

NEERENUFF

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I lived in many country towns,
Some considered quite genteel, and some a little rough,
But there's one which lives in memory;
A town called Neerenuff.

Few will now remember
Neerenuff, in its heyday and its prime,
Because it's been gone now sixty years, come November;
The manner of its passing - that's how and why it went
Will later be revealed, in this harmless little rhyme.

I lived in Neerenuff when I was just a kid,
But my recollections are still crystal clear,
Some things I know I saw, or maybe overheard
From adults, cooking food or drinking wine and beer.

In case you wonder where it stood, the town of Neerenuff,
In its heyday years ago,
Suffice to say - it was somewhere north of Inverloch
Not far from Come-by-Chance
And south-east of Bendigo,
It occupied a river frontage on land both low and flat,
And of course it flooded sometimes,
But later - more of that.

Back when it first was founded, the town of Neerenuff
Was known as *Pasta Plagon*,
Later changed to *Swiggins Bluff*,
Then later still as *Bog - yer - waggon*:
Only when they formed a Shire Council
Did they name it Neerenuff,
And as you might expect, even if un-told,
This new name copped a baggin'
From local chappies, young and old
But the council called their bluff.

This dignified new council, elected and sworn in,
Took on four or five full-timers,
Plus two part-time local men,
There was William 'Shylock' Jones, Collector- Rates and Monies,

And Clarrie 'Chocco' Glenn,
Who attended to the dunnies;
Chocco was known in Neerenuff as king of the night-cart men,
And he employed a scruffy pair of local 'dunny - bunnies'

The first thing this council did, after its election,
Was secure a little grant, from a gen'rous govern-ment
The one up there in Spring Street, top of Collins,
A lovely cash injection
Of twenty thousand, to be 'wisely spent' -
Even more than they expected, although they tried again,
But the Premier said 'no way - you should be well content,
This is my first and only offer,
And the Goose that laid this golden egg
Has more than once been slain
So, however much and often you might beg
I can assure you - she will not rise again'.

Local rumour has it that the shire presi-dent
Was fairly friendly with the Premier
A man named Tommy Bent,
Tommy had a reputation for bribery and corruption
A well-known pre-dilection,
So this request for council funding
Was really heaven-sent
Because Premier Tommy owned some *land* nearby,
And welcomed all and any, new develop-ment.

The little town grew quickly, back in Eighteen Ninety-two,
Because someone there found gold ,
So Shire revenue was rising - not a fortune, it is true,
But ambitious civic plans started to unfold,
And an urgent pressing need was soon discovered
For expensive study tours, for councillors and wives,
To other cities round about, and even overseas.
So they studied quite a lot, yes, they studied other lives
Those aldermen at Neerenuff,
And Council's finite coffers - they never quite recovered,

The seam of gold diminished, just as quickly as it started,
But by then the council had a taste for grandiosity,
And identified some projects, none of them half-hearted,
Considered most desirable, although maybe not essential,
But by now they were inclined towards pomposity,

With ambitions exponential
To their typical town councillor's unlimited verbosity.

First-up, they said, we need a decent road
From the highway to our town,
And gas-lighting to illuminate our streets,
So we can be clearly seen for many miles around,
And we must have a fire-fighting system
So the town cannot burn down,
And, yes, of course, an eight-foot levee bank
Along the River Mudd,
To contain that little river,
If ever it should flood.

Council's bank was rather limited, so *cost-cutting* was required
To carry out these works, on which their hearts were set,
So *fact-finding* tours were much reduced,
They called for tenders for the plans that they had set
Then sat down to study cost estimates produced.
And of course the tenders proved what they already knew
The Shire of Neerenuff had nowhere near the conkers
To match its high-falutin' world and local view.

So - did they decide to abandon or defer
Some of their expensive fancy schemes,
Dreamed up on study tours, and to reality defer?
No - not at all, or so in retrospect it seems;
They decided to cut corners, and other risky stuff,
The City Fathers on the Council
Up there in Neerenuff.

Shire Council sorely needed
To save every precious shilling,
So they employed a Scottish engineer
Named Hamish Justin-Thyme,
He was canny, tight and willing;
'Mr Justin-Thyme,' the councillors instructed,
'We want you, as engineer, to do whatever it will take
To complete these vital projects, and even more, we hope,
- That is why you've been inducted -
At half the quoted cost but still providing
Major projects of a sim'lar size and scope,
And if you *can* achieve this,
As a bonus we will pay,

An extra year's salary,
- Do you think that you can cope?'

'Weel, of course Ah cannae guarantee
There'll nae be some compromise,
But Ah'll more than earn mah contract fee,
And give ye all that ye desire -
Fouurr projects for the price of two,
Barring a repeat of Noah's famous flood
Or Hell's eternal fire,
So, aye, Ah'lll give ye what ye think ye need,
Or near-e-bloody-nough',
At lowest cost and greatest speed.'

So that canny Scot went straight to work
To halve the quoted costs, and thereby further his career;
This was his first big job ashore; he'd always been at sea,
But what's the difference, Hamish asked -
The land is just the land
And a mar-ine engineer is still an engineer'

Beginning with the tarmac road,
Hamish found a cheapish road constructor -
A chap he knew from early child-hood, back in Inverness
Who quoted five hundred pounds per mile, money paid up front -
And paid before each mile of road was laid,
So Hamish ordered twenty-seven, not a furlong more or less,
Based on careful measure,
Using sextant, stars and slide, and an educated guess.
To cover bends and curves and subtle council pressure,
To provide certain local farmers
With guaranteed access.

The final mile of road was laid,
And contractor Mackintosh
Packed up his bags and left,
But his final mile of tarmac road
Finished two miles out of town,
Quite a bit, by gosh,
And two very muddy miles they were,
If you traversed them on foot, and had to traipse and trudge it,
But the good news was the way in which
The project came in right on time
And well within the council's budget.

Then Neerenuff's new fire system,
Installed down High Street, either side,
With bright red fire hydrants, brassy, straight and tall,
Fifty yards apart, to much local admiration,
And Hamish saved lots of precious Pounds
By installing *three-inch* pipes, out of sight and underground,
Instead of costly six-inch, as required by legislation.

Then came the gas street-lighting,
To illuminate the town,
With lovely ornate lamp-posts,
Fed by a gas-producer, an ancient hand-me-down,
Which Hamish purchased for a song,
And more savings were effected,
In the gas-lines to the lamps;
They were buried rather shallow,
Because trenches don't come cheap:
So they were buried only two feet down
Instead of six feet deep.

Then the levee-bank was built
Using local labour,
To meet the budget - rather tight,
And coming down from eight feet six,
To six feet tall, in height,
Because no-one could recall
Just how high the river peaked in flood,
Or if it had ever peaked at all.

The City Fathers were delighted
When all these works were done,
And happily they paid the bonus
That they and Hamish had contracted,
For the savings, all hard-won,
And the bargains he'd exacted
From suppliers, every one.

As local legend has it, engineer Justin-Thyme,
His reputation much enhanced
Returned to work in Britain, and turned his hand to ship design,
Employed, by happy chance
By Harland Wolfe, ship-builders of vessels oceanic,
His last big job, in fact,

Was doing hull design on a brand new ocean liner,
Called, I think, Titanic.

Disaster struck at Neerenuff
After Hamish left for Blighty,
Starting with a gas-leak which ignited;
It soon grew fearful hot and mighty,
Consuming shops and houses, and ravaged City Hall;
They think this fire started
When Paddy Murphy drove his pick
Right through a shallow-buried gas-pipe,
Six inches from a wall;
Then poor Paddy, Irish lunatic
Struck a match to light his pipe
And has not once since then been sighted -
Not once at all, at all, a'tall

Those fires might have been contained,
And caused a lot less harm
Had water from the hydrants flowed full force
To match the level of alarm,
But when the volunteers opened three of them together,
The flow dropped instantly, from a muckle to a mickle
So the fires raged on hell for leather
And the flow of water from their hoses
Slowed down to just a trickle.

Two fire brigades from nearby towns,
Seeing their distress,
Raced to their assistance, down the new sealed road,
But failed to gain access,
No access to Neerenuff,
Because the brand-new road expired, just two miles out of town
And they got bogged in sticky mud
With their fire-carts and their tenders,
And their other fire-fighting stuff.

Well, over many years, the town recovered, more or less
From the fateful fires of Nineteen-o-six, or was it Zero-Seven,
So when I lived there early in the Fifties,
Things seemed pretty normal:
We went to school and played the fool,
We rode our bikes, and went on hikes,
And life in Neerenuff was mostly pleasant and informal.

All of this, of course, was prior to the floods of Fifty-four
The year the drought broke with such a vengeance,
And the River Mudd rose seven feet -
That's higher than it ever went before.
Now, seven feet might'nt sound like much
If your levees stand at eight feet high, or higher
But when they stand just six feet tall
You know that something really bad is certain to transpire.

And so it was with Neerenuff,
Where they trusted their defenses, which had always held before,
Until it was too late, and the waters of the River Mudd
Rose higher than the six-foot wall
And the town was lost in muddy water;
For three whole days the water flowed
Across the six-foot levee,
But the little town was washed away, and the loss of human life
Was considered far too heavy.

It took six or seven weeks,
For the waters to subside,
But by then we'd moved to Inverloch,
Where 'flood' means only that
We've had a high-ish tide,
And the local engineers -
Bless their little hearts,
Avoided fire hydrants, and gas-lights in the streets.

But woe betide the bloke down here who *measures only once*,
Even though he's not the kind that cheats,
He might be honest, keen and willing,
But if he's inclined to think
That 'near-enough is good-enough' -
Just to save a little time,
Or make an extra shilling -
He'll end up like like poor old Hamish, engineer,
Living in disgrace, and probably in clink!