

## Early Days of the Ovens & Murray Football League

*Greg Ryan*

Delegates met in April 1893 to arrange the first matches of the newly formed Ovens and Murray Football Association. Under president John Dodsworth and secretary Tom Hishon, the competition had teams from Rutherglen, Beechworth Wanderers, Wangaratta West End, Wangaratta City, Chiltern and Eldorado.

The first two premierships were won by Beechworth Wanderers, but the competition was dominated in the early days by Rutherglen, winning ten times from 1895 to 1910.

Both Albury and Border United were admitted to the Ovens & Murray Association in 1895. The *Corowa Free Press* reported that "The eight clubs now forming the association are Rutherglen, Albury, Beechworth, Border United, United Miners, Lilliput, Chiltern and Wangaratta."

Albury lost their first match in the O&M Association against reigning premiers Beechworth Wanderers, played in Albury on May 4, 1895. Albury had to wait until 1902 to win their first O&M flag.

By 1899 the competition was reduced to seven teams, Albury, Chiltern, Wangaratta, Rutherglen, Excelsior, Border and Southern. These teams competed until 1904 when the competition was reduced further to Rutherglen, Border, Excelsior and Lake Moodemere.

The O&M folded in 1911. Rutherglen & District Football Association (R&DFA) formed in 1911, admitting Wahgunyah, Lake, Lake Rovers, Chiltern, Springhurst, Christmeadows, Great Southern, Excelsior, Corowa, Barnawartha and Howlong.

Albury and Rutherglen were admitted in 1912 and in 1913 R&DFA had six teams – Albury, Balldale, Border United, Howlong, Lake Rovers and Rutherglen. Albury defeated Rutherglen in the 1913 final at the Albury Sportsground.

The Ovens & Murray Football Association reformed in 1914 and 1915 then after a three-year break due to World War I, they reformed for the 1919 season. The competition struggled for a few years with some clubs joining other district leagues. In 1926 the Association became Ovens & Murray Football League and began to grow in strength.

The photo shows the Albury team outside the Globe Hotel as they prepare for a trip to Balldale. The *Border Morning Mail* reported in August 1912 that "The long journey [to Balldale] ... being got over by the enterprise of Mr R Whitehead, with his 45hp motor waggon, which was fitted with seats for the journey. The motor acted splendidly averaging almost 12 miles an hour."

An article in the same newspaper by "Half-Back" in September 1938 reported that Fred Blacklock provided his 'motor lorry' to transport Albury players to Balldale in July 1913. The newspaper included the photo (see page 2) and identified many of the players and officials:

"The driver, with his head thrust forward, is Mr R Whitehead, and his three companions in the front are 'Joker Byrnes', C Waterstreet, and the late Bill Strang. In the second row the man with the beard is a Mr Laird, and next come Arthur Burton, Fred Bohr and Clive Burt. The two outside men in the next seat have not been identified, but the centre man is George Eames. The boy on the extreme left of the next seat is Ollie Cox, now of Mangoplah, and next to him the late Norman McDonald, with Ernest McDonald, now manager of the

New Zealand Loan and MA Co in Albury, on the outside. In the next seat the two men visible are Mick Larking and the late Lieut Colonel Simpson, MC. In the back row, the only man visible, with his hand raised, is Bill Howse. Right below him, on the ground, we see W J Delaney in the boxer hat, with Paul Curran the boy in the cap in front of him. The lad on his left, with the panama hat turned up in front, is Joe Adams, showing an early interest in football.”

In spite of what must have been a bone-rattling ride, Albury won the 1912 match 8 goals 11 behinds to Balldale 4 goals 4 behinds and the 1913 match 9 goals 8 behinds to Balldale 5 goals 7 behinds.

