Sentimental Memories of the Port of Melbourne

By Geoff Walker

(Port of Melbourne Archives)

A dramatic caption of the hustle-and-bustle at Railway Pier (now Station Pier), Melbourne, in the early 1850s

The area surrounding the modern **Port of Melbourne** was occupied for thousands of years by hunter-gatherers from three indigenous tribes: the **Bunurong Boon Wurrung** and **Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung** peoples of the Eastern **Kulin Nation** and respect is paid to their Elders past, present and emerging. These tribal peoples were considered traditional owners, but what is now Melbourne was only discovered by Europeans in 1802 when Captain Matthew Flinders and Lieutenant John Murray visited what is now known as Port Phillip Bay. In 1803, a party sent to explore the surrounding area located the **Yarra River** and attempted to establish a settlement at the site of today's the Port of Melbourne, but they considered the location unsuitable, so shifted their focus to Tasmania.

The Port of Melbourne was originally established in 1835 when pioneering explorer and colonist John Batman, reached agreement with the traditional Aboriginal owners to buy 200 thousand hectares at the head of Port Phillip Bay. The cost was 30 axes, 40 blankets, 50 scissors, 100 knives, 30 mirrors, 100 pounds of flour, 200 handkerchiefs, and six shirts, as well as a promise to make similar payments as annual tribute. Batman left the area days after signing the treaty.

The first government administrator arrived in the Port Phillip District in 1836, and the Port of Melbourne became capital of the State of Victoria in 1851. The gold rush era of the 1850s brought many new residents to the city of Melbourne, and it was the Australian Commonwealth's first capital from 1901 until 1927 when the capital was relocated to Canberra. Just three years after the discovery of gold, the Port of Melbourne was home to a community of 80,000 people, its early port facilities providing a solid base for future growth, and for administration of the region's new found wealth and trade. A network of railways was constructed between 1856 and 1873, which linked the Port of Melbourne with smaller regional towns in the State and also connected with the New South Wales railroad system.

The early 20th Century, saw Australia became a commonwealth, with Melbourne as its capital until 1927 when it was shifted to Canberra, mainly because of heated rivalry between NSW and Victoria, and claims by each, for the honor to have the nation's capital within their respective boundaries. This forced the Government to select the neutral city of Canberra as the capital, which lay somewhere between the two large cities. Canberra itself offered no special claims to its selection other than a conveniently neutral location. Melbourne had become the richest capital city in the world because of the gold rush. The city was designed and laid out with the view to becoming the Paris of the southern hemisphere. The rivalry between both cities of Sydney and Melbourne still exists, albeit on a more friendly footing.

In Melbourne's early days, large ships were unable to navigate the Yarra River, so cargo destined for Melbourne had to be unloaded at either Hobsons Bay (now known as Williamstown) or Sandridge (now known as Port Melbourne) and transferred either by rail or by barges which were towed to warehouses which were concentrated around today's King Street, which was an expensive and inefficient process.

In 1877, Victoria's government resolved to make the Yarra River more navigable, and engaged English engineer Sir John Coode to devise a solution. His solution was to change the course of the river by cutting a canal south of the original course of the river. This shortened it by a mile and made it much wider. It also created Coode Island; a name still used today although the northern course of the river has long since disappeared. With these works completed, ships were able to sail as far up the river as Queensbridge where a swinging basin was constructed.

With the passage of time the docks moved progressively downstream as ships became larger and road bridges were built across the Yarra River. The construction of the Spencer Street Bridge in 1928 and the Charles Grimes Bridge in 1975 each closed access to docks to the east. The barque **"Polly Woodside"** lying in the old Duke and Orr drydock, the warehouses of South Wharf and the **"Mission to Seafarers"** building are now the only two reminders of the maritime history of this area.

Both World Wars stimulated growth in manufacturing, and European immigrants began to flow into the city after the end of WW2, well into the 1960s and beyond. Growth of the Port of Melbourne continued into the early 1970s when immigration began to decline. The Port of Melbourne economy then slowed during the mid-1970s and early 1980s and the worldwide impact of containerization started to influence of the Port's traditional break-bulk trade, resulting in fewer general cargo ships calling.

An aerial panorama of Port Philip Bay, the mouth of the Yarra River and the City and Port of Melbourne,

including, Web Dock, Station and Princess piers. Taken some time between 1965 and 1978 prior to the Westgate Bridge opening. The Westgate Bridge infrastructure had commenced in 1965 with approach roads, etc., being built, but the bridge opening was delayed until 1978, due to the collapse of one of the center spans of the bridge in 1970, sadly causing 35 fatalities amongst the construction crews, during the building phase. The opening of the Bridge was further marred by disagreements over "Toll" charges intended by the Government, which were eventually abandoned, leading to today's "Toll Free" status.   (Unknown photographer)

My first visit to Melbourne was when I was serving as a Deck Apprentice on the old Bank Line vessel **"Weybank"** in about 1962. I recall we picked up the Port Philip Pilots after passing the "Rip", on a wet and windy spring day, it was a Saturday. We had arrived from Nauru with a cargo of bulk phosphate, and we were heading towards the Yarraville bulk jetty, from memory. By the time we were passing St Kilda beach, thronged with bronzed swimmers, and entering the Yarra River, it was blazing hot and by the time we were secured alongside it was pouring in rain yet again. So much for the changing climate of Melbourne and claims of all four seasons in a single day!

During the late 1960s and early 1970s Melbourne was a busy port, and it was not uncommon to see about 30 ships in the Port each day. These were mostly general cargo vessels, although there were a few tankers and bulk carriers as well. Seldom did one see vacant wharf space, most of it occupied by the various tonnage. The wharfs which flanked the Yarra riverbank, North and South Wharfs, Victoria Dock, Appleton Dock, Holden Dock, Webb Dock, and Maribyrnong wharfs. Swanson dock did not open until early 1969, established for container shipping. The first coastal and international container ships to use the new facility were, **Kanimbla** and **Encounter Bay** respectively

Station and Princess piers were also kept busy, catering for general cargo ships as well as cruise liners. The Ferry to Tasmania operated from Webb Dock, and as an apprentice, I did my Lifeboat Certificate in Melbourne and can well remember rowing around the Webb Dock basin in a lifeboat from the **"Princess of Tasmania"** ferry. In 1985 Princess Pier was demolished as it had been left derelict for some time and fallen foul to a series of devastating fires caused by squatters and vandals.

A more recent image of Melbourne Port Showing Coode Island Tanker berths (extreme bottom), Swanson Dock container berths, Appleton Dock and South wharfs.

With the decline in conventional General Cargo ships calling at Melbourne Much of the old North wharf and Victoria dock area became underutilized and has now been redeveloped into a maze of upmarket, high rise residential properties, commonly referred to as "Docklands". The modern Port of Melbourne now extends downstream of the Bolte Bridge shown in the image.   (Port of Melbourne)

Despite all the redevelopments for alternative purposes over recent years, the Port of Melbourne remains the largest port for containerized and general cargo in Australia. The Port of Melbourne is the

fourth-largest container port in the Southern hemisphere. In 2003, it became the first Australia port to handle up to 2 million TEU per year. Now Melbourne handles upwards of 3 million TEU, and about 3,000 ships call at the Port each year.

Below is the layout of the Port as it is today, the entire Victoria Dock precinct has now become part of the modern Central Business and Residential District. Very few of the old pubs and sailor's haunts remain, mostly being replaced by a wide variety of world class continental coffee houses, restaurants, and hotels, in keeping with the multicultural city into which, Melbourne has now evolved. It bears little, if any, of the city of 1960-70s sailors may remember

(Port of Melbourne Authority)

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