

THE JOLLY WAGGONERS HOTEL STORY

The Jolly Waggoners Hotel, built in 1881, stood proudly near the northwest corner of Mitchell and Glen Streets in Bourke, a wooden sentinel of the bustling town's life. Its weatherboard structure, distinct from the more common brick buildings, made it an immediate landmark. The long verandah, offering shade and respite, beckoned to the weary teamsters transporting goods across the vast expanses of New South Wales. The hotel was not merely a place of refreshment but a central hub for stories, commerce, and the colourful characters who passed through Bourke.

Edward "Ned" Dugan, the hotel's first licensee, was a figure well-known for his genial nature. From the day the Jolly Waggoners opened, Dugan ensured that his establishment became a magnet for both locals and travellers, especially the teamsters after whom it was named. From 1881 to 1884, Dugan presided over the hotel's lively affairs, providing a welcoming atmosphere for all who entered. His tenure ended when he moved to the Shakespeare then the Carriers Arms hotel, both on Mitchell Street, continuing his legacy there until his untimely death in 1890. Under his stewardship, the Jolly Waggoners became a cornerstone of Bourke's social scene.

Following Dugan's departure, John Murray took over in 1884. That same year, the hotel witnessed one of its more sombre moments when William Harris, a local palliasse-maker known for his addiction to alcohol, collapsed and died suddenly in the bar. Harris' tragic end added a melancholy note to the Jolly Waggoners' history, reflecting the darker side of life in the harsh outback.

The hotel was at the heart of Bourke's growing pains, and the next few years would bring dramatic events that cemented its place in local lore. In January 1886, a devastating fire broke out in Patrick Murray's store next door. The flames quickly spread, and although the community, led by night watchman Thomas Scriffin and licensee John McLoughlin, made a valiant effort to contain the blaze, significant damage was done. The fire threatened to consume the Jolly Waggoners, but the newly introduced Climax Fire Extinguisher, brought in by Ghest and Co., helped save the structure. Still, McLoughlin suffered considerable losses, including damage to the hotel's furniture and a bedroom, which was partially destroyed by a well-meaning but overzealous neighbour with an axe.

In The great 1890 Flood the flood water which had inundated the town was running through the hotel about a foot deep. This, however, did not discourage McLoughlin, who kept it open and was doing essential business. People were paddling in and out, and McLoughlin was splashing about behind his bar serving the thirsty customers.

Despite the fire and flood, McLoughlin oversaw the hotel's recovery, and by 1891, the Jolly Waggoners had expanded to occupy the full corner of Glen Street. Yet, the hotel's growth came with its share of drama. In 1893, an incident involving John Ahearn shocked the town when he was convicted of exposing himself to a young girl outside the hotel. His punishment—a public flogging—drew significant attention, as it was the only time such a sentence was carried out in Bourke. Later that year, a violent altercation erupted when Thomas Harris, slightly intoxicated, provoked the hotel's cook, Jimmy Ah Foo. Ah Foo struck Harris with a shovel, leaving him seriously injured. Ah Foo was convicted of unlawful wounding but received a light sentence of good behaviour, a testament to the complexity of justice in a frontier town.

In 1894, Donald Matheson took over the hotel's license, and under his management, the Jolly Waggoners continued to be a lively, if rowdy, establishment. One infamous incident from his tenure occurred in 1899 when a local man, William Taylor, attempted to ride his horse into the bar. Though such antics were once common in Bourke, times were changing, and Constable Wilson promptly arrested Taylor for drunkenness and obscene language. The arrest brought Taylor to tears, a scene that amused and entertained the locals.

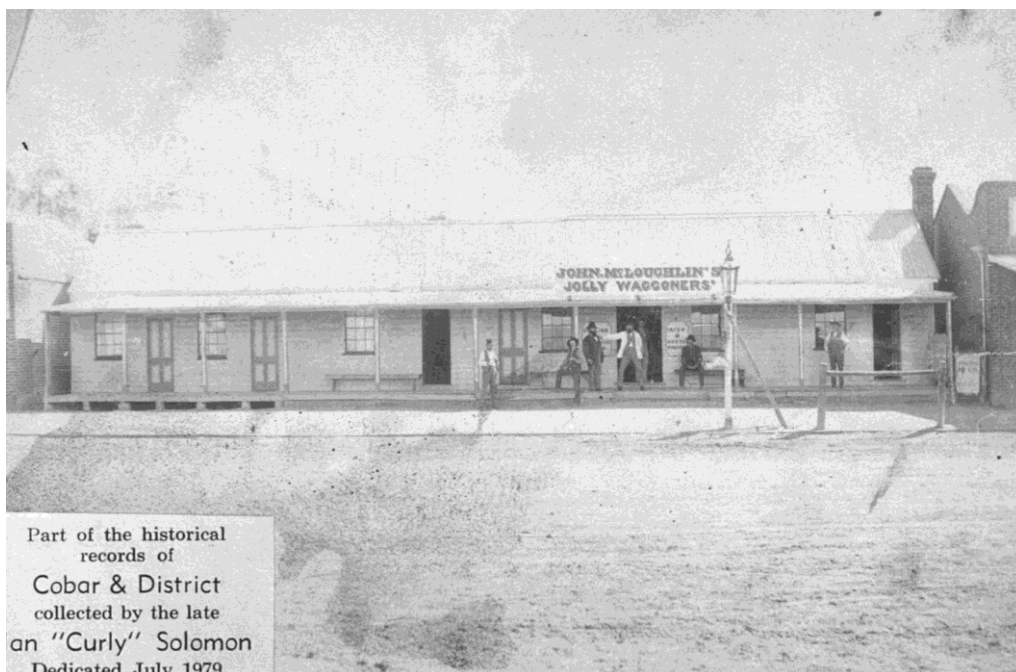
The hotel's reputation for violent altercations was further reinforced in 1895 when a woman named Florence Smith stabbed the hotel's cook, William Herbert Hill, after a heated argument. While Hill survived the attack, the incident underscored the often volatile atmosphere that pervaded the establishment, reflecting the unpredictable nature of life in the outback.

As Bourke continued to evolve, so too did the Jolly Waggoners. The early 1900s brought more challenges, including another devastating fire in 1902. The blaze began in the western end of the hotel and quickly engulfed the bedrooms and bar. Despite the best efforts of the town's residents to save the building, significant damage was done. The total losses from the fire were estimated at £3500, a substantial sum for the time. Charles Campbell, the licensee from 1904 to 1907, and George Wall, who held the license from 1908 to 1924, continued to run the hotel in the years that followed, though its reputation remained one of both vibrant life and chaotic incidents.

By 1924, the hotel's days as a licensed establishment came to an end when the State Government's License Reduction Board cancelled its license. The building was eventually taken over by Mr. J.P. O'Mara in 1928, who converted it into a bakery. The Jolly Waggoners Hotel's transformation from a bustling hotel to a bakery marked the end of an era, though its colourful history lingered in the town's collective memory. O'Mara later sold the bakery to Mr. D. Cottee in the 1950s, but a fire gutted the building in 1957, ruining the bakery's oven and bread-mixing plant.

Finally, in 1962, the old structure was demolished, making way for new development. In the mid-1960s, the Department of Main Roads built a brick Divisional Office on the site, which stood until 1988 before being sold to another government department.

The Jolly Waggoners Hotel, though long gone, remains a key part of Bourke's rich history. It was a place where stories were made—where fires, fights, and moments of both triumph and tragedy unfolded in equal measure. The hotel's wooden verandah and bustling bar saw the highs and lows of outback life, a testament to the resilience of Bourke and its people. Today, its legacy endures as a symbol of a town shaped by the unpredictability and spirit of the Australian frontier.



The Jolly Waggoner Hotel taken about 1885 – Patrick Murray's Store on RHS



The Jolly Waggoner Hotel after extensions following Murray's Store fire



Patrick Murray's Store before the 1886 fire. The Jolly Waggoner can be seen on LHS

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