

ORBOST & DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY Inc.

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NEWSLETTER 175 - August 2023

Orbest Mechanics Institute

The early years, 1886 – 1915

Mechanics' Institutes were the forerunners of public libraries and adult education in Australia. The first Victorian Mechanics' Institute was the Melbourne Mechanics' Institute established in 1839. From the 1850s, Mechanics' Institutes quickly spread throughout Victoria wherever a hall or library, or a school was needed. In New South Wales, they were referred to as "School of the Arts."

Orbest's Mechanics' Institute was constructed in 1885 as the first hall in town. It was situated in Browning Street (on the corner of Raymond Street), Orbest, where it stands idle today.

The first building was a large building of weatherboard, 56 feet long x 26 feet wide with 15 feet walls. The Orbest Mechanics' Institute became a vital establishment which serviced the community and beyond.

At its inception, there was a dearth of suitable meeting places; inquests and coroner's enquiries, police court hearings etc. were held in the Orbest Club Hotel, as were many other gatherings of meetings. Concerts, dances and balls were generally held in Mr. James Cameron's barn [near Lochiel Lagoon] in the early 1880s.

There was a free library, and a cooking centre built in conjunction with the Mechanics' Institute and the Higher Elementary School. Sporting activities such as roller skating were undertaken within the hall, along with meetings of all sorts including Council meetings, concerts & musical events, send-offs, balls and dances & entertainments, debating, political meetings, fairs and bazaars, and flower shows.

From 1914, Hardy's Majestic Pictures was showing movies at the Orbest Mechanics' Institute.

For further information on "Mechanics' Talkies", please refer to Newsletters 143 and 144.

Bairnsdale Advertiser: July 1886

(FROM OUR OWN CORRESPONDENT)

Three years ago Orbest was a township only in name, no building being at the time on the site proper; now we boast of two stores, one hotel, a shoemaker's shop, a butcher's shop, a **mechanics' institute**, a schoolhouse, and several private dwellings, and, still more, a coffee palace in the immediate future, a lady from Melbourne having secured Mr. Jas. Cameron's township allotment for the purpose of erecting such an establishment, or temperance boarding house — a much felt want.

The last building erected, the mechanics' institute, is one which has been much required for some time past, no room capable of accommodating even a local audience having been constructed, and when a concert was held, Messrs. Cameron's barn had been used, the greatest advantage of which was that it held a crowd.

The mechanics' institute is a large building of weatherboard, 56ft. X 26ft., with 15ft. walls. The floor is of red pine, and when it gets hardened would make a capital skating rink.

The opening of the building took the form of a concert and ball, in aid of the building fund. It was thought at one time that the seats would not be finished in time, the timber not having arrived from Bairnsdale till the last moment, but Mr. Williams worked almost day and night, and he was able to have them ready about two hours before the concert commenced.

The concert was not the success it was, at first, expected to be. A large number of the residents here comprise working men, and although they as a body, are intelligent, educated and respectable, a high class concert is not suited to their tastes, and they have already shown their approval of the introduction of comic songs to break the monotony. Not only the working classes, but a good many of the other residents are of the same mind, and the committee formed to organise the concert did not suit everybody by a good deal.

No fault, however, can be found with the singers who gave their services, for without doubt the concert, from an artistic point of view, was superior to anything in the district before.

THE BEGINNING

Bairnsdale Advertiser: September 1885

The committee of the Orbost Mechanics' Institute and Free Library are pushing the matter on now, Mr. Kramer having received the order to prepare plans for a building suitable for the requirements of the district.

There is also to be a concert in aid of the building fund, to be held on the 27th, for which tickets will be issued in a few days.

Bairnsdale Advertiser: Nov 1885

Concert at Orbost

(FROM OUR OWN CORRESPONDENT)

Orbost, October 31

The concert in aid of the Orbost Mechanics' Institute in the Messrs. Cameron Bros' barn. There was a large attendance, about 170 being present, but the building was found large enough to accommodate all, though its acoustic properties were sadly deficient, making it hard for the vocalists to sing, and in consequence some of the best songs were quite lost. The concert, as a whole, was, however, a complete success, for which we have to thank our energetic secretary, Mr. W. Cameron, and the musical conductor, Mr. John Cameron, who took a leading part in it. Mr. W. Cameron's comic songs, sung in character, were quite new to this district, his make up being very good, and on both occasions he was most enthusiastically encored.

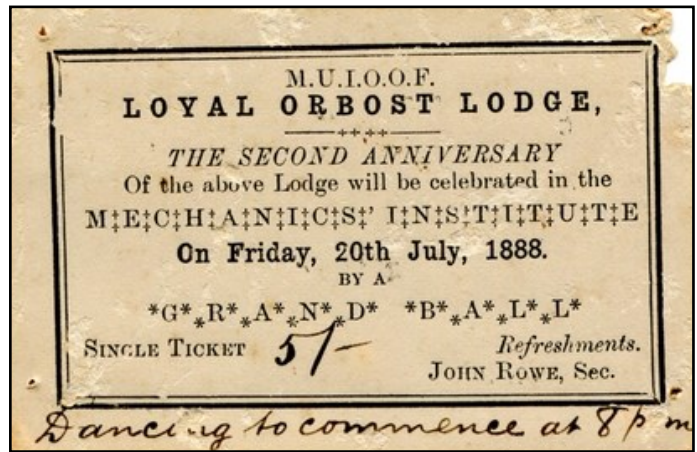
Bairnsdale Advertiser: May 1886

A CONCERT AND BALL
WILL be held in the Mechanics' Hall, ORBOST, on FRIDAY Evening, 21st May, commencing at 8 o'clock. Admission to the Concert—Front Seats 3s, back do. 2s. Admission to the Ball—Double ticket 5s, single 3s.
W. N. CAMERON, Hon. Sec.

Bairnsdale Advertiser: May 1886

OPENING OF ORBOST MECHANICS' INSTITUTE

The Mechanics' Institute at Orbost will be opened on Friday next, and the event will be celebrated with all the due *eclat*. In the evening, a concert will be given, at which a number of well-known amateurs from Bairnsdale and elsewhere will contribute vocal and instrumental selections. The concert will be followed by a ball, and the hon. Secretaries and committees for these events have been hard at work perfecting the arrangements, a thoroughly good evening's enjoyment will be provided by all who attended.



Snowy River Mail (Orbost): November 1890

MECHANICS' INSTITUTE—The committee of the Orbost Mechanics' Institute have recently removed the floor of the building which was showing signs of wear from the skating, and have now laid down a substantial floor of 4 x 1 1/8 kauri pine which will be a material improvement to the building for skating or dancing purposes.

The boards of the old floor are to be offered for sale by Messrs. E. Watt and Co., this day at 3 p.m.

Snowy River Mail (Orbost): November 1890

ORBOST MECHANICS' INSTITUTE.
GRAND
ENTERTAINMENT,
In aid of the Piano fund, on
THURSDAY, 20th NOVEMBER, 1890.
GREAT ATTRACTIONS.
VOCAL AND INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC.
For full particulars see programmes.

Snowy River Mail (Orbost): November 1890

The entertainment held at the **Mechanics' Hall** on Thursday evening in aid of the fund for purchasing a **piano** for the Institute passed off very successfully as far as the performance of the various numbers on the programme were concerned, but the rain which unfortunately set in on Thursday afternoon and continued drizzling during the evening, appeared to have materially affected the attendance at the concert and, in consequence, the attendance was not up to anticipations and it was probable that after paying the expenses, there will not be a very large amount available for the desired object. Considering the muddy state of the roads and the threatening aspect of the night, the attendance was a good one and those present enjoyed a really good entertainment.

THE LIBRARY

Bairnsdale Advertiser: July 1888

A Concert was held last week in the **mechanics' institute** and went off with a great eclat. There was a large and appreciative audience, and the ladies and gentlemen, who so kindly gave their services were gratified with the reception which was accorded to one and all. The object of the concert was to provide funds for the purpose of buying books for the free library, and the amount obtained was about £17.

Bairnsdale Advertiser: November 1888

The Orbest Mechanics' Institute library has received a large stock of select books, which may be read in the room on Saturday evening. As the committee are not rich enough to pay a librarian, they take it in turns to act in that capacity. This is an act of kindness on their part that merits our most hearty thanks, and the same are hereby freely tendered.

Snowy River Mail (Orbest): March 1891

ORBOST MECHANICS' INSTITUTE & FREE LIBRARY.

APPPLICATIONS for the position of **LIBRARIAN** to the above Institute, at a salary of £10 per annum, will be received until Monday, March 16th, 1891, at 6.30 p.m. Applications to be addressed to the secretary.

HENRY JAMES,
Secretary.

Orbest, March 12, 1891.

Snowy River Mail (Orbest): March 1891

MECHANICS' INSTITUTE.—Miss Alice Pleydell has been appointed librarian of the Orbest Mechanics' Institute.



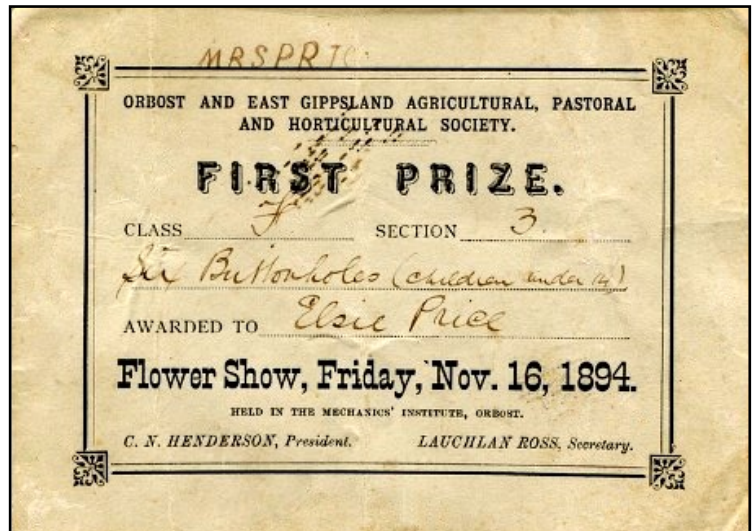
ELSIE COOKE—Librarian—Elsie Cooke was Librarian at the Mechanics' Institute, Orbest, for many years. She was also a loyal member of the Presbyterian Church and a stalwart of the Ladies' Guild, a worker for the Hospital Auxiliary, and a member of the Red Cross.

Snowy River Mail (Orbest): January 1898

The Institute, being out of debt and having a balance in hand, the purchase of books for the library will continue at regular intervals.

Several illustrated papers and magazines, which in the days of depression and retrenchment were discontinued, have been, again, subscribed to and are available to the general public at any time when the library is open, as also are any books in the library, a fact which does not appear to be generally known.

FLOWER SHOW



CHURCH SERVICES

Snowy River Mail (Orbest): August 1890

CHURCH NOTICES

WESLEYAN CHURCH.—The Rev. J. Smith will preach at the Mechanics' Institute, on Sunday, 31st August, at 11 a.m.

CHURCH OF ENGLAND.—Divine service will be conducted at the Mechanics' Institute, Orbest, to-morrow, Sunday, 23rd Aug. at three p.m., by the Rev. R. Martin, who will also conduct service at Buchan, at 3 p.m. on Sunday, 31st inst.

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH.—The Rev. A. Murdoch will conduct divine service at the Mechanics' Institute, Orbest, to-morrow, Sunday, 17th Aug., at 7 p.m.

SKATING RINK

Snowy River Mail (Orbest): October 1890

ORBOST SKATING RINK.

THE above Rink has been **RE-FLOORED**, and will be open for a few nights, on Saturdays only, commencing Saturday, October 11th. Prices as usual.

HENRY JAMES, Sec.
Orbest, October 8th.

Snowy River Mail (Orbest): May 1891

SKATING RINK—By advertisement in this issue, it is notified that the skating rink at the Orbest Mechanics' Institute will be open this evening from 7.30 to 10 p.m., and every Saturday evening until further notice

Snowy River Mail (Orbost): May 1891

ORBOST SKATING RINK.

THE above Skating Rink, will be open on Saturday, 16th May, and every Saturday until further notice, from 7.30 to 10 p.m.

Admission—Gentlemen ... 1s.
Children and Ladies 6d.

There will be no skating allowed during any other hours, unless the hall is specially engaged.

Snowy River Mail (Orbost): October 1911

SKATING CARNIVAL

On Saturday night, the skating season was brought to a close in Orbost by a carnival given in aid of the Mechanics' Institute. There was a fair attendance and the evening passed off very enjoyably. The financial result will be satisfactory.

Prizes were awarded for several items, Miss Lynn being first for ladies fancy dress, and for the fan and balloon race. Master Frank Richardson was placed first for gentlemen's fancy dress, and the "musical cushions" was won by Mr. O. Andrews.



THE MECHANIC'S INSTITUTE WAS RE-BUILT IN 1930/31 WHEN THE HALL WAS MADE MUCH LARGER. THIS HALL REMAINS LARGELY INTACT TO THE PRESENT DAY AND REFLECTS THE BUILDING STYLE OF THAT TIME.

A MAJOR RENOVATION TOOK PLACE IN 1975 AS SHOWN IN THESE PHOTOS. THIS INVOLVED THE REMOVAL OF THE LIBRARY AND KITCHEN AND BRICK CHIMNEYS.

PHOTO ON RIGHT SHOWS THE MECHANICS HALL ON THE L.H.S. AND THE R.S.L. HALL ON THE R.H.S. AND THE REMNANTS OF THE LIBRARY AND KITCHEN IN-BETWEEN.

COOKERY CENTRE

Snowy River Mail (Orbost): January 1914

The committee of the Orbost Mechanics' Institute have decided to build a room for a cooking centre for the Education Department who have agreed to lease the room for twelve months at a rental of £20 per annum. The building will be one room, the same size as the library building and the contract price is £170 for labour and material. As the committee have not sufficient funds available, it will be necessary to make arrangements to meet this liability. It is anticipated that when the Education Department have no further use for the room it will be found very useful in connection with the main hall.

Snowy River Mail (Orbost): February 1915

The cookery classes in connection with the Higher Elementary school are now in full working order under the direction of Miss Newey. The building has been provided by the **Mechanics' Institute** and is a very nice, airy and well lighted room. The Department has fitted it up with four kerosene stoves, an oven, a number of tables, and other appliances of the culinary art.

The pupils are taken from the upper class in the school and appear to be making good progress and taking an interest in their work.

On Friday last, members of the school committees to the number of about a dozen, were entertained at dinner, when a very nice bill of fare was presented, everything having been prepared by members of the cookery class, who also waited at the table.

Mr. Jacob Perry, chairman of the Orbost school committee, presided and extended a welcome to those present, and at the conclusion of the repast, some more or less appropriate remarks were made by Messrs. James, Lynn and Ross.

A dinner is served in the school every Friday and is available to any of the children at a low price. Visitors are also welcomed and will be supplied with a nice meal at the cost of ninepence.



Our Mechanics Institute has had many uses over the past 130+ years. Sadly, in 2023, it now lies silent and disused with an uncertain future.