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Peter Butters Talk
Guiding Group
24.9.97

YUILLE'S SWAMP

Ballarat's tourism drawcard for many years, was its well known lake and Botanical Gardens. The City has watched the transformation of the Black Swamp from its humble beginnings to its present splendour.

* We can visualise its origins when 'Ballarat & Vicinty' 1894 commented, 'This now beautiful sheet of water would be hardly recognisable at the present time as the rush bordered and reed clogged 'Yuille's Swamp of the early days. In place of the mass of matted reeds and slimy ooze which once filled its bed, we have a sparkling surface of pure water covering some 600 acres which is alike 'a thing of beauty and joy forever'.....

* The swamp was also described as that 'natural depression' and Withers in his 'History of Ballarat' supports the other descriptions, referring to it as 'one time alternate swamp and mud or dust hollow'.

Eugene Von Guerard speaks of the Black Swamp in his diary. His entry for the 4th August 1852 states, 'This morning my mate James and I again shouldered our picks and spades to join a new rush to the neighbourhood of the Black Swamp, there to peg out some claims. We found some seventy diggers there, at work, surfacing at a depth of one and a half to two feet with very poor results.' On the 6th November he records that he went with his friend to get leeches from the swamp to put around his mates eye, which was terribly swollen. His friend waded into the water barefoot 'and soon began a vigorous dance among the reeds, his legs being covered with the disgusting things. We had much trouble in getting them into the bottle he brought for them.'

The first attempt at obtaining drinking water was in December 1852 when men were employed to build a dam across the Gnarr Creek for the Government Camp authorities. The Swamp creek from the lake flowed into the Gnarr behind the present Anglers Hall in Wendouree Parade, however this proposal proved unsatisfactory and the creek was referred to the 'Gnarrsty Creek'.

Lake water was conveyed to the city by a nine inch pipe which was laid underground and carried the water down Webster Street, along Drummond to Sturt and then to the 'Water Works' near the intersection with Lydiard Street. The lake water was then sold by licensed carters. Kirk's Dam superceeded this system in 1862 and after the completion of the Gong Reservoir water was carried to the lake as well as the city. This enabled the lake level to be controlled and alleviated the fear that the lake would run dry, which was a concern.

* View Point was the scene of a large stone quarry after 1862 and another quarry was at the site of the present St. Patricks Boatshed. An early picket fence around the lake which enclosed a cyprus hedge was erected by prisoners from the gaol who were marched up Eyre Street daily.

{ * By 1874 Lake Wendouree was described as the finest inland water in the colony. Double decker horse trams began carrying passengers to the lake and gardens in 1887 and horses and trams were housed at the depot in Wendouree Parade on the north shore.

The lake was the location of Fry's mill which stood on the site of the recently demolished S.E.C. depot and another mill stood on the Nazareth House site. Mining was also prevalent in the area of the lake. The present City Oval was the site of the Royal Saxon mine, and other mines were also in the vicinity. Mining under the lake also took place.

The Acclimatisation Society was formed in 1863 with the idea of bringing English birds to Ballarat. On June 26th 1863 three pair of skylarks were released and shortly after a pair of white swans. In the mid 1860's sparrows were released 'with much rejoicing' and by present numbers obviously thrived. Blackbirds and thrushes were introduced in 1879 and Black Swans in 1884.

In 1870 the Fish Acclimatisation Society whose aim was the importation of the ova of English trout and the hatching and distribution of them locally, was formed, and well stocked the lake with perch, carp and tench as well as trout. Prior to this Perch were the first fish introduced to the lake, in 1869.

Prussian Carp were introduced in 1872 and in 1876 several varieties from the Murray, and Murray lobsters were also introduced. Conditions were favourable and the fish quickly reproduced. Over two thousand fishermen gathered at the lake for the official opening day, November 1st 1872 and it was reported in 1880 that in three and a half hours an angler took 5 dozen trout, carp and perch totalling four hundred and eleven pounds. In 1922 a Loch Levern trout weighing 10lb 2.5oz and which was two feet six inches long was caught in the lake, and in 1915 the City Council had issued shooting permits for the destruction of cormorants at the lake as they were detrimental.

At the turn of the century the lake was a social highlight.

Reeds have always been and still are a problem. The first attempt to remove them was in 1864 and the problem still continues. In dry years they have been burnt, they have been slashed by prisoners and cut by boats but never eradicated. Mayor Thompson proposed to use a steam dredge to remove the accumulation of reeds to end the problem once and for all as

it was said that 'the weeds grow so fast in the open water as to necessitate their being cut down each season at great expense.' Looking positively at the problem they do however provide homes and shelter for some of the water birds and fish.

'Ballarat and Vicinity' noted 'The people of Ballarat are noted lovers of all classes of aquatic sports, as evidenced by the handsome boat-houses and numerous jetties that line the shore, and the hundreds of pleasure boats that throng the waters of Wendouree. A fine line of steam pleasure craft is constantly at the service of the public to convey them to all places of interest around the lake, the beautifully laid out botanical gardens on its western shore being the objective point of each and all.'

The names Gill and Ivey are synonymous with the lake. The first steam boat on the lake was the 'Victoria' in 1865 and was built at the Soho works. By 1887 Thos. Gill had five paddle steamers on the lake, the 'Ballarat' 'Prince Consort', 'Golden City', 'Queen' and 'Princess'. Two other steamers on the lake which are still well remembered were the 'Gem' and the 'Lord Roberts' which were Bob Taylor's boats. The 'Garden City' was double decked and was in its time the largest inland craft in Australia, however it had one failing - it rolled over several times, tipping its occupants into the lake, and was ultimately therefore abandoned. Not everybody was happy about the situation and the Council passed nautical laws to combat the dangerous racing and collisions due to rivalry, and local residents complained about the incessant whistling of the steamers.

Some of the steamers had brass bands and moonlight cruises on the lake were a source of summer enjoyment. The cost of a steamer trip from View Point to the Gardens was threepence for adults and a penny for children.

Apart from the Melbourne University Club the Ballarat Rowing Club is the oldest rowing club in Australia, having been formed in November 1861, with Ned Williams as one of the foundation members. Ironically the first two regattas were held at Lake Burrumbeet and marred by two drownings and so Lake Learmonth became the venue for the third regatta. Because of the difficulty of getting the boats to these venues it was decided to sythe a path through the weeds of the swamp for the first local regatta in May 1864. Unfortunately it was not a good spectator sport as the oarsmen could not be seen because of the height of the reeds.

The first regatta of the Yacht Club was held on the 30th November 1877, in fact yachting was so popular on the lake and so many sails were visible that it was said it looked 'as though the town's laundry had been hung out to dry on Lake Wendouree'. Swimming was banned in the lake and the hideous crime brought with it a five shilling fine, however this embargo was lifted in 1928.

The publication, 'Ballarat & District' 1901 stated that ' To come to Ballarat and not visit the lake and gardens is looked upon by every right minded citizen as amounting almost to insult. Yes, Ballarat folks are very proud of their lake and gardens, for the simple reason that they are their own creation. Sydney may have its harbour, and Melbourne its bay, but they were made by nature. Ballarat people improved upon nature, and converted a reedy, oozy, muddy swamp into a fair sheet of water four miles round, 300 acres in extent, bordered by drooping willow trees, furnished with boathouses and jetties and a fine fleet of yachts and steamers. So wide is the course for aquatic competitions that half a dozen (or more) eight-oared crews can start abreast, and at the annual regatta competitors from all the river side and seaboard clubs congregate at Wendouree.'

Reeds may still be a problem, but Lake Wendouree adds a dimension of beauty to the local landscape.

Peter Butters. Hon. Secretary Ballarat Historical Society
(053) 359980.