

## PLOD ESSAY: Tent Town



Not long before the State Coal Mine began at Powlett River in December 1909, a report in *the Age* in September of that year stated that a newly declared township, which would include the mine, had just been named *Wonthaggi*.

There had been a great deal of thought about it, according to *The Age*: “Various names had been suggested. One that was eagerly recommended – for [the naming of the township] is one that excites considerable interest – was Bungalow, but it was pointed out that under the biting-off pungent of the railway department [the railway being the main recipient of the coal to be mined], the railway station might be cut down to *Bung* or *Bun* or *Bungle*, and either of these sobriquets would bring a shiver to the frame if not a blush to the cheek of a local patriot. The worst the department can do with *Wonthaggi* is to make it *Won* or *Wo*.”

“At present, the future of the township – if prophecy be fulfilled, of course – consists of 320 acres of partially cleared scrub and bush country four-and-one-half miles south-east of Dalyston and about one-and-a-quarter miles south-east of the government line of bores... the government has the idea of making surrounding land the model coal field and propose to offer the miners blocks of land upon which they may make their houses.”<sup>1</sup>

While officials contemplated the naming of the new township, the planning for a much-needed coal mine continued at speed. Deciding where the first four shafts should be sunk, clearing land, organising the creation of a long-awaited railway to move, among other things, newly hewn coal from mine to city, hiring of miners to hew the rich seams was first and foremost. Men, lots of men, were needed to sink shafts, descend underground on long ladders to hew coal and lift it on pullies to the surface in buckets (no horses and skips at first underground) then load the coal into huge baskets onto drays pulled by massive bullock teams from the first Powlett Shafts to Inverloch where it could be loaded onto ships and sent to Melbourne, at least until the planned rail arrived.

Housing for these men was urgent, but the State had it sorted. A large paddock close by the first shafts was marked out like a makeshift town with areas for tents along paths that served as roads going east-west and north-south. Each man was allotted a tent and a place to put it up. Within a couple of weeks 300 men had put up enough tents to begin calling their new home Tent Town, and some of them with wives were making room for their families. Very quickly the numbers of workers and tents grew to 700 and a camp very much like a town began to

<sup>1</sup> *The Melbourne Age* 22 September 1909

emerge with shops, a church, and streets with names like Bourke and Collins and Spring Street and even McBride Avenue where the tents of the officers were lined up on the hillside nearest the mine.

The first men hired consisted mainly of miners, surface workers, carpenters, smiths, carters, and the storekeepers. According to one newspaper reporter, “The miners are a fine, sturdy, good natured lot from every mining field in Australia. It’s strange how the Scotsmen predominate. One can call out ‘Mac!’ in Collins Street and half a dozen men turn around and as many call out ‘coming!’ from half a dozen tents. There are two Welsh miners who have been in Australia only a fortnight...”<sup>2</sup>



Another reporter described the new town as a “canvas town developing along its own charmingly natural lines. The impression one gains upon first viewing it from the far-side lip of the basin is of a miniature goldfield of the early days. Like Ballarat or Coolgardie and the great infant fields of the past, there are lines of tents on the hillside and the lower levels. True, by day the air does not ring with the clank of pick-and-shovel and the rattle of innumerable dollies, but by night the hillside is aglow with the lights of a hundred campfires and the hot air heavy with the fragrance of the burning gum boughs.”<sup>3</sup>

One month later, in the same newspaper, description of Tent Town in the making seemed frantic: “The cheerful sound of hammer and axe and saw is heard day and night in the canvas township: a miner is constructing a bunk, another is making a rocking chair with a kerosene case for a seat. The usefulness of the kerosene case cannot be realised until one has been a few days in the Powlett River Township. It acts as a chair, meat safe, or bread bin and with a board running through the centre as a shelf it can be made to hold all the groceries required for an ordinary establishment. A piece of deal nailed to each corner converts the case to a table. A bootmaker and repairer sets up his trade in the camp using his bunk as a bench; a girl starts working a sewing machine under the shade of the cover of a wagon; a laundry is promised although there is yet no sign of laundress or laundry man. It must be explained that there is no point in ever wearing a starched collar and white shirt which would only last until breakfast time, after which you could keep on wearing the collar for a month since it could not possibly get any dirtier than it did after the first hour of wearing, the dust was so bad...”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *The Argus*, 3 January 1910

<sup>3</sup> *The Argus*, “Town in the making; settlement at Powlett coal fields; life and types,” 14 December 1909

<sup>4</sup> *The Argus*, 14 December 1909

The creation of a townlike atmosphere continued apace and, in fact, spread out beyond the tent town confines towards what was to become the town of Wonthaggi that exists today. *The Argus* reports: “While the camp is asleep the township grows. One awakens to find in the place of a patch of scrub a butcher’s shop, with an inviting row of legs of mutton in the window. Further down the street a draper’s shop of weather board and canvas has sprung up in the early morning. A carpenter is putting up shelves while the draper unpacks his goods... Mr J. Armstrong, the camp architect, finished the plans for a post-office at midnight. The first thing in the morning teams were on the road to bring in timber. The accountants sat up until 2 o’clock this morning preparing the paysheets for the fortnightly pay where 300 men would be paid. At 7 o’clock Mr G Falloon was awakened with an urgent request from the head carpenter to send a telegram for the requisites of his trade. The supply cannot keep up with the demand.”<sup>5</sup>

Tent Town boasted an especially large tent at the bottom of ‘McBride-avenue’ that served as a church. A sign had been put up communicating the news that a service was to be held at half past 7 o’clock on Sunday night the 3rd of January 1910...

“There was no ringing of bells to summon the worshippers, but punctual to the time they filed into the tent – ladies from Dalyston and other parts of the district in their white dresses, sensible miners in shirtsleeves, and others, including most of the officials at the mine in their orthodox stiff collars and starched shirts [*which had to be sent to Melbourne for cleaning*]...very soon over one hundred worshippers had congregated... Mr Browne, storeman at the mine and also acting surveyor, was the organist. He sat upon a kerosene case. Mr. W.J.Hamilton, sub-accountant at the mine who leads the singing, sang the mission hymn, ‘He will hold me fast,’ and at the first note of the music, the miners smoking and chattering at nearby tents ceased their gossip and seated themselves closer to the church doors where they could hear the singing and at the same time enjoy the easterly breeze which had sprung up after an intensely hot day. The pungent smell from the smoke of many campfires entered the church, mingling with the pleasing scent which arises from the sun-burnt bush in the cool of the evening.”<sup>6</sup>

The sermon about making Tent Town a Temperance Town and treating animals with kindness lasted almost two hours, after which a deep voice from the back called out, ‘You’re not in the game, Sir.’ The singing is what drew people to the church. Though the air was close in the tent, everybody sang hymn after hymn and it was reported that Mrs Davis from Dalyston contributed the solo bits.

At the end of the service as people poured out of the tent, as usual, someone was waiting for Mr Hamilton, the sub-accountant. This time it was a bullock-driver asking him for a “ticket” or docket to show how much coal he had on board his wagon on his last trip to Inverloch. And after the church had emptied out and the town began to quieten down, a team of bullocks, 26 in all, came through hauling a tree trunk 76 feet long and weighing 8 tons destined as one of the poppet legs for No.3 Shaft

“There is always something for someone to do at Powlett River – time or occasion matters not.”

Tent Town had everyone in the Powlett district, from Philip Island to Inverloch and above and beyond, abuzz. All the talk throughout the countryside was about the Powlett. *The Argus* reporter wrote, “Farmers drive into the camp and gaze about them in amazement. No one is in the fashion unless he or she has seen the camp and the mine. Everybody wants to go below, and everybody ascends with one impression in his head and that is of the vast extend of the coal... everywhere the visitor looks below he sees coal. The workings are roomy and this led

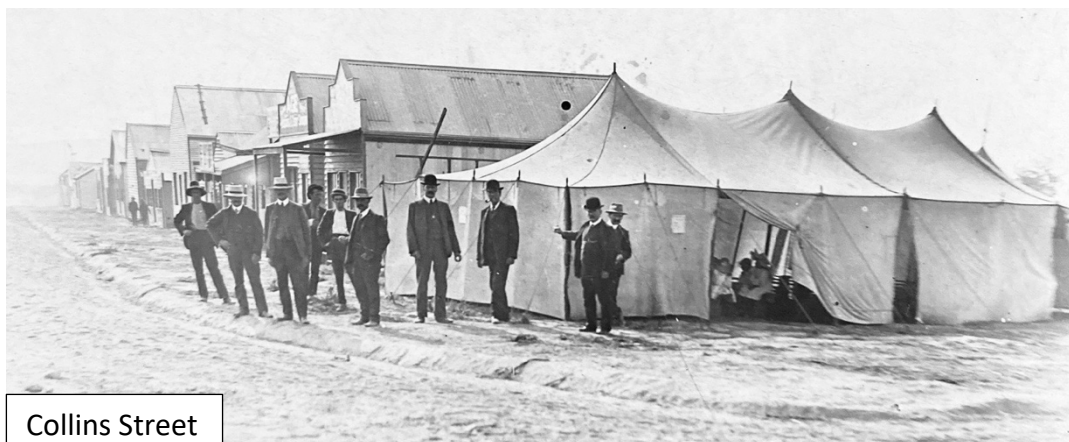
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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 29 January 1910.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 4 January 1910

Mrs D. C. Mackenzie, the first lady to go below, to remark, ‘The mine is like a palace with walls of black marble!’<sup>7</sup>

Tent Town thrived for about six months before the winter weather set in and made life



Collins Street

difficult. The area where many of the families with children had been allotted was at the lower end of the canvas town and became swampy with winter rain. Children were susceptible to all sort of illness back then: measles, mumps, chicken pox, whooping cough... Several died. The township of Wonthaggi was being planned out as a model town but there was delay in making miners blocks available for selection. In August the government surveyor, Mr Drape, got busy and marked out 60 plots for residential purposes. They were taken up immediately. He marked out 60 more. And so on until all of the men were provided with ground to move to. Some miners wished to stay in their tents, the ones who had laboured to make them comfortable, but eventually all were made to turn in the tents that had been allotted to them by the state and find new dwellings. Boarding houses became a thing in Wonthaggi along with small cottages that were easy to build. And, so, Tent Town was abandoned except for the wonderful memories of those few months of pioneering that was the beginning of the State Coal Mine.

Eventually, Tent Town – or where it was – became an Historic Reserve overseen by Parks Victoria and was unable to be touched by ‘developers.’ Although there have been ideas for its preservation, it has become a fairly overgrown paddock on the eastern side of the fence that demarcates the wonderful Five-Brace Walk. At the Five-Brace car park, a walker can look over the fence towards Wonthaggi and see a large field planted with a variety of Australian flora, trees and bushes mixed with blown-in weeds. That is Tent Town.

Before the planting happened, there was an attempt, using old maps and photographs held by the Historical Society, to uncover the Tent Town roads, the camp sites including shops, school, and church in order to clean it up. The roads were identified and named; the history written up and signs made to demarcate aspects of the area, but as is happening now with the “State Coal Mine,” money and enthusiasm has come up short and “Tent Town” was let go. The roads are covered over once again, and although there is a gate, the area has become difficult to enter. Somewhere in the middle of the greenery is a story board explaining details of the history, but it sits abandoned and unread.

It is important for us to walk where our history took place, to remember and tell stories about the unique and incredible place this town and its people had in the making of Australia. We can’t lock-up our memory in the Historical Society Archives and leave it there. We must re-read the stories and tell them. We must walk the country.

**C.R. Landon PLOD Essay May 2023**

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.