A plan for irrigating 7,500 acres with water from the proposed dam on Pyke's Creek was put forward in 1906 by the Minister of Water Supply, Mr. Swinhour. The scheme was officially opened in 1912. Several farmers took up blocks for orchards, and grew vegetables while their trees matured. After World War I, O.T. Chadde donated land to a land settlement scheme for Returned soldiers. The water supply was enlarged in 1916 with the completion of the Marama Reservoir on the Warraboeke River. Consistent improvements have been made to the system including increasing storage capacity at each of the reservoirs.

The original channels were formed in earth by horse-drawn scoops followed by men with shovels shaping off. They were unsatisfactory because trenches and blockages were caused by erosion and wood growth. In 1931 work began on the present concrete channels.

By 1929 about two hundred acres of fruit trees were planted in Warraboeke South. The largest orchard was thirty acres, owned by Mr. Thomas. Experienced market gardeners also came into the area and introduced successful farming methods which were copied by locals. Much of the area under lucerne was converted to market gardens at that time.

In the 1920s, Italian immigrants began to settle in the area of South Warraboeke. They leased and later purchased land and irrigation rights. They brought their own skills to the area, though their new homes was a contrast to the poor soils of their native Sicily that could only produce a single crop a year. In Warraboeke the pace was faster and more consistent with three crops down and harvested in rotation during the year. The population of Warraboeke doubled between 1926 and 1931 from 250 people to 450 by the time it had been established with water. Such prosperity helped the early immigrants to sponsor their relatives to emigrate so that a close community developed in the area. It continues to be a unique environment producing much of Melbourne's requirements for fresh vegetables.

Apart from irrigation works, Warraboeke also has roles of early domestic water supply schemes, including the concrete water sewer on Tower Road Mid 205 A, and one of Melbourne's first water supply tanks, now in the MMWB farm.

The Warraboeke area has a tradition of agricultural research beginning with the experiments in breeding programs in crops and stock at Warraboeke Park in the 1880s and leading to the establishment of the State Research Farm in 1912. As one of its first lines of inquiry was in irrigation problems, the research farm may have had considerable input into the success of the Warraboeke irrigation area.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The Rural Water Commission in Warraboeke conducts surveys, provides an educational service, and is a good source for historical material. Ph. 741 2155.


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