

Do you remember ...

When *Karrabee* sank?

by Graeme Andrews



In 1980 *Karrabee* showed her style in the first Great Ferryboat race.

That tired old semblance of a Sydney ferry that lies limply on the waterfront at Gosford was once a busy floating restaurant. But, before that she had another, much longer life that few passers-by know of. The old *Karrabee* was once one of the finest and longest-lived ferries ever to work on Sydney's Port Jackson.

Karrabee seems to have reached the end of her long road. The chances of her leaving the site in anything other than pieces seem remote but *Karrabee* has seen better days – and many of them.

Karrabee made it through most of her long and active service life with little fuss, which is as her owners and builders would have wished. Of course, there were minor collisions, altercations and engine breakdowns. In 1975 she failed to stop in the Quay until the concrete intervened. In 1951 she collided with near-sister *Kameruka* and much later, took on the smaller *Radar* in 1979. There were many such minor incidents, generally thought little of in pre-TV news days.

During the 1950s *Karrabee* was spruced up with a trim coat of red, white and blue with the words NAVY ARMY AIR FORCE around the bulwarks. Inside the cabins were enticing photographs of life in the armed forces. I was one who was enticed, I joined the RAN.

Karrabee was built in Balmain by Morrison & Sinclair as a steamship, in 1913. In full working trim she was of 192 tons, displacement and had a length of 107ft and a beam of 25ft (32.8m by 7.6m). As a steamer she could carry 590 passengers and rather more later, as a motor ship.

The new ferry's original steam engines had previously worked in the Parramatta River ferry *Pheasant* of 1889 so by the time they were replaced with *Karrabee*'s first diesel engine in 1936, they'd certainly paid their way. These engines are now in the care of the Powerhouse Museum but, sadly, not generally on display although they look magnificent.

The idea of the (staged) Great Ferryboat Race caught on after the first running in 1980.

Karrabee 'won' the second race, in 1981 but in 1984 on January 22, she came home a bad third. There was trouble down below but no-one realised it for some time. The old wooden hull was leaking under the strain as the old ferry trailed the field with many of her enthusiastic passengers crammed forward, egging her on.

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Floating restaurant Karrabee was doing good business at Gosford when this photo was taken in August 1993.

This, of course, as photos showed, pushed the bow down and water was flowing over decks which were normally dry. Water entered in many places and when Captain Archer realised what was happening, towards the end of the event, he took the old ferry, pumps racing, into the wharf at the Quay. Safely alongside all aboard scrambled onto the wharf – and then *Karrabee* – always well behaved, sank!

Two days later the great floating crane *Titan*, herself now long departed, lifted and refloated *Karrabee* but it was the end of the traditional wooden Sydney ferry. Enquiry followed investigation and all hands involved were roundly criticised. The remaining old-style wooden ferries were quickly replaced by noisy, vibrating, short-lived, lightly-built catamarans. *Karrabee* and her sisters were sold.

Near-sister *Kameruka* was sold to proposers of a fun park at Lansvale and *Karrabee* was 'tossed in' for free. *Kameruka* soon sank at the wharf, in 1985, and was removed by mechanical grab. *Karrabee* was towed to Hardys Bay, near Gosford in May 1986 to be converted to a floating restaurant for Aldo Katalinich.

The garishly painted ferry worked well as a Gosford waterside attraction for some years but the problems of maintenance began to be obvious even to the casual eye and the old boat was sold.

The new owner was soon looking for help, claiming the ferry had heritage value. Suggestions were made that she would be towed to Brisbane for a maritime museum. Why such a 'Sydneycentric' craft would have appeal in Brisbane was not explained, nor was how the old hull would hold together for the trip.



Stuck in the mud alongside the Quay wharf in 1984, *Karrabee* seemed to have reached the end of the line but that was nearly 20 years ago.

Plans to redevelop the Gosford waterfront are now pressing and it seems likely *Karrabee* will soon be moved, one way or the other. Before that happens, visit the fine old ferry and, ignoring the hogged hull and the commercial additions, try to image how well she looked when she thumped around the Harbour at a steady 10 knots – for more than 70 years! ↓

Note: Because of many enquiries I have decided to combine the Watermen series published over the last two years as a book – to be called Watermen. I expect to publish this before Christmas this year – stay tuned. Graeme Andrews.



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Join the Armed Services in the 1950s. Twenty five years after he took this advice, the writer was employed as Master of the *Karrabee*.