

# THE CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACT OF THE BEGONIA FESTIVAL ON BALLARAT AND ITS DISTRICT

by

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From the earliest beginnings Ballarat's potential for growth as a regional centre was recognized. As the city grew in the 1850's and 1860's it was not lacking in boosters who sang its praises. Mayoral reports record that "Ballaraarat has been fairly described as a jewel in a rich agricultural setting ... a city of opportunities ", and it was the boom centre of the gold rush years for central and western Victoria. Its display of independence, regardless of Melbourne's growing hegemony was moulded in an era of poor communications enabling Ballarat to grow relatively free from outside interference. The spirit of independence this engendered was challenged as "roads improved and the arrival of the railway in the 1870's". A further indication of the strength of this spirit of independence which led to the consolidation of Ballarat's early growth was "the way in which its citizens poured money into public rather than private display".

"The beautification of public areas erection of statues, foundation of an art gallery... were features of their generosity".

This generosity was to be repeated one hundred years later when Ballarat citizens were to pour their energy and imagination into promoting their city by means of an annual Begonia festival. A welcome though unexpected boost for the fledgling city came from Anthony Trollope, the inveterate English traveller and chronicler who visited the district soon after Christmas in 1871. He was "struck with more surprise by Ballarat than any other city of Australia, not for its youth...and not for its size...but because it was so solidly built and so well endowed with hospital, libraries, hotels, public gardens and other amenities".

Trollope's observations were made only twenty years after the discovery of gold and when Ballarat celebrated the centenary of that event in 1951 it was on the threshold of discovering new trends in culture that would be shared later with the rest of Australia.

The movement of troops during the Second World War brought the States closer together. Air travel in the immediate post-war years to all capital cities, and the growth of an Australian motor-car industry were harbingers for travel opportunities, which formerly had been the preserve of the wealthy. By then Ballarat had established itself as a place worth visiting. The legends of the goldrush days together with the uniqueness of the Eureka uprising had established a mythical backdrop, which, wedded to the lore of the bush, had long brought visitors to experience something of this colourful past. As well as its historical background Ballarat had also attracted visitors because of its Botanic Gardens with its impressive marble statuary. Associated with the gardens was the annual display in March of the magnificent begonia blooms that had for many years attracted thousands of visitors.

Allan Searle's dictum, "the seed is extremely fine - ten times dearer than gold, so handle with care !" could well have been a portend of the value of the Begonia Festival to Ballarat's economy and developing tourist potential.

In the early 1950's the word "tourism" had not been coined, those who came to Ballarat were "visitors", yet the civic fathers and business interests were convinced that "our city had much to show...its history, its natural beauty, its statuary, its lovely streets and gardens and its unique begonias." As well as these attractions Ballarat had long been the home of the South Street Competitions. The roots of this organization go back to 1879 when it began as the South Street Debating Society. With its revival in 1890, "200 entrants were present and 1250 in 1898...they sang, played instruments, recited, debated and made speeches...(and they came) from all over Victoria and from other colonies."

The prestige of the South Street eisteddfod was further enhanced by the success of such artists as James Henry, Peter Dawson, Florence Austral, Marjorie Lawrence, Bernard Heinz, Henry Scullins. "People, even in far off countries know (South Street) refers to one of the world's great cultural centres."

What was it about the people of Ballarat that had inspired them to provide these cultural attractions from the earliest days of the foundation? W. Bate, historian, suggests that, "Ballarat was a melting pot in which British culture was reinterpreted."

It would have been surprising if nothing of the spirit of Eureka and the inter-mingling of the Anglo-Saxon, American and other people who flocked to the Ballarat goldfields had not remained part of the fibre of those who stayed to build the city and develop the rural hinterland. What they did they did well, as is evidenced in Ballarat's fine buildings and streetscapes, as well as in cultural events such as South Street, and the annual display of begonias in bloom. Such things were established for the enjoyment of the local people and have now become a national and a growing international attraction. This aspect was unthought of by the organizers of the first Begonia Festival; they would have little idea that the Festivals would become an important contribution to the promotion of tourism now considered as the Cinderella industry of the Twenty-First century.

"... Tourism is an industry for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. It is a labour intensive industry providing job opportunities across a range of skill levels."

When the idea of holding a Festival was suggested in 1949 the Ballarat City Council was preoccupied with preparations to celebrate the centenary of the discovery of gold. Edgar Batrop now recognized as the 'father of the festival' had then recently returned from a world tour during which he and his wife had visited many famous festivals. Among these were Nice's Battle of the Roses, the Cherry Blossom Pilgrimages in Japan, and in Australia, Grafton's Jacaranda Festival in New South Wales and, the Carnival of the Flowers in Toowoomba, Queensland. Despite the initial lack of enthusiasm shown by the civic fathers Batrop's vision never waned.

"He began a round of visits to service clubs and other organizations championing the cause of holding a festival and tying it into the annual display of begonias. His persistence and standing in the community marked him out as a person not to be ignored or dismissed as an arriviste. He was the director of a real estate firm established by his father and today managed by his son. Success came in early 1952 when the mayor of Ballarat showed interest in the proposal. Batrop's vision was soon to become a reality."

A meeting of the Greater Ballarat Association agreed to the appointment of a special committee "to examine a proposal for the sponsorship of an annual festival."

This was followed by a public meeting chaired by the mayor and the proposal for a festival was enthusiastically accepted. The attendance at this meeting was representative of the general public, business interests and service clubs.

The embryonic tourist industry and the boost the festival would give it, together with the dynamics of organizing a festival of such dimensions, were factors little understood in 1953. These, with financial benefits and its impact upon the community were only to be realized after a number of successful festivals. Its success and its ability to attract crowds would have motivated those who subsequently launched Sovereign Hill, a replica of a main street in a gold rush town and Kyal Castle, both venues for tourist coaches and the private visitor.

It also encouraged the growth of accommodation facilities. The population of the Ballarat district in 1953 was 48,030 and the number of hotels and boarding houses providing short stay accommodation was fourteen. Today, there are twenty-nine hotels, motels and guest houses providing meals and accommodation for a maximum of 2,184 guests. As an indication of the Festival's ability to attract the tourist, these venues recorded guest arrivals totaling 17,202 during the festival month of March 1992, an increase of 4,500 on February's figure.

The hope expressed in successive mayoral reports and by the Ballarat Begonia Festival Association Limited was largely fulfilled because of the criterion of allowing the Festival a

flexibility for encouraging a range of activities that would involve people. It was to be a people's festival and it would be centered on the Botanic Gardens, Lake Wendouree and the Eureka Stockade. Such hands-on activities as the floral carpet, children's demonstrations, the choosing and crowning of the Queen of Begonias and street dancing have continued from the first Festival to be among the most popular attractions.

These activities attracted the attention of South Australia's Premier, Mr. Don Dunstan when Adelaide was developing its festival programme. Mr. Barry Wilkins, the festival's first director, introduced a fun water tunnel, which soon became and continues to be the most popular lake-side attraction. It was the first in Australia and has been subsequently used in festivals in Adelaide, Canberra and Japan with the acknowledgement being given to Ballarat.

A further criterion underlying the success of the festival was the formation of the Ballarat begonia Festival Association Limited as a separate entity from the Ballarat City Council. It has been suggested that the Association saved the Festival from the possibility of becoming a political football under the control of one faction or another of the Council. An example of this may perhaps be seen in the now moribund Melbourne Moomba Festival, which has been dominated, by a group of Councillors who formed themselves into a separate company and are now its owners.

Regional rivalry may be seen in Melbourne's endeavour to free itself of Moomba and attempt to establish itself as a cultural centre of world standing. Kelly Trench, journalist, comments,

"Yet Melbourne itself seemed dissatisfied with Moomba for the Melbourne International Festival of Arts (grew) out of the quadrennial year-long state wide celebration called Arts Victoria...to replace the truly dreadful Moomba with an annual event that would have an international edge on Adelaide."

Another indicator for the continuing success of Ballarat's Festival has been the involvement of the community service clubs. Some of these had their origin in the United States of America with strong emphasis on service to the community among their ideals; an ideal enthusiastically embraced by the clubs in Ballarat.

After sixteen years of a virtually self-generating Festival under the general oversight of the Ballarat Begonia Festival Association Limited, the first full-time director was appointed. Barry Wilson's appointment did not change the necessity for people participation.

"The Festival...still depends on volunteers...more than 300 people are required each festival time. (It) reached all sections of the community...it grew out of the people's pride to share with others the beauty of Ballarat's begonias."

In 1963, the occasion of the tenth festival, tourism as an industry and as a source of revenue was beginning to be recognized as the Mayoral report for that year states:

"an untapped revenue source...the Tourist Trade does not require a large outlay of capital, nor a large staff as it has been the pleasure of many citizens and the service clubs...to achieve what we now hold."

What this report overlooks is any sense of need to pamper and encourage the tourist. The bed and breakfast motels were a great improvement on the dingy mosquito-plagued rooms of country Victorian hotels of the 1950's. THE COURIER newspaper has pleaded with Ballarat to do more for the tourist, to develop world-standard accommodation facilities and to foster a reputation for being a friendly and hospitable city willing to indulge tourists. A further benefit for Ballarat and its district not mentioned in the Mayoral reports of the time was the growth of employment directly associated with the growing tourist trade.

Many factors contributed to the success of Ballarat's Begonia Festival; there was full employment, a buoyant economy and Ballarat's strategic location.

"It is the pivot of State highways to Melbourne, Geelong, Bendigo, Echuca, Maryborough, Swan Hill, Mildura and the whole of the main interstate highway to Adelaide."

It was also a very different era from the time when Bendigo launched the first Easter Show in 1871. M.Roper saw this as a reflection of the social relations in the nineteenth century; male dominance in the procession, women viewed as ornaments, and the Chinese as an exotic edition.

"It was a ritual which, because of its regularity, imported a sense of tradition to an era in which this was sadly lacking."

Roper also supports the suggestion that while the Fair was an opportunity for community leaders to bridge social differences the result was that such rituals "writ large the inequalities and patriarchal values which underpinned colonial society." By the time Ballarat came to organize the first Begonia Festival in 1953 such extreme social distinctions had been largely dissipated. The Festival began and has continued as a community-based festival involving people from all walks of life.

When the proposal for having such a festival was so enthusiastically accepted it was a matter of getting on and planning it. There was a considerable foundation upon which to build and to present in a festival context. The traditional exhibits such as processions, floral carpets and folk dancing were not incongruous in a city that had developed its lake and gardens from the earliest days. Such attractions could not be dismissed out of hand as simply a representation of "Olde England" or a cultural cringe to the "Olde Countries."

The enthusiasm that was generated for the Festival also overcame the problem of finance, for the first festival committee was virtually without funds; "its chairman guaranteed three hundred pounds (\$600) to allow it to function." The success of the first festival was such that the festival Association was able to announce a profit of 1,357 pounds, (\$2714) and having decided that the festival would be held annually, part of the profit was spent in decorations and on the begonia houses at the Botanic Gardens and the Eureka reserve. The Festival Association was responsible for the financial side of running the festivals but insisted "the Festival objectives do not include the making of a financial profit as such."

Such a philosophy would seem to indicate the growing awareness of the Association that the festivals generated cultural and regional cohesion as well as financial benefits. Among some of the unplanned achievements successive festivals have brought a willingness on the part of the churches to come together for the Festival's Ecumenical Service and Ballarat's government and church schools have cooperated in combined concert band performances and children's displays. There have been years when the Association has been able to contribute towards the cost of automatic heating for the new Begonia House and the musical Sound Shell. Also recorded in the BALLAARAT FESTIVAL SOUVENIR PICTORIAL of 1963 are contributions by the Tourist Development Authority and the boost to the Festival's finances from the Ballarat Travellers' Social Club who by 1963 had raised nearly 20,000 pounds (\$40,000) for local charities. The Festival also attracted State and Commonwealth grants.

The success which greeted Ballarat's first festival was not lost in a number of regional mayors who attended what was billed as the "World's First begonia Festival". (It has subsequently been learned that a Begonia festival has been held in Capitola, United States of America since 1953, and this is now acknowledged as the "sister festival") Many of these cities were to organize their own festivals, which prompted Edgar Bartrop to comment:

"Inevitably, the success of Ballarat's festival – the first in Victoria, brought competition from other centres, notably Melbourne. The fact that Moomba despite agreement to the contrary is staged on coincident dates has been unfortunate."

He also pointed out that Warnambool and other districts held their festivals during the period of Ballarat's Begonia Festival.

The fear of competition in those early days of festival pioneering is a further indication that the organizers were quite unaware of the potential that festivals would have in attracting tourists in generating a new style of employment catering for the tourist, and the promoting of regional festivals in a network of tourist bureaux with their fleets of tourist coaches. Indications that

Ballarat's festival would succeed in attracting visitors from beyond the region were evident because of the interest shown by metropolitan Melbourne.

The occasion saw the revival of the annual railway picnic, which had lapsed for a number of years, special trains carried 3,500 passengers from that city, to participate in the first Festival. Because of the customs of the day and the relatively fast and frequent service provided by the railways the majority would have come on day visits. No official records have been kept of the numbers who attended the festival from surrounding towns, though the Visitors Book kept by the organizers of the floral carpet shows that they were well represented.

As the years passed the other shires and municipalities impinging upon Ballarat joined with the Ballarat City Council in making grants to the Ballarat Begonia Festival Association Ltd. In 1992 the Creswick Shire was the only one not to do so. Such support would have relieved the minds of the festival organizers who saw the possibility of financial failure as a haunting shadow. That such fears preyed upon their minds may be seen at the time of Ballarat's COURIER CENTENARY ISSUE in 1967. While recognizing that the Festival was "now firmly entrenched among the city's cultural and tourist attractions", it could ask, "Is it, will it, like an old soldier never die but slowly fade away, diminishing in popularity each year?" Bartrop believed so:

"Unhappily many people take the Festival for granted...just content to look on."

The worst of these fears were not to be realized for another twenty-five years. This was to be in 1992 when the festival celebrated its fortieth anniversary and was basking in a glow of pride having won the prestigious Australian Tourism award, "an award it had won for the second year in a row." The Mayoral Report of the previous year had also boosted it as a successful tourist attraction: "since the first Festival...thousands of visitors had come from all parts of Australia. With such high praises and high hopes the Festival was launched with Forty Years of Begonia Magic as its theme."

It is somewhat ironic that during the ten days of the Festival it came to be realized that all was not well. Outside attractions were well patronized but attendances at many theatre performances were poor. The recession which hitherto had not had any noticeable effect was reflected in nearly all the Festival's activities. Ballarat's unemployment figures at the time were estimated at 17%, and unemployed youth as high as 42.1%. The Chairman of the Ballarat Begonia Festival Association announced a loss of \$86,363 and the acting chairman called it a financial disaster. It seemed that the former forecasts were to be realized and the end had come for the Begonia Festival. There followed a remarkable response to the "Save the Festival" appeal which resulted in \$112,000 being raised in a little over a month "through the co-operation of the Ballarat City Council and the extraordinary efforts of an independent committee. Ballarat obviously valued the power of the Festival to attract the tourist trade and the effect of this on its economy.

From the humble beginnings of forty years ago the Ballarat Begonia Festival, together with festivals in other centres have become in some ways greater than the districts that initiated them. The tourist industry supports them by including them on their itineraries, the motel, hotel and catering industries are dependent on them for much of their custom, and the economy of the festival centres is boosted by them.

The retiring Festival Director in his final report suggested that for the Begonia Festival to continue as a tourist attraction it is essential that it be recognized "that our links with the Association of Victorian Festivals, Australian Celebratory Events and the International Festivals' Association are vital networks for its future."