Trouble brewing

In the town with no beer

very beer lover’s worst nightmare came true in November 1967 when a “draught beer drought” impacted the vast majority of NSW, with Wagga and the Riverina being heavily affected.

The shortages stemmed from a brewery workers strike in Sydney which began on November 8, 1967.

The workers were striking in support of a 25-hour working week, a $10 per week industry allowance and an additional week’s annual leave each year. A total of more than 2000 workers went on strike in Sydney.

By Monday, November 13, many of the clubs and pubs in and around Wagga, who had already begun to experience draught beer shortages, were forced to start switching to bottled and canned beer supplies.

Despite the shortages, all of the licensed premises in Wagga were adamant they would not be closing their doors, and that they would remain open even if they ran out of beer completely. Though experienced publicans such as Mr Jack Andrews from Romeo’s Hotel knew that in all likelihood those “seasoned beer drinkers were unlikely to switch to spirits no matter how short supplies of beer became.”

In Sydney, the “drought” had already worsened and six of the city’s biggest clubs had restricted entry to members only. Some of the smaller clubs in the metropolitan area put rules in place to allow each member only one can throughout the duration of the strike.

Locally, the weather also started to exacerbate the issue. The temperature on Tuesday, November 14, reached the “century” mark (37 degrees Celsius) which resulted in the few existing keg supplies being diminished completely. Interestingly, the decision had already been made by the brewery companies that when the strike was broken and beer supply resumed, the country and rural areas of NSW would receive supplies before their city counterparts.

November 14 was also the date chosen to open Wagga’s newest pub – the Koorungga Hotel-Motel. Understandably, the official opening of the hotel was delayed by the strike.

By Wednesday, November 15, only two of Wagga’s hotels had any beer “on tap”, with only 15 kegs already out of kegs.

Mr Barry Torr, the manager of the John MacArthur Hotel, told The Daily Advertiser of his predicament. “We had half a canister left at the end of Monday’s trading, so I called in a few of the fellows and we polished it off. Today they had to drink canned or bottled beer, at 17 cents a can and 44 cents a bottle.

The seriousness of the situation really began to take hold in Wagga on November 16, when clubs and pubs began to lay off staff as a direct result of the downturn in trade. The state’s biggest club at the time, the St George Leagues Club, had completely run out of draught beer, as had the NSW Leagues Club.

Somehow, the South Sydney Leagues Club had managed to secure 1600 bottles of Victorian beer to keep supplies coming.

On November 18, it was reported a large number of Sydney venues had been forced to use up considerable quantities of their bottled and canned beer stocks, which had been reserved for Christmas.

Finally, on November 21, the striking brewery workers voted to return to work after it was learnt that their log of claims would be referred to the Commonwealth Arbitration and Conciliation Commission for settlement.

The “drought” was broken in Wagga on November 22, 14 days after the strike had commenced, when the “beer train” arrived in Wagga in the early hours of the morning.

While not containing the quantity of beer requested, the train carried enough beer to ensure all Wagga and surrounding district clubs and pubs had draught beer on tap again for their 10am opening times.

Despite being a week later than planned, the new Koorungga Hotel-Motel was able to finally open its doors for the first time.

References: The Daily Advertiser
15/11/1967 – p.3
16/11/1967 – p.3
21/11/1967 – p.3
13/11/1967 – p.1
17/11/1967 – p.2
22/11/1967 – p.3
14/11/1967 – p.3
18/11/1967 – p.3
23/11/1967 – p.3