

AUGUST MENNEKE

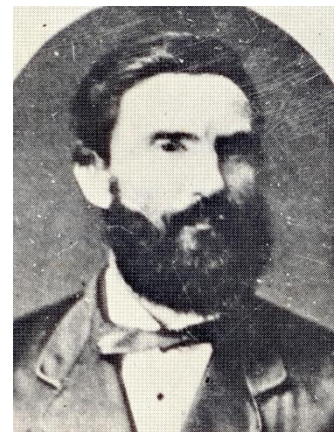
By Sherry Morris

Although they were not always treated as such, blacksmiths (or 'smithys') were a vital part of nineteenth century communities, especially on the frontier.

They were usually located adjoining or next to hotels, which also served as refreshment stations for coaches, bullock drivers and courier services. However, blacksmiths did far more than just manufacture horseshoes and nails and shodding horses (although all of these were very necessary and important tasks in a society so heavily reliant on horsepower). Blacksmiths also made bows for the bullock yokes, repaired chains, made crook wedges, put clips on wheel spokes and repaired ploughs and drays.

The most famous North Wagga blacksmith would have to be August Menneke. August was born in Bockenem in Germany in 1838 and immigrated to Australia about 1858. He married an Irish lady named Maria Mary Fisher at Reid Creek in Victoria in April 1867. The couple then moved to Wagga Wagga in New South Wales.

August (pictured right) had served his apprenticeship for the blacksmithing trade before he came to Wagga and established a blacksmith shop next to the Black Swan Hotel in North Wagga.¹ He remained there for several years and was well known for his skill and for the good service he provided for his many customers. He was particularly well known for the bells he made. Initially they were made from cross-cut saws which were heated to a dull red, moulded to shape and then given a thin brass coating. This coating, consisting of fine, sieved sand or ground glass mixed with brass, was spread over the red-hot bell with a wool pad. According to many 'old-timers' the brass coating gave the bell the melodious, penetrating sound which Dame Mary Gilmore so greatly admired.



Later, August Menneke refused to use inferior material and imported all his metal from Germany. By the 1870s, he had become famous for the goods he made for the bullock drivers especially for the bells which were being used on the 'leaders' of bullock teams and other stock so that they could be located easily. The bells were admired for their clear tenor quality and could be heard at a long distance. According to David Cassidy, writing in the *Wagga Wagga Daily Advertiser* in November 1947:

I have heard it at a distance of six miles (almost ten kilometres) while it was on a horses' neck on the plains in the Hay district, just before daylight when all nature was at rest.

These cattle and horse bells were used extensively throughout Australia.

August owned extensive river flat lands at North Wagga Wagga. He held four hundred acres in 1895 and he owned ten horses and forty head of cattle. He was a member of the committee formed to establish a school at North Wagga in November 1871 while a public meeting of

persons interested in the opening of a Good Templars Lodge at North Wagga was held at his residence in December 1894.

August was joined in the business by his son William (Bill) Menneke.²

August Menneke died on 11 May 1904 at the age of sixty-six, but he is still remembered throughout the Riverina as one of the finest blacksmiths and is one of North Wagga's favourite sons. His widow died on 28 June 1911 at the age of seventy-seven.

He was immortalised by Dame Mary Gilmore in the poem, *Bells and Bullocks*:

Once in a while we ask if he hears
The sound of Mennicke's (sic)bells,
Deep in the pits of his ancient ears
Repeating their olden spells.
'Mennicke's bells? ... Then he'll say,
'Never heard none like 'em;
Mennicke, he had the way;
No one else could strike 'em.

And by Australian author, Alan Marshall who wrote:

There's no sweeter music in the bush than the sound of bullock bells on a frosty night. There was a time when men of the outback took as much pride in their bells as a drover does in his dogs. I remember talking to an old bullock driver over a campfire in western N.S.W. He'd just belled his bullocks and it was noticed that the one he put on the straggler had a more penetrating note than the others. 'It's a Menneke bell', the bullocky said 'and no better bell has ever been made. You can hear it five miles away on a clear night'.

CHILDREN

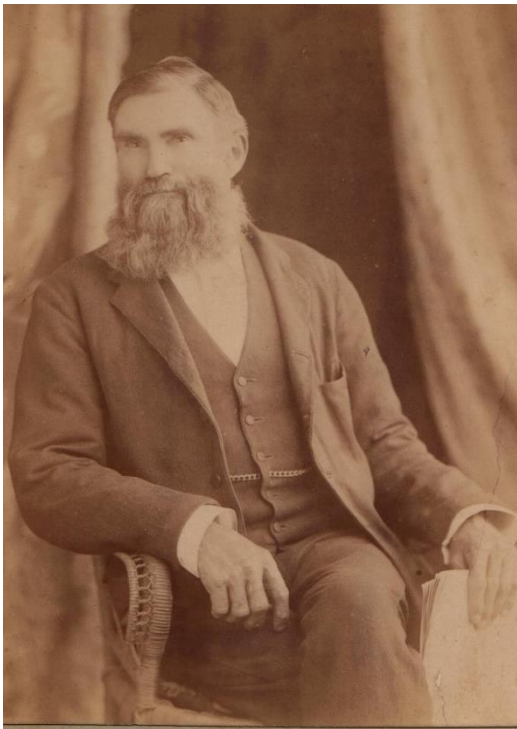
August and Maria had three sons, Fred, Bill and Albert, and a daughter Emily, all of whom attended the North Wagga Public School and all of his sons helped him in the blacksmith shop.

Albert August resided at Rutherglen in Victoria and was employed in the mines for some years. He returned to Wagga Wagga about July 1904 with his wife and two children to visit his brother, William. He died at North Wagga Wagga on 25 August 1904 at the age of twenty-nine.

Emily Margaret married Edward Pulver, the first treasurer of the North Wagga Progress Association when it was first formed in 1919. They lived in William Street, North Wagga. Emily died at the Wagga Wagga Base Hospital in August 1957 at the age of eighty-two and was buried on the Catholic Portion, Wagga Wagga Cemetery. The couple had four children: Albert (North Wagga Wagga); Royden Francis (Wagga Wagga); Claude (Tasmania) and Muriel (Mrs W. J. Thomson, Sydney).³

Frederick Henry ('Fred') was born at Wagga Wagga c.1870. He worked as a blacksmith and wheelwright for his father but then worked for the Wagga Experiment Farm for fifteen years. He was later a stock dealer. He played cricket and football for North Wagga 1888-1900. During World War I, he and William subscribed five guineas towards the Australia Day Fund for the return of the wounded in 1915; and on the War Chest Day Appeal bought two prime fat bullocks donated by H. T. Davidson. He was also a member of Manchester Unity Independent Order of Oddfellows. He married Ellen Mooney. They lived in Crampton Street, Wagga Wagga, in 1926. He died in Goulburn on 25 November 1939 at the age of seventy-two.⁴

William James ('Bill') was born c.1867. He worked as a blacksmith, at first helping his father but later he too became famous as a bellmaker. He played football for North Wagga in the 1880s. He died on 26 November 1930 at the age of sixty.



August Menneke on the left and his son, Bill Menneke on the right

Not only were Menneke bells immortalised by Dame Mary Gilmore and Allan Marshall. In 1992 August Menneke was honoured with the naming of Menneke Park, which is bordered by Pugsley Avenue and Gunn Drive in Estella. In addition, Menneke is still remembered throughout Wagga as one of the finest blacksmiths and legendary bell-maker.

¹ Section 205, North Wagga, 1875-76, owner/occupier of weatherboard cottage; Wagga Wagga Rate Books, 1775-76.

² Wagga Wagga Rate Books, 1903-1904.

³ *Daily Advertiser*, 11 March 1919, 27 August 1957.

⁴ *Daily Advertiser*, 19 July 1915, 9 October 1917.