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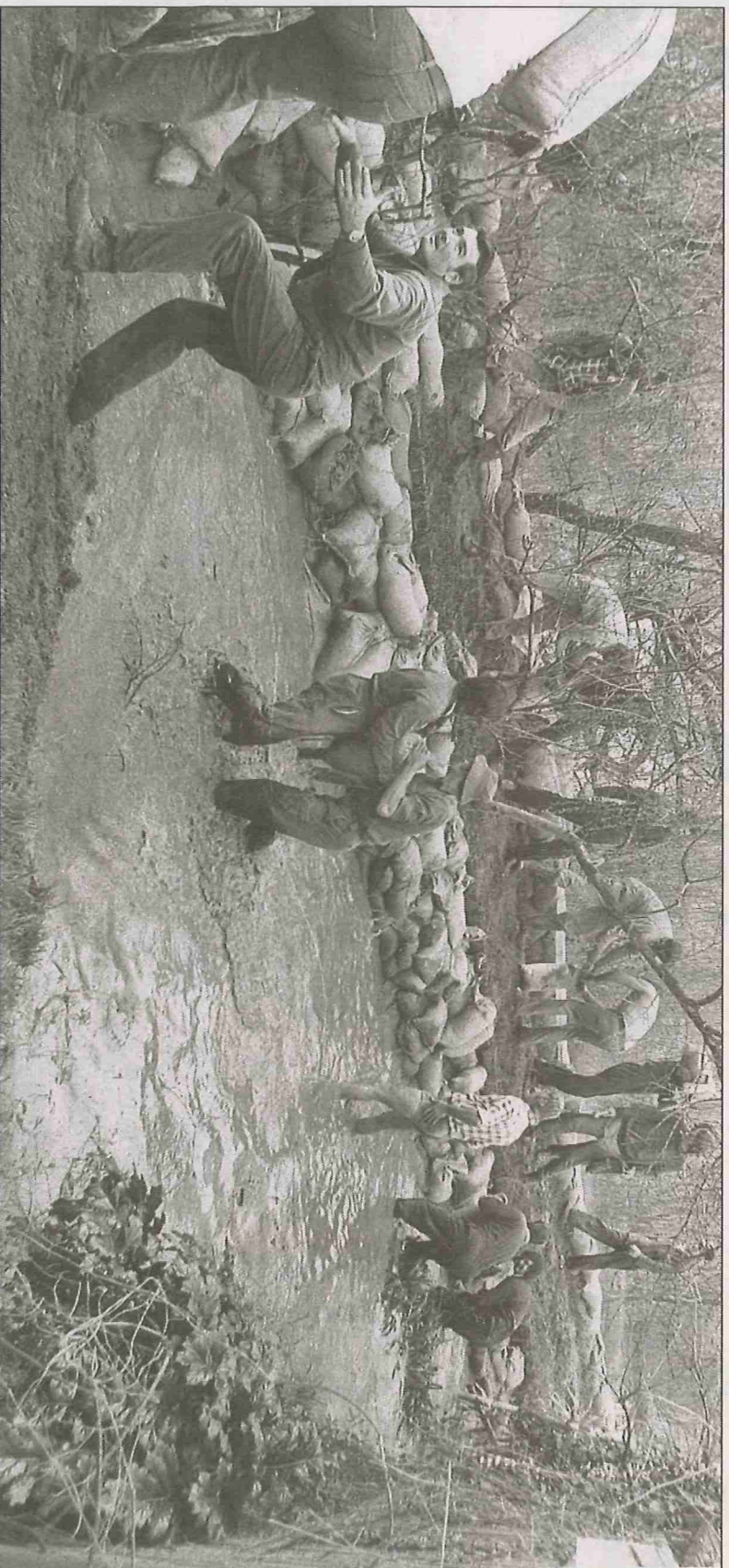


Photo from the 1974 flood. RW1941 (CSURA Photographic Collection).

# Wagga levee bank's big test

at the archives



Wayne Doubleday

The flood which hit Wagga on August 30, 1974 will long be remembered by the city's residents as the first major test of the levee bank.

In fact, 1974 was quite unique in that a total of five floods, all over 8.92m (28 feet 9 inches) in height, hit Wagga between April and October.

Wagga has had a long history of floods dating back to the early 1840s. Amazingly, there have been a total of 77 floods of over 8.23m (26 feet 6 inches).

Since 1891 official river heights have been recorded from the Hampden Bridge gauge, and estimated heights are available dating back to 1844.

The decision to build the levee bank was made by council after large floods inundated Wagga in 1950 and 1956. The former led to 1300 buildings being flooded as floodwaters up to eight feet (2.48m) deeply submerged parts of the city, and a total of 1800 people were evacuated. Work on the levee bank commenced in 1960 and was completed in early 1962, however its construction was not without controversy. North Wagga and the eastern industrial suburbs of Wagga were not protected by the levee bank, which resulted in many residents signing a petition to protest their exclusion.

Temporary levees had been in place around North Wagga since 1936, but it was not until 1990 that an upgraded levee was erected around the suburb.

The levee bank was built to withstand a flood of 11.16m (36 feet), but as *The Daily Advertiser* of August 30, 1974 reported "You never know how good something is until it's been tested ... and they have never been tested by a river height of this magnitude." Mr Colin Knott, Wagga City Council engineer, informed the *Advertiser* that there was no doubt that the levee banks would hold the river.



Photos from the 1974 flood. Right: The Black Swan Hotel. RW1941 (CSURA Photographic Collection).

The Wagga Flood Warning Association kept the public informed through regular radio broadcasts and updates.

It was expected that the river peak would take between 30 and 36 hours to travel from Gundagai to Wagga, and by the evening of the August 29 the river was reportedly rising by 2 feet (0.62m) an hour.

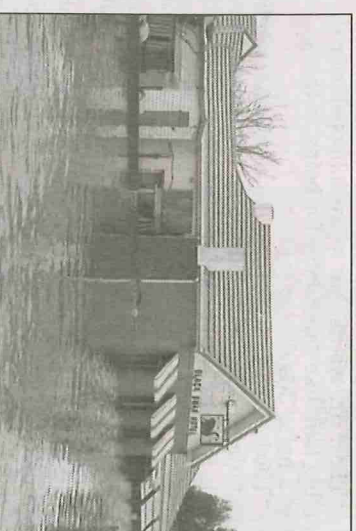
The Wagga Rescue Club, the Wagga State Emergency Service and the Civil Defence Unit all moved into action, ferrying people to and from North Wagga and operating a mobile food unit which provided snacks and hot drinks for more than 100 workers in the flooded areas.

The Murrumbidgee River finally peaked at a height of 10.74m (34 feet 8 inches) at 9pm on the evening of August 30, 1974, making it the biggest flood to hit Wagga during the 20th Century.

Despite this the 1974 river height ranks only third on the list of heights recorded since 1844. The floods of October, 1844 (10.97m) and July, 1853 (10.90m) were supposedly both higher, however it needs to be remembered that all recorded river heights prior to 1891 were estimates only.

As predicted, the levee banks did hold, however there were several anxious moments including the discovery of a weak point in the levee at the site of the gasworks.

Other weak points, seepages and areas of concern were manned all through the night and thousands of sand bags were flown in to Wagga on a RAAF Hercules plane from



the Richmond Airbase and filled to reinforce the levee bank.

Approximately 2000 homes were evacuated at North Wagga and the *Advertiser* reported that most of the houses in North Wagga had between five and eight feet (1.55 to 2.48m) of water pouring through them. As a direct result of the August, 1974 flood the levee bank was upgraded in the late 1970s and again in 1983 to rectify some of the issues that had become apparent in 1974.

This major emergency brought the people of Wagga together. Mr Dick Gorman, the Secretary of the Wagga Flood Warning Association said "There has been a tremendous display of community service throughout the whole Wagga area.

"Many farmers stayed up on Thursday night and kept readings coming into the flood warning office."

Mr Gorman also praised the townspeople, the emergency services and the RAAF and Army personnel who assisted throughout the flood.

The editorial from *The Daily Advertiser* on August 31, 1974 congratulated all those who answered the call for help. "It was a display of community spirit of which Wagga can be proud."

■ **References:** *The Daily Advertiser* 29/08/1974, 30/08/1974 & 31/08/1974; *Wagga Wagga - A History* by Sherry Morris, p.237-238, 1999; *Remember the 1950s, 60s & 70s in Wagga Wagga* by Patrick Byrnes, p. 308-309, 1998;; 'Murrumbidgee River & Floods', Wagga City Council website [www.wagga.nsw.gov.au/www/html/303-murrumbidgee-river-and-floods.asp](http://www.wagga.nsw.gov.au/www/html/303-murrumbidgee-river-and-floods.asp)