

The Grand Day the Bridge was Opened

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Wednesday 27 March 1895 was a special day for the Canberra region, so special in fact that it was declared a public holiday. Just after dawn that morning a cloud of dust began to rise high and long above the Tuggeranong Plain.¹ It marked the route of a continuous line of horse-drawn carriages packed with people making their way to the Murrumbidgee River. Everyone was dressed in their Sunday finery, men with dark suits, ties and best hats and the ladies in long flowing gowns and jewellery. On reaching the river they stepped down from their carriages, brushed off the clinging dust as best they could and jostled for positions along the bank of the river. At nine o'clock a half company of the Queanbeyan Mounted Rifles marched out from the town adding to the cloud of dust on the plain. By noon that Wednesday almost 1,500 dust sprinkled people had gathered. The biggest collection of people the district had seen. Their carriages had been parked in a nearby field kindly thrown open by Mr A. J. Cunningham J.P; the horses grazed nearby. The great occasion was the long-awaited opening of the Tharwa Bridge spanning the Murrumbidgee.



Dignitaries and the local militia at the opening of the Tharwa Bridge (L. Gillespie 1991)

The bridge was in its finery too, artistically decorated for the occasion. A kind of triumphal arch made of greenery marked each end of the bridge with a banner emblazoned with the word 'Welcome'. Along the length of the bridge were similar smaller decorations and ribbons; 'making the structure gay in its baptismal robes' was one description.

An official procession of the invited dignitaries was planned to start from Lanyon but had to be rerouted because of the thick dust still hanging over the crowd. Instead a cavalcade travelling a much shorter route to the bridge was formed. It consisted of the Queanbeyan band, the Queanbeyan Mounted rifles, recently arrived on foot, Mrs Elizabeth McKeahnie of Booroomba (the oldest female resident in the district), who was to cut the ceremonial ribbon, the two local politicians Messers Edward O'Sullivan MP and Austin Chapman MP and the Mayor and Mayoress of Queanbeyan. Following them were the carriages of principal residents of the district and escorting horsemen. The cavalcade entered the bridge through the green arch and halted midway. Mrs McKeahnie was assisted from her carriage and presented with a 'handsome Morocco silk-lined case' containing a pair of gold-plated scissors by Mr O'Sullivan. The case bore the inscription:

'Presented to Mrs C. McKeahnie
by C. McClure contractor,
on performing the ceremony
of christening Tharwa Bridge 27th March, 1895.

In the centre of the bridge where the procession had halted a bottle of Champagne was suspended by a blue ribbon. Mrs McKeahnie alighted from her carriage, stepped up to the ribbon and, as if launching a battleship, with deft action severed the ribbon with her new scissors. The bottle swung towards the side of the structure, crashed into a wooden beam and scattered its fizzing contents on the floor of the bridge. Mrs McKeahnie declared: 'I name this structure the Tharwa Bridge'. With that the 1,500 eager onlookers cheered with great gusto and the band played proudly. One or two of the grazing horses looked up and blinked at the strange scene.

The procession then made its way across the bridge where Mrs McKeahnie was presented to Mrs Cunningham and 'other prominent ladies.' A group photograph was then taken with the military contingent seated on their horses forming a background. At the front of group next to Edward O'Sullivan stood a special guest, Nellie Hamilton. Nellie (or Queen Nellie as she was then commonly referred) was believed to be the last surviving full-blood member of the Ngunnawal people of the Canberra/ Queanbeyan area.

Then came the official speeches. Amongst those giving discourse was Mr. George Fane DeSalis, son of Count Leopold Fane DeSalis formerly of Cuppacumbalong, the nearest property on the western side of the river. George

DeSalis, standing on the seat of a carriage, referred to the importance of the bridge to the district and the advantages it would confer to the residents west of the river and to the years of inconvenience they had endured for want of an all-weather crossing. Mr. Edward O'Sullivan MP, who had been instrumental in procuring government funding for the bridge, then climbed up into the carriage and, trying to avoid party politics, on this occasion at least, proclaimed that they were standing on the confines of civilisation. The unbridged river, he said, had been a bar to progress and prosperity as for long periods of the year the people could neither get their stock to market nor procure provisions for their sustenance. It was this state of things which had animated him to agitate for so long for a bridge. As long as he was their local member, O'Sullivan claimed (now launching into politics), he would see that the communities on the western side of the river would suffer no more. Austin Chapman then stood and admitted that while he had first opposed the expense incurred by the government in building the bridge (£4,469.14.10) he could now see by the enthusiasm of the large crowd that building it had been desperately needed and that it was the right thing. Christopher McClure, the bridge contractor, was next and admitted in a short speech that he was a better bridge builder than a speech maker but nevertheless, thanked the people for the strong appreciation of his work.

The speeches completed, it was time to celebrate the opening of this new engineering marvel. The Queanbeyan Mounted Rifles gave a display of riding and tent-pegging; there were games for the children, a cricket match and even a baby show. By late afternoon the horses became restless and it was time to head for home although some stayed on for a formal ball held that evening. The long trek back across the Tuggeranong Plain began raising the dust once again. But despite long speeches and the soiled gowns the 1,500 people knew that the Tharwa Bridge did indeed represent a new boost to the economy of the region and more freedom of movement for the residents on either side of the river. It had indeed been a grand day.

References

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Gilliespie, L. 1991 *Canberra 1820-1913* Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.
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¹ The last decade of the nineteenth century was marked by a debilitating drought. Known as the 'Federation Drought' it finally broke in 1902. Along with the drought the last decade was renowned for a severe economic depression which plunged many landholders into bankruptcy.