

Nhill - where 'the gold was wheat' and 'firsts' abound

Emma Russell & Susan Faine, May 2022



We had great fun in Nhill recently, assessing the cultural heritage significance of the Nhill & District Historical Society's collection under the Community Heritage Grant program. We needed to understand what history they were representing - what are Nhill's curious and prosaic qualities? How well are they reflected in this local history collection? Here is the history we wrote with some images of the curious and the prosaic to be found in Nhill.

Nhill sits on the Western Highway, about halfway between Melbourne and Adelaide in Victoria's Wimmera region. It is the administrative centre of the Shire of Hindmarsh formed in 1995 from the amalgamation of the shires of Lowan and Dimboola. Nhill is the shire's most populous town, closely followed by Dimboola. [1]

In 2005, the Wotjobaluk, Jaadwa, Jadawadjali, Wergaia and Jupagik Nations, represented by the Barengi Gadjin Land Council, were formally recognised as the traditional owners of this area in the first Native Title Consent Determination in south eastern Australia. [2] Their first contact with colonists in the mid 1840s was followed by the arrival of squatters who cleared vast tracts of land, introduced thousands of cloven-hoofed sheep to the area and set in train a tremendous ecological change in the landscape and ecology of the Wimmera.

In the late 1870s station leases ran out and properties were divided and sold to selectors. This was the beginning of wheat farming in the area, and the development of the Nhill township. A plaque on the Western Highway reminds passers-by that 'The construction in 1879 by the Oliver Family of a stone flour mill at the rear of this site marked the beginnings of Nhill', since local growers no longer had to take their grain to Dimboola or Bordertown for crushing. [3]

The 1880s saw the beginnings of local commerce and amenities with Kozminski's general store, the Union Hotel, and a school in a Bible Christian church; along with a post office, hospital, racing club, agricultural and pastoral society, churches, foundry, police station, fire brigade, brewery, Cobb and Co coach services, the railway, and so on. In the words of local historian Mike Kingwill, 'Nhill grew at a rapid pace, like the goldmining towns - but the gold was wheat'. [1]

In the latter decades of the nineteenth century both Victoria and South Australia extended their rail networks and in 1887 they connected their lines at Serviceton on the Victorian side of the border to provide a direct rail route for both freight and passengers.



[1] Population Nhill 1749, Dimboola 1424:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shire_of_Hindmarsh

[2] <https://www.bglc.com.au>

[3] Built on Crown Land beside the Dimboola-Lawloit road

[1] Kingwill, Mike The Bottles of Nhill and the History, 2001

Innovation came with growth: the Lowan flour mill that opened in 1888 generated its own electricity for lighting, the Nhill Water Trust supplied town water from bores and wells, and in 1892 Nhill became the first town in Victoria after Melbourne to have electric street lighting.[1]

Despite the 1890s depression, and drought, Nhill was in 1903 considered 'one of the most important agricultural and pastoral districts in the Wimmera', which at the time produced about 50% of Victoria's wheat.[2]

Clubs, schools, and churches in Nhill record the names of local service personnel in the first and second world wars. From 1941-1946 Nhill Aerodrome served as a major RAAF training base, instructing over 10,000 air crew. Today this is the site of the Nhill Aviation Heritage Centre; the Air Radio Station, believed to be the only one of its kind in Australia today, is now under restoration. [3]

Agricultural and pastoral industries, and associated manufacturing and services, as well as food processing, are at the fore of local employment. The family poultry processing business Luv-a-Duck that began in Nhill in 1968 is often cited as an example of successful local business, noted for its sponsorship in 2009 of 50 Karen refugees to settle in Nhill and work at the business. The Nhill Free Press, begun in 1882, continues to be published in Nhill.

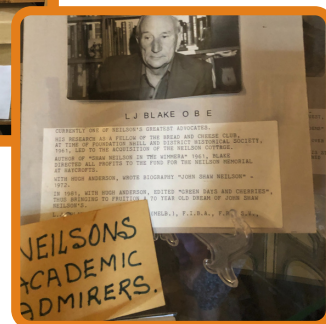
Community-driven local heritage initiatives have begun to emerge in Nhill, with the Nhill Aviation Heritage Centre, the Nhill Agricultural and Pastoral Society's display of restored vintage farm machinery at the Vintage Machinery Shed and most recently, the Nhill Silo Heritage Project whereby the community has raised funds to buy the Noske Flour Mill silo – keeping it a local asset. [4]

Nhill is included in the Wimmera Mallee Tourism's Heritage & Culture trail <https://www.visitwimmeramallee.com.au/explore/> and we encourage you to spend a bit of time there if you're travelling through to South Australia.

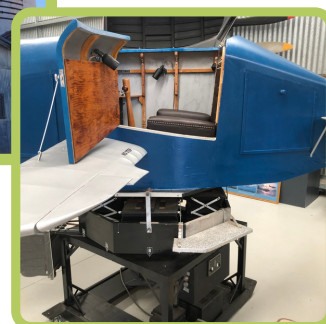
Extract from the Statement of Significance: *The Nhill & District Historical Society collection is a classic 'small rural town' collection: a mixed object, archival and audio collection that represents many aspects of civic, domestic, personal, social, commercial, and agricultural life in Nhill, and other locations in Hindmarsh Shire. Its focus is on the 19th and 20th century up to the 1980s, and so resembles a time capsule of Nhill & district's history, and is both an archive and a museum, as well as a PROV registered Place of Deposit.*



A very small part of a fabulous community archive, and part of the poet John Shaw Neilson [1872-1942] exhibit.



The Nhill Silo Heritage Project is an exciting community development, while the Aviation Heritage



Centre commemorates the RAAF base and WWII air school at Nhill Aerodrome that trained over 14,000 recruits. This little blue plane is an early flight simulator.

[1] Wiki, Nhill

[2] 'Wimmera Region', Victorian Places, <https://www.victorianplaces.com.au/wimmera-region> [accessed 26.03.22]

[3] Nhill Aviation Heritage Centre leaflet, undated

[4] <https://rustbelt.com.au/community/164-nhill-silo-heritage-project>

