OLD DAYS ON THE LAKE:

According to statistics the post-war expansion and population boom in the Greater Wollongong area was only exceeded in British Commonwealth nations by that of Edmonton in Canada.

However, whilst urban growth in Greater Wollongong usually involved the proliferation of housing outwards from long established villages and townships, as happened at Figtree, Unanderra, Dapto, Berkeley, Port Kembla and Balgownie, there is one locality which in living memory has grown from a single residence housing one family to a conurbation with a population of many thousands: The assemblage of townships comprising Windang, Lake Illawarra South, Warilla, Barrack Head, Mount Warrigal and, to some extent, Oak Flats.

The nucleus from which all this grew is the entrance channel to Lake Illawarra, which first came under notice as the spot where Bass and Flinders came ashore in their small "Tom Thumb" in 1796, and set up the first business enterprise in the district when they performed some hair-trimming on the Lake Illawarra natives.

The area must then have remained untouched for another thirty-five years, until the large kitchen-middens of sea shells resulting from aboriginal feasts down the years became the source of quicklime for building purposes in the new seaport of Wollongong, and therefore lime-burning became an early industry in Illawarra.

With other sources of limestone becoming available, the area appears to have again been left to its original inhabitants until in the 1860s a number of families established a fishing community on the lake, centred on the village of Berkeley. The abundance of fish, prawns and oysters in the channel once again brought activities to its shores. The fishing families of Massey, Barber, Denniss, Thompson and Parks soon evolved and built a type of open sailing boat suitable for their work and for conditions on the lake; the boats were fitted with a centre board and rigged with a jib and spritsail, and in a strong wind sailed like witches. I have a boyhood recollection of a wild ride in one of these craft when three of them, handled respectively by brothers Walter, Jack and Jeff Massey, engaged in an impromptu race from Native Dog reef to Berkeley in a hard nor-easter and the rough jobble that is a characteristic of the lake.

In the 1880s my uncle, Charles Weston, always clever with tools, built a somewhat similar boat from local cedar in a hayshed at the homestead at Albion Park. This was mainly a pleasure craft used for family excursions around the lake.

About this time the setting up of native reservations on the coast was accompanied by an annual Government distribution of blankets and cheap trade tobacco to the various tribes involved, and the late Major E. H. Weston of Albion Park was appointed local agent. Bales of blankets and cases of "bacca" were shipped to Wollongong, thence taken by horse dray to Albion Park, and on the appointed day loaded into the Weston boat and sailed across the lake to the entrance, where by that time hundreds of men and women from the tribes at Minnamurra, Crooked River and Coolangatta had joined the Lake Illawarra blacks to share in the handout. This took place in a clearing in the bush at what is now the northern end of the
Windang bridge and was followed by an all-night corroboree and feast, with snake, goanna, possum, shellfish and fish featuring on the menu, of which my grandfather, his two sons and their helpers were expected to partake. He often told me that they had an overwhelming preference for fish on these occasions.

Throughout the night the natives danced around a large bonfire to the accompaniment of much rattling of throwing sticks and boomerangs, stamping of feet and an endless chant of "wuh wuh wooroo woonyuh" from the bucks while the gins sitting back in the rear kept up an equally monotonous wail of "Air, men yair, men yair, men yair." A little of this was enough, and early in the night the "Gubmin fellas" would sneak off, hoist sail and head back for the Albion Park shore.

The old tribesmen used to tell Major Weston that down through the ages, when flood rains caused "big water" in the lake, if the mouth was closed by a sand bank their camp sites would be flooded and there would be a concerted effort by all hands to cut an opening to the sea. Using sticks, a small pilot trench would be scratched in the sand which soon became a wide swift torrent. When the natives passed from the scene, the same operation was carried out by fishermen and lakelands farmers using shovels when the need arose.

Apart from these diversions the channel and its scrub-covered shores remained untouched for a century until in the nineties the Lake Harbour project was given a token start. This scheme envisaged dredging the channel to 400 feet wide by 23 feet deep, continuing it as a shipping channel across the lake to a coal-loading jetty near Tallawarra Point and using rock quarried from Windang Island to build a training wall seawards.

The effect of subjecting the virtually tideless lake to the ebb and flow of ocean tides would have laid bare hundreds of acres of shallows at each low tide, with the resulting loss of essential fish nurseries and aquatic birdlife feeding grounds. (The term ecology had not then come into prominence).

After some preliminary work had been carried out by way of opening up a quarry on the north-west corner of the island and running a short tramway to the initial dumping point for the rock wall, the project was abandoned in favour of the harbour-to-be at Port Kembla and solitude again reigned, relieved only by visits from fishermen and picnickers.

(To be continued)

—B. E. WESTON.
OLD DAYS ON THE LAKE (Continued from September Bulletin):

My personal recollection of the place goes back to the time (about 1913) when, as a small boy, I was one of an Anglican church party from Albion Park which hired Beach’s open launch, based in Mullet Creek, Brownsville, for a day’s outing at Windang.

To digress—Bill Beach, the former seven times world champion and undefeated sculler, was then in his sixties and living in retirement at Brownsville. During the late 1870s, when working as a teenager blacksmith’s striker at Dapto, he became locally famous for his success in rowing matches at the annual Fishermen’s Regattas on Lake Illawarra.

Taken to Sydney by a promoter named Deeble to tackle the professionals, his fisherman’s style of rowing—oars chopped deep into the water and a short jerky stroke—earned him the derisive title of “the Dapto eel puncher,” which changed to hero-worship when he came back from overseas as world champion. Special trains ran from Bathurst, Goulburn and Newcastle bringing admirers to meet his ship; sculling was the popular sport at the time and he had put Australia on the world map.

Hundreds of stories and jokes concerning his exploits were circulated, one hilarious example being that “Beach rowed like Hell because the Deeble was behind him.”

To resume—on reaching the channel Bill Beach pulled in at a small jetty on Bevans Island, where fisheries inspector Aitken lived, to fill a can with water from his tank for tea-making. His was the only residence and family between Shellharbour and Primbee. In return for the water, he asked if we would leave him any bread or food left over from our picnic, as they had not had any bread for days owing to the breakdown of the bicycle which he rode to Shellharbour each week for provisions. At the end of the day we left him rejoicing.

Settlement eventually began with the construction of Turnbull’s two-storied guest house at Windang in 1922, which was followed by a straggle of cottages, but access from Port Kembla still consisted of a sandy track winding through the scrub. About the same time Degotardi’s Peterborough Estate subdivision offered weekender blocks at Lake Illawarra South, and a few small cottages of made-on-the-spot sand and cement blocks and Swyny’s store came into being; but here again access from Shellharbour consisted of a narrow dirt track.

In the mid-twenties the Shellharbour Council discussed the idea of providing a two-vehicle punt across the channel, to be hand-winch ed across by the users; this was dropped on the Town Clerk’s assessment of a maximum traffic flow of a dozen vehicles per day, and the assumption that Shellharbour residents would always favour travel by passenger train to reach Wollongong and points north.

The twin townships bordering the channel began to grow after the move by Hoskins Iron Works from Lithgow to Port Kembla in the early 1930s. The access roads north and south were brought up to bitumen standard and the Windang bridge was built as a relief work during the Depression years. Dion’s and Hill’s bus services took advantage of the through road to set up bus services to Shellharbour and Kiama, and this brought in many new residents from the ranks
of employees in the heavy industries at Port Kembla.

During the 1939-1945 war, and for several years thereafter, little growth took place until the Housing Commission built a row of cottages on Shellharbour Road, just north of the present-day Council Chambers, and so Warilla was born. The land sales and building boom which brought in thousands of residents and the streets, homes, schools and the business and community facilities which make up the interlinked townships named at the commencement of this article are matters of recent history. Who now, crossing Windang bridge, would give any thought to Bass and Flinders, to the native inhabitants with their feasts and tribal fights, or to the lonely fisheries inspector of a mere sixty years ago?

—B. E. WESTON.

(Concluded)