

Omeo Highway Tales



By Russell J Kelly*

The track linking north-east Victoria to Gippsland had its beginnings more than 120 years ago, connecting the new goldfields of Sunnyside and Glen Wills to supplies on either side of the Divide. Bridle tracks followed where aboriginals walked but as the goldfields expanded the need to improve the route became very apparent. The local Shires did their best to widen the track and extensive lobbying eventually resulted in the State Government funding the improvements. The road was gazetted as a highway and responsibility for the upkeep taken on by the Country Roads Board, sealing the thoroughfare was finally completed in 2014. These tales reflect some of the interesting historical events that took place in the early years of the track.

Tragedy at the Lightning

The Austral Alps Hotel at Lightning Creek (earlier known as Thunder & Lightning Creek) promoted their accommodation as a 'cool, comfortable retreat for tourists' which indeed it was. Exactly half-way between Tallangatta and Omeo the convivial establishment offered a stop-over and 'change station' for the coaches operating the service connecting Gippsland to the Tallangatta railhead.

Built by the McCann brothers of Granite Flat in 1902, construction was distracted when a hunt for stone for the chimney foundations discovered a rich reef that was subsequently mined for the next five years. The attractive timber hotel with its shingle roof, post and rail fence and timber awning provided a refuge for thirsty travellers or for a tariff of 4/- a day, accommodation and all meals provided.

In February 1905 it was very thirsty weather. Following a prolonged drought, the year started off badly with high temperatures and uncontrolled bushfires along the Great Dividing Range. The area was covered in heavy smoke and as the fire approached, residents at the declining Lightning Creek mining settlement prepared for the inevitable. Buckets of water were prepared at the hotel but anxious guests and the hotelier knew that in reality there would be little that could be done when the fire reached the doorstep.

Flames could now be seen through the smoke and the inhabitants busied themselves with stamping out embers with wet sacks.

The Saturday coach from Tallangatta via Mitta Mitta was due to reach the hotel at 4pm, it was now that time but the coach was often delayed with trees across the road. Perhaps with fires ahead the driver had returned to the safety of Mitta Mitta.

Driving the Crawford and Company coach was Arthur Kilpatrick with the typical

contingent of three horses that would receive a well-earned rest at Lightning Creek. Hiram Crawford ran a very successful coaching network in north-east Victoria and southern NSW for 64 years and the run across the Divide provided a valuable connection with the goldfields at Sunnyside and Glen Wills.

There were no passengers this day, only some mail and goods destined for the Austral Alps Hotel. As the coach entered the steep cutting to the north of Lightning Creek the smoke became thicker, the horses nervous. The track paralleled Snowy Creek 10-15 metres below, thick bush either side, a trap if surrounded by fire.

Then through the smoke Arthur sees a man on a horse that turns out to be early Gippsland pioneer and Benambra resident, James O'Rourke. O'Rourke had just ridden from Lightning Creek and Arthur was keen to know if it was safe to proceed. Arthur was told that "it should be safe" and they parted company with the coach moving slowly through the thickening smoke.

Four kilometres from the destination and still within the steep cutting, Arthur draws alongside a man carrying a swag and heading in the same direction. The swagman was



Austral Alps Hotel, Lightning Creek

Thomas McBride and Arthur thought that under the circumstances it would be prudent to give the poor man a lift so McBride hauled himself onto the driver's seat next to Arthur Kilpatrick.

The bush was alight on the side bank of the track and 400-500 metres further on a large gust of wind suddenly covered the coach with flames catching McBride on the head and face. McBride screamed, the horses bolted with the right-hand coach wheels going over the edge of the cutting. In severe pain and unable to see, McBride attempted to leap off the coach, knocking Kilpatrick off his driver's seat and over the cutting.

Meanwhile the coach righted itself with McBride still onboard disappearing down the track into the smoke.

Dazed and grazed, Kilpatrick picked himself up and proceeded down the steep slope to the apparent safety of the Snowy Creek. It was difficult to see, the smoke was choking and the thick bush was flaring as the wind twirled within the cutting. Finding the rocky creek bed, Arthur gulped some water and splashed it over his face and clothes.

Kilpatrick now picked his way upstream towards Lightning Creek with flames igniting hop scrub on both sides, his increasing exhaustion necessitating frequent stops. He finally staggered into the smokey clearing where frantic efforts were being made to stop the hotel burning with flames licking the edges of the building.

Kilpatrick had no further energy left to help and joined the women and children in a clearing next to the creek.

Several hours later it was dark, the hotel saved and in the bar Kilpatrick recounted his near death experience. They feared for the safety of McBride the swagman and agreed that a search party should be despatched at first light.

The party soon found the burnt-out coach, the perished horses and 30 metres below on the creek bank, McBride's charred body. With both legs fractured he had been crawling towards the creek when enveloped in flames. One of the party rode on to Mitta Mitta to alert

Mounted Constable Tony Strahan who recovered the body and arranged for an Inquest.

Thomas McBride, age 41, was buried at the Mitta Mitta Cemetery.

The Austral Alps Hotel had several more close calls with bushfires but it continued as a licensed hotel until 1921.

The 1905 bushfires ravaged north-east Victoria until a deluge arrived in April but Crawford and Company maintained its daily coach service to Lightning Creek.



The "Knocker"

The original track from Omeo to Mitta Mitta did not pass through Anglers Rest but instead took a short cut via the treacherous 17km "Knocker" which today can shave 20 minutes off the journey.

Travel through Gippsland was difficult in the late 19th Century; the easiest way from Omeo to Melbourne was via steamer from Bruthen via the Lower Tambo River to Bairnsdale and schooner to Melbourne. A coach service connected the Bruthen steamer – P.S. Tanjil – to Omeo and onwards to Tallangatta and then train to Wodonga.

The coach leaving Omeo ran alongside Livingstone Creek to the famous Hinnomungie Station, traversed the Mitta



Passengers had to endure not only climatic hardship but also the indignity of pushing the coach up the steep incline of the "Knocker"

River and stopped for a hearty breakfast at the Hinnomungie Inn. Hotel proprietor Michael Carmody and his wife Margaret ran a good establishment, the tucker was good and the horses well looked-after. Carmody who doubled as the local butcher was to later take on running the Commercial Hotel at Glen Wills which was an over-night coach stop.

The four-horse coach then had a steep climb of 660 metres dropping onto small fertile flats bisected by Nine Mile Creek and known alternatively as Staleyville. This was the former site of the Staleyville cattle station but also a small run of alluvial gold mining had brought a number of prospectors to the area. At one time about 50 people were living there with several accommodation houses operating, ideally located at the foot of the gruelling climb up the "Knocker". From 1890 this small village was able to service the large volume of traffic moving people and goods to and from the goldfields at

Sunnyside, Glen Wills and the Wombat.

Edmund Reeves and his wife Ellen as notional proprietor set up a guesthouse called "Lindenow House" that was extended with a large dining and lounge room and extensive stables that were part of a commercial deal for the coach line. *'Tourists will find this a delightful resting place'*, boasted the 1903 tourist guide.

In reality the coach stop was a thinly disguised sly-grog outlet that drew constant attention from police with complaints made by the competitive legal hotel operators on the track. Ellen supplied the liquor but was only convicted twice, once in 1895 when she was fined £25 and the other in 1899 when a fine of £40 was imposed with three month's jail in default. The couple tried the legitimate path and applied for a roadside license in Edmund's name but were consistently refused by the Bairnsdale Licensing Court because of past misdemeanours and objections

from the proprietors of the nearest hotels.

Ellen Reeves became quite famous for her culinary efforts, the speciality of the house being boiled turkey and fowl followed by plum pudding. An extensive luncheon menu was available for the coach passengers together with whiskey, beer and aerated waters bottled at Glen Wills. And while they enjoyed Ellen's hospitality and yarns, Edmund swapped fresh horses for the coach and unloaded supplies destined for his establishment.

Lindenow House was also popular with miners heading to the bank at Omeo to trade their gold. Ellen was willing to weigh and offer cash for their gold, discounted to allow her to later make a tidy profit. With money-in-hand the miners were able to buy their illegal grog and partake in the frivolities including licentious women who were coached-in for the experience. Ellen was an astute operator and many of the miners were relieved of

their gold winnings, returning to their goldfield empty handed.

Leaving Nine Mile, the coach with fresh horses was now ready to scale one of the roughest and steepest tracks in the colony, the famous "Knocker". Aptly named and ready to 'knock up' man, beast and equipment, the track had a reputation for death, injury and lost loads.

Heavy loads intended for mining operations were dragged up the 900 metre slope by bullock teams with deep ruts cut into the red granite by rain, snow and previous heavy traffic. Opposite direction traffic attempting to pass would often topple over the edge and the route was littered with broken axles and wheels. Sharp pegmatite rocks and fallen trees added to the mayhem that even in dry weather caused the horses to slip and slide.

The hapless coach passengers were required to disembark and help push the coach up the slope that seemed to get even steeper, a strange arrangement for paying passengers.

Horse riders found the climb no easier with one recording the event-

'dismounting at the foot of a steep and rocky rise, hereabouts and pulling our horses up after us, we were panting and perspiring with the exertion'.

The coach driver was relieved when the four-hour journey to the top was achieved unscathed, the remainder of the trip was downhill to the comfort of the overnight stop at Glen Wills.

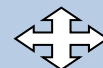
Miners and users of the Knocker constantly complained about the condition of the track and the high cost of carting supplies. Omeo farmers were becoming concerned that fresh produce from Mitta Mitta for the mines was now becoming cheaper due to better access and a more prodigious source.

Under the jurisdiction of the Omeo Shire, token improvements were made and the track straightened but as mining activities increased, conditions only became worse. Deputations to Melbourne politicians were organised to lobby for an alternative dray route via Glen Valley and the partitioners had an excellent ally in tow.



Hon Henry Foster MHR, a staunch supporter for an improved road

Henry Foster, Minister for Mines and Omeo resident for over 30 years became the conduit for agitation for the Knocker bypass but he was unable to win funding prior to his death in 1902. The new dray road was not started until 1908 and in the meantime the Knocker continued to take its toll.



The Spotted Tree Frog, *Litoria spenceri*, is a mountain stream frog species that is **critically endangered**. The Omeo Highway cuts through habitat areas adjacent to the Snowy and Lightning Creeks and Big River.

Gold Fever

The Omeo Highway now threads around the base of Mt Wills where tin was first found in 1891, just as a serious depression was hitting Melbourne. Prospectors flocked to Mt Wills but within 12 months the deposits failed to live up to the promoters' expectations and as the search widened, gold was discovered, some of it accidentally.

Two old prospectors – Walter Sloan and Bill Galway – noticed their dog scratching up dirt at a wombat hole and on further investigation noticed lumps of quartz studded with gold. A claim was pegged and the "Democrat" mine floated, yielding nearly 400kgs of high-grade gold over the next 20 years.

Irish-born Alfred (Alf) Moran was from a large family and seemed to have contracted a large dose of gold fever mania. Alf was an astute prospector and had been successful in the Dark River and Wombat diggings - enough to support himself, his mother and siblings. When gold was discovered at Mt Wills Alf got himself a job at the newly opened *Ritchie's* mine but was not happy at being a mere employee, he wanted his own mine and his own wealth. On his day off and at every spare moment, Alf would go prospecting instead of drinking with his mates at the Mount Wills Hotel in Sunnyside, following the creeks in search of the allusive reef. Gold fever does that to you.

Creeks & Streams

A number of creeks run off the slopes of Mt Wills, these all now flow through culverts under the Omeo Highway. In the early days of the track the water caused the road to collapse and in winter became a quagmire. The only named creek remaining is Christmas Creek, a popular stop for coaches to water passengers and horses – "the best drinking water in Australia" it was claimed.

The creeks that all eventually connect to Wombat Creek were sometimes named after prominent miners such as Roberts, McKenzie and Tetu,. Havelock Creek bears the name from the nearby mine, One-speck Creek reflects the disappointment of a new lease.

Lyre-bird Creek and Havelock Creeks provide the headwaters for the Wombat Falls, a popular picnic site when the Sunnyside township was operational. The pic below (c1902) shows a party at the base of the falls in their Sunday finery.



Minute to Water

"Minute to water" was a spot on the track where coaches paused on the steep climb between Lightning Creek and the Razorback. 15m below the track, down a steep slope, was a spring where cool fresh water bubbled to the surface. A bucket was kept there to bring up water for the horses and thirsty passengers. It did take a minute to get there provided footing wasn't lost on the slippery surface.

The most successful miners were physically fit, didn't let the grog take over and did not abandon their families. Alfred Moran fulfilled this prerequisite.

It was knock-off time on a hot Tuesday afternoon and the tired miners left in groups to walk back to their houses at Sunnyside. Since darkness was another two hours away, Alf and his two mates decided to take a different route home. Rather than follow the worn

bridle track they would follow the contour to the next gully and drop down to the dray track that runs from Omeo to Mitta Mitta – now the Omeo Highway. Whilst Alf's compatriots were focused on getting home, he was busy as usual looking for the tell-tale signs of gold. They were ahead of him now as he glanced to the right at a small outcrop and noticed a quartz rock lying in some mica material that

appeared to have impregnated specs of gold.

He quickly picked up the rock and put it into his pocket, excited he caught up with his mates and nonchalantly continued the journey home – this was *his* secret. Whilst a symptom of gold fever is greed, Alf would not have thought himself self-indulgent and was always up for a shout at the pub.

Alf couldn't wait to get home to closely inspect his discovery and when he did he was elated at the find. He couldn't sleep that night and decided that he would wait until the following Sunday to better explore the outcrop, he would do this alone.

At first light on Sunday Alf walked to the site and quickly found what he thought to be an exposed reef and some more rocks bearing gold. He could hardly contain himself, he almost ran down the mountain to Glen Wills looking for his close friend Thomas Crowther who had some business nouse and a source of cash. Crowther needed some good news, he had been given a hiding the



Bill Howland (left) and Alf Moran (right) pose to celebrate the first crushing of 473ozs at the Gentle Annie (c1902)

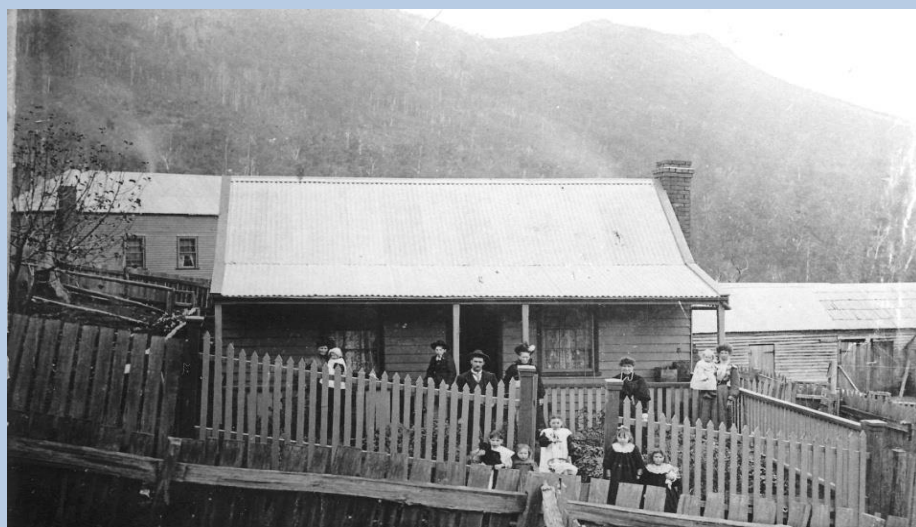
week before by a couple of louts and was sporting black eyes and a broken nose but being a good entrepreneur was always on the lookout for an opportunity. They returned to the site, pegged out a claim and returned to the Mount Wills hotel to announce the discovery to all and sundry. Whilst some celebrated, others more afflicted with the gold fever contagion scarpered to the reported area just to see if they too could peg a claim.

Moran and Crowther needed

capital to start work on the mine so a company – *the Mount Moran Gold Mining Co* - was formed on a 12ha lease application on Wombat Creek. Shareholders were all locals eagre to share in the spoils; sometimes gold fever can be satisfied by investing in someone else's success.

The mine was off to a good start even finding some silver and tin but more capital was needed to fully exploit the lease. Alf and Thomas, funds drained, sold out to a Melbourne syndicate who could provide the cash resources to invest in labour and machinery.

With more capital the mine did well and over 20 years yielded over 209kgs of gold averaging over 2oz to the ton. The lease was eventually taken over by the *Maude & Yellow Girl* mine at Glen Wills and was operated again from 1937 to 1942. Past Mitta resident Jim Petersen who was born at Sunnyside together with his father worked at the mine during this time but it was



Sunday at Alf and Annie Moran's house at Sunnyside. This was in more prosperous times.

no longer viable and closed for good.

One of the five tunnels (#4 adit) of the *Mount Moran* can be seen and explored today at a bend on the Omeo Highway 50kms from Mitta Mitta. 110 metres along the tunnel there is an intersection where the "Moran Reef" was discovered and followed until the reef petered out and gushing water became a problem.

Alf Moran went on to bigger things after the Mount Moran was sold. Broke, he and his mate Bill Howland founded a much richer mine higher up the slope of Mt Wills, the *Gentle Annie*. Named after Alf's soon to be wife Annie Chaplin, she was by some accounts the antithesis of gentility. This mine was eventually very rich but it took 22 months and 300 metres of tunnelling before the reef was exposed. During this time Alf and Annie barely had enough to eat but gold fever has the knack of providing that huge inner-drive to keep up the relentless search. There were some record crushings but eventually their luck ran out after producing over 220kgs of gold, worth \$12m today. Alf Moran moved to Omeo where he invested his winnings in the *Oriental Sluicing Claim* at Dry Hill that needed capital for a very large expansion program. The plan was a failure with only 54oz of gold recovered, the mine closed and Alf was once again broke. Gold fever more often than not ends in tears.

Alf continued as a prospector and miner until he died in Melbourne in 1939. Thomas Crowther operated as a mine investor including helping out

Uranium Find in Victorian "Ghost Town"

Cecil Cooper created news headlines in 1951 when the Mt Wills miner showed some specimens to a visiting geologist that were analysed as uraninite (uranium oxide). At a time when there was a World-wide hunt for the precious element, the discovery triggered considerable interest and an investigation by the State Mines Department was quickly instigated. No other samples were found in the gold/tin areas of Mt Wills suggesting that Cec may have collected the specimens elsewhere. Was Cec playing games?

Cec was born in 1898 at Glen Wills, his early childhood was spent at Daylesford and returned to Glen Wills in 1931 initially working the Yellow Girl Mine. He was certainly 'hooked' and indeed demonstrated a textbook case of gold fever.

He operated the Government Battery near the Glen Wills cemetery up until it closed in 1936. When the Maude & Yellow Girl Mine closed in 1952, Cec acquired a 5-head battery and re-worked the mullock heaps and then operated many of the mines around Mt Wills. He married Norma when he was 60 years old and his later years were spent looking after some historic mining machinery at Glen Wills, later destroyed during the 2003 bushfires.

Cec claimed that he knew where there were large deposits of gold nearby; he just hadn't got around to digging it out. Some would claim that this was delusional behaviour but dreams of yet to be won gold were a basic symptom of gold fever.

Did the colourful Cec find his specimen at Mt Wills or was it seeded ?

Uranium oxide was later found in the Lake Boga area of Victoria in similar country rock to that around Mt Wills so geologists have given Cec the benefit of the doubt.



Alf Moran at the *Gentle Annie* but was smarter with his money. Crowther became a hotelier and at one time owned the Mount Wills Hotel at Sunnyside.

The Omeo Highway has conveyed many with gold fever, few ever saw the rewards.



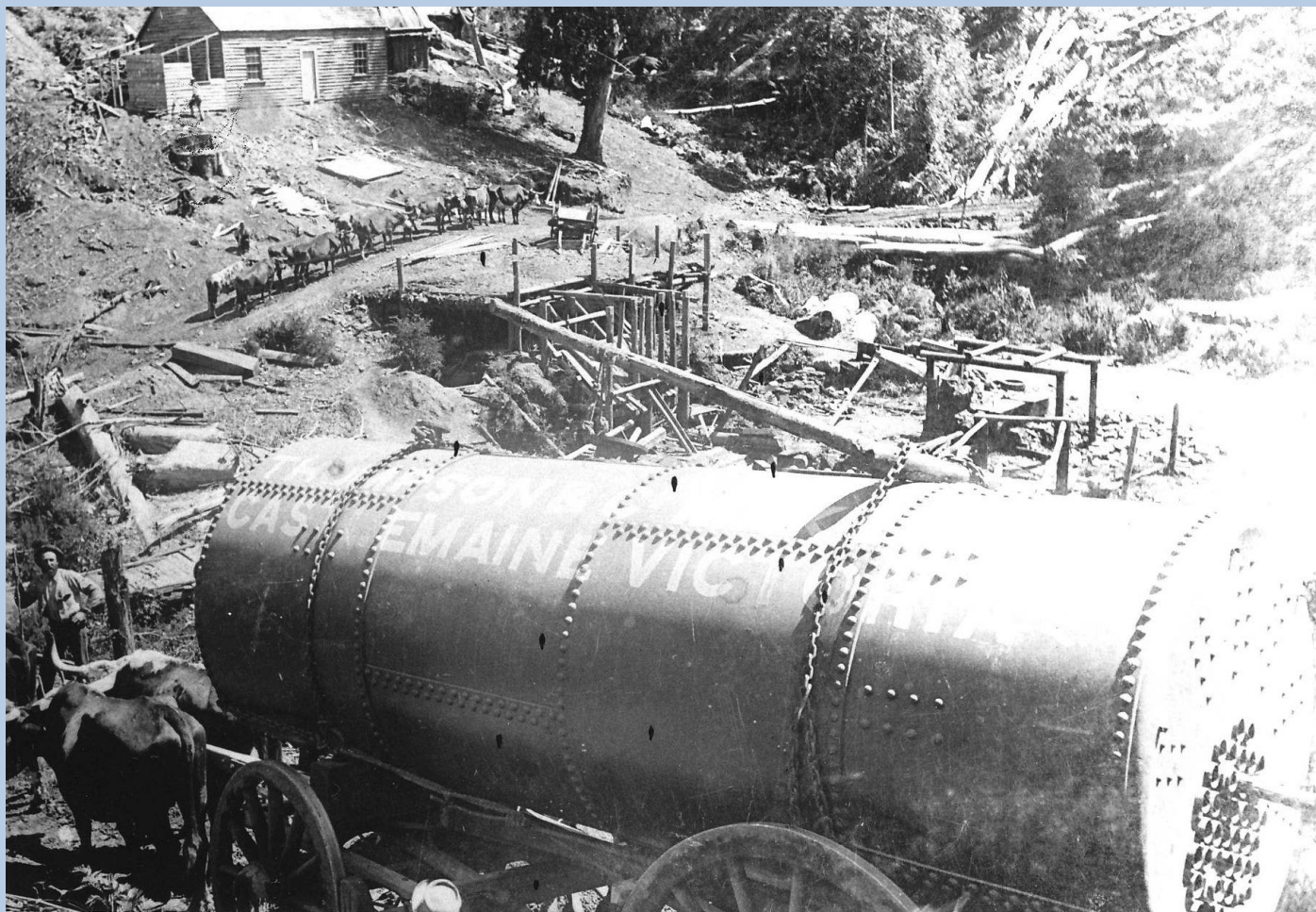
Omeo Road Becomes a State Highway

The road was declared a State Highway in February 1925 by the Premier, Mr Allan. The Government had earlier declined to build a railway to serve the Omeo district and the highway declaration was made to pacify the Omeo Shire.

The Premier said that the declaration "could not justifiably be denied the (Omeo) Shire, in which stalwart pioneers have for years battled against great odds".

Indeed, agitation for a better road has been ongoing for over 120 years.

The first highway to be gazetted in Victoria, the road was officially named the Omeo Highway.



During the mining period (1892-1955) the track had to handle heavy mining equipment brought to Mount Wills via Omeo and Bruthen. Hauled by bullock teams, the weight of the machinery presented a challenge to the timber bridges and the unmade track. This new boiler manufactured by Thomson's Castlemaine foundry is arriving at the United Brothers Gold Mine at Mt Wills (c1894).

A Villain of the Track

The first track along the Mitta Valley threaded its way easily

through the open red gum country ("parkland" as described by some) but problems always occurred during the spring floods. The dray track initially terminated at Mitta Mitta, the site of *Magorra Station* that was settled by early pioneers over 170 years ago. Magorra was

owned by William Wyse but sold in 1855 to an Irishman, John ("Jack") Ahern who was soon to become notorious in the Colony as **Mitta Mitta Jack**.

Mitta Jack was 30 when he arrived in the Mitta Valley with his wife Maria. Like many of the

early Valley pastoralists, the Aherns settled via the Monaro where his life of crime mostly involved horse stealing a cattle duffing. An excellent horseman and handy with his fists, Jack worked around the area and given work at *Magorra* by William Wyse. Jack purchased *Magorra* and steadily acquired a herd of mostly stolen cattle but police visitations failed to pin particular cattle to a hapless owner.

An additional distraction was the finding of alluvial gold on *Magorra* and Jack's purloined beasts were often inturn the subject of further larceny by the miners. Jack had his own method of summary justice that was dealt out with little mercy but his main interest at the time was finding good horses for the ready local market.

An excursion to Yackandandah yielded several good mares, one belonging to William Hedley who later was a manager at *Mitta's Pioneer Mine*. This time *Mitta Jack* was caught red-handed and swiftly taken to court and sentenced to eight years imprisonment with hard labour at *Beechworth Gaol*. Horse stealing was clearly considered a serious offence in those days!

Just before this episode, Jack had been questioned about the disappearance of a bloke called Griffiths – believed murdered and last seen in company with Jack. There was no evidence and the matter was dropped.

And there was another problem. Jack hadn't got around to settling the Bill of Sale for the purchase of *Magorra* and since he was in

prison with no funds, Wyse went to court to have the property returned to him and was successful.

Released from *Beechworth*, Jack headed straight back to his waiting wife and family at *Mitta Mitta* where a small mining town was being rapidly established. It was here that a most daring event took place that was reported in newspapers across the colonies:

It was a hot January day in 1863 and *Mitta Jack* together with his mate Charles Smith were riding past James Moncrieff's mining claim that was situated on what is now the *Omeo Highway*, almost opposite the *Mitta Pub*. *Mitta Jack* challenged Smith to test who had the best horse by jumping them off the bank, a drop of around 5 metres. The bet placed, the winner had to stay on the horse and the horse had to remain upright. They both galloped to the edge, Smith lost his nerve and pulled up, Jack plus stead leapt over the edge, the horse landing on all fours with Jack intact in the saddle. Smith honoured the bet and immediately handed over his horse to Jack.

Mitta Jack broadened his challenge to anyone else in the Valley willing to take up his dare but contestants failed to materialise and the record remained intact.

Jack was unable to change his ways and continued his life of thieving and on-selling horses and brazen illicit acquisition of increasingly larger herds of cattle. Horses tied up outside the *Laurel Hotel* would

disappear while their riders enjoyed a cool ale but local police were unable to pin Jack to the crimes.

His luck eventually ran out when Snr Constable James Pepper based at *Mitta* made an arrest after tracing the theft of a herd of 67 cattle along the *Mitta Road* to where Jack had secreted his booty in the bush. This resulted in another of many prison sentences throughout Jack's unsavoury life.

Police hadn't given up on the cold case of the missing Griffiths and Jack was still the principal suspect. Eighteen years later, as a result of 'information received', *Albury* police were searching the wells at the rear of the old *Criterion Hotel* and other parts of *Albury* for the *corpus delicti*. The body wasn't found, Jack was still in goal and about to be released. Local newspapers carried warnings that

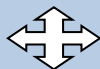
"Jack...may soon be expected back to his old haunts, ready for a fresh career of villainy and crime"

Riders embarking on horseback along the *Mitta road* would be warned – *"be careful you don't run into Mitta Jack, he will take your horse and do you a harm"*.

Jack was never charged with Griffith's murder but he diversified his activities and became more daring including some coach robberies on the *Mitta Road*. Trouble was that everyone in the Valley knew *Mitta Jack*, he did more time

and when released didn't return to the area.

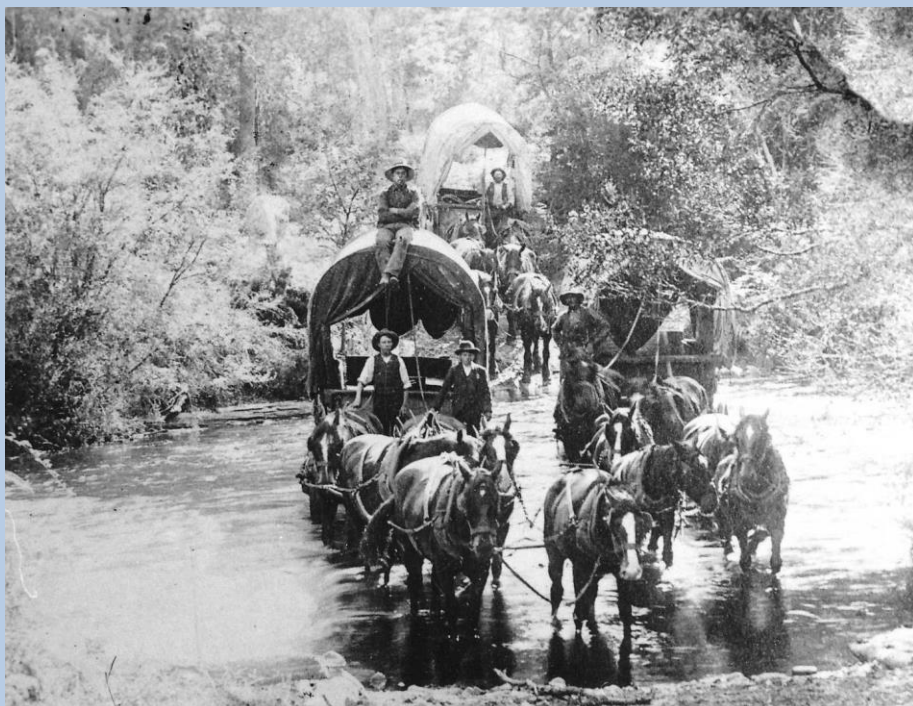
Along with Tom Toke, *Mitta Jack* became one of the criminal legends of the area but others were to follow.



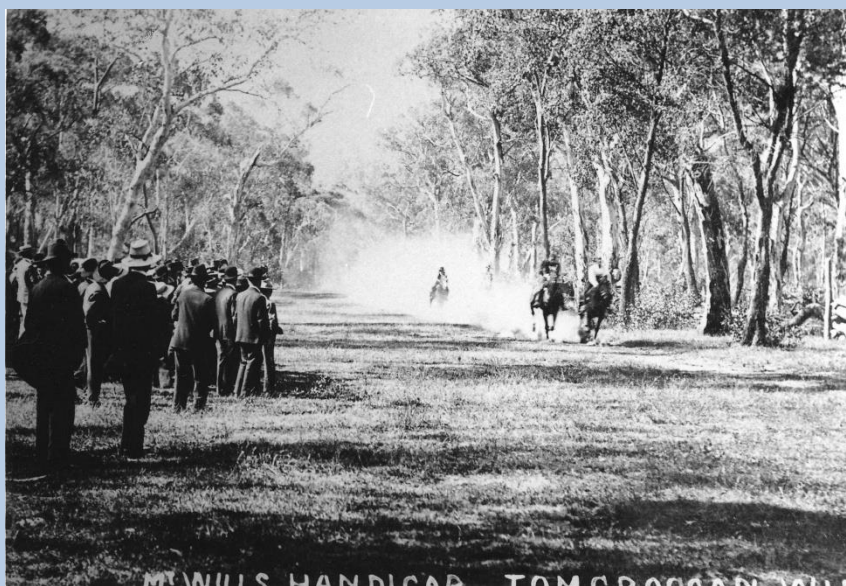
GHOSTTOWN

Sunnyside and Glen Wills were once both bustling towns supporting the gold mining that started in 1888. Sunnyside was well and truly depleted by 1920 when the bulk of the gold ran out although this goldfield produced nearly 100,000 ozs of gold worth \$15m today. Serious mining continued at Glen Wills until the 1950's with a number of exploration companies operating since that time.

The towns were only 3km apart but separated by a 245 metre difference in altitude with a steep precipitous track joining these remote attempts at civilisation. Glen Wills was the larger town and boasted a doctor, hospital and resident police to keep order.



Wagon teams brought supplies to the Sunnyside & Glen Wills gold fields from Granite Flat and Beechworth. Crossing Lightning Creek (c1900) gives the horses a chance for a quick drink.



Race meeting on a track cut through the bush at Glen Wills. *Tom Groggin*, a very successful horse at the time won the Mt Wills Handicap (c1908)

A Mammoth Undertaking

A flume built over the Omeo road at Lightning Creek made the track famous; iconic in its boldness, innovative in design yet financially disastrous, this

engineering feat symbolised nineteenth century mining folly. This was the largest flume built in Australia and with its commercial duties completed, the structure became a major tourist attraction, a monolith to be admired.

Origins of this edifice lay in gold mining activities at Granite Flat, or more particularly Yankee Hill

where it was decided to float a new company to rework an alluvial field. The Mammoth Hydraulic Sluicing & Gold Mining Company was formed in 1885 with a large number of investors; considerable capital was required for this undertaking. One of the major outlays for this type of mining was to bring water to the site and it was decided to build a



Lunch stop. Teams pause to boil the billy with the iconic Lightning Flume as a backdrop. (c1895)

22km water race (ditch), a major engineering exercise at that time. Henry Kaye, a very experienced mining manager, was given responsibility to build the infrastructure and make the mine profitable.

As well as blasting through rock, the ditch had to cross creeks and gullies with flumes, a total of 28 required. The race followed contours and had a fall of only 1 metre per km. Kaye employed a team of nearly 100 men to complete the water race and flumes, the biggest challenge being flume #27, a structure to transit water over the Omeo Road at Lightning Creek. This was to be called the "Big Flume" or the "Lightning Creek Flume" at a site where over 2000 miners toiled during the 1880s.

A sawmill plant was purchased from Melbourne and set up to fashion local alpine ash into the structure designed by Henry Kaye. Built in two tiers, the height was 36 metres and the length 214 metres with a 1

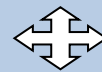
metre box to carry the water. Completed in November 1885 with much fanfare the mine commenced operations but after 3 years only 8.4kg of gold had been recovered. Kaye was fired and replaced by a local manager who was unable to make the venture profitable. The company finally folded in 1895 and the Big Flume transitioned to a sightseer destination.



Water flows across the Lightning Flume, wonderfully engineered from timbers cut down at the site. (c1896)

A local story suggests that locals Kate Walsh, Thomas Petersen and Charles Cross all rode their horses across the top of the flume. It was an amazing feat of horsemanship if the exploit actually occurred.

The Austral Alps Hotel situated at Lightning Creek did well with visitors but there were complaints of timbers falling onto the road from the flume, on one occasion just missing a coach and startling the runaway horses. Soon after Archie Blair took over the hotel in 1908 the Shire decided to remove the flume, it had become dangerous. Explosives were used and Archie recovered the timbers for firewood, the Omeo Road lost one of its main attractions.



A Floral Tribute

'Nearly there!' yelled Tom the old coach driver to the three passengers in the back.

The Mitta to Glen Wills coach was passing under the leaking flume crossing the road just before the turn off into Granite Flat, the morning tea stop. Michael and Brigid Keating will be terminating their journey here leaving their boring companion, a geologist from Melbourne, to continue his boring way to Sunnyside.

The Keatings noticed lots of rubble from earlier mining days, dilapidated timber buildings and some Chinese remnants working a very large commercial vegetable garden, their produce still in demand at nearby gold fields. But it was



neither the scenery nor the gold that brought the Keatings for a 3-day stay at Granite Flat, it was treasure of another kind; a juxtaposition in a community notorious for lawlessness, indeed a cultural black hole.

As Tom pulled up the horses in front of a large homestead he



"Mrs McCann's Chair" on the Omeo Highway near The Walnuts. She came to this granite outcrop to write, paint and contemplate.

waiting at the entrance was the reason for the Keatings travelling all the way from Melbourne – the famous Mrs Annie McDonald McCann. Her reputation had spread far and wide, not just amongst Australians but even in her native County Louth, Ireland.

Standing there, diminutive, dark hair and sporting a large apron she welcomed the party to her guesthouse in a thinly disguised brogue. Michael and Brigid could not wait to hear her story, over the coming days they would find out about one of the Mitta Valley's most talented women, a poet, artist, writer and nationalist.

Annie's flair as a poet was obvious in her early teens at Carlingford Convent where she received a good education. She married Torrens McCann in 1856 and in 1858 (at age 22) boarded the *Red Jacket* for Melbourne to escape the misery in Ireland. They arrived at the Granite Flat goldfield via Beechworth diggings and started a family in a very rough

Mrs Torrens McCann, never 'Annie', a formality probably becoming to her soon to be recognised prowess and standing.

There was no school at Granite Flat at the time and understanding the value of education, Mrs McCann set up the first private school in north-east Victoria at her house, being paid by the Education Department. An excellent teacher and communicator she was a devout catholic and proselytising was an integral component of her instruction.

She was well-read and developed a deep love of the Australian bush, identifying, sketching and painting native plants. In the early 1880's she was in regular correspondence with Baron Ferdinand Von Mueller, famous botanist, a past director of the Royal Botanical Gardens in Melbourne and benefactor of some prominent explorers. Mueller had a high regard for McCann's work and was happy to help her identify seeds and specimens

sent to Melbourne in the hope of identifying new species. Sending in seeds of the local Geebung, she asked Mueller if the fruit represented any danger to children - little was known at the time about the toxicity of native fruits.

In appreciation, Mueller helped Mrs McCann with her plant collection and despatched a book, his 'Introduction to Botanic Teachings at the Schools of Victoria' (published 1877).

Rockalpine House had now become a sort of hotel, well a guest house that was licensed to sell liquor. The building had 10 rooms, stables, vegetable garden and orchard, all on 479 acres surrounding Snowy Creek. Mrs McCann's husband had died a couple of years earlier so she was a busy host and it was during quiet times that Mrs McCann wrote poetry, and she wrote copiously.

Her passion was wattle, this plant permeated throughout her writings. In 1888 George Robertson & Co published a book of her poetry, *The Poetical Works of Mrs Torrens McCann*, believed to be the first verse volume authored by a woman in Victoria.

McCann's poems were often published in newspapers and journals and every Wattle Day she produced a special poem on a card that was widely distributed.

Brigid and Michael remarked that for a 60-year-old she was sharp as a tack. Mrs McCann shared her poetry with the Keatings and even read out several of her favourites,

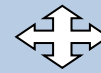
emphasising stanzas that were important to her message. They marvelled at the water colour paintings decorating the walls of Rock Alpine House, exquisite landscapes and native plants fit for any major gallery.



And after dinner Mrs McCann revealed her admiration for the late Sir Henry Parkes and the need for Australia to become a federation, preferably without any connection to mother Britain. Yes, unification was close but she had been advocating for two decades to anyone who would listen - the imperative that her adopted land become a nation. She successfully campaigned for wattle to be part of the new federation's Coat of Arms and eventually in 1988 the Golden Wattle became the floral emblem of Australia.

The coach to collect the Keatings for their return to the city was running late, Tom was driving again and was apologetic for the delay. 'A tree across the road, took me a while to cut it up', Tom exclaimed pointing to the passenger inside. The boring geologist looked very second hand, 'I had James help me with the axe'.

The Keatings had experienced something special, something they will never forget.



Wildside

The sign now stands forlorn on the Omeo Highway below an impressive Mount Wills. Offering no hint of the frenetic activity nearly 120 years ago, "Sunnyside" was once a bustling mining town that was firstly a base for a short-lived tin boom and then to support the more substantial reef mining at Mount Wills.

Initially branded as 'the Slope', a more alluring name depicting the magnificent vista and the preferred location mitigating the bleak winters and the heavy snow was more appealing.

As the gold rush quickened, log huts were replaced with more substantial buildings, the town was surveyed and blocks sold within the 100 acre town boundary. By 1895 there were 500 residents, a large guest house, stores, two billiard saloons and an abattoir.

Sly grog shantys proliferated including Con Jones' congenial establishment complete with a piano and his sister to play it. The music from Con's place would waft down the Slope often to be accompanied by the melodies from Benjamin Butler's hut where similar illicit transactions were taking place. Thirsty miners were pushing for a licensed hotel and despite

strong opposition from the Temperance Party and a small band of local religious interests, the licence was granted and a large weatherboard hotel constructed. The 25-room Mount Wills Hotel quickly became the nucleus for all activities but it was a wild pub that kept a straight-jacket behind the bar to manage the more recalcitrant patrons.

Foster Street served as the thoroughfare from Glen Wills to Tallangatta and also the main street of the town with eight streets and lanes running off to service 110 allotments. It took a while for all the tree stumps in Foster Street to be cleared and this provided an excellent platform for visiting preachers to remind their flock of 'slippery ways in the darkness'. Hecklers provided some amusement but it was unlikely that there were many conversions. A Wesleyan church was soon built and as a counterpoint, a public hall to hold parties and concerts was erected next door to the hotel.

Sunnyside continued to expand with the addition of a school housing 70 pupils but the Education Department was frustrated with the inability to attract female teachers from Melbourne who deplored the unruly behaviour, the austere amenity and the cold winters.

The Progress Association campaigned for the telegraph to be connected and the town developed extensive social infrastructure to placate the more genteel and sober sections of this very isolated community. The Sunnyside Debating Club was very active with the political polemic of the



Mt Wills Hotel, Sunnyside. (c1899)

day and eventually a football and cricket club was formed.

Refined citizens lobbied for a local police presence to keep the peace and demanded that a constable be permanently stationed in the town instead of having to call the hapless mounted policeman from Glen Wills. Crime was not limited to drunken brawls or sly grogging and included thefts of gold, explosives, vegetables from gardens, milking cows, cut wood and chooks.

The day of Sabbath at Sunnyside where the hard-working miners and their families enjoyed their day of rest was the most exhilarating. Some families went to church followed by a picnic in the bush such as a trek to Wombat Falls to admire the cascade and collect sassafras sticks that were popular as walking aids. Or perhaps a visit to the library or Forsyth's bakery to pick up some freshly baked bread.

But those wanting a more exuberant release headed to Foster Street where a sheer juxtaposition would take place,

a Sunday treat where anything could and did happen. The 'warm up' for the audience would often be provided by the popular Sunnyside Brass Band with Mr Morgan as leader. Sometimes a fight or two would break out before the first bracket had completed but most waited for an entertaining procession of strange and varied speakers, many freelancing from Melbourne.

One of the more bizarre performances was provided by 'Professor' Charleston, self-proclaimed lecturer and phrenologist who with a pair of callipers proceeded to measure the skulls of the audience. His pet subject was 'Love, Courtship and Marriage' that he clearly spoke with some authority since he was later convicted in the Melbourne Supreme Court of bigamy and sentenced to 18 months imprisonment with hard labour.

By lunchtime the speakers and the hecklers had retired to the 'Sunnyside Games, a popular billiard tournament followed by the further drinking, two-up and a wood chop outside the pub. The grog would flow and

the brawls continued with some falling asleep on the road.

technology, the Edison phonograph. One of the best

considerable strife. A very hot Christmas Day in 1896 started with heavy drinking and brawling then fires were lit in Foster Street as the mob became more excitable. The publican, Jim Carney, could see the crowd becoming dangerous and remonstrated for calm but they turned on him and he retreated inside his hotel. The rabble then tried to burn down the hotel with Jim inside but common sense prevailed when the miners realised the consequences of destroying their means of quenching a mean thirst.



Football game at Sunnyside. Fires were lit around the ground perimeter to keep patrons warm, games often played in blinding snow. An out-of bounds ball was often difficult to find. The same ground was used for summer cricket games and the concrete pitch can still be located in a clearing on a ridge to the south of the town. (c1901)

One event brought the debauchery to a sudden halt. No-one took much notice of a bloke who placed a box on top of a stump, it looked like a butter churn with a handle at the end but it had a large trumpet on the top. He fiddled with it for a while then started turning the handle and those closest could suddenly hear a woman singing, her voice was coming out of the trumpet, what magic trick was this? A crowd gathered around the stump, there was silence and stark amazement, the only contender a kookaburra yelling from a nearby tree, the woman completed her song and the machine stopped.

The crowd cheered for more, the bloke announced that his machine cost a lot of money to run and an assistant went around with a hat to collect enough for another cylinder to be played on this latest of



Ford Street, Sunnyside (c1896). To the left is the hall with shops being erected on both sides of the main thoroughfare. A herd of cattle remains stationary probably while the owner was imbibing at the hotel.

singers in the World now appearing at Sunnyside, what an amazing invention!

Whilst Sundays had a reputation that often attracted a police presence, there were other occasions such as funerals where the Irish population in particular caused

supply of gold eventually ran out.

A correspondent writing in a Melbourne magazine following a visit to Sunnyside in 1929 described the scene:

"... It was like a ghost town. Many of the houses

were still standing and in them were tables, bedsteads and other articles of furniture. In one house a piano, partly hidden by the blackberries which had invaded the building, still stood against the wall. Out

in the open near the front door of another home, was a sewing machine showing the effects of many years' exposure to the elements. There was not a sign of life anywhere. The old 25-room hotel, once the scene of

lavish spending and nights of gaiety, stood with its door and window frames gaping open to the chill of the mountain blasts."



Tough days as a Mitta Cop

James Pepper was born in Gilford, County Down in 1832, the son of a farmer treated badly by the local British baron and eventually by the potato famine. Like many of his contemporaries, Pepper emigrated to Australia in search of a new opportunity and on arrival joined up as a Mounted Trooper. He cut his teeth on the rioting and looting of the Eureka Hotel, the prelude to the famed Eureka Stockade.

Gold had been discovered in north-east Victoria and miners flocked to the area bringing with them an assortment of criminality to be hopefully subdued by the hapless law-enforcement officers. Bushranger gangs, lone horse and cattle duffers and assorted opportunists plied their trade and the police were kept busy managing this and a high workload of assaults and theft.

"Mad Dog" Morgan, Bogong Jack, Mitta Mitta Jack and Tom Toke were locals with some notoriety and when Mounted Constable Pepper arrived in the area there was plenty of work ahead of him.

Initially based at Beechworth, Pepper was renowned as 'incapable of fear' and did not hold back when there was trouble. During one attempted arrest at Three Mile Creek when police had revolvers drawn, Pepper was hit on the back of his head by a bottle. Some claimed that Pepper was never the same again after the attack but this did not deter his future policing.

In 1863 Pepper was transferred to Mitta with wife Margaret and their first child. His 'patch' was enormous, covering a large mining area with many anti-social issues.

For 6 years the notorious Thomas Toke evaded the law, committing serious crimes including horse stealing. Pepper was tasked to track down and apprehend Toke as a high priority which he

soon accomplished, his reputation seriously enhanced.

Pepper who 'appears to enter his heart and soul into the profession' also rounded up and arrested Mitta Mitta Jack, wanted for horse and cattle stealing offences and a suspected murder.

But a day in 1867 made headlines, causing considerable controversy and tarnishing the (now) Senior Constable Pepper's considerable standing. Whilst on patrol he was thrown from his horse and fractured his collar bone. After returning home his wife made a sling and after changing into civilian clothes, set out to visit the doctor at Yackandandah. Robert Cardwell who operated a store at Mitta and Lightning Creek was to accompany Pepper since Cardwell needed to bank £400 of gold from the diggings that he purchased as a licenced dealer. But Cardwell was running late so James Pepper proceeded without him.

Stopping at the Mitta River before the bridle track climb over Lockhart's Gap, Pepper lit his pipe when suddenly a man appeared from the bush. "Bail up Cardwell" – clearly mistaking Pepper for Robert Cardwell and his gold shipment. Pepper recognised him as Kennedy who he had previously arrested but subsequently released on bail. Then two more men appeared who he believed to be the infamous Clarke Brothers, NSW criminals on the run. Kennedy threatened to shoot him but one of the 'Clarke brothers' said "I won't have a crippled man harmed; tie him up and give him a chance". Pepper was tied to a tree where he remained for the next 9 hours.

In the meantime, Cardwell, wanting to get to the bank before dark used a fast horse and took a short cut. He caught up with Pepper who seemed

extremely traumatised and agitated by his experience. Cardwell however was very thankful that he wasn't the victim which he would have been had he been on schedule.

Proceeding to Yackandandah Superintendent Langley at Beechworth was alerted and an extensive search for the Clarke brothers commenced at first light the next morning. Kennedy would be easy to find but capturing the Clarke brothers would be a feather in the cap of the police district.

But Langley was doubting Pepper's story. The murderous Clarke Brothers, probably the worst in Australian bushranging history, had recently been sighted near Braidwood in NSW. There was no evidence that they had crossed the Murray into Victoria and a month later the Clarkes were captured in NSW and the search in Victoria called off.

Rumours that Pepper was suffering from *delirium tremens* during his ordeal persisted, but Langley was certain that Pepper had no smell of alcohol on his arrival at Yackandandah. A police investigation was commenced into Pepper's claims and Inspector Nicholson, head of the Detective Force in Melbourne arrived at Beechworth and together with Langley, interviewed Pepper.

Nicholson later to be Superintendent Nicholson, was to become famous as officer-in-charge of the Ned Kelly gang pursuit.

Pepper was exonerated from any wrong-doing and was despatched to Melbourne for 'medical treatment', from all accounts suffering from a PTSD-type mental condition. He later transferred to Pitfield, a gold mining settlement near Ballarat and died there in May 1869, aged 37. A large police funeral was indicative of his successful 15 years of service as one of the longest serving members of the Victorian Mounted Police.

According to Robert Cardwell, a good mate of Pepper, the story was true. Yes, Pepper was mistaken about the Clarkes but one of the perpetrators was an ex Pentridge criminal who had opened a shop at Sandy Creek. According to Cardwell, the rope used to tie up Pepper had been purchased from Mr Waldmer Dyring's general store at Sandy Creek.



Fire at the Junction

Mitta Mitta was starting its second mining boom and the town was buzzing with renewed optimism.

It was 1883, the new Pioneer Mine company had been floated with Melbourne investors and locals were excited about getting some fulltime employment.

Several years earlier, local identity William Walker decided that there was room for an additional hotel in the town and converted his house to a new pub, the Junction Hotel. Some minor alterations and the 12-room hotel - complete with cellar - was ready for business.

There were now three hotels in Mitta, including the Bridge Hotel on Mitta North Road and the Laurel Hotel, 100 metres from the Junction.

The Junction was popular with miners and had a reputation for civility and hospitality with clean rooms and fine beverages. Walker sold the hotel to Henry Spier and Robert Crawford who ran a wine and spirit operation in Melbourne and they in turn leased out the hotel.



Mitta's Junction Hotel circa 1882. William Walker is mounted on a horse at the far right.

One of the leasees was 41 year old Lancashire-born William ("Bill") Lord who was to operate hotels in Albury and the district before his death in 1897. At the time, Lord also owned the Laurel Hotel, in strict contravention of the Licensing Act requirement that limited him to one hotel. A smart move at the time because hotel custom at Mitta was divided along the lines of miners, Catholics and protestants/lodge members. William was able to cut across these barriers and get a majority of the local trade.

To overcome this little discrepancy, he had veteran publican Arthur Allen listed as licensee for the Junction. Allen left Mitta in November leaving Lord's wife Eliza, running the hotel.

The December weather was mild and those not busy with small alluvial mining claims were involved in harvesting a bumper wheat crop in the Valley. At around 3am in the morning Eliza awoke to a loud noise sounding like wind roaring through the little timber hotel. Leaping out of bed she quickly discovered that the bedroom over the cellar was

well and truly alight and started screaming – "fire, fire, fire". There is no record as to the whereabouts of Bill Lord during this commotion, but he may have been domiciled at his other hotel.

One of the hotel guests, a Mr T Pellin, a coach driver for Crawford & Co whose stables were next door, heard the ear-piercing cries for help and joined Eliza. Eliza rushed outside to get help while Pellin started throwing buckets of water at the flames. The town was now awake and with no formal fire brigade, residents were well-practised in dealing with such disasters by forming bucket brigades. Every man, woman and child were on the conga line from the Pioneer Mine water race at the back of the hotel to the spreading fire.

The hot northerly wind that had been blowing all day had dropped. Maybe with a lot of effort the fire could be stopped.

But the buckets were not keeping up with rapidly expanding flames.

And of increasing concern were the Crawford stables next door with

Pellin still in his long-johns with several others trying to remove the coach and distressed horses to safety. As the fire progressed the timber-slab stables were quickly engulfed and destroyed with apprehension that the fire might spread to other weatherboard buildings in the town.

The buckets of water were no match for the fire's ferocity and within an hour the little hotel was destroyed. And lucky that the fire was contained to only two buildings and a pile of timber building materials.



William (Bill) M Lord (1842-1897)

Shaken residents stood around and commiserated, adjourning to the Laurel Hotel for refreshments. At first light the extent of the damage was realised and chatter took place as to whether the pub had been insured and whether it would be rebuilt.

The Junction wasn't rebuilt and there were issues over the insurance. The insurance cover with Norwich Union was inadequate with a 70% shortfall leaving owners Spier & Crawford out of pocket. This and other issues

resulted in the Spier/Crawford partnership being dissolved a few months later.

Licensee, Arthur Allen, was summonsed for leaving his hotel for more than 28 days without the

Court's permission and Bill Lord was in legal strife for owning more than one pub.

But life goes on. Mitta still had two pubs, Bill Lord now only enjoyed half of the trade.



Halls & Lodges of Justice

Early Mitta Valley court sessions were conducted in Beechworth and later in Tallangatta with the occasional inquest conducted at the Laurel Hotel by a local JP.

Protests about the long trip to Tallangatta gained approval for the general sessions court to be conducted at Mitta from 1886 onwards. The Mitta Mechanics' Institute was a hall, library, mecca for social occasions and now the centre of a busy court list that included assaults, drunkenness, horse stealing, trespass and unpaid debts.

Tragedy struck in 1925 when the hall burnt down following a fire at the next-door Bernicke's general store. The library was mostly destroyed but the piano purchased in 1897 and some of the furniture

Mitta Store. The Templars' Hall was also used for formal and social events sometimes with singing and dancing, the men in full regalia. A contract for £5 for six-month rent was signed with the Government for the Templars' hall to be used as a court house while the new hall was being constructed nearby.

Once the new hall had been completed, agreements were struck

was somehow saved during the mayhem in extinguishing the blaze.

W. J Thomson (1858-1944) was reputedly the first person to be born at Mitta, a successful businessman, farmer and community leader and now instrumental in building a new, more central, hall. Thomson donated the land and funding of £1000 was obtained with working bees arranged to assist the contractor. A fine hall indeed with a Tasmanian hardwood floor, stage and supper room completed with great fanfare in October 1926.

At the time, alcohol was seen by many as a terrible evil, destroying families and ruining lives, the adverse health consequences not as well understood. Prohibition was introduced in the USA in 1920, the sale of alcohol was banned in the for the hall to conduct Petty Sessions hearings. Ironically, Thomson and Moncrieff who were JP's sat on the bench dealing with the weekly flotsam of crime including drunkenness.

The court operated in the Mitta Hall until 1985 although there were continual squabbles regarding the rental arrangements. Many will remember the visiting magistrate

new town of Canberra and locally the courts were busy dealing with assaults and thefts attributed to the demon drink.

Well before public debate had started, locals including Thomson, Alexander Moncrieff and Samuel Ellis formed the local branch of the Independent Order of Rechabites, a temperance union based on freemason principles but vehemently opposed to the consumption of alcohol. Later this was replaced by the Independent Order of Good Templars with branches at Mitta, Tallandoon and Tallangatta.

Thomson was the Chief Templar with B Pritchard as secretary and a meeting hall (now known as Templar's Cottage) was built behind the

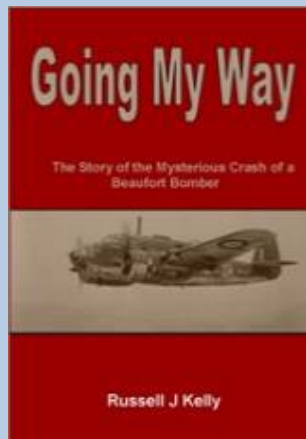
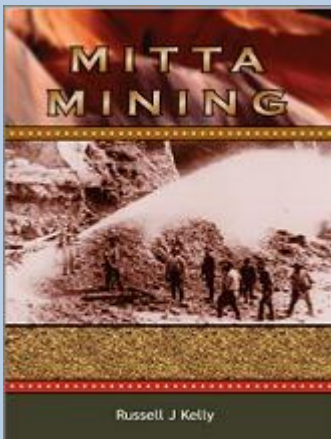
and clerk enjoying a convivial lunch at the Laurel Hotel whilst being monitored across the bar by some apprehensive defendants gaining sustenance prior to their appearance.

By the 1930's temperance organisations mostly disappeared, social attitudes changed and other priorities like the depression and war took primacy.



Templars' cottage as it is today

*Books by Russell J Kelly, details at <http://www.wombatgully.com.au/Books.html>



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