



**HOME:** May, Ron and Jack Williams outside their hessian home in Bag Town, on the river flats north of Merbein is about 1938.

# 'Bag Town' was home for many

By Chris McLennan

SOME of those returning to Merbein's centenary celebrations this week will have lived in what came to be known as "Bag Town".

With some optimistic pundits already predicting an end to the 21st century's first global economic crisis, it is worth remembering the real and terrible sufferings of people during the Great Depression immediately before World War II.

Almost one out of every three people was out of work in the Merbein area during the 1930s.

Things were so bad that temporary homes, mostly made of hessian type material, were built along the Merbein river bank,

stretching from the Mad Mile (Ranfurly Way) to the Abbotsford Bridge.

Hessian was a fairly cheap and common material in the district, often used to dry grapes.

This collection of temporary homes, housing many families and itinerant workers, became known, locally, as "Bag Town".

In those days, there was no or very little public housing in Merbein and the irrigation settlement, founded in 1909, was still in its infancy.

Hemp – similar to hessian, but stronger and of a larger ply was used along with wheat or flour sacks, which were opened out and then sewn together using a bag needle and twine. This bag

cladding was often white washed to make it weather proof.

Local histories said the butcher and the baker delivered supplies to "Bag Town" residents, who walked or rode a bike up to the Merbein Township for other needs. Some families kept goats for milk. Fish were caught in nets and Murray Crays, which were quite common in the 1930s, supplemented their diets.

With the outbreak of World War II, some residents left "Bag Town" and joined the army, while others were pressured to move to public housing being built in Merbein.

The rest simply moved on, ending a colourful era in Merbein's social history.

## 100th will be remembered

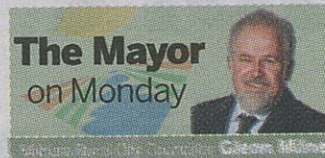
THE weekend marked the beginning of a wonderful week of celebrations for one of our region's most vibrant communities – Merbein.

This year marks the town's 100th birthday and it is fitting that a range of exciting activities and events has been planned to commemorate this special occasion.

Already scores of locals and past residents have gathered for the official opening, a concert, centenary market and the Settlers' Picnic.

These fantastic events saw people of all ages share memories and tales from times gone by and provided an opportunity to look ahead towards an exciting future for the town.

The dedicated team of vol-



unteers who have been working tirelessly for some time to plan and organise the centenary celebrations are to be commended.

Not only have they coordinated a range of activities that the whole community can get involved in, they have paid tribute to the town's heritage.

I encourage locals to take advantage of the opportunity to learn more about the history of Merbein over the coming week.

Particularly interesting is the photographic display of ex-servicemen from the Merbein region

which is on show at the RSL Hall and the Merbein and District Historical Society has collected a huge display of historical images of the town over the past 100 years.

This display can be viewed at the society's rooms.

A range of blacksmith's tools and equipment from times gone by has also been collected as part of the centenary celebrations and is on display at Cuppers.

The street parade this Friday will also no doubt pay homage to the Merbein of yesteryear and is sure to be a popular community attraction.

I encourage everyone to get involved in the Merbein Centenary celebrations and am sure that the occasion will be remembered for years to come.