

ADELONG YARN – By Stephanie Jackson

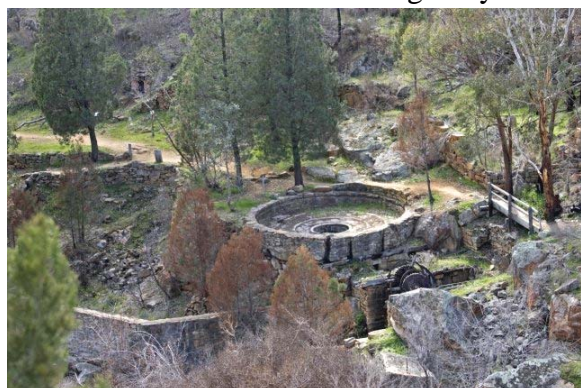
A journey through the historic village of Adelong, NSW, Australia

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Damn and blast – or something infinitely more colourful – were the words I spurted out in frustration when bad weather and subsequent road closures forced a change to my route through the NSW Snowy Mountains. The fascinating places I had dreamed of visiting had become inaccessible, and I had no option other than to take an alternative route, one that would pass through Tumut, a town that, I thought, as another version of damn and blast singed the cool winter air, was not where I wanted to be. But my mutterings of disappointment were obliterated shortly after my arrival, for the Tumut River with its avenue of gnarled and ancient trees, the extensive parklands that border the town, and a collection of elegant 19th century buildings have created a town with a pleasant blend of urban and rural landscapes. Even Tumut’s most unusual tourist attraction, the broom factory, where millet brooms have been made by hand for more than 60 years, and that I was confident would offer an experience as boring as watching hair grow on a peach, proved to be a pleasant surprise as workers revealed the fascinating story of an old and dying trade.



It was the nearby village of Adelong however, that was exactly what I was looking for. It’s small, it’s quiet, it’s full of the hospitable and friendly people for which Australian country towns are justifiably famous, and there was enough to see and do to make a visit well worthwhile.

Explorers Hume and Hovell, the first Europeans to pass through the area, had plenty of yarns to tell when they returned to Sydney in 1825. But their comment that it was “rough and difficult country” did little to encourage settlement in the region, and by the 1840s, only a few hardy settlers had taken up land in the area. They were probably happy to chat to any stranger who passed by and who brought news of the world that, for pioneers, seemed a million miles away, and those who call Adelong home today still have time to tell a yarn or two.

My first yarn was with the jovial caretaker of the caravan park that sits on the banks of Adelong Creek, and the main topic of conversation quickly turned to gold, for it had been this glittering treasure that eventually brought men flocking to the area. The discovery of substantial quantities of alluvial gold at Adelong Creek in 1852 triggered a gold rush that was more of a dawdle. But in 1857, when huge quantities of gold were found at Victoria Hill, the dawdle became a frenzy, and as thousands of men converged on the area, the village of Adelong was born.

As the early morning sun brought its own glint of gold to Victoria Hill that rises beside the caravan park, I headed off along the ‘Cultural Trail’ that follows the creek’s meandering route, and that leads to the old goldfields that the park’s caretaker said were only a five minute stroll away and could only be reached on foot.

But after 10 minutes, the only relic of the past that I discovered – other than overgrown mullock heaps - was ‘Farmer Blogs’, an old codger who appeared as ancient as the hills, and who was working in his paddock with a wheelbarrow salvaged from antiquity. I responded to his mumbled and incomprehensible greeting with a bright and cheerful ‘G’day’, but when I asked about the mining area, he gruffly replied, “You’re wasting your time, luv. There’s nothing there worth seeing, and it’s a bloody long walk to see nothing.”

Locals, I thought, must know what they are talking about, so I abandoned my excursion, and headed back the way I had come.

As I strolled along the narrow swaying suspension bridge that crosses the creek and connects the caravan park to the heart of the village, breakfast was foremost on my mind. ‘Farmer Blogs’ was not a man who was eager to talk to strangers, but when I stepped into the Swinging Bridge Café, it immediately became obvious that other residents of Adelong were more outgoing.

The owner, as she served me a bowl of steaming hot home-made soup that was more like a thick stew, rambled on with passion about the village. A walk around its streets, she said, would reveal a mixture of old and new houses scattered among ornate 19th century buildings that include the Catholic church, the courthouse, the school, and an elegant building of sandstone bricks and cast iron lacework that had once been a bank.

The scars of the economic decline that has threatened the survival of many small rural towns are conspicuously evident in Adelong’s main street where National Trust listed buildings stand beside abandoned shops and derelict cottages. But with regional prosperity boosted by a paper mill established nearby, the future of the village is looking bright once again, according to the owner of the newsagency who chatted as I checked my e-mail on what must be one of the slowest computers I’ve used in a long while. But slow and sleepy is the normal pace of life in Adelong.

I wasn’t expecting another conversation as I stopped outside the old Adelsonia Theatre to take a few photos, but when a stranger invited me to come inside, I couldn’t refuse. Although it’s a building that has minimal architectural merit, it’s one, my new friend insisted, of which the local community is intensely proud, for they saved it from demolition and gave it a new role as the venue for anything that passes as entertainment in Adelong.

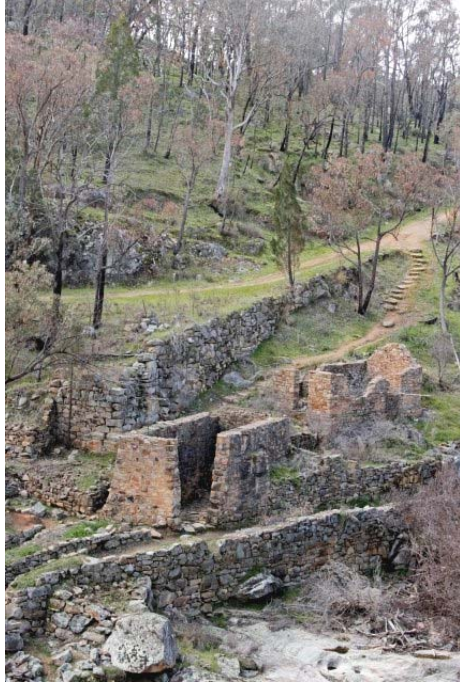
No one pleaded with me to go into the nearby red brick building constructed in 1877 and that once housed the village pharmacy, but as someone who suffers from a sweet tooth, I just couldn’t help myself. But with Sweet Prescriptions, the village sweet shop, offering remedies that included liquorice comfits, Pontefract cakes, jelly babies, jelly rats, chocolate ginger, and fudge, my affliction was easily cured.

I left with enough sweets to make a dentist cringe in despair, and literally bumped into the official unofficial mayor of Adelong. It’s a title that locals have bestowed on Jason Sullivan, for he does his two bob’s worth, or more, on the committee of every organisation that gets things done in the village.

“That’s my house,” he said, pointing up the road as our conversation came to an end. “It’s always open house at my place, so when you’ve got time, come and have a cup of coffee and some lunch.” I accepted his hospitable offer, and listened as he chattered passionately about the village and its history in which gold played a pivotal role. But when he asked if I had been out to the old goldfields, I didn’t mention that I had been told it was nothing to crow about, and merely mumbled, with a smudge of embarrassment, “No, not yet”.

It was, he insisted, an attraction not to be missed, and as I muttered a white lie that I didn’t have time for the long walk, he blurted out in amazement, “but it’s only a few minutes away by car!” First, he insisted, I would have to visit the museum, and as the official unofficial mayor, he had the key to the building. Although it housed only a small and unimpressive collection of memorabilia and photographs, this, together with his worship the mayor’s commentary, provided a brief insight into what I would discover at the goldfields at the Adelong Falls Reserve.

It was there, on the banks of Adelong Creek, that thousands of men with dreams of untold riches had set up their tents, and by 1860, the population of the village had soared to more than 20,000. Some men had worked beside the creek; others had toiled in mines such as the Gibraltar that, at its peak, employed 450 men who excavated ore in the 400 metre long tunnels that speared into the heart of the mountains.



The goldfields are less than two kilometres from the main street of Adelong, and on my early morning walk, despite what ‘Farmer Blogs’ had said, I had been only 200 metres from the site. His perception that there was nothing to see was way off the mark too, for here, as I made my way down the long flight of steps that lead to the creek, a diversity of landscapes and varied fragments of history came into view.

When the last of the mines closed in 1915, the miners had countless yarns to tell about their luck, or lack of it, but today it is the ruins that sprawl along the creek’s banks that tell silent tales of the past. The stone walls, the lofty brick chimney, the remains of the gold battery where ore was crushed, and the water wheels that were used to operate the battery, all reveal a fragment of Adelong’s story, for each played an essential role in the extraction and processing of the more than 25 tonnes of gold that were won from the goldfields.

I strolled along the narrow trails along which men drenched in the sweat and dust of their hard labours had strolled before me; I meandered among the ruins that are a memorial to both those who struck it rich and those who battled poverty; and I wandered along the creek’s bank where miners had erected the primitive tents that they called home. But as a gentle breeze muttered past the trickling stream, past rocky pools where bathers cool off on a hot summer’s day, and past the designated fossicking area where modern day treasure hunters pan for gold, I thought, for a moment, that I heard voices from the distant past.

If the ghosts of that golden age, of men whose names remain unknown and whose personal stories were never recorded, were indeed chattering here, I would hardly be surprised, for chattering is a passion common to just about everyone in sleepy Adelong. And in this village where life rolls along at a comfortably slow pace, chattering and having a yarn, even with strangers, is an art that the people of Adelong have perfected.