

Construction of Hume Dam, 1919-1936

Part 4: The Human Cost

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Estimates of workforce numbers vary widely. In 1927, they were: Victoria 355, NSW 650 and Bethanga Bridge 89. As the depression bit, these numbers dropped significantly. Housing, barracks, stores, workshops and recreation halls were built. A post office and police presence were established, a casualty ward, a doctor with a phone and motor vehicle were provided.

Manual labour was harsh with a 48-hour week, later reduced to 44. With such a large workforce and dangerous working conditions, accidents were always waiting to happen.

October 25 1921: Jacob Gehrig senior 55, George Pearce 62 and William Wakeford 17, were killed while attempting to retrieve unexploded blasting powder. The *Albury Banner* reported that "The work of removing the powder from the cavity in which it had been lodged was in progress, and about half a bag of the explosive substance had been taken out. Gehrig was in the hole when the terrific explosion occurred." The paper went on to note that Gehrig was thrown into the air and landed 150 yards (137 metres) away.



Looking towards the Victorian side – excavation for the foundation of the spillway and scene of the fatal explosion.

April 17 1923: Henry Stanley Meade 19, was crushed between rail trucks on the NSW side.

July 24 1925: John McNamara 43, fell from the elevated back verandah of his house, striking a woodhorse. He died in Albury District Hospital, leaving a wife and 7 children.

March 30 1928: John Glen 60, was a driller working on the face of the stone quarry, “when his drill jammed and in endeavouring to free it, he missed his footing” – he fell 20 metres to his death.

May 17 1929: Edward Parker, 28, a benchman employed by State Rivers and Waters Commission at Mitta Junction, leaned across a bench, his coat was caught by machinery and he was tossed against a circular saw blade, having both legs severed. He died four hours later in the Albury District Hospital.

April 16 1935: Jack Newman 37, a carpenter, was killed, leaving a wife and 3 children, when he fell onto concrete from wooden decking, 12 metres above. In a bizarre twist, a workmate, Jack Meades 30, was hit by a car and killed in Mate Street, while riding his bicycle home after attending Newman’s funeral. Meades was married with three young children.

Illustrating the often dangerous working conditions at the site, in April 1935, while reporting the death of Newman, the *Albury Banner* commented that in the previous couple of months “two other men employed on similar work at the weir have fallen through the decking. Hugh Cornell, the well-known footballer, broke both collarbones. One of his hands was also twisted, and he is at present in Sydney under treatment. The other man was Frank Gulson, of Lavington. He was considerably shaken, but his fall was broken and he was able to resume work a week later.” Cornell had fallen preciously, the first time into the water.

An onsite plaque at the Dam quotes nine deaths but gives no details. Several offsite fatalities are believed to have occurred.

Both the NSW and Victorian village had a church. Dances and picture shows were enjoyed. The NSW school had 66 pupils in 1921. The baker, milkman and greengrocer called regularly as did the ice man. Each village had several privately run businesses. Alcohol sales were banned.

Sport attracted many, including tennis, golf, football and cricket. Both Ebden Weir and Hume Weir cricket teams competed in ‘A’ Grade of the ABCA competition between 1922-1929. In 1929 both football clubs merged. Weir United were premiers of the O&M League in 1930 and again in 1931.

In the two years prior to leaving Albury for Melbourne in 1930, triple Brownlow Medallist Haydn Bunton scored four centuries and a 97 against the Weir cricket teams, three centuries against the Hume Weir, the other against Ebden Weir.
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