

Paddle Steamer Hero



Restored PS Hero – Echuca. 2008.

The Murray River was first navigated in 1853 by William Russell and Francis Cadell who responded to the South Australian Government's £2,000 competition to open the Murray as a waterway.

The paddle steamers which came to trade along the inland rivers of the Murray, Darling and Murrumbidgee were an Australian design. About 300 were built of local red gum. They were flat-bottomed with a broad beam for greater stability. Their carrying capacity was increased by towing barges.

Low water, overhanging trees, sandbars, driftwood, dangerous currents and sudden shallows were everyday hazards for paddle steamers. Snags, where red gum trees which had fallen into the river, presented the most dangerous problem. They were impossible to spot in the brown water of the Murray and frequently caused holing and sinking of vessels.

Paddle steamers navigated sandbanks by rushing the small ones and winching across the large ones. Because of the seasonal variation in river height, the boats could only be operated for about eight months of the year. Sometimes river levels fell so quickly that paddle steamers and their barges would be trapped in pools, occasionally for months at a time.

When the rivers were in flood the vessels could paddle almost anywhere but it was easy to get lost as familiar landmarks disappeared. Some boats

were found miles from the river, left high and dry after the floods receded.

By the start of the 1900s, the river trade was rapidly disappearing to the growing network of roads and railways. Gradually more and more steamers and barges were tied up at the river bank waiting for work which never came and were left to rot. By the 1930s there were only about thirty paddle steamers still in service while the trade was completely finished by the end of the 1960s.

The Paddle Steamer Hero was built at Echuca in 1874 by George Linklater and traded on the Murrumbidgee River as a hawking vessel until the 1930s when it was sold to Arbuthnot Sawmills at Koondrook as a logging boat. The company also owned the PS Alexander Arbuthnot.

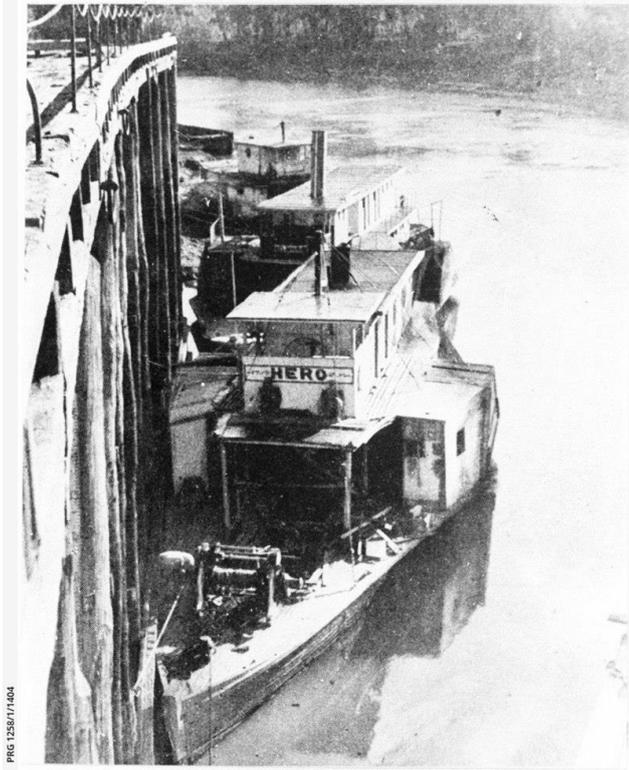


PS Alexander Arbuthnot (left) and PS Hero were used to supply logs the Arbuthnot sawmill at Koondrook. Source State Library of South Australia. Circa late 1930s.

One of the pressing requirements during the Second World War was to organise emergency supplies of firewood for a range of uses including military and civilian heating and cooking, and as a substitute for coal for locomotives because of a miners strike at Wonthaggi.

So in 1942, the Hero and two barges (John Campbell and Canally) were purchased by the Forests Commission Victoria from Arbuthnot Sawmills and moved to Echuca.

The PS Hero, under well-known Captain Spencer (Spinny) Clark, was then used to transport the much-needed redgum logs from the Barmah State forest about 80 upstream back to Echuca Wharf.



PS Hero - Echuca Wharf. Circa 1940. Source State Library SA

The two loaded barges were floated downstream from the forest to Echuca and the logs cut into foot blocks before being taken by rail to Melbourne.

At one stage, annual production was upward of half a million tonnes. Most of the labour was provided by Italian internees.



PS Hero pulling a barge loaded with timber. Unknown photographer and date. Possible when it was owned by the Forests Commission, Circa 1943.

In November 1949, Hero arrived back at Echuca with the barge Canally, fully loaded with firewood after being stranded for 9 months 50 miles upstream. She was inspected by a marine surveyor before heading back out to work.

In 1950, the Forests Commission sold the Hero and barges to Collins Brothers and it moved to Mildura.

Later in 1956, the Hero was sold to Chislett Brothers at Boundary Bend, near Robinvale, and again it worked as a logging boat.

Sadly, in January 1957, the PS Hero caught fire at Boundary Bend and sank. Over the years it was stripped and slowly deteriorated. Its paddle wheels were removed and installed on the PV Pride of the Murray.



PS Hero at Boundary Bend. Unknown photographer and date. Circa late 1960s.

In 1989, the Hero was raised and the boiler and engine removed. The hull was moved to Echuca where it was restored and relaunched as a luxury craft on 16 September 2000, the 126th anniversary of its original launch.

The Hero is one of the last remaining paddle steamers on the Murray River.

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