

ORBOST HISTORICAL SOCIETY INC.

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NEWSLETTER

JULY, 2006

'Snowy River Mail', Wednesday, July 7, 1965:

The Other End of The Snowy River

(By F. W. RODWELL in the "Snowy Review")

In the early spring 1964 edition of the Snowy Review, I wrote a little of the early history of the Snowy River, of its first appearance on official records by John Lhotsky in 1834, and of its rugged path through the Victorian foothills to the coast at Marlo, of the settlement of Orbost Station, 10 miles upstream by the Imlay brothers, and later John, Norman and Dalmahoy McLeod, and of the trouble they had with the blacks.

In 1870 Orbost station was taken over by Mr William John Clarke, Bt., who inherited a large income and considerable property from his father, reputed to be the wealthiest man in Australia. Sir William never lived at Orbost, and spent his latter years in his residence, "Cliveden", in Melbourne, Where He died on 15th May, 1897. A statue to his memory was erected in that capital.

The station at first was managed by Mr Robert Henry, and later by Mr C. N. Henderson. At this time, due to silt deposited during floods, the river banks were higher than the surrounding swamps covering the flood plains and were actually the only dry lands between the river and the surrounding hills. To reclaim more land, a plan was devised to drain off the stagnant water and open thousands of acres of otherwise useless wasteland.

Mr Henderson, then station manager for Sir William, traversed the swamps in a flat bottomed punt marking the deeper channels for

drains. Then the hard work began. Without the aid of machinery, using shovels, muscles, grit and determination, these men — men who earned the name of pioneer — dug their way down little by little, stage by stage; the man on the bottom shovelling to a man on the landing above, and he in turn to the man above him until the required depth had been excavated.



Orbost Station Homestead

Starting at river level and running two or three miles into swamps, they graduated from about thirty feet in depth to ground level, laying open land that has been recognised for years as among the richest in the world.

Between 1880 and 1885, in the station horse paddock, the township of Orbost started to grow; when it was proclaimed on the 17th April, 1885, its future was assured and it grew rapidly.

Sir Rupert Clarke, Bt., succeeded his father as station owner in 1897, and offered the whole of the property for sale at a paltry £4 per acre. He was unable to find a buyer has such a large area so had it subdivided and sold by auction. This proved a wise move as the small lots sold at high prices. Three generations later most of that land is still owned by descendants of those buyers.

It may come as a surprise to some to learn that the Snowy River once had her own paddle steamers trading on the lower reaches. Nothing like the Mississippi river boats of course, but steam powered, side driven paddle wheelers just the same.



The 'Curlip' towing maize barges on the Snowy River

From memories of stories passed down to me, and from facts I have picked up, I think there were three of these boats: "Curlip", the "Watt-Watt" and the "Corringle", each named after a lake in the mouth of the river and built by Richardson Brothers at their sawmill on the Brodribb River about a mile from where it enters the Snowy. The Snowy River Shipping Company was formed by Mr Henry James during the 1880s, with Captain McNeil as master. Captain Hegarty was the shipping agent at Marlo.



Mr Henry (Harry) James

Towing a line of small barges these paddle steamers plied their trade between the port of Marlo, and the farms along the river banks, churning their way almost twenty miles up-stream to a landing beside what is now Frank

Richardson's property.

On these trips, the barges carried mail and supplies to the townspeople and farmers, loading their produce, mostly maize, on the return trip to the coast.

Maize, the versatile crop which can be used as green fodder, ensilaged or stored as grain, was the main crop of the mixed farmer, some growing little else. Each year thousands of acres of it were planted, cultivated, picked, stored to dry, then threshed and bagged for transportation to the Melbourne market.



Maize Crib, Irvine's Farm

The coming of the railway in 1915 spelt the end for the little river boats and few people today can remember the barge loads of Yellow Dent and Hickory King strung out behind a paddle steamer as it puffed its way to a rendezvous with the coastal trading vessels of Melbourne.



Construction of the Orbost Railway Line