

Merbein is merry for its centenary

Two years after Merbein was founded in 1909, the settlers organised a picnic day by the Murray river. So successful were the get-togethers — in 1922 it attracted 6500 people — they were repeated almost every year until 1955.

Since then, Merbein, which overlooks the red gum and black-box flats near Mildura, has fallen into tough times.

About 25 per cent of the town's 36 shops are empty, and the town — at the heart of the area's irrigation district — no longer has a hardware store or packing plant for its dried fruit.

But now, determined to revive the town's spirits, the locals are again planning a river picnic to celebrate the town's centenary.

During 10 days of celebrations from August 14 to 23, there will be a variety of other events and displays, including a street parade, concert, film nights, historical walks, an old time bush dance, CSIRO laboratory open days and more.

"The centenary has given the community something to think about — some hope and pride — when things have been difficult economically," says Bernadette Wells, who is on the centenary organising committee and is the local historian. "The centenary office is now in one of those shops that was closed. It wasn't the aim of the celebrations to lift everyone's spirits, but it's definitely been one of the spin-offs."

Bernadette says the town was first established as a "model colony and

Tough times aren't going to stop the Merbein community from marking 100 years, as **Sarah Hudson** writes



Bernadette Wells

irrigation settlement".

"Originally it was meant to be a dairy settlement. But of course the cows didn't like the heat and refrigeration wasn't great.

"So it switched quite quickly to dried fruit. It was close to the river,



In times gone by: at Merbein, irrigation water was initially delivered in channels and distributed to plants in furrows.

close to Mildura and the new railway.

"By the end of 1909 the irrigation pumps were ready. By 1910, the first fruit was ready to go by railway."

At its peak, Bernadette says, the town produced and packed about 30,000 tonnes of dried fruit.

Today it's about nine tonnes.

She says the centenary celebration, three years in the planning, was originally going to be low key, but it has just ballooned. "It's gone from a small parade to a giant one with 60 floats that will include about 600

school children and we're now having a big fire works spectacular. The whole community is involved."

● **Settlers picnic, Kenny Park, August 16, noon-5pm. For full details of the celebrations, visit merbeincentenary.com.au**