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Australia Day is one of the major public holidays on the Australian calendar. Communities across the country gather together for awards and naturalisation ceremonies and the day is filled with barbecues, parades, concerts, fireworks, and other community activities.

The anniversary of the First Fleet landing has long been a noted day across the country and has been marked by an official public holiday for more than 150 years in NSW, known as Anniversary Day.

Rise Australia!

In the early years of the NSW colony, there was not much official recognition of January 26 being a celebrated anniversary. There were a few exceptions, though, one being a dinner party held at the house of Isaac Nichols, the colony's postmaster, on January 27, 1817.

The 26th day of the month happened to fall on a Sunday, hence the selection of the 27th as the celebratory day. There were about 40 people in attendance at the party. Dinner was served at 5pm and afterwards, the company drank toasts and sang a number of festive songs.

One of the stewards at the dinner wrote a “few appropriate verses for the occasion” and one of the gentlemen at the dinner sang these unified verses to the tune of Rule Britannia.

The Sydney Gazette published the words in the February 1 issue that year: “When first Australia rose to fame, And Seamen brave explored her shore; Neptune with joy, with joy behold their aim, And thus express’d the wish he bore: ‘Rise, Australia! with peace and plenty crowned! Thy name shall one day be renowned.’”

The following year, 1818, Governor Macquarie ordered a 30-goon salute at 1pm in the afternoon from the Batery on Dawes Point on the anniversary, 30 being the number of years since the landing of the First Fleet. The governor also exempted all government employees from turning up to work on the day and gave each of them an extra allowance of one pound of meat.

Anniversary Day

BY THE 1870s, the public holiday was fully established as an annual occasion. Shops and banks would close for the official public holiday in celebration of the anniversary of the landing. The pubs would open for business and sports were the order of the day. Horse racing seems to have been a popular choice of Anniversary Day. In 1869, the Mangoplah Annual Races were held in the Mangoplah Inn (Mills Hylands), on Anniversary Day.

The Alfredton Races provided a place for punters to try their luck on the holiday in 1870. In 1872, Junee and Mangoplah offered racing for the sporting citizens of the area.

The next year, a race meeting was held at Lower Tarcutta Inn, under the auspices of Mr Hassett, and in 1874, it was Forest Hill’s turn. Anniversary Day, 1875, was a particularly memorable one for Wagga residents. A notice appeared in the Wagga Advertiser on Saturday, January 25, 1873, that certain storekeepers had agreed to close their places of business on Monday to celebrate the anniversary of the foundation of NSW. The notice was headed “Early Closing Association” and was signed by eight leading businessmen.

The strange thing about this is it weekend— with a couple of exceptions, such as the Sesquicentenary (and Day of Mourning) in 1898.

Every year, Wagga and the surrounding areas gave over their towns to sporting events.

One of the few visible concessions to the anniversary was the naturalisation ceremonies for the “New Australians.” But 1876 marked the beginning of a change in Wagga, when Australia Day started to become more like the celebratory event it is today.

The Wagga Australia Day Committee was formed to prepare and organise displays and events for the Australia Day long weekend.

A street fair kicked off proceedings at 10.30am on Saturday, January 24, followed by a model boat race on the Wollundry Lagoon and the Wagga Gun Club shoot.

An art and photographic exhibition was opened in the afternoon and a street parade began at 3pm, starting from the Woolworths car park and running all the way down to Hampden Bridge.

At 4pm the Bushwackers and Bullrocker Band performed on the North Wagga flats.

The same parade displays and events held over the three days included:

- The Pony Club gymnastics
- The Judo Club display
- The Wagga and District Car Club motoring
- The Wagga Gem Club sapphire mining display
- The Polish Club
- The Tennis tournament at the Wagga Lawn Courts
- The Bushwackers Band
- The Wagga Model Aero Club

Compiled by Jillis Kippen

References: The Sydney Gazette, 1 Feb 1817, 24 Jan 1826; The Wagga Wagga Advertiser, 30 Jan 1869, 23 Jan 1870, 25 Jan 1872, 24 Jan 1873, 24 Jan 1874; The Daily Advertiser, 24 Jan 1873, 26 Jan 1876.