

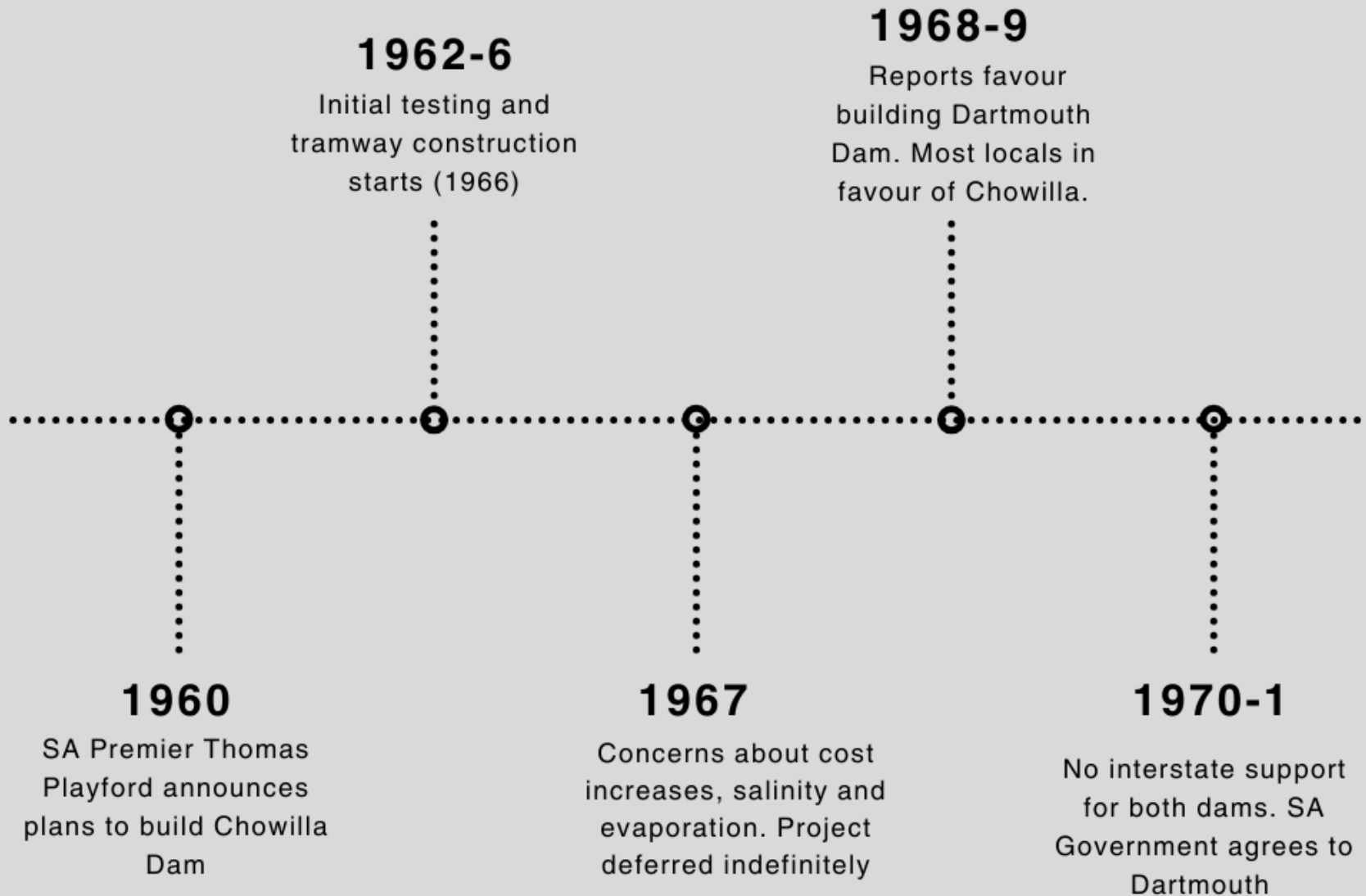
**RENMARK
IRRIGATION
TRUST**

**HISTORY
FESTIVAL
EVENT**



**DAMMING THE DAM:
THE CHOWILLA CONTROVERSY AND ITS LEGACY
1960-1971**

Timeline



1958-1960

SA Premier Tom Playford advocated for a new Dam to secure water for SA's future prosperity



Sir Thomas Playford SA Premier 1938-1965

"We need a dam to ensure that Victoria and NSW do not deny SA's use of the River Murray. If not, by 1970, Victoria and NSW would be using so much of the available water that SA would be left with only a trickle for use"

Role of E&WS Engineers in the Chowilla Dam



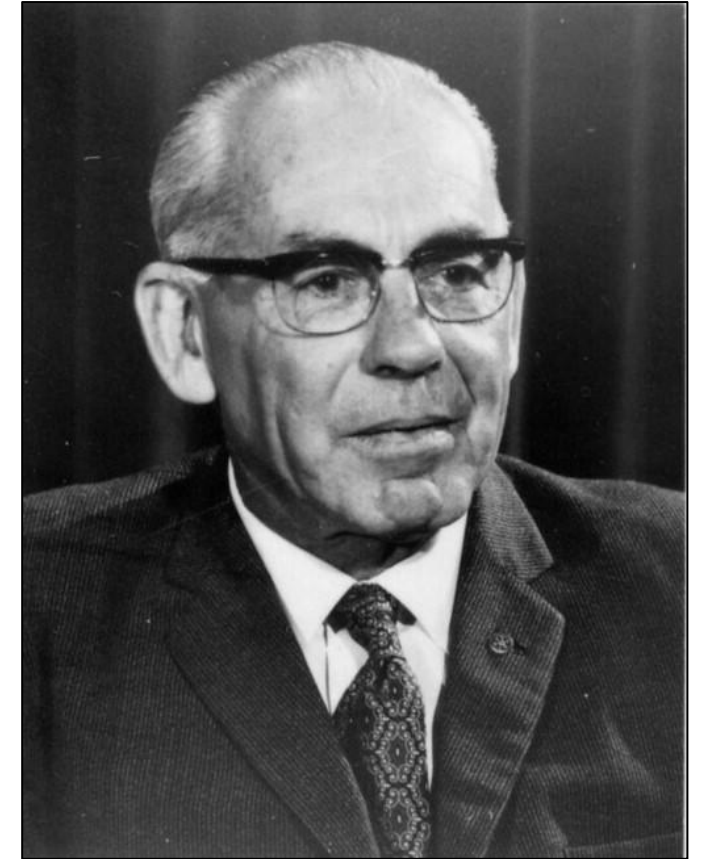
Julian Dridan
EWS Engineer in Chief (1949-1966)

Julian Dridan

- Strong connection to Renmark. His cousin Harold Dridan was RIT secretary from 1936-1945
- SA Member of the River Murray Commission (RMC)
- Promoted need for storage solutions during droughts – “driest state in the driest continent”

Harold Beaney

- Replaced Dridan just before problems emerged
- Weight of evidence now against Chowilla Dam
- Agreed with RMC to consider alternative sites – against Premier Don Dunstan’s position



Harold Beaney
EWS Director and Engineer in Chief (1966-1974)



Proposed Chowilla Dam site

Aerial view of the proposed Chowilla dam site in 1967.
The site of the dam wall would have run for 5km into the left
background



Artist's impression of Chowilla Dam

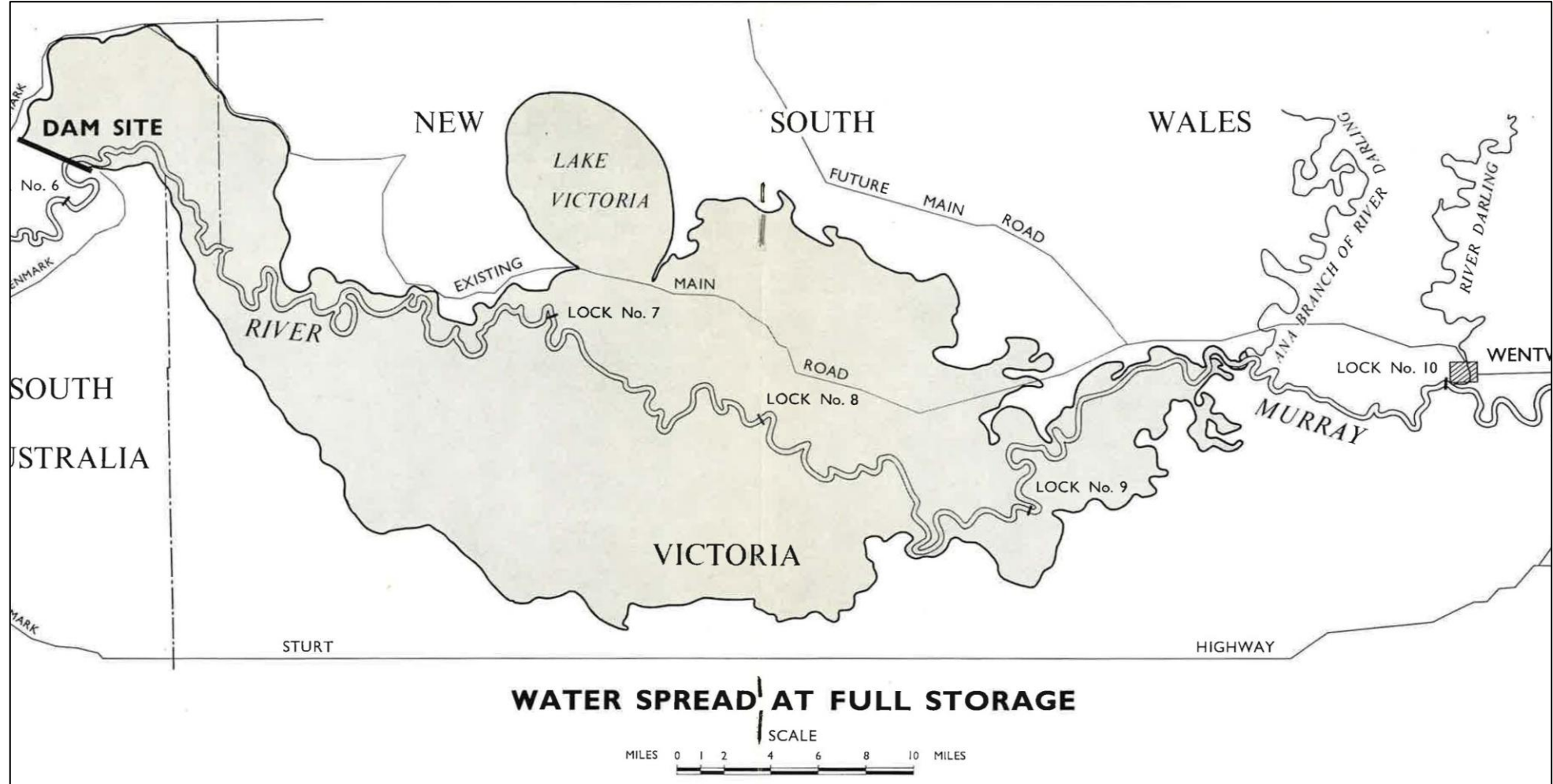


Proposed Chowilla Dam Project and Tramway

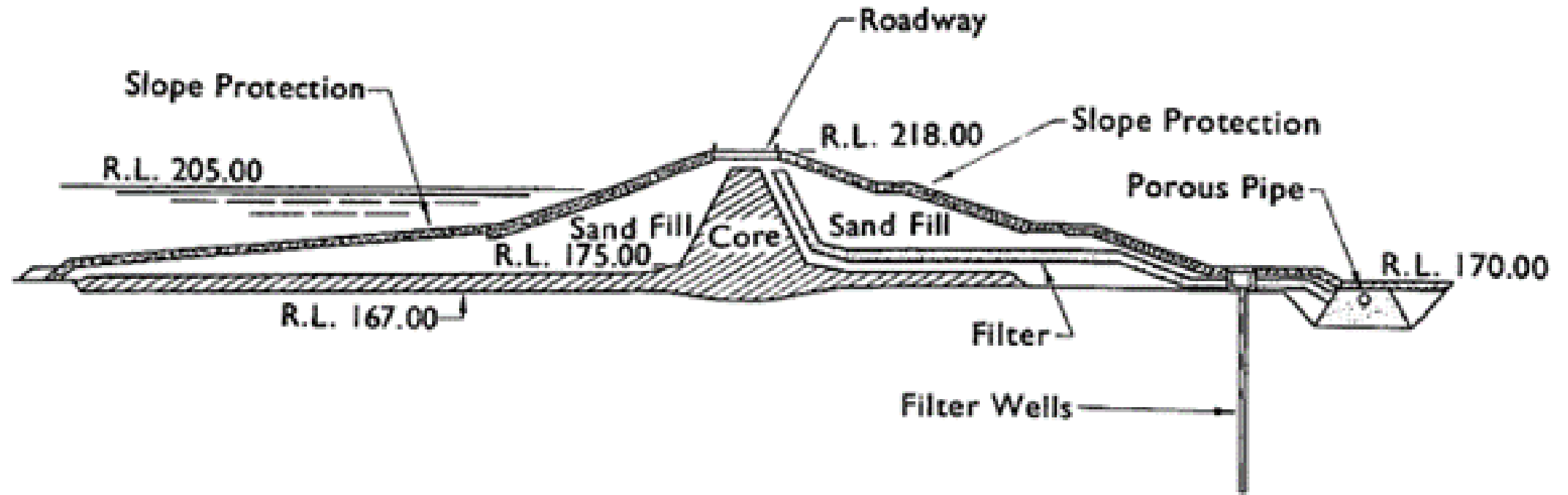
*Diagram from Ken Bank's 50th anniversary booklet
on the Chowilla Dam project*



Proposed spread of water at full storage 88kms long, 30km wide in places



5.5km, 14.6m earth and rock wall to maintain a depth of 10-11 metres above the floodplain



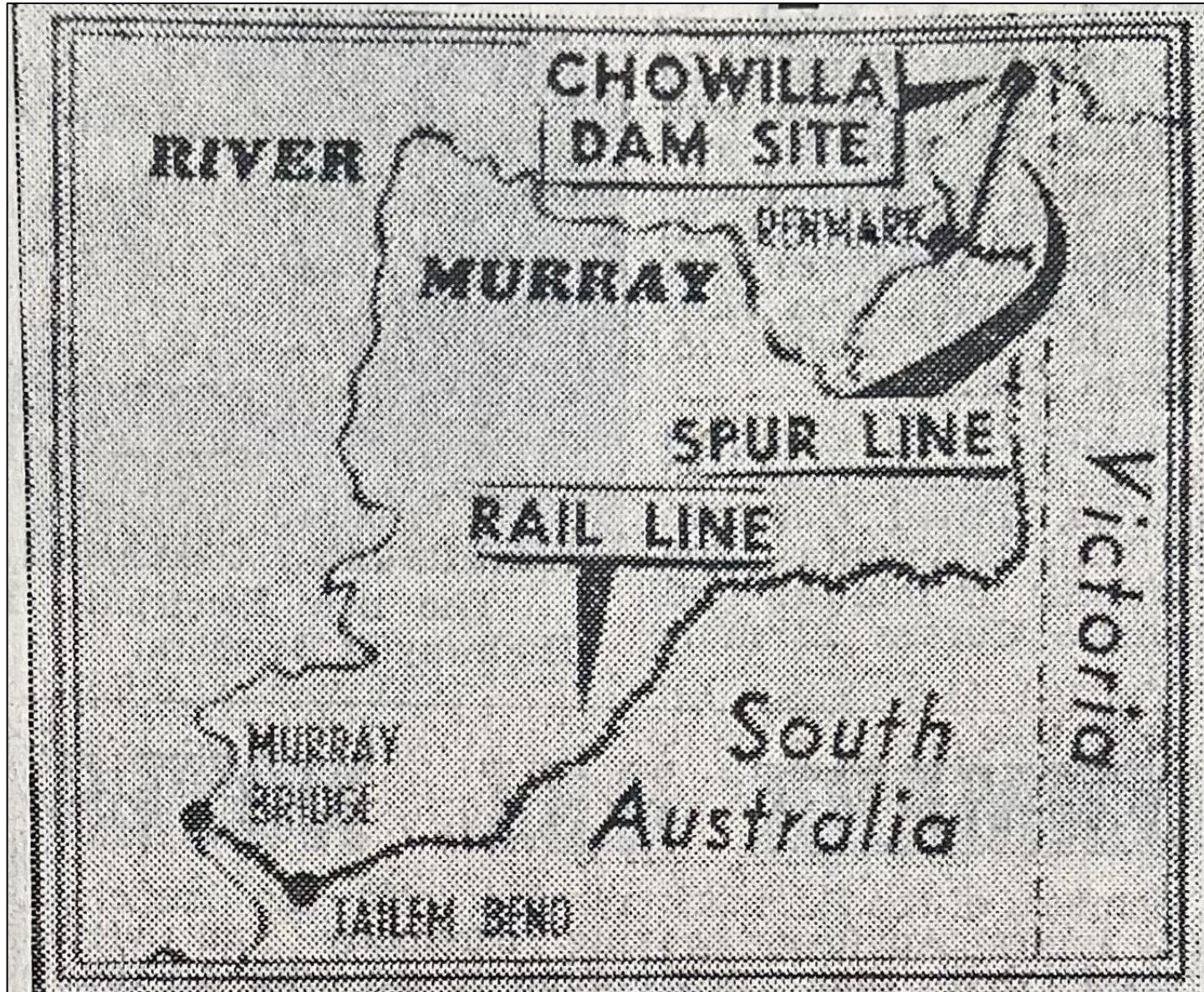
SECTION OF EMBANKMENT





*1963- 5
Initial investigations:
boreholes and bitumen testing*

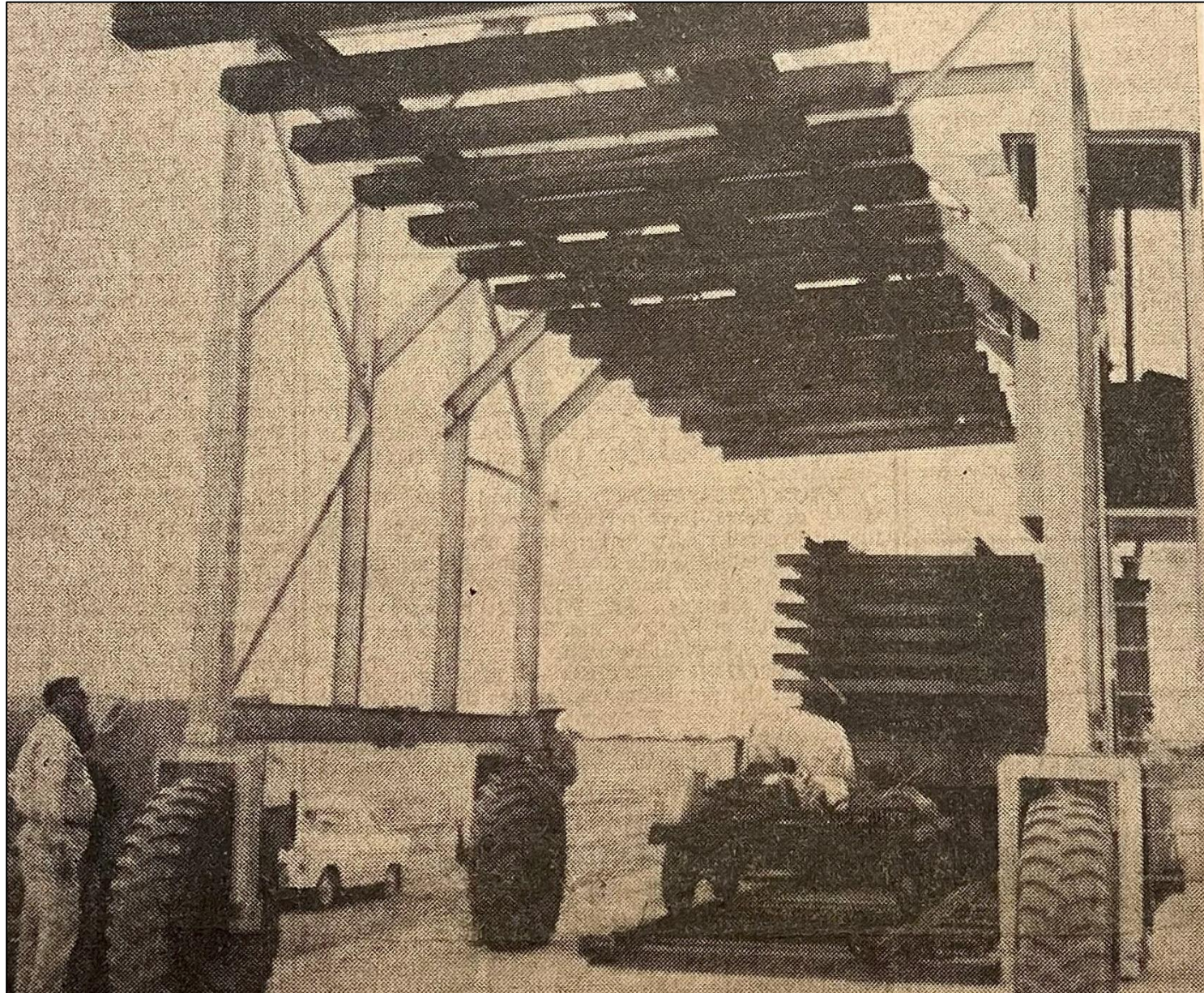




1966 *Chowilla Dam tramway*

‘A 20-mile spur railway
line will be constructed
to the site of the mighty
Chowilla Dam’

Murray Pioneer April 7 1966



January 1967

Straddle buggy lays prefab rail sections

“40-foot prefab lengths were constructed at a siding and transported to the site.

A straddle buggy then lifted a section from the truck and laid it in front of the last section which had been laid’

Murray Pioneer January 26 1967



Straddle Buggy on site



Wagons and hoppers at the only train trip to Chowilla Junction



Accommodation at Chowilla Village

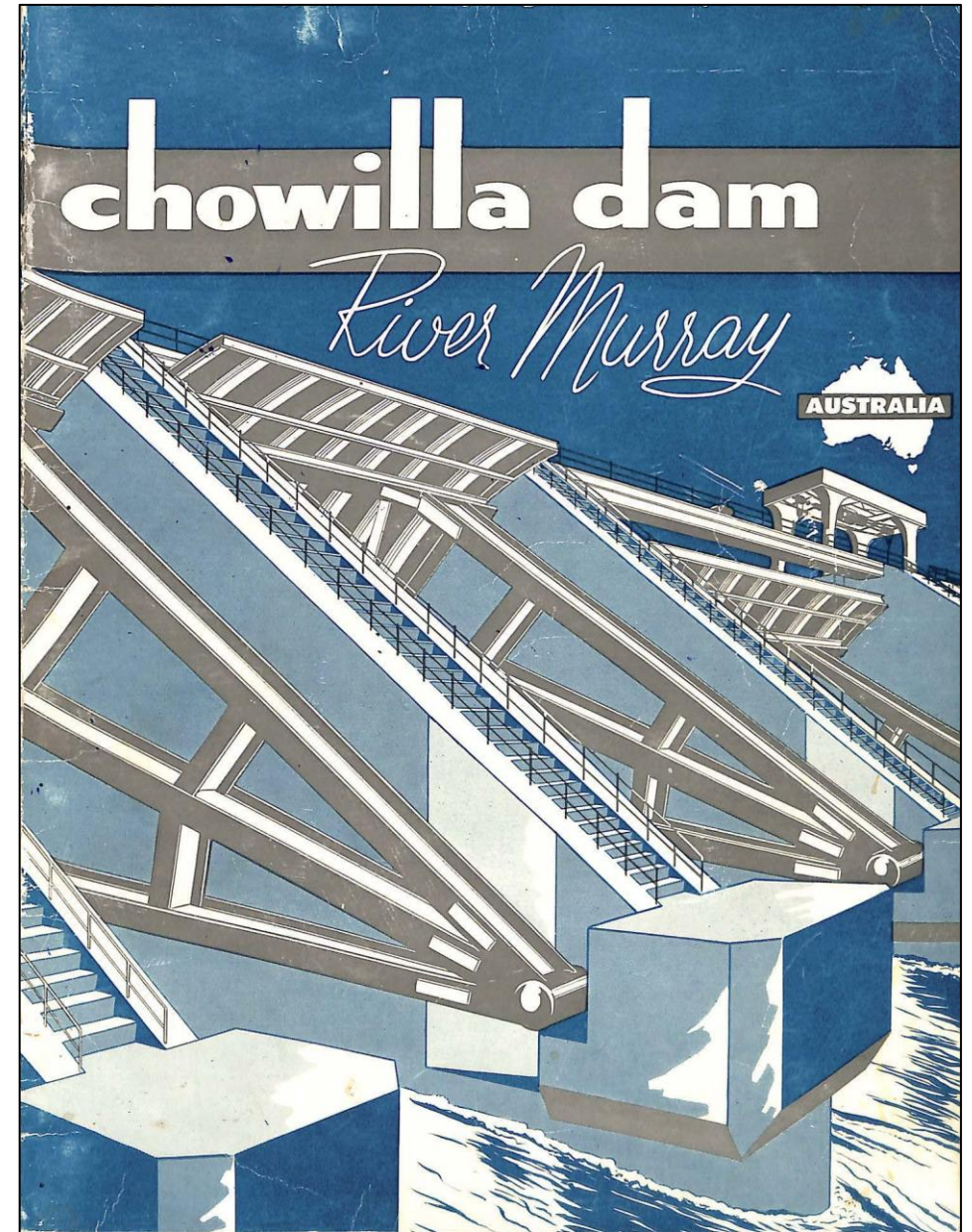
February 1967 - "Paringa" village



Strong Support from Renmark residents

"Chowilla will secure our future. We won't have to worry about NSW and Victoria taking all the water."

"This is the best thing for Renmark. It means more jobs, and money coming into the local community."



‘Salty’ Jack Seekamp - local voice against Chowilla Dam

“If they put Chowilla Dam in and filled it, then from the Dam down to Calperum homesteads, perhaps the Chaffey pumps, the water would have been oozing out of the ground.

“The salt water would be forced back into the Creeks and the River Murray”



Interview with Jack Seekamp 1998

1967

Problems emerge

Two Premiers and the fate of Chowilla Dam



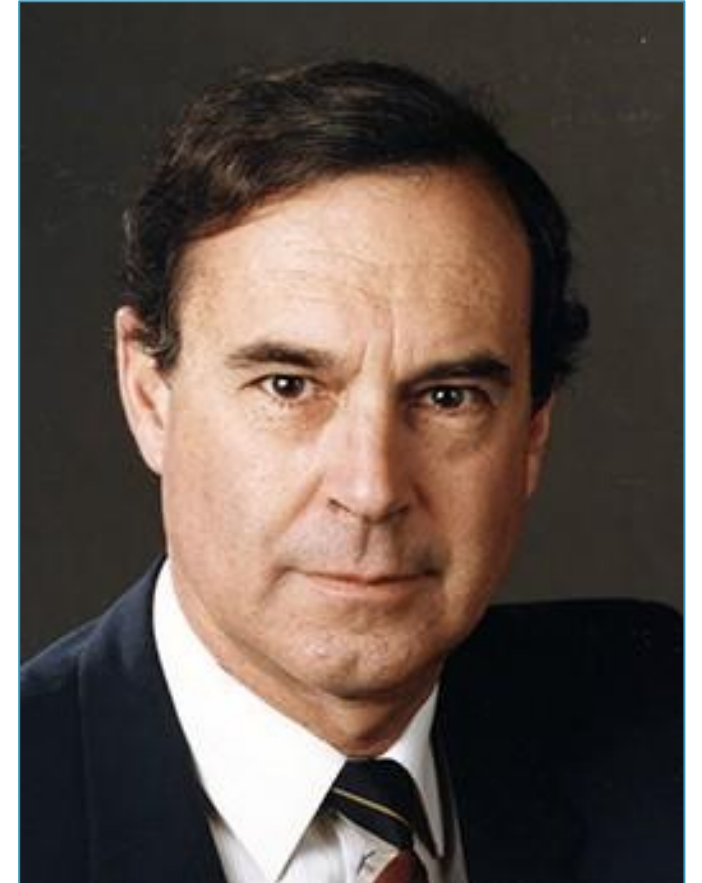
Don Dunstan Premier
1967-68, 1970-79

Steele Hall (Premier 1968–1970): LCL

- Supported then opposed Chowilla Dam due to spiralling costs and environmental concerns.
- Advocated for the Dartmouth Dam as a more viable alternative.
- Political rift with independent MP Tom Stott, contributed to the fall of his minority government.

Don Dunstan (Premier before and after Hall, notably from 1970): ALP

- Supported 2 Dams. Later accepted the shift to the Dartmouth Dam
- Negotiated an increase in SA's water
- Oversaw the official shelving of the Chowilla Dam project.



Steele Hall Premier
April 1968- June 1970

August 1967 – work on Chowilla deferred indefinitely

"If Chowilla is abandoned, I wouldn't want to depend on a living in SA in the 2000s"

"Canberra and Melbourne control the Murray. South Australia always gets the short end of the deal."

"Dunstan caved in too easily. Playford would never have let this happen."

YOUR FAVOURITE BRANDY

ST AGNES

BRANDY

Vol. 75 No. 33

fine Australian pot-still

Renmark, Berri, Barmora, Loxton, Waikerie

The Murray Pioneer

WITH WHICH IS INCORPORATED THE LOXTON CLARION AND MURRAY LANDS GUARDIAN
Registered at G.P.O., Adelaide, for transmission by post as a newspaper

Thurs., Aug. 17, 1967

Chowilla Dam Postponement Big Blow to S.A.

The announcement last Friday by the River Murray Commission that work on the Chowilla Dam project had been deferred indefinitely came as a great shock to South Australia and to the River Murray districts in this State in particular.

The news of this threat to SA's future water supply has given rise to expressions of disappointment and dismay on all sides, and strong approaches by the Premier (Mr. Dunstan) and State Parliament on the matter.

The Premier stated on Monday that SA's representative on the River Murray Commission, the Engineer-in-Chief of the E & WS Department (Mr. H. L. Beavey) had addressed Cabinet on the matter after his return from the meeting of the commission.

Mr. Dunstan explained that other members of the commission had not been prepared to let contracts for the building of the 5 million acre feet capacity dam at this stage, and that, in order to keep the Chowilla project alive the SA commissioner had been forced to agree to the further studies called for.

The reason, given by the commission for its action in suspending operations on the dam was firstly, the big increase in cost which, from an original estimate of \$28m, had increased to \$43m two years ago, and was now shown by the tender price to be \$40m.

Three other factors had also arisen, stated Mr. Beavey in his report. They were:

- (1) Since the dam was originally approved for design, it had been shown clearly that certain minimum flows must be maintained at Mildura to retain the old Ozona Theatre (new AEC headquarters).
- (2) The evaporation loss through the Chowilla Dam was much greater than assumed in 1962.
- (3) The capacity of the Blowering Dam had been increased markedly.

The commissioners therefore wished to investigate some other way of assuring the water SA needed in dry years.

The engineer for the River Murray Commission, Mr. G. L. Harrison, of Melbourne, has been quoted as having denied that the project had been "shelved indefinitely"—the deferment was simply a continuation of the delay the commission had called for when tenders were received in May.

The computer study made since then had revealed new problems and many changed conditions since the original investigations which had begun in 1959.

SA would continue to get its entitlement of a minimum 1,254,000 acre feet of water a year.

GOVERNMENT ACTION

The Premier stated on Monday that he had approached the Prime Minister (Mr. Holt) by telephone on the matter, and he (Mr. Holt) had given an assurance that the Federal Government would "continue to consider" to SA's claims.

On Tuesday, the House of Assembly unanimously passed a resolution calling on the Commonwealth, NSW and Victorian Governments to give him assurance that sufficient water would be available for SA needs pending the construction of the Chowilla Dam.

The Federal Minister for National Development (Mr. Fairbairn), who is chairman of the River Murray Commission, is reported as having stated that there was no doubt that the project would have been proceeded with if the cost had remained within reasonable limits of the original estimate of \$28m. However, the big increase had made a reassessment inevitable.

A preliminary investigation, he said, had indicated that the situation might be met by a smaller dam or a dam at another site.

Citrus Growers Indenture will

Shareholders of the Murray C at an adjourned special general meeting agreed, on an amended basis, to the indenture.

The original indenture was amended by reducing the basic fee payable by SA Citrus Sales Pty. Ltd. from \$25,000 to \$17,500. This fee is payable to the MCCGA in return for the use of the Riverland trade name, overseas and interstate business interests, the transfer of all trained personnel and establishment of offices for the exclusive use of SA Citrus Sales Pty. Ltd.

The agreement, as presented, represents months of negotiation between the SA Citrus Organization Committee and the MCCGA.

The original special meeting of shareholders had been held at Barmora in order to clarify a legal point in the indenture.

When the meeting resumed on Monday, the association president (Mr. R. L. Andrew), who was in the chair, opened the meeting by saying it appeared as though he owed shareholders an apology for the manner in which he had adjourned the original meeting.

He said, "I genuinely thought I had the right to adjourn the meeting, particularly as the suggestion of exercising my prerogative came from the floor of the meeting."

However, whether acted rightly or wrongly, my conscience is clear as I have since

ORANGE WEEK CELEBRATIONS

Orange Week in the Upper Murray officially commenced on Tuesday, and at Renmark in particular a very interesting programme of events got under way.

The opening of the week was held on Tuesday night in conjunction with an art exhibition arranged by the Adult Education Centre in the old Ozona Theatre (new AEC headquarters).

In performing the celebration of the week, Mrs. Rasheed added that it was fitting that the official opening should take place in the new Adult Education Centre, as solid support had always been forthcoming from the AEC, which had staged an art exhibition in the town. The annual exhibitions had proved very worthwhile for local artists, and were shown side by side with those of more renowned artists such as the Malayana painter, Tushar Kanti-Paul.

A vote of thanks was extended to both Mr. Sims and Mr. L. G. Sims.

Statement by Mayor

The Mayor of Renmark (Mr. L. G. Sims) echoed the feelings of disappointment felt generally in the SA River districts when he commented on the latest development regarding the Chowilla Dam project.

Mr. Sims said today that Renmark was not only shocked but saddened by the recent report on the Chowilla Dam project.

"Renmark", he said, "shares common problems with all other Upper Murray communities, and among the gravest is the declining quality of our irrigation water."

"I believe we have displayed a patient optimism and laid our entire faith on the trend of events over the last five years."

"In this time, the best in engineering brains and the better of five million dollars have proven to all concerned that Chowilla is a feasible, practicable project. So much so, that the Federal Government and three States had jointly agreed to share a cost estimated at that time."

"Our optimism has been founded on the anticipated reality of the Chowilla Dam by 1970, giving renewed hope for the future."

"Our friendly neighbours across the border agree that much is to be gained and that they will share in the advantages but no-one will view Chowilla adaptation as does South Australia—as a means to avert disaster," he said.

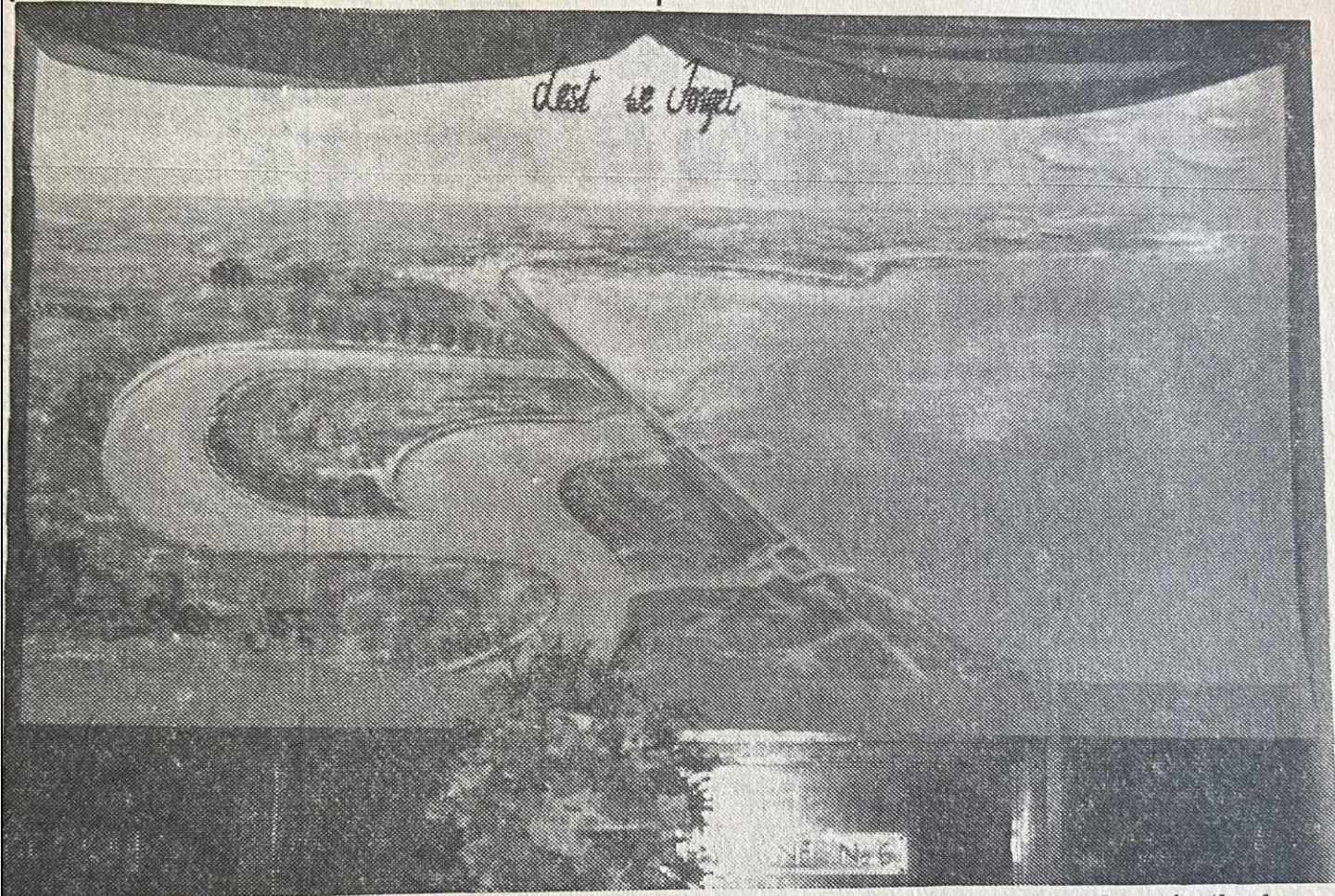
"I believe", he said, "that our hopes lie with the strength of our State in standing firm on our claims for Chowilla. Also, we depend on the unselfish attitude of our neighbouring States in this vital matter."

EISTEDDFOD

The 25th annual Renmark Toc H Eisteddfod will begin in the Renmark Institute next Monday night, when the Mayor (Mr. L. G. Sims) will perform.

DAM THEME

"THE MURRAY PIONEER", Thurs., Aug. 24, 1967—15



A BLACK DRAPE frames a painting of the proposed Chowilla Dam, which was hung in the foyer at the Renmark Hotel, during Orange Week. At the time it was hung, Renmark people were looking to the benefits of flow from Chowilla Dam, but then the news broke and the words "Lest We Forget" and a wreath bearing the wording "In Deepest Sympathy" were added, expressing local feeling in a nutshell. The hotel manager (Mr. Stan Rickards) was responsible for the touch of "humour", which has been widely publicised.

*Words 'Lest we forget' on the painting of the proposed Chowilla Dam
Renmark Hotel August 1967 – a week after the postponement*

Key concerns:

Cost blowouts: \$28 million skyrocketed to \$68 million.

Salinity risks: newer studies suggested that the dam could worsen salt buildup in the water table.

Evaporation losses: the dam's vast surface area would lead to significant water loss, making it inefficient.

*1968 - 69
Chowilla or
Dartmouth?*

April 1968

RIT supports Chowilla

“RIT gives its full support to the Chowilla Dam proposal believing any difficulties can be adequately provided for by the eminently qualified persons engaged by the River Murray Commission”

“The River Murray people want Chowilla and the State needs Chowilla urgently”

Irrigation Trust Stresses Support for Chowilla

The chairman of the Renmark Irrigation Trust (Mr. S. W. Heritage) issued a statement today stressing the trust's support for the Chowilla Dam project.

Mr. Heritage said that many opinions expressed during recent months on the proposal to construct the dam.

However, little representative opinion has been expressed from sections of the community which would stand to benefit if the project eventuated — namely the irrigators and persons associated with commerce and industry in the district.

In this connection, he said the Renmark Corporation was a notable exception, having made its submission for the dam quite early.

The Renmark Irrigation Trust, which controlled the oldest irrigation settlement in the Commonwealth and the largest irrigation area in South Australia (with 10,000 acres of hardwater plantings under irrigation) was most anxious of the future prospects for the district, and strongly supported the views expressed by Sir Thomas Playford in his recent article, “Why Chowilla is Essential”.

While the various reasons for the deferment of the project were the subject of a thorough re-examination of the proposal by qualified engineering specialists, said Mr. Heritage, it would be unfortunate if outside issues outweighed a recommendation by these specialists favouring the Chowilla proposal.

Water Supply

From Renmark's point of view, he said, a constant supply of good quality water was the basic requirement for the well-being of the district. Many people have expressed concern over the possibility of a build-up of salinity in

the Murray in South Australia if the proposal proceeded at Chowilla. The trust suggested that a favourable report by qualified personnel should be heeded, despite any predictions of disaster by unqualified public opinion. Experience on this aspect from Lake Victoria should disprove any fears.

It was a great pity that the personnel most closely associated with the venture had not commented on the prospects of increased salinity in the river, arising from the future construction of the dam in its proposed location.

Too often, silence was interpreted as acquiescence and treated accordingly by public opinion.

Our climate and soils had proved that South Australia can produce world quality citrus, dried and canned fruits and wine and there was room for expansion of irrigation in certain directions, including wine grapes and pastures — the latter to succor and save the State's livestock in drought years.

Commonwealth revenue from excise on wine and brandy production in Renmark alone was nearly \$1,000,000 per year. Commonwealth finances stood to gain, therefore, if further plantings could be brought into production in the district and adjacent districts.

Mr. Heritage stressed that Chowilla would be ideally situated to impound water from any section of the catchment of the Murray and Darling system, since all must eventually flow past this site on entering South Australia — and was the only site; e.g. in the 1890 flood nearly all run-off was from the Darling and was lost out to sea.

Renmark, he said, was a district of fighters — fighters in the sense of the struggle which faced its pioneers as an aftermath

of the Chaffey Brothers' failure; fighters in another sense, with its highest ratio of enlistment to population in Australia in two World Wars; fighters against too much water during the record flood of 1956; fighters for a proposal for the safeguarding of a supply of water to maintain the prosperity of its inhabitants.

The Renmark Irrigation Trust, he said, on behalf of its ratepayers, gives its full support to the proposal to construct a dam at Chowilla, believing that any difficulties in its construction or operation can be adequately provided for by the eminently qualified personnel engaged for the purpose by the River Murray Commission.

Salient Points

Salient points in the trust's stand on the Chowilla project could be listed as follows, said Mr. Heritage:

1. Flood mitigation — to take damaging peaks off approaching floodwaters.
2. S.A. would benefit from more direct control of Murray waters.
3. Water would be immediately available for flushing the river at short call to alleviate salinity.
4. Possible benefits had already been demonstrated by Lake Victoria storage.
5. Support was given by the RIT to the State government, urging strong and vigorous approach.
6. “The River Murray people want Chowilla, and the State needs Chowilla urgently”.

Temperatures

APRIL	Min.	Max.
11	62.7	92.9
12	63.2	93.8
13	62.9	93.7
14	58.1	90.0
15	64.8	77.8
16	57.8	79.2
17	59.4	78.5

DATES TO REMEMBER

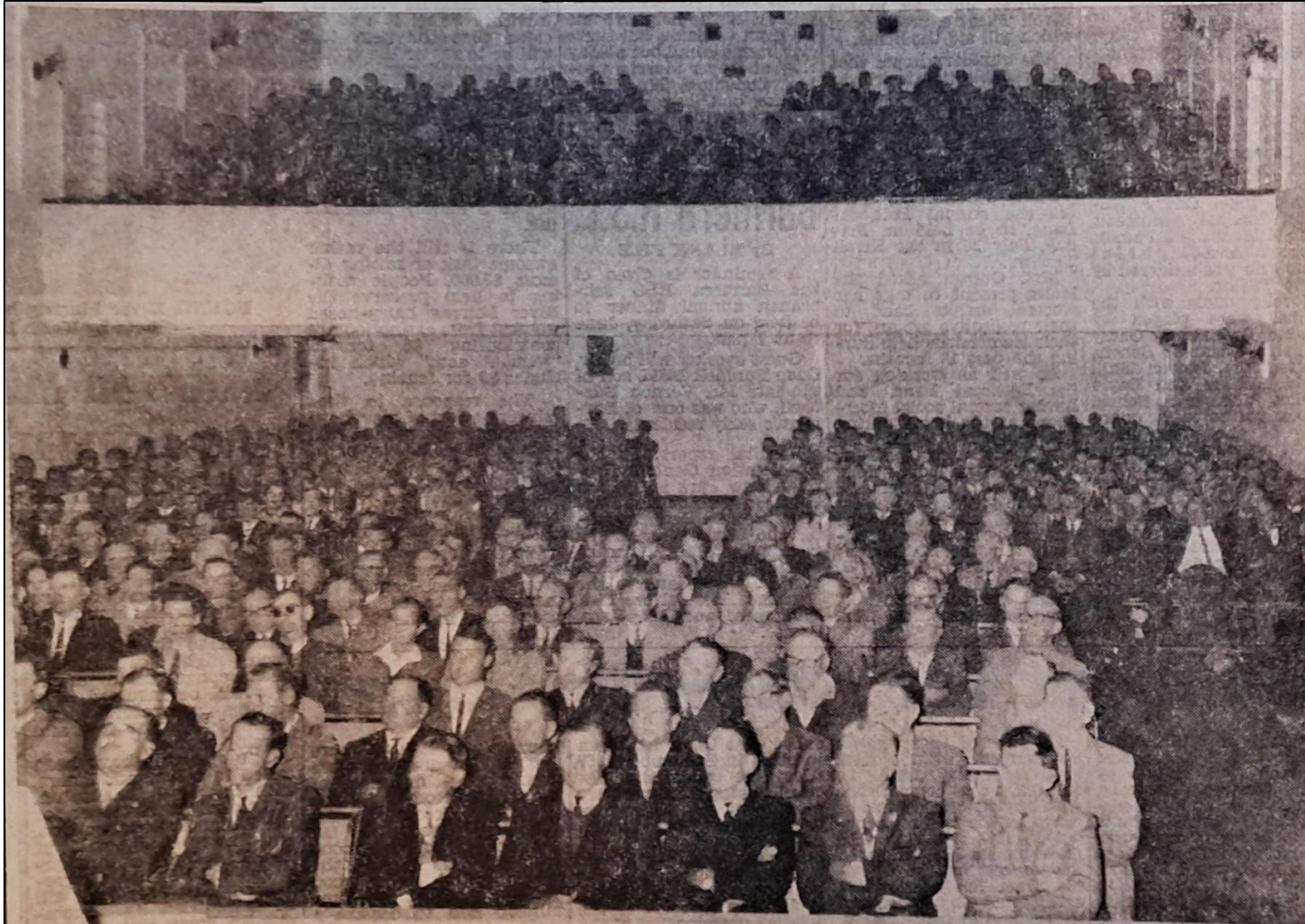
- Apr. 19 — Renmark R.S.L. dinner.
- Apr. 19 — Teenage Dance, Renmark Institute.
- April 19 — Renmark C.W.A. meeting.
- Apr. 20 — Monash fortnightly Dance.
- Apr. 20 — U.M. Philatelic Soc. meeting.
- Apr. 20 — Berri Hockey Club practice.
- Apr. 21 — Cobdogla Tennis Club closing day.
- Apr. 22 — Renmark Boy Scouts Parents meeting.
- Apr. 23 — Barmora Homes for Aged annual meeting.
- Apr. 23 — S.A. Field and Game Assoc. gen. meeting.
- Apr. 26 — Learners' Dancing Classes, Parings Hall.
- Apr. 26 — Tee H. Dawn Service, Renmark.
- Apr. 26-27 — Renmark Floricultural Society Floral Exhibition.
- Apr. 27 — Rotary-Alex charity auction, Renmark.
- Apr. 27 — Opening new courts, Parings oval.
- Apr. 26 — Berri Swim Club annual meeting.
- May 2, 3 & 4 — Bell, Book & Candle, Ren. Little Theatre.
- May 3 — Renmark Guide Film evening.
- May 4 — Renmark Pre-School buffet dinner.
- May 5 — Lyrrup Fishing competition.
- May 27 — A.D.P.A. State Conference, Barmora.
- May 30 — B-M Football Club Carnival Queen dance, Monash.

MARKETS AND AUCTIONS

- Apr. 22 — Property auction, Loxton — H. W. King & Co.
- Apr. 29 — Auction of 5 Cool-ton properties — J. F. Sharkey.
- May 3 — Fruit property auction, New Residence — H. D. Rooney & Son.

ANZAC CO SERVICES
Three Upper M
oration Services th

June 1968
600 attend Berri meeting to support Chowilla



Premier Steele Hall

**“My government will
stand firmly behind
the Chowilla Dam
scheme”**

**“Chowilla must be
built”**

The Murray Pioneer June 13 1968 Rivoli Theatre Berri

March 1969

Premier Steele Hall now supports Dartmouth at Renmark meeting – 450 attend

“Premier Steele Hall: I have only changed my attitude on the basis of technical reports.”

“River residents are far from happy – once the strong man Bolte (Victorian Premier) gets the OK for Dartmouth, Chowilla will be dead.”

The Murray Pioneer March 20 1969, Ozone Theatre
Renmark

mature perfection

Angove's

VINTAGE PORT

The Murray Pioneer

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Vol. 77 No. 12

Renmark Berri, Barmera, Loxton, Waikerie.

Thurs., March 20, 1969

Premier Explains Dam Policy To Big Meeting

The Chowilla Dam would not be such a good proposition as Dartmouth in so far as assuring SA's supply of River Murray water was concerned, stated the Premier (Hon. Steele Hall) at a very well attended public meeting in the Ozone Theatre, Renmark, on Tuesday night.

His Government, accordingly, had done the right thing for the State in agreeing to the latter project, especially as he had got the signatories to increase our minimum annual allocation from 1¼ million acre feet to 1½ million acre feet.

Mr. Hall faced an audience of some 450 people, including a number from other River centres, who packed the Ozone Theatre.

you at the next election” Sir Thomas Playford had questioned the political implications of the reports, but when matters become

Discussion Prior to Meeting

The Minister of Works (Mr. J. W. H. Coumbe), left, talks with the Premier (Mr. Hall) centre, and the Member for Chaffey (Mr. P. B. Arnold) prior to the public meeting at Renmark on Tuesday night.



AGGREGATE WINNERS IN M. L.

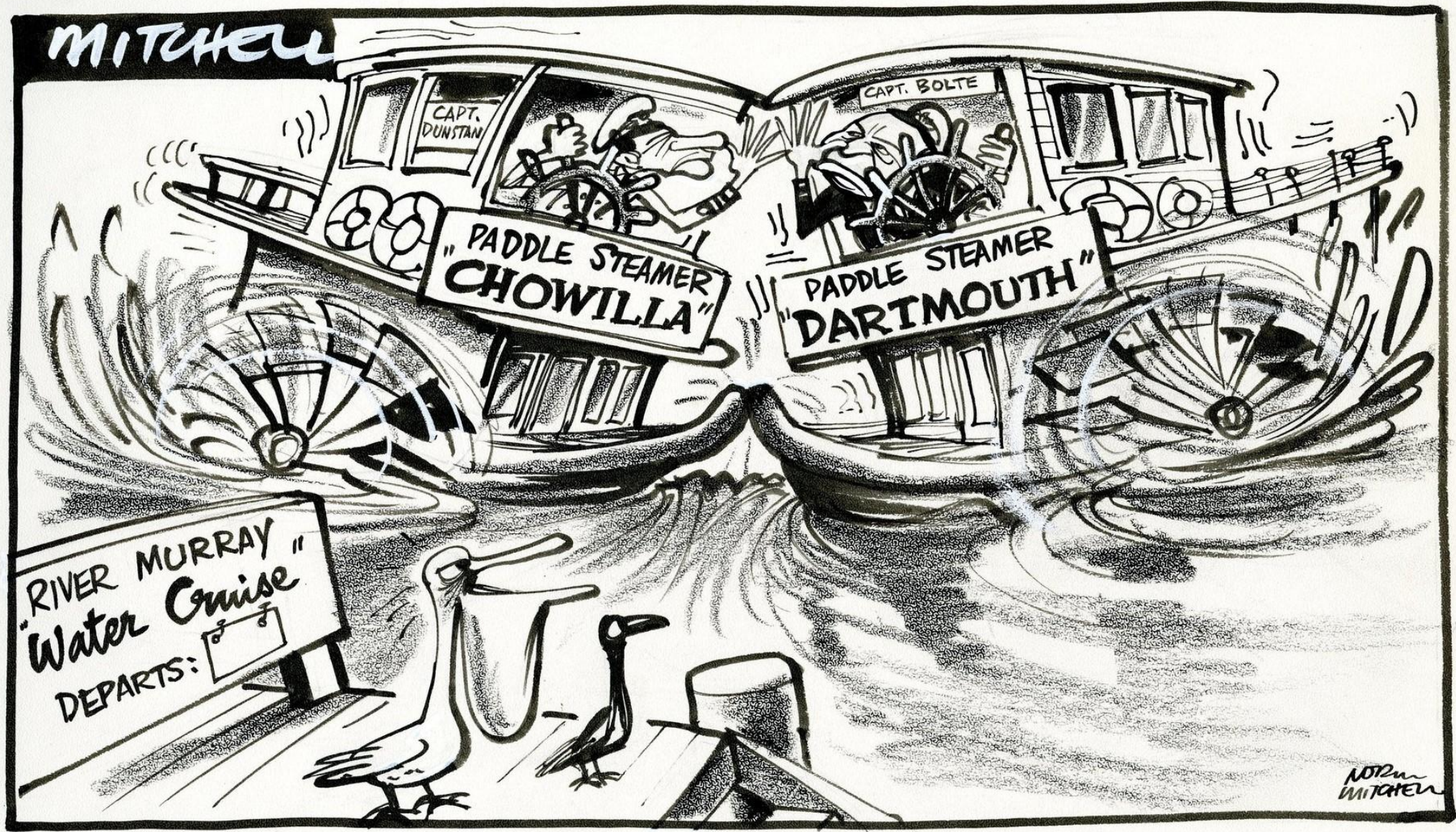
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Winners of sections of the 1969 Murray Lands Ag

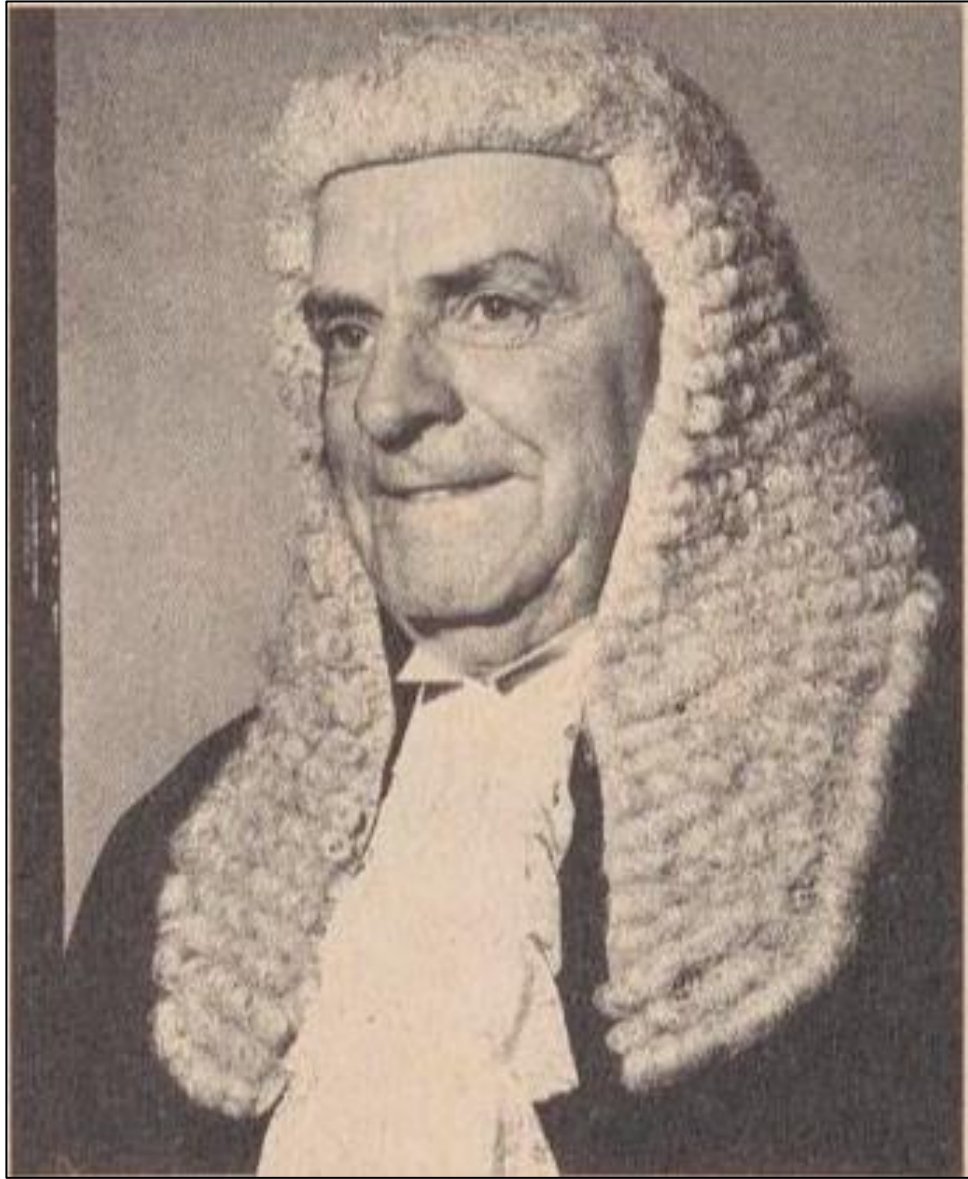
The announcement was made in calling the annual meeting of the society held at Swan Reach last Friday.

The aggregate winners are as follows: Dairy cattle, L. J. Doherty, of Borriana; beef cattle, P. W. and H. S. Wurmt, of Loxton; pigs, P. G. Zimmermann, of Taplan; sheep, M. G. Doherty and Son, of Paringa; wool, R. R. Edson and Son, of Blanchetown; poultry, G. L. Mangelsdorf, of Murray Bridge; flowers, D. W. Ruston, of Renmark; needlework, Mrs. I. Krohn, of Nildottie; cookery, Mrs. R. L. Prentice, of Yurgo; vegetables, K. and M. Trimper, of Renmark.

The Rural Youth display trophy, it was announced, has been won by the Pinnaroo Junior Rural Youth Club.



Dam Debate – SA v Victoria



Tom Stott, member for Ridley 1933-1970

April 1970

Hall Government defeated on a vote to ratify Dartmouth Dam instead of Chowilla on the casting vote of the Independent Tom Stott.

ALP returned to power in July 1970.

1970-1971

New Premier, Don Dunstan, supported Dartmouth but failed to convince Victoria, NSW and the Federal governments to construct Chowilla Dam as well.



Proposed Chowilla Dam site in 1967 showing Chowilla village and tramway [The Advertiser 22 December 2017](#)

1971 -Dartmouth Dam to proceed

Don Dunstan:

“Under the Amending Agreement, Chowilla will be looked at as possible future storage, not on the basis of the protections it can give to SA.

This is a sad thing for South Australia, since the Dartmouth Dam will not provide immediate water protection, will take years to build and even more years to store water.”



Press Statement from the Premier Don Dunstan 19 August 1971

Chowilla Dam Legacy

Indicated growing influence of environmental considerations in public policy.

Prevented inundation of wetland areas which are now protected.

End of dam infrastructure projects in SA but **not** the end of controversy about how Australia should manage its water resources.



Photo of Chowilla Floodplain MDBA website March 2025