

STUFF



February to August, 2026

100 *WILD*, WEIRD and *wonderful* objects from the Museum of the Riverina collection

Museum of the Riverina,
Historic Council Chambers site
243 Baylis Street, Wagga Wagga

museumriverina.com.au



City of Wagga Wagga

MoR

NSW GOVERNMENT

Museum of the Riverina is a cultural facility of Wagga Wagga City Council.
This project is supported by the NSW Government through Create NSW.

“One can pass from one country
museum to the other and see

the same old flat irons,

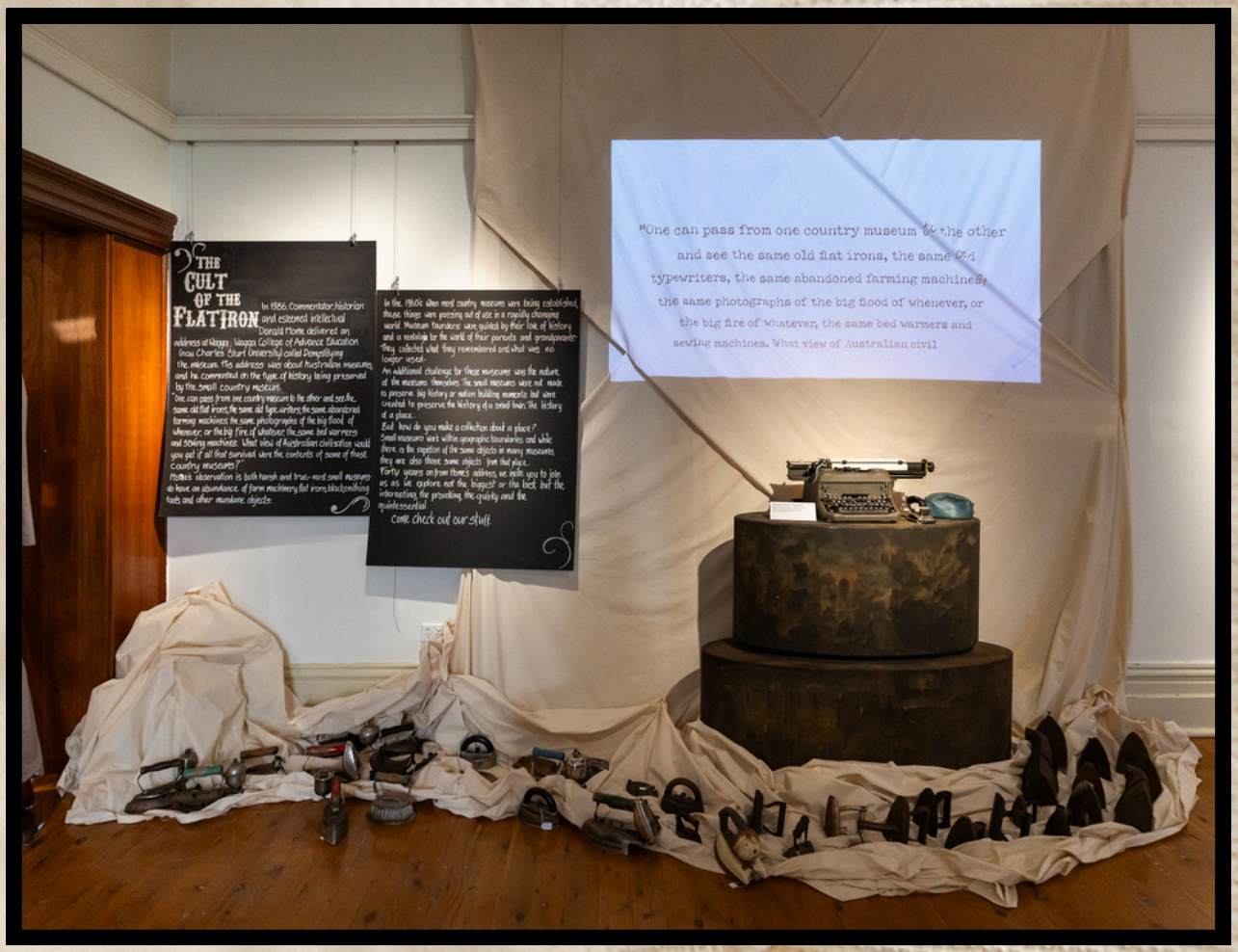
the same old typewriters,

the same abandoned farming machines,

the same photographs of the big
flood of whenever, or the big fire
of whatever,

the same bed warmers and
sewing machines.

What view of Australian civilisation would you get if all that survived were the contents of some of these country museums?”



The Cult of the Flat Iron

In 1986, commentator, historian and esteemed intellectual Donald Horne delivered an address at Wagga Wagga College of Advanced Education (now Charles Sturt University) called Demystifying the Museum. His address was about Australian museums, and he commented on the type of history being preserved by the small, country museum:

"One can pass from one country museum to the other and see the same old flat irons, the same old typewriters, the same abandoned farming machines, the same photographs of the big flood of whenever, or the big fire of whatever, the same bed warmers and sewing machines. What view of Australian civilisation would you get if all that survived were the contents of some of these country museums?"

Horne's observation is both harsh and true—most small museums do have an abundance of farm machinery, flat irons, blacksmithing tools, and other mundane objects.

In the 1960s when most country museums were being established, these things were passing out of use in a rapidly changing world. Museum founders were guided by their love of history and a nostalgia for the world of their parents and grandparents. They collected what they remembered and what was no longer used.

An additional challenge for these museums was the nature of the museums themselves. The small museums were not made to preserve big history or nation building moments but were created to preserve the history of a small town. The history of a place.

But how do you make a collection about a place?

Small museums work within geographic boundaries, and while there is the repetition of the same objects in many museums, they are also those same objects from that place.

Forty years on from Horne's address, we invite you to join us as we explore not the biggest or the best, but the interesting, the provoking, the quirky and the quintessential.

Come check out our stuff.


Remington Rand







Happy Snaps

Before the advent of digital images, photography was a more deliberate exercise.

Cameras were packed, film wound, and the number of shots that could be taken was limited. Photographs were often planned and posed. Family photography captured moments of importance, like holidays or day trips. Groups posed before well-known landmarks or gathered around birthday cakes. Unusual events like floods or a visit from the Queen also prompted a flurry of photograph taking.

The bias of photographic collections often prioritises special moments - weddings, holidays and one-off events - above everyday ones.

Our museum collection reflects this process. There is not an even spread of documentation around places and times. The museum's collection has thousands of photos of Wagga Wagga during different floods, and yet, for some places like Tin Town, which was located at what we now call Wiradjuri Reserve, the only photographs we have are of those places underwater. As a well-known landmark, the Hampden Bridge has been incredibly well documented with artistic photos, the first car, news pictures, holiday and even wedding photographs all being taken on the now demolished bridge.



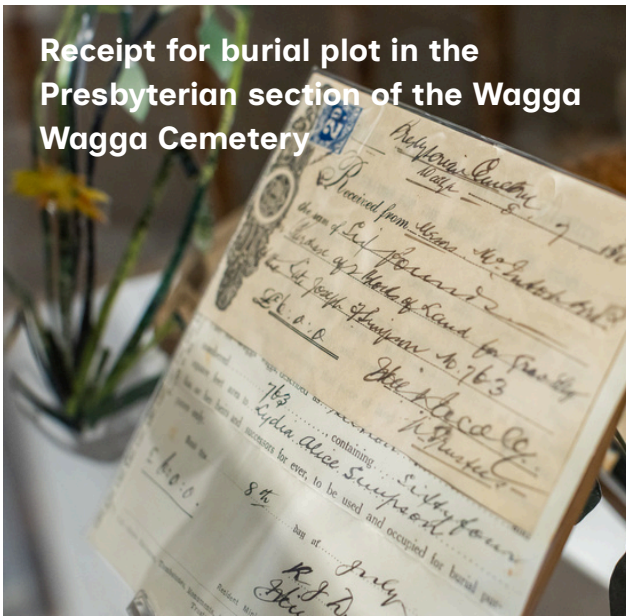
Life Between the Headstones



Gates from Wagga Wagga Monumental Ceremony



Two taxidermied King Lowrie parrots and two eggs



Receipt for burial plot in the Presbyterian section of the Wagga Wagga Cemetery

A long drive. Looming gumtrees. Birds chattering. A rusted fence. Rural Australian cemeteries conjure unique images of small, abandoned, and overgrown places. In vast landscapes, they are anchors of life, death, and the spaces between. They are reminders that time rolls on even in places which feel timeless.

Many rural cemeteries are rarely mowed and are fenced off to keep grazing sheep or cattle out. The lawn between the headstones has become a refuge for threatened and endangered species, such as native grasses like Wild Sorghum, flowers like Parson's Band Orchids and tubers like Yam Daisies.

Once a widespread food farmed by First Nations groups, the fields of yam daisies were wiped out by cattle brought in by colonists, with only scattered plants remaining. Places of death and commemoration have become havens of life, helping to restore plants once thought lost.

Law and Order

Wagga Wagga and the Jerilderie Letter

The 'last' of the bushrangers—and by far the most famous—was Ned Kelly who was hanged on November 11, 1880, at the age of 25 years. He dictated a long, wild, fluent and often hilarious justification of his lawless career in the famous Jerilderie Letter.

On page 11 of the 56 page letter, he questioned the ethics of the justice system in Wagga Wagga:

"Mr O'Brien seen no other chance of getting his money so there was a subscription collected for Hall and with the aid of this money he got James Murdoch who was recently hung in Wagga Wagga to give false evidence against me."



Bullet fired by Mad Dan Morgan at Henry Baylis

Bushranger Daniel Morgan, also known as 'Sydney Bill', 'Warrigal', 'Dan the Breaker', 'Beardie' and ultimately 'Mad Dog,' ran wild and lawless in this area. He robbed and shot squatters and workers from Cookardinia to Walla Walla, Burrumbuttock to Tumbarumba. On the 26th of August 1863, near Urangaline Creek, he ambushed and shot at the Magistrate of Wagga Wagga, Henry Baylis. The bullet struck Baylis in his right breast, "leaving a fearful opening", but Baylis lived to tell the tale.

Morgan was shot dead during a robbery in Victoria two years later after more crimes and murders.

Henry Baylis lived till he was 80. He died from head injuries after a tram knocked him down at Homebush in Sydney.

Holy Bible used at Wagga Wagga Courthouse, 1960s

Under the Australian Courts Act (1828), the British parliament established that English law would be the only law applicable in civil courts in the Australian colonies. The Act required that prior to giving evidence, an oath was sworn on the bible. Those who weren't Christian were able to swear on an equivalent text.

This changed in 1995, when the Evidence Act stated that "it is not necessary that a religious text be used in taking an oath."



A POLYSTYRENE BOX FOR YOUR HAMBURGER...
CHLOROFLUOROCARBONS IN YOUR HAIRSPRAY...
IVORY ON YOUR PIANO KEYS...

These are all things that were once commonly used, until they were phased out because of their environmental impact. From waste that may never break down to greenhouse gasses still circulating the atmosphere, along with protected animals that are struggling to recover numbers, the impact of the past remains with us even after our ideas and values change.

The museum collection reflects the social, cultural, and environmental legacies of the past. These are potent reminders that our own actions do not exist in isolation but build on both the good and bad of what has been done before.


Upright piano, c. 1900
Elephant tusk gifted to the city in the 1950s, before the 1989 international ban on ivory trading
Belling





1 elephant tusk = 45 sets of piano keys

Strong, warm to the touch and smoother to play than wooden keys, ivory was a high-quality material used to make thousands of pianos throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Piano keys were made by applying a thin veneer of ivory to a wooden key. A skilled ivory sculptor could cut 45 sets of keys from one large tusk.

Pianos once had a central place in family life and were as important as the radio or the television would be to later generations. Even poorer working-class families or remote farms had a piano. In the nineteenth century, worldwide demand for pianos—and ivory—soared, and millions of elephants were slaughtered. In 1800, there was an estimated 26 million elephants in Africa. Today, there are about 600,000.

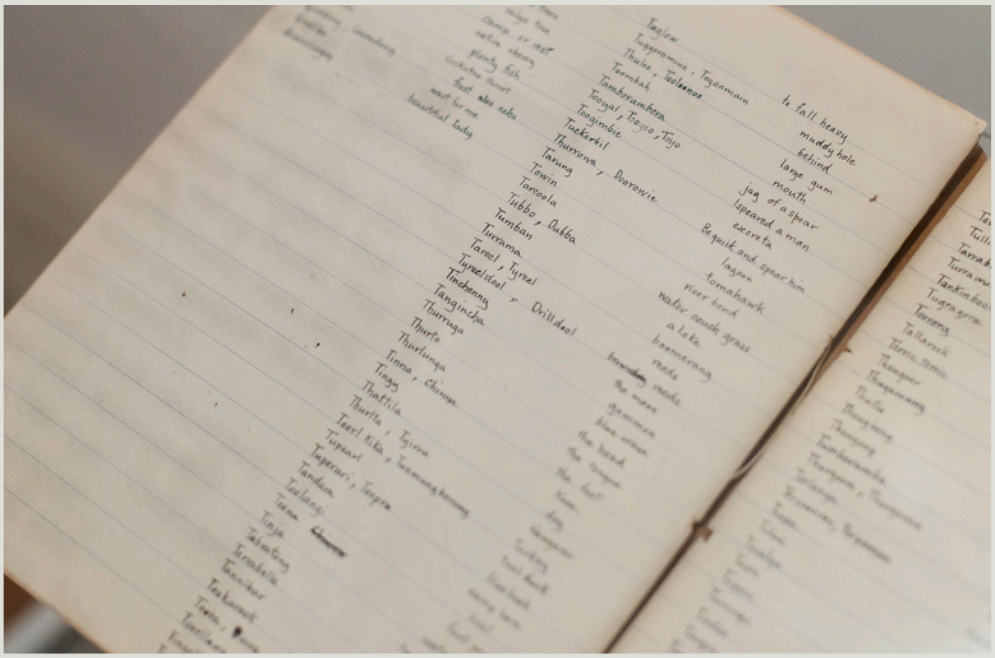
Shifting habits and technologies have since replaced the piano as the heart of the home, and many pianos are abandoned in loungeroom corners or sent to the tip.



Collecting and Colonisation

While objects in museums can look calm and passive, their history is not always so simple. Collecting can be violent and sometimes involves changing the meaning of something so that it fits into another person or group's story. As part of this process, many First Nation's objects in small museums have been interpreted through a colonial lens.

Early small museum collections were focused on documenting the "pioneer" past, and as part of that, they brought the ideas, history, and attitudes of early European colonists to the museum collection. Stories lost, associations severed, links to landscapes broken. In being collected, studied, and documented using Western processes, objects and language were given Western identities that obscured a violent past.



Documenting the Die Out
Notebook of J.J. Baylis, 1870-1928

This notebook was owned by J.J. Baylis, son of Wagga Wagga's first police magistrate, Henry Baylis. The back of the book contains rows and rows of words from languages Baylis thought were near extinct.

During colonisation it was assumed, and often hoped, that Aboriginal Australians would "die out." Colonists waged war, poisoned food, massacred communities, and curtailed personal freedoms. This oppression spread to more than just land. Across Australia, the roughly 250 pre-settlement languages were being aggressively erased, and anyone caught speaking them could be gaoled, beaten, or worse.

At the same time, some men like J.J. Baylis saw themselves as anthropologists documenting the last days of a doomed culture. To further the overwhelming irony of collecting these words, most of the Wiradjuri is incorrect.





Shoebox Collections
Aboriginal worked stone tools, possibly collected at Grubben Station, c. 1950s.

It is not uncommon for rural properties to have tucked away in the shed a milkcrate or sometimes just a loose pile of stones. These are “shoebox collections” of worked stone tools that have been collected by farmers, who recognised them as human creations but did not know what to do with them. Keen to document all history, many small museums acquired these shoe box collections, but attributed their ownership to the farmer who brought them in rather than to the First Nation’s people who made them.



Coolamon made from tree at the Museum of the Riverina by Barry Walsh, 2001

While small museums have been part of the colonisation of the country, they are also placed to make change. They are not chained to telling the same colonial stories as they have in the past, even if this is what was inherited.

A big part of that is contribution and participation by people who can tell their own stories. This coolamon was donated to the Museum of the Riverina by Wiradjuri man Barry Walsh. It was made from a tree at the museum’s Botanic Gardens Site as part of a reconciliation event held by the museum in 2001.

They are symbols of hope and change, and a reminder that small museums have a big role in reconciliation and creating more accurate, more complete histories.



Sentimental Objects

The white dress, cutting the cake, bridal parties, and gift registries—these are well known wedding traditions.

But many wedding “traditions” are not very old at all. Most of them come from the mid to late nineteenth century.

At this time, many families become wealthier, and the middle class became a larger group. They had more disposable income than generations before, and manufacturers happily created lots of things for them to buy. Etiquette guides, many of which were written by businesses or contained advertising, made recommendations for those unsure on how to spend their money.

As part of this, the wedding ceremony became a much bigger event. Larger ceremonies with more guests meant more presents needed to be purchased.

Wedding guides encouraged adopting “traditions” along with buying gifts from shops. This created an emotional space where people developed a sentimental attachment to manufactured objects on a scale and intensity not common before.

The wedding dress, and bridesmaid’s dresses, are often only worn once, but are incredibly personal. Wedding dresses are usually high quality and custom fitted. They are impractical for any other purpose than being worn by a bride and are rarely reused or remade into something new. At the end of the wedding day, they remain in almost pristine condition, and are reminders of one very important day.

Rich with meaning, symbolism and personal connection, representative of fashion, materials and cultural values, wedding dresses hold many stories. They are the most common item found in museum textile collections.











On the Bridal Catwalk

Today we celebrate some of our favourite moments in Wagga Wagga's fashion history. It's all about bold choices, stunning silhouettes and fabulous fabrics.

Our first model today is Stephanie, wearing a gorgeous emerald green silk drop-waisted cocktail dress from the Miss Wagga Wagga Quest in 1990. Stephanie completes her look with a wide-waisted belt embellished with silk flowers.

Our next bridesmaid Kylie is wearing a beauty of a frock. She's rocking a silk cocktail dress with a magenta bodice, puff sleeves and a multicoloured skirt lined with tulle. She's bringing home the look with Magenta-covered slub silk heels. Kylie Jacobsen was an entrant in Miss Wagga Wagga Quest 1992.

Next up is our groomsman Garry, pulling off a hired Brian Ferrari suit with velvet lapels, ruffle shirt and burgundy butterfly bowtie exclusively from the Fuller's 1970s range. He is sure to be a hit with the ladies.

The mother of the bride Merle wears a fabulous ready-to-wear Ottino evening gown in scarlet with bell sleeves and beaded trim from the 1970s Brenda Fuller Collection. Merle completes her look with a kitten heel from Oriel 'Granny Begg" of Wagga Wagga, from the 1960s.

Now, here's the moment we have all been waiting for. Let's welcome the lucky couple!

Introducing the bride, Mrs Kimmy, who wears Jeanne de Campo from Melbourne, originally worn by Mildred Anderson at the 1966 Masonic debutante ball. A stylish tulle wedding veil with handmade pansies accompanies the look, originally owned and worn by Judy Pulver of Wagga Wagga Central in 1964. Kimmy completes the look with silver jacquard shoes owned by Nadine Carlin of Lake Albert.

The handsome groom, Ronnie, pulls off a Lewis & Co. black tuxedo with pleated front, bow tie and black dress shoes from the Ken Reynolds 1954 Galore collection.

And special mention goes to the photographer, sporting a distinguished leisure suit owned by Col Carlin of Lake Albert and worn in the 1970s.





WHAT SURVIVES

Many museum collections, the Museum of the Riverina's included, have a higher number of objects that came from wealthier families. This is partially because these people tend to be part of big political movements or economic events, but another side of this is the obvious—the rich have more stuff. Therefore, they leave more of it behind.

One of the challenges for museums is how to preserve the stories of those with less. Through times of financial hardship, like the Great Depression, or for large families with many children, things were reused and recycled over and again. Clothing was handed down before being sewn into new things, like blankets or aprons, before being cut up for rags. Milk crates could be furniture. Glass bottles were repurposed, and tin cans cut and bended to new uses.





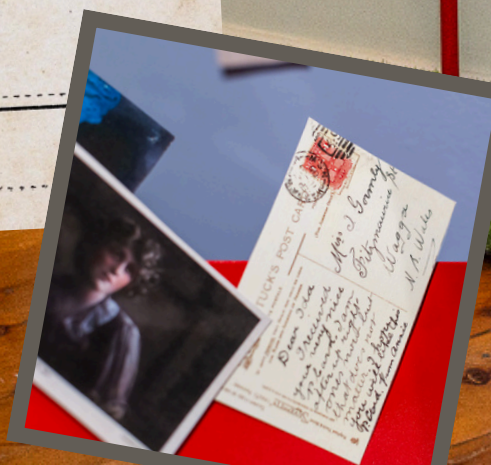
Love Notes

Ida Gormy postcard collection

In an age before instant messaging and emoji's, postcards were a quick way to let someone special know you were thinking of them.

These postcards belonged to Ida Gormly, who was an avid collector of cards. Each tells a story—stories of friendship, notes from admirers, and a few broken hearts.





HIT THE ROAD



Come the holidays, and Wagga Wagga residents hit the highways —onto the Sturt, along the Olympic and the Hume. These roads take locals to dams, the beach, to the big smoke and small towns.

Roads from Wagga Wagga are part of a vast network, and there is always a stretch that is under maintenance. It's not cars that do the damage, but trucks, as an average 35 tonne semi will add 2400 times more wear and tear to a road than a 2-tonne car.

Surveyors, engineers, skilled roadworkers and testing laboratories constantly monitor, design and fix the roads we drive.





We Are Here banner from CSU Momentum float, carried at the 2015 Mardi Gras.

T-shirt worn by members of the Riverina Lesbian and Gay Social Support Group in the 1995 Mardi gras, for their float inspired by the teen drama television show Beverley Hills 90210: the college years.

"For some people, it might be the only positive day in their year."

Zoe, speaking in 2015 about participating in the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras

For many LGBTIQ people, life in the country is a life of treading cautiously, quietly, or between spaces of acceptance and being closeted.

In the late 1970s and 80s when laws around sexuality and discrimination were changing and providing legal protection, safety and acceptance was a shifting line. While legally protected, people still experienced discrimination in their work lives, families and from the press.

Travelling to Sydney for the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras offers the opportunity for LGBTIQ people to connect, celebrate and party with others, just as they are. Since 1978, many people from the Riverina have attended the parade, to watch or join in.

For many LGBTIQ people living in the country, Mardi Gras is the one night of the year where they truly feel like they can be themselves.



A Fair Day's Work for a Fair Day's Pay

Labour Day, held on the first Monday in October, commemorates the 8 Hour Day movement that started in Australia in 1856. The movement campaigned for better working conditions and sought to find a balance between the need to work and the right to leisure time outside of work. This was a rhyme at the time:

Eight hours to work,
Eight hours to play,
Eight hours to sleep,
Eight bob a day.
A fair day's work,
For a fair day's pay.

Time clocks, often called a 'Bundy' in Australia, were used to record workers hours in many businesses. Both a blessing and a curse, they documented the hours worked to avoid exploitation, but also increased the surveillance of staff.






The Four Seasons

Spring



Miss Wagga Cape, 1989

Behold the mighty wattle
The symbol of our land
You can put it in a bottle
You can hold it in your hand
Monty Python, the Bruce sketch

In the early twentieth century, Wattle Day, celebrated on September 1, was a popular community day. People would plant wattle trees in community gardens or their own backyards, and sprigs of wattle were sold as lapel pins.

By the time of the outbreak of the Second World War, Wattle Day had been almost forgotten and the wattle wasn't used as an Australian symbol. However, in the 1960s, a new Australian nationalism emerged, and the wattle regained its place in the popular imagination.

Gumtree green and wattle gold were officially declared Australia's national colours in 1984, and the golden wattle was proclaimed the national floral emblem in 1988.



Summer

Fighting the six-legged menace

When dinner on the back deck means being dinner for the mozzies, it's time to take action.

Insect repellent was invented during the Second World War for troops fighting in New Guinea. It was commercially introduced in the 1950s, and we've been spraying it on ever since.

I Scream

Anytime is a good time for ice cream, but summer has a way of lifting Zooper Doopers to the galactic scale.

Ice cream was delivered and stored in ice chests and had to be eaten quickly. The invention of the home freezer meant that frosty treats could be bought at the supermarket and enjoyed at home, at any time.

We have sea world at home

Running aimlessly through sprinklers is one of the best ways to beat the country heat. Roll out a sheet of plastic and add some dishwashing liquid for the world's jankiest slip and slide.



Bug spray



Peters ice-cream tin


Home sprinkler


Electrolux fan



Autumn

Miniature Dunlop's trench coat, 1948
Miniature of the famous "Chips Rafferty" trench coat made by the Dunlop's Weatherproof Factory

Women's Rubber Overshoes, made by Dunlops Weatherproof Factory, c.1945
Worn over heels to keep toes dry on rainy Autumn days





Winter

A Trip to the Snow
"We would wear a pair of socks, then over them put bread bags, then another pair of socks. That's how we kept our feet dry."
– Matt, Christian Brothers student, speaking about school excursions to the snow

Woollen Mittens, c. 1950s

Wooden Sled used by Buchcik Family, c. 1950s



ACME

ACME Furniture used at Lewis House

ACME seemingly made almost everything. However, there is no single Acme company, but dozens of them.

Acme is an ancient Greek word meaning peak, or pinnacle, so it was used by many stores and manufacturing companies in trying to make their brand stand out as the best. But there was another reason to use Acme for a company name—the spelling of “Acme” made it more likely that a company would be listed at the top of the search list in the phonebook.

The “Acme” name became so common in the 1960s that any product in a Looney Tunes cartoon was branded as coming from the Acme company.

This furniture, stacked to pay homage to these cartoons, was manufactured by the Acme Steel Furniture company based in Alexandria, NSW. This is a bedroom set that furnished one of the 30 rooms of Lewis House, the nursing accommodation that formed part of the Wagga Wagga Base Hospital, until it was demolished in 2022.










SINGER

Wagga's Tiny Dancers



Sewing Machine used by Edna Buse to make costumes for the Inland Ballet

Edna Buse was a student and prima ballerina with the Borovansky Ballet Company. In 1962, the company became the foundation for the Australian Ballet. Following her retirement from the stage, Edna moved to Wagga Wagga to establish the Inland Ballet in 1967.



Edna used this sewing machine to make costumes for the Borovansky Ballet and later, she brought it to Wagga Wagga and made costumes for all performances of the Inland Ballet. As none of the costumes have survived, only photographs and film, this sewing machine and the memory of the dozens of costumes made on it is a testament to Edna's commitment and contribution to the ballet in Wagga Wagga.



All I Want for Christmas

During the 1950s and 1960s, responsibility for unpaid domestic labour was assumed to rest naturally with women. Housewifery, wifedom, and motherhood were constructed as women's primary roles and treated as labour performed in exchange for the support of husband's wage rather than independent economic work.

Time-saving devices, such as the stylish Hoover vacuum cleaner, were promoted as symbols of technological progress and as tools that elevated domestic work into a new "profession." When given as Christmas gifts, these appliances functioned as an "end-of-year bonus" for women's hard work.

Rather than bringing fulfilment or happiness, they reinforced women's confinement to the domestic sphere and the expectation that unpaid labour was both natural and sufficient reward.











WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE COLOUR

On average, humans love blue more than any other colour. We form different associations to colours based on our life experiences, and one theory as to why we are so drawn to blue is because of the powerful place the colour has in our daily lives. Vast blue skies, endless oceans and clear water.

For ancient Egyptians, the colour blue symbolised the Nile, life and fertility. When Egyptians made the world's first synthetic paint over 5000 years ago, it was blue.

Since the 1100s, blue has been used to paint the Virgin Marys dress. For artists in the renaissance this had to be ultramarine blue. This paint was made from ground lapis lazuli stones and was more valuable than its weight in gold.

Between the 1880s to the 1960s, some First Nations groups adapted blue laundry whitener from missionaries to add a new colour to their rock art.

Many people associate blue with reliability. Perhaps this is why so many companies, like Facebook, Microsoft and Disney use the colour blue in their logos and marketing.



Salt Jar Found at Berry Jerry Station, 1890s



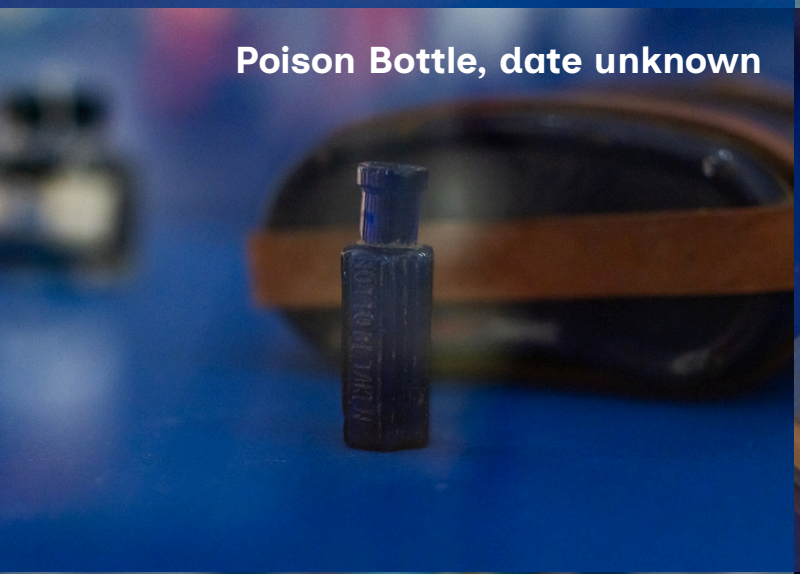
Blue Velvet Tiara, date unknown



Parker's Quink Ink, 1960–1980



Meggeson Pastilles, 1940s



Poison Bottle, date unknown



The Australian Blue Book, 1942



Hat Worn by Jan Lampe, 1980s



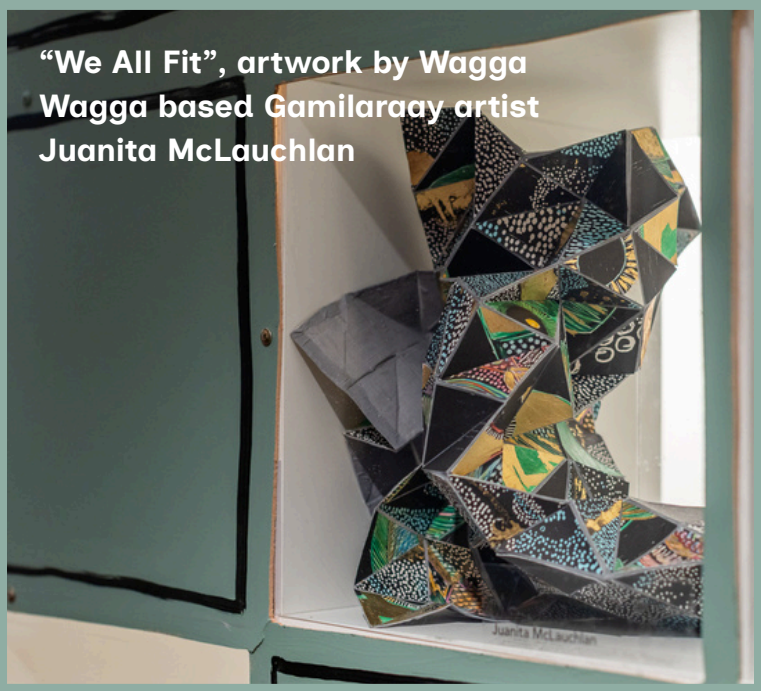
Bumper Sticker, 1980s
Tourist Information Sticker, 1990s


OUR PLACE
116


Convict brick with diamond frog and thumbprint, 1830s-1850s
Convict brick with diamond frog and thumbprint, 1830s-1850s


Japanese sandals, c. 1945


Large iron keys, date unknown


“We All Fit”, artwork by Wagga Wagga based Gamilaraay artist Juanita McLauchlan


Dinner bell from Pullitop Station, c. 1900



Baylis Street sign


School uniform, Kooringal Public School


Rubber horseshoes, 1930s-40s



Tobacco tins, c. 1940s

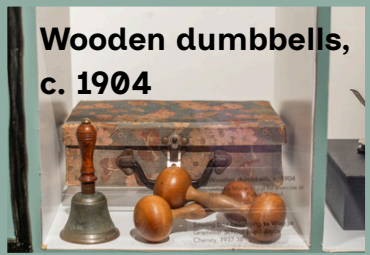

Egg cup table set from the Hurst Family, 1880s



Fish Shop toy set, c. 1955



Little Wonder toy iron, 1950s


Wooden dumbbells, c. 1904

STUFF: 100 Wild, Weird and Wonderful Objects from the Museum of the Riverina collection

was curated by

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Rebecca George
Sam Leah
Hamish Maclean
Sophie Magnusson

