

## THE HISTORY OF DROUIN WEST PRIMARY SCHOOL

With the school's 125<sup>th</sup> birthday on June 15<sup>th</sup> this year, I have put together a brief outline of the school's beginnings and history.

This information has come from Graeme Butler's Book "Buln Buln – The History of the Buln Buln Shire".

Jenny Dawson.

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In February 1887, F.C. Mason – Parliamentary Member for West Gippsland wrote to the Department of Public Instruction pointing out the necessity for a school in the district of Brandy Creek.

Two weeks after this letter, the Department acted and Inspector C.A. Topp arrived in the area to attend to evaluation of the factual data and consequent need for a school. His finding was that F.C. Mason had overestimated the population and that there was no town or village there.

Topp concluded the children were needed at home to help with everyday farm chores and therefore low attendances during summer seasons and bad roads would prevent high attendances during winter. He noted that the road at Brandy Creek Crossing was familiarly known as the "Glue Pot".

The Selectors then put forward a petition accompanied by a map. The entire village lay south of the Tarween River (Tarago River) and east of the branching arm of Gum Scrub Creek. It had streets such as Cook Road, McNeilly Street and Connor Street. There was a market, straw yards, a cemetery and a racecourse. The names on this petition were: John McNeilly, James Young, William Young, Henry Williams, W.H. Smith Joseph Hall, Henry Walton, Richard Higgs, Frederick Wright, Henry Dicken and Ezra Cook.

W.H. Smith received freehold of 159 acres in 1876, this was opposite the present school site to the east. He built an eight roomed hotel on the southwest corner of his land. This "public house" was the renowned "Northern Junction Hotel" – an institution which always boasted excellent stabling as well as hearty company.

Ezra Cook and Richard Higgs also had hotels, with Higg's Hotel called the "Selectors Arms Hotel", situated on Sale Road, but east of the Junction Hotel. Richard Higgs also had a sawmilling plant on Higg's Road.

The nearest police camp was at Shady Creek. There was a Constable Strahan and a Mounted Constable Commans.

Another letter was sent to the Department of Public Instruction by Mr. C. Flemming – Care of Brandy Creek, also stating that Mr. F.C. Mason had overestimated the population. The Department once again sent Inspector Topp to the area. He had to decide firstly whether a school was needed and then whether it should be at Gum Scrub Creek or at Brandy Creek.

His findings were clear, Brandy Creek area was well known as the “Glue Pot” and was not a place for a school. As a contrast, the land around Gum Scrub Creek was sandy and comparatively dry. If a school was placed at Brandy Creek, children attending from the west would be forced to walk through up to two miles of mud. Three children lived east of Gum Scrub Creek, while 14 lived west of it. Topp adopted a site between the two creeks. 5/8 of a mile from Gum Scrub Creek and 1¾ miles from Brandy Creek. The place was called “The Junction” (road to Jindivick and Neerim).

Five acres were set aside for the site for the new school.

Selectors at Brandy Creek and to the east, angrily claimed they would be deprived of a school within the required 2 mile limit. How could a Brandy Creek District School be 2 miles away from Brandy Creek?

Nearly a year had passed since the application for the school had been lodged before tenders went out for building the school. Tenders varied from 722 tendered by Thomas Wright of East Melbourne to 431 by William Swanson of William Street, Melbourne. The Department accepted the lowest tender and eventually found that they had also received the lowest quality.

One acre was cleared of about 40 to 50 trees, of about 8 feet in diameter. The rest of the site was topped – the top of the trees were taken off. The scrub was cut and burnt and logs rolled to the side of the clearing for burning later.

On 29<sup>th</sup> December, 1873, John Holmes, the Clerk of Works for the Department was dismayed at the quality of construction going on at the new school. He found rough hand sawn blue gum and messmate palings proffered as “dressed external lining” while the bricks for the chimneys were still on drying racks, hardly having been cured for any length of time. These were the first bricks to be made in the district and were roughly moulded. The rest of the job was not really successful and Swanson left a trail of unpaid bills and unfinished or shoddy work. After 5 months the school and the residence were not finished. The carpenter made official complaints – he and his sub-contractors had not been paid by Swanson. Richard Higgs wrote angrily to the Department that he had not seen any money for supplies or cartage.

The school leaked at the chimneys, doors and roof. The bricks needed urgent cement wash before they themselves were washed away by rain. In fact they were washed away in August of the following year and the chimney rebuilt in the next November.

Miss Margaret McLean arrived in the middle of winter to take on a new building for opening on the 15<sup>th</sup> June, but finding no equipment for teaching and that her books were delayed at Berwick, she decided not to open the new school until June 22<sup>nd</sup> 1874. However with heavy rain and bad roads, no pupils arrived on that opening day – not one child.

An inscription board bearing the name Drouin West was carried all the way from Melbourne and fixed to the school front.

By November the undergrowth had reverted back to its natural state, which meant no playground. There was no tethering place for the children's horses. The boundaries were unfenced and cattle tended to stray in and despoil the yard. Miss McLean complained that the cattle were not the only strays on the grounds. Trespassers came to cut down saplings and to steal water from the tap. The need for a fence remained well into the 1890's.

In 1876 F.C. Mason wanted the school moved to the Buln Buln Township. A petition was put forward by the local selectors and the school stayed.

No maintenance was done on the school building for about 30 years and the head teacher, J.H. Laity 1879-1899 complained often about the leaking roof in his residence, about the lack of fencing and the encroaching undergrowth.

This scrub was blamed for the near loss of the school in 1885, when a fire broke out near the Tarago River and swept within 2 chain of the school house.

By 1915 the chimney was leaning and smoking badly and parents complained about the safety of their children, fearing the building would collapse. The floors were rotten with big holes in them and in the two front rooms the floors had been eaten away by ants.

When storms blew up the children would be moved out of the school to the safety of the shelter shed.

Inspector William Dooley, District Inspector, visited the school in February 1916. In August renovations were started and the children moved into the Mechanics Institute Hall on Sale Road, which was built in 1910. The school reopened in February the next year. Total cost of renovations were 133. A further 190 was spent on both the school and the residence in 1927.

The first reference to the tennis courts was in 1911 when the Drouin West Tennis Club gained permission from the school committee to clear part of the school ground for a tennis court. J.J. Featherstone, the teacher at that time did not object to the courts being placed within 6 feet of the school residence.

Harold Higgs became active on the school committee in the 1930's. In 1934 the problem was overcrowding – one small room had to accommodate 17 desks, 2 teachers and 39 children. In 1937 there was a problem with blackberries.

In August of 1935 an extension to the old school was added. Once again the children used the Mechanics Institute Hall.

Electricity was not connected until 1948. Also in 1948 six vehicles had crashed through the eastern boundary fence, while failing to take the corner into Jindivick Road. It was thought to be the same driver each time.

Mother's Club purchased playground equipment about this time and the school building after a total overhaul in 1950, was joined by a Jennings built L.T.C. classroom which first became occupied in April 1960.