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■ 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.

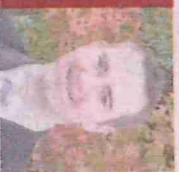
■ For further information, phone 6925 3666, email [archive@csu.edu.au](mailto:archive@csu.edu.au) or visit the website at [www.csu.edu.au/research/archives](http://www.csu.edu.au/research/archives) for a full listing of holdings and more detailed information.



A forgotten night of fun and fireworks

# Empire Day fun

at the archives  
Wayne Doubleday



Those who attended school prior to the 1960s would certainly remember Empire Day, which was celebrated on Queen Victoria's birthday, May 24, each year.

The first Empire Day was celebrated in 1905. The main purpose of the day was to foster loyalty and patriotism throughout the British Empire and its member nations.

In Wagga, national flags were flown on government buildings. Pupils attending the local schools heard addresses by leading citizens.

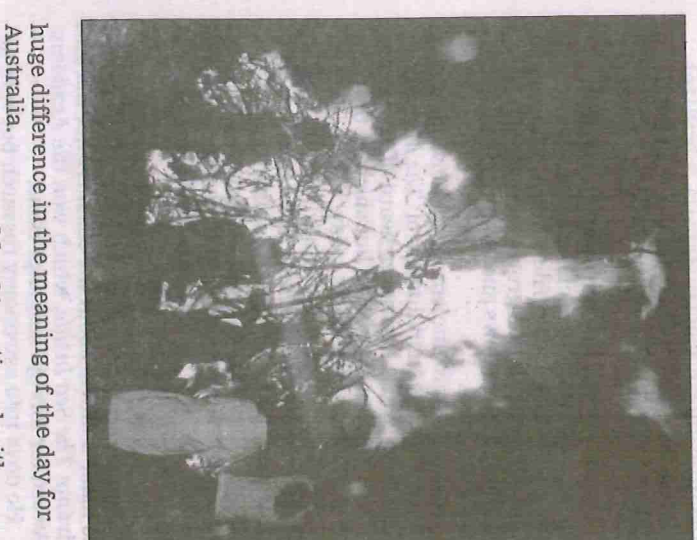
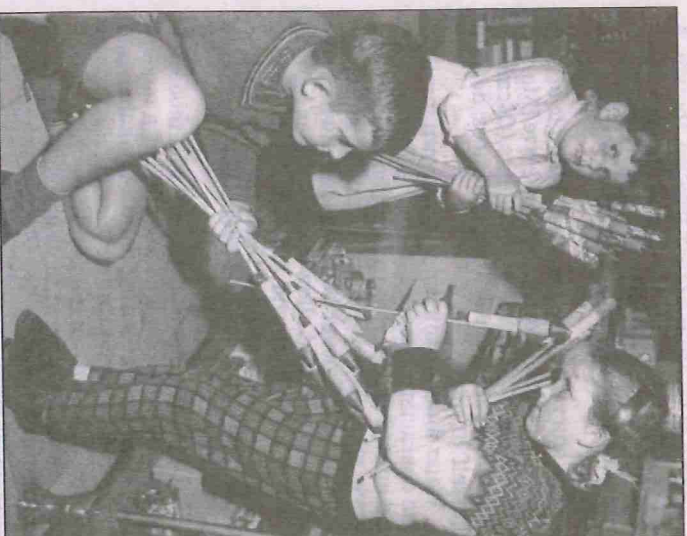
The children sang patriotic songs and the national anthem before being dismissed for their half-day holiday picnics and sports afternoons.

In the 1920s, children were becoming more involved in the official proceedings of the commemoration services and in 1927, at Wagga High School, a lady teacher was able to take an active part for the first time.

Miss Mitchell urged the students to appreciate their heritage. The mayor's bonfire in 1927 attracted an estimated four to five thousand residents to the bank of the Wollundry Lagoon and surrounding streets.

A pyrotechnic display was introduced and balloons of coloured paper with inflammable material inside were displayed. When these were set alight, the red, white and blue coloured balloons would fly hundreds of feet into the air.

Three balloons were set free and, after a period of time, they wafted away in a current of air, disappearing in the eastern sky. In 1946, at Wagga High School, pupils were in



charge of the entire programme. Robert Yates read the Empire Day message from Lord Gowrie.

Class representatives Ivan Armstrong, Jill Bender, Arthur King, Ken Osmond and Meg Yalland each gave an address.

In later years, it was customary for children to build bonfires with a certain amount of competition and pride.

These were carefully guarded against being prematurely set alight. For weeks beforehand, fireworks would be purchased and covered in paper bags and shoeboxes, usually hidden from their siblings.

These "exotic crackers" included bungers, rows of tom thumbs, catharine wheels, sky rockets, sparklers, roman candles and jumping jacks.

By the late 1950s, the British Empire had started to decline and member countries were starting to claim their own identity, making a

huge difference in the meaning of the day for Australia.

Celebrations on May 24 continued with variations until the late 1960s. There continued to be more participation for school children with the introduction of essay and colouring competitions.

For more than 50 years, Empire Day "Cracker Night" or "Bonfire Night" was celebrated but it is now a forgotten anniversary; the origins of which are only remembered by today's grandparents.

A public holiday was never declared by the government for the day, although children always enjoyed their half-day holiday activities and for many country people the night became one of social interaction with friends and neighbours.

■ Compiled by June Dietrich  
References: *The Daily Advertiser*: 25/05/1905, 25/05/1927, 25/05/1947; National Library of Australia News: 08/05/1908; Photographs: RW1574, Tom Lennon Collection, CSU Regional Archives.