

Warrnambool Standard
July 1901

The Hopkins Mouth Revisited

[By Hugh Donnelly]

Sixty-five years have passed away since I first visited this romantic river. What changes during a lifetime! Standing on those fertile banks and looking around, I go back to the year of 1836, and the incident that occurred to two boats' crews, twelve in number. Our mission was to bring a boat back from there, that three brave fellows in search of seals had capsized in the surf in trying to land, which proved fatal to one of them. Arriving at the entrance, the attempt to land looked dangerous, so we pulled alongside and talked the matter over, when one and all agreed to run the risk. We were under the command of Mill Brother, two stars. What cared those braves for surf, waves, or weather, when youth or pluck were there together.

John Mills made the first attempt, while we lay on our oars, watching the result, and fortune favoured him. He landed safe. John pulled back as far as he could venture in case of an accident. Watching our first chance, we made a rush and got through the heavy part, when the boat got the best of Charlie and we were turned over. The first words I heard from Charley *[sic]* were "Stick to your oars lads." I was struggling hard for an oar, when he pushed it to me, he himself plunging round the rest. At this time John could not get within reach of us. One young fellow and I had an oar each; and breasting it, my plan was straddling it, the flat of the wash showing above the surface. (John Mills, to his last hour, would often relate, how "Curly" passed him like the flying Dutchman, riding the oar. I may state I was better known in those days, as "Curly" being so curly headed). The other young fellow was first landed, then he assisted me, and both were safe. By this time the rest were in John's boat and were soon safely landed. The next work was to save the boat and gear.

Previous to the attempt, we secured all in the boat in case of a capsize; we got all safe but the "nose-bag" which we never saw after.

The first work was to make a fire and have some lunch, after which we made a tent of the sails.

The blacks never showed up until the next morning at 10 a.m. About 50 (male and female) appeared on the scene. Although rather shy at first they soon forgot it and it was most amusing to see them examining the lance and harpoon.

I may say we were the first whites with whom they fell in with and we could not understand each other but I could see they compared the harpoon to the jag spear; and to see the antics of the poor creatures (both male and female) when John Mills would shoot a gull, was a sight long to be remembered. They would tear a bird to pieces to see what had killed it.

We caught fish in the river which ... *[sentences in originalarticleunreadable]* ... helped our "nose-bags," and strolled along the river banks to the rise beyond where the hotel stands, but still had to be very careful for fear of blacks. We kept watch all night, but I can safely say they never showed any signs of treachery. The last day we were there, several of them helped to carry part of our gear to the bay, for which we gave

them some fishing lines and hooks; also a few pocket knives, with which they were highly delighted. We had to leave the sealers' boat to the mercy of the blacks, and launch our boats and pull back to Port Fairy.

I am taking my final view of this romantic river. Looking across the entrance many incidents come back to my memory, and the brave men and youths (which whom I was in company) undaunted and fearless, where are they now? The last of them were old Bill M'Lean, who died in Port Fairy hospital, in 1888, and Captain Fermaner, who died in later years in Newport, Melbourne. How can I expect that any of these brave fellows should be in the flesh, as I was the youngest of them all and now within a few weeks of 80 years of age. May they all rest in peace.

During the whaling season of '44, a boat's crew was missing for the night. The following morning, three crews went in search of them, but when reaching the bay, we found them alright. They were sounding and taking a survey of the bay. A few nights afterwards a petition was drawn up and signed by seven of us, bringing it under the notice of the Government, and now the only one of those seven in the flesh is the writer of this article.

In '46 I spent a few hours with the surveyors, while laying out the township, and, on my way there, in company with a few mates, travelling along the beach to Tower Hill, was the last time I had the pleasure of seeing the ancient "wreck". Little did I think, in those days, that I would live to see Warrnambool and its surroundings such a splendid sight as they have become up to the year of 1901.

The public must admit it is the "Blue Ribbon" of the west. The early residents are few and far between. F. Tozer, J Good and Allan Jenkins are the only ones left.

When the allotments came under the "hammer", little did I think there would be such a rush to purchase.

Until my last hour I must state that Warrnambool and its surroundings, in their natural state, were beautiful and romantic in the year of '36.

The bush fires had crossed a large portion of the neighbourhood and the green verdure rising on the banks of the river, the emu, kangaroo, wild turkey, and Lake Petrobe, with its swans, ducks and other wild fowl, made it look romantic.

The poor unfortunate natives- what has become of them? That is easily accounted for, as the white man brought destruction and disease into their midst, and that all since the year '36 when one would see hundreds of blacks and little townships of mia-mia's. Go where you would, you would see and hear them, or their "cooe" from the Hopkins to Port Fairy. On the north side of the hummocks they were to be seen fishing in the swamps. The hummocks were all covered with green verdure in 1837, and the first sheep were feeding on them, but are now gone (like the blacks), a mountain of sand being left. One thing the public is neglecting, and that is cutting a canal through the lake up to the sheds. It would bring the coasting vessels within reach, and your wharf would be lined with stores.