"THE THUMB" and "PORT" EIGHTY YEARS AGO

(Abridged from the reminiscences of Mr. C. S. Cutcher. A brief note on the author appeared in the May Bulletin)

As I remember, during my boyhood days we proceeded down Crown Street, on foot, by bicycle (at a later stage), on pony-back or by horse-drawn conveyance, and turned right into Kembla Street. Then we would pass the rifle-butts, where at an early age I persuaded my father to let me fire off an old single-shot Lee Enfield (standard equipment for the army until Boer War times). These rifles were charged with black powder and lead bullets (collected by us from the dune sands—for the butt targets overlooked the sea—and melted down). Their bore was, memory serving, very close to half an inch. The single discharge numbed my shoulder and convinced me that rifle-shooting was a man's occupation. Next we passed the Showground, then the Wollongong Racecourse, whose southern boundary was Tom Thumb Lagoon.

The first bridge across the lagoon, three furlongs upstream from the sea, was a ti-tree-poled structure with a narrow walkway—locally built, I understand, by right-minded citizens. This bridge remained for some time, and was used by men riding to work at the Port Kembla jetties. Just what influence was brought to bear on the authorities of the time I do not know, but a very forward design of bridge, mounted on concrete piers with double carriageway, was constructed—perhaps, in view of the imminence of work starting on the Port Kembla breakwater, to reduce travelling by all concerned with the undertaking, shortening to three miles what would have been otherwise a distance of approximately eight miles from the breakwater site to Wollongong.

The route just described ran almost directly south, with the sea on the left, and to the right the eastern shore of Tom Thumb Lagoon, whose northern end was not far from the outskirts of Wollongong. The lagoon's width would be not more than half a mile. It was a relatively small, slightly tidal, shallow, reed-bordered stretch of water, popular with duck, snipe and plover shooters using flat-bottomed punts.

Nostalgia has a place in my thinking back, when I picture the relatively short (about ¼ mile) and narrow outlet to the sea of the waters of Tom Thumb Lagoon: the picture of my father, who would select a kerosene tin from the town rubbish dump as we passed in the horse-drawn sulky en route to fishing at the "Thumb" entrance. Having arrived and tethered the horse a short walk—only yards—away from the entrance, Father would put the tin on its side and then lower himself on to what he described as the most comfortable fishing seat. Whilst I, or we, would play in the sand, Father's fishing (hand line) would commence, with the result on most occasions of a catch of flathead and/or whiting.
Coupled with the picture of "Tom Thumb" was what we could see of Port Kembla at this time, before the southern breakwater was commenced. On looking south from the fishing spot mentioned, a full view of the inlet designated Port Kembla could be obtained. The first structure at the inland or western end was the "Southern Jetty," where Corrimal-Balgownie coal was shipped into the holds of some very large vessels for the time (including the Como of 13,000 tons and the Agincourt of 10,000 tons, which I previously mentioned). The next jetty, more into the bay, was the "Kembla," where, memory serving correctly, the Mount Kembla Colliery's coking coal and coke from the Unanderra works, and from the Mount Lyell Mining Co's. works close by the jetty, were shipped. I remember only one or two houses; no settlement existed. The few men employed there lived away, and travelled via the new bridge by bicycles or horse-drawn vehicles or on horseback. Apparently, with the bridge in use commerce was established with Wollongong, for I have on occasions seen a butcher's and a baker's cart traversing the bridge, apparently after attending to ship's orders. Previously supplies would have come from George Lindsay's business at Unanderra, three miles away.