

# ACKNOWLEDGING THE 150 ANNIVERSARY OF THE ALBURY SHOW SOCIETY.

*Edited talk by Jan Hunter (presented at A&DHS General Meeting, November 2007 and reprinted from A&DHS Bulletin No 476)*

In 1857, forty people attended a meeting in Albury called by Robert Brown. From that meeting, 150 yrs ago, the Albury and Murray River Agricultural and Horticultural Society was born. Almost immediately the Society held a Show in which 'fine peaches, grapes, quinces and maize were shown.' The wheat exhibited however was only 'tolerable.' As part of that Show, a ploughing match between a three-horse team and a two-bullock team was staged. Later in that year a stock exhibition was held.

A Showground site was chosen in Wodonga in 1860. This was fenced and the fifth annual Show was held. The fruit and vegetables were displayed next door in McKay's Victoria Hotel in their large upper room. After this effort, the Society collapsed and the next Show was held six years later on 'Hospital Hill' in Thurgoona Street, Albury.

About this time the Society dropped the term 'Murray River' and became Albury and Border Pastoral, Agricultural and Horticultural Society.

The Society struggled till 1875 when a new committee was elected. Three thousand people attended the Show in 1876 which was held in the Gaol Gardens with the jumping being held on the Botanical Reserve.



ALBURY SHOWGROUNDS 1930s (NORTH STREET)

In 1878 another site was chosen in Hume Street, but a five-acre site at Alexandra Park on the north-east corner of Guinea and Young Streets became available and that land became the Showgrounds till after WWII. The first Show on the new site was in 1879 in conjunction with the Albury Industrial Exhibition adjacent to the Mechanics Institute. This exhibition was run by the Show Society. A side light to that exhibition is that Alf Waugh a local butcher, attended and as a result, purchased a generator to run a refrigerator at his shop. He was the first butcher to use cold storage in Albury.

Another six acres was purchased on the Young Street site in 1884 and a very substantial grandstand was erected (to which there was much opposition but I don't know why). The stand held 600 people. That year the Show had an attendance of 7000. Another grandstand was built in 1904 which was even bigger. Before the turn of the century the Showgrounds also had a cycling track and 'facilities for all types of sport.' The Show had become a significant event in the life of the wider district, an example being that Yackandandah Shire declared a public holiday on the middle day of the Show and Messrs Crawford and Co (successors to Cobb and Co) organised a drag to leave Yackandandah in the morning of the holiday.

As we straddle the turn of the century in the Society's history, it is interesting to note that a 1918 headstone, in the Albury Pioneer Cemetery, in memory of Walter Isaac Johnson, is inscribed, 'for twenty years secretary of the Albury & Border Agricultural Society.'

In the 1920s, part of the Showgrounds was leased to the Albury Motor Cycle Club, which had a cinder track there, similar to the Speedway Royal, Sydney. In 1928 a working bee added a safety

strip to prevent riders from hitting the fence. A newspaper reported: 'Racing on a cinder track is most spectacular, and although spills do occur, usually the rider comes to earth gently, and suffers no injury.'

In the early twenties Albury's name went round the world when 'Sundown,' a horse owned by A T Judd of Blayney, cleared a world record jump at the Albury Show. This caused a sensation. In 1925 the same horse, competing again, dropped dead while trying for a third attempt at a jump. One newspaper account recorded that there was a shocked silence, and then people moved onto the ground to pluck tail hairs from the dead horse for a memento. Mr F C Blacklock lent his Fordson tractor to drag the animal from the ground so that the events could continue. The family say that 'Sundown' was buried where it fell, which is probably now under the Principal's residence at The Scots School.

A successful Show is dependent on the weather but there were other difficulties over the years. A very early Show had to be postponed for two days because of the death of the first president. One year (1860) the Society had to issue medals instead of prize money and there was only one sheep exhibited. 1869 was a depression year. In 1889 floods prevented people crossing the river. In 1892 depression forced the Society to reduce prize money from £1400 to £500 and the committee had to personally guarantee the over-draft.

The 1930s depression affected interest and attendance, but as the effects weakened the Society spread its wings again. A special train was run from Wangaratta for patrons of the Show in 1935 and the Belbridge Memorial Gates were erected at the Young Street entrance. Frederick John Belbridge was a member of the Society for 27 years and president six times.

In the next year, Society members discussed the purchase of a larger site to cope with increased attendance and exhibits. The proposed land was on Mate Street, between North and Fallon Streets and owned by Mr Stewart and the Education Department but the committee were uneasy about committing themselves to buying land without knowing if they could sell the existing site. In the ensuing discussion it was noted that the Industrial Hall in the Showgrounds was used as a skating rink and had returned a profit of £185 for the year. By the end of 1938, the new site of nearly 15 ha had been purchased.

Meanwhile, back in September 1937, with plans for the Show completed, a polio scare blocked travel between NSW and Victoria. Children under 16 were not allowed to cross the border without a permit stating that the holder had not been in contact with the disease in the past fortnight. The permit was to be signed by a doctor or other designated resident. An urgent letter was sent to the Border Morning Mail from the president encouraging residents to get the required documentation. In the same paper were large advertisements with Show-train timetables from Wangaratta and Junee to Albury. Unfortunately there was a drop in attendance because of 'too many formalities' and general unease about the illness. The gate-takings were £150 down on the previous year.

The war was suddenly close to home when a temporary military centre was established at the Showgrounds. In June 1940, two contingents of 400 soldiers were billeted, and at its peak the ground held 1000 men. These became Albury's Own, 2/23<sup>rd</sup>, and at first the men were housed in the cattle stalls and yards. When soldiers were later transferred to Bonegilla and Bandiana, the Friendly Aliens (4<sup>th</sup> Employment Company) took their place at the Showgrounds.

It was not surprising that the 1940 Albury Show was abandoned, but in July 1941 the military authorities gave notice of vacating the Showgrounds, leaving everything but the officers' mess, the guard house and the cook house for the Albury Show Society. They also gave £400 towards returning the ground to its former use. The Society discussed whether they should hold a Show

that year, in view of the war situation, but they decided to go ahead with a three-day event in September. Their decision was a wise one, with the 1941 Show an 'outstanding success.'

The Society was fully prepared, in view of the severe petrol rationing, for a falling off in the attendance figures, but these were well up to those of former years. Indeed, there were larger crowds present than at the last Show, held in 1939, when the shadow of war first fell across the world.

At this time the committee added their voice to others in Albury to suggest that the government purchase the land for a munitions factory. Late in 1941 a munitions annexe was established at the southern end of the Showgrounds. This annexe was not a long-lived enterprise and began discharging workers in 1943. The next year Gadsdens took over the premises, manufacturing cans etc. from tin plate.

By 1942 the Show Society buildings had been successfully re-located to Mate Street. A Show was held there in October and the *Border Morning Mail* commended the 'Carry On' attitude of the community. 'The Showgrounds were new' said the *Border*, 'but the spirit was old.' The Society showed 'courage and initiative.' The report continued: '...the impact of war upon Albury's first Show on its new ground yesterday was inescapable. One felt it everywhere in the half-completed grounds (grandstand and a host of other facilities have yet to come), fall off in side-shows and, above all, in the absence of at least two major attractions, the cattle and sheep sections.'

No doubt the Show Committee members were relieved when the Presbyterian Church, owners of the Albury Grammar School, purchased the old Showgrounds in 1944. The school paid £8500 for the 5.6ha between Young and Perry Streets. The Belbridge Memorial Gates were shifted to the Mate Street entrance of the new Showgrounds, facing Stephen Street and they are still standing today.

Apart from the annual Shows the actual Showgrounds have been a useful public space. In the early years of the century the militia had weekend camps on the grounds. In 1920 Captain Roy King landed on the oval by mistake, despite a smoke fire on Alexandra Park where he was supposed to land. In 1924, 1500 school children made the phrase, 'Hume and Hovell 1824-1924.' When the Duke of Gloucester visited in 1934, his party were welcomed at the Showgrounds and he inspected the buildings.



The Albury Show Society is one of the oldest organisations in Albury and it appears that the only formal history of the Show Society is a paper on the first fifty years written by Dr Arthur Andrews in the early 1900s.