

Tomatoes source of revival after years of hardship

Women who saved a town

By SAMANTHA WILLIAMS
Regional Reporter

WHEN women's rights icon Helen Reddy sang, "I am woman hear me roar", little did she know it would become the theme to revive a small rural town.

For years Guyra's main street was almost deserted before it was changed into the bustling shopping strip seen today.

A hydroponic tomato farm and women power has led Guyra, 35km north of Armidale, to a facelift.

It is now being described as the next New England boom town.

Dubbed the "Birds of Bradley St", the women of the town have been instrumental in re-building Guyra after Victorian-based fresh produce company Costa Group constructed a \$36 million hydroponic tomato growing operation in July 2005.

"The town's turning point was the arrival of the tomato farm but it's the women who have really got behind the town and helped to save it. The street is very much a women's domain," Mayor Robyn Jackson said.

Most of the businesses in Bradley St are owned or managed by women.

The town, which didn't have an ATM, now has two as well as a tourist information centre.

"If you knew the town two years ago and you walked down it today you wouldn't know it was the same town," Mrs Jackson said.

Real estate agents said the revamp had pushed up property prices by up to 100 per cent.

Jackson's Property and Live-stock's David Bearup said an ordinary brick home, bought three years ago for \$60,000, sold recently for \$190,000.

"Two years ago the town was dying. After the abattoir closed in 1995 we lost 300 jobs in one day, which started the catastrophic downfall of the town," Mr Bearup said. "Now it's a dream come true."

Fork and Spoon cafe and pantry owner Nicole O'Malley-Jones, who opened up her shop one year ago, said: "Farmers have married good here because it's the progressive women who are making the town appealing."

Tanya Kilpatrick, who has launched her own deluxe bed and breakfast Top of the Range Retreat, said: "We have come a long



Time for business . . . Margaret Swerdlow, Nicole O'Malley-Jones, Tanya Kilpatrick, Sandy Worthington and Deb Heffernan. *Picture: ARMIDALE EXPRESS*

way from a horse and cart town to a boutique town."

Ms Jackson said the council wanted to build the population from 2000 to 6000.

On the outskirts of town is Top of the Range Tomatoes, which looks more like the set of a science-fiction movie than the future of Australia's fruit and vegetable production. In its first year it produced its millionth tomato but last year it turned over 3.3 million kg of tomatoes from 5ha — the equivalent of two Australian rules football fields and the highest yield per square metre in the southern hemisphere.

It started employing 50 people but that doubled to 100 in two years.

"We definitely helped the local economy," manager Godfrey Dol said. "Now people think there is a future in town."

... as others struggle to survive

By JUSTIN VALLEJO

GHOST town is a dirty, unspoken term in places like Rankin Springs.

The population of 112 know they must stay positive to survive the worst drought in our history.

But for local pub owners Darrell Burroughs and Cathy Harris, who moved to the state's southwest last year for a "tree change", staying positive is harder each day the beer taps stay switched off.

In the grain-growing belt 60km north of Griffith, 562km southwest of Sydney, Rankin Springs booms or busts on its dry land farmers — who are starting to pack up and leave.

"We wouldn't be able to keep run-

ning the place for much longer ourselves if it continues like this," Mr Burroughs said.

The Conapaira Hotel and Motel reopened in 2002 after a six-year closure but half of the commercial properties in the town remain vacant.

Local garage owner Colin Parsons said: "The town can't get much smaller and still sustain itself."

Narrandera Shire mayor Des Edwards said the council had run an appeal before Christmas to help small towns like Rankin Springs and Barellan, another town of dry land farmers — population 350 — on the east of Griffith. "We can't solve everyone's problems but we can do a little bit," he said.



Grim . . . Harris and Burroughs