Putting Swan Hill on the Map
Roy Grounds, the People of Swan Hill, and the Pioneer Folk Museum in the 1960s-1970s

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In 1972 artist Robert Ingpen, writing of Swan Hill’s Pioneer Folk Museum, suggested that “seeing how our forebears lived, we discover how they fitted themselves into the new land and established a balance which we must maintain for the sake of future generations.” For fifty years, the Museum has been a key element of the Rural City of Swan Hill’s suit of tourist attractions. Its creation, to a design by Roy Grounds in collaboration with Victorian National Gallery director Eric Westbrook, coincided with both men’s research work on the Victorian Arts Centre in Melbourne. Inspired by Stockholm’s “living Pompeii” of Skansen, its example would go on to inform the creation of numerous historically based “folk villages” around Australia.

This paper uses newspaper reportage and previously unexamined material in the Folk Museum’s archives. It examines the role of the museum within Swan Hill, its creation as a “by-product” of Grounds’ and Westbrook’s (and the people of Swan Hill’s) interest in furthering a founding narrative. It also positions the iconic Folk Museum in the space between Grounds’ fame as a modernist architect of consequence in Australia; the mid-20th century expectation or understanding of pioneer life; and the desire of progressive regional cities such as Swan Hill to make its way in the automobile age as a tourist destination.

**Keywords:** Swan Hill; tourism; Roy Grounds

Swan Hill, a rural city of 10 000 in Victoria’s north west located on the banks of the Murray River, invested in two major tourist attractions in the decades following the Second World War which distinguished it as a beacon of extraordinary initiative and purposeful self-promotion. These differed significantly in form. The first was a wildly successful Shakespeare Festival that brought tens of thousands of Australians to Swan Hill; the second a historically-themed open air museum that harked back to the early days of pioneer colonization and settlement. By the 1960s, the fortunes of both were linked by their economic, cultural and social significance to Swan Hill at a time when car
ownership and domestic travel for leisure in Australia was rapidly expanding. This paper charts the forgotten story of the city’s Folk Museum – later re-named the Pioneer Settlement – which in its early days attracted the serious attention of architect Roy Grounds, among others, as an important site of historic interest in a new era of nationalism.

**From the Shakespeare Festival to the Folk Museum**

The Swan Hill Shakespeare (often referred to as “Shakespearean”) Festival was an informal initiative drawing on the local enthusiasm for amateur theater when it was first established by playwright and director Marjorie McLeod in 1947. McLeod had strong links with the National Theatre movement, which broadly aimed to improve training in theatre and music across Australia and to foster the arts as a key element of national cultural development. The Shakespeare Festival gained official support from the Swan Hill Council in 1950 and was transformed into a yearly extravaganza usually taking place in the first weeks of March. By the mid-1950s it included full plays featuring actors of national (and occasionally international) stature, alongside affiliated sporting, social and artistic events. It was strongly supported by Swan Hill’s business community for its contribution to the local economy through tourism. As the largest Shakespeare Festival in the southern hemisphere, the Festival also gained the patronage of Prime Minister Robert Menzies, and was covered extensively in the local and national press (Darian-Smith, Nichols, Grant forthcoming 2016).

In contrast, the opening of Swan Hill’s Folk Museum (later, Pioneer Settlement), with its centerpiece the iconic river paddle-steam the Gem, turned community attention to the history of the early non-indigenous settlers of the region. While it had many parents, its present form was the brainchild of Council employees Town Clerk Bob Pugsley and Town Engineer Noel Scofield. External direction via Melbourne came from National Gallery of Victoria’s Director Eric Westbrook and architect Roy Grounds. Swan Hill resident and actor Brett Freeman remembers that the impact of the Settlement “turned Swan Hill from a two to a nine motel town in 15 years” (2013). He explained:

Pugsley and Scofield went down to [Melbourne] to see Westbrook and ask him what to do up in Swan Hill, and he was just back from an overseas trip and he said “I have just come back from Europe and a place called Skansen in Norway... a folk Museum”. They said “What’s a Folk Museum?” And that’s what kicked it off (2013).

Freeman is, or Westbrook was, slightly misremembering: Skansen is, in fact, in Sweden. It was described in 1897 as “a living Pompeii.” (Rentzhog 2007, 6). Established by a teacher, Artur Hazelius (1833-1901), in 1873, it challenged the convention of history as “mainly about politics, wars and great men”. As Sten Rentzhog writes:

The great thing about Hazelius’ new museum was that he collected items to do with ordinary people, the cultural development of his own country, from the nobility to the very poorest. It became an enormous success, leading to a democratization of history, and an example to follow in the founding of folklife and ethnographical museums in many other countries (2007, 4-5).

It is unclear when Pugsley and Scofield visited Westbrook, but it may be assumed it was early in the 1960s. Two articles side-by-side in the Swan Hill Guardian – the city’s paper of record and a key
source for this research – on page five of the 27 April 1962 edition, and headed “Easter tourists spend huge sum in Swan Hill” and “Move to buy Gem for Folk Museum”, are surely a strong formative element of the story. It is one of the earliest mentions of the mooted “Folk Museum” but also, notably, shows a shift from purely Shakespeare-oriented attractions in the area.

Certainly the scene was different a year before when the Swan Hill Borough Council agreed in principle to provide land on the city’s northern edge, on Nyah Road, for a “Globe Theatre” (“Move to establish…” 1961). Although there are many suggestions of an ongoing commitment to Shakespeare as a key element of Swan Hill’s tourist strategy, the “folk” theme began to rear its head. In February, Swan Hill celebrated its 125th year as a settlement with a “Back to Swan Hill” event. Arising in the 1920s, “back-to” festivals in country towns welcomed past residents for activities that honoured the pioneers and the “old days” of colonial settlement and recognized the “old-fashioned friendliness” of rural life (Davison 2000: 204).

In 1961, the organizing committee of Swan Hill’s “Back-to” sought a Cobb & Co coach, hansom cab, bullock team and even a camel to join a range of floats in a procession on Monday morning. An arts ball, re-union picnic, photographic exhibition, gymkhana and cricket match were all enacted in the subsequent week for this “important and historical occasion for the district”. The “Shakespearian festival” was incorporated as part of the “Back-to,” and thereby continued to be consolidated as a key event in Swan Hill’s annual festivities (“Colourful procession”, 1961).

By April 1962, the idea of a “folk museum” had become a key initiative of the Swan Hill Historical Society. Calls were made for artifacts in the Swan Hill Guardian, and the Society was determined to track their provenance diligently: “It is important to obtain the full history of each item, such as date of manufacture and maker’s name, purpose of use and by whom used…” (“Material Wanted”, 1962).

Things quickly converged, no doubt spurred on by what appears to have been fruitful cooperation between city employees and private citizens. An array of items were donated, including a “solid wooden wheeled log jinker… in good repair”; “pioneer farm implements including a Mallee roller, or rope making machine” and a “collection of mounted, stuffed birds of this district” (“Donations of items…”, 1962). However the focus of the collection was to be the paddle- steamer, the Gem. Constructed in 1876, and then substantially lengthened in 1888, the vessel had ceased active use in 1952 and was a tangible reminded of Swan Hill’s initial raison d’etre as an inland port.

A section of land to the immediate north of Swan Hill’s centre was set aside the planned folk museum (the city’s administration and retail heart effectively converges on the Murray River flatlands, with all suburbs and industry to the south, east and west). The swimming pool, picnic grounds and caravan park were all nearby, and this area had long been a place for community and recreation space.

**Roy Grounds at Swan Hill**

The Gem was already a key element of the Folk Museum when Eric Westbrook visited Swan Hill in February 1963. He advised the Swan Hill Guardian that:
The next stage is to advise on two aspects of the general layout of the whole scheme, and the special problems of the conversion of the Gem for a theatre, art gallery and display purposes.

One of the most important problems that will face any architect engaged in the second aspect of the scheme and in one general design of the museum will be to retain the character of the Gem, otherwise future generations would not know how this once beautiful vessel looked during the time of its working life on the Murray.

I say this because we have now reached the stage in our national history when people seem too easy to forget what our forebears faced in the tremendous task of conquering a new and often hostile country. Only through the folk museum will future generations see the actual means by which much of this was achieved. ("Museum project", 1963)

Roy Grounds also enters the picture at approximately this point. The early 1960s were heady days for the already famous architect. He had unveiled his plans for the Victorian Arts Centre, which was to include an “‘Eiffel’ tower (‘probably... the highest structure in Australia’) under which there will be three theatres... The main gallery building surrounded by a pool of reflection [and a] two-storey triangle housing the Art School” as well as “three large courtyards... the Oriental, the Sculptural and the Australian” (Melbourne Herald 21 February 1961).

In 1962, Grounds disassociated himself from Frederick Romberg and Robin Boyd following his partners’ disapproval of his Arts Centre design; he was to maintain his relationship with the Centre until his death in 1981. The connection to Swan Hill and the Folk Museum no doubt came from his apparently very convivial and fruitful partnership with Westbrook. The two men had travelled globally researching the best form and approach to the Arts Centre; when they visited Swan Hill in 1963, the Guardian announced Grounds had been the first private citizen to contribute to the fund to purchase the Gem. Grounds also pronounced on the project’s importance to the nation, claiming he had “inspected a number of such museums throughout the world” and that each was nationally “of great importance... as it presented the people of the particular country to the world.” ("Noted Architect", 1963).

April and May 1963 were months of great activity as Grounds prepared, then presented, his plans for the museum. The exact role the Gem was to play in the complex was confusing from the outset. So wedded were the civic fathers and mothers to the idea of Swan Hill’s key tourist appeal as theatrical (and Shakespearean), the notion of the boat and a theatre became parallel, an ambition Grounds quickly moved to eliminate.

On the 30 March, accompanied by his staff members Bruce Douglas and Alan Nelson, Grounds gave a three hour “explanation and talk” to the museum’s planning committee on his scheme, in which attractions were to be strategically arranged to the view so that “no more than two or three objects of interest are revealed at one time.”
Rather than remake the Gem as a theatre, Grounds proposed a second icon nearby: new 200-seat theatre building including revolving stage, placed within the Folk Museum and using what he described as a “drop log” process similar to American log cabins but with a “definite difference” (“Folk Museum Master Plan…”, 1963). He described this as a variety of construction “used in the early days” and it was presumably Grounds who designed a log cabin “built as it would have been a hundred years ago” which was opened at the Folk Museum in March 1966 (“Log cabin display”, 1963). Marjorie McLeod was positive about the element of the scheme which sought to create a theatre in the same style, telling the Swan Hill Guardian:

I realise that the establishment of a little theatre on the Gem would have been unique, but there is more to be thought of than that. The future must be considered and action taken now to provide something adequate which will not only be beneficial to National Theatre but to the Swan Hill district and future generations… (“Draft Plan of Folk Museum…”, 1963).

The Gem had multiple functions for Grounds and, in a concrete “cradle” surrounded by water, was crucially the entry point to the complex:

Mr Grounds explained that the “Gem” did not contain sufficient room for all the things the committee desired... He explained that during his 27 tours of the world in connection with his vocation he had not found drop log construction being used.
Swan Hill district was unique in this aspect and this would be responsible for many thousands of tourists visiting the area to have a look at it.

[...]

Referring to the “Gem”, he said this would be in a land-locked pond and would contain such things as art gallery, historical display room, kiosk and refreshments, director’s office, committee room, subscribers’ club lounge, toilets and on the top deck living quarters for the director.

The remainder of the project was to include a richness of artifacts and active and passive attractions, not least a locomotive (“old D3-688”) as well as a “traction engine, portable steam engine, farm implements, blacksmith shop and tools, shearing shed and exhibits, dairying display, irrigation channeling, and pumping equipment.” (“Folk Museum Master Plan...”, 1963). There is a chance that Grounds was less interested in the theatre than the museum: he “told the committee he was fascinated by the unique approach being made to display the life of the Mallee pioneer and he was sure the museum would gain National importance.” Grounds and Douglas had paid close attention to the Folk Museum’s site, on the banks of a deviation of the Murray known as the Little Murray and were particularly interested in locating areas into which the museum could expand. (“Draft Plan of Folk Museum...” 1963).

Douglas also, it was reported, gathered “information on town planning in the near vicinity of the site so that the scheme will be planned in harmony with the surrounding residential areas and parklands” (“Progress Report...” 1963). In the production of the museum’s layout and execution of its replication of a rural town its “plan” is, in the final analysis, one of its greatest peculiarities: Swan Hill itself, like most regional towns produced in colonial Victoria, conforms to a highly regulated grid pattern. The Folk Museum’s replication of a town, however – comprising, in the main, rescued buildings from the surrounding district – is random and fractured (Fig 2) perhaps following Grounds’ desire to lay the components of the settlement out to the visitor in limiting the visible number of attractions at any one time.
Figure 2 Roy Grounds, revised plan for Swan Hill Folk Museum, 1979 including “existing settlement” and further development across the Little Murray. The plan is oriented with south at the top of the page. From Swan Hill Pioneer Village archives.

In 1964 Ross Holloway was appointed the museum’s director. A marine engineer, Holloway had studied modeling in Sydney under the sculptor Rayner Hoff; he was not only the foundation president of Swan Hill’s Historical Society, but had also served as the president of its National Theatre (“Ross Holloway…”, 1964). In the previous decade Holloway had aspired to create a local museum in the cellar of his property, Tyntynder, housing “old documents and letters and tape recordings of tales told by old people” (Marshall, 1955). By the time Grounds alighted from a well-publicised flight (part of the “Moomba Air Race”) to Swan Hill from Melbourne, in 1966 (“Centre Court”, 1966), the Folk Museum was an acknowledged work in progress and in many respects – given that its principle purpose was to excite interest in the pioneers of the Swan Hill district – already a success. The Gem paddle-steamer in particular was a major local attraction, exciting the attention of thousands each year (to a degree disturbing to the Swan Hill Guardian which feared that a lack of caution amongst teenagers visiting the boat might at some point result in a tragic accident) (“Gem attracts visitors”, 1966).

From this mid-1960s point, however, two important developments eventuated which served to dissipate Swan Hill’s importance as a tourist destination. Explanations for this are numerous, and largely devolve to speculation. Notoriously, international travel has become a cheaper option since the early 1970s and the novelty of the motoring holiday has faded. Pioneer history, itself, has lost some of its sheen and become complicated.

The Pioneer Festival

McLeod’s withdrawal from the Shakespeare Festival in the late 1960s saw that event lose much of its drive; many locals also suggest the arrival of television to the region in 1963 led to waning volunteer interest in producing plays and supplementary events. However, from a contemporary standpoint it is the mixing of messages that seemed to act as the greatest problem in Swan Hill’s “branding”. The assumption that visitors would come for the Shakespeare Festival and stay for the Folk Museum (or, indeed, visit the Folk Museum at any given time of the year) was based on shakier ground than it might have seemed.

1973 – a decade after the original excitement and preliminary plans for the Folk Museum – appears to have been a catalyst and the time at which Swan Hill overreached. When Councillor T. R. Mellor was awarded an OBE in large part for his work promoting and managing the Folk Museum, by now renamed the Pioneer Settlement, he observed “that Swan Hill was...being used as a link point by people travelling to various parts of southern Australia” (“Many visit...” 1973). At the same time, a move towards professionalization of the Swan Hill “experience” was to prove ill-fated. Promotions group Festival Planners was invited to prepare a spectacular program for the 1973 Festival, which now honoured the town’s pioneer past and the colonial career of Major Thomas Mitchell, ostensibly the first explorer in the district. Although the company was heavy on rhetoric and spin, they were unable – largely due to circumstances outside their control – to deliver an event that delivered the anticipated economic return.
Two of Festival Planners’ principals, Alan Sussein and Tony Freeley, saw the capacities of an annual event in Swan Hill sorely underexploited, including attracting international visitors (which they opined “could prove profitable to a degree”). Sussein noted that the Pioneer Settlement was “similar in many ways to America’s Disneyland.” However many tourist visits were brief, and Freeley believed a “pioneer festival” would play “a vital role” in encouraging visitors to “Stay another day.” In Festival Planners’ vision the Pioneer Festival comprised a Major Mitchell Pageant, “Shakespeare play, pioneer church services, a bacchus festival, musical shows, an Australian film festival, horse racing and trotting, water sports, and a variety of other entertainments” (“Organisations hear plan”, 1973). The reduction of the formerly unassailable Shakespeare to merely one in a range of components in this reimagined festival is telling.

Swan Hill’s biggest problem as a tourist destination since the 1970s has, however, not been the demise of the Shakespeare Festival (the legacy of which, incidentally, is still strong in the town, where local drama maintains a high profile). Rather, the issue was that the fine idea of the Folk Museum and Pioneer Settlement was too good to not be adopted by other regional centres. Sten Rentzhog writes that the people of Ballarat were inspired, in the late 1960s, by the Folk Museum’s achievement: “What Swan Hill had managed surely Ballarat could do” (2007, p. 289). Just as the Gem celebrated Swan Hill’s initial incarnation as a port, dependent on the river, Sovereign Hill (the name itself sounds purloined, given its inspiration) evoked the first ten years of the colonial gold-rush town of Ballarat, prior to arrival of the railway.

The Swan Hill Guardian recorded the visits of burghers from other Victorian towns seeking to glean the secret to the Folk Museum’s alchemy. In the same month that Festival Planners were concocting their Major Mitchell Festival, councilors from the former coal mining town of Korumburra visited the Pioneer Settlement (“Visitors…” 1973). Living or open air museums were established across Australia; Balladong Farm, at York in Western Australia, was purchased by the National Trust in 1974 and reinterpreted through the sensitive ministrations of Feilman and Associates (“Balladong” 1979). Meanwhile, Swan Hill’s Pioneer Settlement moved with the times as best it could. A “sound and light” display was incorporated into the complex (Ingpen, 1972 p. 54) and through this and a range of publications artist Robert Ingpen – well known to Australians for his heritage-themed paintings and his 1970 designs for stamps commemorating the 200th anniversary of Cook’s expedition – created a vision of the settlement with visual appeal. Ingpen believed the Pioneer Village provided Australians with the chance to see “how our forebears lived” and thence “discover how they fitted themselves into the new land.” He even saw an environmental message in such explorations as it enabled examination of the way in which the pioneers “established a balance which we must maintain for the sake of future generations” (Ingpen, 1972 p. 6).

However by 1977, the Pioneer Settlement’s ubiquity was compromised. A report published that year questioned its resilience:

In the past Pioneer Settlement has established a favourable image due mainly to its pioneer role as the first outdoor museum/folk village in Australia. With the development of other outdoor museums in recent years and with the emergence of Sovereign Hill setting a standard of quality in presentation, Pioneer Settlement’s status has fallen somewhat and is likely to slip further over time. We think this is to a significant extent due to the quality of experience at Pioneer Settlement. In recent years little has been
done to add to the level of activation or number of buildings and there has been a perceptible decline in the quality of the exhibits and buildings themselves. In many ways Pioneer Settlement exhibits a “tiredness” due to resting on past achievements and any future visitor growth will only be based upon the launching of a vigorous qualitative redevelopment of the attraction. (Economic Research Unit, 1977, iv).

The report goes on to critique the “impression of piecemeal development” conveyed to the visitor, through “a somewhat arbitrary arrangement of buildings from time periods ranging from the present to the later 1800’s in close proximity of each other and with little consideration of spatial relationships,” as well as the haphazard placement of artifacts exposed to the elements.

This paper cannot give the full detail of subsequent events in the history of the Swan Hill Pioneer Settlement, which changed its name again to the Pioneer Village. It is important, however, to note that just as Grounds continued his involvement in Melbourne’s Arts Centre until his death in 1981, so too did he continue to work on revisions at Swan Hill – indeed his office remained associated long after his death. For all that, however, little of Grounds’ work is easily identifiable at the Pioneer Village today; certainly none of the major buildings he envisaged for the settlement were constructed. Two rotunda – unsympathetically adorned with faux lacework – are attributed to him.

The Gem paddle-steamer is still a part of the museum, and forms a backdrop to events held there, but it is largely unused, having proved structurally unsound for the various new functions envisaged for its retirement. A scheme to house Swan Hill’s Art Gallery on board the ship did not come to fruition, though the Art Gallery itself is located in close proximity to the vessel.
In the final analysis, the Folk Museum/Pioneer Settlement/Pioneer Village was at very least a brave and visionary move by Swan Hill’s council into the unprecedented Australian field of “living museum” (Fig. 3). Whereas Sovereign Hill, its most successful imitator, was created from scratch as a replica, Swan Hill was assembled from extant elements, and its creators thereby had less control over its constituent parts and greater responsibility to interpret that which was there – a task which in many cases, being untrained and working in a nascent field, they were often unable to fulfill.

It is easy to imagine that the rise of nationalism in the 1970s brought down the Shakespeare festival, and then became an unmanageable cliché in itself. Perhaps more truthfully Swan Hill’s largest handicap has been the difficulty of shaping a readily consumable narrative of its own history and development – though the Gem was for a long time, and to a certain degree remains, a tangible example of this. The involvement of Grounds and Westbrook is, perhaps, the strangest element of the story and one which, as yet, has little obvious explanation – other than that the two men were engaged in the possibilities of telling a story of a history and a culture back to its local people. It is this, more than anything related to the history of the Folk Museum, that requires further investigation.
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