

THE MONSTERS MEET YET AGAIN ...

There were many new faces among those who gathered for the 156th anniversary celebrations of the great meeting of gold diggers. On the 15th of December 1851 there was sufficient concern about a proposed gold tax increase that many of the miners on the Forest Creek goldfields came together to protest. Estimations were 14,000 assembled at the Shepherd's Hut site, making this meeting the first major protest on the Victorian goldfields. Hence the name – the Monster Meeting.

The 2007 anniversary began at the Mount Street ford, just downstream from the site of the original meeting. Members of the Castlemaine Theatre Company led the colourful walk upstream.

As at the original meeting, proceedings began at 4 o'clock with speeches delivered from the back of a dray. After acknowledging the traditional owners Master of Ceremonies John Flaus introduced the first guest. Bob Cameron as Minister of Police was also representing the Premier, and John passed the comment that there is "a different attitude to police in the 21st Century than there was in the 1850's."

Bob referred to the event 156 years ago as a momentous one in the history of the district. The beginnings of democracy shown then shaped the institutions we have today – for the better! That is something we can all be proud of and Chewton can be very proud of its place in history.

The next guest speaker was Geoff Hocking who has just published a new book "The Rebel Chorus". He said it was the first time he had stood on this site in an official capacity although he did outline his links to the area. His wife's great grandfather had lived just downstream and was involved in running Shields Tannery. Geoff outlined his interest in dissent and sedition, and how the new arrivals in the colonies had found the new society run like a military establishment. There were few freedoms and rights and for those employed there

was no concept of unfair dismissal. Gold changed that and became the passport to freedom. But then the government tax collectors turned up and put this at risk. Hence the protests through the goldfields that were reasonably benign at first. From the small protest at Buninyong, the sparks started at Forest Creek, the flames appeared at Bendigo's Red Ribbon Rebellion, and then exploded at Eureka. Geoff referred to the flags of the protests and said we should all be proud of them as they say something about what our forebears said – we are not going to be treated like slaves, we have rights and we demand them!



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... THE FOREST CREEK MONSTER MEETING - 2007

The dramatization of the events of 1851 was then presented by members of the Castlemaine Theatre Company. After the A. Digger letter was read, we were introduced to Mr. Potts (John Walter), Mr. Lineham (Barry Palmer), Mr. Booley (Ian Braybrook), Captain Harrison (Jeremy Forbes), Dr. Webb Richmond (Ross Donlon) and Mr. Hudson (Russell Sheehan). Speeches and motions were presented courtesy of the Argus Newspaper of the time.

An innovation for the 2007 celebration was the acknowledgement of the role of women on the goldfields. Mrs. O'Brien (Robin Gray) spoke of managing her five kids in a tent, with the cooking outside and the washing being done in the muddy creek while still being expected to help her husband washing the gold. She didn't know whether she was more likely to melt in the sun or disappear in the dust!

Flo (Marilyn Bennet) then introduced herself as another kind of "working woman". She said she wasn't on the goldfields "for diggin' no holes". Her concern was that any proposed tax increase would leave less money to circulate on the goldfields.

Doug Ralph closed the re-enactment with a reading from the records of "The Old Pioneers". MC John Flaus then called on those present to end the ceremony as was done in 1851. The diggers had been very aware that the media of the time (two Melbourne newspapers) had taken different sides in their attitudes to the diggers and their rights - so three cheers were called for the Argus, followed by three boos for "that perfidious publication" the Herald. The Herald had described the diggers as "vagabonds" and "the scum of the earth". An enthusiastic response from those present ended the 2007 proceedings.

Bendigo Advertiser photographer Alex Ellinghausen took many photos of the 2007 celebration, and ABC Radio 91.1 FM had helped publicise the event with Dave Lennon interviewing Doug Ralph on air. Thanks also to the Castlemaine Theatre Company, Parks Victoria and the committed group who put the program together. Well done!

After the 1851 Monster Meeting it wasn't until 1995 that the anniversary was celebrated. Despite the intentions of the organizers of the 1995 re-enactment it wasn't until 2003 that another commemoration was held. An annual celebration has been held since. What will 2008 bring? And will you be there on December the 15th too?

Photos clockwise from bottom left:

*Walking up Forest Creek to the Shepherd's Hut,
Guest Speaker Geoff Hocking,
Mr. Hudson (Russell Sheehan) on the dray,
Mother of five Mrs. O'Brien (Robin Gray),
"Working woman" Flo (Marilyn Bennet),
and current Police Minister Bob Cameron
surrounded by angry protesters.*



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