

# Webber's Point 1862 - 1865

## Dancing saloons and women of ill repute

The initial rush to Donnelly's Creek in 1862 brought an immediate population of about 1200 with numerous stores, shanties and dancing saloons in three distinct centres known as Morning Star (Tullamore), Webber's Point and Store Point.



Early storekeepers at or near Webber's Point included Samuel Webber, Slack & Moss whose business operated under the name of 'The Victoria Store and Post Office', Mark Rice's store and a brewery. Webber's store or saloon at Webber's Point was the first permanent building at Donnelly's Creek. It was of slab construction with a sawn timber floor cut from local material. Some of The Creek's liveliest moments of the early days occurred at Webber's saloon, either at this site or at Store Point where, in 1864, he was listed as licensee of the Mount Useful Hotel. Miners keen to spend some of their new wealth came to the saloons to celebrate, socialise and be entertained. Shanty-keepers of Donnelly's Creek advertised in Melbourne for female staff positions at their 'hotels'. A correspondent to The Gippsland Times in 1862 described the new arrivals: "I can assure you sir, the greater, number of the women who arrive here are as bad as they can be before they come, and know well what is expected from them. There have been very few instances of young women of a respectable class being brought up here." The women were initially offered honest work as housekeepers or barmaids but in reality the prime reason for their arrival was for the entertainment of miners. However; many came with an alternative mission – to seek out, seduce, and marry a wealthy miner. Several respectable Gippsland families had their origins in the bars and dancing saloons of Donnelly's Creek.

Athletic sports days were always popular with the mountain folk of Donnelly's Creek. One Christmas during the early days saw a large number of visitors gather for a bumper day of athletic competition and well publicised wild-bull fight. Richard Mackay was present that day and elaborated on the scene:

*"Bob Mann's brewery was decorated with flags. Barney Walker had his big room fitted with tables and forms, for the use of such of the fair sex as might prefer tea, coffee and light refreshments to the strong potatoes. Webber's dancing hall was festooned; walls and ceilings, with Chinese lanterns, all ready to brighten up when day kissed night. The trades were all at the fete. They had laid aside their tools of the trade, and laughed and chatted in their mixed dialects of French and German and English, and drank each other's health in pewters with Bob Mann's beer. Pat O'Brien and his bosom friend Jimmy Rice were there, and Bob Keelan and Kerrie Tim, and Dan McLaughlan, and Oldie Cullen and Pat O'Toole, and scores of others from up and down the rivers for 40 miles. There had never been such a day under the shadow of Mt. Useful, and it's altogether unlikely there will again be another. The entire population seemed bent on enjoying themselves, whilst guarding against excess, and for a gala day in the hills I never saw less drinking. The different events – running, wrestling, stone putting, caber tossing and jumping- were all got through without a hitch, and as the day was declining, those who had come to see the bull fight became uneasy and quarrelsome, because the animals didn't appear. The organisers had not been able to procure any wild beasts. Two of the most influential men on the creek, James Rice and Pat O'Brien reasoned that there was no animal who could be compared with a prize bull recently purchased by James Brown for £300. After all had positioned themselves in the safest possible position, Brown's fearsome animal appeared from behind a clump of scrub, with a blue ribbon around its neck, a string of pannikins (small tin cup) hung from his shoulder, and his tail decorated with green ribbon. Jimmy Brown, the owner, leading him with a ring in his nose, and followed by a whole pack of nondescript dogs. Silence which preceded this entry was succeeded by roars – some of laughter, but a great many angry and threatening. The good humour of the day disappeared and there were fears the situation would become uncontrollable. At this time the darkness began to set in and an orchestra diverted the heat of the moment with music, to which the crowd responded with song as they resumed festivities in Webber's Saloon."*

Source:

Luke Steenhuis, 2006, Ghost Towns of the Mountain Goldfields; Luke Steenhuis, 2001, Donnelly's Creek – From Rush to Ruin of a Gippsland Mountain Goldfield (Re-published by Rudi Paoletti); Rudi Paoletti, 2000, Recollections of Early Gippsland Goldfields.