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## History of the Mildura Working Man's Club

Today, Mildura is the heart of a huge wine and fruit growing region and centre of a range of exciting holiday activities. The municipality covers an area of 22,330 square kilometres with the population being approximately 46,000. The municipality has a regional flavour given its distance from Melbourne and its borders to New South Wales and South Australia.

However, we have come a long way....

The history of the City of Mildura and the Mildura Working Mans Club spans over 100 years and we can now reflect on one of Australia's amazing colonisation stories.

The history of our club is one of the few in the world which runs parallel with its town's history. It's a compelling story...

The story of Mildura, situated in the northern-most point of the Australian State of Victoria can be fittingly introduced by a sentence extracted from the famous "Red Book" published in 1888 to advertise the new colony. In part, that sentence reads "...there is probably no nobler task for human enterprise in the present day than that which is to be found in the great pioneer work of colonisation...". Mildura irrigation settlement began in 1887 when two visionary Americans, George and "W.B." Chaffey signed a deed which was to bring about changes of such magnitude that could not have been envisaged during those early days of colonisation.

The Murray River our source of life....

Settlers carved a niche out of semi-arid country against the incredible odds that had to be surmounted, a century before last. No ordinary people could have survived the trials and tribulations of nature and market forces over the years.

Mark Twain compared it favourably with the Mississippi River when he visited late in the 1800's. And indeed, a decade or two before he came, it seemed as if the Murray might well become another Mississippi.

Among the hardship, in the true pioneering spirit, the colonists never lost sight of the wholesome things in life. In their true determination to establish happy homes amid civilised conditions the settlers established choral and musical societies, sporting bodies and church groups in order to nurture their souls. As it has always been an inherent quality of human nature to seek the company of others, and from the first year of the settlement's existence plans were put into place to establish a licensed social club. It must be remembered that this was propagated at a time when the irrigation settlement was promoted as a temperance colony. From the start, not, as often reported, because the Chaffey brothers were teetotallers, but rather the influences of an era when prohibition was held in widespread favour for the whole of Victoria.

### Club Established

It came to pass that on Monday 20th January, 1895, Mr. G.E. Leonard in company with Mr. C.H. Belcher, (Mildura's first solicitor), left for Swan Hill to attend a sitting of the licensing court. Mr. W.W. Green, PM, had sent a very favourable report to the licensing magistrate, who must have been duly impressed and the permit was granted, signed and registered on the 25th January 1895. On the following Monday evening the permit was read out to the assembled members and the club was declared officially opened, **toasted in soft drink as not one barrel of beer was available for the river had ceased to flow** and supplies could not get through! It was not until June that the light draft paddle steamer Nile, captained by "Jock" Innes, arrived towing the barge Naomi. She was the first steamer to get through for the season, loaded with 60 tons of box timber for the fruit season and "40 tons of liquor aboard, consigned to the local club" - a heavy consignment for a prohibition settlement! The joy of this occasion was such to inspire the composition of the following verse which was published in the Melbourne Argus:-

### The Relief of Mildura

The doctors had run out of whisky,  
And our stock of liquor was spent.  
Save one pour half dozen of lager,  
That belonged to the Rechabite tent.

And the sky was as brass above,  
And the land was fevered with drought.  
As we wandered with blistered gullets,  
And tongues that were hanging out.

And ever the Murray to tempt us,  
At the edge of the sun-cracked flat,  
But no, we were men of Mildura -  
We hadn't come down to that.

But daily the torture lasted,  
And daily the horror grew,  
Of the drought that we dare not utter -  
The thing that all of us knew.

Someone must try the water,  
Must yield to the fatal law.  
So we shared in that devil's gamble -  
And mine was the shortest straw.

One moment of human weakness,  
Then I stepped to the rivers brink.  
It was flowing before me, water,  
And I was condemned to drink.

And then, oh, was it an angel,  
Or that daft lass, Jessie Brown,  
Cried "Dinna ye sniff the reek  
O' the pipes of Echuca town?"

And louder and ever louder,  
And near and nearer the while,  
We heard the beat of her paddles,  
The rescuing steamboat Nile.

With her bar-doors breathing a blessing,  
On her mission of mercy she came,  
And the sunlight blazed on the bottles,  
In a halo of living flame.

And "Courage!" the skipper shouted,  
As he moored to the blighted scrub,  
"There's forty tons of liquor aboard,  
Consigned to the local club."

Then madly rushed through our being,  
The warm wee current of life,  
We didn't wait for a corkscrew,  
We hacked off the heads with a knife.

And the brass band burst into music,  
The temperance banners waved,  
And we saw three stars in the evening sky,  
And we knew Mildura was saved.

While the new club settled down to a meaningful existence, membership grew steadily. The Working Man's Club, then situated in Madden Ave between 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Streets, as well as serving its members more than adequately also contributed to the needs of the community. At the annual meeting, held on January 29th, 1903, some 150 members voted to contribute 25 pounds to the Mildura Hospital. 10 pound to drought relief and 5 pound to the Mildura Rifle Club Band. It was around this time that inter-club competition billiards matches first commenced. In future years many outstanding players would grace the clubs championship tables. On May 7th, 1910, a large audience congregated to witness an exhibition match between Walter (Fred) Lindrum, Champion of Australia, and George Gray, champion hazard player of the world. Enthusiasts may be interested; the final score was Lindrum 780, Gray 499. Mr Lindrum did return on other occasions and praised the "world standard" of the billiard room. Others of note to play at the club were English Champion, Tom Reece and Melville Inman - World Champion snooker player 1912.

By May, 1915, in spite of abnormal conditions arising from War and the heavy taxes upon goods the club continued to show a strong financial position and it was at this time that things really brightened up for the club. Electric light, having been installed in Mildura two years previously, was finally connected to the club causing great excitement, pleasure and convenience especially in the reading and billiard rooms. During the 1914 - 1918 War 243 members offered their services in our country's cause and in a tribute the club erected a fine life size marble monument of an Australian soldier on guard at the entrance of the club. The Club's War Memorial was unveiled on the 10th March 1920, by Brigadier General C.H. Brand, C.B., C.M.G., C.V.O. and D.S.O.

The next momentous occasion for the members and the town was on May 7th, 1936 with the official opening of the Working Man's Bowling Club. Visitors from all parts of the State and South Australia listened as the Mayor of Mildura, Mr. E.T. Henderson, congratulated the club on having such a fine bowling green and Mr. H. Swann, an executive member of the Victorian Bowling Association officially declared the club open for play. The long hot summer of the same year 1936 saw the first major changes to the Working Man's Club premises since its construction in Deakin Avenue in 1908.

Mildura Working Man's Club, now with a membership of 2,603, was described as "one of the show places of Mildura and was fast approaching what a club should be, something more than a beer house" - a tag it had been fighting to disown continuously through the years. Many thousands of tourists from all over the world were coming to this wonderful inland City and to the club, mainly to see the famous Long Bar.

### The Longest Bar In The World

A brief history of the Famous Long Bar...

Since the club began in 1895, there have been a number of bars - and even different buildings in which to house them. As indicated earlier, before 1908, the club premises were in Madden Ave., over the road from the current rear car park. When the club had settled to its present site, the first T-shaped bar appeared in 1938 and was believed to be of a record length in the State of Victoria. This bar lasted until 1970 when it was rebuilt to include a hook at one end of the T-top, which gave it World Record Length status and was noted in the Guinness Book of Records. There remained, nevertheless, some debate as to the veracity of this claim, as there was a rumour of a longer, temporary bar somewhere in the USA.

In spite of this, this club's bar was undeniably the longest bar in the Southern Hemisphere throughout its existence. In 1970, the rebuilt bar featured magnificent, hand crafted Red gum panels right around its girth. These proved very popular as souvenirs when the bar was eventually removed in 1995 (they were sold off to members for \$5 each - and this writer has one). Despite its length, the long bar was regularly 3 to 7 deep, all the way 'round, with thirsty members - particularly in the 1960's and 70's - putting away over 140 kilderkins (18 gallon kegs) per week. This club was CUB's best customer in Victoria in those days. The long bar featured 32 beer taps, many in clusters of 4, each fed from one of three huge chilled cellars, ensuring a short beer pull. The bar's length measured 298 feet 7½ inches (approx. 91 m) around the centre line of the service surface.

Times change however, and it was becoming evident in the 1980's that something was going to have to be done. Member's tastes were changing, and a need for a downstairs entertainment area was becoming more apparent. But the long bar was *in the way* of development. In addition, stricter drinking laws were discouraging many from a social drink at their club - at least for daily socialising. For the off days, many chose to drink at home. The huge length of the bar made it a costly exercise to staff, for a significantly reduced number of customers.

As that decade progressed, members regularly found large areas of their long bar being closed, awaiting busier times. With a limited capacity to run live shows in a useful auditorium, plus substantially reduced liquor sales through diminishing member attendance, it was becoming a real concern that the club may soon face financial difficulty. Other clubs could readily embrace the newly legalised poker machines, but this club had nowhere to put them. The long bar was again in the way. No one liked the thought of the famous long bar being removed, but the club couldn't even turn it into a profit-making tourist attraction. We'd regularly see busloads of curious sightseers settling for a mere glimpse - but unable to purchase alcohol because of the liquor laws of the day.

So in April 1995, it all began to come out, and a big job it was. The Red gum panels were sold off - and even some short lengths of the bar itself, to a lucky few. The PS Ruby has a short length. Temporary panelling divided off the space to allow continued trading while the club's ambitious refurbishment took place - and it was a time of nostalgia, curiosity and wonder for the members as they watched. The new bar was completely in place in October 1995. It wasn't just the long bar that was affected; administrative offices, the stairwell, the foyer and the boardroom were also altered and/or relocated, and a lift was installed. Poker machines, adjacent to the new bar, entertained many members and assisted with the Club's finances and a large auditorium supported a wide variety of attractions - bands, dancing and live shows.

While many might miss the old long bar, it cannot be denied that at the time, it had to go. It was a brave committee that made the hard decision then, but it was made in time. It is arguable now, since the application of stricter drink driving laws, that the long bar might have kept the club viable as a tourist attraction. We will never know, and would the members really want it that way?

At the turn of the century, it was becoming noticeable that trade was again nowhere near what it had been. With each passing year, frustrations grew as live entertainment would or would not be supported by the Members, and bar trade was getting worryingly low. It was becoming apparent to Management that **again** something drastic was required to change the demography of the active membership. The club's interior, just five years old, was beginning to look tired, and competing venues were hurting our business by their 'freshness' of more recent renovation.

And so in late 2005, the Manager and Board Members made themselves aware of the thrust of expectation in other regions, and 'bit the bullet' yet again. This time, the renovation (commenced early 2006) comprised a major rebuild of the entire ground floor – opening up the feel of the place with big windows and large areas including alfresco, and moving administration offices to the rear thus providing large west-facing lounge windows. Together with this development is a greatly enhanced Bistro area, fully equipped to cater for the culinary needs of the accommodation facility to be built next door. It is the best equipped facility in regional Australia.

Where the Auditorium once was, now stands a fabulous TAB facility, better equipped with technologically than any regional venue – and surrounded by an enormous lounge area. Extensive Audio/Visual equipment is situated throughout the entire ground floor including two huge plasma TV screens. Poker machines now operate in the same area as did the previous machines, but within a much more stunning environment.

While the old Long Bar had 32 beer taps, our new bar proudly sports 35 – and from them can be purchased any of 17 types of beer. These beers are always properly chilled, being supplied through state-of-the-art cellar technology.

Membership is higher than ever before, with the younger age demographic giving the new generation a club to call their own and a venue that provides an all round entertainment experience. As a prominent supporter of local community organisations and sporting clubs, the Mildura Working Man's Club is now not only known for '**A Great Time Out**' but has a strong standing locally with the other well known slogan of '**Your Club... Our Community**'.