

MANANGATANG



Wattle Street, Manangatang,
1940s (courtesy Ian Grant)

Following pages Jack (left)
and Allen Langley, 1930
(courtesy Museum Victoria)

Ten Bag Press
120 Victoria Street, Ballarat East, Victoria 3350, Australia
First published 2011
Text © Adam McNicol, 2011
Contemporary photographs © Andrew Chapman, 2011
All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a
retrieval system or transmitted in any form, by any means, without the prior
permission of the copyright owner.

National Library of Australia
Cataloguing-in-Publication data:
McNicol, Adam
Manangatang
with photographs by Andrew Chapman
ISBN 978-0-646-55080-0
1. Local history
2. Australian studies

Designed and typeset by Phil Campbell
Printed in Australia by BPA Print Group
Historic photographs on pages 11, 35, 79, 108 and 113 taken by Geoff Easton

Manangatang 100 gratefully acknowledges the support of the Victorian Government
through the Community Support Fund and Public Record Office Victoria.

Front cover Wheat crop and
Manangatang silos at sunrise

Back cover Opening of
the Back To Manangatang
celebrations, 1959 (courtesy
Keith Thompson)



MANANGATANG

ADAM McNICOL

With photographs by Andrew Chapman



TEN BAG PRESS







CONTENTS

Introduction	10
1 The small beginner	16
2 Give them land	42
3 A measure of progress	68
4 Triumph and tragedy	94
5 An era of prosperity	116
6 A trickle of outsiders	138
7 The rush to upgrade	158
8 Left in the lurch	174
9 A vibrant heart	192
10 Eternal optimists	212
Acknowledgements	220
Index	222

INTRODUCTION

Walk down the main street of Manangatang today, past the vacant blocks where machinery dealers, butchers, saddlers and blacksmiths once plied their trade, and it's hard not to be struck by how empty the place feels. As lifelong resident Verna Dickson remarked after the old Dalgety branch was pulled down: "Another space. Dear oh dear." Many of the buildings that remain have fallen quiet. The Commonwealth Bank branch hasn't cashed a cheque since 1993. Nearby, the shop that was once the newsagency is shuttered. The pharmacy, where local legend Gerry Nihill hand-wrote medicine labels and dished out jelly beans to kids for three decades, is open only a couple of hours per day. The Manangatang Hotel, the Five Star Café, Matt Barry's garage and a couple of agricultural supplies stores are about all that remains of what was once a bustling business centre.

In the 1920s, when nearly 40 percent of Australians lived in rural areas, Manangatang's main thoroughfare was a thriving centre of commerce. The surrounding farms were small, the families on them were large, and the district boasted a population of around 3000 people. These folk had been drawn to the northern reaches of Victoria's Mallee region by the dream of making their living from the land. Many of the men who brought their clans to Manangatang were veterans of the First World War; by growing wheat they were continuing to fulfil their patriotic duty by helping to feed a booming nation. But for these pioneers, with their farming ideas grounded in European traditions and methods, the Mallee initially proved to be a heartbreaking place. The regular plagues of mice, rabbits and locusts, and the dust storms that blackened the sky, gave the area a nightmarish reputation. "To speak in praise of the Mallee, to express a desire to settle there, to compare it favourably

Facing page Top: Men mixing poison during a locust plague, 1934 (courtesy of Marlene Zanker and Nyree Templeton)

Bottom: The weighbridge at Cocamba silos

Previous pages Bill Monk on his horse Socks (courtesy Marj Monk)



to other parts of Victoria, seems to be a thing that is just not done,” wrote Presbyterian minister Fraser Sutherland, who spent time at Manangatang in the 1920s and ’30s. “I have spoken with many in the Wimmera and have received the impression that those living around Birchip and Wycheproof ... would blush with horror at the suggestion that they are in the Mallee.”

Yet after the doom and gloom of the depression, and the prolonged drought during the Second World War, Manangatang emerged as an icon of rural Australia. The initial credit for that must go to comedian Ward Leopold, whose *Here’s Hooey* skits were a major hit in the post-war years. The skits sent-up the wildly enthusiastic commercial radio announcers of the time, and Leopold was loved for the way he took the mickey out of their dramatic time-calls and overblown promotion of various products. Throughout the comedy routine, a droll voice would interrupt the announcer saying, “They’re Racing on Mars” or “They’re racing in heaven”. When early on in the first *Here’s Hooey* record he said, “They’re racing in Manangatang”, an ever-popular phrase was born.

In the 1960s former Collingwood star Lou Richards added to the town’s notoriety when he wrote in his *Louie The Lip* column in the *Sun* newspaper that a certain VFL team would “not beat the South Manangatang juniors”. In the following two decades Richards refined his sledge to the words “wouldn’t beat the Manangatang thirds” or “wouldn’t get a game with the Manangatang thirds”. While Richards was, to quote *Sun* reporter Geoffrey Wright, using Manangatang as “mirthful measuring stick of mediocrity”, the locals have always revelled in the attention. Wright discovered this first-hand when he visited the town in early 1975 and wrote:

... Manangatang ranks with Alice Springs, Bourke and Wagga as one of the best-known inland places in Australia. Because no place, here or elsewhere, has had as many wisecracks made about it as Manangatang.

Why has Manangatang been singled out for this satirical bucketing?

Possibly because of its size and remoteness. Almost certainly because of the magic ring of its name.

Manangatang! It is the sound of the great Australian outback, the land of the rough-n-ready.

“Manangatang can show them all a thing or two,” said shearer, Dennis Chillingsworth, adding that he was still waiting for someone to break his record of shearing 200 lambs in seven hours.

“You press blokes have really given the place a name,” said another shearer, Ron Uchtman.

“I booked into a motel at Bright with my family. The receptionist asked where I came from.

“I said ‘Manangatang’. Fair dinkum, she thought I was joking.”

Nowadays there are not nearly as many locals as there once were. At a time when less than one in five Australians live in rural areas, Manangatang is one of countless farming settlements that are fading away. But in 2011 the streets again bustled with activity as thousands of people returned to take part in the town’s centenary celebrations. It is this milestone that drove the community to record its rich and proud history and ensure that Manangatang’s tumultuous first hundred years are not forgotten.

Following pages Wattle Street during Back To Manangatang celebrations, 1959 (courtesy Des and Maree Ryan)

