**Essays on Mount Crosby - The Petition**

The early 1890s brought hardship to most Australians. A credit squeeze pressed hard on the economy and resulted in understandable civil disobedience. Strikes were rife and for a time it wasn’t at all certain whether Australians were headed towards federation or some sort of civil war. It was 1895 before workers sensed an improvement in things and their labour again started to have some value. That was the year of Patterson’s “Man From Snowy River” and also a second attempt at a federation movement. At least some things were looking up, so the working men of Mount Crosby felt confident enough to ask the Board for something more. Their best shot is recorded below, and in it are some interesting details about life at the works in October of 1895:

*Gentlemen,*

*We, the undersigned employees of the Board stationed at Mt Crosby have the honour to inform you that on the occasion of your last visit to the pumping station we had arranged for two of our number to act as a deputation on our behalf to ask if you could see your way to return the five percent [deducted from wages in 1895], but the Chief Engineer informed them that it would have to be put in writing. Therefore we now gladly avail ourselves of this opportunity of sending you the attached reasons in support of our request, and we venture to hope that they will be of some assistance to you in your deliberation. We have the honour gentlemen to subscribe ourselves your obedient servants: Geo McPhail, William Bowling, James Little, Edward King, Thomas Craddock, Alex McDougall, Robert Allen, Andrew Simpson, W Mayne, W Butler.*

1. *Increased Cost of Living*

*A few months ago bread had advanced fully 25% and now the butcher who supplies the [pumping] station has followed suit to the same amount and with every prospect of going higher instead of lower.*

1. *Medical Aid*

*Since we have resided here, it has been greatly required. Many of the cases being of such a serious nature that the doctor had to be brought out at a cost of £3.3/ per visit [about $300 in today’s money] as compared with 5/ in town [about $23 today] and unfortunately no less than six deaths has taken place.*

1. *Extra Work*

*We are called upon to wash the reservoir and other work as it arises, for which we receive nothing, not even time allowed off.*

1. *Holidays*

*That we hardly ever get, but work from Jan to Dec. It will admit of no question that in this respect your employees in town has a great advantage over us.*

1. *Sunday Work*

*As you must be aware we do a considerable amount of it, a certain amount of flue cleaning and pumping when required, besides keeping watch in rotation on the bridge and works.*

1. *[Isolation]*

*We are given to understand in good faith; that the firemen of the New Farm Refinery receive from £4 to £6 per year more than we do; and that only for six days per week, any Sunday work paid for extra. Therefore it is easy to understand the advantage they enjoy over us socially and otherwise, and as in the case of the family growing up, they are of assistance to them, whereas owing to our isolated position we are rendered helpless in that direction.*

1. *[Return of the 5% Deduction]*

*As the Government have returned the percentage deducted from the Civil Servants, we hope the Board will favourably consider that as a precedent to go on.*

In submitting the petition for the men, Chief Engineer Joseph Stewart paid them the sort of compliment usually reserved for retirement speeches. The men were, he wrote, the most efficient, well behaved and well doing body of men he’d ever had under his charge. That doesn’t sound like a man whose reputation was one of being a strict disciplinarian, perhaps even an autocratic slave driver. I’ll bet he never told them …

Col Hester