

MECHANICS' INSTITUTES OF VICTORIA Inc.

Newsletter No. 1 Spring, 1999

Mechanics' Institutes of Victoria

Catherine Milward-Bason
Secretary of MIV Inc.,
Pahran Mechanics' Institute,
PO Box 1080,
Windsor, VIC 3181

Tel/Fax 03 9510 3393
Email pmiinc@vicnet.net.au

Welcome to the first Newsletter of the Mechanics' Institutes of Victoria Inc. (MIV). It is being distributed to known Institutes throughout Victoria and to persons and organisations known to be interested in Mechanics' Institutes.

MIV was formed in 1998 following a conference in April at Kilmore. Membership of MIV is open to interested persons and any organisation which is an institution currently or formerly recognised as a Mechanics' Institute in Victoria or which has an identifiable linkage to such an institution.

The objectives of the MIV are:

- to foster the preservation and the restoration of the social, cultural and physical heritage of active Mechanics' Institutes

- to encourage and facilitate the recognition and preservation of Mechanics' Institute buildings and the revival of the inactive Mechanics' Institutes.

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The functions of the MIV are to develop exchanges and systems of mutual support for member organisations by:

- gathering and providing information on sources of funding for member organisations, their buildings and their collections
- developing a contact network
- establishing and maintaining linkages and seeking support from and co-operation with relevant government agencies and other organisations with similar objectives
- establishing and maintaining a means of regulating MIV communications and of communication with external bodies
- establishing and maintaining an MIV web site
- undertaking any activities which will promote the interests and resourcing of the MIV.

National Conference in November 2000

This is something for your diary!! MIV is planning a National Conference "Mechanics' Institutes Before and Since Federation" to be held at the Melbourne Athenaeum on Saturday and Sunday 18-19 November, 2000. For those of you who are able to be in Melbourne on Friday 17 November, visits to Mechanics' Institutes and other places of interest will

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be arranged. The conference will mark the bi-centenary of the founding of the Mechanics' Institute by Dr. George Birkbeck in Scotland and be part of the celebration of the centenary of Federation in Australia. Institutes and Schools of Arts across the country played important parts in Federation debates and referenda.

At the Prahran Mechanics' Institute Library on 23 June Leonie Burke, MP for Prahran and Parliamentary Secretary for Local Government presented MIV with a cheque for \$10,000.00 from the Victorian Government to support organisation of the conference. MIV has lodged a submission for project funding from the History and Education Program of the National Council for the Centenary of Federation. The proposal includes a national project inviting schools to investigate and report on the history of their local Mechanics' Institute or School of Arts and a 4-week exhibition of photographs, documents and artefacts gathered from Institutes around Australia.

The exhibition would be mounted at the Athenaeum and would run for 4-5 weeks through November. The schools project and the nationally-sourced exhibition will require substantial human and financial resources. If the application for Centenary of Federation Funding is not successful, MIV will have to scale back the plan outlined here.

We shall keep you informed of developments.

MIV Committee

MIV was very sorry to lose the services of Jim Lowden, its first Secretary and a driving force in its formation. It was Jim's energy and commitment that led to the Kilmore conference in April 1998 from which MIV emerged. Jim had to retire from MIV for family and business reasons. We thank him for his grand contribution and wish him well in the future.

Adrian Vinck our first Treasurer and the President of the Melbourne Athenaeum is also leaving us as he has taken a position overseas. Adrian organised our incorporation. We thank him for his work and wish him well in his new posting.

Bill Ashworth from Walhalla has taken indefinite leave, we wish Bill a speedy return to good health.

Joining our committee are Julann Meabank from Kilmore, Andy Crabtree from Walhalla and Peter Lovell, President of the Athenaeum and also of Allom, Lovell and Associates, Conservation Architects. Continuing committee members are Frank Hurley (Ballarat, President), Catherine Milward-Bason (Prahran, Secretary), John Murphy (Leongatha, Vice-President), Richard Myers (Berwick), Leila Winchcombe (Athenaeum), Graham Dudley (Local Government Branch, Department of Infrastructure) and our historian Pam Baragwanath.

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MIV President

At the then Minister's invitation, Dr. Frank Hurley, President of MIV, met Rob Maclellan MP, who was Minister for Local Government and Planning on 23 August. Mr. Maclellan referred to the disparate and in some cases confused basis on which Institutes throughout the State had originally been granted or acquired the titles on which their buildings stand or once stood. He outlined a suggestion for legislation to establish a Trust in which, subject to the agreement of an Institute in each case, the title would be vested. As a model, he referred to legislation which established such a Trust for original Crown grant land held by the Church of England in parishes around Victoria.

Mr. Maclellan indicated that he wished to provide clarity and certainty in the matter of Mechanics' Institute property entitlements but that no Institute would be forced to be part of the proposed Trust or whatever structure was adopted in any legislation. He also said he would make the services of Government legal officers available to advise MIV and individual Institutes. Dr. Hurley said that MIV would consult as widely as possible with Institutes, seek legal advice and respond to the proposals.

(Although a State election has altered the position Mr. Maclellan held at the time of the meeting, Bob Cameron MP for Bendigo West is now Minister for Local Government and Planning, consideration of the basis on which Institutes hold, or believe that they hold,

title to their buildings is worth consideration by individual institutes as well as through this newsletter. Ed..)

Local Government Branch, Department of Infrastructure

This office has undertaken a considerable amount of work connected with publications of the MIV and publications which relate to mechanics' institutes. A report on historic books and library collections held by Victorian Mechanics' Institutes is in progress and The Kilmore Conference Proceedings are being edited for publication and should be out by the end of the year.

Historical Publications and Records

Two grants for funding have been applied for under the MIV name. \$25,000.00 has been applied for to publish Pam Baragwanath's manuscript, **Mechanics' Institutes of Victoria** in a form similar to the existing *Victorian Churches*. Pam has been gathering information and taking photographs of Victorian Mechanics' Institutes, Memorial Halls, Athenaeums, Free Libraries, Schools of Art and Public Halls for her publication since 1984. The result of this application to the Centenary of Federation will be known in November.

Of the 1,034 original organisations 500 remain and Pam has information on 360 of them. In a later Newsletter we will publish full lists of

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known buildings and Pam will then be able to hear from you with your recent information for her ongoing record and perhaps hear about some of the 140 on which she has no information.

An application for \$3,500.00 was made to the Local History Grants Program for a 'travelling exhibition' of a reasonably full set of photographs of Victorian Mechanics' Institutes. The outcome of this application should also be known in November.

In Victoria we are losing valuable heritage buildings, tangible connections to our past!

Library Technicians See a Unique Library

The Melbourne Athenaeum Library played host to a group of student and qualified library technicians on 23 July as part of a "Techs on Tour" event. Delegates started the day at the State Library and after lunch a group chose to visit the Athenaeum to see "the unique features" of a library that has been in existence in Victoria since 1839. It was the first Mechanics' Institute in Victoria and still does not use computers. Still being here is quite unique!

The delegates came from as far afield as Horsham, Murtoa, Ballarat and Geelong. On the tour the librarian explained that the Athenaeum relies on its card system and its very dependable staff who have years of dealing with books and people. Staff know most of the members by name and often younger

members remark on how lovely it is not to see a computer on the premises.

The Athenaeum is vastly different from the libraries most of the Technicians work in but its old-fashioned methods still work and members enjoy its old world courtesy and the modern book collection.

The librarian recounted some of the Library's recent and not so recent stories and a good laugh was had by all. It was a very pleasant visit, one that will probably be repeated next year.

Book Launch at Berwick

MIV committee member Richard Myers has written a history, *Berwick Mechanics' Institute and Free Library*. The book was launched by Alex Tyrrell at the Berwick Institute on Sunday 12 September. Alex spoke of the quality of Richard's research and the physical beauty of the book including the excellent photographic illustrations. One gem of information is that the land on which the BMI stands was donated by the local publican on a 999-year lease!

It is a most comprehensive history which is published as a hardback by Berwick Mechanics' Institute and Free Library. The book is also available from them. Cost is \$35.00. Congratulations to Richard on his fine achievement. Are there any other historians of their local Mechanics' Institute out there? Richard would be happy to give you the benefit of his experience.

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Activities at Kilmore

KMI has no building but is a very active Institute.

At the end of June the KMI held its 3rd Celtic Festival. Sunshine, music, workshops, the Guinness tent, food stalls and a Celtic market all contributed to its success. The Dr. Andrew Nash Memorial Medical Lecture, "Living with Asthma" was held at the Kilmore hospital in September and it was appreciated by those who attended. "The Boer War", an exhibition funded through the KMI's George Hudson awards, opened in late October and on the same weekend we were joined by Alan Reid of the Gould League for a morning lecture and a walk on Monument Hill where the tower which commemorates the journey of Hume and Hovell stands. The birds were out in force.

We are looking forward to the Kilmore Open Gardens on 21 November and the re-opening of the refurbished Hume and Hovell Monument on 10 December. The John Taylor lecture and seminar on 11 December will be concerned with the recreational lands surrounding the monument.

More History at Leongatha

John Murphy of the Leongatha Mechanics' Institute has written a number of booklets for the Woorayl Shire Historical Society. The Introduction to *Leongatha Mechanics' Institute and Free Library 1891 - 1991* gives a beautiful

outline of the Scottish origins of the Mechanics' Institutes and their transplantation to the Australian colonies.

John has suggested that brief histories are an excellent way to make local history known and to raise a few dollars for organisations.

Lectures at Prahran

The lectures sponsored by the Prahran Institute are well known. In June, under the title "The Diggers Wedding", Jim Badger of the State Library of Victoria spoke about the 1850s celebrations held in Melbourne by successful diggers returning from the goldfields. His paper is available at the library. In October Chief Inspector Ralph Stavely of the Victoria Police delivered a lecture based on his experiences with the Prahran Police Force and the C.I.B. as well as his research into the history of police bravery. The Living History Group of the Police Historical Society Inc. exhibited early artefacts, uniforms, badges and photos in conjunction with the lecture.

Prahran has also received a generous gift in the form of a donation of some 800 books from the library of the late Dr. John Barrett who was a Reader in History at La Trobe University and the author of *That Better Country*, *Falling In* and *We Were There*.

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Response to Press Release on MIV

Many newspapers throughout country Victoria and the metropolitan area carried stories in June and July about Mechanics' Institutes. This was a result of a widely-distributed press release from MIV. We are pleased that the newspaper articles elicited numerous responses.

One was a delightful letter from Mrs Olive Penno, Chairperson of the Taradale Historical Group Inc. She wrote:

"... we have a small, quaint brick building here on High St (the Calder Highway) - our own Mechanics' Institute. As a child in the 1930s I can well remember this building serving as a library in a room on the left from a small porchway and a free reading room on the right-hand side where the daily papers were there to read. About the 1940s the books were given to the Castlemaine Benevolent Home and there were no longer papers in the Reading Room. However this building continued to be used and is still in use today. Over the years it was used for meetings by various organisations, Municipal council elections as a Polling Booth etc..."

Thanks to Mrs Penno for her letter.

We were also contacted by the following people associated with or interested in their local Mechanics' Institute:

Trudy McColl of Lower Tarwin
Brian Chirgwin of Elmore
Garth Foxwell of Arthurs Creek

Lyn Wilson of Warrnambool City Council.
They are all on our mailing list now.

Contact Point

Apollo Bay. Nerida Rink is fighting to save the Apollo Bay Mechanics' Institute and is preparing a history of it. Tel. 5237 6981

Bright. Agnes O'Donnell is engaged in a more or less single-handed battle to save the Bright Mechanics' Institute.

Castlemaine. Robin Annear has written a book on the Castlemaine library in her attempt to save the building. Contact: Friends of the Castlemaine Library, Booker St., Castlemaine, 3450.

Doncaster Athenaeum. It appears that the Doncaster building has been sold and it faces demolition.

Lakes Entrance. We have heard that Lakes Entrance has lost its building. This is not a happy situation, but take heart, the KMI has discovered that there is live after demolition.

Maryborough. The library building was purchased locally some years ago. The library is to move in 12 months time but the fate of the building is unknown. Contact: Central Goldfields Shire, Wayne Belcher, 5461 0610.

Mildura. The library has been moved out of the building. No more is known

Sorrento. The local historical society saved their Mechanics' Institute building and use it as a museum and

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gallery. Contact: Nepean Historical Society, 5984 0255.

Wangaratta. Plans to use the building as a tourist information centre have fallen through because there is a lack of parking space. Contact: Rural City of Wangaratta, Wayne Stafford, 5722 0888

Warburton. WIN! Warburton Mechanics' Institute is also now on the National Heritage Register along with the Melbourne Athenaeum, Lilydale Mechanics' Athenaeum and others which we will list in a later newsletter. 'The Warburton Mechanics' Institute has strong historic and social value for the community as the Institute served as a meeting-place and social gathering place from 1897 until 1992. The Institute is symbolic of the value of collective endeavour, being a building constructed by and for the community.' There is more information on the Register of the National Estate Database. Sue Mann is researching its history. Contact: PO Box 256, Warburton, 3799.

Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts.
A heritage listing saved this important building. It is next to the Hilton Hotel in Pitt Street and although the interior will be lost the exterior will be retained and the murals restored.

The Contact Page will always be pleased to hear from you about matters of interest to your Institute. A few lines from you about your activities, hopes, fears or wins will help keep this section lively. Questions, answers to published questions and responses to positions taken will all be welcome. Perhaps someone will be moved to contribute a longer article at some time. Please address such correspondence to The Secretary and mark your envelope NEWSLETTER.
Thanks!

Web Sites of Interest

MIV (Mechanics' Institutes of Victoria)
<http://www.vicnet.net.au/~mivic>

RNE (Register of the National Estate Database)
<http://www.environment.gov.au/heritage/register/>

Membership

A Membership Registration is attached and both corporate and individual memberships have been set at \$10.00. We would be very glad to have you join with us.