a year in his much dented truck. Dentists were generally not very good drivers. Following his work at the school he would set up outside the hotel and look after the adults.

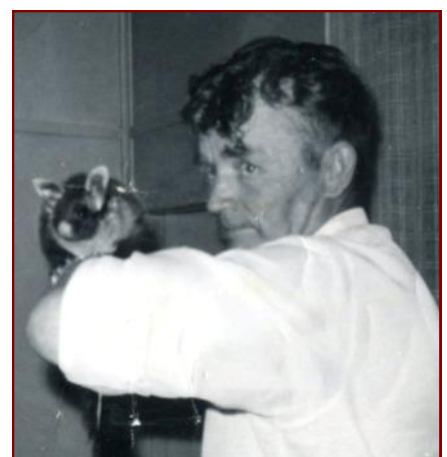
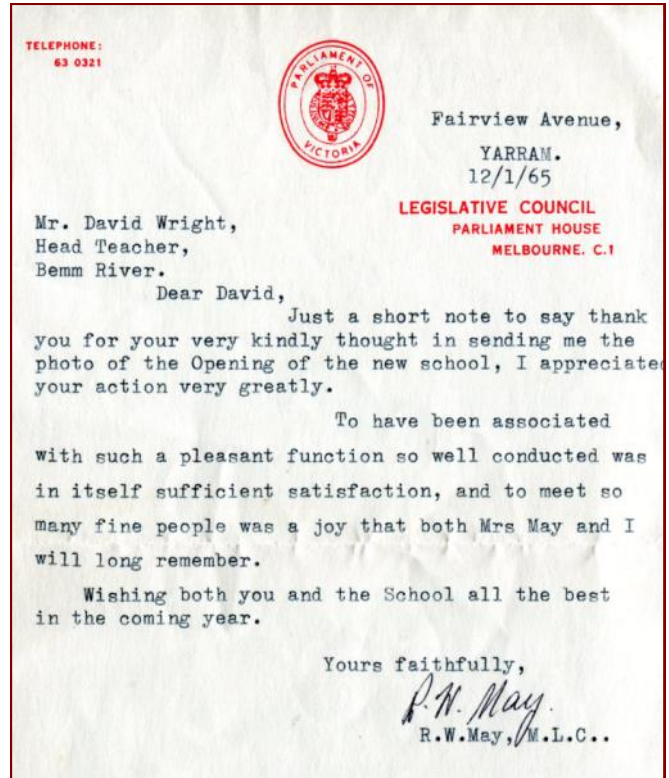
A highlight was the school Easter carnival. This was established in 1964 and was held at Easter to take advantage of visitors and holiday makers. It was the major school fundraiser and was extremely successful.

Below: David Wright with the history board in the shelter at the site of the former School, now under the control of the Bemm River Recreation Reserve committee of management.



Left: David Wright, House Captain of Rowe House at Orbost High School, Form 5, 1959.

Below: A letter from R. W. (Bert) May, M.L.C., following the official opening of the new Bemm River School on 28th November 1964.



Above: Eddie Morgan and 'Ringo'. David boarded with Eddie and Ann Morgan and family after the school moved from the Blackwood Saw Mill hut to the purpose built school on the Bemm River Road.