

Gympie - In The Early Days

Taken from the Gympie Mining Handbook written by A Leek. J. Ivimey, Brisbane 1887.

HOW THE DIGGERS AMUSED THEMSELVES

There was no School of Arts, of course, and the public buildings were the Diggers Bethel, the Temperance Hall, and the Masonic Hall, where the attractions were all more or less of an intellectual character. There were at first the sly grog shops and latter on better class public houses, one of which, at the bottom of Commissioner's Hill, called the Royal, had a theatre and dancing room, built behind, that was crowded with audience pretty well every evening.

If there were any entertainers, the audience sat and drank and smoked in calm enjoyment, but the evenings were generally passed in the festive dance, to properly provide for which the public - and foreign - spirited proprietors engaged an extra number of waitresses who could on occasion dance with the diggers as long as the libations consumed were of respectable value. Many of those girls are to-day the mothers of families in Gympie, for the competition for them was very severe, when it is remembered that it meant about one lady to a thousand applicants. There was a fiddle and piano for band, and there was a bar also, which almost goes without saying. The whole place was locally conspicuous on account of having been built of palings supplied by Benjamin Tarle.

Another caterer to the public taste was the famous Billy Barlow, who arose and shone in the Apollonian Vale where he used to perform for some years, his extempore versification on local men and subjects pleasing the miners tremendously. Billy had also an eye for business, for he was the landlord of a popular hotel and hall which to this day is known as the Apollonian Vale Hotel in sweet and touching remembrance of this temple of Apollo. As a present temple of art it is more an apology than anything else.

The first show of a frivolous kind on Gympie was a small wheeled affair that revolved on its own axis, and which was stationary for some time where Ferguson's saw mill now stands, and Ferguson bought the old rattletrap when he took possession. There was French Charley's theatre at the One-Mile about the end of 1868. This man was also a storekeeper at Gympie and Rockhampton, his Gympie sign being "Live and Let Live". Then here was Byers who went in for Shakespeare;

The Leopold troupe who went in for everything, French Charlie displaying most in heavy dramas of the transpontine type. Strange to say that to-day Gympie has far less amusement than in the roaring early days of big yields and big spending. The town has grown very respectable now, so much so that a show only comes along in that period of time known as a blue moon. The church choirs to-day give the best music Gympie possesses; and a comet-like visit of a variety troupe, whose varieties generally vary from dullness to vulgarity, is about the greatest artistic performance Gympie can boast of to-day.

There is no longer an overpowering percentage of unmarried men; and the miners put most, if not all, their spare cash in other mines as shareholders. So that during the week at least. the flowing bowl is kept out of sight, and the dancing assemblies are things of the past. Perhaps for the sake of the field it is as well that those things are so to-day.

THE TWO GREAT FLOODS

These lines are being written when what might have been the third great flood at Gympie subsided after liquidating three or four claims on the Monkland, but doing no serious damage so far. The mountainous country to the south of Gympie feeds the river Mary from an enormous watershed and as the river runs through the town and never being very low, no matter how bad the drought, it follows that when the floods descend the Mary ascends, and spreads in all directions in Maryborough and Gympie alike.

It was early in March 1870, that the first great up-rising of the waters came on the township of bark humpies and tent-living diggers, almost the first intimation being the sudden disappearance of the alluvial workings beneath the waters, and the stoppage of a great many of the quartz claims. There was no railway line in those days, and not only the town suffered but some hairbreadth escapes took place among the farmers in the district, who were in some cases imprisoned for days on the top of their houses, with nothing but wet maize and a few pounds of flour to keep them alive. One case, which occurred at Bellwood, is still perpetuated by a diary taken at that time by a farmer who had to make stage after stage above the crossbeams in the roof of his barn as the hungry waters came up from beneath, and only escaped at the last extremity, for he and his family could go no higher than they had gone. However, when death was within a few inches the flood stayed, and subsequently went down again.

There was no help from the neighbours, for the nearest was seventeen miles away, and one of the farmer's friends, the only other man there, had drowned himself in an ineffectual attempt to swim to another house for something to kindle anew the fire where the family camping place was, for he had inadvertently put it out.

The time of tribulation lasted a week, during which time the churches in Gympie had been turned into asylums for the homeless ones, whose habitations were floating half way down to Maryborough. It is related that underneath one of the stores in the town was carefully stored a lot of empty barrels which helped considerably in launching the establishment on the rolling wave. Everybody worked with a will to get the women and children out, and as far as the town was concerned no accident by drowning was recorded.

What was probably the most sensational event that had had to do with Gympie, expecting of course, its discovery, was the great flood of 1875, which devastated Maryborough and the valleys of the Mary River with a mighty flood. In that unhappy year there were two floods within a fortnight of each other. The result was that the valley between the two hills of Gympie was turned into a lake as deep as 20 or 30 feet, with a select assortment of miner's small weatherboard and bark habitations which were floating about all more or less in a state of liquidation. Up as far as Pillow's Hotel, in Mary Street, did the waters advance, completely submerging Nash's Gully, or about half way uphill and at length after the flood had lasted a week or so it returned almost as abruptly as it had risen; leaving houses afore-said enshrined in the mud.

There was never such a patronage of religious edifices as when this visitation was on, for to tell the truth the people got in and could not be induced to quit. Big stores, such as Cullinane's, Tronson's and Hawley's were only too glad to store the scared building with as much flour and produce as possible at the very outset, for the churches were built on the Caledonian Hill that was far above the

reach of the flowing waters. This appeared to be, at any rate to the distressed and homeless families of the miners, a direct provision for them, and strange to say their stay became so comfortable that it became a matter of difficulty when the waters had subsided of getting them out at all. One of the churches, the Digger's Bethel. actually held services with the permanent residents curtained off from the worshipping visitors.

Strange to say such was the co-operative posers possessed by the community that losses other than by flood were very rare And no cases of drowning occurred at all. There were parties continually rowing over the lake in which some of the tops of the brick houses in Mary Street could be seen. The Varieties Theatre, at the foot of Mary Street was unfortunately covered up.

The after consequences of the flood were certainly worse than those experienced during the ordeal, for the exposure and the damp caused much more sickness and fever than the actual fright had done to the women and children. The call, of the storekeepers for help in saving their goods was vigorously responded to or the damage in goods would have been far worse than it was. The task of distributing food to the hundreds of helpless creatures housed in the churches imposed a severe strain on the volunteers' willingness, but all the help that was rendered was freely and cordially given.

Godwin's Hotel was floating, it is said; for. having a lot of casks under his house he took the precaution of putting in the bung in each, so that when the water came up to the barrels under the floor of the house it was simply a matter of "inevitable must." It may be some consolation, to the remembrance of many a Gympieite, today to know that the town never looked prettier than when it was submerged. The water having finally subsided to Tronson's footpath disappeared altogether afterwards.