



Charlie Wheeler and the Wheeler family

The Wheelers have the distinction of being the earliest pioneering family still with descendants in the district, and Charlie (1866-1955) was perhaps its most famous son. He trained two Melbourne Cup winners in the early 1900's, including Patrobas, bred at Bringenbrong. Many people at the time believed that the 1908 Cup also belonged to Charlie, but the judge awarded the race to Lord Nolan over Charlie's charge, Tulkeroo, which was owned by Jock McLaurin of Holbrook. Years later Charlie would say simply: *"I was on my way to collect Tulkeroo, being convinced that he had won, and I got the shock of my life to see the number of Lord Nolan put up first in the hoist."* (Charlie Wheeler's Memories, The Mail, Adelaide, 29/10/1929, p.9)

In Melbourne Charlie achieved an impressive reputation as a very astute trainer, especially of stayers, over more than three decades, beginning with success in the St Kilda Cup at Caulfield in 1887. Arguably his career reached its zenith in 1915 when Patrobas won the Melbourne Cup. Charlie Wheeler had purchased the colt at the Sydney Easter Yearling Sales of 1914 for owner Mrs Edith Widdis. Being Upper Murray raised himself, Charlie would have known the quality of horses bred in this district, and appreciated their stamina. Before the train line came through to Cudgewa in 1921, the Mitchell draft of yearlings would regularly be driven 80 miles from Bringenbrong to the railhead at Tallangatta.



Image 1. Charlie Wheeler being congratulated by Mrs Edith Widdis after Patrobas won the VRC Derby, 1915. Photo courtesy of the Andrew Widdis collection.



Patrobas won the Caulfield Guineas, the Victoria Derby and the Melbourne Cup in the same season, a record still unsurpassed in 2020.

Charlie Wheeler's other Melbourne Cup winner was The Parisian in 1911, and he trained many other notable metropolitan winners. Contemporary opinion was expressed thus:

"Wheeler knows exactly the training a Cup horse requires and has The Parisian in splendid fettle for the final stage of his preparation."

'Cup Candidates' The Argus 1911

It will come as no surprise to locals that Charlie Wheeler was such an esteemed judge of horseflesh. He was bred into a family of expert horsemen and racing enthusiasts which stretched back into the previous century, when his grandfather, Charles, with wife Mary and six children made the tortuous journey by bullock dray from Cobbity, NSW, to Nariel. The trek took six months. This was in 1846.

Long before he went to Melbourne, Charlie Wheeler had made his mark at Towong and around the district, both riding and training racehorses.

According to noted local historian, Jean Carmody, writing about the third Charlie Wheeler in 1876,

"it is possible that he and his young cousin set a world record at one of the early race meetings at Towong.....the Bridle Race was won by a horse owned and trained by Mont Waters, aged 11, and ridden by Charlie Wheeler, aged 10."

Early Days of the Upper Murray, Jean Carmody, p.59

Charlie's father, also Charlie, was a noted horseman who rode regularly at the early Towong race meetings until an advanced age. Probably his most famous success was the Commission Agents' Cup in 1885 when Charlie won on his step brother Joe Hanson's horse, Little King, defeating his two sons, Ben and Charlie. The silver cup for this race would become one of the most valued possessions of the third Charlie Wheeler (Charlie Wheeler's Memories). On 13 May, 1910, The Wodonga and Towong Sentinel published an obituary for the second Charlie Wheeler, describing him as *"the most picturesque and characteristic figure on the Upper Murray."* Another tribute to him published in Worker, Wagga, on 9 June, 1910, p.17, describes the late Mr Charles Wheeler of Currajong, Corryong, this way: *"He was a very keen sportsman, and in his day was generally considered as the best amateur rider of the district. It is not a great time since he gave up riding."*

The Sentinel obituary goes on to mention the surviving children of Mr Charles Wheeler, including Charlie, *"the noted Melbourne trainer,"* and Ben, who would become stud groom at Khancoban for many years.



The youngest son was Mark, 25 years younger than Charlie when they were both preparing Patrobas for his famous career. Tragically, Mark was killed at Poziers in 1916, after joining the AIF in 1915. Of Mark, trainer Charlie would say: *“Had he not heard his country’s call he would have had the success that came to me.”* (Charlie Wheeler, as told to JM Rohan, Sporting Globe, 25 October 1941, p.6)



Image 2. Anglican Church, Corryong (above).



Image 3. The bell, now behind the Corryong Anglican Church, once at the Flemington mounting yard (left).

Although Charlie moved to Melbourne in the late 1880’s, and finally Adelaide, he retained his links to the Upper Murray. He also continued the Wheelers’ long association with the Anglican Church in Corryong by arranging an unusual acquisition. The melodious old bell (image 3) which now calls the congregation to worship was originally used to call horses to the mounting yard at Flemington. Charlie Wheeler mentioned this in his reminiscences (as told to JM Rohan, Sporting Globe 1941, p.6) but details and dates are scant.

Another son, William, was a popular and well respected identity who was described by an enthusiastic newspaper man and regular visitor to Towong as a *“very good horseman”* and proud owner of the successful sire Double Court, which stood at the Wheeler property Rosebank, near Towong (Chiron, The Australasian, Melbourne, 16/1/1937, p. 20).

William Wheeler’s obituary, published in The Corryong Courier in 1960 details a shocking accident in which he lost an arm as a child, but states that *“this accident did not daunt him and he was able to carry out tasks with the same dexterity as others with two hands.”*



Image 3. “One Arm Will” Wheeler, courtesy of Choc Thompson

Because of his unfortunate accident, William was popularly known as “One-Arm Will,” and younger generations of Wheelers, as well as older members of the community, still refer to him by this name.

“One- arm Will” also had the distinction of being the first person to introduce a horse float to the district. There was a certain symmetry in this as Charles Wheeler had been the first person to bring a buggy to the Upper Murray, in 1876 (The Upper Murray, A Centenary Survey, Royal M Miller, published 1934).

Members of the Wheeler family were staunch supporters of racing at Towong. They feature prominently in records and results from early race meetings, both as competitors on the track and as officials of the club. William and James Wheeler were both stewards in 1881, and the 1900 Towong Turf Club Committee included William and Charles Wheeler:



Image 4. Towong Turf Club Committee of 1900: L to R Back Row: K Pierce, J Pierce, A Acocks, W Wheeler, J Waters, W Mitchell, Dr Stackpole, C Findlay, Mont Waters, E Brown.
Middle Row: TB Waters, C Wheeler, J Dobinson, J Mitchell, J McMeekin, W Scammell
Front Row: E Scammell, W Phillips, A D Waters.
Reproduced in the Border Morning Mail.

In subsequent generations, Robert Wheeler acted as Clerk of the Course and steward during the 1970's and the race book for the January meeting in 1971 (below) included the program for the forthcoming Centenary Gold Cup meeting, showing the Wheeler family as prominent patrons of the Towong Turf Club.

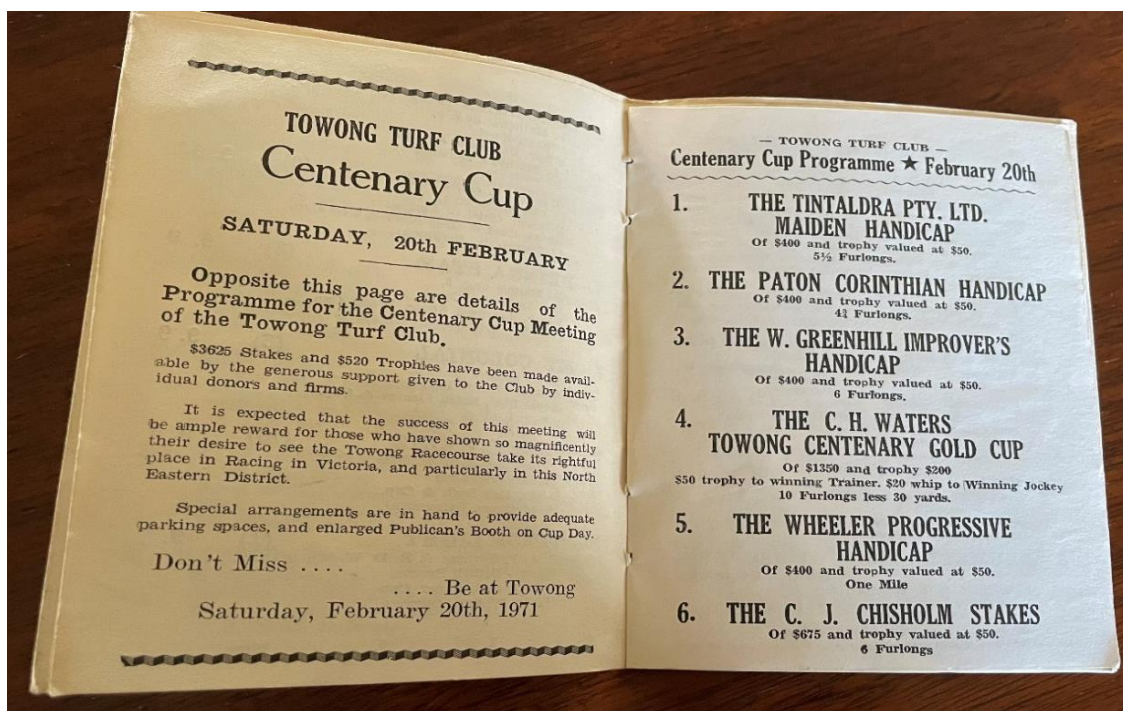


Image 5. Race book for the January meeting in 1971.

It was the Wheeler boys' love of horses and their superb skill in the saddle which led them into other fields of horsemanship.

"James Wheeler (son of Charles 1) was a wonderful horseman and could ride anything. His sons C William and Sidney inherited part of the freehold of the Colac Colac run. C William popularly known as "Klac Klac Will" bred and sold good bullocks for Newmarket....However, like all the Wheelers, he was fond of a good horse and though he only bred a few some turned out big winners, notably Green Wave, with which he won the rich Maribyrnong Plate at Flemington in 1923, the blue ribbon of Australia for two -year -olds. But Will Wheeler was the most modest of men, and meeting and congratulating him later that day one would never have dreamt that he had just won the richest stake for two-year-olds in the Commonwealth."

Pg 317 Memoirs of a Stockman, Harry M Peck

Robert Wheeler still remembers his father, Bill, telling him that Green Wave was trained "at the old place" ie. James' original place at Colac.

Dixie Coutts

Assistance from the Wheeler family.

The Wheeler history continues with the family's prominent involvement in the Light Horse, the Corryong Show and the Man From Snowy River Festival. Further details are included in a book currently being written on the history of the Towong Turf Club.

