SOME BOYHOOD MEMORIES OF WOLLONGONG HARBOUR:

(The author, Mr. C. S. Cutcher, of Gunnedah, was born in 1890 in Wollongong, where his father had also been born, his grandfather having come to the town in the 1830s. He has forwarded to the Society his recollections of Wollongong in his boyhood, from which the following article is abridged. We hope to publish further extracts from time to time).

Wollongong 88 years ago was an important centre, mainly owing to the coal seam. Mount Keira Colliery was situated directly west of the township and conveyed the coal by rail from the mountain foot, almost in a straight line to the harbour basin, for loading on small steamers (300-500 tons) such as the "Mount Kembla," the "Malachite," and several others.

To the north of Mount Keira, and adjoining, was the Mount Pleasant Colliery. This mine, with coke-works, was served by a 3-ft. 6-in. gauge tramway which crossed the main line. Coal was conveyed in four-wheeled box-like wagons, drawn by small-wheeled locomotives to the Wollongong Harbour loading chutes. These small engines were of special interest to me in my boyhood; they always appeared to be so busy as they passed along the cliffs on the way to the harbour.

From memory, this Mount Pleasant coal was used as bunker fuel by three coastal steamers, regular visitors serving the far south to Bega and Eden. They were the "Eden," "Bega" and "Allowrie"; each ship was of 400-500 tons capacity, of conventional design except for the propulsion machinery. Each was furnished with twin propellers; each shaft ended with a single crank driven by one steam-operated cylinder. Steaming normally, the two engines acted as a compound unit but were arranged to act separately when manoeuvring in and out of port.

There were two events which occurred regularly at Wollongong Harbour; firstly the unloading of Maitland coal to be mixed with the coal from Mount Keira Colliery, whose railway line passed the gas-works. (Bulli seam coal was not suitable for gas-making without admixture with the more bituminous coals of the Maitland area). The other event, of great importance to schoolboys, was the arrival of the Colonial Sugar Refining Company’s steamer "Fiona" to load steaming coal for the Fiji Sugar Mills. Its importance to us was that the crew never failed to bring us sticks of much-prized sugar cane. The cry, "The Fiona’s in!" was heeded by many—including the school teachers, who were alerted and, with another sort of cane at the ready, were organised to deal with sugar-cane chewers in class. In retrospect, I am sure the game was enjoyed by all.

I could never ascertain what prompted the layout of Wollongong Harbour—the Basin—but would conclude that the normal size of sailing ships and small steamers of the day, and the extent of the small inlet, would have had most influence. When I last saw the Basin, twenty years ago, it was little altered, but appeared to be used for fishing craft—coal loading was no more.

The Basin, as remembered, would have held two small colliers (say 300-500 tons), the tug "Carbine" tied up opposite, and at the
eastern end the scow from New Zealand, the "Ruakaka," with a deck cargo of kauri timber—all at one time. The western end would, of course, be available at all times for the passenger steamers "Bega," "Eden" and "Allowrie."

The "Ruakaka" made regular trips for years. It was flat-bottomed, with one mast and sails, and used to be warped into its berth by the crew—quite a feat. The skipper would not entertain the idea of using a tug.

The tug "Carbine" was stationed in the basin, under full steam. The fireman-deckhand lived aboard; the skipper and the engineer lived ashore with their families. This happy state of affairs, by which Wollongong was provided with a full-scale, full-time tug, came to an end when notice was taken of the fact that the vessel and crew were solely occupied in providing free schnapper-fishing for a few businessmen every Wednesday afternoon. The "Carbine" was moved to Sydney, where I often saw it in later years.

During a heavy north-east storm, probably the tailend of a cyclone, about 1897, the collier "Mount Kembla" was caught in the harbour basin. Because of the ground-swell, the heaviest ever experienced, the captain eased the vessel into the middle of the basin. To ease the stress on the fore and aft holding ropes, he ordered the engines ahead or astern as the ebb and flow of swell dictated. But, despite all skill and care, it was clear that the ropes were not strong enough to hold the heavy burden indefinitely. By some means, perhaps by telegraph (there was no telephone connection with Sydney, and of course, no wireless), word was sent, and much heavier cables were sent by train. The emergency eased after three or four anxious days and nights for the crew and townspeople. The leeway for the ship could not have been more than sixty yards each way.