

2.0 The MURRAY RIVER STEAMBOATS.

2.2 Barge Loading and steering ...running aground... a surprise meeting on the River Darling Lt. Gov. MacDonnell, Captain Cadell and Mr. Randell...

....Barge loading and steering.....

“Hurry up young Andrew, this is getting heavy. Slip the rope end through that ring bolt to take the weight of me.”

“Done Mr. Murphy!”

“Alright now tie that knot I showed you.”

Suddenly the barge steering wheel was in place. I scrambled along the tied down wool bales to the stern, so that I could see the rudder turn when Mr. Murphy tested the steering.



Barge Steersman

“Thanks Andy. Go ashore now and tell the Captain George Bain Johnston, that I said the Barge and its cargo can now leave this Port of Mount Murchison and be towed by the Albury to the Port of Goolwa, whenever he is ready. We have re arranged the wool bales from this area of Wilcannia. There will be stackable space to collect wool bales downriver at Menindee and Morgan. We can probably also leave extra stores at Captain Cadells new store at Menindee.”

On shore I found Captain George Bain Johnston, and related what Mr. Murphy had said.

“Good oh! Andy. I will tell Captain Cadell, who will inform Lt. Governor MacDonnell and his party that it’s time to leave.”

“Now you can go aboard the Steamer. Go to my map cases. Find the one that shows Haddon’s crossing just outside Wentworth, It will show where the Darling flows into the Murray. If you understand that, before I get on board have a look at the Morgan map. Remember its about 600 river miles from here at Mount Murchison, or Wilcannia as they are starting to call it, to Wentworth, so you will have plenty of time for you to study them.”



Junction of the Murray and Darling rivers.

Captain Johnston's maps, like all river boat Captains, were long pieces of white canvas, wrapped at both ends around a round piece of wood. One end was slowly unrolled and the other was rolled up. The piece in the middle, about 2 feet long showed the river diagrams and notes on what to look for. Every Steamer Captain had maps.



Portion of a Skippers river map.

Captain Cadell had arranged for me to leave the Grappler and join a barge as an apprentice, to learn about the boats and the river's. So far I had been up the Murrumbidgee past Balranald and to Gundagai. This trip to Mount Murchison, near a station called Wilcannia, was by far the longest though. We had carried farming goods and farm supplies up the river system past Wentworth and Menindee. And on to Wilcannia station..

Now we had loaded the wool and it was time to depart. Everyone was anxiously studying the weather and the river depths. Depending upon the unpredictable rain fall in Queensland, the Murray and Darling rivers could only be used about 8 months of the year. Consequently most of the riverboats frequently had to be laid up for some time.

We were all aware of the coming low water and the risk of being stranded. It was worth the risk though, because the Pastoralist's with their very large sheep runs, were getting used to the river system, and avoiding unpredictable and laborious, lengthy horse or bullock team trains to take their wool to the market. One decent sized Steamer could probably load 1000 bales and tow up to 3 Barges each taking 1000 bales of wool.

Planning for our night time stopovers usually commenced about 1 to 2 hours before dark depending on where the boats were on the river. Sometimes the Skipper planned to run along, using some lights in the bow.



Towing.

.....running aground.....

The Riverboat captain tried to slow his boat and therefore our barge, just enough to maintain headway on the pace of the river flow. Most of the Steamers used a 50 feet long towrope that seemed to be the most satisfactory length for the water ways

Lookouts were constantly looking forward and communicating with the Captain in the wheelhouse. They were looking to find deep channels very close to the river's edge, the riverboat could use its paddles to steady and stop its forward progress, then be tied quickly to the bank. The barge could then be tied to the side of the riverboat. Or if the banks were suitable the riverboat and barge could be slowly maneuvered alongside the bank and a stern rope from the barge would be quickly tied to a tree ashore to arrest its progress.

On our way up this stretch of the river we had experienced rocks protruding at least half way across the river, with mud banks on either end. The river turned and twisted just like a snake.

All of a sudden danger !!

CRUNCH! LURCH!

The riverboat had gone through the narrow opening on the right hand side of the bank, and made its way behind the rocks slowly to our left in the part of the curled snake.

We couldn't make it through and the water race swung our stern parallel to the rocks facing across the breadth of the river. The river boat quickly released the tow rope, and used its paddle wheels to keep it also stationary with its bow pointing across the river and its stern just in the opening of the channel. We were pinned sideways to the rocks.

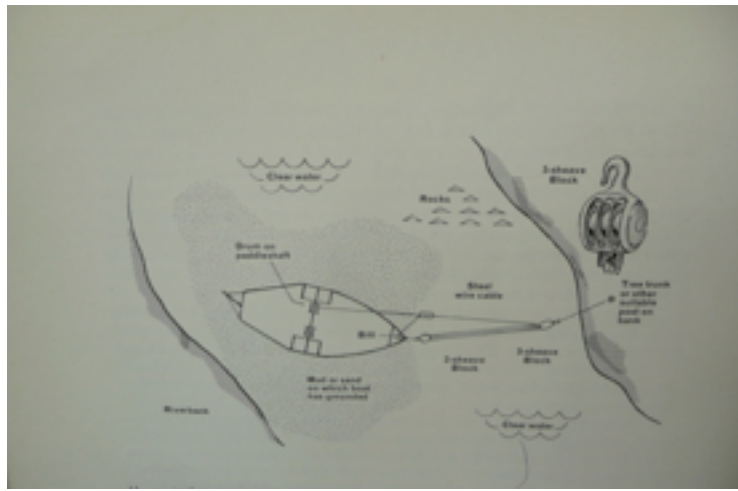
The Riverboat Captain and the barge steersman shouted to each other over the rocks, about what to do. Some of the barge crew quickly tied off a towing rope to a cleat just aft of our starboard stern, and ran it ashore to go around a tree, then down to the Riverboats stern steam winch..

Would it work? Could the Riverboat pull our bows along the rock ledge and mud banks into the channel opening.

We all worked hard pushing the barge off the rocks, allowing the tow lines to gently pull our barge into and through the channel.

That night over billy tea and damper we all had a lot to talk about. I was picked to go over the side in daylight and inspect the Barge hull. Luckily even deeply laden it was only drawing about 3 feet, so I wouldn't have to dive deep.

Some of the crew members discussed what to do if the Paddle Steamer got stuck on a sand or mud bank



How to “walk” a P.S. off a sandbank or mud flat.

....a surprise meeting on the River Darling...

The journey down the Darling proved uneventful, until 3 days later, we heard a Paddle Steamer that sounded very close coming upstream towards us. Suddenly the Gemini appeared.

What a noisy, ugly boat she was. Two hulls joined by planking, with the paddle wheel in the middle, and superstructure built around it.

After all the good humoured shouting and banty, both steamers were quickly tied to opposite sides of the river bank.

I found out later that Captain Randell had used the hull of the Mary Anne of the race fame, and another. The paddle wheel in the middle was to prevent the boat having difficulties with flotsam and jetsam in the rivers. However both hulls had to be re balanced when loads were removed or was taken on board.

Both paddle steamers were quickly tied up to opposite sides of the bank.

Governor Richard Graves MacDonnell, and Captain Cadell then carried out a loud speaking conversation with the Captain of the Gemini, Mr. Randell.

After greetings, Governor MacDonnell directed the conversation, so that Captain Cadell and Mr. Randell would not get into an argument.

Over the trip I had seen, and heard, that the Governor was powerful and hospitable, and was fond of outdoor and intellectual activities. One of his main interests was the advancement of exploration and settlement of outback areas in South Australia, and in many cases just like this trip on the river Murray and Darling, and his other one up the Murrumbidgee to Beechworth, was done to promote South Australia's prosperity, either in selling goods or transporting goods to Adelaide for worldwide shipment.

On his visit to Victoria's Beechworth gold area he, his wife Lady Blanche MacDonnell and his vice regal party traveled on Captain Cadell's Paddle Steamer Melbourne, with Captain Johnson in command, as far as Wahgunyah, then with the men riding horses, and Lady MacDonnell in a gig they journeyed to the Eldorado Hotel at Beechworth. At the hotel during a dinner given by the local dignitaries including Commissioner of Police Bourke, Gov. MacDonnell was said to have outlined his impressions of the trade potential of the area.

I remember a few words that were spoken across the river.

"Where do you intend to get too on this river Mr. Randell, and how do you intend to prosper.?" Said the Governor.

"Well Sir," Mr. Randell replied, "now that I have opened a general store at Wentworth, I believe I can continue upstream to a property called Brewarrina. Way past Fort Bourke and about a 1000 river miles from Wentworth, and sell some flour and a few other things. I hope to load aboard cattle hides or wool for re sale in Adelaide."

"We wish you well. Perhaps you could send a report of your expedition to me at Government House upon your return? As you probably know I am anxious for South Australia to become self sufficient in matters of exploration and financial development."



The Albury

...Wharf Piles at Morgan, and Robert O'Hara Burke....

"Hurry up young Andy sling that chain around the other upright pylon!"

“Yessir,” I replied panting with effort. I was standing on a big spike with my right foot that was dug into the old rotten upright pylon. My left foot was in a small tight rope sling tied around the pylon, my body was leaning into the wooden post and my arms were trying to wrap a small chain around the top of the pylon. When the steam derrick on the Albury picked up the new pylon at the top, swung it around to be next to the old rotten one that I was hanging onto, I could then wrap the end of my chain around it also and join them together.

We were assisting the owner/overseer of Nor’West Bend Station here at Morgan, to repair the jetty. The piles were about 1 foot in diameter and about 40 foot long. The owner’s bullock teams, with lots and ropes and pulleys had slung most of the vertical and horizontal piles of the wharf in place, but the Albury was required to complete the most difficult task in the deeper water.

Every one of us had large steaks for dinner that night, given to us from the grateful owner Mrs. Campbell whose husband had died earlier in the year. Mrs. Campbell’s four sons had a great time climbing all over the Paddle steamer and barge.

Nor’West Bend station, was highly regarded by river men as a successful station. The Campbell boys reckoned they had about 14,000 sheep. 3000 cattle and 90 horses so a few steaks wouldn’t make any difference. Any way they had fun, and our boat put into place the most difficult pylons to repair the wharf.

Anyway, Captain Cadell wanted us to get to the Moorundee area Blanche Town as quickly as possible; the Governor felt he should be back in Adelaide as quickly as possible. The Port of Blanch Town site was personally selected by the Governor, because Moorundee buildings were constantly flooded over the years. He named it after his wife.

I had also overheard Captain Cadell and the Governor talking about Captain Cadell using the brand new electric telegraph to contact the secretary of the Victorian Royal Society and say that he, Captain Cadell, would not support the candidacy of Mr. Robert O’Hara Bourke to lead the Societies expedition from Melbourne to the top of Australia, to see if a route could be followed so that an electric telegraph line could link Melbourne to the rest of the world. But he would offer to transport the proposed expeditions stores free to the value of 500 pounds on his steamers up to Menindee.



Most of the basin River's.

