

SOME HISTORY SURROUNDING THE TRANSFER OF THE G.P.S. REGATTA TO THE NEPEAN RIVER, PENRITH, N.S.W. IN 1936 - Notes by Mr D Bowden (May, 1992)

The N.S.W. G.P.S. Regatta was transferred from the Parramatta River to the Nepean River in 1936, some 56 years ago. In the interest of preserving history, I have prepared some notes from memory regarding this occurrence. Therefore I stress that what I write here requires revision and checking for accuracy.

The mid-1930s were fascinating years in the history of Great Public Schools Rowing. In 1934, for example, Sydney Grammar School had won the Championship, making history by choosing to row in their wide 'practice' Eight because of the turbulent water conditions. The strong westerly wind behind the crews contributed to the then record time of 7 minutes 38.5 seconds. In 1935 Sydney Church of England Grammar School won the last Schools Championship on the Parramatta River, using swivels for the first time in their boat instead of the old poppets*. All rowing clubs in N.S.W. and the other G.P.S. schools had transferred to swivels soon after the N.S.W. Eight's win in the 1929 Kings Cup in Perth (N.S.W.'s first victory since 1911).

The finishing line for the G.P.S. course at this time was at Cabarita Wharf. For many years the finish had been at Gladesville Point, but for a number of reasons, including the better vantage point provided by Cabarita Park for the huge number of onshore spectators, the finishing line by this time had been moved up river to the Cabarita location.

* Poppets - the poppet consisted of two hardwood plugs, called thole pins, with a grooved recess to hold the marline (or marlin) greased light rope. A triangular leather button kept the oar in position in the working area.

By 1936 the Nepean River had been the scene of a number of very successful senior rowing championships. This no doubt influenced the decision-making process of the A.A.G.P.S. Committee. In 1927, for example, the Australian Inter-Varsity Championships had been held there with much success, the river being acclaimed as a fine rowing course. In 1928 the N.S.W. Rowing Association chose the Nepean River as the venue for the Australian Rowing and Sculling Championships. The Kings Cup, held over a distance of 3 miles (from the other side of Glenbrook Creek at "The Narrows"), was won by West Australia in the time of 16 minutes and 50 seconds. The renowned H.R. Pearce won the Sculling Championship for the third successive occasion in the excellent time of 15 minutes and 30.4 seconds.

But it was more the problems of the Parramatta River rather than the attractions of the Nepean which instigated the change of venue for the A.A.G.P.S. Regatta. The annual Schools Championship on the Parramatta River had come to attract huge fleets of launches, rowing boats, skiffs, tugboats and ferries, some moored at precarious angles with large crowds of people on board. The strong element of potential disaster thus engendered was further intensified when the 'loud gun' was fired as a signal for 'the boom across the river' to be removed so that moored craft could up-anchor and go helter-skelter down the river ahead of the field - a spectacle of surging craft and waves. As a result there grew an increasing concern on the part of regatta officials, water authorities and masters of vessels for the safety of spectators and participants, especially the very young and old.

There were other advantages in transferring to the Nepean. The water was normally placid there, with crews apparently competing on equal terms without regard to the whims of wind and tide, factors that were always in play on the Parramatta. And there was no need for Heats on the previous Wednesday, as all eight crews could be accommodated in the one championship Final, providing a spectacle of G.P.S. eight-oared racing hitherto unseen.

The main objection to transferring the race to Penrith, expressed

particularly by Br Louis, the Headmaster of St Joseph's College, was the concern of school administrators regarding the safe transport of their pupils to the Nepean, and the potential damage to expensive rowing equipment in transit. However, the advantages of the move were deemed to outweigh the disadvantages.

On Saturday, 18th April 1936, an estimated crowd of some 35,000 people, including schoolboys, their families and the general public, witnessed the first G.P.S. Regatta on the Nepean River, with all schools competing in positions from Lane 1 on the Penrith shore to Lane 8 on the Emu Plains bank. The Championship Eights raced over a distance of $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles, while the First and Second Fours competed over the 1 mile course. These were the days that preceded the inclusion of the Second Eight and Third and Fourth Four events. All crews rowed through the arches of the Railway Bridge. The finishing line was marked on one side by a telegraph pole at the top of the ramp just outside the entrance to the Nepean Club's boatshed, and on the other by an alignment post on the Emu Plains side, near to which was a little sandy beach, about 50' in length, familiarly known as "Little Manly". Subsequent floods took it away.

The results that day were:

Champion Eights: 1. St Joseph's; 2. Sydney Grammar; 3. Shore. Margins: $\frac{1}{4}$ length, $\frac{1}{2}$ length. Time: 7 minutes, $56\frac{1}{2}$ seconds.

First Fours: 1. St Joseph's; 2. Shore; 3. Sydney Grammar. Margins: 3', 1 length. Time: 5 minutes, 49.2 seconds.

Second Fours: 1. Shore; 2. Sydney High; 3. St Joseph's. Margin: $\frac{1}{2}$ length, 1 length. Time: 5 minutes, 52.5 seconds.

It may come as a surprise today that St Joseph's won the race in a seven year old boat, built by Gus Green for the College in 1929. This "old warrior", as it was referred to, had won the Head of the River in 1932, 1933 and 1936, as well as many other Maiden and Junior Eight races in that time. This was the era when racing boats of cedar

construction were being replaced by boats constructed of plywood, which provided more strength, hence a longer life and a considerable reduction in the costs of repair and maintenance.

Mr Bernie Williams of the Haberfield Rowing Club was coach of the winning crew, having also been associated with the St Joseph's wins in 1932 and 1933. Bernie had a quiet demeanour. He was a humble person - it was relaxing and a pleasure to be in his company. He was held in high esteem by the schoolboy oarsmen. During these years he was also sole selector for the N.S.W. Rowing Association's crews, selecting the Eight for the Australian Championship and Kings Cup (3 miles), as well as the State representative in the Australian Sculling Championship for President's Cup (2½ miles).

In 1936 the Australian Championships were held on the Swan River in Perth. As coxswain in the N.S.W. squad, I therefore did not actually see the first, historic G.P.S. Regatta on the Nepean River, as our squad had left Sydney by train the previous evening, heading to Melbourne, then to Adelaide and Kalgoorlie. The photograph below tells the story:



Members of the N.S.W. Eight at Kalgoorlie W.A. en route to Perth for the Australian Championships on 2nd May, 1936. Sunday morning in a Kalgoorlie street, reading newspaper accounts of the inaugural G.P.S. Regatta on the Nepean River, 18th April, 1936. From right: Sid Raper (coach), Monty Buckham, Ed Buckley (mgr), Stan McGilvray, John Burrell (stroke), Bill Campbell, Duncan Baggett, Doug Bowden (cox). Bill Thomas took the photo. Absent: Ted Bromley, Bill Dixon, Jack Fisher.

The year 1936 was towards the end of the Great Depression that had troubled the world since 1929. Many sportsmen when travelling chose to wear the "plus fours" seen in this photograph - being creaseless they doubled as nightwear when, wrapped in a blanket, the travellers slept on the train floor or seat. The cost of "sleepers" was well beyond the budget of most sporting organisations in those days.