

GRAPEVINE CUTTINGS (August 1999)

By Rob Upson

W.D.C.Denovan

From reading the *Annals of Bendigo* plus other historical sources and researching the battery tram from archival Council Correspondence, the name W.D.C.Denovan appears quite frequently. A reference called *Bendigo and Vicinity*, published in 1895, gives us some clues as to his identity and life.

William Dixon Campbell Denovan was born in Edinburgh in 1829, the son of a British Consular official. On completion of his education, at various schools in Scotland, he opened his own school in Fifeshire, being then 18 years old.

When news of the 1851 gold rush in Australia reached Scotland, Denovan decided he wanted to be part of it. He closed his school, boarded a ship at Liverpool and arrived in Melbourne in October 1852. He first of all headed for the Mt. Alexander diggings and then went on to Bendigo, arriving here in February 1853.

On taking out his first gold license, it soon became clear to him that the miners deeply resented this license fee, or tax, of 30 shillings a month. Failure to pay meant arrest and treatment as a common criminal. As this resentment grew among the miners, Denovan took a prominent role in organising and speaking at mass meetings. These culminated in a huge meeting of 20,000 people on 21 August 1853 at the corner of Forest and McKenzie Streets where All Saints' Church now stands (now the Hill View Fellowship). Among the resolutions passed was one offering to pay a reduced monthly gold license fee of 10 shillings and another requesting those persons, sympathetic to the miners' cause, to wear a red ribbon in their hats. This was then known as the red ribbon rebellion and shortly afterwards the license fee was reduced to 13s. 4d. per month.

By day, Denovan worked his claims like any other miner and by night was often engaged in activities seeking to redress local grievances by writing to newspapers and speaking at public meetings. On the 26 August 1854, Denovan convened another large meeting of the diggers. 3,000 people gathered near the Criterion Hotel to consider the forming of a league whose main aims were to bring about the abolition of the license tax and to have an elected representative of the goldfields in Parliament. This agitation of the Bendigo miners was soon to be followed by other goldfields in the colony.

As reforms were slow in coming, a larger meeting was organised in Bendigo on 14 October 1854 and Denovan was subsequently appointed as delegate representing the Bendigo diggers. On 3 December, he set out on foot for Ballarat to attend a general meeting of all such delegates. He stayed the first night in Castlemaine and the following morning heard of the fatalities at the Eureka Stockade. On reaching Creswick, he learned that martial law had been proclaimed within a 10-mile radius of Ballarat and considering that discretion was the better part of valour, returned to Castlemaine.

While there, he spoke to a meeting of miners and espoused a peaceful and constitutional resolution of their problems rather than violence. He then set off for Bendigo wearing a red ribbon, a black armband out of respect for the casualties of Eureka and a red shirt that had been given to him by a lady admirer in Bendigo. (You may recall a previous Grapevine Cutting discussing a painting by Theodore King, *The First Parliamentary Election, Bendigo 1855*, hanging in our Art Gallery. The figure in the red

shirt seated on the right on the balcony of the Criterion Hotel is said to be W.D.C.Denovan.)

Meanwhile, it had been incorrectly rumoured in Bendigo that Denovan had been arrested in Ballarat. On arrival back in Bendigo he was given a rousing reception by the diggers who were delighted to see him.

Back in Bendigo, Denovan continued to work for the league and miners' rights and it wasn't too long before their grievances had been redressed.

In July 1855 he was elected as a member of the first Sandhurst Mining Court that later became the Mining Board.

Towards the end of 1855 he went to Ballarat and became involved in journalism, first with the *Ballarat Times* and then the *Ballarat Star*. He launched, at his own expense, a weekly newspaper called the *Nation and Ballarat Advertiser*, which, although quite successful at first, put an untenable demand on his personal finances. After ten months he returned to Bendigo with less than 1 in his pocket.

In 1856, Denovan was appointed as a gold buyer for the Bank of Victoria but after a short while returned to his mining pursuits

He was one of the original members of the land league, formed in 1857, that was influential in unlocking the lands of Victoria from the monopoly of the squatters so that the ordinary person could own land.

In 1861 he was nominated for representation of the Sandhurst Boroughs in the Legislative Assembly and was duly elected. The mining community, holding him in high regard, paid his election expenses of 147 and subscribed an honorarium of 280. He found that life in Parliament was no place for a person of limited means and resigned after a short time in office. However, while in Parliament he was instrumental in securing a grant of 2,000 for the purpose of surveying and reporting the feasibility of diverting water from the Coliban River to the goldfields. The Coliban water system was eventually constructed at a cost of 1 million.

After Parliament, Denovan went back to mining for a few months and then edited the *Bendigo Evening News* for two years. In 1867 he became a stock and share broker and was a promoter and an original member of the Bendigo Stock Exchange. During the next few years he made and lost a lot of money through mining speculation.

In 1877, he was elected to the Bendigo City Council and in September 1879 was appointed Town Clerk. He held this position for 13 years, performing his various duties most successfully until poor health forced his retirement in 1892.

Denovan always had a leaning towards literary pursuits and in 1882 had published a book entitled *The Evidences of Spiritualism*, a subject in which he was deeply interested. He also wrote many articles for local and metropolitan newspapers and was a prominent member of the masonic fraternity.

Denovan never married and didn't have a relative in this country except his mother, Margaret Dixon Denovan, who must have followed him out to Victoria at some stage. She died here in 1888 at the age of 79 years.

W.D.C.Denovan himself, died at the age of 77 in July 1906 and is buried with his mother in the Bendigo Cemetery, their grave being just south of the chapel.

Denovan was a man of unblemished character and possessed a reputation for

dignity and integrity. He had experienced the rigours and fortunes of the early pioneer and certainly had an influence in the development of the first fifty years of Bendigo.