

2.0 THE MURRAY RIVER STEAMBOATS.

2.1 Snagging....Captain Cadell's wish...Captain Sturt's Legacy...Overlanders"Gold" the River boat race to Swan Hill.....an injury

...Snagging

"Pwaaaaaaaah!" out went the last of my breath.

Mouth open wide "Aaaaaaaaaaaa!"

Rapidly sucking air and blowing out. That felt better.

I had just kicked my way up to the surface, after being underwater for a long time. I raised my right arm above my head and kicked to stay upright.

The raised arm meant that all was secured below the surface.

"Join the looper rope ends then hook it to the towing rope Ezra," sang out the Captain of the Grappler.

"Well done young Andy, get in the punt quickly we are going to take up the slack!" said Ezra.



A river clearing operation. Consistent, due to floods, erosion and droughts.

I had been diving in the murky water, about 8 feet deep, trying to find a place on the Red Gum trunk, where I could slip around a small piece of rope that could be pulled taut, and then be tied to a thicker stronger rope.

I reached the punt and put an arm over the gunnels. Ezra reached over the side, grabbed me by my belt and pulled me up and over into the punt.

By now the boilers on the *Grappler* were being fed more wood, the smoke stack was belching thick black smoke. I could see ropes everywhere, dripping water, creaking and groaning as the winch took up the slack. The forrard derrick was almost parallel to the water and the bows were dipping as the deck winch amidships, was gripping the hawser and slowly tightening it.

Our riverboat, or Paddle Steamer, the *Grappler's* job was to clear parts of the Murrumbidgee river of tree trunks or debris that prevented paddle steamers from moving up and down the river system. Every time there was a flood or drought, large trees fell into the river and usually blocked the river at its narrowest or most dangerous places.



Erosion.

Owned by the South Australian Government, our Paddle Steamer, the Grappler's job was to clear parts of the River system, of tree trunks or debris that prevented paddle steamers from moving up and down the rivers and preventing lots of trade that affected South Australia's prosperity. Particularly as Captain Cadell had been up this river the Murrumbidgee past Wagga Wagga, to Gundagai opening up a very rich area.

Captain Cadell designed the Grappler. It was built at Echuca in 1858, and had a crane that could lift 14 or 15 tons, or logs 4 to 5 feet thick

How did I come to be here, doing this dangerous diving, trying to slip ropes around underwater branches and snags?

...Captain Cadell's wish

My Dad was a wood supply contractor to riverboat companies, and had a team of men felling, cutting and storing logs at our depot on the banks of the river. This meant that as the wood supply ran out at one place, and it was too hard to drag the logs to the saw mill, we packed up and moved further along the rivers.

It was a bit hard on Mum moving, but she did have a cook and a rousabout to help. Dad said that one day we would all live in a permanent house, maybe at Goolwa or Wentworth or Echuca and he would travel to the camp sites.



Typical Shanty. Anything! to make a "home".

One day I was sharpening saw blades for the sawyers on the steam driven saw, when I saw my step father Archie Ritchie in conversation with three gentlemen that I knew of vaguely. They were a Captain Francis Cadell, a Mr. William Younghusband, Captain Cadell's shipping agent in Adelaide and Mr. Patrick Turnbull.

"Archie, it would be of great help to the Captain of the Grappler, because it is nearly impossible to get a very good swimmer to attach the ropes, and young Andrew is one of the best he has seen."

"Francis, I know what you want, but I was hoping young Andy would start work as a barge hand, get to know the river and become a river boat Captain some day."

"I understand Archie, remember at age 16 I was in the merchant navy, and I served in the English Navy, and here I am.

"If your boy is any good, he can serve on the Grappler for this season, until the river flow dries up and the river becomes impossible to navigate in certain parts. Then when the river floods he can start the next season on one of our barges, to learn about the river and its use. How's that?"

My Father must have agreed to let me go. He came over to me and explained that he thought it would be a good opportunity and I should go with them.

Mr. Turnbull came over to me whilst my Dad continued his discussions with the other men.

"Hello young Andrew," said Mr. Turnbull. "I need to explain our agreement with your Father, and our requirements of you, but first go and get your gear."

I thought it would be exciting and dangerous. I rolled up a few clothes, tied up with a bit of leather strap, said goodbye to Mum, waved to , and walked with Mr. Turnbull along the river to where the Grappler was tied up. I knew that I would see Mum lots of times, so I didn't feel so bad.

"Andrew this is a very good opportunity for you, because you have obliged Captain Cadell who is very influential, and therefore he will return help if he can." said Mr. Turnbull.

...Captain Sturt's legacy

On our walk he told me more about the Captain and the rivers.

" Captain Cadell was the Captain of one of his very wealthy Scottish Father's ships *The Queen of Sheba*. The ship sailed the world delivering and picking up cargoes. Including taking men to the Californian gold fields, also picking up others and bringing them to our Australian gold fields."

"He was also the winner of the South Australian Governments prize money for being the first steel Paddle Steamer to leave Goolwa on the Coorong Lakes, and navigating up the Murray river to Swan Hill. Although even the Lt. Governor acknowledges that Mr. Randell was the first to run small business trips up and down the river in South Australia."

"Myself, Mr. Younghusband, and Mr. George Young, are also in partnership with him. We own several Paddle Steamers, and have contracts for carrying wool and general cargoes along the Murray, Darling, Lachlan and Murrumbidgee rivers."

“But Mr. Turnbull,” I asked, “Why did the South Australian Government want to use the river systems, is it because all the Paddle Steamers all stop at Goolwa.?”

“Good question young Andy! Did you know how the Paddle Steamer trade started?”

“Not really.” I replied.

“Well three things happened. First the explorer Sturt discovered and mapped part of our major inland river systems. Secondly the spreading out of Graziers and Pastoralists. Some of whom became Overlanders. And of course the discovery of gold in parts of Victoria.’

“I can tell you about Captain Sturt and our Murray River navigation Company, but I don’t have time to tell you about the Overlanders and the gold discoveries. You will have to find out about that later. Alright?”

I nodded, of course it was alright! I just wanted to find out.

“Well , Captain Sturt, one of our earliest explorers left Sydney on an expedition to follow some of the western N.S.W. rivers that flowed to the west, and to hopefully discover an inland sea that the rivers ran into. That didn’t happen although he get as far as a part of the Darling River.’

“On a later expedition, he started from the Murrumbidgee river that was first seen by Hamilton Hume, and William Hovell when they went south from Hume’s property at Lake George to find the Westernport discovered by George Bass. He found the Murrumbidgee joined what he called the Murray river. Those rivers then joined the River Darling at Wentworth.”

“He and his men rowed, sailed and floated their whaleboat, all the way down the Murray to its entrance at Encounter Bay. He did indicate that the river mouth was unsuitable for craft to enter and leave. They then rowed back up all the way upriver to a place that is now called Narrandera. And then by foot back to Sydney.



...Graziers and Pastoralists...Gold ... River boat race to Swan Hill.

“But how did all the Graziers’s and Pastoralists come to this area,,” I asked.

“Well young Andy you must listen carefully to understand. First it was because of people we call the Overlander’s. Second the Gold rush in Victoria started, and third the South Australian Government wanted Adelaide to become an important Town and centre of commerce.”

“When the Grazier’s and Pastoralists began to take up thousands of acres in what we call the outback from Bourke and beyond in NSW, most of western Victoria and us here in Eastern SA; it was most difficult, almost impossible to get their stock or fleeces to the markets on the eastern seaboard of Australia, because of the large mountain ranges called the Great Divide running along the coast from north of Brisbane, down past Sydney and along south westwards past Melbourne and beyond.”

“Some pastoralists took 6 months for a round trip by bullock team to Sydney and back. Even to Melbourne used to take 3 months.



“Even Ben Boyd who owned Boyd Town near Eden had difficulty getting his cattle from Monaro Plains to Boyd Town. Mind you the bank that he owned, purchased land at a site now called Deniliquin in NSW.

“So over 10 years the Overlander’s who we call Stockmen now, would collect stock from the Grazier’s and walk them Overland following river’s down to Adelaide, where they could be put on ships.”

“ Small supply settlements sprang up where the Stockmen could use them. Don’t forget Captain Sturt and others, had explored some of the areas around the inland river systems.”

“Then the Gold rushes in Victoria suddenly meant a very large population growth mostly on the goldfields. People came from all over the world including China, and left some our own Townships, to populate many of the inaccessible areas. They all wanted food and other goods.”

Our South Australian Government, of whom the Assistant Colonial Secretary at one time was the explorer Captain Charles Sturt, wanted the river system’s that fed into the Murray to bring the cattle, wool and other produce to Adelaide. So the South Australian Government offered a 4000 pound prize for whichever 2 steel Paddle Steamers were the first to go from Goolwa to Swan Hill.”

“This may be difficult to believe, but our Captain Cadell of the Lady Augusta towing a wooden barge called the barge Eureka built at Goolwa and Mr. Randell of Mary Ann, fame, both with different purposes, eventually had a race to Swan Hill.”

“Mr. Randell with his home made wooden PS about 50 feet long, made with local men and local timber near the river at Mannum. He with his father and brothers owned a Flour Mill at Gumeracha, halfway between Adelaide and Mannum, and had small experiences with the steam engines at the

Mill. They wanted to sell Flour and other to the gold diggers, and using the rivers appeared to be the best way.”

“Captain Cadell who had ordered a 120 foot steel PS to be made in Sydney and sailed down the coast, through the Murray mouth into Goolwa. He had actually explored the gold diggings area, and had especially built a portable wooden framed canvass 25 foot boat.. He then employed 4 gold diggers to row him and his supplies down river to Goolwa. So he knew that the Pastoralists would like to ship their fleeces down river to buyers instead of using bullock teams.”

“It just so happened that the events coincided. Mr. Randell set off from Mannum. Captain Cadell heard about it, and set off after him. To make up time he sailed at night time with lanterns in the bow”



P.S. Lady Augusta and P.S. Mary Ann at Swan Hill 27 Sept. 1853

“ Mr. Randell sold his flour and other goods. Captain Cadell took goods and sold them, then brought back wool bales. Captain Cadell won the prize because his Paddle Steamer. followed the specifications of the South Australian Government. Later on some community people donated some money to Mr. Randell because they thought the Government had not been fair in giving all the prize money to Captain Cadell, because Mr. Randell was also carrying goods up and down the river systems.”

Mr. Turnbull just finished the story as we arrived at the Grappler.

“Here he is Captain! Your new diver. Look after him for Captain Cadell, who will pick him up when he returns down river from Gundagai!”

...a serious injury

I soon became very familiar with the operation and activities and the crew of the Grappler.

One day a crew man was seriously injured. The winch on the Grappler was taking the strain, when one of the many ropes under pressure snapped, the broken end flew through the air wrapping itself around Ezra who was standing in the dingy poling it to the shore. The rope whipped him overboard into the shallows and slammed him up against a tree before it unraveled. I jumped into the shallows shouting for help.

The Captain at the wheel of the Grappler, pulled the alarm signal on the steam whistle.

“Wheee Wheee Wheeeeee!”.

“Wheee Wheee Wheeeeee!”

“Wheee Wheee Wheeeeee!”

Everyone stopped what they were doing and tried to identify the emergency.

When I got to Ezra, he was semi conscious and moaning loudly. Blood was trickling from his mouth, his right shoulder was hunched up and his right leg was seriously bent from the knee. How could he be helped?