

# Saving the Renmark

## Archives: The Flood of 2022

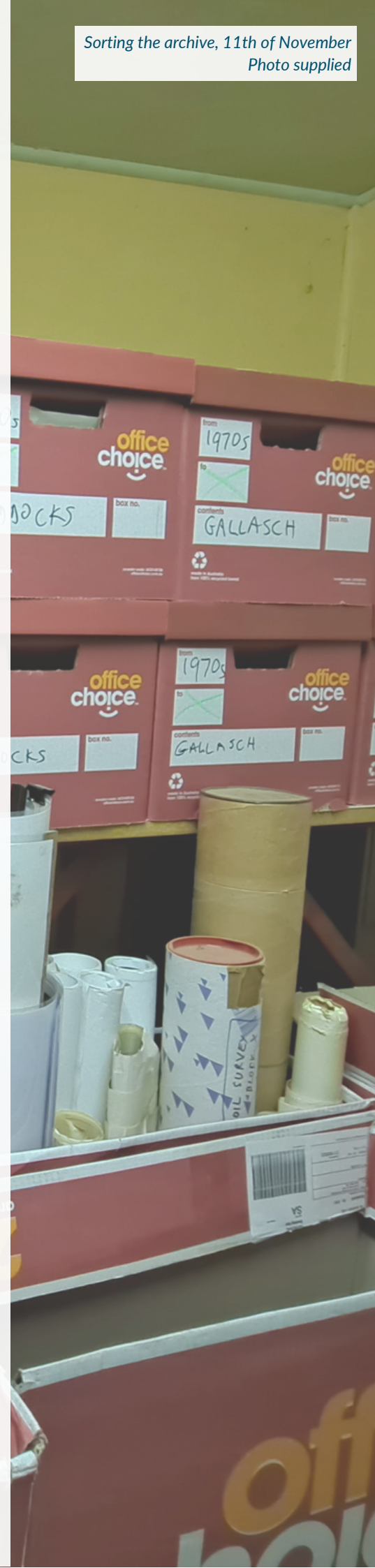
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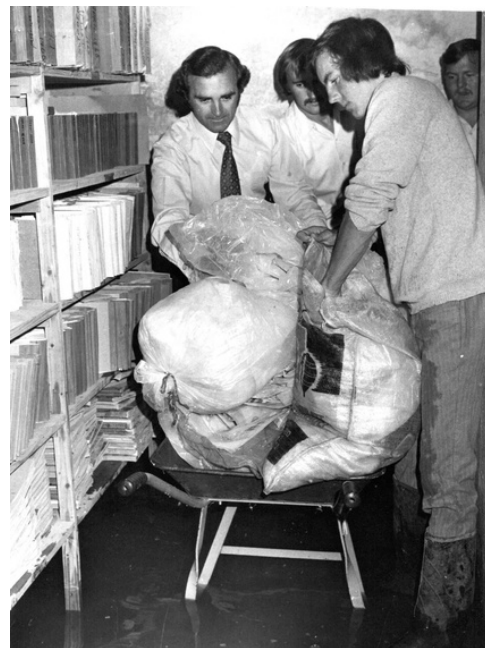
The 1956 Flood is etched on the collective memory of the people who live near the River Murray in South Australia. Although all towns suffered in the 1956 flood, Renmark was the worst hit of all the Riverland towns of South Australia. The '56ers are dwindling now, but their recollections of living on an 'island' bounded by Ral Ral Creek, Bookmark Creek, and the endless bends of the River Murray, of perpetual sandbagging of levees, and the despair of hearing the great hospital levee break in the night, live on. These stories underpin the identity of modern-day Renmark.

Although Renmark has endured floods on a regular basis since the 1870s, none have surpassed the great flood of 1956, which saw over 340 GL of water flow past the town each day. Another high flooding event in 1974 threatened the town, but this time the levees held and, crucially, the Hospital levee did not break. However, the water slowly rose in the basements of the nineteenth century buildings on Murray Avenue, the main road next to the river.

The Renmark Irrigation Trust is housed in the oldest building on Murray Avenue. It is a heritage listed building, constructed in 1888. In 1900, the Trust accepted the role from the SA Government to be the District Council of the Renmark irrigation area. The Trust was responsible for the hospital, children's welfare, sport and recreation facilities, and the upkeep of roads. This was in addition to the delivery of water to the irrigation district, which was the core responsibility of an irrigation trust. In the 1930s, the Trust generated electricity which powered Renmark and the local towns of Paringa, Lyrup, and Berri. The WWII internment camp at Loveday, near Barmera, was powered by electricity which was generated in Renmark. This infrastructure supported over 5000 internees and 1500 Army personnel from 1941-1946. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Trust has an archive which stretches back to the late 1890s and includes an almost unbroken run of rate books, minute books, reports, and accounts. It includes maps from the 1920s and 1930s, engineers' reports, and information about repairs to the electricity network in WWII. The archive is extremely important as it documents white settlement in the far east of SA from the late nineteenth century. Most of the archive was housed in the basement of the Trust Building on Murray Avenue, which was flooded in 1956 and again in 1974.



The River Murray rose slowly through the first weeks of October 2022. The Trust continued to operate as normal. No one thought the river would create a real problem for the town. We knew that the 1974 flood had occurred after three consecutive La Niña events; Southern Australia was right in the middle of its third La Niña event, but there was no real sense of urgency in early October. However, by late October, it was clear that a high-water event was likely and the Renmark Paringa Council enacted Section 298 of the Local Government Act which gave the Council emergency powers.



*The 1974 flood, photo supplied*

The Trust, as the major supplier of water to the irrigation settlement, supported the Council by removing its pipes and infrastructure from the levees. The 38 kilometres of levees were inspected and most were strengthened. Over 150,000 tonnes of local clay and sand were excavated from a nearby quarry, and trucked in an almost continuous run the streets of Renmark.

For 10 weeks they increased the height of the levees. In some cases, such as the Hale Street, Hospital, and the Bookmark Creek levees, the height was increased again in mid-late November.

The belief that this 'high water event' would be different was confirmed by early November. The predictions of the amount of water which would flow past Renmark slowly climbed—135 GL, 140, 150, and then seemingly overnight it was predicted to be 200-220 GL per day. At the SA-Victoria border, the river spanned over 15 kilometres in width. The slow relentless rise in Renmark was punctuated by short bursts of increased flow—in one 48-hour period, the gauge at the riverfront rose 15 centimetres. The '56ers were sure that the River was acting in a similar way to the winter of 1956. Many of them retold their memories of that time, which I captured on digital recordings for the Trust.

The floodwaters of 1956 and 1974 seeped up into the basement of the Trust Building. In 1974, the staff were taken by surprise and many records were damaged (see photo above). Although the documents had been retrieved from the basement, they had been returned before the walls had dried out and so had been irretrievably affected by mould and damp. It was difficult to believe it was happening all over again, yet once more we made plans for the relocation of the archives.



*Pallets of boxes prepared for storage in a shipping container, 17th of November  
Photo supplied*

On November 2, we prepared the archives to be relocated. A good portion of the archive was not housed in archive boxes. Many boxes contained material which was not related to the archives. It was a huge task to box and sort the material, but in two weeks most of the work had been completed. As big as the task was, it was also ultimately rewarding, with the discovery of items once

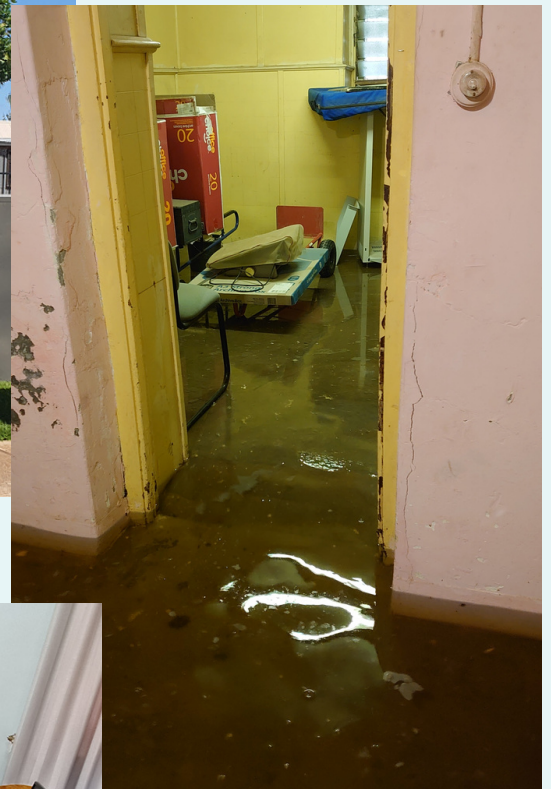


thought lost in the 1974 Flood. These included missing correspondence from WWII, the engineers' reports from the 1920s and 1930s, and correspondence from the 1950s, which documented the desperate state of Renmark after the 1956 flood.

On November 17, the Trust staff removed over 450 boxes from the basement to a shipping container at the Trust Depot, which lay on higher ground (see photos). By early December, a Major Emergency had been declared, all boating and aquatic activities were banned, the local ferry at Lyrup was closed, and Renmark was surrounded by water, apart from three roads. On December 15, the water started to seep up through the basement floor. Two days later a pump was installed and soon after we removed the remaining historical items which were stored on site in the Trust Boardroom (see photos). The flood reached its peak on December 26, with a height of 19.04 AHD (height in metres about sea level) at the Trust's Main Pump Station, and a flow of 200 GL per day. This was 50 centimetres above the 1974 Flood and 2.8 metres above normal. It was the second biggest flood in Renmark in 152 years, second only to the great flood of 1956.



*Moving day, 17th of November  
Photo supplied*



*Flooded basement with items remaining,  
28th of December  
Photo supplied*



*Historical items moved to the Board Room, 20th of December  
Photo supplied*