

“You Must Be Mr Menzies”

Sylvia Baker

So said a six year old boy who had just been introduced to the then Premier of N.S.W., the Hon. J. J. Cahill.

The occasion was the opening of the Lawson Syphons, ten kms east of the town of Deniliquin on the Edward River, Wednesday, 27th April 1955.

As the mother of this child and a newly elected Alderman of the Deniliquin Municipal Council I had attended the opening of this wonderful engineering feat.

The official party was seated on an elevated platform on one side of the channel yet to receive water, and the general public on the other. A small bridge linked the two. It was a grand occasion, a beautiful day, and the town band in all its splendour was doing a magnificent job entertaining the crowd which had come to witness an historic event - the opening of the hinged radial gates which would release Mulwala water, held in the twin twelve feet syphons, from under the Edward River bed on the north to the south side of the river, thus enabling a large further area to be opened to irrigation.

Our young son, with his dad, had taken up a position close to the edge of the channel, and near the outlets of the twin syphons. As the official speeches droned on, young son, whose wandering gaze happened upon his Mum across the channel was off - slipping and sliding down the steep slope to the floor of the channel.

Fortunately he was spotted and the moment of ‘turn on’ postponed. By the seat of his pants he was yanked unceremoniously back up the bank by his irate dad, and the proceedings continued to the final speech and the eventual flow of the waters.

Later, at the afternoon tea in the specially erected marquee, we were embarrassed to have to introduce the cause of the commotion to the Premier.

‘Christopher, this gentleman is the Premier of N.S.W.’ ‘Oh! Are you really? You must be Mr Menzies.’ My embarrassment was total - a Labor Premier of N.S.W. mistaken for a Liberal Prime Minister of Australia by a six year old.

With great good humour and obvious understanding of the ways of mischievous young boys, Mr Cahill soon put me at ease.

It was April 1955 and the Mulwala Canal had been successfully syphoned under the Edward River and Aljoes Creek to emerge on the south side of the river. It has flowed non-stop ever since turning water into gold for those whom irrigation is vital in this part of the Murray Valley.