

“Old Man River”

I'm not going to pretend that I'm a lot smarter than you, but I have been around a long while and have actually been part of what has happened in the area around Wyong for as long as I can remember. So while I may say a few things you already know, I just might mention a few other things of which you were not aware. Hopefully you will find some of these interesting.

Long, long ago ... I'm talking about well over 11,000 years ago, things were a bit different from what they look like today. This period was towards the end of the last Ice Age and the World was about to enter a warmer period called “The Holocene” i.e. the geologic period we are now in. Sea level was much lower, and the coastline was much further out to sea. As the icecaps started to melt, the sea level rose and came much closer to where Wyong is today. Some of the coast, like Brisbane Water and Lake Macquarie, was flooded (or “drowned”) while other parts, like the Tuggerah Lakes area, became lagoons when long sand-spits formed between The Entrance, Norah Head and Budgewoi.

Whereas previously I had been forming my valley and discharging sediment well beyond the current coastline, I now started to deposit it into the new lagoon or lake and build a finger delta which is now North and South Tacoma.

Thank goodness I got all that part out of the road and can now get a little bit more personal.

Most people take me for granted, but I'm used to that because I'm part of the landscape and have been around for as long as people have lived here, and that goes back tens of thousands of years! However, I'm the very reason, to a large extent, that they could live here at all. I know I can be a bit of an obstacle and nuisance and can ‘break out’ and cause a lot of damage, but most of the time I behave myself and provide the means by which most of the Central Coast gets its water supply. I am, of course, “The Wyong River”.

You wouldn't call me splendid or magnificent, but I am quite attractive and, at times when the light is right and the air is still,

I am rather beautiful with the reflections I produce. Add to this the colourful birdlife, the fish and native animals I support, and you have one of those miracles of nature we call an ecosystem.

The valleys I formed with my tributaries have produced the alluvial soils which once supported the giant eucalypt forests that are now long gone. Most of the trees that you see today are little more than a hundred years young, whereas the giants of the past were thousands of years old. Once the trees in the valley were gone, my alluvial soils provided the environment for the crops of sorghum and corn, which were necessary to feed the horse and bullock teams used to pull the timber to the railway at Wyong. There were times, when it was wet, that this was a difficult pass as the heavy-laden wagons used to bog.

To help overcome this to some degree, the men laid 'corduroy roads', i.e. roads with small logs laid at right angles to the road direction to stop the wagon wheels sinking into the mud. It was a bit of a bumpy ride but it worked. This was the reason Alison Road became the main street. Anzac Ave. was too low lying and the parts near the Art House used to be one of my past riverbeds.

As well as supporting crops, my alluvial soils also grew the pastures to support the Dairying Industry. This became one of the important means of employment in and around my valley, and the construction of Milk/Butter Factory in 1906 meant that well in excess of one hundred dairy farms were able to have their milk processed at this facility.

Like I said before, I and the wetlands (some people call them swamps) I produced as I changed my course in flood times, were quite an obstacle to northern travel. Often that transport was forced to take 'The Great Northern Road', which was built mostly along the ridges to avoid river crossings. The convicts did the hard yakka to build that road, parts of which you can still walk today.

It wasn't until the 1890's when the railway came through that people could travel easily from Sydney to Newcastle. The railway and timber industry were the main factors for Wyong's beginnings. Prior to that, the only timber taken out of my valley

was cedar as it was smaller and lighter than the eucalypts and could be snigged up the hills near Yarramalong, then taken down the ridges to Gosford or The Hunter River. I can still remember the sound of the cutters calling out "timber", as trees were felled; and whips cracking above oxen bellowing as the 'bullockies' yelled at their teams in a language that would make your hair curl.

Soon after the railway went through, tourists from Sydney discovered the Tuggerah Lakes and the fun to be had by holidaying at The Entrance. Mind you, it was nothing like today. A couple of guest houses and a camping area near the channel was all there was, but the pleasure of a beautiful sandy beach where the surf club is now, the chance to go boating on the lake, some good fishing and prawning, and the social life of parties and dances at the guest houses, was enough to draw the crowds.

Once again, I provided the means by which they got to their holiday site. The entrepreneurs built about six wharves just down from the railway station, opposite what is now Wyong Nursing Home. A short walk from the station got the tourists to the steam launches, which then ferried them down river and across the lake. That was a fun trip in itself, because the lake could get quite choppy at times.

Speaking of guest houses, I had a couple of my own at Wyong. Mr. Warner, one of the big landowners in the 1800's, built what you would call a mansion for those days on my banks just east of the town. After he died and the estate sold, it became an up-market guesthouse called "Strathavon" and competed with the other guesthouse called "The Regent", which was just opposite where the wharves were. These guesthouses flourished during the 1940's and 50's, but times change and today they are shadows of their former glory. The "Strath" is a venue for low-cost housing and The Regent is now a nursing home.

The first bridge at Wyong was a low-level crossing a little to the west of the current car bridge, which was really the first rail bridge. The low bridge was later replaced by a high wooden one-way bridge. As traffic increased and the big flood of 1949 hit,

which went all the way to Tuggerah Station, the need to raise The Pacific Highway and have a better two-lane bridge was obvious.

They decided the solution was to build a new rail bridge and put the car bridge on top of the old rail bridge. As I understand it, the plans to make the Pacific Highway into four lanes through Wyong will require another bridge, which will cross me about where the old low-level bridge was in the early 1900's.

Another industry I had a hand in was fishing. Initially the main area was at Tacoma, but later North Entrance supported quite a few fishermen. Using their initiative these fishermen constructed a 'tram track' from the lake to Tuggerah Station. Their 'catch', plentiful prawns and fish, were loaded directly from their launches onto 'bogies' and hauled to Tuggerah Station to be loaded onto the train. This got the fish and prawns fresh to the Sydney Markets within a couple of hours. The remnants of that tram track are still to be seen today.

Although it came a little later than those industries I've already mentioned, the Citrus Industry was another important employer that I supported with water for irrigation. 'The Packing House' at Wyong Station had its own rail-siding, so carriages designed for the boxed citrus could be loaded and linked easily with freight trains. This siding also served the big poultry produce store owned by Darcy Rose. Both the packing house and the produce store are gone now, as are the citrus, poultry, timber and dairying industries in Wyong.

As I look back, I recognise that my valley and I have gone from being a highly productive agricultural powerhouse, supporting many industries to one that now supports turf and hobby farms. I am a shadow of my former productive self..

I fondly recall how the produce of the valley, along with cattle, poultry, cooking and handicrafts, went on display each year at the Wyong Show. The fact that it always seemed to bring the rain didn't deter those who also set up 'Side Show Alley' - a fun and integral part of the Show which made it something that the town always looked forward to. But all that stopped years ago. So many changes..

Before the Wyong Olympic Pool was built, I was the only place to swim. Boys constructed 'swings' on some of by big riverside trees. These were no more than a length of rope or wire with a handle on the end. They did however provide a lot of fun as the boys, and some girls, yelling like Tarzan, swung out as far as they could before dropping into the water. Those were fun times!

Nowadays, apart from supplying water for the Central Coast, I'm mainly used for a bit of recreational fishing and canoeing.

As I look back over the last couple of hundred years when William Cape was granted land in the Wyong area and the cedar-cutters started to come into my upper valley at Yarramalong and Brush Creek, and the railway came through Wyong in the 1890's, and the timber industry took off and, and, and ... I start to feel a bit nostalgic for those earlier times. The times which the more senior community members call 'the good old days', were just that. Yes, they were good times but they were also hard times that taught important lessons and sound values. For much of that time there was no electricity (lamp light and fuel stoves only), no town water supply (all houses relied on tanks), most roads weren't sealed, and transport was horse and buggy. But progress has changed all that. The modern world is a far cry from what 'the good old days' used to be ... in my very humble opinion.

Perhaps the next time you see me, you won't take me for granted but think about some of the things I've said and recognise that a big part of you being here is because I was here first and produced an environment that has made this part of the world a wonderful place to live.

By the way, if you happen to see any rubbish that can wash into me and pollute my waters, perhaps you might pick it up and pop it in the nearest bin, please? That may make you feel good about taking care of our Wyong, as well as help keep me cleaner. Thank you.

Rest assured, I am proud to be your most humble Wyong River but, as they say in the classics, everything I have talked about is but 'water under the bridge'.
