

# The Great Kooweerup Swamp

Bygone Days

by "Tarago"  
1923

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"Tarago" was Mr Joseph Kennedy, born in Melbourne about 1880. He came to the Swamp in 1892, and drove the first mail cart from Bunyip to Iona as a young boy. He later took over the "Bunyip and Garfield Express", until enlisting in the First World War. He had four children: Mortimer, Ann, Mary, and Jack.

After the war, he was associated with the RSL and the Agricultural Society and contributed this remarkable history of the draining of the Kooweerup Swamp to the *"Bunyip and Garfield Express"* in a series of 15 articles commencing 31 August 1923.

He died 8 years later, on 10 February 1932, aged 52.

The series on the Swamp was collated years later in 1979 by Mr Bill Parish.

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## **AUTHOR'S PREFACE**

The description of the Great Kooweerup Swamp as it was at the beginning, and in the years subsequent to the drainage scheme, may have some little interest for those who came in later years to comfortable homes and profitable farms, and to those who assisted in the battle with the forces of nature - to transform the vast tract of scrub and water into the prosperous farming district it is today. It may serve to revive memories of friendships and incidents, long-forgotten, of those hard but careless days.

The casual reader who finds these lines tedious or monotonous, or both, is asked to remember that the lives of those men and women who spent many of life's best years helping the State to reclaim a dismal morass from an unknown wilderness, led a tedious and monotonous existence, in a welter of mud and water.

- "*Tarago*" 1923

## **THE GREAT KOOWEERUP SWAMP**

### **1 Early Traditions**

The Great Kooweerup Swamp probably dates from the beginning of things - but rightly or wrongly the accepted theory is that it was a landlocked bay, long before Caesar crossed the Rubicon; but so far as the history of the white or the tradition of the black Australian goes, the Swamp was always a swamp.

To the black inhabitants of the northern and south-western territories it was of evil repute. Their tradition tells of a monster invariably called the Bunyip or Tooradin, which makes its home in the dense tea tree and watery wastes of the district.

This myth was neither flesh, fish nor fowl. It was described as a little of each, with nothing in common with any, for no living being, white or black, saw it walk, swim or fly. It simply existed - as a mighty roar at night, resembling that of a lion. How the blacks came to compare the sound with the roar of a lion is not explained, but it is sufficient to say that they gave the Swamp a wide berth.

A little of their superstition seems to have been transmitted to the early settlers around its margins - for even the white man held the watery wastes in awe. Stories of men being lost in the dense scrub and never being seen again, of mobs of cattle being swallowed in its morasses, were told with bated breath, but in all probability the men who were never seen again did not hanker after publicity, for reasons best known to themselves, and the mobs of cattle went the way of other bush cattle - roaming at large - in those bad old days.

Be that as it may, the Swamp was shunned first by the black, and then the white men, and remained shrouded in mystery till the late eighties of the last century.

Two enterprising Americans - messrs Chaffey Bros of Mildura fame - were the first to see the possibilities of a drainage scheme to reclaim the land, and make it fit for closer settlement, and they backed up their idea with an offer of £8 per acre for the area in its natural (or unnatural) state. The Swamp being the property of the State, no private offer could be entertained. Still, the offer brought home to the Government the possibilities of reclamation; but it was not till the crash of the Land Boom, followed by banks closing their doors, that the government, pressed by the demands of the unemployed, conceived the idea of establishing village settlements and the Swamp reclamation works as a means of relieving the distress of those who had lost their savings in the closing of the banks, or were thrown out of employment by the depression on the labour market.

When the Great Kooweerup drainage proposal was first put forward, the doubting Thomases of the day shook their heads dolefully and declared that drainage of the Swamp was an utter impossibility, abutting the assertion with the opinion that the whole of the area was fed by underground rivers and innumerable springs.

Others maintained that if the government did succeed in draining off the fresh water, it would merely make room for the salt water of Western Port Bay to take its place. Where the fresh water was to go in that case was not made clear.

An investigation of the levels proved a drainage scheme to be feasible - providing there were no subterranean sources of supply, and of these there were no indications as far as could be judged. So, in the face of considerable opposition, the Departmental draughtsmen, under the late Mr Catani, Engineer for Roads and Bridges, were allotted the task of drawing up a scheme of drainage.

Some idea of the magnitude of this work may be gleaned when we remember that the area to be dealt with covered some 250 square miles of unexplored country, fed by three rivers and a score of creeks which lost their channels in the margins of the Swamp and distributed their waters over 85,000 acres of timbered scrub and jungle - making it inaccessible terrain at best since time immemorial, to say nothing of possible unknown sources of supply.

Nevertheless, a scheme was draughted, including 54 miles of main drains, intersected by hundreds of subsidiary drains to cope with the gigantic task. However, the scheme had to be greatly modified when tenders for the work were later found to be higher than government estimates.

Had the original scheme been adhered to, drainage of the Swamp would have been a success from inception; but 30 years later in 1923, there were still portions undrained - but that is another story.

## 2 The Commencement

The first plans for the drainage of the Swamp provided for three main drains of the same dimensions as the one that was later substituted. One was to take a course along the eastern margin, tapping the waters of the King Parrot Creek, the overflow of the Lang Lang River, and to act as an outlet for the innumerable subsidiary drains on the herringbone system. The central or present main drain was designed originally to carry the waters of the Bunyip and Tarago Rivers only, whilst a third skirted the western edge - cutting off the flow from the Ararat and other creeks. It was also to carry a system of subsidiary drains similar to the eastern channel. These plans were found to be too expensive to carry into operation and were withdrawn and modified into one main drain carrying the whole subsidiary system, the waters of the Bunyip, Tarago and Lang Lang Rivers, supplemented by numerous creeks that the drain services today. To 1923, the cost runs well into half a million sterling, and after thirty years of endeavour the Swamp is not completely drained.

After the modification of plans, the first section was let to Mr William Buckley at the Kooweerup end in 1890, and the Victorian government embarked on one of the greatest gambles it had ever undertaken. Those who opposed the scheme, and they were many, typified it as "throwing money into a ditch". Literally, it looked like it! But opposition is a fine thing in the right place, and the Kooweerup drainage scheme had to succeed to justify itself. So, through many phases, and years of labour, the work was carried on till the summer of 1894, when the last shot demolished the last obstruction holding back the flood and the waters of the Bunyip and Tarago Rivers - and channelled an uninterrupted course to the sea.

As already stated, Mr Buckley was the first contractor. His section ran from the mouth of the canal to the point where the Kooweerup-Tooradin road bridge now crosses the drain, a distance of two miles. Messrs Lealy & Rundle secured the next section, ending at the four mile, and subsequently carried on with the other sections till Mr Bloomfield took over. The latter was the third and last contractor, and carried the work to the 15 mile bridge.

It was during this time that the famous Butty gang system was introduced into Victoria. Under this system, a group of men were given a claim, or series of claims, to take out, and payment was equally divided between them. This caused considerable dissatisfaction, as some of the workers were physically stronger and more proficient at the work than others, and did more than their share of the excavation. A dispute arose when the men reached the 15 mile, and this ended in the government having to take over and complete the work.

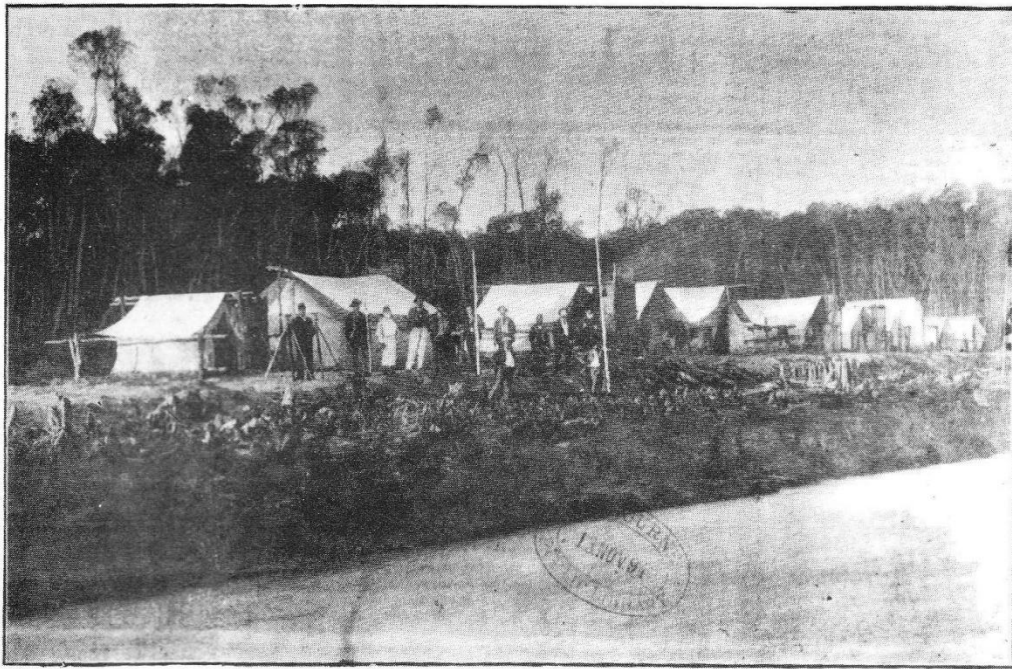
With the opening of the first contract, the government found a loophole in the unemployment difficulty, and hundreds of men were sent up from the city. Many came, saw and were conquered; and who can blame them? Here, men were working in a mud ditch - up to their waists in a sea of desolation! Even the prospect of tramping back to Melbourne with empty pockets and a dismal, workless future did not tempt them to undertake the work.

Others stayed long enough to get a few pounds together and moved to more congenial work and surroundings; but, of those who stayed to see the work completed from beginning to end there were very few. The writer knows but two in the district at the present time: these are messrs G Kraft and A Shandley. Mr Dave Fitzgerald, who left the district some years back, and the late Mr John Bockholt also went through the ordeal.

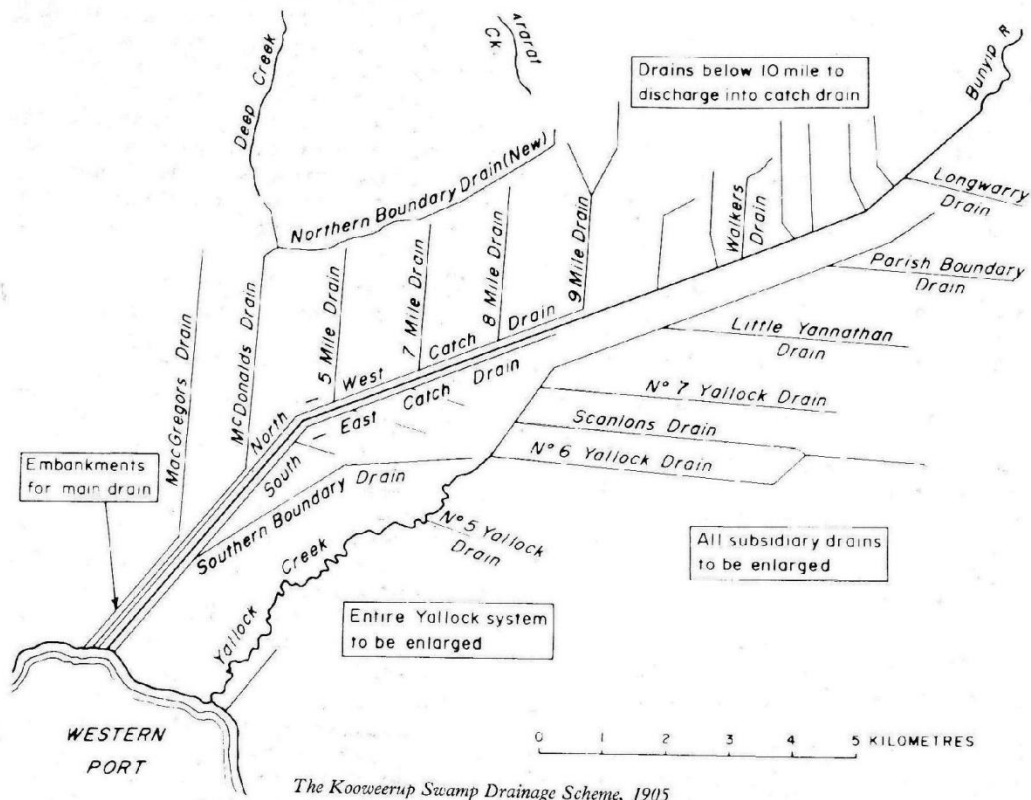
In the early days "The Kooweerup Settler" had come into being, but it is doubtful if the government had any serious intention at that time of settling the workers on the land. In any case, it was not until two years later that portions of the Swamp were sufficiently drained to allow the survey of blocks to be undertaken.

So, the men delved in the water and clay for a mere existence, coming out only to cook their scanty meals and sleep in their tents on the rocking mud banks. It goes without saying that the usual construction works boarding-house keeper was with them early. But many preferred to "do" for themselves, rather than be subjected to the tender ministrations of Mrs Boarding-House keeper. But, men are indifferent cooks, and their fare never varied from the inevitable "tin dog" and "salt horse". Still, there were said to be exceptions. One muckshifter, reportedly famed for his "plum duff", had his shining example held before the boarding-house keepers by their victims. One lady, tired of hearing the praises of her rival in the culinary art, approached him with sarcasm in her voice: "Oh, Mr Blank", she said with a disarming smile, "my boarders tell me you make a beautifully light plum pudding, and they are always advising me to come to you for the recipe. I don't suppose you would mind telling me how I can make it so light?" "No, not at all", he replied after some hesitation: "Yer see, all yer got to do is to take the corks out of the old man's beer, chop 'em up fine, and mix 'em in your duff. If yer put in enough, yer boarders'll be able to float to work!" The next time a boarder mentioned that "duff" to Mrs Boarding-House, she made him feel so lightheaded that he needed the full weight of her pudding under his waistcoat to stay on his feet!

As the channel progressed towards the centre of the swamp, the matter of transport of supplies became increasingly difficult. Everything had to be carried along the mud banks on either side. These grey quagmires were the only tracks above water level, and could only be traversed by means of planks. Therefore, they may more easily be imagined than described. Not only the necessities of life were brought over these tracks, but firewood for cooking and other purposes had to be carried to the camps. In the lower reaches, the Swamp itself was only covered by light scrub and reeds.



Livingstone's Survey Camp, Kooweerup Swamp, 1894  
 Latrobe Collection, State Library of Victoria





### 3 The Men Who Blazed The Track

At this stage, the history would not be complete without some reference to the men who blazed the track. Never in the history of Victoria was the surveying branch of Departmental work faced with such a problem: under ordinary conditions the surveyor has innumerable difficulties and discomforts to contend with, but what can be said of men set the task of bisecting and intersecting an unknown watery wilderness of 250 square miles into a habitable district?

How well they did work, surmounting all the difficulties and dangers to be contended with, is written in the miles of roads and drains, and the chessboard pattern of farms which make the district what it is today. We can imagine what they had to contend with. Mr Livingstone had charge of this Department, and flat-bottomed boats were largely used where conditions were suitable, but in the heavily-timbered portions of the Swamp this method could not be employed, and timber had to be felled in order to afford a definite footing above water level. Many of the levels were taken with the men standing up to their armpits in the water, and no man could say when he ventured out in the morning that he was sure of returning in the evening. Yet, with all the forces of nature against them, they had the work so well advanced in 1893 that the government was enabled to hold its first land sale and allot blocks to a section of settlers.

The first blocks were thrown open to ballot along that section of the main drain between the 15-41 and the junction of 16-24 bridges. The ballot simply consisted of placing the applicants' names in one hat and the numbers of the blocks in another. This was a memorable day in the annals of the Swamp.

Mr Williams Forsythe's name was the first out of the hat, and he secured block number one situated on the south side of the main drain eight chains below the junction bridge - Mr P Forbes having since purchased this property from the original owner-settler at £80 an acre.

Shortly after the first ballot, the government held its first and only sale of Swamp land. The section put under the hammer was an area of forty chains by 27 chains along the western side of the Bunyip Road. This area was surveyed into 2.5 acre township allotments, abutted by eight acre blocks. The upset price was £8 and £5, respectively. The purchasers of these original lots were: messrs H Hart ten acres; W Healy 15 acres; W Bloomfield 10 acres; P Cowley 7.5 acres.

This sale brought such a storm of protest from the original settlers that the Government never repeated it. Still, it is true that four other persons acquired blocks later under the freehold clause. They were: Mrs Devanny and messrs J Cookson, R Power and W Dethmore. Deputations of the settlers went to the minister of lands protesting against public disposal of any of the Swamp area. They maintained that it was a breach of faith, inasmuch as the government had promised them that, on reclamation of the Swamp, the land would be allotted to those who had helped drain it. The conditions under which they worked carried some weight in establishing their claim, since they were only allowed to earn £5 per month whilst working the drains - and the rest of the period they were compelled to devote to clearing the land.

Thus it was they defended themselves from being exploited by the Government and the general public, for no further land sales were ever held, otherwise the rich swamplands would have fallen into the hands of land speculators years ago.

The first weatherboard dwellings to be erected were those of messrs Forsythe on the main drain and Mr Healy on the Bunyip drain. Neither of them stand today, and, by a strange coincidence, both were sold for removal just a few years prior.

At a time when the ordinary settler had to content himself, and sometimes a wife and large family, in a tent or a bag humpy, these buildings - hardwood shells of four rooms were looked upon as so much "swank", and the owners were frequently asked if they intended to take in boarders. By comparison, they were mansions to the ordinary type of habitation which sheltered the struggling families.

Only on odd blocks could anything in the shape of substantial building be attempted, and the settlers fulfilled their residential clause by residing on the mud bank apposite their holding - or as near as they could get to it.

Everything had a habit of disappearing out of sight. Old hands could never agree to the depth of mud and peat. Bill used to relate how he found Paddy's hat on the mud bank - and on picking it up, saw Paddy's head under it. He gave Paddy a lecture for being so foolish as to step off the planking. Paddy defended himself by replying that Bob had disappeared into the mud, and he had only got down to give Bob a hold. If this is an exaggeration, it is nevertheless a fact that on the driest of the blocks an ordinary man would sink to the waist, where his progress was only then arrested by tangled masses of tea tree roots or a submerged log. On the drain bank, to step off meant to go to the bottom, and up to that time nobody ever found it - nor did they want to!

#### 4 Development

There was no system of standardisation in the dwellings built by early settlers of the swamp. Each man took whatever material came handiest and fashioned it to his own liking. Many had no definite plan in mind when they started, and finished still more indefinite. Others ran out of material, and continued with substitutes. Flattened-out kerosene tins and bagging were the most favoured of these, the latter being in great demand for windows and doors. There was no lack of variation in the shape, size and construction of buildings, and the visitor of these days never knew what to expect next. Nevertheless, he always found the doors open to him, and the best in the house placed at his disposal. No, there was no class distinction or pettiness about the early settler.

The business establishments were invariably built of hessian, on the banks of the drain, and consisted of various stores, a butcher's shop and a bakery. Messrs John Kavanagh and Thos Strafford were the principal storekeepers, and messrs A Shandley and W Fowell kept the butchery and bakery respectively. The two business centres at the time were the survey camp - a collection of tents - one of which was used as a pay office near the site of the Pioneers' Hall and the junction bridge, where all roads met. It was here, later, that Mr Alex Leithead built a fine general store. Supplies were floated down the Bunyip drain in a flat-bottomed boat which was not always easy to navigate. Mr A Shandley was captain of this enterprise, and he also constituted the crew. Consequently, the reader will not be surprised to learn that the cargo consisting of meat, flour and other commodities arrived at its destination in one instance without the craft, and its captain indicating that there had been a wreck in the upper reaches of the drain.

Individual supplies were carried over a corduroy track which crossed the site of the present Bunyip Showground. As this track advanced into the Swamp, it submerged under three to four feet of water, and it need hardly be mentioned that the carrier had to exercise a certain amount of judgement to find it - especially if nightfall overtook him. Those were the days before the early closing. Under such conditions it is not to be wondered at that complaints and grievances were numerous. The wonder is that the men endured this for a pittance of 25 shillings a week and that hard-earned in mud and water.

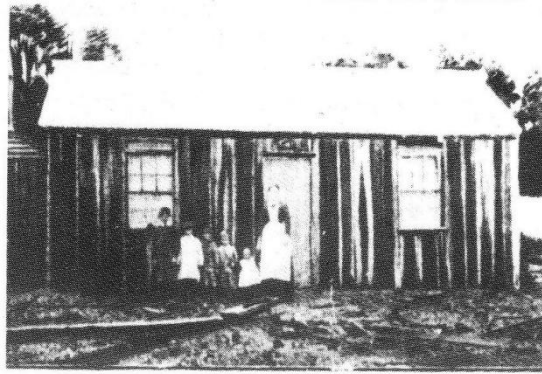
Mr Catani's visits were always eagerly awaited, and it was a common sight to see his sturdy figure surrounded by a crowd of angry settlers, gesticulating and yelling at him in plain Australian what they thought of Mr Catani and his swamp! During these interviews the engineer remained bland and smiling and "turned away wrath" with his soft Italian voice and accent. It was on one of these occasions that an irate settler thrust a three foot eel under his nose remarking with biting sarcasm "Call th' land reclaimed do yer! Why dammit man, I put me foot on this thing when I got outer bed this morning!" Mr Catani smiled serenely with a shrug of the shoulders and with an upward lift of the palms of his hands replied, "Vell ve gif vork, ve gif you lan' an' ve gif you feesh to eat; vat more do you men vant?" These situations required tactful handling, and a more hasty man than Mr Catani would have had the swamp in a state of revolt within a week.

The engineer had a good insight into human nature and knew his men. It was he who organised them into a Co-operative company in Gippsland. This was the first great alleviation to the bad

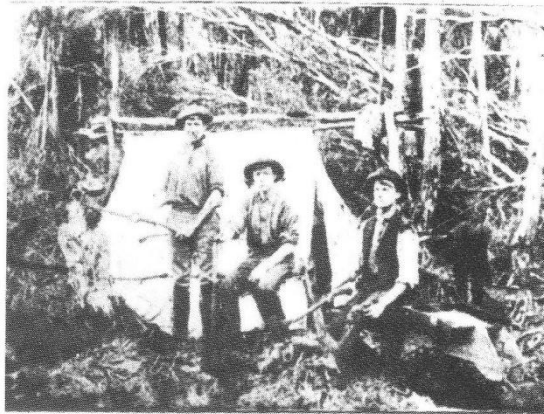
roads. Up to that time it was impossible for any kind of wheeled vehicle to venture into the Swamp, and the idea of a wooden tramway - from Bunyip to a point below where the Iona State School now stands - was conceived. Shares at £1 each were issued and the line laid by the settlers themselves. This tramway played a very important part in the early development of the Swamp.

It was now possible for the settlers to obtain their supplies with a fair amount of certainty and the settlement was connected by a direct route to the Bunyip Railway Station and town. Mr Frank Fenslau was the first driver, and although he and the "Grey Mare" were subjected to many pests, they played a more important part in the history of the district than most people realised. The fare charged for the trip was 3 pence, which was cheap when compared with the railway tariff of the present day, and, if the passengers had to work their passage by helping the driver replace the trolley on the line they paid it cheerfully and treated him to a little refreshment in their gratitude - having reached their destination safely. The driver was postman, newsagent, errand boy, and general rouseabout for the settlement. He required a head as long as the Prime Minister's and a suit full of big pockets; he was also required to understand several languages, for those occasions when he forgot things.

The tram track ran along the north bank of the main drain, thence along the Bunyip drain to the south side of the Bunyip station. It was on this tramway that the first load of seed potatoes came to the swamp - a Government consignment of 3 tons - for distribution amongst the settlers. That load would not be sufficient seed for the smallest grower these days, but potatoes were then reckoned by the bag, not by the ton.



*Swamp Settlers House*  
*Latrobe Collection State Library of Victoria*



*Scrub Cutting on the Kooweerup Swamp, 1894*  
*Latrobe Collection State Library of Victoria*

## 5 Getting Established

After completion of the tramway, a co-operative store was established. In this enterprise, each individual settler was a shareholder. The business premises of Mr J Kavanagh, who had previously conducted a grocer's store at the 15 mile, was taken over and Mr WHR Forsythe Junior placed in charge. This store was on a portion of the property occupied now (1923) by Mr D Field. The venture was never a success, however, and, after trying to compete under various managers with outside firms delivering trolley loads of goods at the survey camp, was finally closed.

It was in connection with this business that the first Post Office was opened, and Mr John Wheels acted as the pioneer Post-Master. Like many other public servants, Mr Wheels had a lot to put up with, but he continued to give his services to the ungrateful public until a postal inspector arrived to investigate one complaint.

The pompous individual strode into the store and placed a sheaf of correspondence in front of the harassed P-M, with the curt request: "Please explain!" Mr Wheels glanced through the letters, offering only the explanation: "Well, I'll be damned!" "You will be, unless you can offer a better explanation than that!" replied the serious knight of the red tape. "This is a serious - most serious - matter within our Department and unless the administration of such an important public office is handled more competently, we will have to take the Post Office away from you."

Mr Wheels took some time to digest what had been said, and, recovering his breath with a gasp, responded somewhat heatedly: "Oh, yer will, will yer?", and, clapping a kerosene case containing half a dozen letters on the counter, continued: "Yer better take the damn thing with yer now: I'll save yer another trip!" Next morning the mailman found his bag hanging on a nail outside the door, with a polite note attached, requesting him to take it away - and never bring it back!

So, the postal service was interrupted for a time, until after considerable correspondence and documents, Mrs John Bell was prevailed upon to take over "the administration of this important public office", and it might be added that the Department saw to it that a proper alphabetical pigeon-holed box was forwarded for the sorting of the mail.

The Red Letter Day of the settlement at this time was the fortnightly payday. Mr Glowser, the Government's paymaster, arrived with unfailing regularity with the settlers' hard earnings. The amount varied, but the average distributed on a payday was between £300 and £400. This amount was subject to various items debited against the settler, and it was very rarely that he received the full £5 for his month's work. Also, it was not an uncommon thing for him to find his scanty earnings were eaten up in this way - and he had to carry on without money on credit till the next pay. Is it any wonder that potatoes became the staple crop of the Swamp?

By this time, some little progress had been made with the clearing, but it was heartbreaking work, and it was impossible to clear an area large enough for cultivation purposes beyond mere garden plots. An acre of scrub was felled and burnt off, then sowed with grass seed obtained from the Government. This was left, pending the time the land would become sufficiently solid to carry a domestic cow. Then paddocks were fenced in by a solid wall of felled tea tree - piled up 6 or 7 feet high and 8 to 10 feet wide at the base. By this means, a considerable portion of the timber was got rid of; but it was a terrible nuisance to the settlement in later years when bushfires swept through it from end to end.

When the ground had consolidated sufficiently, the Government made advances for the purchase of cows, pigs, etc., and, with the coming of "Strawberry" and "Dennis", the Kooweerup settler ceased to be, for he had moved up to the "cocky" class. One well-known character would never lay claim to that title, however, maintaining that he was merely a "ground parakeet".

The price and standard of cattle in those days were very different to those of the present time. One and a half pounds was about the price paid for a good milker, and if the animal failed to come up to expectations, it was always put down to inexperience in the art of milking. As might be expected, many of these "milkers" foisted on the purchaser were duds. He rarely complained, being strong in the knowledge that he could easily find someone more ignorant than himself, one with whom he could trade the beast for half a ton of spuds or some equivalent.

"Ye spuds" were good currency in those days. These trades did not lend towards the harmony of the settlement, and "rotten spuds" and equally "rotten cows" - the latter term usually applied to the settlers who traded them, as well as to the animals - were the subject of many heated arguments. Pioneers would recollect the indignation of the lady when she found that the rooster traded to her had "big feet" - and Mr Peter Grumich attending his first cow with castor oil when the animal was sick.

The first horse brought to the settlement was purchased by Mr W Bloomfield at a cost of £1, and was offered as a prize for The Old Buffers Race at the first sports meeting. The animal was won by Mr John Roffey and acknowledged as an acquisition to the district. There have been many horses since, at big prices, but none ever had the stance or stamina of "Duke".

## 6 The First Flood

In time, all had a "home", more or less weatherproof and on a block, or perched on the mud bank. For the most part; the houses were square or oblong-shaped, partitioned into rooms with bagging - the usual bush chimneys at the end, serving as a smoke distributor rather than a smoke conductor; the wind, coming in the top, carried the smoke through the dwelling until it found a outlet under the eaves and the cracks in the walls. The furniture of the "front room" usually consisted of a "table" constructed of four stakes driven into the earthen floor and covered with box lids, while the seating accommodation was provided for with boxes, a rough stool or two, and a bench along the back wall. The constant tramping of the earth floor caused it to subside, in some instances from 18 inches to 2 feet, thus forming a basin into which the water drained in wet weather, to the discomfort of the family. They were poor homes at best, those humble dwellings, but many a successful farmer looks back on those days with a strange longing, for he had little to gain and less to lose! Responsibility rested lightly on his shoulders.

In the spring of 1893, a few months after the first blocks were taken up, a flood was experienced. It only needed a rise of 18 inches in the Bunyip river at that time to put the partly reclaimed land back to its natural state. There was little to lose on the holdings, but it had a disheartening effect on the settler to see his future home under three or four feet of water, and gave rise to doubt as to whether the Kooweerup Swamp could ever be drained. On the other hand, it replenished the settlers' stock of fish in the potholes and creeks on his property. Several of the freeholders threatened to throw up their allotments and apply for a return of their money through courts of law - maintaining that the government had sold them land falsely described as "reclaimed".

Between the freeholders and the settlers, Mr Catani had anything but a pleasant time during the weeks that followed, for the whole settlement was incensed against him! Nobody wanted land that was in the habit of turning itself into water, and the engineer was held responsible for the transformation. With his tact, he weathered the storm, but not until he prevailed on Mr G Prendergast, MP, to accompany him and address a few well-chosen remarks on the floods, and other matters, at the Junction. It was fortunate for the Government that the same body of water did not sweep the settlement on that occasion as that which swept the whole area some years later. Not only would the settlement have been obliterated, but terrible wounds of damage would have been done to the unfinished drainage works.

Meanwhile, an experimental farm, under Mr J Pincott, was giving a demonstration of what the land could grow and how it would grow it. Vegetables of every description were grown to giant proportions. One cabbage which the writer saw measured 3 feet across the heart whilst growing. Other varieties of garden produce were in like proportions. Mr 'Baulty' Ryan who lived next to the farm, was wont to complain that after losing his cow for 3 days, he found that she had eaten her way into one of Pincotts turnips - and it was only Strafford pigs coming out of the turnip patch that gave him an idea as to the whereabouts of the missing animal! That's as it may be, but what would the Iona potato-grower of today think of a sample 5 3/4 pounds in weight! No, it was not a pumpkin, it was a genuine "Brown River" potato.

About this time, the first serious attempt was made to form a road in the Swamp. The mud bank along the Bunyip drain was levelled off and corduroyed. It cannot be said that the attempt was successful, but it served. With the advent of the road came the first opposition to the Co-operative Tramway Company. Mr WG Kraft, who was one of the few who worked continuously through all stages of the drain from its commencement, set up as a carrier between Bunyip and the Junction. His was the first wheeled vehicle owned on the Swamp, if we exclude



wheelbarrows, and was of more importance than the motor cars that scurry through it today. Gippsland has ever been notorious for its bad roads, but it is doubtful if the province, before or since, possessed a "road" that could compare with the Bunyip drain bank for unmitigated badness. Pedestrians at that time balanced themselves on the tram rails and stepped out along the 3 inch footway for their destination. Residents of the Swamp soon became adept at the art - so much so that a local wit predicted that future natives of the district would all be pigeon-toed and web-footed! But, the tram rail offered the only solid footing amid a sea of mud two or three feet deep in places, so it is not surprising that it became a common footpath.

That area bounded on the east by the main drain and on the north by the railway line was still under water, for as yet the main drain was not cut through to the Bunyip River which entered into the Swamp at the railway bridge. Water flowed over the eastern bank of the Bunyip drain in a continual cascade along its entire length, and was dammed back by the high mud bank on the western side - then was carried south into the last-completed section of the main drain.

At that period, the Bunyip drain was deeper and wider than it is at the present time, for, apart from silting up the bottom and the crumbling of its banks; it must be remembered that the land along its course has subsided fully three feet. The primary object of this channel was to reduce the depth of water on the course of the main drain, and having served its purpose, no further money was spent on it.

## 7 The First Fire

Roughly translated, the name "Kooweerup" means 'home of the fish'. Despite his superstition and fear of the Bunyip, the native evidently ventured close enough to gain some local knowledge of the Swamp; hence the name. Beyond doubt, it was the home of the blackfish.

On the Sunday following the tapping of the Bunyip River with the main drain, water ceased to flow over that section east of the Bunyip drain. Throughout the whole area, blackfish were left stranded in shallow pools and watercourses, literally in layers, and could be scooped out by the bucketful. Soon this knowledge became public, and people came from all points of the compass, and for some months the chief industry was fishing. Hundreds of boxes were conveyed to the metropolis and to other parts of Victoria. Many local residents became so tired of this diet that they could hardly endure the smell of the fish, and the place reeked of it - alive and dead.

Notwithstanding this heavy toll, the deeper creeks and holes supplied many large hauls of fish for years afterwards. The last one caught in the Bunyip drain was a fine specimen weighing 2 3/4 pounds. It was taken in 1920 - 26 years after the Bunyip River ceased to flow in that channel!

Now that the water was diverted from this portion, survey lines were run through, and the area was cut into five one-acre blocks. It was apparently the government's intention to make a village settlement out of it. Other settlements of this class which had been established previously on poor country turned out to be failures, and it was now proposed to remove these to the rich swamp land - to give them an opportunity of relieving their failure. Mr T Chippendale, Senior Crown Lands Bailiff, was placed in charge.

This movement was destined not to succeed. Apart from any other reason, many settlers who had been delving in the bush for the past two years to carve out a home were in no heart to tackle the impenetrable Kooweerup - which at the time was one of the toughest propositions a man undertook to clear. It was one of these 5 acre settlers who posed the conundrum: "Why is the back of my block like the South Pole?" His friend shook his head and gave it up. "Well", was the reply, "because nobody has ever found it, and I'm darned if anyone will."

During the next few months, many of the new men were offering to transfer their allotments to any person who would advance them a few shillings over and above the railway fare to Melbourne. But as most of the residents had all the property they could manage, the blocks had to be abandoned. Those who persevered had no cause to regret their coming to the Kooweerup.

The spring of 1893 was a moist one, and if Nature erred in the bounty of water she poured over the settlement, she equalised matters by making the spring of 1894 an exceptionally dry one and - with the aid of fire and fiend - scourged it with fire. Almost from inception, one particular person had been saving on labour and courting disaster - and in November that year the first bushfire broke out on the Swamp. Oily black clouds, shot through with red tongues of flame, rolled down on the settlement like a pall of doom.

The bright day suddenly turned to twilight - and the roar and crackle of fire could be heard for miles. Business places in Bunyip were compelled to light their lamps, and the fate of the settlement seemed to be sealed. A change of wind fortunately carried the fire away from the settlement in a north-easterly direction, and only the dwelling of Mr W Healy lay in its path.

Gangs of men jumped into the Bunyip drain and waded to the assistance of this settler, and, with an unlimited supply of water, managed to save the dwelling. But the outbuildings, together with the pigs and poultry, were destroyed. This was the Swamp's first experience of a bushfire, but unfortunately it was not the last.

It was on the same day that Mr P Grummish carted his first consignment of five bags of potatoes for Melbourne - one of the first loadings to leave the Bunyip station.

Up to this time, nothing in the way of recreation had been attempted, and a committee was appointed to draw up a programme for the original St Patrick's day sports. Considerable difficulty was experienced in settling on the matter of a ground, which is not to be wondered at, since there was not sufficient space cleared in the whole area to swing the proverbial cat. Finally, the section of Main Street Bunyip between the Gippsland Hotel and the Mechanics' Hall was decided on as the recreation ground.

The principal event of the day was a tug-of-war between the Swampies and the Middleton Bros. In the uproar that followed, the result of the event was lost, and the only thing that was clear about it is that it resulted in a number of other events that were not on the programme! However, everyone had an enjoyable day's sport, and it was decided to make the gathering an annual event.

A portion of the flat near Bunyip Road was pegged out, and, during the next 12 months, "working bees" were organised to clear it. By the end of the year, an oblong strip of something over 2 acres was cleared and proclaimed a recreation ground.

The district has had many gatherings under more up-to-date arrangements since then, but it has had nothing that could approach those old gatherings for variety and entertainment.

## 8 Politics

Who, among the old, would have forgotten the first parliamentary election? If it was only for the night walks through oceans of mud to hear the contesting candidates, many would remember it; but there are many memories.

Dr LL Smith was the retiring member, and he was opposed by messrs Downward and Bourke. The Swamp had not then risen to the dignity of possessing a public, or any other kind, of hall. This difficulty was overcome by Mr John Kavanagh allowing the use of his storeroom, attached to the grocer's shop, for entertainments, meetings and the like.

It was here the electors foregathered to hear the views of the candidates. The late Dr LL Smith had an impediment in his speech, and on the night he addressed the settlers it was most pronounced as he attempted to tell them something about the "Muwwie Valley" (Murray Valley).

There is nothing that irritates a public speaker more than continual interjection - and the doctor was no exception to the rule. He continued for a while, then finally lost his temper and told his audience that he "could buy any of their votes for a pint of beer". As might be expected, the meeting broke up in great disorder, and that remark subsequently cost him his seat in parliament - after many years of representation.

That election day was one of the most crowded in the history of Bunyip. The settlers turned out to a man to defeat the retiring candidate.

Agitators addressed the crowd from "points of vantage", and when the audience tired of the address, they kicked the points of vantage away and had peace until another had time to mend them and give his version of the political situation. Little differences of opinion were continually cropping up and were settled on the side by "mutual agreement". Towards evening, a general "mutual agreement" took place and brought the festivities to a close. Everyone went home happy in the knowledge that Mr Downward had beaten Dr LL Smith by three votes.

But the end was not yet. The doctor was not a man to take things lying down, and he undertook to prove that at least three of Mr Downward's votes were informal. After a lapse of time, the hoping candidate satisfied the authorities that three of Mr Downward's votes were informal, and another election was organised.

To compare the second election with the first would be to compare a Sunday school picnic to a Donnybrook Fair, and to many electors there had only been one election day - the first. The issue was now between two candidates, and Mr Downward won by a substantial majority. After representing his constituency for a number of years, we have lost touch with him following a redistribution of seats. Although he has been continuously in parliament ever since, Mr Downward can attribute his success as a politician to the settlers of the Kooweerup Swamp, and Dr LL Smith's unlucky utterance.

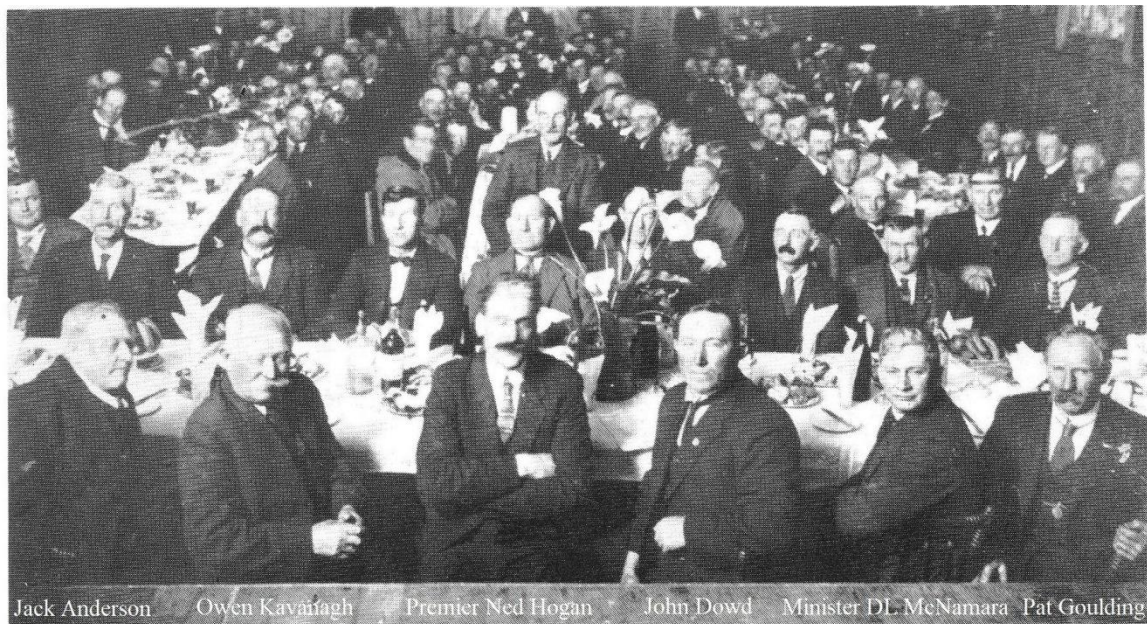
For a long time the settlement solved the lack of accommodation with Mr Kavanagh's storeroom, and, for the want of something better, entertainments were still held there.

Mr George Witham now stepped into the act by purchasing a building for removal and erecting it as a hall on his block below the Junction Bridge. This hall was of no great pretention, but it was a

vast improvement on the old order of things. Regular entertainment was now organised, and a nigger minstrel troop under the name of "Magpies" sprang into being. Among the members of this troop were: messrs G Penham, P Carey, T Gallick, J Wheels, S Gee, R Shandley, A & G Leithhead, G West, and others whom memory fails to recall. Mr Frank Fenslau acted as general manager and M-C at the inevitable dance that followed each entertainment. There was never a worthy cause, whether family misfortune or funds required for some public movement, that did not benefit by the existence of the Magpies. One familiar figure at these charitable entertainments who has passed beyond our ken, was the late Mr John Plant who was always foremost in these movements.

There was no doubt about the popularity of these minstrel entertainments, for crowded houses were the order of the day. Years after the troop had gone out of existence, its songs were still popular. Who could forget Phil Carey's "Old Mother McGrath", or George West's "Buttercups and Daisies"?

Mr S Gee, who was a comedian of no mean pretensions, was always the star turn of the evening, and his song "The Talkative Man from Kooweerup" never failed to bring the house down. During its reign, the troop gave entertainments in several towns along the railway line, but with the passing of Witham Hall, it passed into the limbo of forgotten things.



## 9 First Public Building

After the success of Witham's Hall, it was to be expected that some movement would be started to erect a public hall, and after the usual meetings and discussion, the present Pioneers' Hall was started on the corner of Mr D FitzGerald's block.

Mr John Bell was the architect of this building, and the government came to the aid of the settlers in the cost of erection. It was completed about the end of 1894 and was first opened as a Mechanics Institute and free library. Mr F Whiston was appointed librarian, but the library was never a success and it was closed after some months' trial.

On the other hand, the hall was a success from opening, and entertainments of all descriptions were numerous. Dancing was the favourite pastime and was indulged in by young and old, single and married. Naturally, with little or no competition from the neighbouring towns, the building was the scene of many enjoyable gatherings. At these evenings Mr August Burrows always officiated as musician and Mr F Fenslau as M.C. On one occasion, the two Miss Snells, of the famous Gippsland giant family, put in an appearance; escorted by the diminutive master Ken Leithhead. Clara, over 6 feet in stature, turned the scale at 32 stone, and Anna a little shorter, weighed 28 stone. One would hardly look for much activity in these girls, but Clara proved to be one of the best dancers in the hall and was quite as much at home in a waltz or a set dance as any of the womenfolk present!



*Clara Snell*

Another institution that came in to being at this time was "The Bunyip South Fire Brigade". Mr J Donald, who had many years experience in metropolitan fire fighting, captained the brigade. A manual engine and uniforms were procured from the city and the hall was secured for headquarters. The only drawback about this organisation was that any person intending to have a fire had to give 24 hours notice, as under ordinary circumstances, the brigade would arrive 24hrs late. Whether it was a lack of sufficient notice, or the knowledge that the fire fighters would take 24 hours to get to the scene of the outbreak is not explained, but it is a fact that the brigade was never called out and finally went the way of many good intentions. The engine stood near the hall until it sank to its axles in the peaty soil, and this writer has a lively recollection of a dozen men putting up a strenuous battle to save it from being burnt up in a bush fire! After this escape from the elements, it was brought to light, put on a truck and returned to Melbourne. The uniforms came in handy as fancy costumes at subsequent entertainments.

Settlement at this period extended a little beyond the Iona State School site, and in the immediate vicinity of the main drain. But the population was much denser than it is today, for it must be remembered that every 5, 10 or 20 acre block was occupied by a family. It was estimated that this area supported no fewer than 1,000 souls.

So, it goes without saying that the settlement was gaining some importance, especially in the eyes of the business people, and, of course, the politicians. The government, by way of recognising the advancement, conferred the name of "Bunyip South" upon it and placed it on the postal map. But, to "call a rose by any other name .. ", etc., the Swamp will always be the Swamp, and while the pioneer lasts he would not have it otherwise.

In what other district can you hear residents converse in: 15-14s, 17-10s, 14-37s, 5s, 6s, 9s, 8s and 4s? No sir! You may smother it up with phonies such as: Iona, Vervale, Cora Lynn and the rest of it, but the Swamp lies just underneath and keeps jutting out in the numerical names of its roads. The Princes Highway may be in Timbuktu and a dozen other places, but the 12-10 can only be on the Swamp!

Tell the man who knows the geography of the Swamp that the person who wishes to see lives on the 13-70, and he knows immediately where it is, how to get to it, and the approximate mileage. To the stranger, of course, it is a different proposition.

There's none so dense as those who won't think - and it used to be a habit of the local boys to befog this class of visitor. Here is an example:-

"Can you tell me where Mr Smith lives, boy?"

"Yes, sir. On the 8 mile".

"8 mile? Where is that?"

"Well you go past the 15 and cross the 13-70 bridge. Keep on past the 12-10 and 11 and you'll come to the 9. The 8 is between the 9 and the 7. You can't miss it because the 6 is the next".

"Yes I quite understand; but where am I now?"

"You are at the 16-24, three quarters of a mile from the 15-41. But do not mistake the 14-37 bridge for the 13-70. The 14-37 bridge is next to the 15-41, and you will land out between the 6 and the 7 - and then you will have to go on to the 4 to get to the 9, the next drain to the 8."

The poor man got somebody else to do his thinking for him, and was just as likely to miss the 8 mile and walk into Western Port Bay as find it. But, if he followed his directions, he would have undoubtedly come out right!

Without exception, roads, drains, bridges and positions were referred to numerically by the pioneer. Even men were distinguished by numerals. Jones of the 15 was quite different person from Jones of the 15-41.

One of the traits of the settlement was the number of persons with the same surname - yet in no way related. Take the Kellys as an example. They were too numerous to be distinguished by numbers. Numerals and a variety of nicknames had to be resorted to. A few of their designations came readily to mind by reason of their oddity - such as Clearwater Kelly, Cast Iron Kelly, Kelly the Rock, Kelly the Rambler, Gentleman Kelly, Quiet Kelly, Stuttering Kelly, and Kelly the Gambler. It is hardly necessary to add that they lived up to their designations!



## 10 Trouble Over Roads and Valuation

In a cosmopolitan population like that of the Swamp, all general professions and occupations were represented. Lawyers took on the role of scrub cutters, doctors acquitted themselves creditably as cooks and rousabouts between cases, whilst the ordinary rank and file of managers, contractors, clerks, carpenters, bricklayers, soldiers, etc., "swung the banjo" in the drains. Many of these would hardly recognise a shovel when they first entered the Swamp, but they learned to call a spade a spade before they left it.

Throughout the course of the works, some thousands of men from all countries were at one time or another employed, but the majority passed on - and in following years advertised the Kooweerup in the four corners of the globe. It was a common meeting ground of many people and languages, and none were poorer for the experience.

"German Charlie", who was very proud of his English - and he had a fair flow of it (of sorts) used to remark: "Ven first I gums do Audzschtralia, I good nod say: 'Yack' (Jack) nor 'Jackandandah' (Yackandandah), bud now I gan say: 'Yack and Jackandandah' as blain as any bodies".

But they were not all quite as dense as Charlie, and their own Swamp experience had shown a side of life which had hitherto been a closed book to them. There were many hard doers and many educated gentlemen amongst them, but there were no social distinctions. A man was judged by a man's standard, and those who failed to come up to it soon found that they were outcasts, and passed on.

At this time the town of Bunyip consisted of two hotels, a butcher's shop and a small general store which carried stock brought up from the station by two goats harnessed to a box on wheels. Thus, it may be judged that there was not a very extensive variety of stores to select from. Consequently, the Swamp population shopped in Drouin. The orders were sent by rail, thence on the cooperative tramway to the survey camp, where they were delivered.

On payday, all work was suspended and everyone partook in a general holiday. It was the day when all accounts, disputes, and misunderstandings which accumulated during the previous fortnight were settled. It was generally a day of festival. Those who had no pay to draw turned up for the mere pleasure of seeing others get it. Subscriptions were taken up for charitable and public objects, and collectors had cause to complain of the niggardliness of the settlers.

There may be thousands of pounds more coming into the Swamp annually at the present time, but the casual observer would not believe it. Money was not the sole object of the earlier settler's life. He had to work too hard for it and believed in a little recreation once a fortnight.

Improvements were steadily going forward, but the great drawback was the lack of roads. Certainly, the government had undertaken the formation of some of these, but it appeared to be half-hearted about this work, and was continually advising the settlers to form a Shire and elect a council of their own - which could build roads to their own liking. The settlers were a little too wide awake to act on this suggestion, and pointed out that the formation of a council meant the payment of rates - and with the roads in their condition, it would take a mint of money to put them in order. Failing their agreement to form a Shire on the Swamp, the government offered a

further suggestion that they should attach themselves to the Shire of Buln Buln or Berwick, or both, and be rated on the same basis as residents of those shires.

Again the settlers balked. They replied that if this suggestion were followed, either or both councils would probably strike a special rate in the district for the purpose of roadmaking - and that the settlers were not in a position to pay it. They further added that they would consider the suggestion of forming a Shire, or attaching themselves to either or both of the neighbouring Shires, when the government carried on with the roadmaking.

Up to this date, the blocks on the Swamp were held under a Permit to Occupy. A certain amount of improvement had to be carried out and the occupier had to reside for a stipulated time on the block during the twelve months to comply with this. His permit valuers then arrived in order to assess and classify his holding.

It is amusing, after this lapse of time, to look back on those settlers who, hitherto, had the best block on the Swamp - and were prepared to back up their opinion either with money or physical fitness - suddenly discover on the arrival of the valuers that "the government had dumped them on the worst block on the Swamp".

However, the valuers went on with their work, and all things considered, they did their work well. Certainly, they did not err on the side of harshness, for they assessed the pick of the swampland at between three and two pounds per acre. The former valuation applied for the most part to the blocks fronting the Main drain between the Junction bridge and the present Iona school, and the latter price to those off the main drain and on the fringes of the settlement.

There was a considerable amount of grumbling and complaining at the time. Jones, who was valued at three pounds, could not understand why Smith, who had always maintained that his block was superior to anything else in Victoria, was valued at two pounds per acre. But the government based the valuation on the upset price of the freehold land, which was eight pounds and five pounds per acre unimproved. Therefore, the settler had the advantage of five pound and three pound per acre; and for the most part he had better class land. These values hardly appear worth considering when compared with those of the present day, but it must be remembered that the difference represents the labour put into the land by the pioneers.

Settlers still continued to be discontented at their valuation until the first private land sale took place sometime later. William Bloomfield sold ten acres on the Bunyip road to Mrs Sarah Hanson at twenty pounds per acre - a price that was looked on as fabulous - but it silenced all grumbling and gave great encouragement to the settlers and splendid advertisement to the Swamp.

## 11 Cutting Subsidiary Drains

All the principal roads and drains were indicated by mud banks, hemmed in by a solid wall of tea tree 60 or 70 feet high. On the other hand, what are now called the principal roads and drains were indicated by a survey line which represented nothing so much as a tunnel in the green gloom of a thicket. It was along these survey lines that pioneers went to and from their work, balancing themselves on fallen logs and scrub above the water - and other times wading through it with a week's provisions on their backs.

As the central works were completed these journeys became longer, and a 6 or 7 mile tramp to and from the job was a common thing; but they were a cheerful, irresponsible lot, and made light of their hard work and harder fare - and were not above playing jokes on each other or the overseer. It was the latter's duty to see that the men got the right claim for excavating, and to see that they were taken according to the specifications when completed. The matter of measuring the length and width on top was not difficult, but to measure the width of the bottom, which as a rule was under between 3 and 4 feet of water was somewhat harder.

One of these overseers became very exacting, and provided himself with a pair of firm boots which reached to the hips, and, not satisfied when measurement proved correct, he would walk the length of the claim along the bottom, in order to see that it had all been taken out properly below water level. He adopted this method until he found that one claim not only had the stipulated number of yards taken out, but a few extra were thrown in for good measure - in the shape of a 3 foot hole in the bottom of the drain! Just what the gentleman said at the time is not recorded, but it may be taken for granted that those extra yards were not paid for.

Food at this time was such as the men working all day in mud and water could cook. There was no great variety, so that, when a well-known character caught a hare, all the camp on the number 7 knew of it, and invitations for dinner were eagerly sought. The lucky possessor of the luxury skinned and cut up his hare and placed it in a kerosene tin of salt water - then went to work, happy in the knowledge that his diet would not be "salt horse" that night. During his absence, his mates captured a native bear, killed it, skinned it, cut it up and substituted it for the hare in the kerosene tin. If the diner noticed anything wrong with the flavour of his jugged hare, he never mentioned it; he must have thought all hares tasted like that.

It was bad policy for anyone to brag about any little delicacy on the menu, for it had a habit of vanishing before the cook had time to get it to the fire. One worker complained to overseer, Mr Thos Chesterfield, that 2 dozen eggs - "hen fruit" - were missing. Mr Chesterfield retired to his tent and dropped his 18 stone wearily on 2 dozen eggs neatly arranged between the blankets in his bunk. It was these pranks that made life endurable and nobody was immune from them.

The work at this time had extended to the numerous subsidiary channels, and although conditions were bad, the northern portion of the Swamp had been improved by the outlet to the main drain; the men were able to earn better money. But to the south in that district, fed by the overflow of the Lang Lang river, King Parrot Creek and other streams, conditions were almost as bad as at the beginning. As a matter of fact, that district is invariably subject to annual flooding up to present day.

All those drains, including the 6 & 7, were cut between 1894 & 1895, and if they are not adequate now in 1923 to cope with the water, the reader will gain some idea of the district all those years ago!

One of the unforeseen circumstances in the drainage scheme of the whole Swamp was the land subsidence, which had been in many places up to 8 feet. Up to a few years before 1923, ample proof could be had of this at the "White Elephant", a bridge which was built across the 1 1 mile on the Main drain road. This bridge was built level with the road originally, but as the water drained out of the land, the road subsided until the average man standing on the highway could just reach the decking with his fingertips.

This subsidence had a serious effect on the drains. It reduced the carrying capacity of all of them, whilst in many cases, where formerly deep channels existed, they were practically obliterated - owing to the banks sinking almost to the level of the bottom. More than one settler worked from daylight to dark, to clear portion of his block fit for cultivation, only to find that within a few months another crop of stumps and logs of some bygone period were gradually appearing through the surface of his clearing - and this continued, even to the third and fourth layer. Perfectly sound logs up to 2 feet in diameter were found at variable depths in cutting the drains some 12 and 15 feet down, or as deep as the channels went.

Before the land subsided, it was unsafe to venture off the beaten tracks, owing to the peaty nature of the soil. The writer has a lively recollection of rescuing an over-eager settler off his new block by means of tea tree thrown down to this unfortunate who had ventured onto the allotment to test the quality of the soil!

## 12 First Council Election

Having spent some hundreds of thousands of pounds on the Swamp drainage to date, and the system still incomplete, the government already indicated it was trying to shift the responsibility of roadmaking onto the shoulders of the settlers. This was strenuously resisted - the settlers fearing that a special rate would be struck for the forming and maintenance of roads. Finally, the Berwick Shire agreed to take over the major portion of the Swamp under current rates, and the opposition died down. Cranbourne and Buln Buln: Shires were to take over the south western and eastern margins, respectively.

It was proposed to elect three councillors to represent the Bunyip South riding in the Berwick Shire, and the seats were contested by 5 candidates. Considerable interest was manifested in the election. The poll was held in the Pioneers Hall - and a record percentage of votes was recorded. The Hon. DL McNamara MLC, then a youth of 21 years, was elected at the head of the poll, and the other seats were filled by messrs D Field and ES Hill.

With the formation of the riding, a new phase was entered upon by the Swamp. Roads were the councillors' first care. The settlers were suspicious that a special rate would be struck, and were prepared to resist any move in this direction to the last ditch. The general rate, if memory serves rightly, was one and three pence (in the Pound), and this mollified them somewhat; but, as everyone predicted, it was quite inadequate for roadmaking requirements.

After trying to carry on under this handicap for some time, Cr DL McNamara proposed that the riding should raise a loan. Instantly, the whole settlement was up in arms against him, and there was a storm of protest. Deputations were sent to the council chamber to protest against such a course, pointing out that the council was breaking faith by proposing such a thing, inasmuch as a special rate would have to be struck to repay the loan.

Cr McNamara stuck to his point, and tried to make clear that it was impossible to form roads through the Swamp without it. The settlers held their views of their position and became very incensed against the youthful councillor. Had he not been elected for three years; his political career would have been cut short as far as the Swamp was concerned.

Seeing no hope of carrying out the loan proposition with consent of the riding, Cr McNamara went ahead and secured the money without it. This bold action threw the whole district into turmoil. Public meetings were held with a view to withdraw from the Berwick Shire - and forming a separate shire on the Swamp. After much agitation and discussion at these meetings, it was found that responsibility was thrown onto the settlers, and that they would have to shoulder it.

Finding that there was no help for their position, ratepayers settled down to make the best of it, but vowed vengeance against Cr McNamara when he came before them for re-election. So much for public opinion - Cr McNamara continued to represent them for many years, and became president of the council!

With the loan money, 99 miles of formed and sanded roads, which would compare with any in Victoria, were opened up. The Bunyip and Main drain south were the first roads formed, and there is no doubt that they were a credit to the settlement. Cr McNamara, at the risk of reviving old differences, used to refer in after years with some pride to the achievement of obtaining the loan, and point to the result of it.

Although the government gazetted the name 'Bunyip South' to the Swamp area, the residents never put it into general use, and the district was always referred to as 'the Swamp'. This was somewhat of a misnomer at this period, and its energetic young councillor set about finding a more suitable name. His choice fell on 'Tona', but why he went to the coast of Scotland to select it, he never explained. Perhaps it had something to do with St Columba? With the name change, a change came in the character of the people; this was chiefly brought about by a change in conditions. Hitherto, one glance at the Swamp, with its impenetrable giant walls of tea tree, gum and blackwood hemming in streaks of mud by courtesy of so-called "roads" was quite sufficient for even the most land-hungry outsider.

In 1898 the fire fiend swept down on the settlement and swept it from end to end, ruining many in its course of destruction - but it had the effect of killing the timber, and the land became more-easily cleared. The first acre cleared at the corner of the Main and Longwarry drains cost the government 34 pounds, and the work was done by patent stump extractors which were afterwards let out to the selectors at one shilling per day. In the years subsequent to 1898, it was possible to get the same area cleared for as many shillings, and the opening up of the Swamp progressed rapidly.

Settlers who were disheartened by years of struggling grasped the opportunity of clearing a cultivation patch and selling it to the first buyer who happened along. Under the original settlement Act, no one man could hold more than 20 acres. This, of course, did not apply to those who "bought in". Nor did it prevent a settler who had sufficient money from buying out his neighbours. People from all parts came to test the fertility of "the Kooweerup", and with their coming, the old type of settler died out. Many poor men came in, many left as poor men.

But, those who originally selected and held on through flood, fire and adversity had no cause to regret their struggles in the battle of survival of the fittest. The Great Kooweerup was a hard taskmaster, but in the end it paid a dividend to those who tackled it, and to the government that conquered it.

### 13 Go on the Land Young Man

During the years 1893 and 1894 considerable headway was made in cultivation on the holdings about the Junction. The government experimental farm at the Main and Longwarry drains gave the settlers some idea what to sow and how it would grow. Few, if any, had any previous experience in farming, and their methods were necessarily rough.

The first potato crops were in the most part planted with mattocks, for, although there were two ploughs for hire at sixpence a day at the "Farm", it was impossible to use them in ground matted with roots and criss-crossed with submerged logs.

Looking around the Swamp today, few would realise what it cost to clear in its early stages. The first acre on the experimental farm took months of labour - even with the aid of two stump extractors erected on a tripod, working on the endless chain system. The cost, already mentioned, was 34 pounds. It hardly needs to be stated that the settler could not afford that amount. His clearing had to be done in the intervals between the labour in the drains, and progress was necessarily slow. Every inch of ground had to be matted over to a depth of 6 to 8 inches, and by the time a man had completed a square chain, as often as not he found the ground had subsided with the constant tramping, and another crop of logs appeared through the cleared surface behind him. In parts of the Swamp there were as many as four layers of stumps and fallen timber, and for years the ground had to be cleared when the land subsided.

To aid the men with their clearing, the government let out the extractors from the experimental farm at one shilling per day. These were found to be useless; instead of pulling the stump out, the stump pulled the extractor in - and the settler found that he had to grub out the stump-puller as well as the stump itself!

Under these early conditions, settlers were given a "Permit to Occupy". The permit provided clauses for a certain period of residence on the land in each 12 months, and also that improvements to a given value should be carried out. Mr Thos Chippendale Snr had to see that these clauses were complied with. His job was not an enviable one, for at that time it was not possible to comply with the clauses; they had to stand in abeyance until such time as conditions would allow them to be carried out. It goes without saying that those settlers who never intended to make their homes on the Kooweerup did their utmost to avoid the improvement clause and were up to all schemes to hoodwink the inspector.

A favoured method was to find the most lightly-timbered parts of the block, if any, and fell the timber on these. On some holdings there were as many as half a dozen small clearings which had to be inspected, and this meant almost half a day's travel through the tangled bush for the Crown Lands bailiff and his guide. After inspecting several such clearings on one holding, the bailiff asked: "Is that all the clearing you have done?" "No", replied the settler, scratching his head, "There are three more, but I'm darned if I can find them."

On another tour of the settlement, Mr Chippendale had occasion to speak to a settler for not attempting to comply with the improvement clause. "You know", he said, "You've hardly done a

thing on this block since you've had it, and you will certainly have it forfeited if you don't make some effort to get a bit of clearing done."

"But I tell you, I have", replied the settler with some heat. "I've been working day and night to get a bit of clearing done to build a house on."

"Well, I don't see you've a great deal to show for it."

"No", said the other, "but if you had been here yesterday you would. I had more than half an acre grubbed yesterday, but the ground went down during the night, an' when I get up this morning here's all these blasted stumps poking through."

This underground timber was the bugbear of the early settler, and in later years it became a menace in the case of fire. Once properly alight, it burnt for months and left many fertile blocks a mere bed of ashes to a depth of three and four feet. Dwellings could only be saved by trenching the ground around them down to six feet, and ramming the pug at the bottom of the trench.

When the main drain was first constructed, two "drops" were put in along the last four miles. These resembled miniature weirs. The first was constructed at the 14 mile, and the second at the 16 mile. These were designed to steady the rush of water between the railway bridge and the Iona State School, where the fall of the ground was found to be much greater than in other sections along the course of the channel. By means of these "drops", the original bottom of the channel along the section between and above them was kept four and eight feet higher respectively than the section immediately below.

For some years they served their purpose, which saved erosion of the banks but caused many floodings. The cost of maintaining them was considerable because the water was continually making its way behind the sheet piling and threatening to sweep them into Westernport Bay.

Finally, the big flood of 1899 left them in such a state of wreckage that their remnants were removed and used to sheet pile the breakaway in the main drain opposite Mr R McNamara's property. After their removal, the reason for their constitution became evident, because that section of the channel immediately started to show the action of the water. Today there is no resemblance left of the original channel.

In 1899 a great flood swept the whole area of the Swamp. The water rose until it flowed over the Junction bridge, which today is at least 15 feet above water level. All roads in the vicinity were submerged to a depth of four feet in places, and boats had to be used to rescue settlers from roofs of their houses in some instances. Scores of families took refuge in Bunyip township, where they were accommodated in private houses, billiard rooms, sheds, in fact, any structure which afforded shelter from the weather. It was a pathetic sight to see these unfortunates wading along the banks, trying to drive their livestock before them to the higher ground around Bunyip. In many places the water was so deep, and rushed across the roads in such volume as to sweep away the smaller animals, such as calves and pigs, and pedestrians could only hold their feet by joining hands.

"The Age" of the day reported that "Scores of settlers were making towards Bunyip with their livestock". The "Sydney Bulletin" seized on this as a subject for illustration, and the following week illustrated the Bunyip schoolteacher trying to teach the three Rs amid a melee of roaring cattle, squealing pigs, crowing cocks and a battery of goats and rams.

As may be surmised, a flood at such a critical time did irreparable damage. Settlers had just managed to get a few acres cleared for cultivation, and their crops were either still in the ground or just harvested.



For months after the flood had subsided, every wire fence for miles was festooned with onions washed off farms, hat straw, etc., whilst tons of potatoes stood in bags and rotted in the sodden paddocks.

Two boats were sent by rail from Melbourne to assist in the rescue work, and these were kept busy night and day as gangs of men relieved each other in this work and on the bridges - which were in danger of being carried away by floating logs and trees rushing down in the current.

At the junction of the Bunyip and main drains, a weatherboard building was lifted bodily and carried for chains till arrested by a boundary fence. The main drain swept away its banks between the 15-41 and Junction bridges, and inundated the whole area to the south-west, depositing feet of sand over the farms and cutting new watercourses through standing crops.

Not one settler in the whole area escaped damage. Many were practically ruined and had to start the battle afresh. The government came to their aid with loans for seed and stock, and the fight commenced once more with no assurance that a similar catastrophe would not occur in the following year.

Nature, however, has many moods; you may fool her many times, but not all the time. Those who had experienced the ordeal of the flood made some provision to save their stock, etc., should another deluge visit the settlement in the following year. But fate and nature came at them from another angle. This time Nemesis paid a visit to the infant settlement in the form of fire - leaving devastation and misery in its wake. Again, the government came to the aid of the suffering settlers, and the uphill fight recommenced.

In all, the government advanced something between 30 and 40 thousand pounds to replace stock, seed and fencing, and it stands to the credit of the settlement today that the sum, with the exception of 15 shillings, was repaid to the government. The writer would like to meet that person who got away with the 15 bob; he must have been a man of some character and willpower to fight his way through the miles of red tape that the government ties to its loans!

## 14 Vicissitudes

One of the best landmarks of the early settlement days was Leithhead's store at the Junction bridge. Mr Alex Leithhead late of McCormick's Timber Merchants, Sydney Road, Moreland, and formerly mayor of Brunswick, was the proprietor, and he catered for every want of the settler. Very few country stores of today carry the same extent of stock. It was the proprietor's boast that he could "Start you in life, or bury the old man." Literally, all roads in the Swamp led to this store, and it was the scene of many a political and social gathering. No candidate for parliamentary or council honours ever missed addressing the settlers at a meeting at Leithhead's store.

Sir Alex Peacock, Sir Robert Best, Mr Prendergast, and the late JL Dow and many others addressed the meetings on land, flood or fire, and many other vital matters at this point. Whenever matters assumed a serious aspect between the government and the settlers, Mr Catani always prevailed, with his usual diplomacy, on a member of the government to accompany him on his next trip. The Swamp was full of budding politicians and bush lawyers, and it pandered to their vanity to allow them to address their grievances, real or imaginary, to a minister of the Crown, and to receive in return the usual political promises. Had the government kept its promises, the early settler would have been wading up to his waist in milk and honey instead of mud and water - and it is doubtful if he would have been satisfied even then!

However, many grievances were remedied by these meetings, and they served to show that members of the government in those days had the welfare of the settler at heart, and that politics were less of a profession then than they are at the present time.

Mr JL Dow, as minister of Agriculture and editor of "The Leader", wrote many articles in the metropolitan press on the progress and development of the Swamp. With the weight of "The Age" and his own weekly behind him, he brought the searchlight of the press to bear on many knotty problems that threatened a rupture between the men on the land and knights of the red tape in their furnished offices in the metropolis.

At the time, "The Age" created and destroyed ministries, and, when it took up a subject, it was merely a matter of adding: "I have spoken; let it be done." No other community in Victoria received such wholehearted support as that of the Great Kooweerup. Otherwise, failure might have taken the place of success.

During the first two years of occupancy of the land, very little could be attempted by way of clearing. As time passed, considerable gaps were made in the timber. Small areas of crops were planted, and the settler with his family worked day and night in their efforts to extend cultivation. The great question was what to do with the timber. Burning a mass of tangled tree trunks was a very unsuccessful and laborious method; the fire merely singed the tops off and left the trees piled criss-crossed feet above the ground. It was difficult to clear sufficient space to start the process of picking up. Huge walls of tree trunks were piled around the buildings to serve as fences until every little clearing resembled a fort where the occupants intended to make a last desperate stand.

This was the condition of things when the matter of getting rid of the timber solved itself in flame and smoke. A rolling bushfire swept along both sides of the main drain and transformed the whole settlement into a bed of ashes. A number of settlers, including K Brown, W Richards, T Kelly and others too numerous to recall were burnt out. But for the most part, the dwellings were saved - due no doubt to the abundance of water at hand. All suffered heavily in the loss of stock, crops and outbuildings. Potato crops were roasted in the ground, haystacks melted into flame, and, for weeks after, the district smelled like an Irish stew from the stench of baked potatoes and roasted onions.

The co-operative tramway suspended service owing to great gaps being burnt into the wooden track, and the roads along the drain banks smoked like volcanoes, due to the timber and peat below them taking fire. The whole area was isolated and the settler, after years of struggling, found himself back at his starting point.

Again, the government came to the rescue, with loans for seed stock, fencing wire, etc. Some well-meaning person voiced an appeal in the metropolitan press. Those benevolent old ladies who use charity as their middle names and form themselves into organisations which trade on the misfortunes of others jumped into the breach and sent a truckload of secondhand hats, coats and pants. Until the writer saw that consignment, he was ignorant of the variety and shape of raiment which mankind clothes itself in. There were straw hats, "Hardhitters", felt hats, "Bell-toppers", and caps of all sizes, colours, shapes and stages of dilapidation. The coats covered a range, from the "Clawhammer" and "Frock" to a "Norfolk Jacket". There were hats without crowns or brims, and pants without seats - and gone at the knees. Many of the coats looked as though somebody had been invited to tread on the tail of them. Yes, bushfire week in the Kooweerup was a harvest for the secondhand shops around Melbourne. Anxious settlers enquiring about consignments of seed, wire, &c. at the local station had a parcel containing a variety of dilapidated headgear, with a "Bell-topper" thrown in for good measure, thrust on them by the harrassed stationmaster; and the choice of "Beauforts" or frock coats, with pants that didn't match, to go with a coil of wire! Had those old ladies been present at such times, their faith, hope and charity would have died early.

Finally, stationmaster Griffin, tired of collecting discarded headgear and wearing apparel thrown down by ungrateful settlers, and despairing of delivery ever being taken, gave them to the boys. For weeks later, it was common to see these youths with an axe, pick or shovel on their shoulders going to work in belltoppers, straw hats, boxers, and frock and Beaufort coats. One lad added an umbrella to his outfit - to add to his social standing. It was not safe to mention "bushfire relief" to any settler for many months after.

Although the fire had done many pounds of damage throughout the settlement, it solved the timber question. The peat took fire and scores of acres of standing timber were burnt out at the roots and was consumed by the fire in the ground as it fell.

Unfortunately, this destroyed the fertility of the land. Still, it was bound to happen to some extent in such country at some time or another. Timber left standing was effectively killed, and rotted within the next few years.

All this facilitated clearing operations and it now became possible to sow large areas down to grasses, which led to the advent of dairy herds. From that date, the Swamp holdings may be said to have been placed on a profitable footing.

The first creamery was erected by The Fresh Food Company at the corner of the 15-41 and the main drain. Like most of the Swamp enterprises at that date, it was largely supported by local shareholders. Mr H Hobbs was the first manager and the establishment was carried on for a number of years until destroyed by fire. This building played an important part in schooling the settlers in the dairying industry - and gave many of them their first real start on the Kooweerup.

## 15 Passing of the Swamp

At the beginning of the dairy herd, the settlers' farms were necessarily small, but the creamery suppliers were numerous – and their methods of transporting the milk varied. The favoured vehicle of the time was a fork, cut from a tree, with a couple of battens nailed across on which the milk can stood - if the owner was fortunate enough to possess one. If he didn't have one, he got over the difficulty by delivering the milk in a kerosene tin.

Others went in for a more elaborate mode of transport. Another vehicle consisted of a hardwood frame with a wheelbarrow wheel at each of its four corners - commonly known as a Catani car. These cars had their drawbacks, however. They had a habit of running down every little incline and prodding Dobbin on the heels - often with dire results for the milk supply!

So, taking one thing with another, the supplier who delivered his milk in kerosene tins, Chinese-fashion across his shoulders, at the end of a tea tree pole, usually found that he had chosen the safest method.

Many of these struggling suppliers, notably messrs Kavanagh, Curtain, Field and others, possessed picked dairy herds, and in after years installed milking machines; but it was a long dreary struggle from the wheelbarrow to the milking machine.

With the creamery well established, and a few acres of potatoes and onions growing, the settler received some return, however poor, from the block - and for the first time many saw the possibility of making a living from the land.

About this time, the first private transaction took place which may be said to have established a value on properties which hitherto had none. Prior to this, it was possible to acquire choice blocks of 20 acres for a deposit of £5, on the undertaking to carry out the conditions of lease, or permit to occupy. Others were willing to surrender their blocks to any friend who wanted them. The present writer was offered three partly-cleared blocks, 60 acres in all, at a government valuation of from 39/- to £2 per acre. These properties were sold a few years later at 50 to 60 pounds per acre, and it was not until the private land sale already-mentioned that residents of the Swamp realised that their land had a cash value.

Mr W Bloomfield, who had purchased 10 acres at Bunyip at the upset price of 8 pounds per acre, was the first person who had the distinction of making money from the sale of land in the settlement. After improving his land to the extent of felling the scrub and erecting a weatherboard dwelling, the property passed into the possession of Mrs Sarah Hansen at 20 pounds per acre. This created a greater sensation than a sale at 100 pounds would today, and it established a basis for Swamp land valuation.

At this period, there were many abandoned blocks throughout the settlement, and new areas were being thrown open for selection as the subsidiary drains were completed . As no settler could hold more than 20 acres, and, as no person was eligible to apply for an allotment under the age of 18 years, there was enough land to spare for all.

Those who saw a little further into the future suddenly discovered that they had sons and daughters over the age of 18 years, and applied for allotments on their behalf. The government was eager to dispose of the "waste", and readily granted the land. Thus, nearly every youth and girl on the settlement became a land proprietor. This was the beginning of the "large holdings", as we know them in the district.

Many of those who held land, to the value of 3 thousand pounds on the present day valuation in 1923, were forced to leave their families and seek work in railway construction as far away as Tasmania and the Moe swamp reclamation works. But they "kept the home fires burning" and later came to their reward.

A recent article in "The Age" mentions that the Kooweerup Swamp is being kept back by bad roads. If that is so in 1923, we leave it to the imagination as to what it was like in 1898. Slush thrown up on the top of a quagmire of peat and water, and piled up to a height of four to five feet above ground level served - or rather, didn't serve - as roads. Grocers, butchers and bakers delivered the necessities of life per medium of packed baskets along a plank-walk over the tops of these so-called roads.

Other roads and drains off the main and Bunyip drains were indicated by survey lines, like tunnels in the green gloom of the scrub, and the government saw that the expense of road formation would rival that of the drain excavation. Thus arose the suggestion of forming a Shire, or the settlement becoming attached to neighbouring shires. This brought the storm of protest mentioned previously, and ended up in the major portion being taken over as the Bunyip South riding of the Shire of Berwick.

Messrs DL Mc Namara, D Field and ES Hill, the first representatives sent to the council table were faced with the road problem - which the government considered too expensive at an annual valuation of £64. Cr McNamara suggested a loan as a way out of the difficulty, but met with strenuous opposition from the ratepayers. However, he gained his point, and, during the first three years of the riding's existence, 99 miles of roads were laid down. These served as the forerunners for many miles of roadway, until today, with the exception of the area about the McDonald's track railway, the Swamp compares favourably with any other district in Victoria in the matter of roads.

The first council election also caused a referendum for the licence of the Iona Hotel, Garfield, previously known as Cannibal Creek - and a "bottle licence" at the Junction bridge. Mr Ellis applied for the hotel licence and Mr Leithhead for the right to sell wines and spirits at the Junction store. The former application was granted, but the latter was carried on to the second election; but as there was no election for the Pakenham riding, the majority lost out. However, the government granted a 2 gallon licence, and all were satisfied!

From this time onward, through many vicissitudes, the Swamp developed and graduated as Bunyip South (later Iona), Cora Lynn, Modella (Cr Modella, as it was more-aply called) and Vervale. But to those who saw it in its early stages, it is still the Swamp, and those higher-sounding names are merely used as a form of postal address!

Each succeeding year had its greater development and higher valuations, until at the present day, the casual stranger considers the area a "Cocky's Paradise". It "made" many and "broke" others, but it will never again see a community such as that carefree, hardworking population of pioneers who gouged the forces of nature in the struggle for a crust, and conquered - leaving the State an asset to benefit posterity.

- "Tarago" 1923