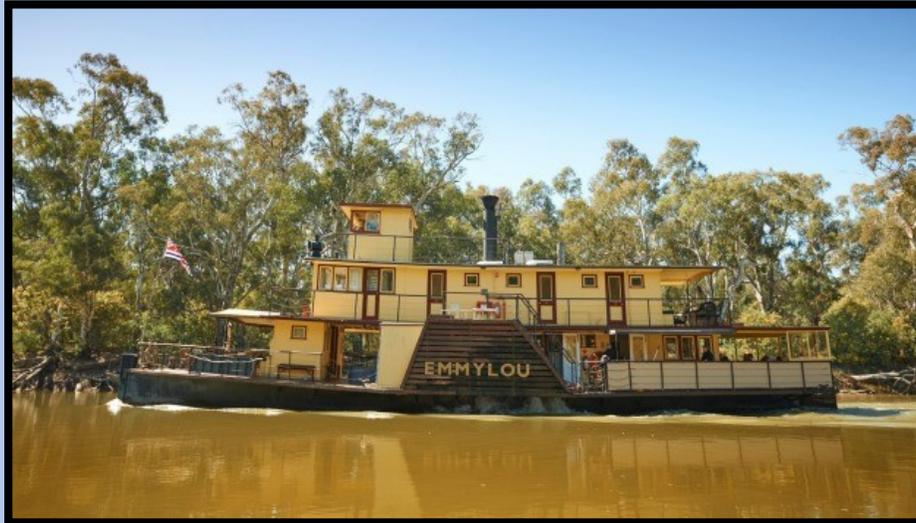


The Magical charm of the Old Australian Paddle Steamers

By Geoff Walker



The Majestic **"PS Emmylou"** photographed on the Murray River. (Unknown photographer)

A modern addition to the burgeoning Echuca Tourist Trade, the Paddle Steamer **"PS Emmylou"**, rebuilt in 1980, so named after the popular country American singer Emmylou Harris. She is the only woodfired Paddle Steamer in the World, operating passenger services. **"PS Emmylou"** is powered by a restored 1906 wood-fired Marshall, Sons & Co. steam engine. Her furnace burns approximately one ton of wood per day, and daily freshwater consumption of 250 liters.

She is based at the river port of **Echuca** in the northern border country of Victoria. The paddle steamer also featured in the popular 1983 Australian TV miniseries **"All the Rivers Run"** but was renamed **"PS Providence"** as for the duration of filming. then in September 2018 she underwent a further renovation.

Australia's Darling and Murray Rivers were some of the first to operate steam driven Paddle Steamers, stemming back to the Paddle Steamer **"Surprise"** launched at Sydney in 1831. By the 1840s, a number of paddle steamers were not only operating in Australia's vast navigable rivers, but also in coastal waters.

The use of the Paddle Steamer in Australia was initially used for the transportation of Wool and Timber, not forgetting passengers, and other essential goods from upstream river ports to the commercial centers nearer the coastal Ports, and vice versa.

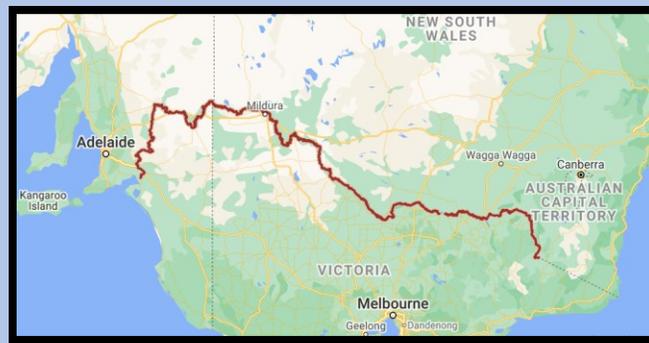
The Murray, Murrumbidgee, and Darling Rivers provided important access to inland south-eastern Australia, during the second half of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. The Murray River is Australia's second-longest river, the longest being its tributary the Darling River. These rivers were water highways and very instrumental in regional development. Paddle steamers, some towing barges plied the narrow, winding, muddy watercourses, to supply stations and riverside towns with their needs, and to carry wool, and other products of the surrounding land, to markets to be sold and for export. A century ago, people were far more aware and reliant on the Murray-Darling River system than today, because of their dependence upon these rivers for transport and communication,

and the significant role these rivers played in their daily survival and prosperity cannot be over emphasized.



(Unknown photographer)

The old Australian Paddle Steamer “**PS Melbourne**”, operated on the Murray River from **Echuca**, the raised platform (deck) above the paddle wheels that allows the engineer ease of access to the paddle wheels, on either side, giving rise to origins of the term “**Bridge**”. Built in 1912, the “**PS Melbourne**” retains her original steam engine and boiler. She still operates two-hour river cruises along the Murray.



A map showing the meandering Murray – Darling River Basin, of Southeast Australia.

The Darling River connects with the Murray River and casts north from the river town of **Wentworth**, whilst the Murrumbidgee River, has its confluence with the Murray River at **Balranald**, then extends east across the plains of New South Wales. The Murray River forms much of the border of the Australian states of **Victoria** and **New South Wales**. The border is generally agreed as the southern high-water mark of the river. This boundary definition can be ambiguous, as the river has changed its course slightly since the boundary was charted in 1851.

From the 1860s through to the early 1900s, paddle steamers, transported passengers and goods throughout Riverland communities and sheep stations. The side wheel paddle steamers are distinctly Australian having first plied the Murray River in 1853, they established a thriving industry which survived until rail and roads began to service the region near the turn of the century. By 1873 there were 240 boats trading along the Murray River. These vessels played a significant role in southeast Australia’s pioneering history.

The old Wentworth wharf became the nexus of the town and the outback region, where bullock and horse teams carted in the wool from outlying stations to load on board the steamers and barges that used the wharf. The river port at Wentworth was always busy, and during 1890 in just one week, some 31 paddle steamers reportedly used the wharf. The exports that year were valued at £1,276,202 and imports worth £654,042, which by standards of the time were huge sums of money. Wentworth's Customs Office was the busiest in New South Wales outside Sydney and Newcastle. A total of 420

paddle steamers visited Wentworth in 1890. At its peak these river craft shipped over 12,000 bales of the highest quality wool, from the Darling River woolsheds alone, mostly for export.

West of the 141°E meridian of longitude, the river continues as the **Victoria - South Australia** border for a short distance of only 3.6 km. This was due to a miscalculation in the 1840s when the border was originally surveyed. Past this point, the Murray River is entirely within the state of **South Australia**, where it flows for some 500 kilometers. The waters of the Murray stem through several lakes including Lake Alexandrina and Coorong, before discharging through the Murray mouth into the Southern Ocean, near **Goolwa**.

The lack of a Deepwater estuary means that shipping cannot enter the Murray from the Southern Ocean in South Australia. However, in the 19th century the river used to support a substantial commercial of shallow-draft paddle steamers. The first trips were made by two boats from South Australia, on the spring flood of 1853. One vessel, "**PS Lady Augusta**" reached **Swan Hill** while another, "**PS Mary Ann**" navigated upstream as far as **Moama** (near Echuca). In 1855 a steamer carrying supplies for the gold-mines, reached Albury, but **Echuca** was the usual termination point and headquarters central, although smaller river boats continued to link with up-river ports such as **Tocumwal, Wahgunya** and **Albury**.

In anticipation of increasing the navigability of the river system, numerous locks were proposed, but only thirteen were completed; Locks 1 to 11 on the stretch downstream of **Mildura**, Lock 15 at **Euston** and Lock 26 at **Torrumbarry**. Construction of the remaining weirs purely for navigation purposes was abandoned in 1934. The last lock to be completed was Lock 15, in 1937.



The "**PS Pevensy**" former river cargo boat that once served station properties along the length of the Murray River. After catching fire in 1932 the "**PS Pevensy**" was rebuilt, but later became a floating museum. Restored in 1973, she was re-floated in 1976 and now serves as only one of a number, of old restored "paddlers", offering river excursions from **Echuca**. Built in 1911, she traded on the Murray River until about 1958, running between South Australia and Mildura. After the river trade ended "**PS Pevensy**" was tied up at Mildura where it was sunk by vandals in 1967, though later salvaged.

In 1973 the steamer was purchased by Echuca City Council and towed there for restoration, with assistance of the Victorian Government. (Unknown photographer).

Today, the river operates the largest number of original, restored, paddle steamers in the world and carries on the traditions of the early Australian outback pioneers and gold prospectors. The paddle steamer excursions are extremely popular and still manage to paint an accurate picture of life on the riverboats of the Murray-Darling and Murrumbidgee river systems, during the early years of colonization.



The “**PS Pevensey**” was of composite construction, with timber on iron frames, built at the Moama slipway by Permewan, Wright & Co. Ltd. The hull is 111.6 ft (34 m) in length, 23.0 ft (7 m) beam and 6.9 ft (2 m) in depth and was measured at 130 GRT. It still has its original steam engine and boiler, built by Marshall, Sons & Co. of Gainsborough, England. It is a 20 nhp high-pressure two-cylinder engine, No. 55721, which gives her a speed of 8 knots. “**PS Pevensey**” also featured in the role of the fictional “**PS Philadelphia**” in the Australian television miniseries **All the Rivers Run**, filmed in Echuca in 1982–1983, alongside another Echuca steamer “**Emmylou**”. **The River Kings** filmed in 1991 on South Australia's section of the Murray River, was another television miniseries set during the 1920s, also following the popular theme of life on the river boats

The beautifully restored and maintained steam engine of the “**PS Pevensey**” (Unknown photographer)



(Unknown photographer)

A flashback in time to the heydays when laden barges were towed from the outstations to Echuca where goods were transhipped to and from Melbourne, by rail.

End

References: Echuca Historical Society, Emmylou Cruises, Murray River Paddle Steam History, Port of Echuca, Murray River website, Paddlesteamers.info, various online data from which some additional information has been sourced.

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