



Historical Rambling

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THE NEWSLETTER OF THE
WENTWORTH HISTORICAL
SOCIETY

HOW TO CONTACT US...

Come to our meetings

Bi-monthly commencing
February on the 1st Thursday of
the month at 5.30 pm, at the
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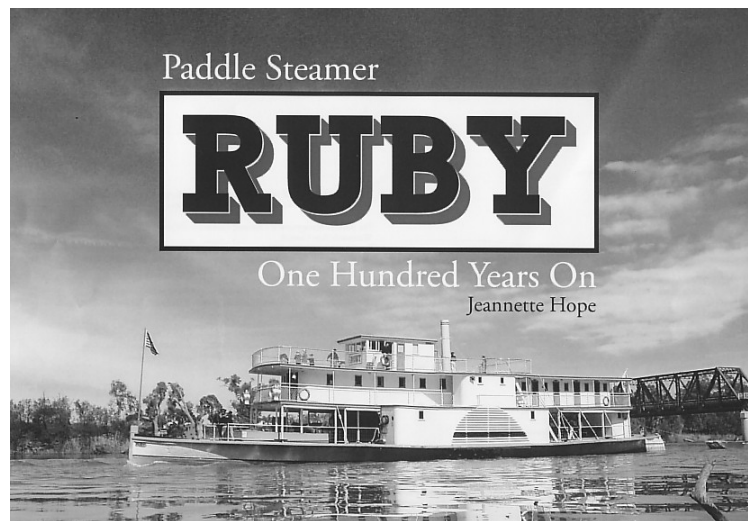
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PS Ruby's 100th Birthday



In 2007 Wentworth's own paddle steamer, *Ruby*, turns one hundred. While we don't know the exact date, the birthday celebrations are scheduled for 7-8 July, at the Junction Steam Rally. After the opening of the Rally on Saturday morning, *Ruby's* birthday cake will be cut.

Wentworth residents will know that the engine has already been steamed up—*Ruby's* whistle sounded through the town last month. But whether or not *Ruby* actually steams down to the Junction for the Rally is in the hands of the gods, in this case the bureaucrats who certify engines. But *Ruby* will be on show, her restoration completed after 12 years of hard work, at the Wentworth Wharf and/or the Junction.

Two special birthday events are planned. The first is the dedication of the Winnie Leach Galley. Winnie Leach (1908-2006) began working on the paddle steamers 1923 at age 15, first as stewardess and later as cook on the *Ruby*. She was guest of honour at the refloating of the *Ruby* on Australia Day 2002.

The second event is the launch of the *Ruby* history 'Paddle Steamer *Ruby* One Hundred Years On'. This book will be available for sale (\$25) at the Junction Rally, from various local outlets or through the website www.psruby.com. Profit from book sales goes towards the continued conservation and maintenance of the *Ruby*. For a taste of the book, turn over the page and read an extract, about *Ruby's* role in locking the Murray, and how not to go through a lock!

Ruby's Role in Locking the Murray

Ruby was the paddle steamer used as the model for the size of the Murray locks. There are two sizes in locks on the Murray. Those upstream of the Darling Junction are shorter than those between Blanchetown and Wentworth. The larger locks were adopted for the Lower Murray because of the greater volume of traffic below the Darling Junction in the 1920s. The locks had to be sufficient 'to accommodate one of the large steamers now in use, two of the large barges, probably abreast, at one lockage.' Captain Johnston, the American engineer contracted to design the system, based the size of the large lock, 56 x 275 feet (17 x 84.3 metres), on the dimensions of the PS *Ruby*, 130.9 x 18.8 x 6 feet (39.7 x 5.7 x 1.8 metres), towing barges such as the *Ukee* and *Emerald*, 130 x 26 x 6.5 feet (39.4 x 7.9 x 2.0 metres). These were considered the most suitable sized vessels for the Murray and Darling rivers.

Do You Always Go into Locks like This?

Although the lock size had been based on the dimensions of the *Ruby*, there was not a lot of leeway for the big vessels. Taking the large paddle steamers through a lock could be a challenge, due to cross-currents and cross-winds. William Drage described a touchy situation at Lock 9. After working on the Marion,

"They ... transferred me to the *Ruby*, as mate under a skipper who enjoyed his grog. The main stream of the Murray below Wacoal Junction was still running high and fast, so we had a few narrow squeaks as we ran between Morgan and Mildura. The skipper was in the habit of loading himself, as well as the boat, to full capacity, and when a few like-minded passengers were aboard then a jolly good time was had by all. When we left Wentworth one afternoon he continued grogging on with a few passengers until it was time for him to relieve me at 6 pm, by which time we were only a short distance above Lock No 9. I noticed that he was walking as though the *Ruby* was pitching through a heavy sea, and asked casually, 'Why don't you let me take her through the lock, skipper?'

He looked at me as though I'd insulted him and his forebears all the way back to Adam. With his arms waving as though he was handling a pair of signal flags he explained in highly-decorated terms that he was running boats on the river while I was still a twinkle in my daddy's eye, and that it would be a long time before any jumped-up little whippersnapper could teach him anything about taking a steamboat through a lock. I retreated gracefully, and went to my cabin for a wash and brush-up before dinner. The skipper had taken over the responsibility, but I couldn't help thinking about the terrific thrust of the current across the entrance to the lock. It was caused by the angle of the river at that point and the partial opening of the weir to allow the swollen river to pass through. For some reason these factors combined to cause a strong 'set off' of the current.

I put on my jacket and went along for my dinner in the saloon, which was situated on the second deck and in the forepart of the boat. It was a pleasant spot, with big windows giving a view of the river ahead and on both bows. I took a seat facing astern, and was enjoying my dinner when one of the passengers who could see ahead asked suddenly, 'Do you always go into locks like this?' I looked around, and saw that the *Ruby* was charging across the river in what was apparently an attempt to beat the cross-current, then swing her stern round against the current so that she would steady into position for dropping down into the lock. It was a manoeuvre worthy of a destroyer at high speed, but unfortunately the current was too strong and I could see she wasn't going to make it.



I dropped my knife and fork, rushed out of the saloon, and jumped down to the main deck. Just as my feet touched the deck the *Ruby* crashed her starboard side against the outside wall of the lock. She struck about eight feet from her stem, and was going at such a speed that she ripped along for another fifty feet. The deck timbers from for'ard to amidships groaned and cracked as they sprang up like a fence, and the whole boat shuddered as though she'd fall apart. A mooring line lay handy to me on the deck, and I picked up one end and looked for someone to catch it. The lockmaster, looking both amazed and aggrieved, was gazing down at us from the lock wall, but he grabbed the line smartly when I heaved it up to him. He made it fast round a bollard as I yelled to the engineer to put steam on the winch, and surprisingly enough the winch began to turn as soon as I opened the cock which let steam into the cylinder.

It clattered away merrily, and I whipped three or four turns of the mooring line around the spinning barrel. Gradually the line heaved the boat's head around, perhaps saving her from pivoting on the angle of the lock wall and smashing her stern against the weir. The poor old girl looked a wreck when we got her into the lock and had time to inspect the damage."

Historic Headstones in Wentworth Shire

Leanne Watmuff was interviewed last week (28 June) on ABC Local Radio about the Society's cemetery recording project. Here is a transcript of the interview. The project is going well, but more volunteers are needed. If you can come along and help, please contact Leanne for details of planned cemetery visits.

Armed with a digital camera and a sharp eye for historical detail, local librarian and historian Leanne Watmuff and the Wentworth Historical Society have been recording the historic headstones of Wentworth Cemetery and a number of Darling River stations. Leanne says there was an incredible range of materials used in the making of some of the oldest grave markers in the region.

"All sorts of materials have been known to be used on headstones in the past," she says. "Very early on there were lots of metal, wrought iron frames; I've even seen some old fence posts used, old iron gates sometimes, depending on where the grave is."

The study started off in Wentworth cemetery; it's close to hand, meaning that if something goes wrong with the photos, it's easy to fix.



Recording team at Wentworth Cemetery: LtoR: Jean Davidson, Elaine Grace, Jenny McLeod (Pres.), Patsy Crozier and Joyce Ablett.

"There's been a lot of to-ing and fro-ing, and assessing as to whether the photographs have been okay, whether or not we're going to be able to reproduce them, lots of discussion on whether or not we're capturing all the correct information - because we're actually doing an appraisal of the headstones and the graves as well. We want to be able to say what the condition of the graves and the headstones is as well."

The project is transcribing the writings on the headstones, to make sure that they'll have records into the future. Some of the markers are very weathered, with not much left of the writing on the stone. The project team uses photography techniques to bring out the writing in images, and other techniques like chalk rubbings as well. Transcribing the stones is a painstaking process: the graves must be restored to the exact condition they were in before the transcription. That means returning any flowers to where they were, and washing off any traces of chalk.

"We're very careful to return the grave to the condition that they were when we arrived," Leanne says. They're aiming to cover as many burial sites in the shire as possible - not only the town cemeteries, but the station cemeteries as well. "Quite a few of the bigger stations in the area have cemeteries and different people over the years have taken photographs," Leanne says. "We'd like to also go out and reassess them. There are also lone graves. Many of them are recorded in local newspapers, and the newspaper articles can be quite informative, telling you where the deceased person was found, who found them. Sometimes they might have a piece of paper identifying the name of the person, so you can get a name there, and of course there may be a request, there may be details about contacting the family."

The first burial in the Wentworth cemetery is that of a three year old child, who was buried in 1861.

"We don't know very much about that particular family, why they were in Wentworth, but his mother and father died in the 1880s and were buried with him. But there are a lot of older graves and headstones throughout the area. One of the ones that's quite interesting was a Margaret Cameron; she was the wife of John Cameron of Neilpo Station, and she's got quite a significant headstone. But on her headstone, it says she's the daughter of William McLean, so that gives you her maiden name. Her father was on Polio Station, and she was buried in 1857, at the age of 21."

The Two Frank Thrings (and the Rest)

Peter Fitzpatrick, Professor of Drama and Theatre Studies, Monash University, visited Wentworth this week to research a book on the two famous Frank Thrings, Frank Thring the film entrepreneur (1882-1936) and his son Frank Thring the actor (1926-1994). Frank the elder was born in Wentworth on 2 December 1882 and seems to have spent all his youth in this area. His son, Frank the actor, was born in Melbourne in 1926.

But there were even more Frank Thrings, as each generation had a Francis William, sometimes known as William Francis. The first Francis William, born 1812, migrated to SA with wife Elizabeth and four children in 1849. In 1856 he became the first licensee of the Middleton Hotel, SA. In 1858 he had an illegitimate son, William Frank Thring, to Catherine Canfill, possibly the nurse who came with the family to Australia. In 1859 or 1860, the Thrings moved to Wentworth, bringing the infant William Frank with them; his mother died in the Destitute Asylum Kapunda. Why did they come - perhaps the lure of opportunity in the new town of Wentworth, or perhaps to escape the ignominy of an illegitimate child?

Elizabeth Thring ran a boarding school in Wentworth with her daughter Emma, taught at the new National School, in 1861, then returned to her own school in 1862. When a new public school was built in 1870, it remained closed until Mr and Mrs Thring took up positions as teachers in 1871. The Thrings remained in Wentworth for the rest of their lives, and are buried in the Wentworth Cemetery.

Their eldest son, another Francis William (1837-1908) adds another Wentworth connection. He went on John McDouall Stuart's second and third (successful) attempts to cross the continent in 1861-63. In 1865 he took part in the NT explorations of John McKinley, the first lessee of Lake Victoria Station west of Wentworth. In 1863 Emma Thring married draper John Davie, who had a shop in Darling Street. John died in 1871, but Emma continued to run the business; in the late 1890s she went into partnership with the Price family, and in 1903 they jointly purchased the PS *Enterprise*.



Davie and Price Drapery Darling Street

The younger son, William Frank (b.1858) married Angelina McDonald in Wentworth in 1882. Angelina disappears from the record after giving birth and her husband remarried as a declared widower in 1902. Their only child was Frank Thring (b.1882), our film entrepreneur. Although his trade was boot-making, from an early age he toured the carnival circuit in SA, NSW, and W. Vic, performing conjuring tricks as the Great Dexter. In the early 1900s he toured western Tasmania performing and showing early films, under the name The World's Best Pictures. After running Kreitmayer's Waxworks Museum, Melbourne, he acquired a number of cinemas and established Electric Theatres Pty Ltd. He bought the Paramount Theatre in Melbourne in collaboration with Sir George Tallis of J.C. Williamsons.

As managing director of JCW, by 1921 he ran more than 80 cinemas in Victoria. When JCW and Electric Theatres amalgamated with Hoyt's 1921, Thring became managing director, opening Regent Theatres in five Australian capitals. With Stuart Doyle of Greater Union Theatres, he became the major film entrepreneur of his time. In 1930 he established EFTEE films, Australia's first major sound company and produced 9 feature films and more than 300 short films over 5 years. Had he not died suddenly in 1936 at age 53, Australian film history might have been a very different story.

Frank Thring the actor needs no introduction—he possessed one of the most recognisable voices and presences of all Australian actors. His appearances in Hollywood movies as a tyrant are well-known - in Ben Hur, King of Kings and The Vikings. He later became the most recognisable face of the Melbourne Theatre Co. as well as a TV personality. He did a number of ads including one for Remy Martin Brandy, one of his favourite tipples. He lived in sumptuous wealth in a house in Toorak painted entirely black inside, but died as a recluse in 1994.

Sources: Peter Fitzpatrick; Margaret Blacker 1995 Things about Thrings: an anthology of the Thring family, copy at Wentworth Library.

NOTE: Peter would be keen to hear any new information about the Thring's Wentworth connections: contact him by email: peter.fitzpatrick@arts.monash.edu.au, or mail: 2 Little Boundary St South Melbourne 3205.



Peter Fitzpatrick with Maud Crang and Jeannette Hope at Wentworth Library.