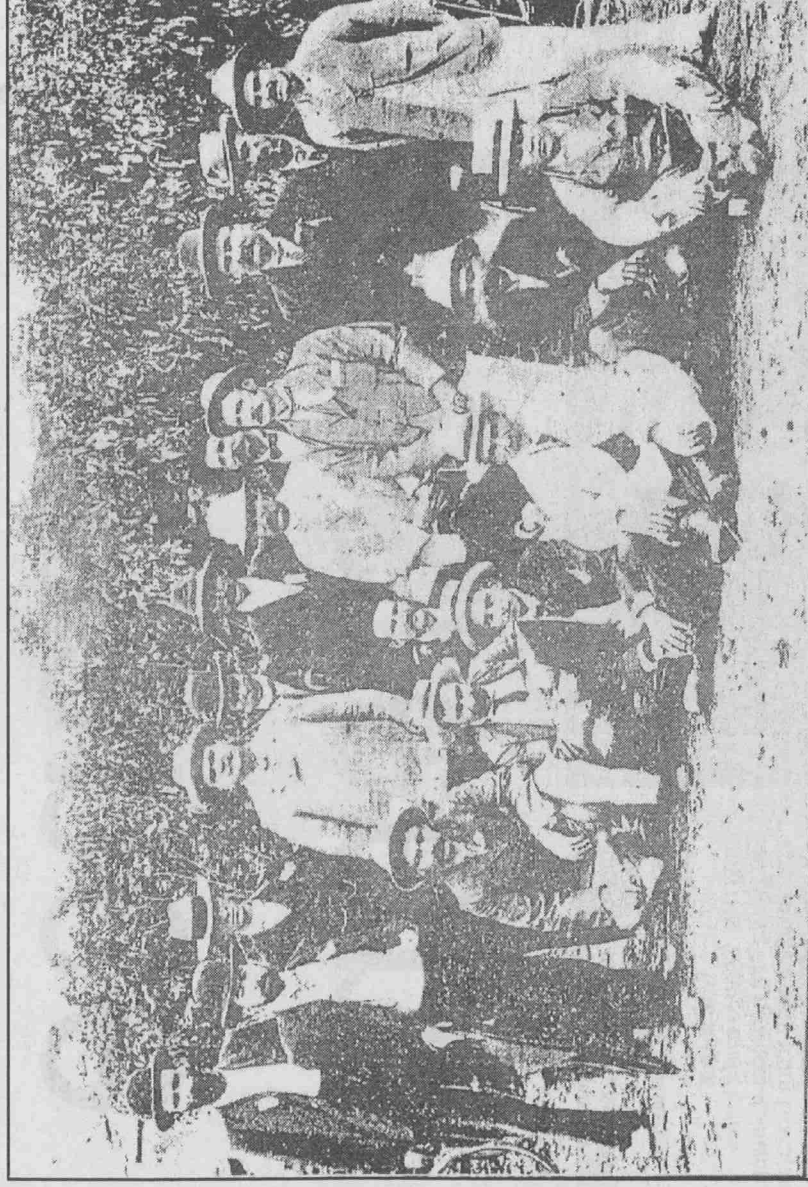


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The committee of the Coolamon Ploughing Carnival 1897. They are (standing) J Iverach, J Walsh, E J Egan, C E S Page, unknown, G Iverach, J W Skien, E Noona, G Roach, W McKenzie, T Lockett, R K Pyke, (sitting) A J Shorthouse, A W Stinson, W K Moore, P G Seymour, J H Seymour, G Bailey, A Brown.



Charles Pacey Pratt and his wife Caroline Ann. Photo courtesy of Geoff Haddon

Battle of the 'Plough Kings'

at the archives
Wayne Doubleday

In the 1890s and early 1900s, ploughing matches were a popular attraction throughout many local areas. September 2008 marks the 100th anniversary of the last Coolamon Ploughing Competition and Carnival, which was held on September 9, 1908. After this date, the ploughing matches gave way to the Coolamon Agricultural Show.

The first recorded ploughing match was held at Rannock in August 1893, and was organised by a local blacksmith named Charles Pacey Pratt from Winchendon Vale. Initially, these matches were between local farmers, with the intent of teaching young men the art of ploughing. However, due to their popularity, it was decided to move the annual event to Coolamon in 1895, where larger crowds could attend. In fact attendances were so large that the *Wagga Advertiser* of August 15, 1908 recorded that: "The entries showed a record on all previous matches, and the attendance was the largest ever seen at any function in Coolamon."

Estimates vary, but according to some sources, the final ploughing match in 1908 attracted a crowd of some 8000 people. Ploughing matches were held in many locations including Coolamon, Ganmain, Junee, Wagga, Temora, Barmedman, Grenfell Young, Albury and Koorawatha to name a few. Machinery exhibits were also a regular occurrence, as machinery firms were very interested in the outcome of the contests, particularly if their brand of plough was being utilised. The most famous ploughs of the day

were the Mitchell, Clyde, Whitlock, Massey-Harris, Robinson, Hudson, Guards and Crystal. A horse parade was another feature of the ploughing matches and the local band was also often in attendance.

Novelty events were also popular. In 1896, a competition which caused considerable amusement was the "finest-looking competitor". A judging panel of three young women decided that Mr W C "Billy" Bye from Wagga was the winner. He received one guinea, a barrel of beer and a kiss from each of the three judges.

In 1903, a digging competition was held, where competitors were required to dig a patch of ground three yards by five yards with a spade or shovel in the quickest time.

The ploughing matches themselves were very serious business, and as a result were keenly contested, giving farmers an opportunity to showcase their ploughing and horsemanship skills. Undoubtedly the two most famous ploughmen, and considered to be the most skilled of their day, were Charles Pratt and John Dunn from Methul, who contested many matches. The former, as a blacksmith was the inventor of the famous "Pratt plough", and Dunn also made his own plough for use in competitions.

Dunn competed in 32 ploughing matches during his career, for a remarkable 26 first prizes. Dunn defeated Pratt at the first match in 1893, with Pratt reversing the result the very next year. For a number of years the two battled for the title, which they each won a number of times.

The ground used for the ploughing matches was divided into "lands", each eight chains long and 33 feet wide, and each competitor was given their own "land" to plough.

Promptly at 10.30am, all the teams were lined up and the ploughing began. If teams were not finished by 4.30pm they were immediately disqualified.

The most-coveted categories apart from the overall champion were "best strike-out", "best crown", "best ins and outs", "best formed land" and "best finish". Events were also staged for the women drivers, best horse, best horse and sulky, and best driver. Prizes were always presented at a banquet after the ploughing had finished and a dance lasting long into the night would conclude proceedings.

Charles Pratt always believed there was more to driving a plough than yelling at a team of horses. He saw ploughing as an art form.

Indeed, Pratt's trusted horse, Toby, was almost as well known as Pratt himself. Toby, said to be particularly intelligent, was capable of leading the other horses in the team without Pratt needing to use the reins.

Pratt could complete his work without leaving a mark on the ploughing. To do this on the final round, he hooked his team in single file and put away the reins, the leader (Toby) taking a wider circle, to bring the plough on to the land at the exact place. None of the horses tramped or disturbed the smooth even lines so essential to a good finish.

For the final ploughing match in 1908, the "Champion of Champions" received a gold medal and prizemoney of £25, which was a good deal of money at the time. All the regular competitors attended except for one - Charles Pratt had lost interest in the matches due to the deaths of two of his children three months earlier.

A jeweller in Coolamon presented Charles Pratt with a silver miniature of the Pratt plough as a memento of his role in establishing the ploughing matches.

■ Compiled by Wayne Doubleday. Special thanks to Geoff Haddon for supplying the information used to compile this article.

References: *The Daily Advertiser*, August 15, 1907; *Back to Coolamon Souvenir* - 1956, pages 47-49; *Down the Wide Road - A History of Marrar & District* by Alby Armstrong, Pages 31-32