

Building the Snowy Scheme – A multi-cultural experience

Leaflet from: Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Authority.

When the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Authority was established in 1949, there was a serious national shortage of skilled personnel, equipment and construction materials, as a legacy of World War 2.

This shortage led to an intensive recruitment campaign overseas which, together with the Commonwealth Government's Immigration Scheme, resulted in two-thirds of the personnel employed on the Snowy being 'new' Australians. Their integration into the small local communities of the Scheme has been a very important and successful venture.

Many newcomers were escaping the privations of war-torn Europe and were eager to start a new life in a new land. They brought with them a commitment and resolve that was to prove a major factor in the creation of what was to become Australia's greatest engineering wonder.

The Scheme's first major contractor brought most of his supervisors and workmen from Norway. In 1950-51 the Authority recruited engineers, technical staff, tradesmen and other skilled workers from West Germany. These were followed by others from the British Isles and Central Europe. In later years most of the employees came from Italy.

Together they made up a polyglot 'army' of tenacious workers under the command of an inspirational New Zealander, the Authority's first Commissioner, Sir William Hudson.

The rapid progress in the construction of the Scheme and its part in the development of Australia was due in no small measure to the valuable contribution made by them at all levels in the Authority's work forces.

A large proportion of the Snowy Scheme's requirements for tradesmen, in practically all of the ordinary trades, were supplied by the employment of overseas tradesmen. Many were specially trained on the Scheme to Australian standards of trade recognition and in the English language.

Migrants other than tradespeople did a fine job in the tunnelling crews, building huge dams, underground and surface power stations, high voltage transmission across the mountains and camps and 600 km of roads through previously inaccessible country.

It is certain that without the skills brought by workers from over 30 countries, the high rate of progress on the construction of the Snowy Scheme would never have been achieved.

The Authority assisted the assimilation of these people into the community by providing help to form sporting, camera and chess clubs and many others - which they were encouraged to join.

An International Club was formed in Cooma which proved very popular with the wider community.

The Authority conducted free English classes in all its camps and townships. These were conducted under the supervision of the Department of Education.

A branch of the Good Neighbour Council was formed in Cooma which provided a valuable asset in the assimilation of newcomers into the community.

These initiatives helped the migrant population adapt to the Australian way of life.

Well-attended naturalisation ceremonies were

arranged by the Authority, local Shires and Councils in co-operation with the Department of Immigration at Cooma, Khancoban and other Authority camps and towns.

As a result of these activities our new Australians worked closely with other members of the community to develop social, business and community life in the Snowy area.

It can be truthfully said that the harmonious assimilation of these families into the Australian environment in Cooma and regional townships was as good as, if not better, than any other area in Australia. It is generally accepted that the pioneering spirit that was generated by the multicultural work force throughout the construction of the Snowy Scheme contributed in a major way to its success.