



at the
archives
Wayne
Doubleday

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Beach babies

River has been enjoyed for generations

The Murrumbidgee River and the Wagga Bathing Beach, in particular, have been used by Wagga residents for all manner of recreational pursuits for more than 150 years.

Swimming, fishing, boating and simply relaxing by the cool, tranquil waters of the Murrumbidgee are just some of the activities fondly remembered by many generations of citizens.

Swimming has always been a very popular pastime in Wagga and was centered on the river until the City Baths were completed in 1953. In the late 1800s, many men and boys would go to the river to cool off, particularly on a hot summer afternoon.

They did, however, need to find somewhere inconspicuous for their dip, due to the law forbidding bathing near a public thoroughfare between the hours of 6am and 8pm.

At this time it was still considered inappropriate for women to swim in the river.

A swimming club was formed in 1897 with races and carnivals held in a roped-off section of the river near St John's Church.

In January of 1899, the club, by now boasting over 150 members, hosted the Mile Championship of NSW.

The South Wagga Swimming Club was formed in 1915 with the Wagga Soldiers' Comforts Fund benefitting from money raised through swimming carnivals.

Mixed bathing was accepted by this time and upwards of 600 people could be found enjoying the river near the railway viaduct most evenings in summer.

Learn to swim classes were also held at the beach prior to the opening of the City Baths.

The Wagga Beach Lifesaving Club, formed in 1927, would patrol the beach in the summer months, with the area brightly lit until 9pm in the evening.

Club members, all volunteers, gave up their spare time to safeguard swimmers for over 40 years with the club officially disbanding in December of 1971.

Apparently, throughout the history of the club, not one person drowned while club patrolmen were on duty.

The Wagga Rowing Club was formed on May 13, 1887, however rowing events were held as early as 1866.

The original course ran from a point opposite the Squatters Hotel to a site near the Ferry Hotel in North Wagga and back.

By early 1888, the club had 90 members and had constructed a floating boat shed which was moored near The Rocks.

The club, which disbanded in October 1890, was re-formed in 1913 but closed again in 1916 when over half the members enlisted for World War I.

One of Wagga's most popular attractions during the 1920s and 1930s was Dixieland, a dance floor located amongst the willow trees on the river bank at the end of Little Gurwood Street.

At night, the coloured electric lights and stars set against the backdrop of the willows and fast-flowing Murrumbidgee made for an amazing atmosphere.

The Wagga Brass Band, Riverina Revellers and Dixieland Melody Makers were some of the regular performers.

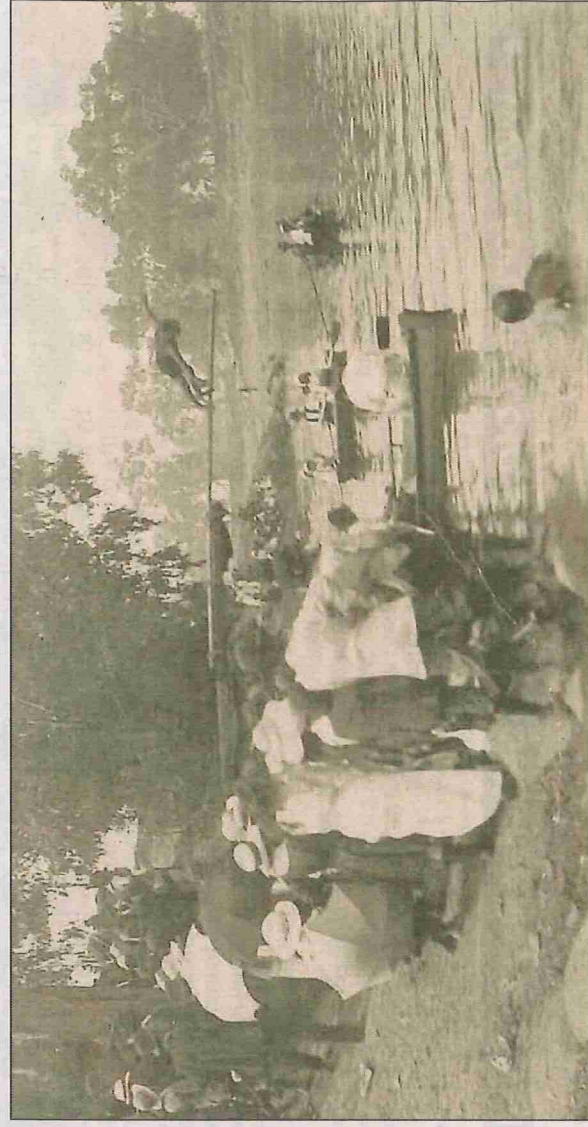
The popularity of the venue is highlighted by the large numbers celebrating New Year's Eve at Dixieland with over 2000 people paying for admission in 1926.

The annual Gumi Festival was a highlight of the Wagga calendar from 1976 to 1995.

The festival was held over a week and in 1989 included events such as a Pool Party Kids Fun Day, MTC Gumi Cup, Street Parade, Breakfast at the Beach, and Family Concert.

Sporting events incorporated into the festival included the National Aquathlon Championship, NSW Claycourt Tennis Championships, Go Kart races, a fishing competition, bicycle criterion and a golf tournament.

The race itself commenced at Eunony Bridge Reserve with contestants traversing a



nine-kilometre section of the Murrumbidgee to finish at Wiradjuri Reserve.

All craft had to be manually propelled (no motors) and rubber inner tubes had to make up at least 80 per cent of the flotation mechanism.

There were many different categories, including the World Open Teams Championship, business houses, schools and odd bods.

Various themes, such as Pirates on the High

River, First Fleet, and Salute to Kunning were encouraged and a King and Queen of Gumi were also crowned. In 1982, it was reported that approximately 25,000 spectators viewed the race.

Compiled by Paul O'Donnell
References: *The Daily Advertiser*: 18/8/1988, 14/2/1989, 1/2/1989; Sherry Morris, *Wagga Wagga* - A History; CSURA, RW2612 & RW1414.