River steamers on the Murrumbidgee: Part 1

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River steamers (and paddle steamers) are a historical component of the "mighty" Murray River.

What is less well known is the Murrumbidgee River was also navigated by steamers from the late 1850s well into the early 20th century. Certainly the number of vessels on the Murrumbidgee was a lot less than on its more celebrated southern counterpart, but the contribution the steamers made to the development of transport, trade and commerce in Wagga and other settlements along the Murrumbidgee should not be neglected.

Exploration of the river

The first attempts by river steamers to ply the Murrumbidgee occurred in 1857, when exploratory voyages were made. In September of that year, the Mosquito got as far as Balranald despite the large number of snags in the river.

However, it was August 1858 before another vessel, the Gemini, attempted to go further upstream. Carrying 59 tonnes of cargo, the Gemini went past Hey (at the time called Lang's Crossing) and got 260 miles from the junction of the Murrumbidgee and Murray rivers to a place called Illawilla.

At the same time, Captain Francis Cadell, who had played a pivotal role in navigating the Murray River up as high as Albury, was attempting to go further up the Murrumbidgee in his steamer named Albury. Amazingly, he managed to negotiate the river all the way up to Gundagai, although this was one of the few times that steamers were ever able to reach the upper Murrumbidgee, and as a result, Gundagai never enjoyed the benefits of river trade.

Local reaction

The project was a second trip late in 1868 and reached Wagga on November 14, this time with a barge (the Wakool) full of cargo in tow.

The project of the township was rendered by the Wagga Wagga Express: "On Tuesday afternoon, the principal portion of the inhabitants of this place proceeded on board the steamer, and started up the river on a pleasure trip. After sailing about five or six miles up the river, the steamer returned to her moorings at 5pm and the company then dispersed, highly delighted with the trip. That evening a presentation was made to the captain at Boor's hotel (a purse of 50 sovereigns), '... a testimonial of their esteem. For the successful manner in which he had conducted the navigation of the river.' Somewhat comically, the day before the townpeople had their joyride, the river steamer and the barge were seized by the Chief Constable (James O'Keefe) on the charge of 'carrying about fermented and spirituous liquors for sale without a licence'. A summons case was heard on November 16, 1858, with several witnesses appearing, including Captain Cadell and a number of passengers. The case was dismissed, after the prosecution failed to substantiate the charge, and the vessel was released from custody.

Navigation problems

UNFORTUNATELY, the extent to which river steamers could negotiate the Murrumbidgee was reliant on the amount of water in the river. When the Albury was attempting to come up to Wagga in July 1859, and could make it no further than Tubbo Station (near Darlington Point), the editor of the Wagga Wagga Express was scathing in its criticism. 'The present uncertain and irregular style of doing business - of sometimes coming here, at others of stopping 100 miles lower down, and of occasionally not starting at all - is utterly valueless, in fact rather injurious than otherwise.' It even advocated the establishment of the 'Murrumbidgee Steam Navigation Company' to ensure the protection of local interests, although this did not occur for another decade.

River steamers only reached Wagga on six occasions between 1859 to 1880, and between 1881 and 1885, not a single steamer managed to reach Wagga.

It is these statistics which have led historians such as Keith Swan to conclude that: "The 1860s and 1870s have many fascinating stories of river steamers plying the upper Murrumbidgee to Wagga, but this traffic contributed much less to the town's 'take-off' than has been sometimes claimed, unless one gives some weight to the influence of a community's morale of a merely promising prospect."