

The CSU Regional Archives is currently extending its opening hours to include the first Saturday of the month. This initiative has been put in place to cater for those researchers who are unable to visit the Archives on weekdays during normal business hours.

The next Saturday opening will be on April 6, from 10am to 3pm.



A group of young men awaiting their turn on the spring board at the Wagga bathing reserve, c.1918 [from the Wagga Wagga and District Historical Society collection, RW5/402].

MIXED BATHING ...

... a hot topic of debate for many a decade

what you need to know

The CSU Regional Archives are open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm. Located in the Blakemore Building on South Campus of the university, access can be gained via College Avenue or Hely Avenue. Members of the public are welcome to visit the search room, where professional archival staff can assist with inquiries. For those people unable to visit the archives in person, staff can provide a research service for straight-forward inquiries for a fee of \$55 per hour including copying and postage. For further information, phone 02 6925 3666, email archive@csu.edu.au, or visit our website at www.csu.edu.au/research/archives for a full listing of holdings and more detailed information.

at the archives

Wayne Doubleday



In February 1915, the *Gundagai Independent* published a small article on the large numbers of residents patronising the "bogey" hole near the Gundagai railway bridge, and especially noted the large number of ladies who "indulge in the healthy natatorial art".

A Sydney paper then proceeded to compare the attitudes of Gundagai and Wagga to mixed bathing:

"We are glad to learn that there is at least one town where the Romeos and Juliets bathe in perfect harmony, and that it possesses such a sylvan bogey hole. So very unlike Wagga, where the inhabitants have been tearing each other's hair for the last three months regarding the "propriety" of the lads and lassies disporting together. So far as we can learn they are still at it."

Mixed bathing (men and women swimming together) was certainly causing quite a debate in Wagga during the 1914/1915 summer. Many residents considered the morality of their young people, especially their girls, to be at stake when swimming in mixed company.

Swimming was not new to Wagga residents. Swimming clubs had been operating on and off since the 1890s. However, these were, for the most part, for men and boys only – the river was no place for ladies. Carnivals were popular events and for a number of years, residents had been agitating for council to build public baths, either on the river or the lagoon.

In December 1914, Wagga Council received a report from the works committee that it was considering accepting a tender of 35 pounds to erect a gentlemen's bathing shed on the bathing reserve. At the following meeting a few

weeks later, expenditure for a shed for women was approved.

The gentlemen's shed was to be located at the rear of St John's Church, opposite the springboard; the ladies' bathing shed was to be erected at the rear of the bowling greens (on the other side of the bend in the river). The ladies' shed was to be built first.

In a council meeting held on December 23, Alderman Cullen referred to a criticism made in the local press that the two sheds should be built closer together. Cullen stated that he was opposed to mixed bathing and he thought it was better for the morals of the town that the sheds should be apart.

And so it began ... "Onlooker," in a letter to the editor of *The Daily Advertiser* stated:

"I am a firm believer in mixed bathing. Children will have a better chance of being taught to swim; also very few women will care to enter the water if their menfolk are not allowed to be with them ... I have no misgivings whatever as regards bad language or behaviour; the presence of women and children would prevent that ..."

"Tuck AC" was a little less polite in his letter published a few days later. He had quite a lot to say about the type of bathing sheds council had chosen to build:

"I saw the ladies shed being built ... Till I was informed as to what it was, I imagined the council was going to try its hand at chicken-raising ... No person in his senses could imagine anyone enjoying a sun bath through a galvanised iron roof. This removes one of the pleasures of swimming. Nobody cares to swim if they can't turn brown."

He then proceeded to expound on the separation of the ladies and gentlemen's sheds:

"Then, the council has erected the ladies' shed quite an afternoon's walk from where the gentlemen's shed is. That seems hardly fair to either sex. It would put a stop to mixed bathing ... It is a well-known fact that no girl cares to learn to swim unless a rather large sized lad supports her."

"Enix" was firmly on the other side of the debate and believed the sheds should be even further apart:

"Mixed bathing will not do the town any good or the people who indulge in it. It is no doubt

very nice for the young people to swim together; but their morals must be looked after ... I have often been down near the railway bridge on a Sunday, and the language I have heard is something terrible. I shiver when I think of innocent girls going bathing and mixing with the riff-raff that was there on that occasion."

Bad language appears to have been one of the strong arguments against mixed bathing. Just three years earlier, in February 1912, a number of boys were fined for "bathing within view of a public place" under the Police Offences Act.

It seems the boys had been fined not so much for the bathing, as for the bad language that had been heard from them while they were in the river. Since such an offence was unknown to have ever been enforced in Wagga, the public believed the charge had been laid to prevent the bad language, not the bathing.

Back in the summer of 1914/1915, the police magistrate commented that "there was too much bad language used by those who bathed in the river and there was no excuse for it ..."

Those opposed to the restriction on mixed bathing showed their support in a practical way, by swimming away from the official bathing reserve in a shallow area of the river near the railway viaduct.

The Daily Advertiser reported that large crowds of people were bathing at this location most evenings and that Mr B Box and others had collected £4 to £5 to provide dressing room facilities in the form of a tent for the women and a hessian enclosure for the men. Two refreshment stalls were reportedly doing well.

Mixed bathing is not a question that arises anymore. The river, too, is no longer the only option for Wagga residents when they wish to cool off during summer.

Council finally opened the city's first purpose-built public baths in November 1953, over half a century after the subject was first raised.

References: *The Wagga Wagga City Council Minute Books* [RW2608/19] *The Wagga Wagga Advertiser*: 16 Nov 1897; *The Daily Advertiser*: Feb 20, 1912, January 3, 12, 15, 18 and 28, February 8, 1915.

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