

Sunshine's History

Tuesday, 22 March 2005

Many of SunRRA's members are frustrated by what we see when we look around our community. Many of our public facilities, parks and gardens look to be neglected and are fairly ordinary when we compare them to those of other communities. But Sunshine is far from ordinary in historical terms.

In the preface to Olwen Ford's book on Sunshine's history, Professor Geoffrey Blainey (who has been recognised as one of Australia's most significant and popular historians) states that:

'Of Australia's hundreds of suburbs, Sunshine is one of the most unusual. In the first two decades of the 20th century it was one of the most influential.'

What is the significance of the Sunshine Harvester Works to Sunshine's history?

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The Sunshine Harvester Works employed more people than any other organisation in Australia during the period from 1907 to 1915.

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Professor Blainey states that there were approximately 1600 employees at the Works in 1911, and by 1926, at the time of the death of the founder of Sunshine Harvester Works, H.V. McKay, that number had grown to 2500.

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During WWII the Works employed approximately 3000 people.

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In its halcyon days, the Sunshine Harvester Works was one of Australia's outstanding and internationally competitive firms. In today's terms it would have had the significance of an organisation like BHP Billiton.

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The Works was at the centre of what has been claimed to be the most significant industrial decision in Australia's history. The Harvester Judgement brought down by Justice Henry Bournes Higgins on 8 November 1907 'as a result of an application by H.V. McKay for his Sunshine Harvester Works' set the standard for what was a 'fair and reasonable wage' (Ford, 2001). This decision is not just one of national significance. It had international significance, as it is probable that it was influential in the establishment of minimum wages not just in Australia, but throughout much of the developed world. Professor Blainey states that the decision to set a basic or minimum wage was '...a concept which was virtually unknown in the remainder of the world (Ford, 2001: vi).'

How did Sunshine get its name?

Sunshine was known as 'Braybrook Junction' until April 1907. It was known as a 'junction' because the trains from Bendigo and Ballarat converged in what is now known as Sunshine.

Because of the continual traffic between Melbourne and Bendigo during the 1800s, a direct railway line was built, which went through Sunshine and St. Albans. This line was later joined by a new line to Ballarat in the 1880s. 'The place where it joined the Bendigo line became known as Braybrook Junction (Popp, 1979:33).'

Now to understand how Braybrook Junction changed its name to Sunshine, we need to understand a little bit about the remarkable H.V. McKay, who devised, constructed and promoted the Sunshine Harvester. This particular harvester was very popular in its day, so much so that it resulted in Sunshine Harvester Works becoming a highly successful, internationally competitive company, the largest employer in the land for a time.

H.V. McKay's company was based solely in Ballarat until 1904 when he purchased the Braybrook Implement Company, and began to transition his entire Ballarat workforce to 'Sunshine'. The Braybrook Implement Company, which McKay purchased, had been a successful company during the late 1800s, manufacturing and selling farm implements and machines. However, because of drought, new technologies, and international competition, the company folded very early in the 1900s and the factory lay idle for some time, before it was purchased by McKay.

As McKay's empire expanded in Braybrook Junction, there was a good deal of confusion regarding the train station. Braybrook Junction station was two miles away from Braybrook proper, and people confused the two regions. In addition, the Sunshine Harvester Works had become tremendously significant to the region and the railway system was used by many of its workers to get to and from work each day. Perhaps the workers even referred to the region as Sunshine before the name was officially changed: 'I'm getting off at Sunshine Harvester Works' may have evolved to 'I'm getting off at Sunshine'.

In 1907 given the confusion associated with the Station, and given the significance of Sunshine Harvester Works to the region, there was a push by the community to change the name of the region to Sunshine, including a petition to change the name of the station from 'Braybrook Junction' station, to 'Sunshine Junction' station. In April 1907, the Council accepted a proposal by a community association (The Sunshine Progress Association) (perhaps not unlike SunRRA today) to change the name of Braybrook Junction, to Sunshine.

Other bits of information about Sunshine

- During the 1800s, Sunshine was renowned for its flat, grassy, volcanic and rocky plains.
- The Sunshine region was a preferred area for raising sheep.
- Along with surrounding areas, it was one of the most important quarrying areas in Victoria, famous for its Bluestone.
- The Darling Flour Mill is one of the best examples of the 20th century's flour mills
- Because of H.V. McKay's influence in developing the region, including planning and developing residential estates, Sunshine is an important example of town planning in the 20th Century.

Recommended reading

Much of the material for this piece was obtained from Olwen Ford's (2001) book, *Harvester Town: The making of Sunshine 1890 ~ 1925*. This is a great book and well worth a read. It is available at the Sunshine Library, or it can be purchased from the Sunshine & District Historical Society Incorporated. The Society can be contacted at:

Sunshine & District Historical Society Incorporated
PO Box 720
SUNSHINE 3020

President: Norman Carlton, (03) 9311 2881

Secretary: Anne Best, 03 9311 3812

annebest@optusnet.com.au

If you want to know more about Sunshine's unique history, two other books worth reading are:

McGoldrick, Prue (1989), *When the Whistle Blew: A Social History of the Town of Sunshine 1920 - 1950*.

Popp, Edith (1979). *Glimpses of Early Sunshine*.

These two books, and Olwen Ford's *Harvester Town*, are all initiatives of the Sunshine & District Historical Society. They are available at the Sunshine Library, and they can also be purchased from the Society.

Websites

The Sunshine & District Historical Society Incorporated has a website that contains further information about the society, and is a great site for historical photos of Sunshine.

Museum Victoria has a section on their website that is dedicated to the history of the Sunshine Harvester Works Company. Visit <http://www.museum.vic.gov.au/sunshine/> to find out more about the significance of this company to

Sunshine's history, and its significance nationally and internationally during the early part of the 20th century.