

ORBOST HISTORICAL SOCIETY INC.

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NEWSLETTER

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'Snowy River Mail', Wednesday, March 20, 1963:

Early Days Of Orbost



Awaiting Turn at Borland's Blacksmiths
An early scene of Orbost's main street about 1890

(Contributed by Mrs. M. Roberts (nee Maggie Stirling) a member of one of the original and foundation families of Orbost).

As far as I can gather, the first settlement of Orbost took place in the year 1842, when Peter Imlay, son of a Scottish doctor, brought cattle from New South Wales and settled on the eastern side of the Snowy River at Orbost.

Hostile Blacks

The blacks, then very hostile, speared so many of the cattle that Mr. Imlay mustered as many as he could, about 500, out of 800 taken there, and returned to NSW. He sold those remaining on the run to Norman and John McLeod who held the station until 1870, when it was taken over by the late W. J. D. Clarke.

During the early years, Mr. McLeod had several encounters with blacks, and narrow escapes from death at their hands. On one occasion he had to get assistance from Sale to disperse the natives. A cook on the station, named Dan, was

the only death that occurred as far as I know.

In 1850 the Lakes Entrance run was occupied by the late Thomas Roadknight. In 1852 his brother William took charge. Soon after this Corringale Station was occupied by the late T. T. Stirling. (Corringale means shallow water). I am unable to give exact dates; but about 1866 T. T. Stirling went to reside at Bruthen and the late James Stirling, afterwards of Marlo, took charge.

Wet Years

At this time there was a succession of wet years and all the low country remained flooded, isolating the stations and making transport very difficult. All stores had to be brought from Lakes Entrance, Lake Tyers remaining open to the sea.

Ewings Marsh in constant flood, the only settlers, Messrs McLeod and Stirling, often had to do without the necessities of life and not receiving any letter for perhaps many weeks at a time. When journeys had to be taken to Lakes Entrance or Bruthen often risking life in the flooded creeks and dangerous quick sands at Lake Tyers the only boat that the McLeods possessed to cross the Snowy River was a log dug-out, truly a very crazy craft.

In 1870 the highest flood yet recorded occurred. Both Orbost and Corringale homesteads were submerged. At Orbost some of the McLeod family and station hands had to

take shelter in a loft. The old homestead, situated on rising ground near the river, became surrounded in the night, thus cutting off from the high ground.

Raw Flour and Water

The marooned people had to remain there until the water receded, subsisting on raw flour and water. They were unable to obtain any other food from the flooded storeroom below.

At Corringle the flooded waters also invaded the house, and all furnishings had to be removed to



Orbost township in the late 1880s

a small hut on higher ground. This was done with the help of a survey party, in charge of the late E. L. Bruce. Part of the house was built with wattle and dab which all dissolved in the water, and had to be rebuilt.

Heavy floods occurred all over Gippsland at that time. Several lives were lost and there were many narrow escapes.

Great damage was done to property and great hardship endured by the settlers. The McLeod family left Orbost that year. The station was then under the management of the late Robert Henry. The first few years Mr. Henry was in charge they frequently were forced by floods to leave the homestead and seek shelter on high ground. A new boat had been obtained, and they were thus able to get away from the flooded house. Mr. Henry first built a bark hut for a refuge, and afterwards built the present homestead. Soon after this, there were many people looking for land for selection. The rumours of the rich Snowy River flats reached many would-be settlers. Numbers visited the district, but all were afraid to undertake the hardships and difficulties of settlement. The most direct road was via Lake Tyers and Ewings Marsh. The lake was often running out and the marsh so often flooded, that the only way to proceed was to go over the hummocks and travel along the beach.

River Crossing

The only means of crossing the Snowy River was by the Station boat. Mr. Henry was opposed to settlement so that when land

seekers tried to inspect, every obstacle was put in their way. On the other hand, Stirlings saw the potentialities of the rich Orbost flats and helped as far as was in their power to induce settlement - giving free accommodation to all travellers; supplying those who needed it with provisions, and guiding them over the land.

The first to take up land was the late James Robertson, who took property now known as Loch End in Newmerella. Then followed Patrick O'Day, who took the Devil's Backbone; J. W. Kidd, Pumpkin Point; Cameron Bros., Ernest Watt, D. Gilmour, H. Cameron, Richardson Bros., J. A. Watt and others.

As settlement progressed a weekly mail was established to Lakes Entrance. To get this concession, the settlers had to carry it free for three months, each taking his turn to act as mailman for that time. The Post-office was at Mr. Burns' house, situated at the foot of the big hill.

First Storekeeper

The first store keepers were J. and S. Blacklock; the first hotelkeeper, J. McGuire. Alex Hall drove the first coach.

By the dates herein, it will be noticed that the Centenary of Orbost is not far distant. It will therefore be time to fittingly commemorate that event.

If I may make a suggestion would not a memorial to the pioneers be a good idea? Say, for instance, an obelisk in the main street, with the names of those who first settled there: P. Imlay, McLeod Bros., Stirlings, and any others who were known to live there at that early date, and helped to develop the district. It would be an ornament to the town, and remind the future generations of the sacrifice and hardships



Snowy River Punt 1884

endured by the pioneers to win for them the great heritage they endured.

There is another of the latter date, who is deserving of a memorial. I mean the late Jennings Carmichael, who sang so sweetly of the bushland, and wrote that charming poem "The Old Bush Road."

If something is not done soon her name will be forgotten, and "The Old Bush Road", lost to memory.