

Coonawarra 100 years ago

With the 1996 Coonawarra vintage approaching its conclusion, it is time to revisit the district and see what was happening here 100 years ago in 1886.

Readers will recall that the first vintage of some 1800 gallons (8000 litres) had been made the previous year in The Nursery shed by the Nurseryman, Mr Frederick Wood.

In 1896 the yield would grow to about 6000 gallons (13,200 litres) and be vintaged in the Katnook woolshed.

In February of 1896 an article in The Border Watch read: "Our fruit colony is now well worth a visit from anyone who takes an interest in horticulture, or can enjoy the eating of a good peach or apple.

"I have been shown some handsome samples of both, grown both at Mr Riddoch's nursery and on Mr Darwent's block, and am given to understand that the whole of the peaches

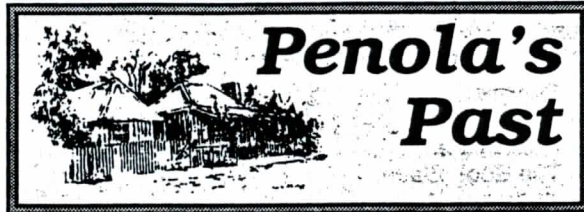
grown at both places have been quitted at good prices for table use.

"The grapes are fast ripening, and very shortly winemaking will be the order of the day under the management of Mr Salter, the manager of Mr Riddoch's winery."

William Salter, the 27-year-old son of Edward and Emily Salter of the Saltram Winery, Angaston, had arrived from Great Western three months earlier with his wife, Edith, and two small daughters.

Remembered as a charming man, thorough, skilful in the winemaking business and possessing an engaging dry wit, he again acted as host in late March, 1896.

The Border Watch reported: "On Thursday last a representative of The Watch had an opportunity of looking over Mr Riddoch's winery at Katnook, the Manager Mr Salter showed him around and



explained the mysteries of winemaking.

"The arrangements, although not on a very large scale, are complete, and meet the requirements of the Penola vineyards at the present time.

"When brought in, the grapes are lifted from the carts onto a stage at the side of the woolshed which is at present being utilised as the winery, and are here put through the crushing press.

"The crushed berries are forced through small holes into a shoot by which they are conveyed into vats in the shed below, where they are allowed to ferment.

"On one side of the room there are five 500 gallon vats in which the berries are allowed to ferment, and on the other side are four of 1000 gallons capacity each, which are now full of the juice of the shiraz, which will turn out claret."

An excellent claret it turned out to be, in the opinion of Dr Ockley, the Chairman of the Penola Agricultural Bureau, who stated, "I

have it on the authority of various experts that the wine produced so far is of the description most desired and saleable to meet the most fastidious palate."

The wine, a blend of approximately two thirds shiraz and one third cabernet, had been produced from a total district crop of some 50 tons of grapes, 20 tons which had been grown in the Riddoch vineyards, managed by John Riddoch's son, Jack, who operated from the office at Katnook.

The remaining 30 tons had been bought from the colonists whose vineyards were coming into production, despite the unwanted attention of light brown apple moths, woolly aphids and curculio beetles.

The foremost of these growers was Joseph Darwent, who had produced four tons of cabernet at seven pounds, 10 shillings per ton and six tons of shiraz at four pounds, 10 shillings per ton.

He was followed by Mr Stoney with four tons, which included some

Mataro and Carrignan, each one pound, 12 shillings and sixpence per ton.

Then three tons each were delivered by Messrs Snelling, W. Lear, Alexander and R. Lear, two tons by Captain Stentiford of Laira, one ton by Messrs Pounsett of Undoolya, and Pavey, and less than one ton by Messrs Richardson, Gordon, Wallace, Neilson, Sharam and Fowler.

The rapidly growing community included 34 children who were in need of a school.

In response to their request, Penola District Council agreed in October to spend 100 pounds for such a building, now the Nib's restaurant, to be erected on one and a half acres of land adjoining the Chinaman's block which had been given by John Riddoch for the purpose.

At the same time, in this atmosphere of general optimism, Riddoch was busy supervising the establishment of another building, that of his new cellars, now Wynn's, which was being constructed by Mr Blight, the contractor, on the western side of the colony close to the railway siding, which was about to become the gateway to the world for the wines of the district for many years to come.