

**The Wagga Wagga district community's relationships with the Murrumbidgee river
and wetlands over time.**

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The flows of the Murrumbidgee river and the history of the Wagga Wagga area are inextricably intermingled. At times this connection is as subterranean as the underground water that courses just beneath the surface water and the flood plains. The indigenous Wiradjuri are river people who have become practically, emotionally and spiritually accustomed to the ways of the river over thousands of years. In comparison, settlers since colonial times have struggled to come to terms with the river, at times embracing it, others fearing it, or seeking mastery over it, often in reaction to the dramatic changing moods of the river. A single short essay cannot hope to cover the complete history of this interaction, it is instead a series of distilled reflections, contemporary and historical, on observations and conversations that trace key moments in this shared history between the community and river.

The name "*Murrumbidgee*", the original Wiradjuri name of the river, meaning "(which) at times (or often) has often turned aside (flooded)"¹, is an indicator that the river's nature is dynamic and subject to dramatic change. The link between the Wiradjuri and the Murrumbidgee is ancient. One Wiradjuri story tells of the creation of the Murrumbidgee, when a young woman travels to its source and prods a stick in a rock which causes the river to flow for the first time, sweeping all before it.²

Wiradjuri life around the lagoons and wetlands in the Wagga Wagga area appears to have been closely adapted to the rhythms of the river. Some of the information on this lifestyle, land and water management was documented by Dame Mary Gilmore who grew up in the area in the 1870s.

Where there were plains by a river, a part was left undisturbed for birds that nested on the ground. They did the same thing with lagoons, rivers and billabongs for water-birds

¹ Dick Green, *Wiradjuri Heritage Study: For the Wagga Wagga Local Government Area of New South Wales*, Report to Wiradjuri and associated community of Wagga, Wagga Wagga City Council, NSW Heritage Office, 2002, <http://www.wagga.nsw.gov.au/city-of-wagga-wagga/community/aboriginal-services/wiradjuri-heritage-study>, pg165

² Dick Green, *Wiradjuri Heritage Study*

and fish. There was once a great sanctuary for emus at Eunonyhareenyha, near Wagga Wagga... ...Parghan Pregan lagoon at North Wagga Wagga was a sanctuary for pelicans, swans and cranes; and the land between it and the Murrumbidgee was a curlew sanctuary.³

According to Mary Gilmore, the immediate vicinity of what is now the town of Wagga Wagga was a network of fish, bird and animal reserves, arranged around the wetlands and lagoons. Hunting was regulated and subtly managed to ensure that abundant food was readily available for large ceremonial, political and social gatherings of people from local and distant parts.⁴

There is some criticism of Mary Gilmore's perspective from a range of points of view⁵, including her romanticism and difficulties verifying what she says, however, there is some correlation with earlier accounts such as those of Thomas Mitchell who also describes Aboriginal methods of managing water, fish and birds on his exploratory journeys through southern NSW⁶. They both refer to the extensive use of wooden fish baulks to regulate the flow of small and large fish between the main river stream and the surrounding wetlands. For example, Mary Gilmore states that there were log baulks on Parghan Pregan and Wollundry lagoons.⁷ Mary Gilmore describes a process she observed where a tree was undermined and, timed with the rise and fall of the river, felled into the water, then floated into place at the mouth of Wollundry lagoon, to form a fish barrier, which was later reinforced with angled poles.⁸ She also observed Wiradjuri collecting stranded fish after floods and placing them back inside the lagoons.⁹

Although Mary Gilmore is perhaps best remembered as a poet and storyteller, more than a historian, she attempts to find words for which there is too little record, for a complex way

³ Mary Gilmore, *Old Days Old Ways* 1986 edition, pg140

⁴ Mary Gilmore *Old Days Old Ways* 1986 edition, pg161

⁵ for example Kosmas Tsokhas *Romanticism, Aboriginality and National Identity: The Poetry and Prose of Mary Gilmore*, Australian Historical Studies 10/1998; 29:230-247

⁶ For example Mitchell, *Three Expeditions into Eastern Australia*, Vol 2 pg 153

⁷ Mary Gilmore, *Old days Old Ways* 1986 edition

⁸ Mary Gilmore, *Old Days Old Ways* 1986 edition 170-171

⁹ Mary Gilmore, *Old Days Old Ways* 1986 edition 170-171

of life that was diminished, through the process of white settlement. It may be surmised that the first white explorers and settlers saw only what they could culturally see, a place where they could create a new life, and it was imperceptible to them that they moved through a land and riverscape that was subtly formed by human hands over thousands of years. The marks of European culture they were familiar with cut into the landscape in a more pronounced way through such elements as architecture and monumental buildings and towns, earth works, water diversions and agriculture. When Sturt passed along the Murrumbidgee his eyes translated the landscape on its banks in terms of suitability for future farming and grazing.¹⁰ Abundant wildlife was unlikely to have been seen as the result of hundreds of generations of carefully evolved management and selective harvesting. (Yet this was partially recognized in some other accounts besides Mary Gilmore's, such as in the writing of Edward John Eyre¹¹ and at times in Thomas Mitchell's¹² accounts.)

Wiradjuri seasonal occupation was carefully managed to have sufficient without depletion. According to Mary Gilmore, "The blacks used to camp on each side of the big swamps so that the birds would not leave their nests though being annually hunted, but could breed and multiply in quiet."¹³ The richness that the river provided to the initial white settlers began to break down when Wiradjuri management systems were broken. Dame Mary Gilmore's quotes her father as saying that "when the blacks go the fish go."¹⁴

The explorer Thomas Mitchell on first encountering the Murrumbidgee was impressed with its grandness and noted how happy his cattle were.

...I suddenly saw the water before me, and stood at last on the banks of the Murrumbidgee.

¹⁰ Charles Sturt, *Two expeditions into Southern Australia* vol 2. for example pg 41

¹¹ Edward John Eyre, *An account of The Manners and Customs of the Aborigines and the state of their relations with Europeans*, <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/au/>

¹² Thomas Mitchell, *Three Expeditions into Eastern Australia*, Vol 2 page 351

¹³ Dame Mary Gilmore, *More Recollections* forward pg vii? check

¹⁴ Mary Gilmore, *Old Days Old Ways* 1986 edition

This magnificent stream was flowing within eight feet of its banks, with considerable rapidity, the water being quite clear; and it really exceeded so much my expectations... ..I was delighted to find that this corner of Australia could supply at least one river worthy of the name. After thirsting so long amongst the muddy holes of the Lachlan, I witnessed with a slight degree of satisfaction, the jaded cattle drinking at this full and flowing stream, resembling a thing of life, in its deep and rippling waters. Now, at length, there was an end to the privations, we had so often suffered from want of water; and the bank was also clothed in excellent grass – a pleasing site for the cattle.¹⁵

The ease with which the local inhabitants handled the Murrumbidgee was in marked contrast with the problems the explorers had in crossing it with their heavy equipment.

The weather was cold, but the stranger who first swam across, bore in one hand a piece of burning wood, and a green branch. He was no sooner landed than he converted his embers into a fire to dry himself. Immediately after him followed a grey haired chief (of whom I had heard on the Lachlan), and two others.¹⁶

This was one of the best proofs how valuable the services of the aborigines who accompanied the party were to us on some occasions. They could strip from a tree in a very short time a sheet of bark large enough to form a canoe; and they could propel the light bark thus made through the water with astonishing ease and swiftness. By this means alone most of our effects were transported across broad rivers without an accident even to any of my papers or dried plants.¹⁷

The arrival of white settlers

Sturt and Mitchell's journeys throughout southern NSW were fashioned by the rivers. The Murrumbidgee provided a passage, and geographical landmark, a crossing and boundary feature, for the explorers and then the settlers who quickly followed. The settlers who came

¹⁵ Thomas Mitchell, *Three Expeditions into Eastern Australia*, Vol 2 page 75

¹⁶ Thomas Mitchell, *Three Expeditions into Eastern Australia*, Vol 2 page 76

¹⁷ Thomas Mitchell, *Three Expeditions into Eastern Australia*, Vol 2 page 365

from the 1830s, squatted first along the river, relying on the water and the rich alluvial soils. They brought cattle and later sheep with them. Not only were the river banks chosen first for the squatting runs, but because stock were limited in the distance they could travel each day to water, the riverbanks were the most intensively grazed part of the land and most trampled by stock.¹⁸ They were soon in direct conflict with the Wiradjuri, whose lands and food supplies were disrupted, and who, in turn, began spearing cattle. The cattle's use of the river had created a zone of direct conflict. This account by James Gormly, recalling a conversation he had with a local squatter, describes how the Murrumbidgee was used as a location for cattle spearing,:

The plan the black men adopted was to hide in the reeds that grew on the water's edge, and watch until the cattle went down the steep bank to drink. Then the blacks would range themselves along the top of the bank and spear the cattle that were below them.¹⁹

Thomas Mitchell describes the cultural conflict in this way:

The kangaroo disappears from cattle runs, and is also killed by stockmen merely for the sake of the skin; but no mercy is shown to the natives who may help themselves to a bullock or a sheep... ...At present almost every stockman has several strong kangaroo dogs; now it would be only an act of justice towards the aborigines to prohibit white men by law from killing these creatures which are as essential to the natives as cattle are to the Europeans.²⁰

A lot of the retaliation in the broader region that occurred against the Wiradjuri is only noted in whispers in written records, yet, in a pattern that was continued all over Australia, it included mass shootings, poisoning of food and water, and organised killing expeditions.²¹ The shadowy nature of these events is alluded to in the contemporary

¹⁸ Troy Whitford, *An historical analysis of cattle grazing practices on the Murrumbidgee River flood plain 1895-1996*, Rural Society. 9.2 (Summer 1999): p457.

¹⁹ James Gormly, *Exploration and settlement in Australia*, Sydney, Ford, 1921, pg 118

²⁰ Thomas Mitchell, *Three Expeditions into Eastern Australia*, Vol 2 page 351

²¹ For multiple examples of this pattern see, Rachel Perkins, Dir. *First Australians*, Special Broadcasting Service, Screen Australia, New South Wales Film and Television Office, South Australian Film Corporation, Screenwest, Blackfella Films/First Nations Films Pty, 2008

accounts of Edward John Eyre. When travelling with stock down the Murrumbidgee, in 1838, he heard accounts of stockkeepers making raids against the Aborigines.

Many dark hints were given us on the subject of the natives and I quite gathered that the stockkeepers were in the habit of occasionally making raids against them and that they had only recently returned from one of these expeditions – the particulars of which, however, I could not learn.²²

It can be imagined that even when these events were occurring they were clandestine, but he held the impression of widespread complicity. In chapter 1 of his book, *An account of The Manners and Customs of the Aborigines and the state of their relations with Europeans* Eyre enters notes he had made accumulating reports of crimes carried out throughout different regions of Australia.²³ Mary Gilmore speaks with emotion and without scholarly attribution, however, the massacre at Murdering Island²⁴, on the Murrumbidgee near Narrandera, directly correlates with Mary Gilmore's assessment that the rivers and waterways were used to hide the evidence as the bodies were washed away.²⁵ As an old man, Frank Jenkins, whose Buckingbong Station was adjacent the massacre site, told James Baylis:

...all the settlers on both sides of the river determined to give them a lesson; so one day they all went out armed and drove the blacks before them, who took refuge on an island thickly overgrown with reeds in the middle of the river, about seven miles up from the town of Narrandera, and here they were shot down in numbers. The island is known as the Murdering Island to this day.²⁶

It is not that this happened near Narrendera, and so did not involve Wagga Wagga, according to this account, it involved a collective group of squatters systematically clearing

²² Edward John Eyre, *Edward Eyre's Autobiographical Narrative of Residence and Exploration in Australia 1832 – 1839*, Caliban Books, London 1984, pg 175

²³ Edward John Eyre, *An account of The Manners and Customs of the Aborigines and the state of their relations with Europeans*, <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/au/>

²⁴ Bill Gammage, *Narrandera Shire*

²⁵ Mary Gilmore, *More Recollections*, pg 245

²⁶ James Baylis, *RAHS Journal and Proceedings* Vol 13 1927, cited in Eric Irvin ed, *Letters from the River: A Boat trip down the Murrumbidgee*, p 49

the indigenous population down both sides of the river for some distance. This systematic killing is also the story that runs through Indigenous oral history of the event also, notably the account by Uncle Ossie Ingram, passed down to him from an old man in the 1930s.²⁷ A traveller's account of the steamer journey down the river past the island in 1875 shows how the river washed away any obvious traces of this event, as if the island's name was hard to speak, and "Murdering" becomes just another murmur on the river:

... we passed an island covered with reeds, having the rather peculiar name *Muring* Island. How it comes to be so called I could not find out."²⁸

There are many accounts of the Wiradjuri continuing to camp seasonally around the township of Wagga Wagga after white settlement²⁹, including where Hampden Bridge is now and at Wiradjuri Reserve, which, according to James Gormly, was a long standing camping and swimming place.³⁰ Brad Montgomery's CSU Archives Summer Scholarship from 2010-11³¹ gives an extensive account of evidence of the Wiradjuri's presence throughout much of the nineteenth century. Later in this essay accounts of a hidden Wiradjuri life by the river in Wagga Wagga in the early Twentieth Century, uncovered in recent oral histories, will be discussed.

The Floods and the continuing development of Wagga Wagga

Given the strong fluctuations in the height of the river and what was to often happen to the towns of the Murrumbidgee flood plains, the Wiradjuri pattern of seasonal camping on the flood plain was common sense. Permanent settlements on the river banks were particularly vulnerable to inundation. In the words of John Winterbottom, "What a stupid place to build

²⁷ Cited in Peter Kabaila, *Wiradjuri Places: The Murrumbidgee River Basin (with a section on Ngunawal Country)*. Canberra, Canprint Publishing, 1998, pg 90

²⁸ Eric Irvin ed, *Letters from the River: A Boat trip down the Murrumbidgee*, p 49

²⁹ Brad Montgomery, A Study on the Relationship between the Wiradjuri people and the non-indigenous colonisers of Wagga Wagga 1830-1900, CSU Archives Summer Scholarship 2010-11

³⁰ James Gormly, *Exploration and settlement in Australia*, Sydney, Ford, 1921

³¹ Brad Montgomery, A Study on the Relationship between the Wiradjuri people and the non-indigenous colonisers of Wagga Wagga 1830-1900, CSU Archives Summer Scholarship 2010-11

a town.³² In 1852 a massive flood swept away the entire settlement at Gundagai with the loss of 89 lives.³³ Wagga Wagga was inundated but without loss of life. Many buildings were washed away. In Gundagai many lives were saved through the efforts of a Wiradjuri man, Yarrie, who showed a great skill with a canoe in the flood waters,³⁴ and, in Wagga Wagga, a Wiradjuri man by the name of Big Peter was recorded by James Gormly as having helped rescue many.³⁵

Gundagai was moved to higher ground as a result. The plans for Wagga Wagga, only recently prepared, were altered after this flood, and a flood with even higher levels the following year, and rebuilding took place taking this hard earned knowledge into account.³⁶ The school, courthouse and lock up all needed to be rebuilt and when they were they were constructed on higher ground.³⁷

The revised town plans from this time show a diminishment in the scale and number of streets planned for North Wagga and lower level land in South Wagga was also removed from the plan.³⁸ Even at this stage, flooding was beginning to shape the prominence of South Wagga and Newtown. However, before levees, the lower part of Fitzmaurice St in South Wagga was even more subject to flooding than the North.³⁹ In the 1870s a traveller notes that the bottom of Fitzmaurice Street goes underwater pretty well every year which must make it a difficult place to live:

Wagga proper is situate on the southern side of the Murrumbidgee, and is a really nice town, built as if the designer had some idea of beauty about him when he drew the plan of the town. It is, however, not a nice place to live at, for the following reasons :— In Summer time the heat and dust are almost

³² John Winterbottom, *Interview with the Researcher*, Jan 2013

³³ Sherry Morris *Wagga Wagga: A History*, p56

³⁴ Wardiningsih Soerjohardjo, *Remembering Yarrie: An Indigenous Australian and the 1852 Gundagai Flood*, <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/phrj/article/view/3096/3279>

³⁵ James Gormly, *Exploration and settlement in Australia*, Sydney, Ford, 1921, pg 110

³⁶ Sherry Morris *Wagga Wagga: a history*, p 56

³⁷ Sherry Morris *Wagga Wagga: A History*, p 56

³⁸ Maps of Wagga, mid 19th century, CSU Riverina Archives

³⁹ Wagga Wagga City Council Website, web. 15.02.13 <http://www.wagga.nsw.gov.au/city-of-wagga-wagga/engineering-services/flood-management>

intolerable, and in Winter time, when the river is high, the lower end of the town is under water. In November the houses were half under water; boats were sailing about the streets picking up furniture, etc., which was being washed through the windows, which my readers must admit is not very pleasant to the parties concerned.⁴⁰

After the floods of the 1850s leading townsmen asked the government to erect extensive embankments and culverts along Tarcutta Street and wanted 'a way of escape' during a flood. Instead, at the recommendation of the District Surveyor, PF Adams, a bridge over the Wollundry Lagoon was constructed at the end of Fitzmaurice Street, and Baylis Street was formed to serve as a road south from it. The first sale of new town allotments in Baylis Street took place in 1860 and the proceeds were used to help cover the cost of the bridge.⁴¹

There appears to be a pattern, that has persisted throughout the history of Wagga Wagga's settlement, of a period of a decade or two without a major flood, though smaller floods happened often (floods that didn't break expectations), followed by two or three major floods in rapid succession. For example, the flood in 1852 was followed by a flood of higher levels the year after, and similar clusters from 1867 to 1870, 1891 to 1894, 1950, 52 and 56, 1974 to 1976 and, 2010 and 2012.⁴² In addition there were often several floods in the one year, which must have been difficult,⁴³ on the other hand, it appears that the destructiveness of the flood was often related to the degree of preparation and recent familiarity with flood events, not just the river height. From the first recorded flood in 1844 to the last flood in 2012 there appears to have been a systematic improvement in the state of readiness, yet, there is also a pattern of this readiness being lulled when there was a long period without a flood.

⁴⁰ "A TASMANIAN IN RIVERINA." The Cornwall Chronicle(Launceston, Tas. : 1835 - 1880) 28 Dec 1878: 3. <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article66499254>>.

⁴¹ Sherry Morris Wagga Wagga: A History, p 59

⁴² Wagga City Council Website, <http://www.wagga.nsw.gov.au/city-of-wagga-wagga/wagga-wagga/murrumbidgee-river-and-floods>

⁴³ Wagga City Council Website, <http://www.wagga.nsw.gov.au/city-of-wagga-wagga/wagga-wagga/murrumbidgee-river-and-floods>

This 1870 account of a last minute attempt to protect the town through the construction of an improvised levee appears to be the first serious attempt at building levees. Something that was not entirely successful until a century later. It is interesting to compare the preparations in 1870 with later strategies. The first error was to anticipate that the water from Gundagai, given telegraph reports, would arrive much later than it did.

The river at Wagga Wagga also continued to rise, but old residents insisted that there would be no overflow of the bank to do injury until Friday, and so some projected measures for embanking a block of buildings likely to be soonest flooded were postponed until Thursday morning, and the inhabitants retired to their beds on Wednesday night with a feeling of security, never dreaming that the water would reach their dwellings. But they were mistaken, and many anxious watchers in the lower-lying blocks still thronged the banks of the river, and when at about ten o'clock at night the water commenced flowing into the wharf reserve, the note of alarm was sounded throughout the town, lights suddenly gleamed from every window, and hasty and, in too many cases, far too late, endeavours were made to remove everything liable to damage beyond the reach of the flood which was then seen to be inevitable. From the rear of the Commercial Hotel to the Pastoral Hotel yard labourers were immediately set to work, and by digging a trench and carting soil from the court house reserve, an embankment of about two feet in height was rapidly thrown up, and for some time the progress of the water was in this direction stayed. Through the Pastoral Hotel yard to the rear of Mr. Shaw's premises, a number of men were also employed in continuing the embankment, but after the river had overflowed its banks and found, as it would have been imagined, ample scope in the wide flats for the discharge of its waters, it rose with unexampled rapidity, and mounting the embankment, the imprisoned waters burst forth, and meeting the backwaters which had been creeping up from the lower end of Gurwood street, every house in the block was speedily inundated. After this

no further outdoor efforts were made. Every man rushed to his own house, and, up to their knees in water, amidst the cries of their women, and the screaming of naked, shivering children, goods and furniture were hurriedly piled on tables and counters, and carried into upper stories beyond the reach of the waters. In very many houses the inmates had retired to rest, and only by the unusual noises in the streets and the ripples of the waters, were aroused from their slumbers in time to snatch from destruction a few necessaries and valuables. By one o'clock the whole of Fitzmaurice street, to the corner of Messrs, Bergin, Moxham and Corthorn's premises, were submerged and every house in Gurwood Street was in a similar plight.⁴⁴

This very dramatic and poetic account continues at some length. In comparison with 21st century risk management and precautionary evacuations, the general attitude seems a little casual, until too late of course, when many spectacular rescues were needed. The 1870 flood surpassed all expectations of what a flood would do and, not for the last time, took the town by surprise.⁴⁵

On Thursday various reports brought into town of families surrounded and in distress on the flats about the river; and the boats, of which there were but three serviceable ones in the town, were kept continuously employed in rowing about and taking people off haystacks and the roofs of houses. Messrs Beeson and Jones took eleven persons, including six Chinese, who were in danger, from haystacks, onto which they had clambered for safety, in Mr McAllister's paddocks. A large number of persons who had taken refuge in the grandstand on the racecourse were supplied with provisions by boat by Messrs. Fitzhardinge, Elliot and Brock. Mr Warren, the fisherman, plied up and down the river incessantly in his boat, and, at great personal risk, landed several unfortunates who had been forced to take refuge on house-tops and in trees. On Thursday it was reported that Mr Telford, Mr Bolton and eight men were in imminent danger on Church's Island at

⁴⁴ Wagga Wagga Express 4th May 1870 cited in The Maitland Mercury & Hunter River General Advertiser Tuesday 10 May 1870, page 2

⁴⁵ Wagga Wagga Express 4th May 1870 cited in The Maitland Mercury & Hunter River General Advertiser Tuesday 10 May 1870, page 2

Pomingalarna, and at daybreak on Friday morning Messrs Windayer, Brock and Sullivan pulled off in a boat to their rescue. The distance to be travelled was sixteen miles, and, the current was running at a fearful rate, and the country was studded with submerged stumps and fences...⁴⁶

Accounts of Chinese rescues are common in newspaper reports from the 19th and early 20th century because there was a large Chinese camp beside the river in Fitzmaurice Street toward Wiradjuri reserve, and they were involved in extensive market gardens reliant on river and lagoon water, particularly at North Wagga Island.⁴⁷ There are also accounts of a punt manned by Chinese rescuing large numbers of people during the 1870 flood.⁴⁸ The considerable Chinese presence in the second half of the 19th century was an important feature of life in Wagga Wagga. The Chinese were amongst the first to productively engage agriculturally with the river with extensive and successful market gardens which were a more or less exclusive service essential for the health of the town. This next account of the 1870 floods also implies flooding that went well beyond expectation:

At about 8 or 9 o'clock the river began to roar and the rains poured. The doors of the hotel were shut, and the inmates proceeded to make themselves comfortable by the fire. Soon they heard water lapping at the door and then some of the river came in underneath and flooded the bar. The people laughed, and reckoned they were safe there. During the night the river rose so much that the men had to get up into the ceiling via the hatchway. At daylight they broke out through the roof, which fortunately was shingle, and were rescued by the police.⁴⁹

Perhaps the citizens of Wagga Wagga became habituated to regular flooding and took it in their stride, continuing to go about their daily routines as much as possible, it was just that

⁴⁶ Wagga Wagga Express 4th May 1870 cited in The Maitland Mercury & Hunter River General Advertiser Tuesday 10 May 1870, page 2

⁴⁷ Dr Barry McGowan, *Tracking the Dragon: A history of the Chinese in the Riverina*, Museum of the Riverina, Wagga Wagga, 2010 pg 18

⁴⁸ Ibid, pg 19

⁴⁹ Recollections of JW Walker, The Register, Adelaide SA Friday 8 December 1916, page 5

every now and then the river came in faster and higher than expected. This comfortableness with flooding can be seen in accounts and images of the 1891 floods which describe regular mail and food continuing to be delivered by boats.⁵⁰

However the floods and their aftermath still caused considerable destruction:

The flood is still, high, but the waters are subsiding. Business operations are almost at a standstill. No gas is available in the town tonight. Candles are placed in the streets, and the houses and business places are lighted by lamps and candles. In some places there is over 2ft. of silt and mud. Fences, stables, and outhouses are down in all directions, and boxes, barrels, and timber are floating down the streets. Many of the houses of the Chinese are submerged, and the gardens are destroyed. The roads and footpaths are greatly damaged in places and impassable.⁵¹

At a meeting immediately after the flood a tally of the damage was done and all were congratulated on how quickly the recovery was taking place and a relief loan was speedily arranged with the NSW government.⁵² It shows an emerging pattern of government support for the cost of floods. It would be an interesting study in itself to track how expectations of flood assistance developed and were negotiated over the course of Wagga Wagga's history. The two feet of silt perhaps included a sizeable portion of Gundagai racecourse, which had collapsed into the river as the floodwaters carved away the river bank.⁵³ The river, with instability caused by changes to the banks and run off patterns, was far from stable, in terms of erosion, and wouldn't reach any kind of equilibrium for another sixty or seventy years.

River as a crossing point

⁵⁰ "INTERCOLONIAL TELEGRAMS." *The Capricornian* (Rockhampton, Qld : 1875 - 1929) 24 Jan 1891: 6. Web. 15 Feb 2013 <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article71921567>>.

⁵¹ "THE FLOODS IN NEW SOUTH WALES." *The Argus*(Melbourne, Vic. : 1848 - 1956) 1 Jul 1891: 6. Web. 15 Feb 2013 <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article8639346>>

⁵² "The Late Floods." *The Maitland Mercury & Hunter River General Advertiser* (NSW : 1843 - 1893) 7 Jul 1891: 6. Web. 15 Feb 2013 <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article18998508>>.

⁵³ *Clarence and Richmond Examiner* (Grafton, NSW : 1889 - 1915), Saturday 25 July 1891, page 8

A significant focus of interaction of the community with the river has always been how to cross it. At the time of first white settlement this was rough and ready, and stock were often swum across.⁵⁴

From the discovery of gold in the mid 19th Century, Wagga Wagga became important as a crossing place between the Victorian goldfields and those of Lambing Flat in the north.⁵⁵

Successful commercial punts were installed at Wagga Wagga and later bridges. Sherry Morris has detailed the drama over access and control over the crossings of the river, and how it was subject to ongoing dispute and feuding, often to the point of litigation.

Competition between a private bridge constructed by a group of prominent citizens, ostensibly for the good of the town, and a free punt, set up primarily to avoid the bridge toll, continued for many years until the private company bridge was made public in the 1870s.⁵⁶

A traveller passing through Wagga Wagga made this observation, published in 1878:

North Wagga consists of several public houses, numerous shops, and a few homes, but calls for no comment, except that it does a good business. On account of the railway terminus being situate there, between Wagga proper, and North Wagga, there is a bridge built by private speculation. The charges over this are something to remember. Foot passengers, 2d each; horses, 6d; and 6d per wheel for vehicles. This is a disgrace to the district, and is, I believe, the only bridge in the river where you have to pay for crossing.⁵⁷

Hampden bridge was built in 1895. This became the primary crossing until well into the 20th century.⁵⁸ This bridge also often became the focus of debate. It's upkeep due to heavy

⁵⁴ James Gormly, *Exploration and settlement in Australia*, Sydney, Ford, 1921, pg 117

⁵⁵ Sherry Morris, *Wagga Wagga: A history*

⁵⁶ Sherry Morris, *Wagga Wagga: A history* pgs 7 – 20.

⁵⁷ "A TASMANIAN IN RIVERINA." *The Cornwall Chronicle*(Launceston, Tas. : 1835 - 1880) 28 Dec 1878: 3. Web. 15 Feb 2013 <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article66499254>>.

⁵⁸ Sherry Morris, *Wagga Wagga: A history*, Chap 4

traffic, floods and wear and tear was a continual commitment; and its condition was often a matter of concern to the town,⁵⁹ and still is, even after its recent closure.

The unreliable highway

The river and the land beside it became a kind of unreliable highway. The river was seen as a potential way to link Wagga Wagga to the Murray and from there, by rail, to Melbourne.

River steamers were tried, coming up from the Murray with mixed success.⁶⁰ Sturt had made reference to the difficulty in navigating the river because of the snags.⁶¹ In the 1870s snags were partially cleared from the river to make the way clearer for the steamers.⁶²

Snags were an important ecological feature of the river, particularly because they were an important habitat for fish. It was one of the many things done to the river with the best intentions in the 19th century for which remedial action is now being considered.⁶³

When people made their way along tracks beside the river it was also hazardous, with seven people reported to have drowned on the riverside track between Wagga Wagga and Narrendera in one wet season.⁶⁴

When wool began to make good money the riverside also became a highway for travelling stock which were bought up by speculators and grazed along the river, generally by teams of hired men for a period of time with the hope of making a profit.⁶⁵ In an extensive detailed account for a Tasmanian newspaper, a correspondent from Tasmania working his

⁵⁹ Sherry Morris, *Wagga Wagga: A history*, pg 35 - 45

⁶⁰ Sherry Morris, *Wagga Wagga: A history*, pg 76 -77

⁶¹ Charles Sturt, *Two Expeditions Into the Interior of Southern Australia, During the Years 1828, 1829, 1830 and 1831: With Observations on the Soil, Climate and General Resources of the Colony of New South Wales*. vol 2, chap IV

⁶² For example, "LOWER MURRUMBIDGEE." *Bendigo Advertiser* (Vic. : 1855 - 1918) 3 May 1856: 2. <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article88049829>>.

⁶³ For example, Vic. Dept. of Natural Resources and Environment, *Bringing native fish back to the rivers: River Habitat rehabilitation through re-snagging*, http://www.dse.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/105764/Resnagging_Revolution.pdfhttp://www.dse.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/105764/Resnagging_Revolution.pdf

⁶⁴ James Gormly, *Exploration and settlement in Australia*, Sydney, Ford, 1921

⁶⁵ "A TASMANIAN IN RIVERINA." *The Cornwall Chronicle*(Launceston, Tas. : 1835 - 1880) 28 Dec 1878: 3. Web. 15 Feb 2013 <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article66499254>>.

way through the area gives an insight into the culture of droving, the obsession with land and sheep and the type of tricks resorted to gain an advantage.

As soon as warm weather sets in lots of sheep owners begin to travel their sheep up and down the rivers for food and water. In most places there is a road half a mile, or perhaps a mile in width, over which these sheep loaf for feed at the rate of six miles per day. This seemed strange to me after our roads fenced on both sides and only a chain wide; but nowadays, on the principle rivers, the station holders have purchased the frontage, and now the roads are being fenced in at a great rate, such roads being three chains in width. A stranger would scarcely credit the number of sheep that are sent upon the roads to eat down other people's grass.⁶⁶

At first white settlement in the region primarily consisted in extensive squatting runs that ran cattle and later sheep. There were few fences and only scattered homesteads. Both sheep and cattle were concentrated on the river bank land because before wells and bores were sunk they needed to return to the river each day to water. The gradual emergence of sheep grazing is significant for several reasons. Although heavier cattle hooves trample river banks more heavily, the sheep graze closer⁶⁷ doing more damage to native grasses, particularly with over stocking in dry times.⁶⁸ Sheep made more of a mark on the landscape in other ways as well. They required fencing and shearing sheds, and, once wool became highly profitable in the 1870s, in an effort to raise the number of sheep able to be grazed per acre, large scale ring-barking, killing of trees by cutting a ring through the bark around the trunk of each tree, became widespread⁶⁹ and many landholders carried this out enthusiastically. Large teams of Chinese workers systematically cleared whole stations.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ "A TASMANIAN IN RIVERINA." *The Cornwall Chronicle*(Launceston, Tas. : 1835 - 1880) 28 Dec 1878: 3. Web. 15 Feb 2013 <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article66499254>>.

⁶⁷ for example, *Agricultural Gazette of NSW*, Jan 2, 1908, pg 46

⁶⁸ "PASTORAL AND AGRICULTURAL PROSPECTS IN RIVERINA." *The Brisbane Courier* (Qld. 1864 - 1933) 27 Jun 1885: 3. <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article3443456>>.

⁶⁹ Troy Whitford, An historical analysis of cattle grazing practices on the Murrumbidgee River flood plain 1895-1996, *Rural Society*. 9.2 (Summer 1999).

⁷⁰ McGowan, Barry, *Adaptation and organization: the history and heritage of the Chinese in the Riverina and western New South Wales, Australia. (SA Paper)*, Chinese America: History and Perspectives, Annual, 2007, p.233(8)

Although the squatters of early settlement years still held considerable power, changes in the second half of the 19th century that came in with the Crown Land Acts from 1961 and subsequent legislative alterations meant that over time their essential and improved lands were transferred to freehold title with large sections of their former lease land thrown open to a process of land selection.⁷¹ This was motivated by NSW government policy that sought to create denser settlement. This democratization of the land owning process meant that land was being distributed amongst a larger pool of people. James Gormly, a successful selector himself, and the local member in the NSW parliament for many years, was one who took up the case in the latter part of the 19th century.⁷² For example, the squatters had made public land their own by exploiting reserves and crown land. Gormly argued from the point of view that the “general public” would be best served by taking the land out of the hands of the squatters and making it available as smaller holdings.⁷³ This more inclusive growth in the concept of what was public ownership was entirely based on the interests of rural landholders. It just meant making more of them, which in turned intensified environmental pressure on the river. This conception of who had rights regarding the river and it surrounds is also played out in much later debates, particularly related to water and irrigation. As will be seen later in the essay, it is only as this definition has been challenged in the last twenty years, as the concept of river and water ownership has been strategically reengineered and broadened, that environmental concerns and indigenous interests began to have a real say in the health and use of the river. However, from the 1860s to well into the 20th century, closer settlement and the impact of grazing and agriculture on the river, appear to have increased the pressure on the river considerably.

⁷¹ Troy Whitford, An historical analysis of cattle grazing practices on the Murrumbidgee River flood plain 1895-1996, *Rural Society*, 9.2 (Summer 1999).

⁷² James Gormly, *Exploration and settlement in Australia*, Sydney, Ford, 1921, pg 487, and, Sherry Morris, *Wagga Wagga: A history*, pg 51-53

⁷³ James Gormly, *Exploration and settlement in Australia*, Sydney, Ford, 1921

An anonymous traveller writing letters to his family in the 1870s as he went down the river from Wagga Wagga by river steamer describes the riverside in the following way:

“With regard to selection, every available acre on both sides of the river has been taken up...”⁷⁴

But with it all, the miles of rung trees and deserted humpies tell their own tale of disappointed and unsuccessful selectors.⁷⁵

The land along the river was being pushed to its limits as new selectors experimented with exploiting a living on their blocks. This experimentation intensified towards the end of the 19th century. A general preoccupation of discovering what would best work in terms of agriculture and grazing can be illustrated in the setting up of the Wagga Wagga Experimental Farm.⁷⁶ Farmers and graziers were also testing what would work. For example, Mr George Sheppard of Orange Tree Point (Wagga) made interstate headlines for his experiments with wheat disease protection in 1899⁷⁷. The scientific approach was to be liberally applied to all matters agricultural.

Prior to the arrival of the railways much of what was grown was sold locally, however, with the railway and a streamlined transport option to Sydney, the markets for local produce expanded rapidly. Once there were markets available via the railways, agriculture became more widespread, further increasing the environmental pressure on the river. This created a realignment in Wagga Wagga’s sense of itself, the awkward and arduous routes of river and land transport that linked it to Melbourne altered and allegiance shifted, with the business opportunities now balanced more to Sydney,⁷⁸ diminishing the importance of the river as a means of transport considerably.

⁷⁴Eric Irvin ed, *Letters from the River: A Boat trip down the Murrumbidgee in 1875*,

⁷⁵Eric Irvin ed, *Letters from the River: A Boat trip down the Murrumbidgee in 1875*

⁷⁶ for example, NSW Department of Primary Industries [://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/research/centres/wagga/history](http://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/research/centres/wagga/history), and, James Gornly, *Exploration and settlement in Australia*, Sydney, Ford, 1921, pg 283

⁷⁷Warwick Argus (Qld. : 1879 - 1901), Saturday 16 September 1899, page 4

⁷⁸Sherry Morris, *Wagga Wagga: A history*, pp 77-78

Rabbit numbers were increasing, but only in the early years of the twentieth century was it realized the dimensions of the problem that they were becoming, doing enormous damage to the landscape in terms of damaging grassland, virtually eliminating many native species, and adding to soil erosion.⁷⁹ This was compounded by serious overstocking of sheep⁸⁰ which became evident in times of drought, with landholders still coming to terms with the large seasonal variations of the Riverina, further damaging vegetation and contributing to erosion. Agriculture which was steadily becoming more industrial in scale, and methods that left land to open fallow, made the top soil vulnerable to heavy rains.

At the time (1914) growing wheat on long fallow was the fashion. About half the farm was ploughed and left to lie under long fallow - kept weed free by constant working with scarifier and harrows. Houlaghan's Creek drains some of this area and flows into the Murrumbidgee. A heavy storm dumped four inches of rain over the catchment. The rolling country eroded and the river virtually ran liquid mud, rose six feet in a few hours. The mud killed every living thing in the river. Fish lined the banks with their heads out of water in the morning and were all dead by lunchtime. The lobsters and shrimps crawled out on the bank to die in a solid band, three to four feet wide and about a foot deep, and also two eels. There would have been a ton of dead and dying fish to every one or two hundred yards of river bank."⁸¹

The River as a recreation place

The concept of what the river could be to the town appears to have evolved through the 1890s to the 1930s to give a greater emphasis on its recreational value. Sherry Morris describes this developing aspect of life in Wagga Wagga.⁸² There was greater use of the river for boating, fishing and swimming, and walking by the river became a pastime for

⁷⁹ Agricultural Gazette of NSW, Jan 2, 1908, pg 46
or, for example, SERIOUS INCREASE OF RABBITS. (1926, January 29). *The Land* (Sydney, NSW : 1911 - 1954), p. 20. Retrieved August 3, 2013, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article116261178>

⁸⁰ "PASTORAL AND AGRICULTURAL PROSPECTS IN RIVERINA." *The Brisbane Courier* (Qld. 1864 - 1933) 27 Jun 1885: 3. <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article3443456>>

⁸¹ Max Leitch, cited in Dick Green, *Wiradjuri Heritage Study*, pg 121 - 122

⁸² Sherry Morris, *Wagga Wagga: A history*, pp 99-100, 164

many. The riverside was re-landscaped to fit this new vision, a kind of English folly. Gardens became extensive. Gardens around the Town Hall, three and a half acres, were open to the public in 1890 and this was later extended to land fronting Tarcutta Street where a rose garden was established.⁸³ Plans were put in place to put to willows along the banks of the river in an effort to stop the river eating away the banks behind Fitzmaurice Street.⁸⁴ Fifteen hundred willows were planted.⁸⁵ The same willows were much later recognized to be a serious environmental problem. Private cottage gardens, as early as 1879, were extensive in Wagga Wagga and were noted for their sophistication in the Town and Country Journal in that year.⁸⁶

In these early recreational landscaping plans, there is an eerie echo of the recent Riverside development scheme,⁸⁷ (silently washed away in the 2012 floods). Similarly there is a recurring pattern of finding work for those without it that commences with river landscaping work for the unemployed during the Depression in the 1930s.⁸⁸ Over the history of the town there is a reemerging pattern of trying to shape the riverside as an idealized recreational space, but the river seems to be always resisting, even after a hundred years of trying; the vision not quite matching up with reality.

Burrinjuck - the first dam.

Plans for damming the river were primarily focused on the benefits to potential landholders further downstream from Wagga Wagga in the new Murrumbidgee Irrigation area. The initial private Barren Jack proposal for a dam was defeated in NSW parliament in 190YEAR. James Gormly, the same tireless member of parliament who had taken on the

⁸³ Sherry Morris, *Wagga Wagga: A history*, pg 92 - 93

⁸⁴ *Australian Town and Country Journal* (NSW : 1870 - 1907), Saturday 12 July 1890, page 17 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article71179158>

⁸⁵ Sherry Morris, *Wagga Wagga: A history*, pg 93

⁸⁶ *Town and Country Journal* Nov 15 1879, pg 932, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-page5987391>

⁸⁷ *Riverside Wagga Wagga Strategic Master Plan*, <http://www.wagga.nsw.gov.au/city-of-wagga-wagga/council/riverside-wagga-wagga>

⁸⁸ *The Sydney Morning Herald* (NSW : 1842 - 1954), Friday 20 May 1932, page 10 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article16864968>

squatters in the name of greater access to land for selectors many years before, spoke at great length against the proposal because the private scheme would create a monopoly for a few landowners⁸⁹ in the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area (MIA), and the benefits of the water would not be shared with landholders upstream at Wagga Wagga and Gundagai.⁹⁰ This first private version of the scheme was unsuccessful. A public scheme, for the same downstream MIA area, with control centralized in the hands of government appointees instead, notably NAB Wade, without the widespread access to opportunity envisaged by Gormly, was commenced in 1906.⁹¹ So begins the long and complex journey into the politics of Murrumbidgee water management which will be touched on several times in this essay. The name “Barren Jack” was the name given to one of two peaks which enclosed the dam, the other was Black Andrew.⁹² Barren Jack was a corruption of an Aboriginal (unknown language origin) word which may have been more like “*Borrin-yiak* – meaning a bold or rugged feature in the landscape”.⁹³ The Minister for Lands, Arthur Griffith, changed the name to something he felt was more like the original, *Burrinjuck*, on the primary basis that Barren Jack was an inauspicious name on which to base an irrigation scheme and one of the biggest dams in the world at the time of construction.⁹⁴

The Institute of Engineers nomination of Burrinjuck dam for a National Engineering Award in 1999 states that one of the reasons it should be given the award is because it is still standing!⁹⁵ Given grossly underestimated maximum river flows at times of flooding, and a high degree of guess in calculating the pressures on the dam wall and spillways, it only survived through continuing recalculations and remedial work throughout the following

⁸⁹ James Gormly, cited in NSW Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works, Barren Jack storage reservoir and northern Murrumbidgee Irrigation Scheme Report, 1903, pg 545

⁹⁰ James Gormly, cited in NSW Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works, Barren Jack storage reservoir and northern Murrumbidgee Irrigation Scheme Report, 1903, pg 546

⁹¹ Institute of Engineers Australia, Burrinjuck Dam and No1 Power Station: nomination for National Engineering Landmark, 1999 downloaded from http://www.engineersaustralia.org.au/sites/default/files/Burrinjuck_Dam_Nomination.pdf, pg 3

⁹² Institute of Engineers Australia, Burrinjuck Dam and No1 Power Station: nomination for National Engineering Landmark, 1999 downloaded from http://www.engineersaustralia.org.au/sites/default/files/Burrinjuck_Dam_Nomination.pdf, pg ???

⁹³ Ibid

⁹⁴ Ibid

⁹⁵ Institute of Engineers Australia, Burrinjuck Dam and No1 Power Station: nomination for National Engineering Landmark, 1999 downloaded from http://www.engineersaustralia.org.au/sites/default/files/Burrinjuck_Dam_Nomination.pdf, pg 2

century. Those who were worried that during the flood of 1925 the dam would break and cause devastating floods downstream including wiping out Wagga Wagga, appear to have been justified, as the flood flow was five times the original engineering calculations for the maximum flow of flood waters.⁹⁶

Aside from the fear of biblical annihilation that occasionally emerged when the dam showed vulnerability, (severe structural failings were again discovered in the 1930s⁹⁷), perhaps the most immediate effect to come to Wagga Wagga from the first major stage completion of the dam in 1928 was a new source of electricity from the hydro electric scheme associated with it.⁹⁸

The flood of 1925

For the first time in some years chaos⁹⁹ was caused by flooding in Wagga Wagga in 1925 as many residents were taken by surprise, or, having been warned, not reacting in time, many losing most of their possessions, with a number having to be rescued by boat. A team of horses was swept away.¹⁰⁰ Fears of the new dam breaking compounded confusion.¹⁰¹ A system of brick walls and sandbags constructed around buildings was used to protect many of the town's businesses, though in 1925 newspaper reports claim this was ineffective, yet reports of this system of making individual buildings water tight continues in flood reports over many years. John Winterbottom, living in Fitzmaurice St in the 1950s, recalls the system as by then being reasonably effective.¹⁰²

⁹⁶ Institute of Engineers Australia, Burrinjuck Dam and No1 Power Station: nomination for National Engineering Landmark, 1999 downloaded from http://www.engineersaustralia.org.au/sites/default/files/Burrinjuck_Dam_Nomination.pdf, pg 8

⁹⁷ Institute of Engineers Australia, Burrinjuck Dam and No1 Power Station: nomination for National Engineering Landmark, 1999 downloaded from http://www.engineersaustralia.org.au/sites/default/files/Burrinjuck_Dam_Nomination.pdf, pg 10

⁹⁸ Sherry Morris, *Wagga Wagga: A History*, pg 161

⁹⁹ "FLOOD-SWEPT AREAS." *The Argus* (Melbourne, Vic. : 1848 - 1957) 1 Jun 1925: 13. Web. 4 Aug 2013 <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article2122323>>.

¹⁰⁰ "FLOOD-SWEPT AREAS." *The Argus* (Melbourne, Vic. : 1848 - 1957) 1 Jun 1925: 13. Web. 4 Aug 2013 <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article2122323>>.

¹⁰¹ "FLOOD-SWEPT AREAS." *The Argus* (Melbourne, Vic. : 1848 - 1957) 1 Jun 1925: 13. Web. 4 Aug 2013 <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article2122323>>.

¹⁰² John Winterbottom, Interview with the Researcher, Jan 2013

The floods of 1925 were not over soon. North Wagga residents were flooded and evacuated to Wagga Wagga showground three times in a month.¹⁰³ Polling for elections was disrupted, not to the extent it had been in 1891 when the polling booth building had been flooded, but voters from North Wagga had their vote delayed by some days.¹⁰⁴

The Surf life saving club

Sherry Morris has written extensively about the leisure life on the river for the people of Wagga Wagga during the 1920s and 30s.¹⁰⁵ Notably how the social life embraced the river, with the Dixieland dance floor floating on the river, bringing a touch of international glamour, and the new Surf Life Saving Club bringing a touch of the coast to Wagga Beach. The Surf Club provides an insight into the way the Wagga Wagga community saw itself on a number of levels, including its aspirations to be more than a regional town, and its tendency to find imaginative and original solutions.

Even in dry weather the water is kept at a constant level, being regulated from the Burrinjuck Dam. To enhance the value of their wonderful inland beach the residents of Wagga Wagga have planted hundreds of trees, both for ornamental and shade purposes, and have provided parking areas, kiosks, and picnicking facilities for visitors from afar. There are even floodlights for night bathing. In 1926 members of the local football team formed a life-saving club, because of the danger of the swift flowing river current. Originally a band of ten active members, with an old fruit kiosk for headquarters, this little club has become the Wagga Wagga Beach Life-saving Club, with largely increased membership and a handsome new clubhouse.¹⁰⁶

A large portion of the community, for a time, appears to have embraced the river fully.

Another aspect of the Surf Lifesaving Club, in considering how the town was relating to the river, is not just its practical function of saving lives, it was also in how it made the bathers

¹⁰³ The Argus (Melbourne, Vic. : 1848 - 1956), Tuesday 10 July 1956, page 5

¹⁰⁴ Kalgoorlie Miner (WA : 1895 - 1950), Tuesday 2 June 1925, page 5

¹⁰⁵ Sherry Morris, Wagga Wagga: A history, pp 163-4

¹⁰⁶ The Sydney Morning Herald (NSW : 1842 - 1954), Thursday 14 December 1933, page 12

feel secure in the swift and sometimes deadly waters. Although the surf club had some notable successes in saving lives of recreational swimmers¹⁰⁷, over the period of European settlement the number of people listed in newspaper reports as having drowned, or otherwise dying, in the Murrumbidgee at Wagga Wagga is beyond easy counting.¹⁰⁸ Newspaper accounts range from apparently endless swimming accidents,¹⁰⁹ suicides,¹¹⁰ the occasional murder,¹¹¹ to almost unbelievable accidents, for example, in 1938, of the drover, reaching for his hat as it blew off his head in a dust storm, falling down the bank and drowning in the river.¹¹² From quite early in the 19th century fear of the river for some was mingled with the enthusiasm for it by others:

A CAUTION TO BOY-BATHERS.- A few evenings since a little fellow named Thomas Jones narrowly escaped drowning. He went into the river to bathe, got out of his depth, and being unable to swim was carried away by the current. He must have perished but for the praiseworthy action of a lad named Thomas Smith, who swam to his assistance, and with difficulty rescued him after he had twice sunk, and when in a state of extreme exhaustion. The indifference of parents in Wagga Wagga to the risks which their children incur in bathing in the river, is something remarkable, if nothing more. It is by no means uncommon to see a lot of diminutive urchins disporting themselves in the water within the influence of a current sufficient to sweep them into eternity at once, if they stumbled or fell, and who if they, escaped drowning would be inevitably swallowed by some of our overgrown cod.¹¹³

There were so many drownings, yet it became more and more popular as a place to go for

¹⁰⁷ For example, "IN DIFFICULTIES WHILE SWIMMING." *Singleton Argus* (NSW : 1880 - 1954) 14 Jan 1928: 6. Web. 3 Sep 2013 <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article81112541>>.

¹⁰⁸ John Winterbottom, Interview with the researcher, 2013

¹⁰⁹ for example, 4 in a fortnight in 1929, "DROWNING ACCIDENT AT WAGGA." *The Sydney Morning Herald* (NSW : 1842 - 1954) 28 Jan 1929: 12. <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article16526510>>.

¹¹⁰ *The Mercury* (Hobart, Tas. : 1860 - 1954) 18 Dec 1886: 3. <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-page820353>>.

¹¹¹ SKIN IDENTIFIED. (1934, May 9). *Queensland Times* (Ipswich) (Qld. : 1909 - 1954), p. 8 Edition: DAILY. from

<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article116017823>

¹¹² MAN DROWNED AT WAGGA. (1938, April 22). *Albury Banner and Wodonga Express* (NSW : 1896 - 1939), p. 12. from

<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article102339630>

¹¹³ LOCAL INTELLIGENCE. (1868, December 30). *Wagga Wagga Advertiser and Riverine Reporter* (NSW : 1868 - 1875), pg. 2 from

<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article104083421>

enjoyment. It is to be wondered, was the danger part of the attraction?

Living by the river – the shadow town

Much is known about the Tent Town and later Tin Town that emerged during the Great Depression but it appears that camping by the river has been common all through Wagga Wagga's history. There are accounts, usually of drunken crime, that occurred in camps along the river from the 19th century, but even early in the twentieth century a severe housing shortage forced a lot of Wagga Wagga residents into what was even then known as a tent-town. This account from 1913:

CANVAS TOWN IN WAGGA

Owing to high rents, scarcity of houses, and other causes, a tent town has come into existence on the outskirts of Wagga. Referring to the matter in a report to the council, Sanitary Inspector Tinsley says that the population of the camp is 89, including 33 parents, 36 children from 10 weeks old to 16 years, and 20 pensioners.

Most of the camps are constructed of bags or hessian, and are overcrowded. There were many cases of indelicacies and flies had complete possession of the interior of these crude structures. The sanitary conditions were disgusting. In the interest of decency and health the council must try to prevent these people from living under the present insanitary conditions.

Inspector Tinsley was authorised by the council to take the necessary steps to have the conditions improved.¹¹⁴

Life in this tent town was rough in many ways, and there are numerous accounts of violence:

MAN ATTACKED ON THE RIVER BANK.

ALLEGED ASSAILANT STILL AT LARGE.

¹¹⁴ HIGH RENTS., (1913, November 29). *The Sydney Morning Herald* (NSW : 1842 - 1954), p. 21., <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article15478848>

A man named John Egan was removed to the Wagga District Hospital at an early hour on Friday morning, suffering from Injuries which, if his story is reliable, were sustained as the result of a particularly-savage assault by two men.

Constable Johnson found the man in a semi-conscious state on the town side of the Hampden Bridge, on the bank of the river near what is known as canvas town, shortly after midnight. Egan's head was laid open and from a gash blood had flowed down over his clothes.¹¹⁵

Many of the residents appear to have been itinerant workers, but this account of a drowning in 1923 offers some additional insight into the occupations of those living in tent town.

Two girls, while walking along the bank of the Murrumbidgee River, near Hampden Bridge, today saw a man in mid-stream. They saw his hands above the water, and they raised an alarm. The police and a blacktracker got out a police boat and grappling irons, but up to a late hour on Thursday evening they had failed to locate the body.

They made a search among the residents of what is known as "Canvas Town," and found that an old man named Tippet was missing. A number of residents at this camp are old-age pensioners and travelling tradesmen and showmen. Tippet is a tinker, and earns a living making repairs at his camp on the bank of the river. When the police examined the camp it bore traces of recent occupation, but no trace could be found of Tippet.

It is feared that the man whom the girls saw was Tippet¹¹⁶

Although they weren't the majority, there were Aboriginal families living in tent town.¹¹⁷

Recent oral histories from Aboriginal elders Aunty Kath Withers and Aunty Lorraine Tye,

¹¹⁵ Savage Attack. (1915, January 19). *Young Witness* (NSW : 1915 - 1923), p. 3., <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article113668120>

¹¹⁶ A RIVER FATALITY. (1923, September 8). *The Sydney Morning Herald* (NSW : 1842 - 1954), p. 16. from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article16092177>

whose families continued to live in Wagga Wagga throughout the Twentieth century undermine the misconception that there were no Aboriginal people in Wagga Wagga during the twentieth century before the resettlement program of the nineteen seventies. Lorraine's grandfather and family, including her father, were living in what was an extension of this community in a humpy on North Wagga Island in the 1930s running a market garden.¹¹⁸ Kath Withers describes how her family lived on the Tin Town site in a canvas lean too, despite claims that it was all cleared by then, well into the 1950s.¹¹⁹ Those with Aboriginal heritage either didn't know of it themselves, or they kept it a close secret. For example, Lorraine Tye, says her father never mentioned that they were Aboriginal.¹²⁰ In her early memories from the fifties and sixties, when her father's cousins or his grandmother came to visit, the cousins would leave early in the morning so as to be not seen. Her great grandmother, who had obvious Aboriginal features, would hide in the laundry when visitors came around.¹²¹

Given the difficulties of being known as Aboriginal, non citizens prior to 1967, with a high probability of having your children taken, amongst many other challenges, it is understandable that families chose to be as invisible as possible in Wagga Wagga, and, as in other NSW inland towns, were likely to be found in the shadow world of the fringe camps, in this case Tent Town. Tent Town became Tin Town and was mostly dispersed in the thirties with a number of residents relocated to Gumly Gumly which formed a solid supportive community which residents and visitors remember fondly.¹²² Yet the sanctuary of the river continued to be a shelter even after the war. In 1948 a visiting canoeist paddling down the river noticed humpies beside the river, upstream from Wagga Wagga, where a

¹¹⁷ Peter Kabaila, *Wiradjuri Places, The Macquarie River Basin and some places revisited*, Vol 3 Black Mountain Projects, Canberra, 1998

¹¹⁸ Lorraine Tye, interview with the researcher, 2013

¹¹⁹ Kath Withers, interview with Dick Green, cited in NSW Office of Environment and Heritage, *Wiradjuri Reserve – Gobba Beach (Murrumbidgee River)*, Statement of Significance for an Aboriginal Place Declaration, 2012

¹²⁰ Lorraine Tye, interview with the researcher, 2013

¹²¹ Lorraine Tye, interview with the researcher, 2013

¹²² Daphne Maslin, *Gumly Gumly: The 1934 settlement*, D Maslin, Gumly Gumly 1983

number of elderly residents were living.¹²³ John Winterbottom recalls many traumatized ex soldiers were living along the river after World War II, often camping in the old car bodies that had by then begun to accumulate there.¹²⁴ In fact there are still those who take shelter by the river as is demonstrated by a recent articles on Wilks Park in the Daily Advertiser, describing long term camping at Wilks Park, the Council's efforts to discourage it, and quoting one man who often camps on the river bank as well.¹²⁵

Post World War II

Post World War II, R. Raven-Hart, an English Army Major, travelled down the Murrumbidgee by canoe and wrote an account, published in 1948, that gives a good snapshot of the river. His first glimpse of the river near Gundagai was of it "flowing contentedly among treeless and eroding hills."¹²⁶

He was conscious of comparing himself with Charles Sturt who took the same route, though Sturt entered the water much further downstream. Raven-Hart comments of the three day paddle from Gundagai to Wagga Wagga as:

It was good sport, the best part of the Bidgee, thanks to the current and the exciting navigation. Snags were everywhere, the snags that had worried Sturt, "immense trees that had been swept down by floods" As on his voyage, lower down on the river.¹²⁷

Many of this outsider's observations describe a river in trouble. Showing signs of the strains from a century of settlement:

The river is very much left to its devices up here; and in fact everywhere of recent years since navigation has ceased, and "snagging", or de-snagging with it. No attempt is made to protect the banks and they are eroding rapidly, especially on the

¹²³ R Raven-Hart, *Canoe on the River*, Georgian press, Melbourne, 1948,

¹²⁴ John Winterbottom, Interview with the researcher, 2013

¹²⁵ Report calls for end to Wilks Park camping, The Daily Advertiser, <http://www.dailyadvertiser.com.au/story/746926/report-calls-for-end-to-wilks-park-camping/>

¹²⁶ R Raven-Hart, *Canoe on the River*, Georgian press, Melbourne, 1948, p11

¹²⁷ R Raven-Hart, *Canoe on the River*, Georgian press, Melbourne, 1948, p19

outer banks of curves where the water swings against them and undermines them until whole sections topple in, bringing big trees with them to add to the snag tangles...¹²⁸

... the Murrumbidgee is not a scenic river here. There were a few amiable views of the placidly rolling grassy hills, seen between patches of trees nearer the river: many of these were ringbarked and dying, or already accusing dead grey skeletons, or burnt out black stumps like decayed teeth.¹²⁹

... Willows turned up in patches only; and there was a perplexing thing about the willows. At first, I thought that they must be some Australian species, comparing there almost acid, shrill green with the remembered gentle, soothing colour of English river banks; and then I realised that my eye had come to accept the even gentler, quieter brown-greens of the gums as "green", so that the willow green seemed harsh by contrast.¹³⁰

Raven-Hart compares the four people he comes across on the journey between Gundagai and Wagga Wagga to Sturt's observation:

The evident want of population in so fine a country, and on so noble a river, surprised me extremely. He meant Aboriginal population, of course; but I think that he would be even more surprised today at the neglect of this river by his own people.¹³¹

"But we saw platypuses, many platypuses."¹³² They also saw many birds that are much as what would be commonly found along the river today. On arriving on the outskirts of Wagga Wagga (about 6 miles above the town) they noticed: "riverside shacks began to appear, very ramshackle affairs of packing cases and sacking that Jack calls "humpies" usually with very elderly occupants."¹³³

¹²⁸ R Raven-Hart, *Canoe on the River*, Georgian press, Melbourne, 1948, p20

¹²⁹ R Raven-Hart, *Canoe on the River*, Georgian press, Melbourne, 1948, p21

¹³⁰ R Raven-Hart, *Canoe on the River*, Georgian press, Melbourne, 1948, p21

¹³¹ R Raven-Hart, *Canoe on the River*, Georgian press, Melbourne, 1948, p22

¹³² R Raven-Hart, *Canoe on the River*, Georgian press, Melbourne, 1948, p 24

¹³³ R Raven-Hart, *Canoe on the River*, Georgian press, Melbourne, 1948, p25

It is interesting that even after the war there were still people taking advantage of the freedom of riverside life, even if this was also an indicator of ongoing poverty remaining from the Depression.

Raven-Hart and his companion pulled in at Wagga Beach noting:

Wagga is one of the few Murrumbidgee towns which realise that they have a river - too thoroughly a few years ago, when there were fears that the dam away upstream at Burrinjuck was faulty and provision was made to evacuate the citizens up to higher slopes beyond the town.¹³⁴

As they left Wagga Wagga they passed two boys:

...paddling a row-boat with tree-branches: this was the only "navigation" so far seen on the river, although in the old days steamers used to come up to Wagga, and on occasion even to Gundagai and beyond.¹³⁵

It says a lot about the easy going nature of the times that, in the evening, leaving and going downstream from Wagga Wagga, they stopped to collect some eggs from a dairy/poultry farm. At the homestead they found doors wide open and nobody home, Raven-Hart was told it was common in rural Australia for people to go to town for the day and leave their home unlocked.¹³⁶ As will be seen, this local feeling of security, typical of country life until the 1970s¹³⁷, was at odds with larger nation wide feelings of insecurity driving a policy of building the national economy and infrastructure on a massive scale into the 1950s.

In NSW, even before World War II was over, in 1945, a number of dam construction schemes, to have a significant future effect on the Murrumbidgee valley, including expanding the capacity of Burrinjuck and the construction of Blowering dam, were put forward by the NSW Government as "Priority A" centrepieces for agricultural renewal,

¹³⁴ R Raven-Hart, *Canoe on the River*, Georgian press, Melbourne, 1948, p26

¹³⁵ R Raven-Hart, *Canoe on the River*, Georgian press, Melbourne, 1948, p27

¹³⁶ R Raven-Hart, *Canoe on the River*, Georgian press, Melbourne, 1948, p 28

¹³⁷ Researcher's childhood recollection.

providing immediate post war jobs for returning soldiers, and all round nation building.¹³⁸

Other projects proposed at this time were later given diminished importance but Burrinjuck and Blowering Dams, embodying national priorities, as agreed at the Premiers conference of 1952, of "food and power"¹³⁹, remained high on the agenda into the 1950s. Despite this there were a number of delays to Blowering Dam and it didn't fill until 1968.¹⁴⁰

This was an addition to the national Snowy Mountains Hydro Electric Scheme, which, according to a Sydney Morning Herald newspaper account on the occasion of the scheme's opening in 1949, was going to industrialise and transform the Murrumbidgee in ways hard to imagine:

SNOWY RIVER SCHEME

The Power To Build A Greater Nation

Along the rich inland valleys of the Murrumbidgee and the Murray where today crops grow and sheep graze, great new industrial towns with populations near the million mark will spring up within the next 50 years.

Sixteen underground power stations, hidden deep in the rugged fastnesses of the Snowy Mountains, secure from enemy attack, free from dependence on coal and coalminers, will pour lifeblood into their factories and plants.¹⁴¹

Smoke stacks and factories for heavy industry never really took off in Wagga Wagga, but it shows a scale of thinking, a belief that any transformation was possible. In the same article and others like it the United States post war relationship with Australia can be seen:

President Harry Truman has pledged the fullest aid the United States can give. He has promised that "whatever problem may arise" the United States Government will help Australia to iron it out.

¹³⁸ "POST-WAR WATER CONSERVATION." Singleton Argus (NSW : 1880 - 1954) 5 Mar 1945: 2. Web. 12 Feb 2013 <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article82063394>>.

¹³⁹ "New Pattern For State Works Will Be Proposed." The Sunday Herald (Sydney, NSW : 1949 - 1953) 6 Jul 1952: 3. Web. 12 Feb 2013 <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article18516962>>

¹⁴⁰ Wagga City Council, timeline from website, <http://www.wagga.nsw.gov.au/city-of-wagga-wagga/wagga-wagga/murrumbidgee-river-and-floods>

¹⁴¹ "SNOWY RIVER SCHEME The Power To Build A Greater Nation." The Sydney Morning Herald (NSW : 1842 - 1954) 15 Oct 1949: 2. Web. 12 Feb 2013 <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article18133000>>

America's finest technicians and greatest engineering brains have been offered to Australia to help and advise.¹⁴²

This reflected ongoing Australian fascination with United States dam building construction, for example, the Grand Coulee Dam¹⁴³ and The Hoover Dam,¹⁴⁴ built during the 1930s. It appears to have been heightened by the relationship developed during World War II. The project was not just about engineering, according to this same Sydney Morning Herald account, it was about establishing "an almost impregnable citadel of power which can be used at need for Australia's war machine". Although it has been seen in ways the town of Wagga Wagga embraced the river in the 1920s and 30s, despite the river's floods and unpredictability, after the war, and the feeling of strength and power that went with it, there was a renewed national effort applied towards dominating "wasteful" nature and turning it to productive use. It was not a time for small towns to be preoccupied with self interest:

Such a great battle with nature cannot be fought without casualties.

Two pleasant little towns will be drowned - Jindabyne and Adaminaby - as snow-fed waters bank up to form great storage dams. In their place will arise other and greater towns when the waters of the Snowy now wasting themselves at the rate of half a million gallons a minute into the sea are harnessed to man's uses.¹⁴⁵

There was some confusion over who was going to pay for the Blowering Dam, ie neither the NSW or Federal government wanted too.¹⁴⁶ The agreement was that although the Commonwealth would pay the overall Snowy Scheme bill, recouping the cost through electricity sales to the States, Blowering Dam construction was supposed to be the NSW

¹⁴² "SNOWY RIVER SCHEME The Power To Build A Greater Nation." The Sydney Morning Herald (NSW : 1842 - 1954) 15 Oct 1949: 2. Web. 12 Feb 2013 <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article18133000>>.

¹⁴³ The Grand Coulee Dam, PBS, USA, <http://video.pbs.org/video/2218346883>, viewed 14/2/13

¹⁴⁴ <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/trailer/hoover/>, viewed 14/2/2013

¹⁴⁵ "SNOWY RIVER SCHEME The Power To Build A Greater Nation." The Sydney Morning Herald (NSW : 1842 - 1954) 15 Oct 1949: 2. Web. 12 Feb 2013 <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article18133000>>.

¹⁴⁶ The dispute went on for several years, but, for example, "SNOWY RIVER DIVERSION SCHEME REVIEWED BY N.S.W. PARLIAMENT." The Canberra Times (ACT : 1926 - 1995) 6 Apr 1949: 4. Web. 12 Feb 2013 <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article2798117>>.

And "THE BLOWERING DAM ISSUE." The Canberra Times (ACT : 1926 - 1995) 23 Sep 1952: 4. Web. 12 Feb 2013 <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article2864775>>.

And "DELAY IN STARTING DAM TO N.S.W.'S DETRIMENT." Advocate (Burnie, Tas. : 1890 - 1954) 5 Sep 1953: 3. Web. 12 Feb 2013 <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article69488301>>.

government's responsibility.¹⁴⁷ The overall funding arrangement put no price on water, leaving it up to the States to charge customers for it if they wished.¹⁴⁸ There were mixed messages on what the value of water was, but it was often linked, by proponents of these projects, to the predicted market value of domestic and international sales of food that this additional water would potentially produce.¹⁴⁹

The industrial thinking that accompanied the push for dam building was made possible by post war machinery that made it feasible to do it on such a large scale and speed for the first time.

Modern earth-moving equipment is helping to speed up water conservation and irrigation projects in many parts of New South Wales. It includes power shovels, rock buggies, excavators, bulldozers and tramping rollers.¹⁵⁰

Taken from a Royal Easter Show supplement in the Sydney Morning Herald, this caption from an article¹⁵¹ by the NSW Minister for Conservation, A. G. Enticknap, in 1954, gives a good insight into the contemporary attitudes, outlining the expected benefits that would come from the expense of this spending on water conservation measures. The changes to Burrinjuck would add one fifth to the current holding capacity. The dam at Blowering was expected to double the amount of water available through diversion from the Snowy Scheme to come down the Murrumbidgee.

The expectations of the benefits that irrigation brings were also clearly stated:

- They bring areas of marginal rainfall into full production.
- They permit intensive cultivation and grazing and give high yields per acre.

¹⁴⁷ "For a Growing Nation POWER AND WEALTH FROM SNOWY WATERS." Cairns Post (Qld. : 1909 - 1954) 13 Jan 1954: 7. Web. 12 Feb 2013 <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article42809914>>.

¹⁴⁸ "For a Growing Nation POWER AND WEALTH FROM SNOWY WATERS." Cairns Post (Qld. : 1909 - 1954) 13 Jan 1954: 7. Web. 12 Feb 2013 <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article42809914>>.

¹⁴⁹ For example "For a Growing Nation POWER AND WEALTH FROM SNOWY WATERS." Cairns Post (Qld. : 1909 - 1954) 13 Jan 1954: 7. Web. 12 Feb 2013 <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article42809914>>.

¹⁵⁰ "SHOW SUPPLEMENT IRRIGATION IS CHANGING LAND USES." The Sydney Morning Herald (NSW : 1842 - 1954) 12 Apr 1954: 14 Supplement: Show Supplement. Web. 14 Feb 2013 <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article18419772>>.

¹⁵¹ "SHOW SUPPLEMENT IRRIGATION IS CHANGING LAND USES." The Sydney Morning Herald (NSW : 1842 - 1954) 12 Apr 1954: 14 Supplement: Show Supplement. Web. 14 Feb 2013 <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article18419772>>.

- Continuity of supply is guaranteed even in drought years.
- The pattern of land use can be changed completely, the land being used for one or more of a number of types of primary production - meat, dairy products, fruit, vegetables, rice, dried fruits, wool, and other products, where previously it may have been suitable only for light grazing.¹⁵²

This complete reengineering of the river and its environment created many complex changes. Fish numbers seem to have dropped off directly at the time of the opening of Blowering dam, which reversed the seasonal flow of the river, added extra water, and lowered the water temperature.¹⁵³ It appears, in this way of thinking, the primary function of the river was as an irrigation channel, and the needs of the irrigators downstream were the main concern.

Aside from being involved in providing an increased availability of water, mechanisation was also directly increasing the intensity and scale of agricultural production in the Riverina. New efficient small tractors, such as those from Massey Ferguson, were selling in thousands, and, with a range of implements such as ploughs and rippers (useful for rabbits), they were well suited to use on small intensive blocks.¹⁵⁴ Fertilisers, herbicides and insecticides were starting to be introduced.¹⁵⁵ The Americans were again held up as the example of what to aim for:

The director of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics in Canberra, Mr. T. H. Strong, sums up the position by saying:

"The mechanical revolution which changed the American agricultural system in the 1940's, has yet to find full expression in Australia.

¹⁵² "SHOW SUPPLEMENT IRRIGATION IS CHANGING LAND USES." The Sydney Morning Herald (NSW : 1842 - 1954) 12 Apr 1954: 14 Supplement: Show Supplement. Web. 14 Feb 2013 <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article18419772>>.

¹⁵³ Pat Murray, Conversation with the researcher, 2013

¹⁵⁴ "USE OF TRACTORS NEARLY TREBLED." The Sydney Morning Herald (NSW : 1842 - 1954) 12 Apr 1954: 13 Supplement: Show Supplement. Web. 14 Feb 2013 <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article18419775>>.

¹⁵⁵ "USE OF TRACTORS NEARLY TREBLED." The Sydney Morning Herald (NSW : 1842 - 1954) 12 Apr 1954: 13 Supplement: Show Supplement. Web. 14 Feb 2013 <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article18419775>>.

We have a long way to go in general application before we can expect the degree of increased productivity that has been achieved in America."¹⁵⁶

It appears the post World War II period was a time when local community interests were secondary to national interests, and the collective optimism of the benefits of industrialisation and large scale "nation building" projects were seen to outweigh all else. It would be some time before the environmental effects of this intensification of land use through mechanical/industrial farming became fully realized. On the other hand, with the establishment of the Soil Conservation Services in 1938, there were the start of programs aimed at educating land managers in ways to minimize soil erosion.¹⁵⁷ The introduction of Myxomatosis in the 1950s greatly reduced rabbit numbers. Together, these two changes improved vegetation cover and stabilized land from erosion.¹⁵⁸

John Winterbottom describes the dramatic changes to the landscape when the farm he was growing up on at this time was used as a demonstration farm for this new type of soil conservation work. The researcher also recalls growing up on farms where run off was diverted via new systems of contour banks to dams, gullies ceased to erode, and soil was brought back to life as new conservation farming techniques were steadily introduced from this time, with improvements continuing to be made throughout the 60s, 70s and 80s.

Floods of 1950s and 1970s

In 1950 Wagga Wagga found itself once more inundated with flood waters¹⁵⁹ with more floods in 1952 and 56. Flood relief efforts took a post World War II military flavor with a number of army ducks and armoured vehicles engaged in the effort.¹⁶⁰ The army also

¹⁵⁶ "USE OF TRACTORS NEARLY TREBLED." The Sydney Morning Herald (NSW : 1842 - 1954) 12 Apr 1954: 13 Supplement: Show Supplement. Web. 14 Feb 2013 <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article18419775>>.

¹⁵⁷ Jon Olley & Peter Wallbrink, *Recent Trends in turbidity and suspended sediment loads in the Murrumbidgee River*, NSW Australia, pg 1, *Sediment Transfer through the Fluvial System* (Proceedings of a symposium held in Moscow, August 2004) IAHS Publ. 288, 2004

¹⁵⁸ Jon Olley & Peter Wallbrink, *Recent Trends in turbidity and suspended sediment loads in the Murrumbidgee River*, NSW Australia, pg 1, *Sediment Transfer through the Fluvial System* (Proceedings of a symposium held in Moscow, August 2004) IAHS Publ. 288, 2004

¹⁵⁹ The Advertiser (Adelaide, SA : 1931 - 1954), Saturday 25 March 1950, page 1

¹⁶⁰ John Winterbottom, interview with the researcher, 2013

coordinated the accommodation of evacuees at the showground.¹⁶¹ Many Wagga Wagga residents appear to have been in out of their houses many times from 1950 to 1956.

In the 1950s, thanks to the use of mechanical digging equipment, many river towns in NSW were beginning to believe it possible, with modern technology and a heroic collective effort, to hold back the floodwaters. In 1950, during a flood at Warren, the residents scrambled to build a levee bank, by tearing up the streets as the Macquarie waters rose, and a truck driver made headlines by inserting his body into a breach in the levee and saving the town, and becoming known as the human plug.¹⁶² In 1952, at Darlington Point: "Using bulldozers, mechanical scoops and picks and shovels, the men were trying to encircle the town with a levee."¹⁶³ Still last minute, but a huge amount of soil was now able to be manipulated, quickly.

Informal levees were starting to be built in Wagga Wagga, and by 1956 a substantial flood levee plan was agreed upon by Wagga Wagga City Council.¹⁶⁴

As it went ahead it transformed the river banks and altered the relationship of the river with the town. Old cars wrecks were removed.¹⁶⁵ Many of the willow trees planted along the banks removed.¹⁶⁶ Even the wreckage of an old paddle steamer was removed.¹⁶⁷ John Winterbottom recalls seeing the massive earthwork, extensive use of machinery and dust that accompanied the changes, with the banks excavated down to clay and then built up from that. On the one hand the river banks were cleaned up considerably, on the other, the steep banks of the levee changed the nature of the space and for much of the length of the town the levee now creates a substantial physical barrier between the town and the river.

¹⁶¹ John Winterbottom, interview with the researcher, 2013

¹⁶² The Mercury (Hobart, Tas. : 1860 - 1954), Monday 10 April 1950, page 1

¹⁶³ The Canberra Times (ACT : 1926 - 1995), Monday 23 June 1952, page 4

¹⁶⁴ Wagga City Council, Levee Banks, <http://www.wagga.nsw.gov.au/city-of-wagga-wagga/engineering-services/flood-management/levee-banks>

¹⁶⁵ John Winterbottom, interview with the researcher, 2013

¹⁶⁶ John Winterbottom, interview with the researcher, 2013

¹⁶⁷ John Winterbottom, interview with the researcher, 2013

1974 was the first big test for the levee. It only just managed to cope, with eyewitness accounts describing how that the levee bank was moving and vibrating like jelly.¹⁶⁸ Sandbags were hurriedly placed on top with many people in the town involved in the last minute effort.¹⁶⁹ Those involved recall the great feeling of community spirit that accompanied the experience.¹⁷⁰ The history of the floods adds a depth to community feelings when these events happen. The researcher's experience of being evacuated to Wagga High School during the 2012 flood, and the experience of the community's highly motivated and generous support there, is one of the germs for this research project. Yet with the coming of the levees there appears to have been a shift away from an incremental response to flooding events (with occasional miscalculations). Pre levee it appears that life during a flood often continued on in an improvised way. John Winterbottom, whose family were living upstairs above a shop in Fitzmaurice Street during two of the 1950s floods, recalls food delivered by flying fox between buildings and many boats going up and down Fitzmaurice Street.¹⁷¹ Yet, this self sufficient improvised approach may be compared with the precautionary evacuation of most of the town during the 2012 flood.

Life by the River continues

Aunty Lorraine Tye, whose family moved into a house in Evans Street after the war, talks of life by the river fondly, with her father lobstering and fishing throughout the 50s and 60s, and large groups of children going there to play by the river. As a teenager she recalls the freedom of lying on the river bank looking up at the sky, letting her imagination run free.

¹⁶⁸ John Winterbottom, interview with the researcher, 2013

¹⁶⁹ John Winterbottom, interview with the researcher, 2013

¹⁷⁰ John Winterbottom, interview with the researcher, 2013

¹⁷¹ John Winterbottom, interview with the researcher, 2013

I remember laying on the ground and looking at the clouds, making things out of clouds, making pictures out of clouds, or you'd find rocks or, just anything, even twigs, you'd make things out of, it was quite interesting.¹⁷²

It wasn't only those who lived immediately beside the river who made use of it. Many came from out of town to stay and enjoy the river. Catherine McLeod remembers riding horses, with other children from out at San Isadore, seven kilometres out of town, to come and play in the river. She recalls swimming the horses in the river, swimming in the fast current, and swinging off ropes. She much preferred the river to the baths because she enjoyed the natural environment.¹⁷³

John Winterbottom fondly recalls walking along the river bank with his parents in the evening of a hot day during the late forties and early fifties with the breeze off the river being cool, with his parents conversing with everyone they met. Sometimes there would be hundreds of people. He also recalls swimming with mates every afternoon and often enjoying eating fish and chips by the river.¹⁷⁴

After Aboriginal resettlement programs of the 1970s brought many additional Aboriginal families to Wagga Wagga. Wiradjuri woman Donna Murray recalls, as a child, walking down to the river from Ashmont with her friends, early in the morning, and then floating all the way down the river to Narrandera, phoning home for a lift back when they arrived.¹⁷⁵

As a teenager in the seventies Paul O'Donnell remembers adventures with friends swimming in the river, including one story of rolling inside tractor tyre tubes with his mate, who was on duty as the lifeguard, down the banks and into the river.¹⁷⁶

Jim Rees, with his wife Canny and children, recalls many great family times on the river over a thirty year period to the present at a number of locations including Wagga Beach and Kohlhagens Beach out of town towards Collingully. Time on the river has always been an

¹⁷² Lorraine Tye, interview with the researcher, 2013

¹⁷³ Catherine McLeod, interview with the researcher, 2013

¹⁷⁴ John Winterbottom, interview with the researcher, 2013

¹⁷⁵ Donna Murray, conversation with the researcher 2013

¹⁷⁶ Paul O'Donnell, conversation with the researcher 2013

important part of their lives and Jim recalls that there were often many other people enjoying it with them.¹⁷⁷ Their daughter Kate was in the river wearing a lifesaving vest well before she could swim. He has recently stopped going Kohlhagens Beach is that he feels there is too much traffic on the river now with lots of speed boats and too many noisy people.¹⁷⁸ This thought of the river being too busy and noisy now was also expressed by Kath Bowmer.

It appears that recreational use of the river in the general community did drop off gradually from the post World War II period. The opening of the swimming pool, improvements to it, the opening of the Oasis, greater mobility of the population that made beach holidays more accessible, an increase in private pools, air conditioning, and changes in lifestyle generally, are all possible contributing factors. However, from the series of interviews undertaken for this scholarship, opinions on whether the river remains a quality recreational place varies considerably. If people personally no longer go there they tend to say how inhospitable the river is now, if people still go there for swimming or camping or for a barbecue, or to walk their dog, they still regard it as a good place to be.

The Politics of Water

As was discussed earlier in the essay, from the first years of the Twentieth Century and the development of the MIA and Burrinjuck Dam, the distribution of Murrumbidgee river water became politically and economically focused on supplying the MIA irrigators. The irrigators have been the main users of water from the river for much of the last century and have had a corresponding sway over the determination of what happens to river water. With the completion of Blowering Dam the seasonal flows of water were reversed and the

¹⁷⁷ Jim Rees, interview with the researcher, 2013

¹⁷⁸ Jim Rees, interview with the researcher, 2013

temperature of the water altered dramatically, and a large additional amount of water was sent down the river during the summer at times that best suited the irrigators.¹⁷⁹

In the 1970s a nascent environmental awareness began to influence public thinking. In 1977 this article from the *Women's Weekly* emphasized the ambitious plans of the town to restore its environment.

Wagga is now using its sewage plant as a breeding ground for water birds which are brought in to the swampy pools of treated sewage. Vanished species like the brolga and black swan are returning. An alderman and former mayor, Dick Gorman, showed us the project and talked about plans to bring back koalas and possums. Special grasses that kangaroos feed on are being sown to encourage them back too.¹⁸⁰

Although the article is ultra light in tone, it conveys a little of what the council was considering. This rising awareness was also in national trends such as those linked to the Franklin River protests in 1983, where who owned the river, and who had a right to dam it, or not dam it, was a key legal issue.¹⁸¹

In 1994, triggered by algal blooms in the Darling River, the Council of Australian Governments, (COAG) reached an agreement that there should be water allocated to environmental flows in the river systems and that there should be community consultation with people who would be affected.¹⁸² The local river management committees were set up to facilitate this process. Kath Bowmer was chairperson of the Murrumbidgee River Management Committee set up in 1998, with two objectives, one to gather a response to a set of river flow rules which were about how and when water was going to be released into

¹⁷⁹ Pat Murray, interview with the researcher, 2013

¹⁸⁰ LIFESTYLE WAGGA. (1977, September 7). *The Australian Women's Weekly* (1933 - 1982), p. 35 from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article47253479>

¹⁸¹ Trespass charges against dam blockaders fail. (1983, April 13). *The Canberra Times* (ACT : 1926 - 1995), p. 1. from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article116378670>

¹⁸² Kath Bowmer, interview with the researcher, 2013

the river, and, two, for the first time to provide some water specifically for the environment, because previously the environmental water up until then was really only the water left in the river after the human users had finished with it.¹⁸³ Often this water was of little use environmentally, as it was at the wrong time of the year, the wrong temperature and the wrong flow.¹⁸⁴ The committee went in search of environmental science on the river and despite limited resources gathered together current information for around twenty or so key environmental areas. The committee had representatives from a range of groups including irrigators, indigenous representatives and environmental groups. This in itself was a large change from historical decision making models for water, which Kath describes in the paper, *Water and conflict resolution: from smoke filled rooms to public participation*.¹⁸⁵ That paper documents the philosophy and contribution of the committee. The challenge was, that, despite a lot of good will, environmental interests remained in conflict with the interests of the irrigators and the committee was never able to reach a consensus. In its final draft report in 2003, a number of dissenting individual reports were included, which undermined the legitimacy and credibility of the committee's findings. In the end, the report was overridden by ministerial decree. In the politics of Murrumbidgee water, this was only one chapter in a long saga, yet it was a contributor to an emerging approach of including environmental science and a range of community points of view into the debate over water usage on the Murrumbidgee. A broadening understanding of what has an impact on the river, along its entire length, including in South Australia was developing. Kath and others have written extensively about the difficulties of this kind of community participation in decision making over river water.¹⁸⁶ There is a significant record of this

¹⁸³ Ibid

¹⁸⁴ Ibid

¹⁸⁵ Kathleen H Bowmer, *Water and conflict resolution: from smoke filled rooms to public participation*, in Wilson, A.L., Dehaan, R.L., Watts, R.J., Page, K.J., Bowmer, K.H., & Curtis, A. (2007). Proceedings of the 5th Australian Stream Management Conference. Australian rivers: making a difference. Charles Sturt University, Thurgoona, New South Wales.

¹⁸⁶ See bibliography for a number of recent papers. Kathleen H Bowmer, *Water and conflict resolution: from smoke filled rooms to public participation*, in Wilson, A.L., Dehaan, R.L., Watts, R.J., Page, K.J., Bowmer, K.H., & Curtis, A. (2007). Proceedings of the 5th

committee's work in the CSU archives, and a large portion of these records have been examined for this essay. Over the course of the scholarship additional records have been collected which are being added to these existing records, including reports on the river that came out after the committee concluded, a copy of the draft report that was the final stage the committee reached, and an interview with Kath Bowmer about her experience on the committee.

In that interview Kath says that, "To me a river is a reflection of its catchment."¹⁸⁷

Although the committee's work was given a job description that was focused on water, Kath's view of what a river is, implies all the activities of the communities along the river, including the run-off from agricultural chemicals and the discharge of sewerage, that need to be taken into account when measuring the health of the river and allocating water.

Although this is a holistic entire length of the river approach, such an inclusive philosophy also provides a role and responsibility for a community like Wagga Wagga.

Dick Green, interviewed for this report, has also been involved in this broadening understanding of the interrelationship of the community, the catchment and the river.¹⁸⁸ He moved to Wagga Wagga while with The NSW Department of Soil Conservation in the early 1980s, working on protecting river bank land. He then took on roles with the Murrumbidgee Catchment Management Committee and recalls its establishment in 1990 at Wagga Beach (different body to the committee of which Kath Bowmer was the chairperson, and the precursor to the Murrumbidgee Catchment Management Authority [CMA]). He also became involved with Greening Australia and began to develop a greater understanding of the complex diversity within the catchment. The Murrumbidgee River Management Committee evolved into the Murrumbidgee CMA. Dick wasn't involved in

Australian Stream Management Conference. Australian rivers: making a difference. Charles Sturt University, Thurgoona, New South Wales.

¹⁸⁷ Kath Bowmer, interview with the researcher, 2013

¹⁸⁸ Dick Green, interview with the researcher, 2013

the CMA, but he does recall the broadening representation involved in decision making that took place when it was established. There were no direct indigenous or environmental voices on the committee he was on, but, on the CMA which replaced it, there were a number of indigenous and environmental voices. Dick Green has also been involved in compiling a number of Wiradjuri Heritage reports on places of indigenous significance, which are in the process of being formally recognised, including Gobba beach and Wiradjuri Reserve on the Murrumbidgee River¹⁸⁹ and Wollundry lagoon.¹⁹⁰

These examples, reflect a growing variety of voices involved in river management and also indicate how a number of local people were engaged professionally in roles associated with the care of the river. For example, Pat Murray, also interviewed for this report,¹⁹¹ is an ecologist who did her PhD on insect life on the Murrumbidgee river, was involved with the Murrumbidgee River Management Committee, and with the CMA working on wetlands. She has had a long involvement in the environmental science of the river, and on various committees and organisations such as Greening Australia, Landcare and WIRES, with an interest in riverside wildlife and plants as well as the aquatic life of the river. Her research has given her a holistic understanding of the river, from its source, how it develops as it flows past Wagga, and how it interacts with the sea, including how the subtle life of the river is influenced by everything that happens in the catchment, to the point where it is really hard to know where the river begins and ends.

The engagement of finely tuned personal perspectives such as these, in turn became a structural, institutional part of the way the the Murrumbidgee CMA has coordinated programs and promoted community awareness that fostered these new perspectives.¹⁹² In partnership with Wagga Wagga City Council, local community groups, Landcare, rural

¹⁸⁹ NSW Office of Environment and Heritage, Dick Green Compiler, Wiradjuri Reserve – Gobba Beach (Murrumbidgee River), Statement of Significance for an Aboriginal Place Declaration, 2012

¹⁹⁰ NSW Office of Environment and Heritage, Dick Green Compiler, Wollundry Lagoon, Statement of Significance for an Aboriginal Place Declaration, 2012

¹⁹¹ Pat Murray, Interview with the researcher, 2013

¹⁹² Murrumbidgee Catchment Management Authority, <http://www.murrumbidgee.cma.nsw.gov.au/partners.aspx>

landholders, and traditional owners, the CMA has engaged in a number of joint programs that have had a significant impact on the appearance and health of the river, both in the rural environment and in the city of Wagga Wagga.

Indigenous involvement in water management

Since the CMA commenced in 2003 indigenous voices have been directly and significantly involved in reshaping the health of the river through Wagga Wagga and the foreshores and wetlands but also in the overall catchment management. The National Water Initiative as agreed on by COAG in 2004 also gave a significant emphasis to the inclusion of Indigenous Australian spiritual, cultural and customary connections and perspectives in the formulation of water policy and management practices.¹⁹³ As these voices are heard the researcher suggests they have the potential to affect the way the wider community is perceiving and interacting with the river.

“A lot of people think that rivers are boundaries, rivers are never boundaries, rivers are your responsibility and they belong to all people. They are your responsibility as it passes through your country. For thousands of generations our people cared for the land and the billabongs and the rivers.”¹⁹⁴ Aunty Flo Grant, Wiradjuri Elder

Aunty Flo Grant sees the river as a site of responsibility and connection for the communities it passes through. This was indeed part of the CMA strategy in its Catchment Management Plans.

“The Murrumbidgee Catchment Management Authority has a clear target within the Catchment Action Plan and that is framed around increasing the involvement of the indigenous community in natural resource management and also increasing the wider community’s understanding of indigenous cultural heritage values.”¹⁹⁵

Lee O’Brien, former Murrumbidgee CMA Chairperson

¹⁹³ National Water Commission website, <http://nwc.gov.au/nwi/position-statements/indigenous-access>

¹⁹⁴ Aunty Flo Grant, *Returning to Country and Culture. Murrumbidgee Traditional Owner River Restoration*, video, Murrumbidgee CMA, <http://www.murrumbidgee.cma.nsw.gov.au/services/indigenous.aspx>

¹⁹⁵ Lee O’Brien, *Returning to Country and Culture. Murrumbidgee Traditional Owner River Restoration*, video, Murrumbidgee CMA, <http://www.murrumbidgee.cma.nsw.gov.au/services/indigenous.aspx>

In partnership with Wagga Wagga City Council and the CMA from around 2007, the Wagga Wagga Traditional Owner Restoration Team has worked on an extensive program of riverfront and wetlands restoration which has made a marked difference to the quality of the river environment, with extensive weed removal, landscaping and restoration of a number of plant, tree, bird and animal species.¹⁹⁶

Indigenous involvement has extended to management, with representatives on the committee itself and mechanisms for direct input into decision making processes such as:

“The Murrumbidgee Catchment Management Authority (CMA) is working with Traditional Owners and others in the Aboriginal community through the Murrumbidgee Traditional Custodians Advisory Group. The objective of the group is to build projects and programs that enhance the involvement of Traditional Owners in Natural Resource Management in the Murrumbidgee catchment.”¹⁹⁷

The idea of the community being custodians of the rivers, and so carrying a great sense of responsibility for what occurs with it, is in tune with indigenous ways of thinking. This approach is often quoted in the following way by local Wiradjuri, in this case James Ingram, who has been completely dedicated for several years on the river restoration program at Wagga Wagga:

“Our old Aboriginal people always had a saying that if you look after the land and the rivers then the land and the rivers will look after you.”¹⁹⁸

Environmental flows

The Murray Darling Basin Authority,¹⁹⁹ after twenty years of negotiations across governments and communities, is now implementing The Murray Darling Basin Plan, and has the power to carry out Commonwealth Government buybacks of water for releasing

¹⁹⁶ *Returning to Country and Culture. Murrumbidgee Traditional Owner River Restoration*, video, Murrumbidgee CMA, <http://www.murrumbidgee.cma.nsw.gov.au/services/indigenous.aspx>

¹⁹⁷ Murrumbidgee CMA website, <http://www.murrumbidgee.cma.nsw.gov.au/services/indigenous.aspx>

¹⁹⁸ James Ingram, *Returning to Country and Culture. Murrumbidgee Traditional Owner River Restoration*, video, Murrumbidgee CMA, <http://www.murrumbidgee.cma.nsw.gov.au/services/indigenous.aspx>, as described originally by Uncle Cec Grant (Wongamar), Wongamar lecture, CSU Albury, 2013

¹⁹⁹ Murray Darling Basin Authority website, <http://www.mdba.gov.au>

regular and appropriately timed environmental flows throughout the Murray Darling system including the Murrumbidgee. The environment is treated as another economic stakeholder for the supply of water.²⁰⁰ The Authority has the power to consider structural changes which earlier bodies such as the Murrumbidgee River Management Committee didn't,²⁰¹ such as raising the low level Mundarlo bridge near Gundagai so that higher levels of water can be released, It is also faced with the practical and political dilemma that raising the maximum flow for environmental purposes may become a substantial issue for some rural landowners along the Murrumbidgee, who may have low lying land regularly inundated. Other matters to balance include the need to minimise the potential of river bank and bed erosion from these additional flows.²⁰² The environmental flows have now commenced and are already altering the river environment, with flows timed to build fish stocks such as the Murray Cod, and systematic flooding of a number of wetland areas.²⁰³

Shifting currents

The floods of 2012 reminded the people of Wagga Wagga that, despite a hundred years of effort and expense aimed at controlling the river, it still has the capacity to break out and overwhelm any constraints. Wagga Wagga City Council's fantastic pre flood Riverside plans:

Riverside Wagga Wagga is a visionary project that will reinforce the relationship between the iconic Murrumbidgee River and the city of Wagga Wagga by bringing an array of recreational, cultural, commercial and residential development underpinned by sustainable principles to fully showcase its potential and enhance the quality of living for its citizens and visitors alike.

²⁰⁰ Kath Bowmer, Interview with the researcher, 2013

²⁰¹ Kath Bowmer, Interview with the researcher, 2013

²⁰² Murray Darling Basin Authority website, <http://www.mdba.gov.au/what-we-do/water-planning/managing-constraints/constraints-overview/nsw>

²⁰³ NSW Department of Environment and Heritage,

<http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/environmentalwater/envwatermurrumbidgeeupdate.htm>

The project has the potential to enliven the riverside but also to return the riverside back to Wagga Wagga. This natural resource with its unique riverine setting is a major asset for the city which is currently under-utilised. The Strategic Master Plan sets out a vision to fully capitalise on this potential.²⁰⁴

Although these plans remain on the Wagga Wagga City Council website, since the 2012 flood, and perhaps a shortage of funds, a more defensive aim has been given priority which focuses on strengthening levee banks and raising the city's readiness for future potential flooding.²⁰⁵

The Catchment Management Authorities are being absorbed into a new body, through the *Local Land Services Bill 2013*, which repeals the CMA legislation, and which appears to have an emphasis on placing control back in the hands of the landholders.²⁰⁶ It is yet to be seen how the environmental and indigenous perspectives that have emerged in the last twenty years will navigate this change.

Who owns the river?

The question of who has a legitimate interest and stake in what happens with the Murrumbidgee, and who has access to the river related resources including the water and the land either side of it, is perhaps the most politically contested topic in the history of the Riverina, and it appears to have been so for two hundred years. There was conflict between the Wiradjuri and the first white settlers. There was conflict between the squatters and the selectors. There have been political battles between the irrigators downstream in the MIA and other interests. There has been conflict between governments, landholders and community interests. There have been the dreams that have to be defended, for example of bountiful agriculture and industry, of nation building, and there have also been fears that

²⁰⁴ Wagga City Council website, <http://www.wagga.nsw.gov.au/city-of-wagga-wagga/council/riverside-wagga-wagga>

²⁰⁵ Wagga City Council website, <http://yoursaywagga.com.au/floodfutures>

²⁰⁶ NSW Government, Local Land Services Bill 2013, http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/nsw/bill_en/l1sb2013188.pdf

have caused communities, such as Wagga Wagga, to recoil from the river. Fears such as of the real dangers from floods and drownings, fears of dams bursting and levees breaking. These have existed side by side with the fascinating enticement of the river, as a place for recreation, of enjoyment, of retreat from the heat, of social life, and as resource for productive work. The river banks have often been a place to take refuge, a place to live when times were tough, and a place in the shadows under bridges, humpies and river red gums, where hidden lives have been played out, beyond the confines of Wagga Wagga's social norms and council regulations.

The river is integrated into its catchment and communities so complexly that the conversation can never be separated out into simply being about just water. So many issues relating to river health need to take into account a holistic picture, not just of a snap shot of the river at Wagga Wagga, but an understanding of the communities and country interacting with it along its entire length, understanding underground water, agriculture, flood plains, billabongs, fish, plants, wildlife, and people. This big picture thinking is also present in the way the river is perceived by those interviewed for this report, which may not be typical, in that those interviews are not a comprehensive representation of all views on the river, but they may be said to represent a number of local voices, and community groups, who have lobbied hard for the intrinsic values of a healthy river and environment. Over the last twenty to thirty years in particular there has been a broadening sense of who owns the river, with indigenous and environmental perspectives given some weight alongside the voices of irrigators. One perspective that needs further documentation is the experience of rural landholders who have the river at the heart of their lifestyle and who have adopted strategies for improving river health, for example fencing off river banks and off river watering solutions. In fact, there are many more people who could have been interviewed. Everyone who has lived here has a river story to tell. A real sense of

engagement and commitment to restoring the river across a large section of the Wagga Wagga community is demonstrated in several of the interviews for this project, yet this researcher feels that there is a possibility of this greater sense of ownership and participation slowing, as a result of reactions, such as fears over the extent of environmental water flows from the Murray Darling Basin Plan and the restructuring of the Catchment Management Authorities.²⁰⁷ There is always a risk that a reaction, based on fears of some kind, and narrowly defined economic interests, will hold the community back from restoring the river to environmental health and gradually learning to live in harmony with it. Yet this too is part of a pattern, like the rising and falling floodwaters, of a community that at times seeks to embrace the river, at times pulls back from it, and at times seeks to alter and dominate it to its own great cost.

²⁰⁷ NSW Government, Local Land Services Bill 2013, http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/nsw/bill_en/l/sb2013188.pdf

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