

MCFARLANE BRIDGE CENTENARY CELEBRATION 9TH APRIL 2006.

I recognise the traditional custodians of this land, the Bungalung and Yaegl peoples.

May I bring you greetings and best wishes from Clarence Valley Council and the citizens of our great Clarence valley on this historic occasion, as we celebrate 100 years to the day of the opening of our McFarlane Bridge.

At the outset I want to pay tribute to the leadership of my colleague Cr Doug Mackenzie as Chair of the McFarlane Bridge Centenary Committee, to all the hard working people on that committee and to everyone who helped in any way to make this great day a reality. Well done to you all.

It is my intention today to reflect firstly upon this heritage landmark Bridge, then on our forebear John McFarlane MLA and finally on the day and the people 100 years ago and how we as a community may be thinking and feeling today, 100 years on.

The Bridge

McFarlane Bridge is listed by the National Trust on the Trust's Industrial Archaeology Sites list at number 2045. It is also a bridge of State Significance due to its early construction for the then new American adaptation of moveable span bridges.

A core NSW Planning Instrument, the North Coast Regional Environment Plan 1988, specifically refers to McFarlane Bridge, Quote: -"The Bridge reflects the primacy of river navigation in the transport history of the region. It is important in enhancing north-south road communications in the Clarence area and more generally. Its presence is testimony to the efforts of long serving Clarence State MP, John McFarlane who is commemorated in the naming of the bridge". End quote.

The Maclean LEP 2001 also protects the bridge as an item of Environmental Heritage. The Clarence Valley LEP in preparation will most definitely do the same for all time.

This bridge is known as the 'Coraki' design of a bascule bridge. Its relationship with the Glebe Bridge at Coraki is significant because even though both were built on the same design, the McFarlane Bridge approach spans are longer and thus there were design changes specific to McFarlane Bridge.

McFarlane Bridge is a significant example of the creative and technical force behind early bridge engineers in NSW and Australia and is a demonstration of the influence of American bridge design at that time. It is one of only eight ever built (I understand the 4th actually built) and one of the two oldest surviving bascule type bridges in NSW.

Prior to establishment of the Newcastle steelworks in 1916, metal bridges were very expensive and timber bridges such as this bridge, outnumbered metal bridges by about 8 to 1.

Mr John McFarlane who entered State parliament in 1887 had been keeping up pressure on the Minister for Public Works, and in 1893 approval was granted for a bridge with a lifting span at a cost of 12,000 pounds – no doubt a large sum in those days. And as still occurs today it took another 13 years to build!

An initial government vote of 4,000 pounds was secured in 1902 and tenders were notified in the Government Gazette in April and July 1903. In September 1903 a tender from Mountney and Co for 11,732 pounds was accepted and the first pylon was driven on 15th June 1904. On 5/4/1906 government estimates for the work were 15,000 pounds – so there were cost blowouts in those days too!

2000 cubic yards of earthworks were required for the Maclean side of the bridge approaches and 4000 cubic yards for the Woodford Island side. The required earth was won from a cutting into the hill just around the corner between the Presbyterian manse and the old school nearby.

The Roads and Traffic Authority website was updated in relation to McFarlane Bridge on 6/12/2000 when it was stated that the bridge condition was sound and stable. We, in all levels of politics, must always vigorously insist that this great, historic landmark is always properly maintained and preserved for future generations.

A final note on the bridge – the decking was sealed and the unique lifting span discontinued in 1962. As a youth I saw, as did many of us – this bridge open and close on many occasions – a spellbinding, wondrous experience for a boy I can tell you!

John McFarlane MLA

John's parents came from the Isle of Mull in 1840. His father, also John, was a teacher with the National Board of Education and purchased 58 acres near the confluence of the Clarence River and Swan Creek.

John Jnr was born in the Hunter River District and was one of 6 children and given his fathers vocation was obviously well educated. He worked his father's Swan Creek farm, and then took up land of his own. He had two sons and one daughter. He was Secretary and later Manager of Clarence Farmers Association. In 1884 moved to Sydney and commenced business as an agent for maize, timber and general produce. In 1887 he was elected the State Member for Clarence, a position he retained until his death in 1915 at the age of 61 years.

John McFarlane was a staunch protectionist and saw 12 State Ministries in office and the administration of 8 State Governors. He agitated over the years for the North Coast railway and was an active member of the Cattle Stealing Prevention Association – a serious matter in those days too! He was never a Minister but served on the Committee of Works for a term and was a member of many committees dealing with land ownership, the dairy industry and public works, where his special knowledge and experience was valuable.

He wrote a Clarence River history between 1910 and 1915 and our own living treasure Lin McSwan, in conjunction with the Maclean District Historical Society, fortunately published his work in 1980.

John McFarlane after many years of representation for this bridge was rewarded by officially opening the structure 100 years ago today, when he was aged 52.

At the time of his death he had the distinction of being the longest serving member of the State Lower House of Parliament– from 11/2/1887 to 9/7/1915 – in excess of 28 years. He is buried in Rookwood Cemetery Sydney.

May I provide a few fascinating quotes about John McFarlane MLA:-

“A splendid stamp of a native – burly and brusque and big hearted with a jovial manner”

“Not likely to set the house on fire with his rhetoric”!

“A man of integrity and honour”

“Honest John the farmer’s friend”

On his unexpected death of heart failure in July 1915 Premier Holman in a SMH obituary described him as quote “A sterling member of the House and quite unpretentious in his ways”

Another obituary proclaimed quote: - “There were few men in the public life of the State who held so much of the esteem, the respect and the confidence of all.”

It should therefore be no surprise to us and indeed most fitting that this iconic, heritage landmark is named after John McFarlane MLA.

The Day and the People

For many years the locals had depended on a ferry to navigate the South Arm Clarence River to get to and from Maclean and Woodford Island.

In 1901 the members of the Maclean and District Progress Association lodged a request through Mr McFarlane to the Works Department for the bridge, due to the increased traffic over the South Arm and partly because of the operation of the Illarwill quarry. This is interesting given that 8 years previously, in 1893, the Government had committed to providing the bridge. It seems that the wheels of progress sometimes turned slowly in those days too!

Obviously the ferry had been inconvenient and slow. On this day 100 years ago there would no doubt have been great feelings of relief, happiness even exuberance – a party and festive mood would have prevailed.

On 6th April 1906 the local paper Clarence River Advocate lauded that the opening day was quote “To be celebrated by a basket picnic and other attractions on the showground, with children’s sports to be held, a procession formed and entertainment would be found at the pavilion at the conclusion of the addresses. The public are requested, by their attendance to make the function the success that it deserves to be and the day a red letter day in the history of the Clarence district. ” End quote. What a call to celebration!

Public schools for a 10 mile radius closed and businesses in Maclean decided to close at 1pm.

At the opening Mrs McFarlane broke a bottle of wine on the decking and Mr McFarlane cut the ribbon to allow the waiting crowd to surge across the bridge to Woodford Island and return for the luncheon and sports which followed – a ceremony which we are re-enacting 100 years on. The Maclean RSL photo in the River Room wonderfully depicts that epic opening event. I have no doubt that some of us would have had relatives here 100 years ago.

Mr McFarlane noted on the opening day that he may be liable to the imputation of being a 'roads and bridges member' but quote "This was said by city people. If some of these made themselves better acquainted with the requirements of the country districts, they would see the necessity of roads and bridges to develop the country". End quote. Perhaps not a lot has changed in a century.

The CR Advocate on the day after the opening reported "some 1000 people are thought to have taken part in the festivities and there was much toasting of Mr McFarlane"!

I have thought about what our feelings and emotions might be today as we witness this re-enactment.

Each of us would perhaps be thinking back to what it would have been like here at the festivities 100 years ago

Some of us will no doubt have very special memories of this magnificent structure. For all of us this landmark has always been here and an important component of our local built environment.

Let me conclude by sharing a few personal thoughts.

My then 19 year old grandfather to be, would have been here with other young folk and perhaps my then 11 year old grandmother to be was here too as she was raised locally. Many of us would no doubt be sharing similar thoughts and be similarly reflecting today.

This day for me will always be one of the most special in my public life and a day I have looked forward to for a very long time, never dreaming I would have this role. It is a huge honour to stand before you as a descendant of a man, my grandfather Patrick James Mulville, who worked as a labourer on this bridge construction – a man who lived all his life within a mile of this bridge – a man who with his little woman Eva, raised my dear mother just a stones throw up Lawrence road. My mother walked over this bridge in all weather, morning and afternoon to the Sisters of Mercy Maclean School during the bleak depression years and to Mass in Maclean Catholic Church every Sunday without fail.

Patrick and Eva's youngest of 6, my dear aunt Kathy Coulter I am so very proud to say is here today sharing this occasion. Kathy and her husband, my uncle Bill Coulter were Illarwill kids for whom this great bridge has always been a very special part of their lives.

I am so content and happy that Maclean is again my home and that this bridge silently, sturdily stands guard as a connection between our pioneering past and our present day citizens.

I have no doubt there are many more wonderful stories like mine. I would love to share them with you over time.

Let us today honour the past and our pioneers who made this bridge a reality a century of years ago.

Let us always look back to today with fondest of memories. But let us also look forward to a bright future as we continue to use and cherish our beautiful and outstanding beacon we affectionately call McFarlane Bridge. Long may it survive for those who follow us. Have a wonderful day and thank you.

Ian Tiley
Mayor
Clarence Valley Council
9th April 2006