



Just over one hundred years ago the first plans toward sourcing water from Rocky Creek began, the area proclaimed a water reserve in 1891.

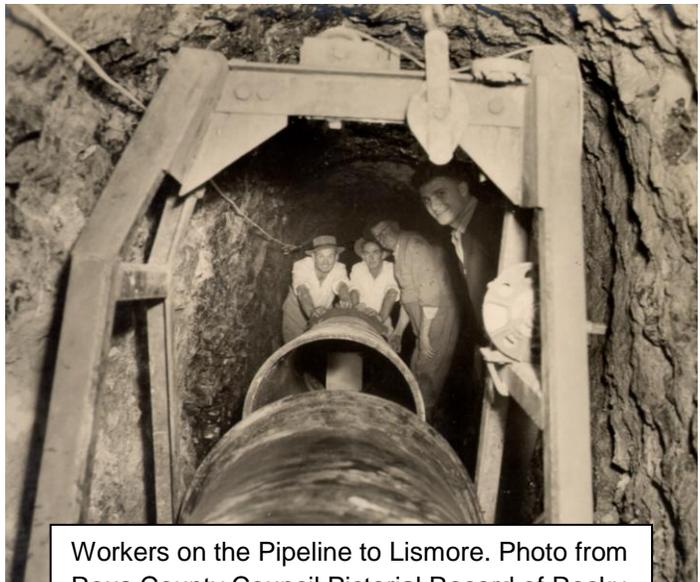
Dr J J Doyle, the then Bishop of Lismore, was an early advocate for the Rocky Creek site. It is said he “knew the configuration of the country having made his first trip over the old Nightcap Road to the Tweed in 1878.”

A story from Stan Thomas of Mullumbimby (documented in 1977) says they arrived at Bullfrog Creek in July 1906. Their property comprised 114 acres grass, 121 acres scrubland, and 40 acres forest and bordered the Old Tweed Road, Rocky Creek, and the present road to the spillway area, and there was “a fence between us and a small farm adjoining the Whian State Forest.”

Stan married in 1930, remaining at the homestead until around 1950 when “the County Council repossessed the farm.”

He tells the story of neighbour, Mr Chittock, who decided to put a bridge over Rocky Creek. “He hired a bullock team and had two very long trees pulled across at a narrow place. Before the decking was on the bridge we had another flood which carried the logs downstream. A little further down the creek was a 90 degree left-hand bend in the creek and the logs lodged there. Next time I saw him I said: ‘You lost your bridge, Christie.’ He said dryly: ‘No, I never lost it, I know where it is.’”

Stan says six other farms were “lost to production”, much of which is now covered with water. A small sawmill located on the dam site was also acquisitioned. Stan maintains that “Although the dam ... is called Rocky Creek Dam, the locality is known as Bullfrog Creek.”



Workers on the Pipeline to Lismore. Photo from Rous County Council Pictorial Record of Rocky Creek Dam, 1949-1953.

According to documents from Rous County Council: “In 1937 the Lismore City Council arranged for a firm of consulting engineers to carry out an investigation of the proposal” to dam Rocky Creek. Deemed favourable, extensive surveys were undertaken.

Rous County Council was constituted in 1940 and authorised by State government to investigate a scheme to supply water to Lismore, Byron, Bangalow, Evans Head, Woodburn, Broadwater and Coraki.

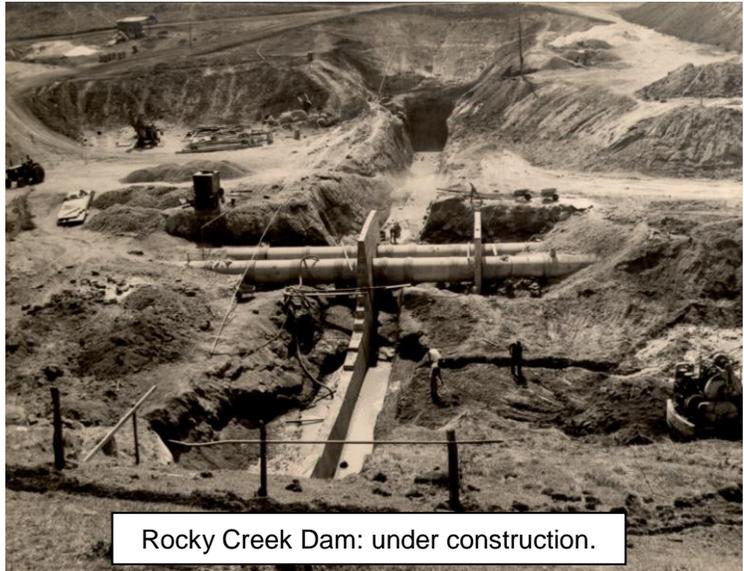
The dam, originally designed as a concrete multiple arch dam, was put on hold when World War II intervened. By the end of the 40's engineers, influenced by labour costs and material shortages, changed it to an earth dam design. Dayal Singh won the contract and construction began in 1949.

Lismore City Councillor, Mr John Crowther, worked on clearing the site and on the water mains to Lismore (built con-current to the pipeline to Byron.)

All vegetable matter was removed from the dam storage area, believed as it was that this would lessen debris flowing through the pipes. According to John, a lot of good mill-timber was obtained and the rest was burnt.

John says we “need to develop a consciousness of forest matters more than we have at the current time.” He says Whian Whian lends itself to being a showcase because of the regeneration and regrowth by forestry and regrowth.

John has some great stories to tell from his experiences working on-site. One in a clearing episode. It was not cleared all the way when there was a cyclonic storm and it filled up overnight (from the west end, to north of Rocky Creek arm). He'd bought a couple of old 6-cylinder 1916 model Buick frames for 10 pound and they were flooded over also. He says they're still in there today, though he doubts there'd be much left of them.



Rocky Creek Dam: under construction.

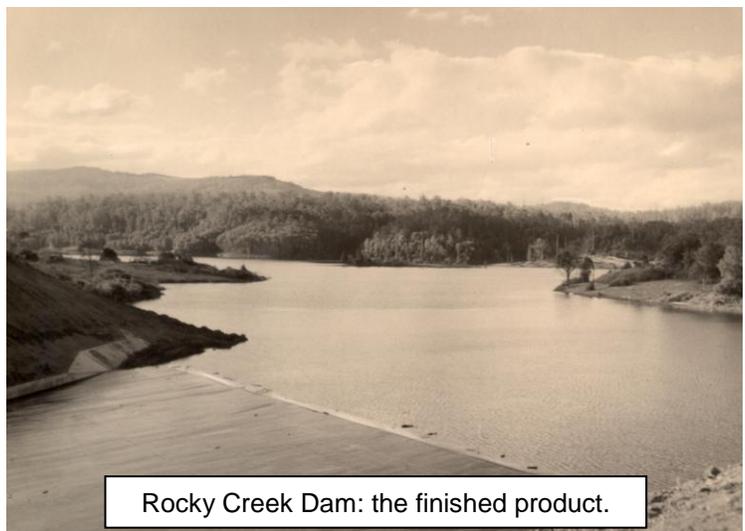
He also tells me of a wall construction drama when, on Friday night, his boss Norm Hepburn rang him up. It was pelting with rain. He got a call from Dayal Singh saying it looks like the coffer dam (temporary holding dam) is going to be breached. The contractors were all on the grog so Norm and he went and worked the bulldozers to lift the walls up.

Prior to construction, water supply to Lismore was obtained by pumping from Wilson's Creek (untreated) into tanks for reticulation.

Rocky Creek was well known for its “beautiful water”.

Construction of the Dam to supply water to Lismore, Byron, Bangalow, Evans Head, Woodburn, Broadwater and Coraki began in 1949.

Over 61 miles of pipeline was laid during construction. Lismore City Councillor, Mr John Crowther, who worked on-site and on the water mains to Lismore, has a funny story to tell about the laying of pipes.



Rocky Creek Dam: the finished product.

The dramatic event took place in the area between Corndale Butter Factory and the Hall. The laying of pipeline along the Corndale flats was done in segments welded together on-site, and placed on timber

supports over a dug trench. John says the line was in the trench, but hadn't yet been backfilled, when there was a flood. According to him the pipe "floated out around the countryside a bit." It was, he says, not convenient.

Another story relating to the pipeline was featured in *The Northern Star* (20/11/53). A truck driver failed to negotiate a turn 5 miles from Lismore, along Bangalow Road, and crashed down a 6ft embankment and rolled over. "The truck landed on a Rocky Creek water supply steel pipe. It was extensively damaged, but Stephens was unhurt."

On 19th November 1953, demands on reticulated water in Lismore reached their highest recorded amount ever. Mr Murray, the city engineer, announced that "four and a quarter million gallons of water were consumed in Lismore on Tuesday." Pumps that generally operated in two eight-hour shifts were now working 24 hours a day to maintain reservoir levels, a new pump not expected until May. The increase in consumption is a result of larger mains pipes and improved services. "People are now able to secure all the water they need" he says, "whereas before many were short of it and at times, without."

"I think people should cut out all waste of water and endeavour to restrict the use to necessitous gardening," he said. Water restrictions were imposed and had to be policed when resident gardeners were found not obeying the restrictions.

On the 20th November, the official opening of Rocky Creek Dam was announced.

Although the Boomerang Creek area was proclaimed a water reserve back in 1891, it was many years before a water supply scheme was established.

In 1945, a newspaper report stated that the Rocky Creek scheme "had been given No. 1 priority and it was anticipated by the County Council that the work of construction would commence soon after the conclusion of the war."

Work began in 1949, and the official opening of the Rocky Creek water scheme by the Premier of NSW, Mr Cahill, took place on November 19th 1953.

At that time the region was dry, and reports in *The Northern Star* declared that "with the worsening of the drought more and more wild animals, such as dingoes, kangaroos and wallabies, are clustering around waterholes." The animals were presumed to be not only thirsty, but also driven from the scrub country by fires.

Farmers and graziers around Bonalbo were kept busy pulling their cattle out of boggy waterholes. According to an article, over 100 farmers in the drought stricken "'back' country of Lismore" applied for drought relief.

It is no small irony of nature that when the official opening took place "water was not coming through the pipeline" (which had "burst under testing") and would not be available until "next Thursday".

Bangalow was the first centre to receive water through the new scheme. It was believed the dam would solve the problem of supplying fresh drinking water throughout the region.

However, this was not necessarily the case. John Crowther, who worked on the dam site and on the pipeline to Lismore, said that water that was "beautiful" in the creek became "rotten" in the dam until the new water treatment plant was commissioned.

Brochures from Rous County Council, constituted in 1940 to investigate this scheme, promoted clearing vegetation from the dam site to ensure a “pure water supply” with “no filtration needed.” The red soil and rainforest of the catchment area is said to “result in high seasonal iron and dissolved organic material in the water supply, which can detract from the aesthetic quality of the water.”

A story featured in “Lismore Happenings” in 1990 says: “the dam which had been built to service 25,000 people was now serving double that amount. Hence, in 1984 the water was chlorinated to remove bacteria, and an aerator was added to spread the iron colouring more evenly in times of drought.”

In 1987 Rous County Council trialled the dissolved air flotation (DAF) process at a pilot plant adjacent to the dam. This proved successful and construction began, with the new Nightcap Water Treatment Plant opened in April 1992.

Paul O’Sullivan, General Manager of Rous Water, says that back in the 1940’s they were “looking at the whole of the area [which] has proven to be a very effective water supply for the region.” He says: “until the late 70’s when second pipelines were constructed, all works were done without subsidy on borrowed funds—until the 80’s when they worked out an arrangement with Ballina Shire, and debt was dissolved.”

Ballina, at the time, was considering building a dam, but in true regional resource sharing style of the shires, Ballina connected with Rocky Creek water supply in 1988.

A site west of Dunoon on Rocky Creek, between Dunoon and The Channon, was designated for a new potential dam site in 1996. Paul says that local council has put restraints on property surrounds and is active on an acquisition basis.

He says construction is not planned for another 20 years, but “we will need a dam in the future”. The Toonumbar Dam at Kyogle, which is owned by state government, was considered as an option for future water supply in the 90’s. It is of similar size to Rocky Creek and will be kept under review.

According to the brochure, Rocky Creek Dam is “on the rugged Nightcap Range ... at the southern extremity of the Mt Warning Caldera. This caldera was formed by large volcanic eruptions some 20 million years ago, and is primarily responsible for the spectacular landscape, high rainfall, and birdlife now evident in the Rocky Creek Dam area.”



Thank you to the Richmond River Historical Society, Rous Water, John Crowther, and the SCU library archives.

Information Source: *The Village Journal* July 2001



From left back: Pennyfather, Birmingham, Everingham, Fischer, Ronan.
Front: McGregor, Herridge, Everran, Gressell, Clark, Martin.