

# Comet Tales & Walking Trails



## *A FRONTIER TOWN - COMETVILLE 1878*

### *SITE 4*

Forward workers on the Great Northern Railway line, which ran west from Rockhampton to Longreach, were in Cometville as early as August 1877. Their families came with them, forming the nucleus of a town.



## THE BIRTH OF A NEW TOWN

Can you imagine coming into a town where buildings were made from sheets of bark or slabbed timber? Looking at a map of Cometville in 1878, bark huts were quite numerous along the streets. Some buildings, such as the Comet Freemasons' Temple, were made from corrugated iron. An occasional dressed timber structure added to the atmosphere of the frontier town.



A COMETVILLE HOTEL

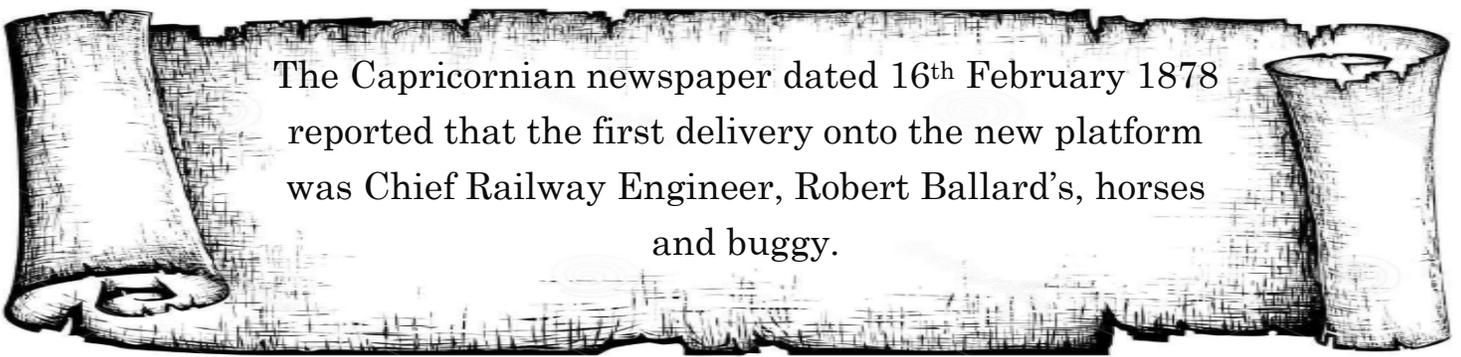
The sturdier structures would have been dismantled in the last town and brought forward on the ever-progressing railway line to the west. The railway workers pitched their canvas tents on any suitable piece of ground around the town.

The majority of the businesses and dwellings fronted a dirt road made dusty by the passing of wagons and drays pulled by horse or bullock teams. The busy road still had the stumps of felled trees rising from the dust or mud if it was raining.

This was Cometville in 1878, in which 1500 people called home for the short eighteen months that the Great Northern Railway stagnated here whilst workers constructed bridges over the Comet River and its two anabranches.

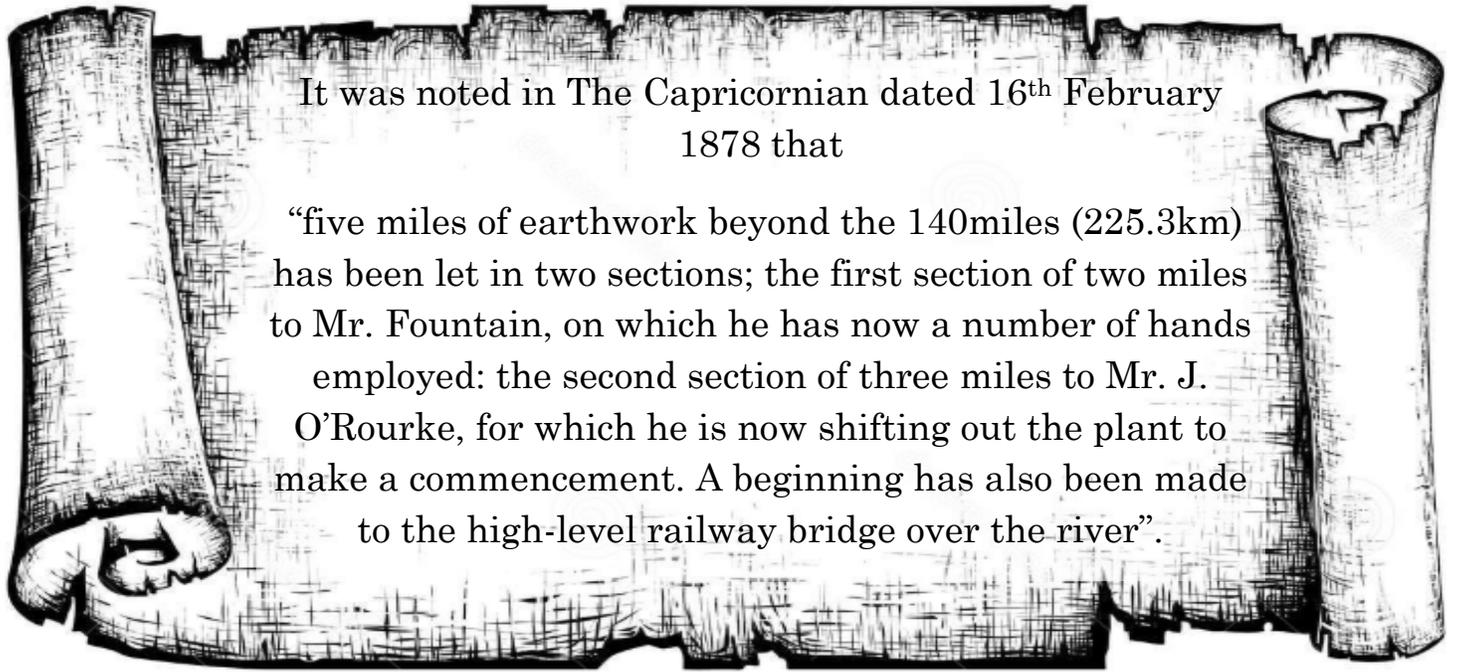
## A CELEBRATION - RAILWAY OFFICIALLY REACHES COMETVILLE

The railway officially reached Comet on the 1st March 1878. A portion of the Dingo Railway Station was dismantled and re-erected in Comet for the official opening of the rail line. This building served the township for the next one hundred years.



The Capricornian newspaper dated 16<sup>th</sup> February 1878 reported that the first delivery onto the new platform was Chief Railway Engineer, Robert Ballard's, horses and buggy.

Rail bed construction work was being done further ahead toward Emerald.



It was noted in The Capricornian dated 16<sup>th</sup> February 1878 that

“five miles of earthwork beyond the 140miles (225.3km) has been let in two sections; the first section of two miles to Mr. Fountain, on which he has now a number of hands employed: the second section of three miles to Mr. J. O'Rourke, for which he is now shifting out the plant to make a commencement. A beginning has also been made to the high-level railway bridge over the river”.

The surveyed line had to be cleared of timber and the rail bed formed with horse drawn scrapers. Sleepers and bridge timbers had to be cut from the surrounding area, then brought in by bullock dray to the work site, before the iron rails could be laid. Drays were preferred over wagons for carrying loads as they could travel over rough and uneven country.

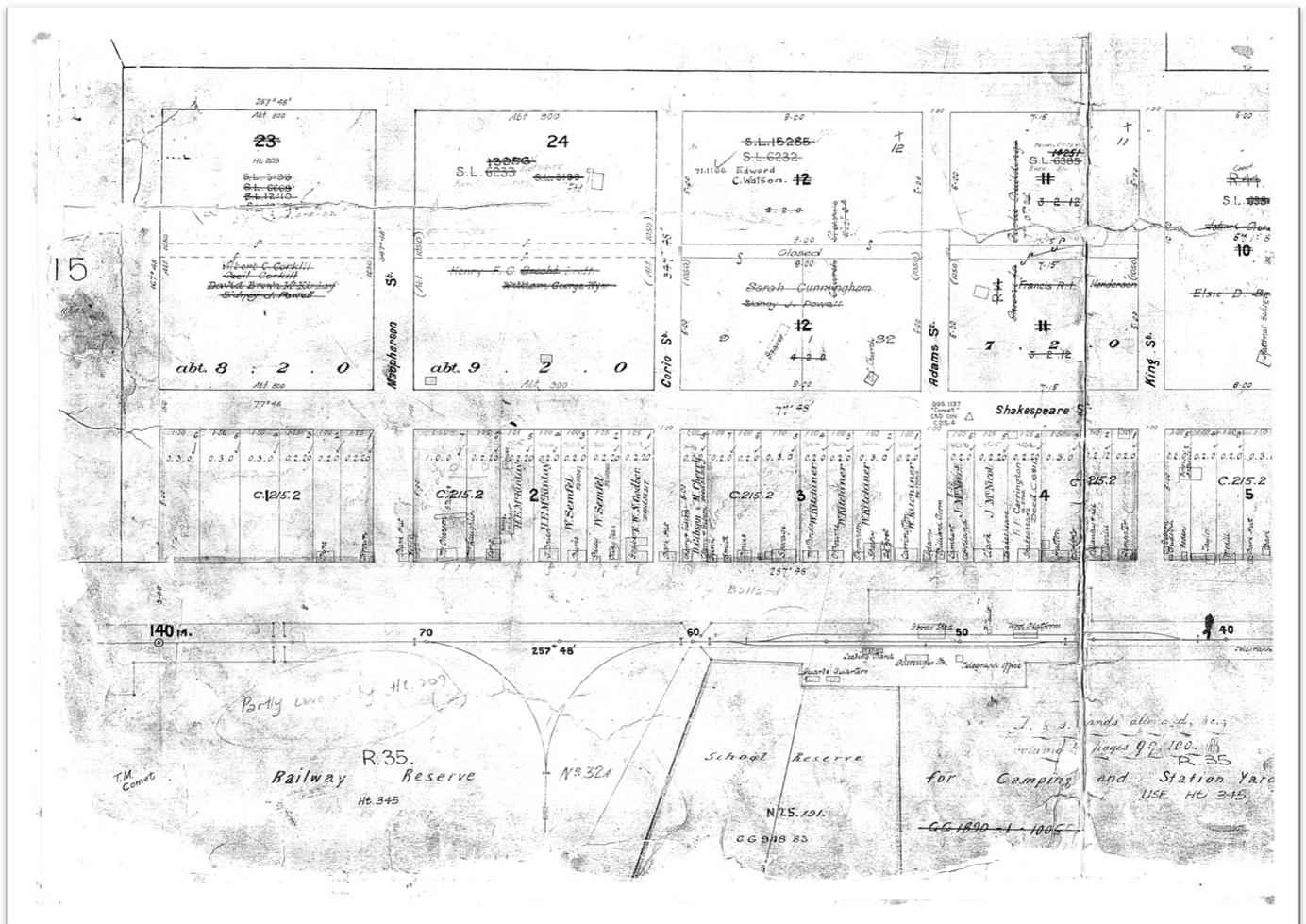
It was said that 600 men worked on the railway construction in one capacity or another.

An article in the Brisbane Courier, dated 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1878, reported that

“Labourers receive an average of 8 shillings and 6 pence (75 cents) per diem (day) and skilled labour – such as carpenters, blacksmiths, etc are paid 12 shillings (\$1.20)”.

## THE NEW TOWN SURVEYED

The town was surveyed in June that year by Willoughby Hannam, laying out the town plan in an orderly fashion. He allowed for a hospital reserve, botanic gardens, a cemetery, (although there was one already in use in Shakespeare Street), a site for public buildings, a recreation reserve and a school reserve.



WILLOUGHBY HANNAM SURVEY MAP 1878

## A BUSY TOWN

The main thoroughfare of the town, Ballard Street, was named after Robert Ballard, engineer-in-chief of the railway line project. Other streets were named McPherson (after the owner of Mac's West End Hotel), Corio (an occupational lease to the north east of the town), Adams Street (named after the chap who owned a billiard room situated in the middle of this street, King Street (which is now closed), Cable Street (named after the Cable

brothers who were carriers in the district), Tolmie Street (for the minister for lands at that time) and Shakespeare Street named after a local hotel owner). Macarthur Street ran parallel to Ballard Street.

**WM. J. MITCHELL,**  
**AUCTIONEER AND GENERAL COMMISSIONER**  
**AGENT, &c.,**  
**C O M E T V I L L E,**  
**Western Terminus, Central Railway.**

**W. J. M. is prepared to undertake the following:—Weekly Sale of Horses, Cattle, or other live stock at the Shakespeare Hotel Yards, Comet; Sale of House or Land Property; Sale of General Merchandise, consignments solicited, prompt sales effected, and account sales rendered; Negotiation of Mortgages and Loans; Adjustment of Carriers' and other Partnership Accounts; Arbitrator and Appraiser; Collector of Rents and other Debts; Care and Management of Tenements; Agency of Absentees; will Act as Agent for Intending Selectors, applying for the rich agricultural lands near the railway on Emerald Downs expected shortly to be thrown open under the provisions of the Homestead and Conditional Selection Acts. Resident Secretary to Comet Progress Association**

The township comprised about thirty buildings which included five stores, eleven hotels, a blacksmith, baker, butcher, saddler and two churches – being Roman Catholic and Church of England. The United Protestant Church was also conducting services by 1880.

There was also a railway doctor, post and telegraph office, a chemist and the billiard room.

**C H E R R Y   A N D   G I B S O N,**  
**GENERAL STOREKEEPERS**  
**AND**  
**C O M M I S S I O N   A G E N T S,**  
**COMETVILLE, Q.C.R.**

A Cobb and Co. coaching office was situated on Ballard Street.

## **THE BILLIARD ROOM**

The billiard room was situated in the middle of the road in Adams Street. Here is a typical case of a business squatting on their chosen piece of ground regardless of where it was in the main thoroughfare before the town was surveyed.

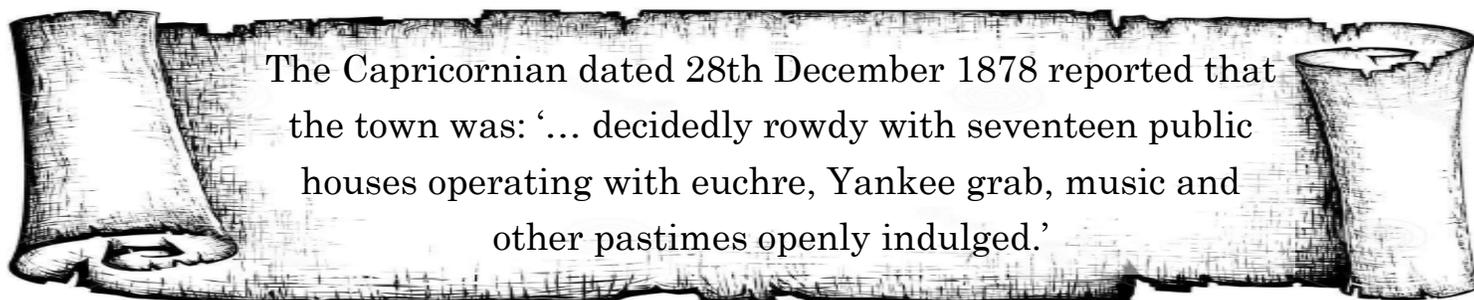
## **AUCTIONEERS AND GARDENERS**

There were auctioneers who held weekly stock sales. One auctioneer advertised weekly sales in the yard at the rear of Shakespeare's Hotel. Two slaughterhouses operated outside the town. There were several Chinese gardeners growing vegetables, possibly near the river for easy access to water. A Scandinavian fisherman and his family, living near the Mackenzie River, supplied fish to the townspeople. This family also ran a herd of goats.

## **HOTELS - SEVEN DAY TRADING**

Some of the hotels in the town were little better than bark huts while others were more substantial being made from timber or corrugated iron. Most of the hotels fronted Ballard Street. These were Mac's West End Hotel, The North Australian Hotel, Comet Hotel, Kellaway and Lees Hotel, Commercial Hotel, Rockhampton Hotel, Royal Mail Hotel, Shakespeare's Hotel, All Nations Hotel, Railway Hotel and the Carriers Arms Hotel. The hotels were open for seven-day trading. Two of these hotels had small ballrooms for dancing.

Noted in the Morning Bulletin dated 23rd August 1878, that the Magistrate's Court granted '*licences for music and dancing to William Carrington and Fanny Clark for a period of one month, two nights in each week to date from 24th instant*'



The Capricornian dated 28th December 1878 reported that the town was: '*... decidedly rowdy with seventeen public houses operating with euchre, Yankee grab, music and other pastimes openly indulged.*'

## **A ROWDY TOWN**

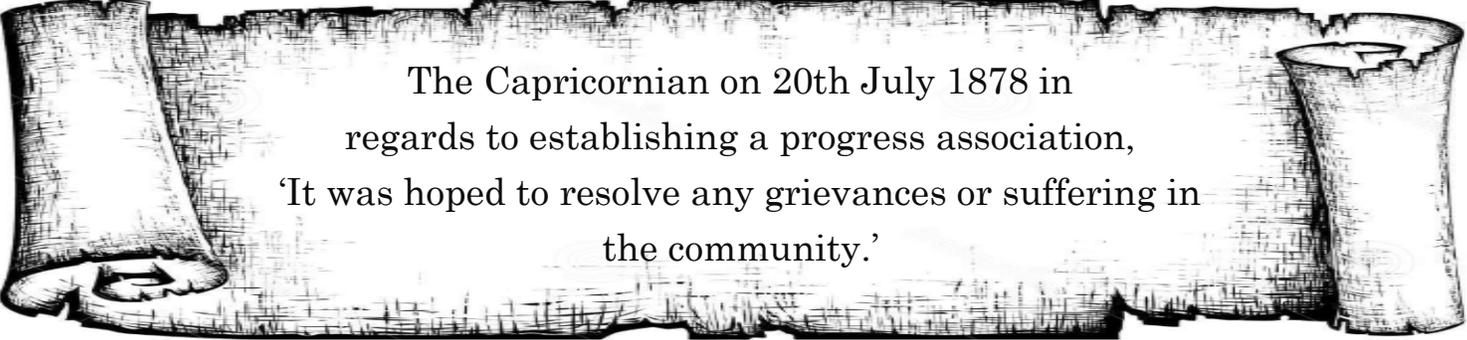
It leaves one to wonder exactly what these establishments were.

William Sheehy, in Ballard Street advertised that he was a Wine and Spirit Merchant, storekeeper and Butcher. Cherry and Gibson also situated on Ballard Street were storekeepers and commission agents.

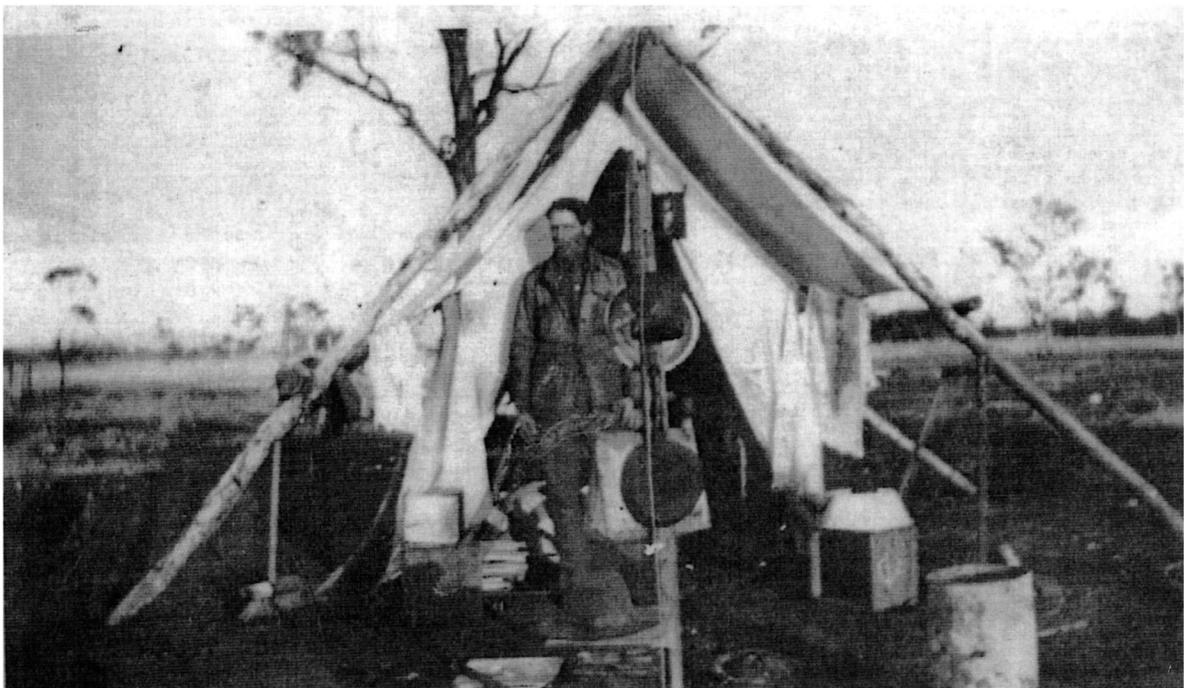
## WATER – A PRECIOUS COMMODITY

The water supply for the town came from the waterholes in the Comet River. These waterholes would have been shared with cattle, horses, goats and sheep. This caused considerable problems for the townspeople when the weather was dry.

A progress association was formed in the town on the 17th July 1878. This association requested that improvements be made to make life a little easier for the townspeople. Requests were made for a better water supply, school requisites, and a boat to carry the mail across the Comet River crossing when the water was too high for the mail coach. The sale of allotments in Comet and a money order office in the post and telegraph office with an assistant to deliver telegrams. It also requested that hotels be closed on a Sunday.



The Capricornian on 20th July 1878 in regards to establishing a progress association, 'It was hoped to resolve any grievances or suffering in the community.'



W. F. (TOM) McLEOD

## **A MOVEABLE SCHOOL**

The school children were educated in a movable building which had come up the line from Dingo along with the teacher, Samuel Clark, in October 1877. This tent school could not cater for the seventy children attending. The Progress Association procured permission from the Department of Education for a new school to be built of local pine and hard timber and it was to have a bark roof. However, there was no assistant to help the school teacher to teach the seventy enrolled children.

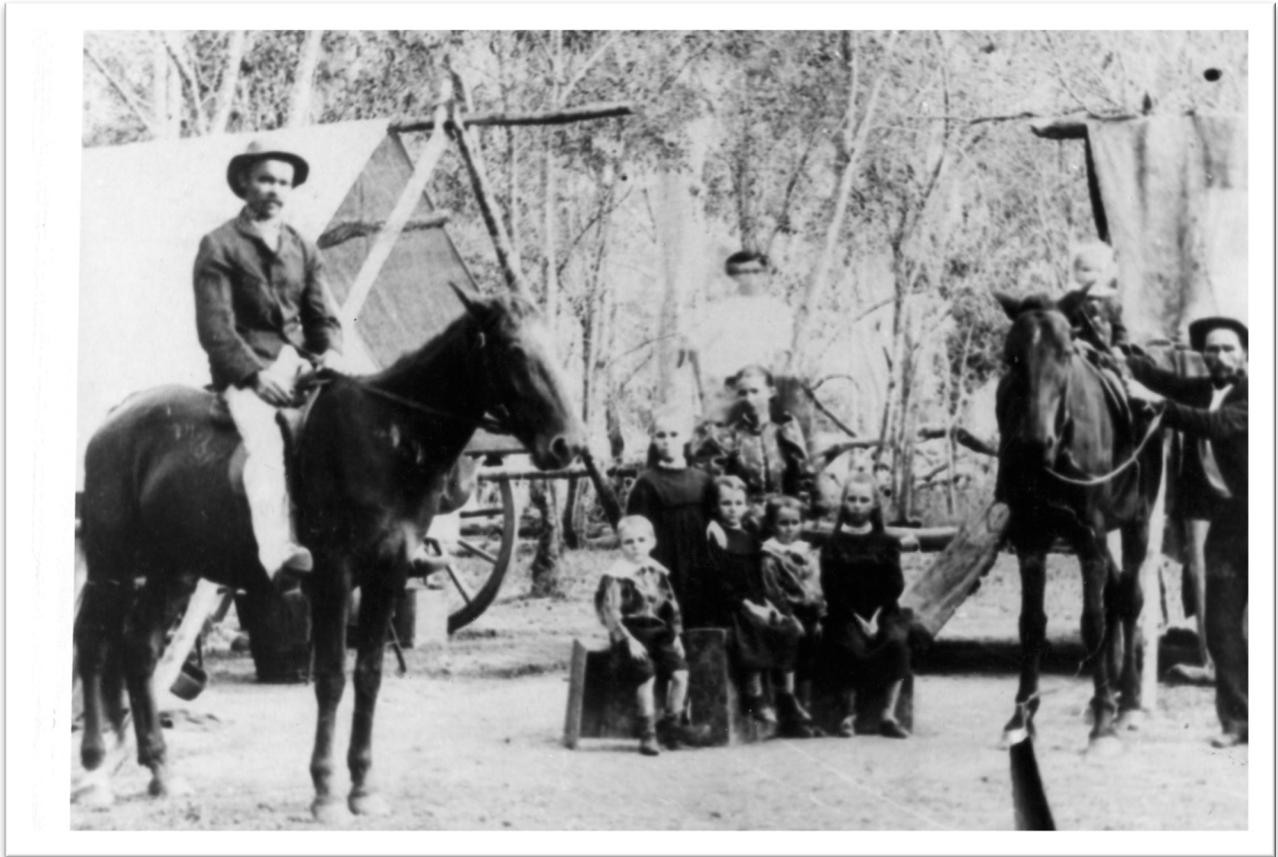
## **MASONIC TEMPLE**

The Comet Grand Lodge of Freemasons No. 28 had been established by Railway Engineer, Robert Ballard, along with other freemasons in Dingo. The dismantled temple came up the line by rail and was re-erected in the town. The two-storied structure was walled on three sides by corrugated iron; however, the front of the building was very ornately decorated with timber.

As the railway progressed westward, the Temple, which was beautifully furnished inside, was pulled down and re-erected six more times before coming to rest permanently in Barcaldine in 1886. In 1900, £720.0.0 (\$1,440.00) was raised for a new masonic temple which was dedicated in 1901. It is still called the Comet Lodge.

## **THE SQUATTERS JUMPERS AND MINDERS**

The arrival of the first businessmen and women in 1877, saw them squatting on their chosen piece of ground. Later, when the land sales commenced it caused a lot of angst among those who had purchased land at the sales on the 15th October 1878. "Mindors" were employed to protect their allotment from "jumpers" who occupied the ground and demanded payment to move.



## **COURT OF PETTY SESSIONS**

The first Court of Petty Sessions was held in Huston's Royal Mail Hotel. The committee of the Comet Progress Association asked for a suitable building in the township to hold court sittings. The Court of Petty Sessions, Comet, was proclaimed by the Governor in Council on the 26th April 1878.

## **POLICE PRESENCE**

A new police station and lockup was erected beside the new courthouse. Prior to this the police lived in two tents. Any prisoners awaiting trial were chained to a suitable log as there wasn't a lockup.

# ENTERTAINMENT

On a lighter note, the Capricornian of 20th December 1879, tells us that horse racing took place once a year and "that a merry-go-round was rejoicing the hearts of the juvenile population. Whilst it lightened the pocket of their parents".

**COMET RACE CLUB.**  
(Registered C.Q.R.A.)

*Official Programme*



**GRASSFED**  
**Race Meeting**  
Saturday, 15th December, 1928

Published by the Club.  
**PRICE: ONE SHILLING**  
D. WALZ, Secretary

**BALL AT NIGHT**

W. RICHMOND

**1. LADIES' BRACELET**  
(10 Stone up).  
**FOUR FURLONGS**

	yrs.	st.	lb.
1. LADY UALIE Miss Audrey Ellis' ch m	5	10	0
Itys—Grania Uaile CARDINAL			
2. CARBINE BELLE Miss Joyce Ellis' ch m	2	10	0
Unknown CARDINAL			
3. HERUAKA Mrs. W. Duncan's br m	5	10	0
Keruka—Station mare CHOCOLATE and BLUE			
4. CAVAN MAID Miss Fawkes' ch m	10	0	0
Undollo—Cavan Lass BLUE jacket, gold sleeves			
5. MIDDNIGHT Miss Forsyth's blk g	10	0	0
Unknown WHITE, red sash			
6. LADY UALIE W. Ellis' ch m	3	10	0
Monolith—Lady Tom BLACK, red sash			

1 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 \_\_\_\_\_ 3 \_\_\_\_\_  
Time: \_\_\_\_\_ min. \_\_\_\_\_ sec.

**2. COMET DOWNS GIFT**  
**SIX FURLONGS**

	yrs.	st.	lb.
1. CORN AYR H. Lewis' ch m	11	7	0
Cornrusk—Lady Ayr WHITE, red sash			
2. OH YES N. A. Daniels' br g	11	0	0
Tarrasa—Bella ROYAL BLUE, white sash, blue cap			
3. FROSTBITE Skelton Bros.' ch g	10	0	0
Perzamour—Dreamer BLACK, yellow sleeves and cap			

1 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 \_\_\_\_\_ 3 \_\_\_\_\_  
Time: \_\_\_\_\_ min. \_\_\_\_\_ sec.

**3. STOCKMAN'S PURSE**  
(10 stone up)  
**FOUR FURLONGS**

	yrs.	st.	lb.
1. CARBINE BELLE W. Ellis' ch m	2	10	0
Unknown CARDINAL			
2. GONDA F. W. Ellis' ch m	5	10	0
Gondn—Attraction CARDINAL			
3. CAVAN MAID F. Fawkes' ch m	10	0	0
Undollo—Cavan Lass BLUE jacket, gold sleeves			

1 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 \_\_\_\_\_ 3 \_\_\_\_\_  
Time: \_\_\_\_\_ min. \_\_\_\_\_ sec.

4. ZEBRA P. J. Ryan's ch g . . . . . a 10 7  
Zilper—Pansy  
BLACK jacket, red sash and cap

5. WUBBERED J. Encman's b g . . . . . a 10 5  
Land Gen—Sunnybrook mare  
PURPLE and WHITE

6. NICKETIME A. H. Burke's b g . . . . . a 10 2  
The Chimney—Station mare  
PINK and GOLD

7. BUCKY O'CONNOR A. McKinlay's b g . . . . . a 10 0  
Gondn—Hampton Lady  
BLACK, white stars

8. IRISH PRINCIPLE J. Quirk's ch g . . . . . a 10 0  
First Principle—Station mare  
BLACK, red sash and cap

9. MIDDNIGHT Miss Forsyth's blk g . . . . . a 10 0  
Marl—Reno  
BLACK, red sash

10. LADY UALIE W. Ellis' ch m . . . . . a 5 9 7  
Itys—Grania Uaile  
CARDINAL

**6. CONSOLATION HANDICAP**  
**FOUR FURLONGS**  
For all Beaten Horses. Minimum weight, 9st. 7lb.

	yrs.	st.	lb.
1. _____			
2. _____			
3. _____			
4. _____			
5. _____			
6. _____			
7. _____			
8. _____			
9. _____			
10. _____			
11. _____			

1 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 \_\_\_\_\_ 3 \_\_\_\_\_  
Time: \_\_\_\_\_ min. \_\_\_\_\_ sec.

4. MEDALLA C. Corhill's b m . . . . . a 4 10 0  
Medal—Eandella  
WHITE, green band and cap

5. LADY MONITOR Miss Eileen Bray's br m 3 10 0  
Monolith—Lady Tom  
BLACK, red sash

1 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 \_\_\_\_\_ 3 \_\_\_\_\_  
Time: \_\_\_\_\_ min. \_\_\_\_\_ sec.

**4. PUBLICAN'S PURSE**  
**FOUR FURLONGS**

	yrs.	st.	lb.
1. VACUUM W. Rosel's blk g	6	10	0
Marl—Reno BLACK, red sash			
2. GONDA F. W. Ellis' ch m	5	10	7
Gondn—Attraction CARDINAL			
3. CAVAN MAID E. Fawkes' ch m	10	0	0
Undollo—Cavan Lass BLUE, gold sleeves			
4. MEDALLA C. Corhill's b m	4	10	0
Medal—Eandella WHITE, green band and cap			
5. MIDDNIGHT J. Forsyth's blk g	10	0	0
Unknown WHITE, red sash			
6. LORD PERZICULAR W. Duncan's b g	10	0	0
Perzicula—Station mare CHOCOLATE and BLUE			

1 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 \_\_\_\_\_ 3 \_\_\_\_\_  
Time: \_\_\_\_\_ min. \_\_\_\_\_ sec.

**5. COMET HANDICAP**  
**FIVE FURLONGS**

	yrs.	st.	lb.
1. CORN AYR H. Lewis' ch m	11	7	0
Cornrusk—Lady Ayr WHITE, red sash			
2. OH YES N. A. Daniels' br g	11	0	0
Tarrasa—Bella ROYAL BLUE, white sash, blue cap			
3. FROSTBITE Skelton Bros.' ch g	10	0	0
Perzamour—Dreamer BLACK, yellow sleeves and cap			
4. ZEBRA P. J. Ryan's ch g	10	7	0
Zilper—Pansy BLACK jacket, red sash and cap			
5. WUBBERED J. Encman's b g	10	5	0
Land Gen—Sunnybrook mare PURPLE and WHITE			
6. NICKETIME A. H. Burke's b g	10	2	0
The Chimney—Station mare PINK and GOLD			
7. BUCKY O'CONNOR A. McKinlay's b g	10	0	0
Gondn—Hampton Lady BLACK, white stars			
8. IRISH PRINCIPLE J. Quirk's ch g	10	0	0
First Principle—Station mare BLACK, red sash and cap			
9. MIDDNIGHT W. Williams' b g	10	0	0
The Chimney—Ruby WHITE, blue band and cap			
10. LADY UALIE W. Ellis' ch m	5	9	7
Itys—Grania Uaile CARDINAL			
11. HERUAKA W. Duncan's br m	5	9	0
Keruka—Station mare CHOCOLATE and BLUE			

1 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 \_\_\_\_\_ 3 \_\_\_\_\_  
Time: \_\_\_\_\_ min. \_\_\_\_\_ sec.

Audrey Bywater

A. BYWATER

## **THE SPRINGSURE ROAD**

A report in the Rockhampton Bulletin dated 30<sup>th</sup> August 1877 stated that Mr Jardine, Engineer of Roads, Central Division, was very much in favour of a road from Springsure to Cometville.

Sixty-nine citizens from the Springsure district petitioned the government to have a road built from Comet to Springsure. At the Comet end, a road already existed for fifteen miles (24km) to Richardson's wool storage shed. A deep waterhole on Minerva Creek, called Woolcamp, was the preferred camping site for the men with their teams of horses and bullocks. Woolcamp was situated on the cattle property "Adelong" south of Comet. The next thirteen miles (21km) was said to be light scrub and easily cleared to complete the road.

## **A NEW BRIDGE OVER THE COMET**

A suitable timber bridge had to be constructed over the Comet River. The construction cost was £1,709.8.5 (\$3419.65). The contract for the bridge was signed on the 30th April 1878. Prior to this, a low-level bridge situated a short distance downstream was expected to meet the needs of the Springsure traffic, however it was a very steep pull up the bank on the northern side of the river.



COMET RIVER 1878 BRIDGE UNDER FLOOD WATERS

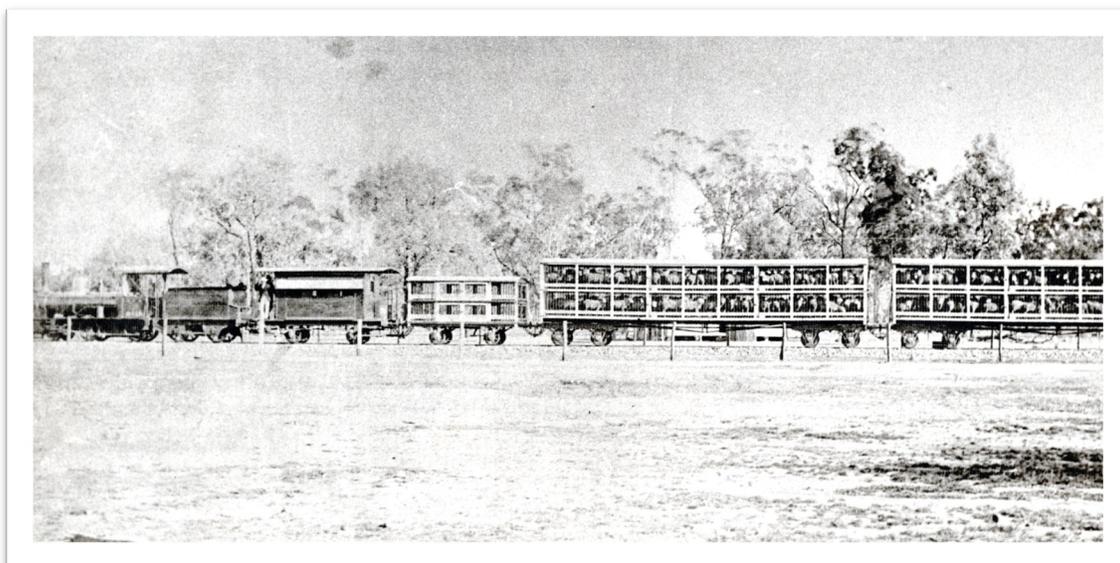


NEW 1878 COMET RIVER BRIDGE

## **THE WOOL WAGONS AND DROVERS**

Cometville saw many wagonloads of baled wool from the western districts delivered to the railway station for railing. Two huge wool storage sheds were constructed beside the railway line to receive the loads. Wagons carried the necessary supplies to the stations on their return journeys.

Drovers brought in large mobs of sheep to be trucked out to the coast. The Brisbane Courier newspaper reported that 5,000 sheep arrived from Coreena Station, Aramac, and were trucked to Rockhampton. These formed part of the first consignment of 20,000 sheep to Mr. William Patterson.



SHEEP TRAIN



## **MAIL AND PASSENGER COACH**

In 1879, Cobb and Co. started a passenger coach and mail service twice weekly between Cometville and Springsure. The coach left Comet on Sundays and Wednesdays, returning from Springsure on Mondays and Thursdays. Their depot was situated fronting Ballard Street, midway between King and Cable Streets. Paddock facilities and the coach shed were situated on the site of the present Comet River Showgrounds. This service was known as MS 108. The distance between the towns is 55 miles or 90 km. The coach driver was Charlie Hewson.

## **A LIVELY FRONTIER TOWN**

It was published in *The Capricornian* on 7th September 1878 that copper from Copperfield near Clermont, which previously had been carted on the Broadsound Road to the port at Saint Lawrence, was now being brought to Comet by carriers, Messers Christian and Rivers, for railing out.

Altogether, Cometville was a very busy and lively frontier town.



EAST END EARLY COMET—McLEOD COLLECTION



WEST END EARLY COMET- COLLECTION

*Compiled by Rosemary McLeod, 2018.*

**Photos:**

*National Library of Australia; State Library of Queensland; Rosemary McLeod collection; Trevor Kemp collection.*