

George's dreamboat takes to the water

By Karen Murphy

JUST one year before his death last June, George Seelaf began another of his many projects designed to boost the heart and spirit of Footscray.

He began a search for the original line drawings of the boat used by Charles Grimes in his navigation of the Maribyrnong River – then known as the Salt Water River – in 1803.

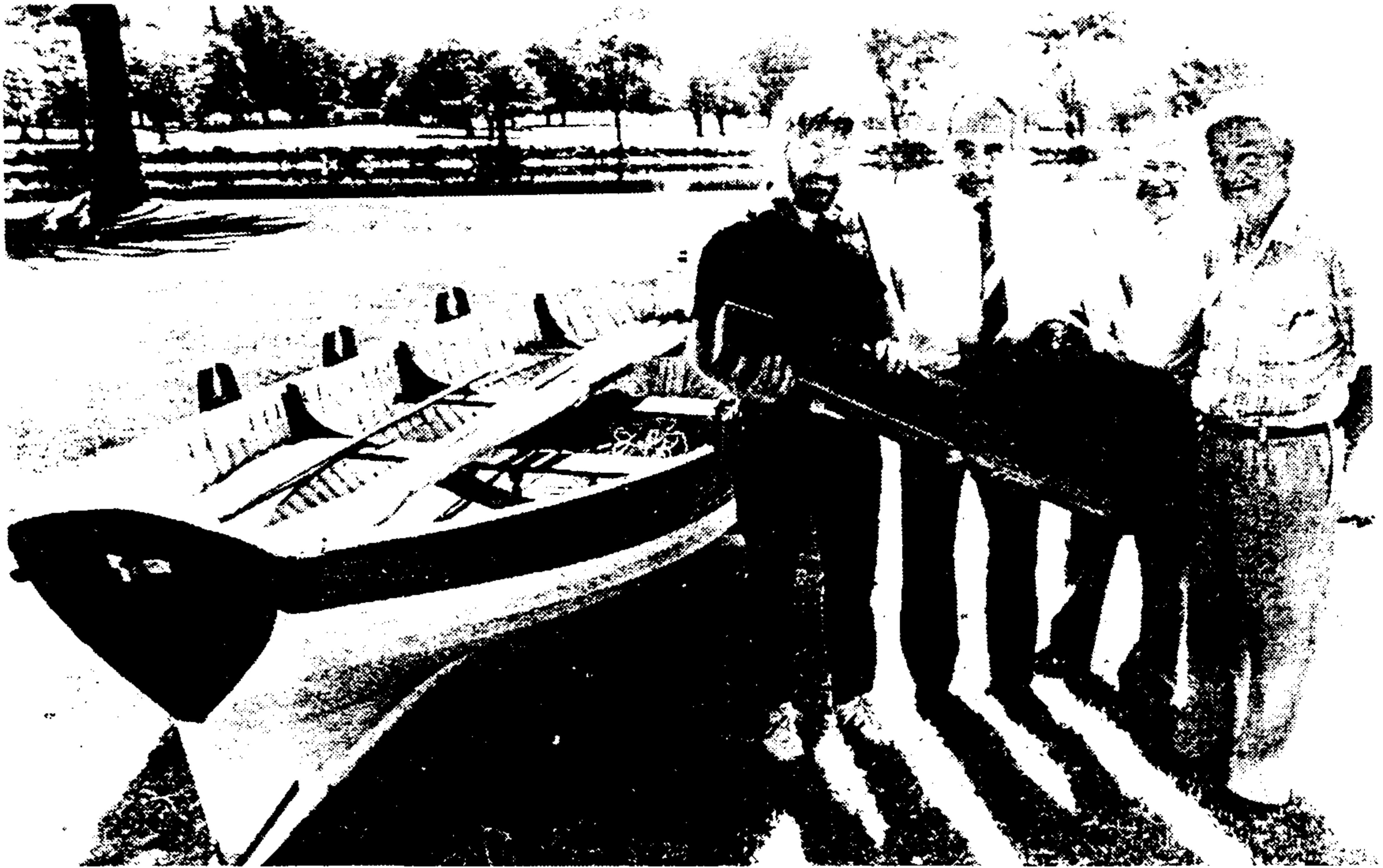
After some time he found the drawings and suggested that a replica be built as part of Footscray's Bicentennial celebrations.

The council and the bicentennial committee agreed to fund the project and students of the Footscray College of TAFE's boat building course began the reconstruction.

Now that boat is finished just in time for the re-enactment by the Footscray Historical Society of the Charles Grimes landing on the river in Footscray Park.

The boat is known as a "yawle". It is 13 feet seven inches long and has a beam of five foot six inches.

It was constructed using the traditional clench or lap-stake methods.



The Footscray Salt Water River Festival was first held in 1974. It was proposed by the local historical society as a means of commemorating the navigation of the Maribyrnong River by Charles Grimes, the New South Wales Acting Surveyor General and his party on February 3, 1803. Thirty-two years later John Batman set foot in the area.

Since 1974 the boat used in the re-enactment has been donated by various historical maritime authorities. Many bore little resemblance to the original boat.

But now they have the real – or almost real – thing.

Mr Wal Hopkins, of the Bicentennial Committee, said the boat used by Grimes to sail the Maribyrnong came aboard the ship Cumberland which anchored in the bay.

Grimes and his party climbed aboard, giving the Yarra a miss in favor of the little known Salt Water River.

For some days the party journeyed up the river with Grimes keeping track of how far they had come by counting the number of oar strokes.

"A lot of the things we know about the boat and the voyage came about through George Seelaf's research," Mr Hopkins said.

"He got involved in everything that was good for Footscray.

"We always said that if George didn't know about something in Footscray's

history it didn't happen.

"It is sad that he died before he saw this project come to fruition."

But even though the committee behind the boat know many details about the historic voyage, no-one yet has been able to find out the name of the boat.

After the re-enactment on Sunday, February 5, at Footscray Park the Bicentennial Committee will give the boat to the Footscray Council.

They hope it will be put on public display but no decision has been made about where it could be kept.

Many people will witness this year's re-enactment as part of the Salt Water River Festival and many will understand the significance of the new boat.

But the person who made the dreaming come true will not be there to see its maiden cruise.

The boat not only recaptures the memory of Charles Grimes it also is a memorial to George Seelaf – a man who did as much for the area as that first explorer.

CHECK out that rudder ... (from left) boat builder Michael Sutton, Eric Pepwell from Footscray TAFE College, and Wal Hopkins and Jack Faulkner from the Bicentennial committee.