



The History of Wemmer Pan Rowing Club



A Time of Transition (1940 to 1959)

*Contributions from Aubrey Miles, Keith Reid, Neill Davies & H Juniper
(edited by Rod MacKinnon & Charley Lewis)*

The War Years

The 1940s and 1950s saw WPRC guided by three chairpersons: Dave Cadle, who restored the momentum of the Club up to 1956; Rail Karg, in 1956 and 1957; and Jim Rogers (1958 to 1962) who was a driving force for competitiveness in the Club as well as in national rowing administration.

1940 to 1945 placed the Club in wartime mode. The Vaal and Buffalo regattas were held in 1940, before the full effects of the War hit this country. 1940 also saw the first Mazelspoort regatta in Bloemfontein. During the war years both Aubrey Miles and Alan Francis recall Sid and Phyllis Nettleton taking schoolboys from Forest High and Jeppe down to row. Alan wrote a particularly vivid recollection in our Sprint brochure a couple of years ago, part of which is worth repeating.



Dave Cadle, Silver Sculls winner 1946 & 1947



On the Barrage, returning from Kroonstad in Eddie Payne's Willy's 77: from left, Neil Norton, ANO, Willie Schunbach, Eddie Payne and Fred Miles

He wrote that on arrival at the Pan by tram from Kensington "two large corrugated iron structures greeted us, the clubhouse with a large elevated wooden veranda and the boathouse, complete with flagpole. Two finger jetties extended into the water from the bank in front of the two large garage-type doors. Everything looked spooky and derelict to young boys. Mr Nettleton opened a door at the rear of the shed. Our worst fears were confirmed as the door creaked open – the place was haunted! Rays of sunlight penetrated the gloom from odd holes in the iron cladding, dimly illuminating the ghostlike dark shapes of long racing craft and wooden racks all festooned from roof to floor with deadly spider webs! After plucking up courage, we followed Mr Nettleton and fearfully groped our way amongst rail-wheeled boat dollies, trestles, oars and other obstacles to unbar the two sets of large doors in the front. Light flooded in

and we were amazed and thrilled with the sleekness and fine shapes of the beautiful racing hulls. We wanted to row immediately.”

Post-War Revival



Aubrey Miles in front of the old club house veranda

The regatta scene restarted in 1946. That year Wemmer crew was leading the Vaal Challenge by a couple of lengths when ‘Buff’ Jones (so-called because he had moved up from East London) blacked out in the 3 seat and went overboard. He was saved only by the quick thinking of the young cox, L. Bradshaw, who jumped in despite being a poor swimmer, and managed to keep Buff’s head above water by hanging on to a rigger. Bradshaw was half of Buff’s weight, making this no mean feat of bravery.

Doug Munton made his first entry as a Junior in this regatta. Such was his prowess that he won Junior Whiffs the following year, and was in the winning Grand crew two years later in 1948. Dave Cadle, who had won a DFC as a Squadron Leader in Italy, opened the post-war years with consecutive wins in the Buffalo Silver Sculls in 1946 and 1947. He was also in the first Wemmer crew to win the Grand in 1948. Our first record of Dave is as a cox in the second Vaal Regatta in 1927, in which he coxed both his father’s and mother’s crews.

Despite the 1948 Grand victory, the crew was narrowly beaten by VLC for selection to the Olympic Games of that year. Undaunted, they were nominated in 1950 to participate at the Empire Games. The crew was stroked by Rail Karg with Doug and Syd Munton in the middle, and Aubrey Miles as bow and coach. Unfortunately, due to lack of funding from the Olympic Committee, they were once again disappointed. In 1952, at the trials for the Helsinki Olympic Games, once again the green and gold blazers slipped through Wemmer’s grasp, the honours going to Wits University, with Wemmer a close second.



The post-War ladies four at Germiston with the former Victoria Falls Power station in the background, now occupied by Eskom

Wits had imported the first carvel four into the country in 1939. An exhibition row over was arranged in 1946 at the Vaal Regatta, since no other clubs had these boats. The row-over was not done, but the principle of racing in the faster boats was adopted. This change also coincided with the introduction of eights into Transvaal rowing. In the following year ‘Fine Eights’ were on the programme at the Vaal Regatta, and in 1948 eights appeared for the first time at Buffalo, with both regattas hosting ‘Fine Four’ races.

From 1947 to 1955 the Vaal regattas were held against the current at Eligwa, rather than Vereeniging. Regattas combined rowing with swimming and power boat races. In the mid-1960s the Club rekindled the relationship, and began using Eligwa for the start of its annual Long Row.

The Kroonstad regatta was held for the first time after the War in 1950, bringing eights to the river there for the first time. This put the regatta circuit back in full swing. The season included Mazelspoort in October, Boksborg on Boxing Day (this date was taken up by Kroonstad when Boksborg faded from the scene), VLC early in the year, Buffalo in February and the Vaal Regatta over Easter. There was also the Durban regatta, and several social regattas held at the Pan, using the tub pairs.

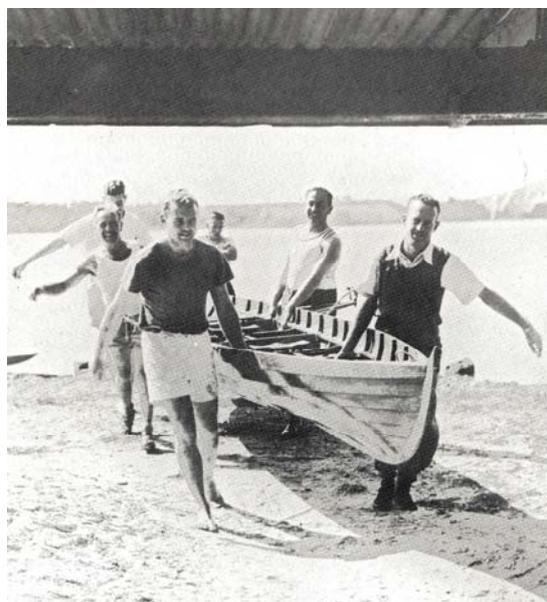


The lads, ready to tour!

Aubrey recalls taking fours to Kazerne rail yard on top of cars and loading them into a D2 open rail truck, in which wooden trestles had been constructed for the purpose of the transport to East London and Durban. A tarpaulin was then hauled over the top. The crews drove down and collected the boats from the rail yard, repeating the exercise for the return journey.

In the 1951 Vaal Regatta, Trevor Steyn was in the Novice Fours rowing for Bloemfontein. Within a couple of years he was at Wemmer Pan, recruited and also employed by Jim Rogers who saw his potential.

While Aubrey was working in London in 1951, he saw a rowing training tank in one of the Tideway clubs. On his return he and Rail Karg, who was a builder, roughed out a design and built the first tank in the country on the western side of the old boat house.



Hauling a clinker tub over the 'beach' in front of the old boathouse, about 1959; l to r, Arnim Heinman, Aubrey Miles, Eric Wolf, Trevor Steyn

The 1950s was a period of further changes. The Transvaal clubs were all using coxless fine fours but understandably, it took some years for the Durban and Buffalo committees to relinquish their 70-year tradition of rowing coxed clinkers in their premier events, the Durban Challenge Bowl and the Grand. As a consequence, the Transvaal clubs adopted the Centenary Fours at Buffalo as their premier event and entered lower-ranked crews into the Grand. Wemmer won the Centenary in 1950 and 1951. The last Grand rowed in clinker fours was in 1955.

All premier races in the country were rowed over 1 mile 550 yards, the 'Henley distance'. This changed abruptly in 1956, when the first South African Championships were held at Billabong, Jim Roger's property on the Vaal. Here Jim laid the first straight 2 000m course in the country. He was the driver behind the national championships, which were designed to establish rowing over the international distance so that crews could more properly

prepare for Olympics. All the senior events were raced over 2 000m, and junior events over 1 mile.

Jim was an Australian oarsman and a businessman in the pharmaceuticals industry. Aubrey recalls that he came to the Pan in about 1954/5, becoming the driving force in the Club, taking it

to new levels and ultimately to the Olympics in 1960. When he arrived, the water was some 30m from the boathouse and the banks were full of reeds. The mining houses were not prepared to invest in dredging the Pan because its economic life was almost over, and the Council could not invest into the Pan because they did not own it.

In 1955 or 1956 Jim Rogers hosted a banquet at the old Carlton Hotel, to which he invited Council and Mines officials for the first time to address the impasse. He convinced them to co-operate in the interests of retaining aquatics sports near the heart of the City. As a result Rand Mines sold Pioneers Park to Johannesburg, and the Club secured the mining surface rights permit for our property (which concluded the requirements set out in the 1923 Surface Water Rights). This administration took over three years and was completed in 1960. Thus were laid the foundations for the growth of the Club in the following couple of decades.



The Buffalo Centenary Fours crew, winners 1950, entered by Transvaal clubs instead of the Grand which was still clinker coxed fours

Jim invested personally into the Club, hosting weekend training at Billabong, buying boats and sponsoring members to compete. He employed Trevor, giving him time to train and work for the Club and ultimately to qualify with Doug Munton for the double scull to the Empire Games in Wales in 1958. He personally sponsored the trip, when the Olympic Committee was again short of funds. Training for the Games took place at Billabong; Jim bought a custom-made coaching boat and employed an Austrian coach, who was living here, to help them.

On returning from the Games, Trevor threw all his time and energy into rowing and encouraged all to follow his example. The result was that in 1959 Wemmer was the most successful Club at the Buffalo regatta, winning the Buffalo Grand, the Junior Eights and the Novice fours (stroked by blind rower Harry Walker). This started the Club's excellent run of Buffalo and national titles on the basis of good coaching and well-structured training. 1959 also saw the Club win the coxless four at the national championships and take two victories over the visiting Cambridge Boat Club coxless four. That 1959 crew was Dave Lord, Jack Mok (who had joined from VLC), Franco Stocci and Trevor Steyn.

Keith Reid was one of the novices who took up the challenge of training with the big boys. He was introduced by Aubrey in 1958 and rowed as a Novice, but by 1959 was in the winning crew of the Novice Fours and Junior Eights. By 1959 he was a senior rower and represented Transvaal at the SA Championships in the pair and eight. Aubrey rowed his last full season in the senior four in 1956.

The 1950s thus ended with remarkable prestige and great success for Wemmer Pan Rowing Club.

