The removal in 1902 of the restrictions on daylight and mixed surfing was followed by a vast increase in the popularity of surf bathing, and a corresponding increase in the number of accidents, many of them fatal, to careless or unskilled bathers. This led to the formation at Sydney beaches of a few small life-saving clubs, which, with a view to united action and standardised methods, came together in 1907 to form “The New South Wales Surf Bathing Association.”

In January 1908 the first country club was formed at Wollongong under the title of “Wollongong Life Saving and Surf Bathing Club,” operating at North Beach. This club combined in 1914 with their rivals the “Wollongong Water Rats” to form the existing North Wollongong Club, the oldest club in the Illawarra branch.

The original Wollongong Club started with two panels of fencing to provide dressing accommodation, and a home-made reel. Membership was open to men, women and children, and the club made surfing history when the captain, Constable W. F. Harmer, trained a squad of women, four of whom obtained their Bronze Medallions.

Modesty was not affronted—Constable Harmer’s sea-nymphs wore belted, braided square-necked tunics reaching well below their knees, mob caps, long black stockings and surf shoes. “Only the unpainted flesh of their faces could be seen.”

As time went on Life Saving Clubs were formed at other Illawarra beaches, though in some cases the exact date of formation cannot now be determined. They went their own way, sometimes using different equipment (some of it designed for one-man operation) and different methods of working, until late in 1917 Sergeant (as he then was) Harmer convened a meeting of representatives of district surf clubs at Bulli to consider the establishment of an association. Clubs represented were North and South Wollongong, Corrimal, Bulli, Austinmer, and Helensburgh-Stanwell Park.

In the wartime conditions then prevailing, the Association got away to an uncertain start, but in 1920 it was finally decided “that the South Coast Surf Bathing Association accept the constitution of the Surf Life Saving Association of N.S.W. and become a Sub-Association.” Two years later headquarters were established at Wollongong, and in 1929 the name was changed to “The Illawarra Branch.”

More clubs were formed and the area of the Branch’s activities extended, until by the time of the Surf Life-Saving Association’s jubilee the
Illawarra Branch comprised nineteen clubs from Stanwell Park to Gerrin­
gong. With the growth of clubs and membership went a constant develop­
ment and improvement of techniques and life-saving methods.