

Archives open today

The CSU Regional Archives is extending its opening hours to include the first Saturday of every month. On these days the archives will be open from 10am to 3pm.

The next Saturday opening is on today. This trial initiative has been put in place to cater for those researchers who are unable to visit the archives on weekdays during normal business hours. It is hoped that enough researchers and visitors will avail themselves of this service to warrant it becoming a permanent occurrence.

Heartland



The construction of "The Hill" on the eastern side of Eric Weissel Oval, taken before 1964. From the left can be seen the new Wagga Leagues Club building, the original clubhouse (now the tennis clubhouse), the newly constructed tennis courts and Eric Weissel Oval (from the Tom Lennon Collection, RW1574/852).

Wagga's old home of rugby league

at the archives

Wayne Doubleday



what you need to know

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



The old Wagga Leagues Club and Eric Weissel Oval in all its former glory will probably ring a bell with the older generation of Wagga's football fanatics. Situated on the corner of Gurwood and Shaw Streets, it is now the site of an independent K-12 Catholic

school. But many people do not know it was once the heartland of rugby league in Wagga.

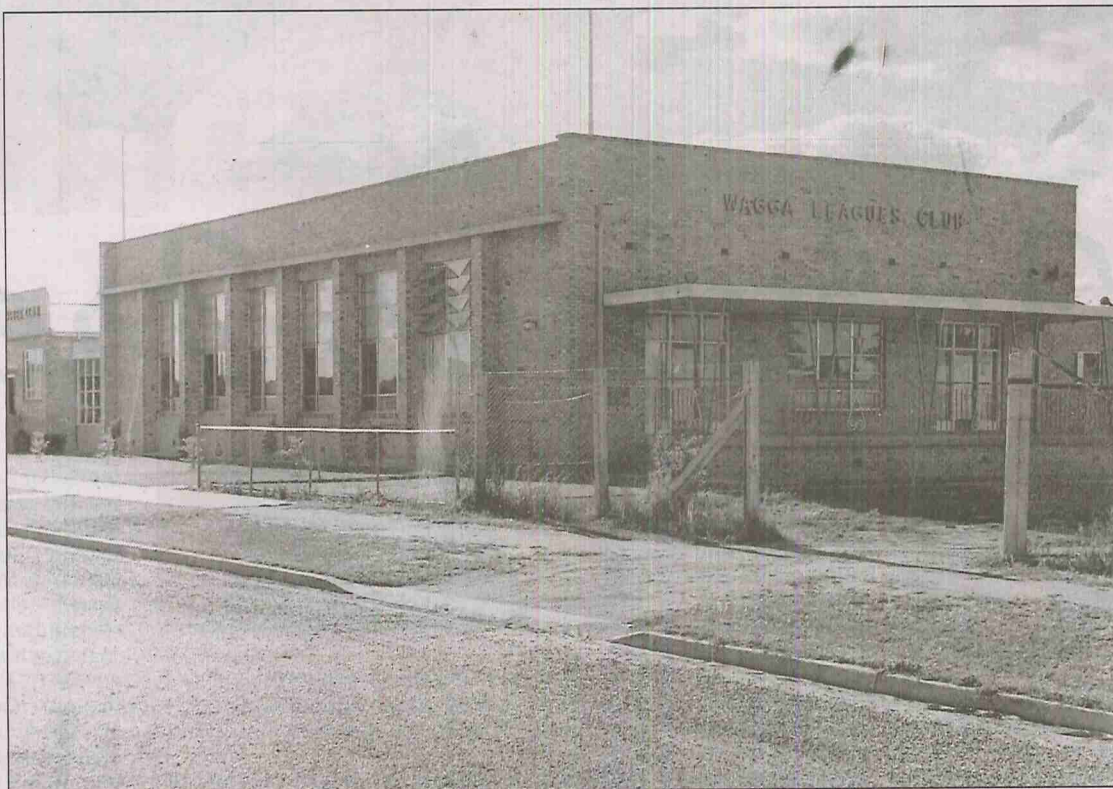
Formed officially in July 1959, the Wagga Leagues Club was created by a group of three men obsessed with rugby league. Mr Joe Rake, his younger brother Bob Rake, and Mr Jack Murphy were working on foundations for Mr. Rake's house during the 1954 football season. When Joe Rake mentioned a Rugby League Club and workman's club should be established, Murphy jumped at the opportunity and the very next day searched Wagga to find a possible site.

According to Patrick G Byrnes' *Remember the 1950s, 60s and 70s in Wagga Wagga*, Murphy considered an old bootmaker's shed in Blake St; however it was at an unsuitable price. He then learned of eight-and-a-half acres of land on the corner of Gurwood and Shaw streets. It was owned by the Wagga War Services Home Commission and was originally used for constructing homes for returned servicemen. On the other hand, after the floods in the 1950s, the committee saw that the area was unsuitable for housing and so granted permission for the site to be purchased.

Sponsored by the newly formed Wagga Magpies Rugby League Club in 1955, the club purchased the site from the War Services Home Commission, and with 140 founding members, began to work on plans for the building and sporting complex. Many volunteers from Wagga came to assist, which helped reduce the cost of the initial building.

In March 1956, the Leagues Club was opened as a temporary building. Its popularity began rapidly increasing and there was a very long waiting list for membership. Future plans were in motion for a football oval, bowling greens, lawns, and hard tennis courts.

By 1959, Murphy had become the president and the club boasted a membership of 1000 people. That year, the tennis courts and long-awaited oval, seating 10,000 people, were established. Interestingly, *The Daily Advertiser* published on



A view from Gurwood Street of the old and new Leagues Club buildings, taken before 1964 (from the Tom Lennon Collection, RW1574/852.)

September 23, 1959, wrote that the "(tennis) courts were in such demand, that a further two courts had to be added", to the original two that had already been installed.

Sherry Morris' book *A History of Wagga Wagga* notes the Leagues Club honoured one of the Riverina's most outstanding players, Mr. Eric Weissel, by naming the oval after him. Eric Weissel had lived in Wagga since 1938 and had captured the hearts of rugby league fans across the country. He was offered positions from Sydney and English clubs; however he never left the bush, preferring to play for a string of Riverina clubs during a career that spanned 18 seasons, including the Wagga Magpies from 1938 to 39. Unfortunately, the latter part of his life remains a mystery as the only records of him in the archives are his Masonic Gavel and Jewel presented to him in 1955 and his death notice in the paper from 1972.

From the state of the oval today, many people who walk or drive past would not realise a 1985 to 1988 Rugby League World Cup match was held at the oval on July 20, 1988. Played between the victorious Australians and Papua New Guinea, two records were set. First, a crowd of 11,685 people showed to watch the game, and second the score was 70-8.

During the next few years, a new, modern Leagues Club building was constructed, and then a second storey was added in 1964. Arthur Summons, the famous Australian rugby league and union five-eighth, took over as secretary manager, after he finished his club career at the Wagga Magpies (1965-67). He remained in that position until 1994.

Today, not many people would truly know the importance of the old Leagues Club and Eric Weissel Oval to Wagga's football heritage. Joe Rake's dream of a rugby league clubhouse in 1954 not only turned into the centre of football for the area but it became an extremely popular social centre for Wagga and its community.

Compiled by Chanel De Bono

References:

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- Morris, S, 1999, A History of Wagga Wagga, p.259, Bobby Graham Publishers, Wagga Wagga.
- Centenary of Rugby League, The Players; Arthur Summons & Eric Weissel, 2008, <http://www.centenaryofrugbyleague.com.au/site/the-players.aspx?cat=3&list=true>