

Revival in the Illawarra in 1902

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14 August 2009

In February and March 1902 an evangelistic tent mission travelled through the Illawarra from Nowra to Helensburgh. When it reached the mining villages, one of the most amazing revivals in Australian Christian history occurred. 131 conversions were recorded at Mt Kembla, 214 at Mt Keira, 183 at Balgownie, 318 at Corrimal, 292 at Bulli and 234 at Helensburgh. This total of 1372 in about 6 weeks was around 15% of the whole Illawarra population! Most of the new Christians were men, mainly coal miners.

W.G.Taylor, the renowned founder of the Central Methodist Mission in Sydney (now Wesley Central Mission) said "I have never known a revival of religion like unto this!" The historian and revival scholar Dr Stuart Piggin has commented "revivalism has been a recurring phenomenon in Australian Christianity, but its finest flowering, the culmination of much prayerful hope and expectation, was in Illawarra in 1902."

Something that became famous in the Welsh revival of 1904 was that the converted miners stopped swearing at the pit ponies when working them. Without this the ponies became confused and didn't know what to do! But two years *earlier* the Illawarra Mercury reported that the same thing had happened in the Mt Keira mine!

What was the background of all this? Australia was a pretty tough place in those days. An economic depression had lasted throughout the 1890's. Forty million sheep died in the drought of 1895-1903. Industry, farming and transport were powered by men, horses or steam engines. Underground coal mining was by hand, cramped for space and lit by burning lamps and candles. It was dangerous, poorly paid and even employed boys as young as 13.

Yet despite these difficult times a spiritual tide had been rising across the nation. A series of major campaigns by famous evangelists had been held in the capital cities with revivals in some places. Prior to the Australian Federation in 1901 there was a nationwide petition by Christians. They succeeded in having a clause inserted at the start of the Australian Constitution to say that the Commonwealth was "humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God".

Ebenezer Vickery was the Managing Director of the Mt Kembla Mining Company, a State politician and a very wealthy and generous Christian. After seeing the effectiveness of evangelistic tent missions in Sydney in late 1901 he decided to pay for several of these

to travel through country towns. On 26 February 1902, right in the middle of the South Coast mission, the new Federal Government gazetted a public holiday to pray for an end to the drought. In spiritual terms this prayer was abundantly answered in the Illawarra harvest of souls!

Then four months later, catastrophe! At 2pm on 31st July 1902 a massive gas explosion erupted in the Mt Kembla mine. 96 men and boys were killed, including at least 40 committed Christians. A special cemetery was quickly set up in Mt Kembla at Windy Gully (where a memorial service is held every year on 31st July). This loss of life was the worst Australian civil disaster for the next 106 years (until 173 died in the Black Saturday Victorian bushfires this year).

It was a terribly tragic and distressing ending to the revival's "during" phase. What followed in its "after" phase? There was a Christian emphasis on a number of the grave headstones, such as for 17 year old David Kembla Stafford at Mt Kembla Anglican Church cemetery:-

*Death little warning to me gave,
And quickly called me to my grave.
Make haste to Christ, make no delay,
For no-one knows their dying day.*

Three years later, a letter to the Editor of the South Coast Times said: "Ah, Kembla is not the place it used to be! . . . God's name is freely blasphemed . . . we ought to feel thankful, however, that there is a silver lining . . . sturdy intelligent Christian people, who are doing their best to counteract these growing evils. These good people meet regularly together in the churches with the view to gain wisdom and spiritual power, and with the hope of persuading others to join them".

The calamity had left grief and ongoing hardship for many, as well as the loss of potential future Christian leaders. Yet a faithful Christian community survived and thrived, with renewed spiritual ploughing, sowing and watering, in hopes of another harvest (1Corinthians 3:6-9).