Towards the end of winter the Digger’s Ball Committee always staged a formal ball which was the occasion - in the absence of dry-cleaning facilities - of much sponging and pressing of blue serge ‘best’ suits and purchase or making-up of pretty evening frocks. They were always programme dances in which it was de rigueur to book one’s partner for at least the first, last and supper dance.

The season always closed with a fancy dress masked ball when scores of revellers in cleverly designed outfits paraded Wollongong’s streets en route for the Town Hall. The scene on the dance floor was really spectacular as scores of colourful couples advanced and retreated, dipped and swayed, side-stepped and slid in unison to the tune of “Lily of Laguna”, “Somebody Stole My Gal”, or “Moonlight and Roses”.

BERT E. WESTON

THE FIRST COAL FROM ILLAWARRA

(From the manuscript notes compiled by Archibald Campbell in the nineties. We cannot guarantee the accuracy of either the statements of fact or the transcription - Archibald’s hieroglyphics almost defying decipherment. Dashes indicate blanks in the original manuscript).

Old inhabitants of Wollongong speak with much interest about the first attempt made in a practical way to work coal in Illawarra, and of a public demonstration that took place to celebrate the first dray load of coal hauled into Wollongong.

15th. October, 1898

In the course of conversation with Mr. Andrew Lysaght Senr. this — in Wollongong, he referred at considerable length to these matters as often he did previously to me in referring to the same subject.

He said he thought the events alluded to occurred about 1849 or some time between 1848 and 1850. There was no newspaper published in Illawarra then - the “Illawarra Mercury” not having been established until late in 1855.

The first man that turned his attention to mine for coal in the district was a Mr. James Shoobert, or Captain Shoobert, as usually he was known, he having been a “Master Mariner” as he designated himself, and commanded a small sailing vessel named “The that traded to Wollongong in the early “Forties”. He became the owner of the Mount Keira Estate, and resided on the old homestead on the west side of the Mount Keira Road, about three quarters of a mile from the Mine Road.

Coal was visible on the estate, especially in cuttings made by the road gangs “in the early days” while forming the Mount Keira Road towards Sydney. Mr Shoobert decided to make an attempt to open
a work over several seams that could be traced in the face of the Range. The seam he fixed upon for his purpose happened to be the second highest one in the series, or what became subsequently known as "the four feet seam", which underlies the top seam about — feet. This (illegible) — — was unfortunate for a beginning as the coal was inferior to (illegible) seams, in addition to that seam being thinner and therefore more difficult to work.

Whether Mr. Shoobert knew of the upper at the time I am not aware. If not, however, its existence became known soon afterwards.

In deciding to open out the said four feet seam, he obtained the services of four men from Newcastle, some at any rate of whom knew something about coal mining. The man who had charge of the operations was named Thomas Gasgoine, another was named Thornton; a third Sydney Smith, and the fourth I can’t recall.

These men opened the seam in the face of Mount Keira, directly overlooking Wollongong, and — feet above sea level, After the seam had been well opened into and the coal tested in one place and another, and favourably commented upon it was decided to have a public demonstration to celebrate the event, which even then was considered important, but which the most sanguine — — no idea of its developing to such enormous magnitude as it has done within half a century (1895).

About 1849, as Mr. Lysaght reckons, the said demonstration took place. Two or three bullock drays — the then only vehicles of the district, as may be said — were loaded with the coal as near the mine opening as could be arranged for. The drays were festooned most richly with green boughs, and other bush decoration, and a long procession followed the teams, with their loads, into Wollongong. A large number of people attended from outlying parts of the district as well as from the town to take part in the proceedings — . Some rode on horseback and many walked — . The procession marched down the Mount Keira Road, and from thence by the main road to Wollongong, which was gay with flags in jubilation of the event, which subsequent experience is proving to have been the most important thing up to that time to have taken place in Illawarra. The man who drove the loading team in the procession was named Simon Cook — father of Mr. Richard Cook, now of Mt. Keira, and Mr. W.M. Cook of Dapto.

A banquet took place in the evening in connection with the event at the Royal Hotel — south west corner of Crown and Corrimal Streets — then kept by a Mr. Edward Elliot. The banquet was well attended, and hopeful speeches were made concerning the enterprise which was being celebrated.

Mr. Shoobert failed however to make the attempted coal mining a success. It languished in his hands, until he discontinued the attempt after a year or two’s trial as profitless.
Early in the “Fifties”, however, Mr. William Robson and Mr. Jackson came from Newcastle, and being experienced in connection with coal and coal mining, they explored the locality of Mr. Shoobert's mine; discovered the upper seam; ascertained its superior characteristics in several ways compared with the four foot seams and made arrangements to open and work it.

Meanwhile the Mt. Keira Estate had fallen into the hands of Mr. Henry Osborne of Marshall Mount with whom Messers Robson and Jackson made the arrangement which extended over and continued about ten or fifteen years. Mr Jackson dropped out of the concern after a few years; and the enterprise was carried out to the conclusion by Mr. Robson only. For some time after the Robson-Jackson era commenced, the coal from their mine was taken in drays to Wollongong for shipment, but in the course of a few years the Mt. Keira Tramway was commenced, and has been in use for such transport ever since.

THE GREAT FIRE OF WOLLONGONG – 1895.

The Great Fire of Wollongong happened on Sunday evening 25th. August, 1895. The Wollongong Argus, its own premises (now the Card Shop) threatened by the fire, published an Extraordinary one-page issue for Monday, 26th. August - the normal paper was four pages for Wednesday and Saturday of each week. The situation of the fire was in the buildings at the corner of Crown and Keira Streets, that part of the town section then known as Upper Crown Street.

This is how the Argus described the fire:-

GREAT FIRE IN WOLLONGONG
A Block in Upper Crown Street Burnt. Other places in Danger.

"The expected has happened!

Probably every one who has given the thing a thought has prophesised that the block of buildings from Mr. C. Chad’s to the Old Mill building occupied by Mr. G.J. Gray, would some day or night make a conflagration. Every aspect of the block was suggestive of it. As a matter of fact fires have broken out in it, but have always been smothered before spreading. The last recorded occurred a few years ago in a refreshment shop kept by a Mrs. Welsh. On Sunday evening, just before Church time, the fate commonly voted to be inevitable came upon the block. The fire was first observed in the back premises of Mr. Alex Osborne, baker. Mr. J.A. Walker, blacksmith, noticed the flames and started an alarm movement, Mr. W.