

A Quarter-Century of Local History

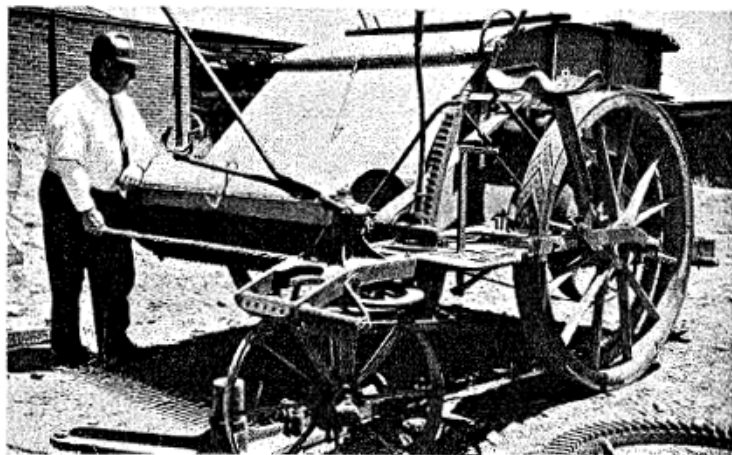
by KEITH SWAN

Annual Report of the President, read to the Society
on 20 September 1982

As my close association with the development and administration of this Society can hardly last much longer, I have chosen the particular title 'A Quarter-century of Local History' for this Annual Report of 1982. True, this Society is exactly 20 years old, but the longer period of a quarter-century will allow me the latitude to remind you of the events preceding our beginnings in 1962 and to raise questions about future development and strategies.

An Historical Society was first established in Wagga Wagga in 1946, with the late Walter S. Hardy as President and the late Norman Grinton as Honorary Secretary. Its main activity was the collection of photographs, and that collection is the important nucleus of our valuable collection of original photographs. Whether the 1946 Society was premature, or whether the death of Mr Hardy was a crippling blow, I do not know, but it was short-lived, for when I joined the staff of Wagga Wagga Teachers College in 1950 I heard nothing of it.

The next move came when the Mayor, the late H.E. Gissing, father of our vice-President, Morris Gissing, called a public meeting in September 1950 at which a new Society was formed, with the late R.M. Davidson as President and Eric Irvin, then of the *Daily Advertiser*, as Honorary Secretary. I attended that meeting, primarily because I was a professional historian one of whose great loves was our history, but also because my Principal, the late George Blakemore, asked me to represent the College. As a relative newcomer I was not elected immediately to the Committee, but soon Rod. Davidson, whom I came to know through our common Church connection, pressed me into service. Unfortunately, that Society soon disbanded. Eric Irvin resigned after a few months, and perhaps Rod. Davidson, in spite of his deep interest in and knowledge of the district, was too close to the end of his life for vigorous promotion. Perhaps, too

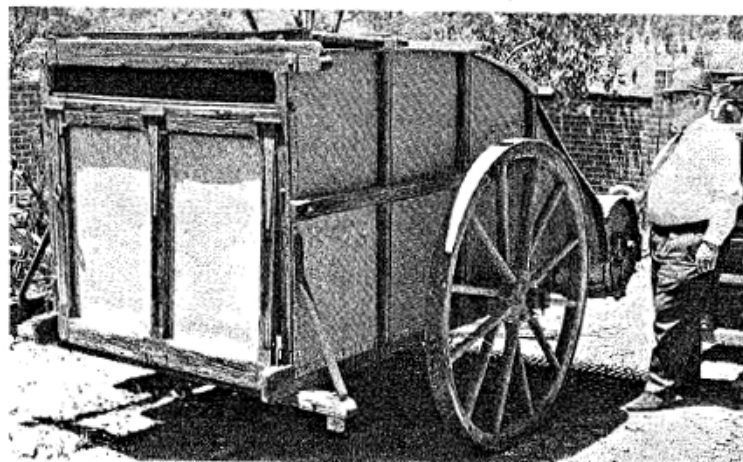


A 'Ridley' Stripper preserved by the Society.

the time was not then ripe. At all events, the last meeting was held on Thursday, 3 April 1952, when the President made this note : 'Meeting duly convened. Attendance Messrs Swan and Davidson and Carew (visitor). Lapsed through paucity in attendance and absence of quorum. Adjourned indefinitely. R.M. Davidson.'

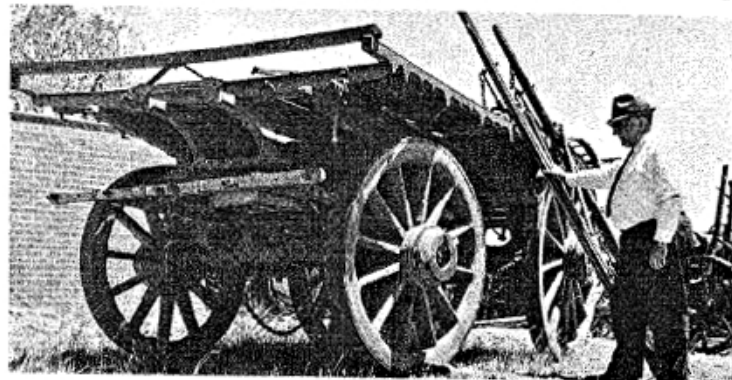
You can imagine how I felt about the community's interest in what was both my profession and one of my hobbies. By the end of 1953, when Roderick Mackenzie Davidson, for whom I had both deep respect and affection, died, I felt quite alone in pursuing local history. At first I was obsessed with what might happen to the items which had been collected, principally photographs. I knew that these were contained in a tin trunk in Mrs Davidson's garage at 69 Urana Street, so during 1954 I consulted the Mayor, the Town Clerk and Mrs Davidson, and by agreement these items were committed to my care in the History Department of the Teachers College. To document this the Town Clerk and I exchanged letters. I insisted on this, but wonder now, almost 30 years later, how soon the document could be retrieved.

When the Teachers College staged an Open Day I would rather apologetically arrange a display, believing in my inferiority complex that the scientific, art and craft equipment of my colleagues would arouse much more interest than my historical display. In those days, too, it was almost fashionable to denigrate the study of history for its own sake, to regard it only as useful when integrated with geography, economics or international affairs.



A Back-delivery reaper preserved by the Society

As the 1950s wore on, fortunately, the climate of opinion changed, and I noticed more people becoming interested in my wares. My confidence was boosted by the interest of my students, who helped arrange Open Day displays, and who began the first copying of photographs. I remember that it was one of my students, Murray Luke, who in 1960 made my first set of slides of old photographs which I have since often used for teaching, lectures and addresses. R.M. Davidson's widow also helped. First, about 1955, I would borrow old documents, maps and photographs for public displays, returning them after use. Then in 1959 she collected such items together and gave them to me. The stimulus for this gift was the refusal of a nephew to accept



A 'Bennett' Waggon — an artifact preserved by the Society.

them because he lacked interest; so she said to him with some asperity, 'I will give them to a man I know will value and preserve them!' From time to time I have committed these items to the Society's Archives, and will complete the process during the next few months.

Then, late in 1961, the regional branch of the Workers' Educational Association arranged a lecture on the history of the Riverina, in old St John's Hall in Baylis Street, by David McMillan, the Sydney University Archivist. At the supper which followed my then Principal, George Muir, said to me, "You know more about the history of the Riverina than he, don't you? What are you intending to do about it?" My reply was that I would get on with the task, but really needed a room in which to store, repair and display the items entrusted to my care. At that time there were surplus timber-framed buildings formerly used as residential accommodation, and I was promised at least one room. Although he left for Armidale early in 1962 George Muir did not forget, passing on his promise of especial space to his successor, Maurice Hale, who was fascinated by local history although his own discipline was psychology. He was so interested, in fact, that he gave me little peace as I settled down to the task. So, with the help of interested students, during 1962 I created a mini-museum and archives in a room in a former womens' dormitory block which was later moved to make way for the Blakemore Library. I am convinced, by the way, that apparently chance remarks like those of George Muir do stimulate people like me to action.

By August 1962, to coincide with the College Open Day, the display was sufficiently advanced for public viewing, so I wrote to the *Daily Advertiser* — one of my very rare letters to the Editor - inviting people to inspect the display, and to advise me or the student on duty whether they would be interested to attend a meeting on Monday, 20 August, to consider forming a new Society. The response was encouraging, so I advertised the meeting.

You can imagine with what trepidation I approached the meeting; and how delighted I was when 25 persons, including the Mayor and the Town Clerk attended, with more than ten apologising for absence. It had been my idea to have the meeting request the Mayor to call a public meeting about forming the Society, but I remember Ivan Jack saying, in his pragmatic, commonsense way, "Form the Society at this meeting, because the Mayor couldn't hope to attract such a good attendance to a public meeting!" So we appointed a committee of eight - Mrs

B.W.A. McGeoch, Messrs C.A. Mallyon, W.A. Bloomfield, W.R. Ellis, L.G. Young, R.L. Palmer, D.P. Hogan and myself - to prepare an Agenda for the next meeting on 17 September 1962. The 20 August meeting also resolved that the Society should arrange an exhibition at the approaching Wagga Wagga Show, a decision in many ways a landmark in our development. The September meeting was even better attended, and those present considered, amended and adopted a constitution prepared by the Steering Committee. The Wagga Wagga and District Historical Society was properly launched!

As I have said, the Show exhibition in October 1962 was important for us. We were thrilled by the interest of those who visited our display; we were delighted to receive the items donated and to list others promised; and we launched the Newsletter. Someone suggested we should have a duplicated 'handout' for the Show, so I prepared a stencil on my portable typewriter and we distributed hundreds of copies. In a moment of weakness I headed it Newsletter No. 1, and the publication has been running ever since. Divide 218 by 20 and you will see we have averaged almost 11 Newsletters per year.

Our programme of monthly addresses began in October 1962, when the late Eric Dunlop, founder of the Armidale Folk Museum, spoke on the topic 'The Local Historical Society and the Folk Museum'. This was followed by an address by the Town Clerk, Bill Ellis, in November 1962, on aspects of the history of local government in Wagga Wagga. By this latter meeting we had 63 financial members, a good start after just three months, so the Society was well on its way. The new year of 1963 saw our development continue, and I recall that on 16 March we enjoyed our first excursion, to Aboriginal sites near Uranquinty and The Rock and to the private cemetery of the Davidson family on Ray Bergmeier's property, 'Bullenbong'. This excursion immediately followed an address on the previous evening by Jack Golson, now Professor of Prehistory in the Institute of Advanced Studies at the Australian National University.

If I seem to have dwelt overlong on these early details, then it has been for what I see as very good reasons. For one thing, we succeeded where our forerunners had failed. Why? Undoubtedly by 1962 the climate for historical societies was much more favourable, but there were other reasons. As Ivan Jack once remarked to me, our 1962 revival was from the grass-roots. Moreover, the early Management Committees were a successful blending of the descendants of early families and citizens more recently arrived; of businessmen and public servants; of rural and

urban residents; of the town and 'the gown'; and of women as well as men. Never could it have been said that the Society was the preserve of either females or males. Yet another reason was that the Management Committees of the early days devised active and imaginative programmes, with interesting speakers, fascinating excursions and exhibitions to capture the imagination of both the enthusiast for history and the uncommitted. These programmes were based on sound aims: the preservation of documents, photographs, buildings and the environment; the establishment of a museum to house the resulting collection; the pursuit of research; and the publication of the results of research. For these reasons we succeeded where our predecessors failed; and we have continued to exist because we have been vigorous as well as imaginative and committed.

A great deal of the rest of the Society's history you know very well. The establishment of the Museum, for example, was a direct result of the work of the earlier societies and of our collecting of artifacts at that Show display in October 1962. That display convinced us that we must have premises to store our items, at least, and to restore and display them if possible. Over the years 1963-66 we examined many proposals, and finally in 1966 we resolved to build on the present site, which is part of the southern edge of the former Copland Estate, purchased in 1929 by the Minister for Education for the establishment of a teachers college. In 1966 the then Minister granted permissive occupancy of the site to the City Council in trust for this Society to build a Museum there. That same year the Management Committee approved of Bob Palmer and me approaching an architect, Jim Tyler, to discuss development of the site. Excited by the plan, Bob and I showed it to the Mayor, Ivan Jack, and the Town Clerk, Bill Ellis. They actually commandeered the document, and you can imagine our absolute delight when a few days later they called us in and volunteered that the Council would lend some money for the Society to begin the project. As you know, the first stage of the Museum, Exhibition Hall No. 1, was opened on 22 April 1967, and other additions have followed gradually.

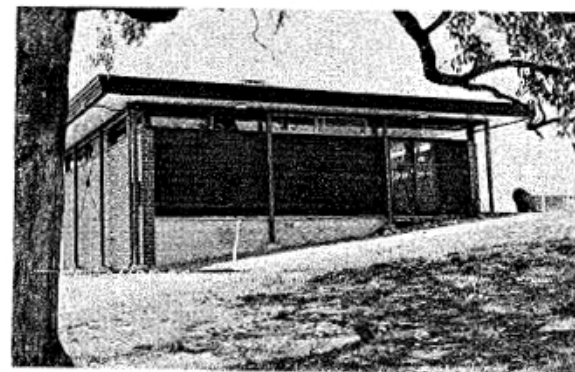
Apart from the Museum, you also know that we have maintained our programme of monthly general meetings, February to November inclusive, our regular excursions and our monthly Newsletter. In many ways the Newsletter served for the publication of small items of research, a feature many people commented upon favourably, and then in 1970 we began to publish longer research papers in the Journal. Publication of the Journal has depended on the availability of funds, and so far we have published four numbers, with No. 5 presently in

preparation. Although *A History of Wagga Wagga* and the 'Page of History' I regularly contributed to the *Daily Advertiser* for several years were my own work, I always regarded them as an extension of the Society's work, for I gained a great deal from leads provided for me by members of the Society.



A CORNER OF THE MUSEUM

Keith Swan demonstrates the washing machine donated by valued early Society members, the late Mr and Mrs A.H. Seccombe.



The Museum shortly after opening in 1967

One feature I believe I should stress is our collecting of historical records. In the past generation there have been great changes in Australia regarding the preservation of such records. When I came to Wagga Wagga in 1950 the main professional repository in New South Wales was the Mitchell Library. The State Archives - and, indeed, the Australian National Library and the Commonwealth Archives - were in the very early stages of development. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, as these institutions rapidly developed, the general consensus was that repositories should be confined to the national and state capitals. This Society has always taken a different view, believing that at least a limited number of regional collections and repositories should be established. Our view has fortunately been supported, for if we look at the situation now we find it remarkably changed, with regional archives in Armidale, Lismore, Newcastle, Wollongong and Wagga Wagga. These are mainly associated with academic institutions, and in most cases there is ready co-operation with the State Archives, which places regional records in regional archives on long-term loan under certain conditions.

In this matter of historical records, both as a Society and as individuals we have supported Wagga Wagga Teachers College, Riverina College and other organizations in their efforts for the region. In particular, when Riverina College began developing its Riverian Collection and Archives in 1972-73, we co-operated as far as possible, beginning to deposit our own collection there on long-term loan.

Lest you think that in outlining the Society's history and in attempting to account for its continued existence for 20 years I have been uncritical, I of course grant that we have made mistakes. As a small group of enthusiasts, concentrating often on actions rather than policy, we have sometimes 'put the cart before the horse'. In our enthusiasm, too, we have failed to perceive at times that our actions might create problems. For example, we have never created a balance at the Museum between the space requirements for storage, restoration and display. While these criticisms are relevant, I assert that we should resolve to do better in future rather than to indulge in destructive thinking which could lead us to the conclusion that we should never have established a Museum, or even that we should never have established a society to engage in preservation and restoration.

It is a mark of our capacity both to admit mistakes and to maintain vigour that in this past year we have taken steps to develop more effectively. With the help of the City Council and

of the Cultural Grants Division - help only extended in the confidence that we could succeed - we have appointed a Museum Director. From our own resources, both of personnel and intellect, we have developed a new administrative or managerial structure, with a Board of Directors which has formed five hard-working committees. The Board, through these committees, is working hard to evolve policies from which sound accelerated development will emerge: in our traditional activities as well as at the Museum. We have improved our programme; we have increased our publicity; and we have set in train measures we hope will rapidly increase our membership from the slightly more than 200 of recent years. The year 1981-82 has been busy, rewarding and successful, laying the basis for accelerated development. Your Directors have been particularly devoted to their tasks.

But what of the future? In my opening remarks I said I had chosen the title 'A Quarter-century of Local History' to allow me to look at the years before 1962 and those after 1982. The two major developments I have distinguished over our 20 years of existence are the establishment of the Museum and the development by Riverina College of the Riverina Regional Archives, the latter a development in which we have played some part. One possible scenario for the Society would be to opt out of both these areas. We might suggest to the City Council that it take over total responsibility for the Museum, and we might opt entirely out of the collection and ownership of historical records, surrendering our present collection to Riverina College. In spite of certain attractions about these suggestions, I do not favour adopting either of them, although continuing as we are presents us with grave responsibilities. What would happen to the Society if we took such actions? I believe it would not last very long, because meetings and excursions pall after a time unless they are linked with some practical, creative activity such as collecting, restoring, research and writing. My long observation of student clubs, for example, and my thinking about the dynamics of voluntary organizations, suggest that the clubs and organizations which continue to exist are those whose aims motivate their members to practical action. Otherwise they wither away. That, I believe, would probably happen to this Society if we abdicated important areas to 'Bigger Brothers'.

You will gather from what I have said that I am a firm believer in voluntary organizations working for the benefit of the community, in partnership with other such organizations and with governments and government instrumentalities. In this way, I believe, the individual citizen feels he is contributing to

community welfare : something emerges from the grass-roots rather than by imposition from above. The 'Museums in Australia' Report of 1975 to the Australian Government made exactly this point when it said

In the last fifteen years hundreds of small museums have been founded as a result of the quickening interest in Australian history. This has been primarily a grass-roots movement, one of the most unexpected and vigorous cultural movements in Australia in this century. Its strength lies outside the capital cities . . .



Tennis at Brucedale in 1890s.

— An example of photographs preserved by the Society.

So you and I have been part of one of the most vigorous cultural movements in Australia this century. I hope we will keep it that way; or rather, let me say that I hope you, who will be active at these tasks much longer than I, will keep it that way. Good models for developing societies and museums in this way exist, I suggest, in North America and Scandinavia, so if you take in history on your overseas trip, make for California, Virginia, New York State, Ontario and Norway as well as the British Isles, for there you will see many successful institutions from which we can learn much.

But voluntarism does place heavy responsibility on the members of such societies. We can no longer hope to succeed

without effective policies on which to base development and without professional expertise. We cannot hope to attract financial support from local, state and federal governments without devising effective policies. We cannot achieve - or continue to achieve - unless we seek professional help for conservation, restoration and display. When we have gained such help - and we have that in the person of our Museum Director - then we need an effective administrative structure encouraging the participation of many. We are developing that in our Board of Directors, which will have to continue refining its procedures as the months and years go on.

Let me close with a note both of warning and of encouragement. Development is based on activity, which can easily create tensions. In my long years as professional historian, professional educator and professional academic administrator, most of the tensions I observed arose from professional differences and from the anxiety of persons in new professions to establish their credentials. Let us remember that the professionals whose advice is crucial for us - museum professionals, archivists, librarians - all belong to new professions with relatively few members. We need them; but they cannot do without us volunteers for very long; so we will all go from strength to strength if we achieve co-operation by being professional citizens, each recognizing that he or she cannot succeed without both seeking and accepting proper advice in season.



Charles Hardy's horse-team bringing logs to the mill

— An example of photographs collected by the Society