



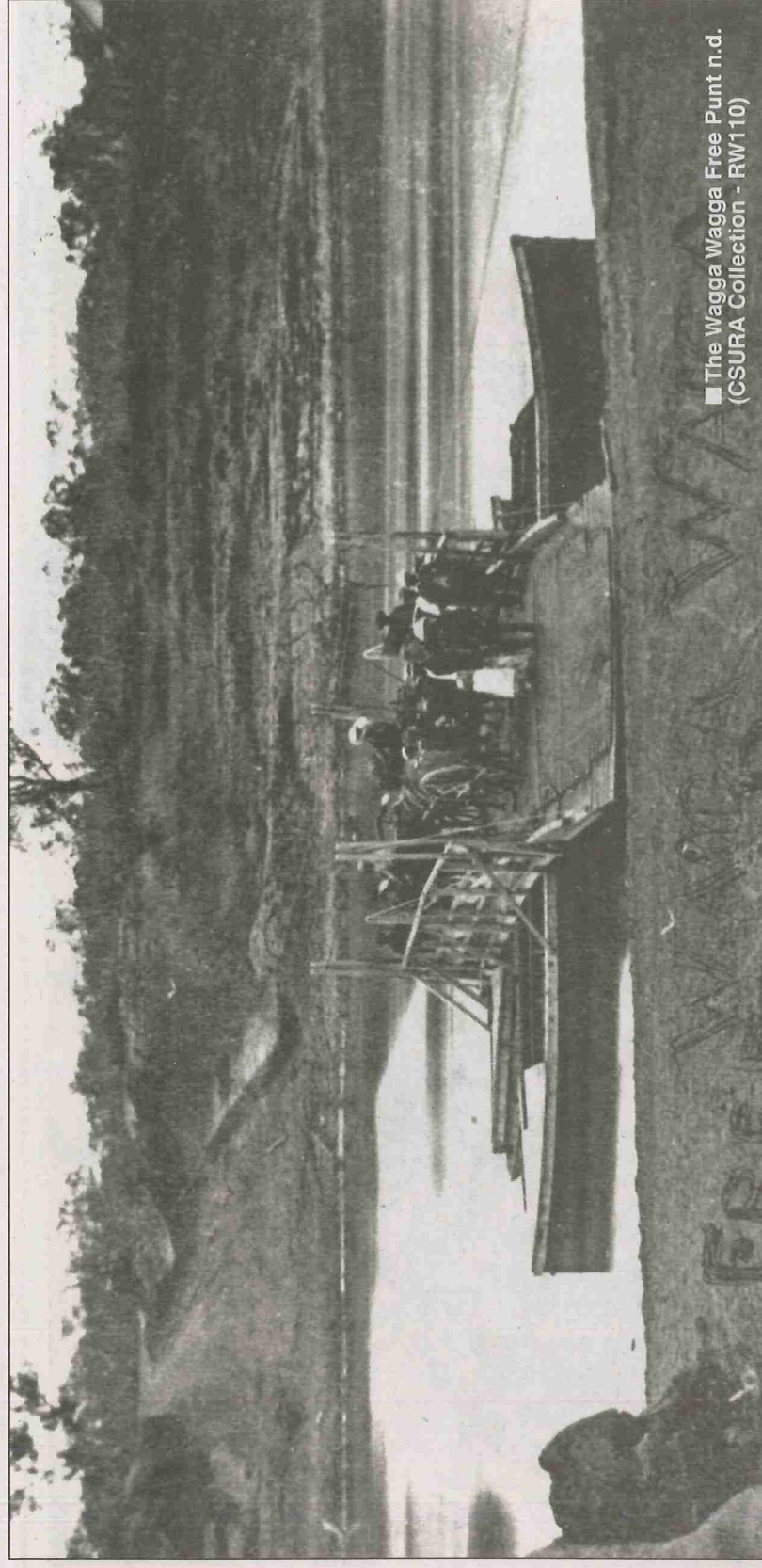
at the  
archives

Wayne  
Doubleday

## What you should know

- The CSU Regional Archives are open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm. Located in the Blakemore Building at the 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 straightforward inquiries for a fee of \$55 per hour, including copying and postage.
- For further information, phone 6925 3666, email [archive@csu.edu.au](mailto:archive@csu.edu.au) or visit the website at [www.csu.edu.au/research/archives](http://www.csu.edu.au/research/archives) for a full listing of holdings and more detailed information.

- **References:** Sherry Morris, *The Hampden Bridge – Wagga Wagga 1895-1995*; Sherry Morris, *Wagga Wagga – A History*, pp. 44, 59, 77-78; Keith Swan, *A History of Wagga Wagga*, pp. 83-88; *The Daily Advertiser Centenary Supplement*, 29/10/1968, p. 16; *Back to Wagga Wagga* Souvenir, 1927, p. 5; *The Progress of Wagga Wagga & District*, 1915, pp. 3-4. (All available in CSURA search room).



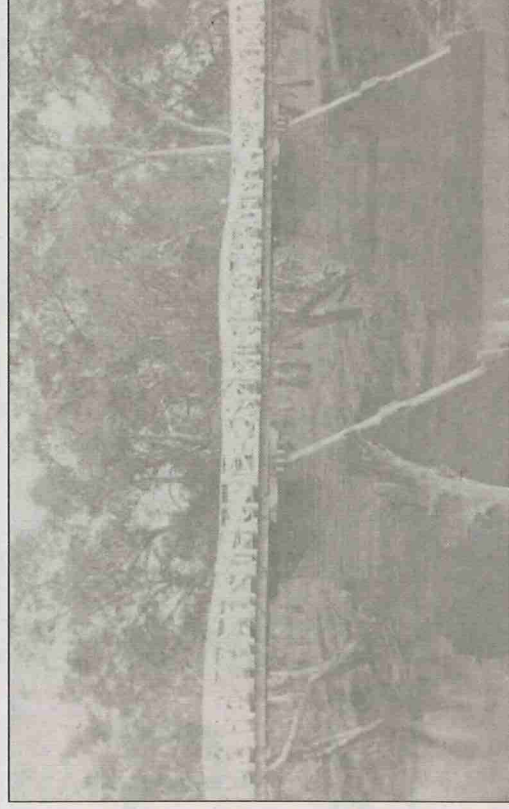
■ The Wagga Wagga Free Punt n.d. (CSURA Collection - RW110)

# Punt or bridge?

For both the residents of Wagga and visitors to the city, crossing the Murrumbidgee River is something we take for granted today to the extent where we don't think about it at all. Yet for the people living in Wagga after the township was established in 1849, crossing the river was a major obstacle which impacted upon their daily lives in almost every way.

Initially some individuals used barrels or rafts, or those affluent enough owned boats to make the trip. Obviously though, demand was high for a more reliable method of crossing the river, particularly for those residents living in North Wagga. As such, by the 1850s there were two punts operating commercially on the river. One situated at the end of Hobkirk Street in North Wagga (owned by William "Tinker" Brown and capable of carrying eight to ten tons in weight) and the other at the end of Kincaid Street (built in 1850 by James Walsh). Interestingly both Brown and Walsh were publicans – the former owned the first store and hotel (the New Ferry Hotel) in North Wagga, while Walsh was the licensee of the Wagga Inn. With the discovery of gold came an increase in the number of people travelling to and from the goldfields (particularly between Victoria and Lambing Flat near Young), and both punts at Wagga soon became very lucrative operations.

The limitations of the punts were evident however during periods of flooding when they were unable to be utilized, leading to people and stock often being held up or stranded until the Murrumbidgee receded. For this reason alone Wagga required a permanent bridge. When it became obvious that the government would not finance the bridge, meetings were organised to elect a committee to examine different proposals. This led to the formation of a joint stock company on August 23, 1860 to build and maintain a bridge at the location



Wagga Wagga Company Bridge n.d. (CSURA collection RW5/103/22).

already approved by the NSW Department of Public Works (between Crampton and Travers streets about 150 yards upstream of the Hampden Bridge).

A private act of the NSW parliament on December 5, 1861 established the Wagga Bridge Company. This allowed the company to receive tolls, although not from government employees and officials, clergymen, mailmen or people travelling to and from church on Sundays. The first directors of the company were F A Tompson, George Forsyth, Dr Allen Bradley Morgan, Henry Baylis and Henry Wallace. Shares in the company did not sell well, due to the popular belief that the bridge would be washed away in a large flood, meaning the directors were forced to finance the bridge themselves through loans.

The "Company Bridge" as it became known, was constructed in a relatively short time and officially opened on October 27, 1862 by Eliza Tompson, wife of F A Tompson. It was 91 metres long, with the roadway six metres wide and a metre wide footpath. The excitement at the opening was soon overshadowed by complaints from local residents at the tolls being charged by the company. Historian Keith Swan in his *A History of Wagga Wagga* said that, "Although the importance of the bridge in improving communications, attracting business and increasing the prosperity of Wagga Wagga can

hardly be exaggerated, it soon caused much dissension. Local residents soon forgot that the original shareholders had taken what was considered a foolish risk, and protested against the tolls which naturally irritated those who regularly used the bridge."

The bridge tolls were levied as follows: three pence for every foot passenger; two pence for every pig or goat; halfpence for every sheep or lamb; one shilling for every horse or mule; four pence for every head of cattle; and for every cart or drawn vehicle the cost was one shilling per wheel and four pence per beast.

Not surprisingly some ingenious methods were devised to avoid paying the tolls. People would "piggyback" others across the bridge and then claim that only one person was actually using the bridge. Groups of swagmen unable to pay the toll would nominate one unlucky person to run past the toll-keeper, and then when the toll-keeper gave chase the remainder of the group would run across without having to pay. Others would lie about attending church services and therefore also not have to pay the toll.

Tired of the fare evasions, the company decided to prosecute local residents who failed to pay. The most well-known was Stapleton Minchin a stock and station agent, who just happened to be the brother-in-law of solicitor William Willans. Later fined ten shillings

for his indiscretion, Minchin was one of the founders of the Wagga Free Punt Association. The group collected enough subscriptions from local residents to allow them to open a free punt on the river not far from Company Bridge.

Operating during 1871 to 72 the punt, which was supported enthusiastically by locals, was doomed to fail as the company was given exclusive rights on the river for two miles either side of the bridge by the Act of 1861.

After the demise of the free punt both local newspapers advocated for the reduction or removal of the tolls. During 1871 the company even offered to sell Company Bridge to the Wagga Borough Council for fifteen thousand pounds, however the council was not in a position to accept the offer. Gradually pressure mounted on the government to purchase the bridge, and in 1884, after the company's 21-year franchise had ended, the government purchased the bridge for 9804 pounds.

The payment of tolls ceased at noon on February 29, 1884, and a public holiday was immediately declared as local residents celebrated with a procession down Fitzmaurice Street, over the bridge and around North Wagga.

Not surprisingly the amount of traffic on the bridge increased dramatically after the tolls were abolished.

This led to increased deterioration of the bridge, and by the early 1890s the bridge was in a poor state and in danger of collapse due to decaying timbers. The importance of the bridge was stressed to the government. It was the only bridge over the Murrumbidgee for one hundred kilometres in one direction and eighty kilometres the other. The appeals of the local member of parliament, Mr James Gornly, were successful and in 1892 it was decided that the bridge should be replaced with a new one.

Subsequently, on November 11, 1895 Hampden Bridge was officially opened. Construction cost just in excess of 14,000 pounds. Somewhat surprisingly Company Bridge was demolished almost immediately, and with it went 33 years of service to the Wagga community.