

My Blood's Country



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The spirit of Birchip



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Every effort has been made to trace the original source of material contained in this book. Where the attempt has been unsuccessful, the publishers would be pleased to hear from copyright holders to rectify any omission.

Acknowledgments

This book is not a ‘history’. That task has been ably fulfilled by others, notably Dr June Senyard (formerly June Lee) and the late Mr George Gould. In fact, little reference has been made to existing sources: almost all the written material comes from recent interviews and individual recollections.

My Blood’s Country is a ‘coffee table book’, to be picked up and browsed, to be put down and re-visited as the mood takes. There is not a consistent narrative, but readers should be able to discern threads of connection as page follows page.

It is a compilation of interviews, photographs and articles, the aim of which is to encapsulate the spirit of Birchip and its people as they have evolved over the last century or so. Its focus is on the people who live and have lived here, on their interests and concerns, on the physical world of landscape and farm and on a few of the fascinating sidelights of Birchip’s recent experience. An attempt was made to trace Birchip’s present in its past by asking a range of people, with some emphasis on the older members of the community, what the place means and has meant to them. The accounts of interviews aim at recording, as closely as possible, the individual voices of their subjects.

We wish to acknowledge the contributions of the many people who willingly shared their memories, local knowledge and ideas, formally and informally, and those who offered photographs from their collections. We also thank especially Brian Lea, Jean Trollope, John Ferrier and Catherine Adriaans whose photographs added depth to our selection, and Bev Neil for her illustration.

We are grateful to The Birchip Historical Society, especially Dorothy Reid and Elaine McCallum, who gave us access to their extensive collection and shared their impressive local and historical knowledge.

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Ian McClelland and Ken Rickard also deserve a mention – tolerance is a great virtue. Thanks to Andrew Cunningham and the team at Splitting Image for their assistance and professionalism in designing and producing this book.

We thank Judith Wright’s daughter, Meredith McKinney, for kindly permitting us to use the words of our title, *My Blood’s Country*, which is taken from the first line of the poem ‘South of My Days.’

A final note: while every effort has been made to make this book representative, it does not pretend to be comprehensive. No doubt there will be many who wonder why certain things and people are not included, or do not occupy a more central place. No omission was intentional or in any way pointed. The material was used as it came to hand, and certain pathways that it suggested were followed.

My Blood’s Country is offered to the Birchip community and those interested in it as a piece of memorabilia hard to put down and impossible to throw away.

Anne McClelland
Glenys Rickard



Introduction

While reading this book, readers will be struck by the almost universally positive vision the people of Birchip and district have of their world. Whether for those who have chosen to leave, and for whom the place is largely a memory, or for those living there today, the vision is in essence the same. In some crucial part of their psyche, they perceive Birchip as ‘home,’ a source of comfort and security, an utterly familiar and necessary part of their being. It is their blood’s country.

When challenged to articulate their sense of belonging, many can be quite clear about the qualities of the place. For some, its real meaning rests in the shape and character of the landscape, the changing, yet eternally changeless, nature of the physical world. Many, as farmers, are less fanciful: their dedication is to farming as an intensely satisfying way of earning a living while revelling in the lifestyle that goes with it.

The town itself plays a vital part in this world. It is as familiar and reliable as an old shoe, but its people are irradiated by almost epic qualities. Observers and residents alike speak of generosity of spirit, courage, adaptability, resilience, toughness, responsibility, even passion – virtues not as a matter of course associated with daily life in the twenty-first century.

Many who still live in the area see the positive values of the place as deriving directly from its rural, as opposed to urban, character. While tolerating the city for its obvious advantages, or as necessitous, they can’t wait to get home to where people have the time and the inclination to talk and where faces in the street are familiar and friendly. As long as the basic necessities continue to be available, they see no need to look elsewhere.

Underpinning all is a deep and often unspoken sense of community: everyone knows; everyone cares. The weak or the differently abled are everyone’s responsibility, their achievements to be celebrated. The community is also staunchly egalitarian: anyone is as good as anyone else, and an apparent tendency to ‘put on side’ is scorned. As a result, and contrary to folk lore, newcomers are generally welcomed and can find a place with relative ease, as long as they are seen to contribute in some way or another. It has even been noted that the town, for so long almost entirely Anglo-Irish in make-up, now has a certain ethnic quality, so that coloured skin is no longer a cause for comment or even notice.

Of course, no-one, even the most partisan, suggests that Birchip is even close to being a perfect community. It is no more free of the normal human frailties and vices than anywhere else. But Birchip’s attitude and achievements continue to be admired and even envied: explanations are sought and not always found.

One suggestion, and an interesting one, is that threats come from the environment, not the people, as is often the case in larger communities. One of the most frequently cited virtues of the town itself is its safety for children. In Birchip, parents are relatively free from the permanent anxiety of their counterparts in the city: children wander the town, confident in their security and in the almost universal good will of the adults

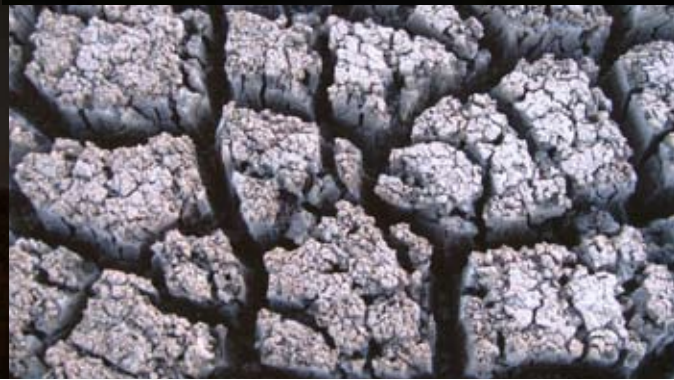
around them. It is a safe for them to sit in the park, or walk up to the oval, or stay at the pool until late, as it is for them to continue the time-honoured tradition of sitting ‘outside the baker’s. They are lucky, as many of their predecessors have recognised.

It is an old adage that adversity makes for strength, and perhaps that is another explanation for Birchip’s relative success and even prosperity. Life in this part of the world has never been easy: drought has always hovered threateningly in the wings, accepted as an inevitable part of life. The recent protracted ‘dryness’ has been taxing, yet somehow the will to continue seems to survive.

It could be added that the Mallee has been seen as ‘a man’s world’, a place where women ‘did it hard.’ No doubt true, but the objective observer cannot but be impressed by the women as well as the men: permanent caterers, home makers, backstops and of late vital contributors to the family income. Most women now have a job, part or full time, and no one thinks a thing of it.

Times have changed in Birchip and district in many ways, but the following pages testify to a continuity of what might be called the life spirit. The faces, the words, the memories of the people of this valiant little community speak for themselves.





Battler and philosopher

Kathleen Smith lives by her own homespun philosophy.

“I’ve never wanted more than I had, and I’ve never worried about the things I can’t fix.”

Her life now on what was her parents’ land, just north of Birchip, is proof that she’s not just talking. She is contented with her small home, her kitchen, with the old wood stove providing warmth on a cold winter’s day.

One thing in Kath’s satisfying existence which probably qualifies her for the adjective unique, at least in the state of Victoria. She has her own electricity generator. Housed in a small shed out the back, it provides 240 v power and runs ‘almost everything’ in her house. Her stove and refrigerator are gas, but the generator provides sufficient energy for the lights, washing machine, extra heating, electric blanket and television, on the rare occasions on which she decides to use it. Usually, she chooses to listen to radio ‘24 hours a day.’

Her first power source was a 32 v generator, which ‘couldn’t run the washer and wringer together.’ When the pull start began to take its toll, the new key start replacement seemed a luxury.

Fortunately for Kath, she loves the hot weather and has been known in midsummer to sleep on the couch on the veranda where it is ‘lovely and cool after the sun goes down.’

Outside, sharing her life, are Kath’s chosen companions. Visitors are met by Cindy the dog, and somewhere around are two cats. Near the house, Cocko the loquacious cockatoo shares his home with some diamond doves and peaceful doves, demanding his almond treat at feed time every day. Further afield is the budgie cage, and in the wild an impressive array of native birds: galahs, pardeloes, rosellas, mudlarks, magpies, crows, miners, honey eaters, willie wagtails, grass parrots, wood ducks and, of course, sparrows and starlings. She did have curlews, though she ‘hasn’t heard them for a while.’

A keen advocate of Trust for Nature, Kath has seen dunnarts on her small piece of land. Her house is filled with model kookaburras, a bird of which she is particularly fond and the large tiger in her kitchen testifies to her passion for her football team.

Like many current residents of Birchip and district, Kath began her life here, moved away, and returned. She was born in 1926 in town, after her mother made the painful and icy trip into Birchip to Mrs Croft, the midwife. During her childhood, money was tight: the milk run provided transport to school, her brothers helping out on the way.

In 1942, Kath volunteered for the WAF and undertook her rookie training at Summers. Of course, as mere women, she and her fellows were trained for mess duties only. She recalls peeling onions and crying, not quite sure whether it was the onions or homesickness which caused her tears on this, her first time away from home.



Her three brothers also volunteered, and after the war returned to the farm. But the war years had taken their toll, and all three died during the 1960s. Kath and her husband, Claude, decided to return to the farm, where she has remained ever since.

Now she is perfectly contented with her lot. As she says, “Birchip does me fine. There’s a doctor, a hospital, a chemist, and a wonderful baker. You name it, it’s there.”

The school, she says, is also ‘wonderful’ and she feels a real fondness for the students, especially the boys. She knows that if she says hello to the group outside Sharps’ Bakery, they will respond cheerfully, even going so far as to help to carry her shopping.

She has faith in the future of the town. “We’ve got community spirit,” she says.

She loves her home, she is content with her life, and revels in the trips round Australia that she takes with her sister and three nieces.

Kath looks back on her life with satisfaction. Yes, it was a battle in the past, but she always did her best, ‘or as near as I could.’

‘I never was a quitter.’

Outside the baker's



ABOVE: (front from left) Nathan Bennett, Emma Forrester, Curtis Smith, Laura Lee, Claire Boyle, Sophie Noonan, (back from left) Harry and Lily Alexander



Families



OPPOSITE ABOVE: the O'Donnells
BELOW LEFT: the Kemps
BELOW RIGHT: the Cooks

A contented couple

Col Russell is a farmer born and bred, one of those with a special attachment to sheep. As he says, ‘I’d be lost without the farm and I like my sheep.’

He and his wife Pat have farmed their scattered property together for WWWWWW years, experiencing the ups and downs of Mallee farming. They admit that life hasn’t been rosy all the time, but assert firmly that theirs has been a good life.

Much of Col’s early life was spent working horses which was ‘steady and quiet, not like it is today.’

They agree that times have changed. Pat says ‘We’re on a fast wheel and we can’t get off.’

Col attended Banyan school, one of the many small primary schools scattered throughout the district. He says quite clearly that he hated school, but stresses that this was not because he was incapable of learning. He is not so clear what the problem was, and one might well ask why when one of his teachers seemed to think that education could best be achieved by taking the class bird nesting. Another felt that a morning’s work was quite sufficient, the wine shanty offering more tangible satisfactions in the afternoon than the attempt to teach twenty country children, many of them similar to Col.

Before leaving school at the age of fourteen, Col lost his father to one of the many farm accidents of the time.

On 11 April, 1939 the twelve year old realised that the team his father was driving had been stopped for a while. The boy found him caught in the combine, and his father’s words were prophetic: ‘Col,’ he said, I’ve just about been killed.’

Possibly because he had nodded off, he had fallen beneath the machine and been pulled along beneath it until the team stopped. The original diagnosis was a double fracture to his leg, but the reality was far worse: two days later he died in Bunworth’s hospital, the given cause a fractured skull.

Pat’s family story is similar to may of the time. Her mother was a primary teacher from Coburg, and met her nemesis in the form of Arthur Pole with whose family she boarded. Pat remembers her mother making the family wardrobe from material sent up from Coburg; they couldn’t have afforded it themselves. Like so many others, the family kept cows in their back paddock; they made butter and sent the cream away. She remembers those childhood years, when she helped her father with the horses and the chaff, and looked after the chooks, as ‘tough but happy.’

Col remembers 1943 as the beginning of the dry, 1944 as the worst drought year he can remember. The horses were sent south on agistment, the winds blew and, with typical stoicism, the family survived. As Pat says, ‘We couldn’t do anything about it. Everybody was in the same position. It’s a cycle. After the tough times, things seem to right themselves, then away we go again.’



And things did right themselves. In 1953, the family moved into town, having bought their current home from Austy Hogan, together with 16 acres of land. The house ‘wasn’t much’, there was no fence and no garden, but there was room for improvement. They grew vegetables, kept chooks and milked cows, so that the family was close to self-sufficient.

Col and Pat have a clear philosophy: ‘You have to be happy with what you’re doing. You have to accept what you get. You work for what you have and then you appreciate it.’ Pat adds that it’s easy to be contented ‘if you are blessed with a good man’ and it is clear that this marriage is a mutual admiration society. ‘People say that he’s been very spoilt, but I have been too.’

We’ve always loved this community. It’s full of wonderful people who have been there for us in times of need. We’ve had good neighbours. The kids are safe, not like in the city, where people are afraid.’

They regret the passing of the old Buloke shire and believe that it is vital that the town keep its essential services. They still look forward with confidence.

‘The younger generation are keeping things rolling, doing a great job. We have faith in the future.’

On the sheep's back



CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW LEFT:
Ray and John Jones feeding out,
Mick O'Keefe loading wool at Whirily,
Goulds' sheep

OPPOSITE TOP: Ken Rickard shedding sheep for shearing,
OPPOSITE BELOW: John Ferrier's merinos



A happy man



Born in 1920, Harry Rickard's early life was similar to others whose families farmed the land round Curyo. He had a happy childhood, a sound early education, first at Curyo, then at Curyo West. There he recalls a school of thirty three students and eight classes which kept the lone teacher, Miss Monaghan, 'fairly busy.' After one year away at Caulfield Grammar, he returned home.

'I would have liked to go back', Harry says, 'But you make decisions which seem right at the time. Most boys left school between the ages of thirteen and fifteen. There was no school here then. The kids today are lucky. The Birchip School's been good.'

Harry worked the horse team until the war, when a new phase of his life began. After enlisting at the Melbourne Town Hall in January 1942, he and his fellow-volunteers were quartered at Caulfield Racecourse, where they would 'shake the maggots off the meat and eat it, we were so hungry.'

After rumour and counter rumour, the new troops 'finally left Spencer Street. There were no lights because of the blackout, no signs. We could have been going anywhere. When the train finally stopped, there on the platform was Mrs O'Malley, proprietor of the Railway Hotel. She'd been at the Shamrock in Birchip, and I knew she'd moved on to Benalla. So that's where we were. Benalla!'

'Most of us hadn't been anywhere. After more time on the train, we could see the Sydney Harbour Bridge in the dim half-light. We were loaded into barges, taken out under the bridge and made to scramble on rope ladders up the side of the Queen Elizabeth. She was a top ship, knocked about a bit by the soldiers, but still quality.'

14000 troops left on the Queen Elizabeth and 14000 on the Queen Mary. Harry's destination was Freemantle, and he spent the next eighteen months patrolling the west coast: 'Supposedly, the Japanese had landed. There were plenty of rumours. Whatever I got, I couldn't grizzle. I'd enlisted.'

1943 saw Harry moved on to New Guinea, first to Lei, then to Bougainville.

'It was so unnatural to be away from home, from everything you were used to. The mail was irregular; it



was tough going emotionally. By the end of the war, we’d spent four years with the same blokes. We got really attached to each other. Someone would get a letter, then it’d be passed round, as if it were for everyone. Sometimes, though, a bloke would go quiet, and he wouldn’t pass his letter round. It wasn’t uncommon for a wedding or engagement ring to fall out. A wife or a fiancée had found someone else, often a Yank. They had money, and silk stockings, which our girls had never seen. It was so sad. The men had been shot at, were putting up with tough conditions, and often those girls were the ones they were fighting for.’

None of it was much fun, especially ‘crawling round on your stomach with a rifle. As a transport unit, we were often a particular target. I had no animosity against the Japanese. What had he ever done to me? I knew that if I didn’t shoot him, he’d shoot me. It was as simple as that. When we met them later, after they surrendered, we found that they were quite decent fellas. Many could speak English. They’d been fed all the propaganda by Tokyo Rose: the Aussies’ll eat you and so on. There was one who had been taken from his family when he was seven, and put in the army.’

The food was memorable as well, but not for any positive reasons. ‘Powdered eggs, dehydrated meat, bully beef in cans which we’d open with our bayonets, and eat in our hands. Army tucker was terrible.’

Compensation came in the opportunity to meet the woman who would become Harry’s wife the day after the war finished. When pressed, he admits that Eleanor, a nurse from Longford, Tasmania, was gorgeous, but he prefers to describe his war-time marriage in military terms. “I was arrested and taken as a P.O.W.’, he says.

They were married in the chapel tent. An unnamed celebrity was to sing at the wedding, but she was held up by fog. Later, the newly-married couple heard the voice of Gracie Fields singing, ‘Are You Lonesome Tonight?’

The war over, the young couple eventually returned to Curyo, to be met by a plague of black flies. Mallee life was not exactly what Eleanor had hoped for.

‘She hated the heat. She hated the flies. She couldn’t run, she couldn’t drive. Everyone was poor in those days. She couldn’t cook, but she had to, and she was lucky to have Nanna Rickard as a backstop. We settled in Curyo, and that’s where we stayed.’ Sixty-three years later, five of Eleanor’s nursing companions attended their fiftieth wedding anniversary, a tribute to the closeness of the bonds formed during wartime.

Harry often reflects on his experiences as a returned soldier. ‘We were all accepted, welcomed and respected. The way some people treated the Vietnam Vets was terrible. Not here in Birchip, but elsewhere. Some had a terrible time. Perhaps it was because we came home as a unit, they came in dribs and drabs.’ He tells the story of one Vietnam veteran who, returning home, was climbing the steps to board the plane at Sydney. There he was greeted by an air hostess who, instead of her normal welcoming smile, offered only, ‘How many women and kids did you kill?’

‘It must have been a terrible war. There were hardly any TPIs from my unit. 72% of Vietnam vets, after 11 months at the front, ended up TPIs. That speaks for itself. At last they’re being recognised.”

Harry has had a great life, he says, and few regrets. He’s happy to be alive and well. ‘That war time food was terrible, but it was a slow killer. I’m still going strong, aren’t I?’



LEFT: Frank Hunt’s Vietnam War experiences have been immortalised in one of Australia’s most popular songs.

Part of Wikipedia’s entry on ‘Only Nineteen’ describes it as “the most widely recognised song produced by Australian folk group Redgum. John Schumann wrote the song based on experiences as he heard them from Mick Storen whose narration records Frank Hunt’s tragic injury. Royalties for the song, go to the Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia. Four stanzas contain the words:

*A four-week operation
When each step could mean your last one on two legs
It was a war within yourself
But you wouldn’t let your mates down till they had you dusted off
So you closed your eyes and thought about something else.*

*Then someone yelled out “Contact!”, and the bloke behind me swore
We hooked in there for hours, then a God almighty roar
And Frankie kicked a mine the day that mankind kicked the moon,
God help me, he was going home in June.*

*I can still see Frankie, drinking tinnies in the Grand Hotel
On a thirty-six hour rec leave in Vung Tau
And I can still hear Frankie, lying screaming in the jungle
Till the morphine came and killed the bloody row*

*And the Anzac legends didn’t mention mud and blood and tears
And the stories that my father told me never seemed quite real.
I caught some pieces in my back that I didn’t even feel
God help me, I was only nineteen.*

When he was not yet eighteen, Ken Kemp enlisted in the Army. 7 months later, when he reached the correct age, he transferred to the Air Force where he served as a Rear Air Gunner in thirty three missions over Europe.

When he was forced to parachute out over enemy lines, the family received an official telegram advising that he was missing in action, presumed dead. In confirmation, a sympathy telegram arrived three days later. After yet another three days, a second telegram arrived: he had been found safe.

On another mission, Ken’s plane was hit but, on fire, was able to limp the 150 miles back over Allied lines. When the crew was ordered to abandon the plane, the Flight Sergeant’s parachute caught. Unable to see for smoke, Norm and other crew members dragged him out of plane and were able to bring him to safety.

As a result of this courageous action, he was recommended for the Distinguished Flying Cross, the citation of which referred to him as an “outstanding member of a gallant team ... (who has) ... always shown a high degree of courage, skill & initiative.”

RIGHT: (from left) Warren King, Ken Kemp DFC, the late Max Pole, Sgt Gary Coles



A tall tale, but (unfortunately) true

On 15 August 1945, the night that peace was declared at the end of WWII, Birchip celebrated in its own way, building a huge bonfire. In the excitement, someone – who has remained nameless – threw three .303 bullets into the raging fire. A piece of shrapnel, exploding from the flames, hit Herb Taylor, proprietor of the Cash and Carry, in the right eye.

Herb’s pain was excruciating, and could be tempered only to a degree by Dr Maxwell’s painkillers. Scarce petrol coupons were hastily found, and Herb was bundled into a 1939 Chevrolet and rushed to Melbourne. The driver was Herb’s brother in law, Clarrie Ferrier, and they were accompanied by a man who knew his way round Melbourne, A.D. Hillgrove.

After what must have been an agonising – physically for Herb, mentally for his companions – the trio arrived in Melbourne where, of course, they were confronted by milling crowds intent on celebrating victory. Struggling desperately, they eventually arrived in the early morning at the hospital.

Herb was finally admitted, and the exhausted drivers attempted to find a meal and a quiet place to rest. On both counts unsuccessful, they wearily headed home.

The patient’s damaged eye was removed and a glass eye fitted. Such was his devotion to shooting – despite the source of his disablement – that he ordered that a modified gun be made, one that could be used on the right shoulder and sighted through the left eye.

A terrible shock

On the night of the Peace celebrations, Ena Smith’s many children had been put to bed early. This was fortunate, because the bonfire was to be held next door.

Her memory tells her that it was HerbTaylor’s concern for people’s welfare which was his undoing. Believing that the site was ‘unsafe’, he set about trying to put the bonfire out. It was while he was doing this that the terrible accident took place.

‘It was such a terrible shock,’ Ena said. ‘It certainly didn’t add to the sense of victory.’



Legends



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
George Gould, Claudie Croft,
Chua Eng Chong, Rob ‘Hen’ Warne,
Janet Lee and the
Pioneer Woman Plaque



My dad got things done

Judy Living's memories of her early education are quite specific but probably also ones with which many can identify. One of the 1954 intake of Baby Boomers, she didn't suffer from a lack of playfellows.

'The Primary school was a rambling old wooden building with ribbons of possum urine staining the walls. We would line up in the mornings under the peppercorn trees for our small bottles of (warm) milk. We played hopscotch, jacks, What's the time, Mr Wolf?, keepings off and poison ball. We did a lot of skipping with long ropes, maybe to thaw our toes out on a cold morning. I loved the maypole and can still remember the clang of the rings when the school yard was deserted. In Grade 3, Miss Trembath would take us out for sports and we'd play tunnel ball and leap frog.

Peter Haslam always knew the answer when the teacher had asked the question of the rest of us without success.

One day, as we all stood round watching as the drinking water tank was overturned and emptied, a dead galah spilled out with the water.

We didn't mix much with the convent kids.

On weekends, we rode on bikes, walked other people's babies and played in the park. I was sad to see the wizzy dizzy go from the park – three generations of my family have enjoyed spinning round on it.

I don't remember working very hard at secondary school, though we put a lot of effort into Speech Night. We modelled dresses we'd made during the year; one year we had a spectacular mediaeval pageant. We dyed Hessian with beetroot juice for our peasant costumes and the 'ladies' wore beautiful dresses. It was a happy time.

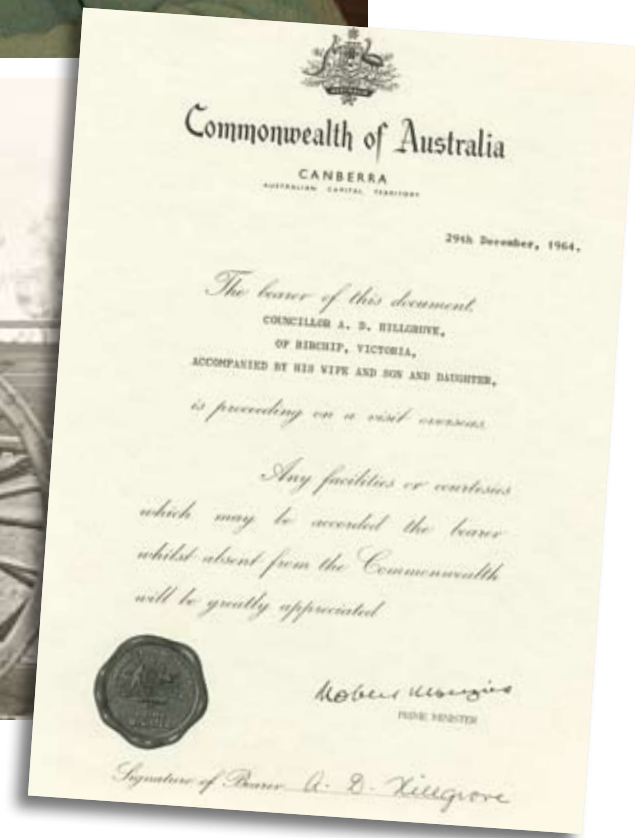
It seemed to be a regular event for our English class with Mr McDonnell to play hockey, boys against girls. We'd select our teams in R.I.

Our French teacher, John Bernard Andrew O'Donnell taught us to sing the Marseillaise at the top of our voices, almost certainly with a strong Irish accent. I can remember it booming out over the loudspeaker.

When the 1956 Olympic Games were on, people stood around outside Clyde Radio at night watching the little black and white TV. We didn't have TV at home. I used to go round to Lorraine Pole's to watch 'The Twilight Zone' and then I'd be too frightened to walk home and Dad would have to come and get me.

I used to listen to the Argonauts Club on the wireless after school, and 'Yes what.' At night we liked 'My Word' and there was a serial called Campbell's Kingdom which seemed to go one for ever. And, of course, Blue Hills was always on at lunchtime.

In my early teens, we were given the choice of a new house or a trip overseas. Ray Sanders took a year off teaching to be our tutor, and we set off on a Greek ship to Spain, France, Portugal. We even had an introduction



ABOVE: (from left) Young AD Hillgrove, Keith Hillgrove and Mary Kirsch
RIGHT: A certificate of passage from the Prime Minister, Robert Menzies

to the Israeli Government from the boss of the State Rivers. Because of this we were shown the Negev Desert. We also had a letter of introduction from Sir Robert Menzies to pave the way wherever we went.

My dad was like that. He got things done.

In America, we went round in a Greyhound Bus: - \$99 for 99 days.

I was privileged when I was young.

Times are different now. In those days, Dad and Alan Wood between them seemed to be able to get pretty well what they wanted.'

Judy's dad certainly got things done around Birchip, in his own inimitable way.

She remembers him as a man of few words, one who never raised his voice, not exactly affectionate, but always fun to be with when he was home, which wasn't often. Useless in the house, he was known once to feed himself and his two children on tinned sardines on toast for a week.

Birchip, she says, was the place A.D. Hillgrove wanted to be. Born into a family doomed to lose the farm during the hard times, he set about retrieving it and creating a place for himself and, later his own family. It was safe and secure for her, a known world, one in which she was recognised, in a special place because he was so well-respected. It was for him the ground on which he based his projects, risky and not so risky. On drives around the family farm, he would say, 'It's mine – and the bank's'. Unlike so many self-made men, 'he never trampled on anyone to achieve his aims.'

His ventures covered many aspects of country life and extended further: shearing, earthmoving, grain pickling, water boring, beef cattle, irrigation, even sorghum. His daughter says that he was always looking for something new, always an adventurer, always branching out, always moving, always changing.

'I'm very proud of Dad, of all that he achieved and the way he lived his life. From the time he started working, he seemed to have a plan, firstly to help his mother keep the family farm. They lost this, but he eventually bought it back. He was always expanding and diversifying, not afraid to take risks.'

'He had amazing energy. He used to do a lot of driving. He could get up at six, drive to Melbourne, do a day's business and then drive home again. He'd get up and go to work as usual the next day. If I went with him, I'd be tired, but he never was.'

As his business grew, it was clear that he was proud of his achievements, but not of the status that came with them. When he died in 1979, he was a millionaire.

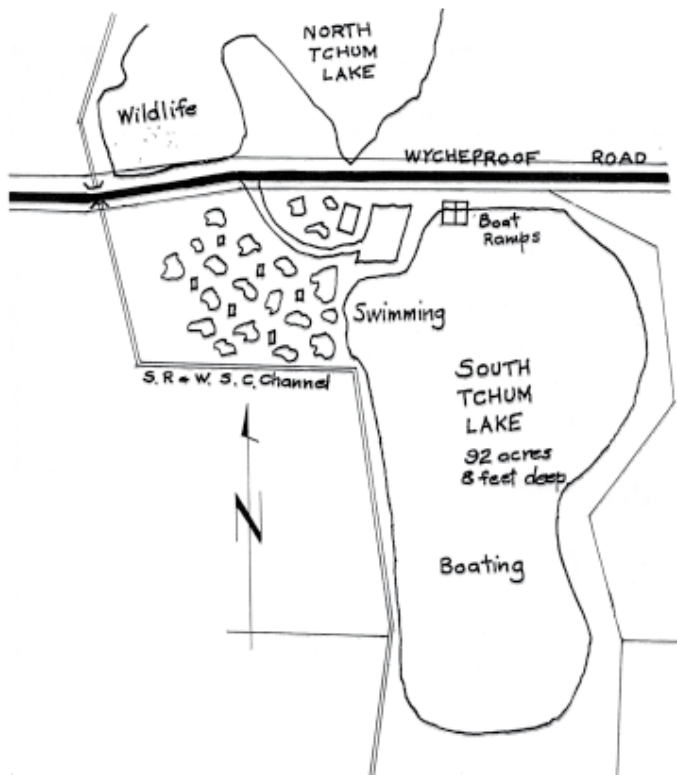
Judy Living is a Birchip girl, though she thinks that she could live elsewhere if the opportunity arose. When her first husband died, the place offered the security she needed. Though her children are all living away from the town, they love to come 'home' to their mother's cottage which itself is a tribute to the past.



A. D. HILLGROVE TCHUM LAKE APPEAL

SUNDAY, AUGUST 5

PREMIER PLEDGES \$30,000 ON \$ FOR \$ BASIS
Therefore Tchum Lake South Committee has to raise
a local contribution of \$30,000 to match the Grant.



DETAILS OF ESTIMATED COST OF CONSTRUCTION ARE AS FOLLOWS:—

	TOTAL \$	GRANT \$	LOCAL \$
1. CONSTRUCTION OF LAKE, EXCAVATION OF BED, CONSTRUCTION OF BANKS AND STRUCTURES, CONSTRUCTION OF INLET CHANNEL AND STRUCTURES. (SPECIAL GRANT)	60,000	30,000	30,000
2. CONSTRUCTION OF DOUBLE BOAT RAMP, ACCESS ROAD AND PARKING AREA FOR CARS AND TRAILERS AND TOILET BLOCK. (TOURIST FUND - BOATING)	48,000	22,000	8,000
3. CONSTRUCTION OF TWO BARBECUES AND PICNIC TABLES ETC. LANDS DEPARTMENT GRANT	10,000	10,000	
	\$118,000	72,000	38,000

The Committee of Management in co-operation with the Lions Club and Apex Club, will be conducting a door-knock throughout the district on
SUNDAY, AUGUST 5, 1979
and is hoping that the community will fully support the appeal thus ensuring the completion of this vitally important project.

This project was strongly supported by the late Arthur Hillgrove and the Committee is anxious to see the lake completed as a community asset and a fitting memorial to him.



Very good at arithmetic

To meet Beryl Coombs is to forget any glib, dismissive assumptions about ageing. Her memory is better than most, her mind sharp and clear. She enjoys reminiscing about the years spent in Birchip which, she says, ‘mean everything’ to her.

Beryl came to Birchip after meeting Dot Atwell when they were playing cricket. Dot’s mother and stepfather were locals and after her parents died, the Parkers virtually adopted her. Dot was both a champion cricketer and cyclist. She trained with Sir Hubert Oppermann and Ossie Nicholson at the Windsor Club. Playing for the Windsor Club, she was picked for the women’s cricket team to play in the 1946/47 competition in England, but finances prevented her going. ‘If you didn’t have enough money, you couldn’t go.’

In 1938, at the age of 17, Beryl finished school, where she had been ‘good at arithmetic’, something of an understatement if her subsequent career is any indication. During the war, she joined the WAF. She was posted to Laverton Hospital - where she alphabetised all the medical and dental equipment - and later to Wagga. While there, she gave up her lunchtimes to teach. Chronic asthma required a ‘sitting down job’, and accountancy seemed the obvious choice for one of her abilities.

In 1950, Dot and Beryl moved back to Birchip. Beryl declares, ‘Dot and I were a combination’ and the list of events and activities they inspired and organised attests to this. Howard Tingey, the football coach, requested that there be a Birchip Ladies’ Football Auxiliary which would organise social events and raise funds for the club. No sooner said than done. The first auxiliary was formed, with ‘Mrs Shannon’ – ‘I never called her by her first name, she was just Mrs Shannon’ – as President, Dot as Secretary and Beryl as President.

Then there was the Birchip Swimming Club of more than 100 members, which ran tournaments and functions. Secretary? Dot Atwell. Treasurer? Beryl Coombs. Lorna Litt acted as ‘backstop.’

Another opportunity for the dynamic combo was the Birchip Shire Swimming Pool Extension Committee.

Even more interesting, from a current day perspective, is the Ladies’ Football Team which played in the black and white colours against Nullawil, Wycheproof and Watchem. ‘We did things that weren’t done,’ Beryl says proudly. ‘Of course we encountered some opposition, especially from Canon Hammerston, who thought such a venture was unchristian, and unladylike, quite out of order. But we stood up for ourselves and made money for the hospital in the process. I remember one game at Watchem – hundreds came. We had an Old Buffers’ Team as well. Everyone loved it.’

From 1979 to the 1990s, the energetic pair also organised the ‘End of the Season’ Golf and Lady Members’ trips to Yarrawonga, Corowa, Cobram-Barooga and Deniliquin. Beryl was also treasurer of the Birchip RSL sub-branch for many years, a service which earned her a life membership.



In about 1969, Beryl began working for A.D. Hillgrove, and like his daughter Judy, she hasn’t a bad word to say about him. ‘He was a wonderful man, and so was his brother Keith. He had foresight and vision and he was involved in so many things. He was tops. We worked so well together.’ In the 1960s, there were 176 people on the payroll, employed in eleven different companies: McIntosh’s Hardware Supplies – Hillgrove’s Hardware; A.D. Hillgrove Constructions Pty. Ltd., Transit Contractors; A.D. and V.L. Hillgrove (farming); Hillgrove Grading Service; A. D. Hillgrove Tractor Division – Hillgrove Tractors Pty. Ltd.; Hillgrove Tyre Service; A.D. Hillgrove (land development); Hillgrove’s Drilling (water drilling) – Hillgrove and Beasley; Hillgrove and Couser (dragline); Hillgrove and Hollis (dragline) and Hillgrove and Dunlop (earthmoving).

Beryl often sat up till two or three in the morning, working in an old leather-bound ledger which ‘covered every transaction we ever did: the wheat, barley, oats, mustard, pickle. The wood, machinery, shearing, crutching, the farm. It was an absolute pleasure to do it. I’d be working away while Dot played cards.’

After AD died, Beryl retired, devoting much of her time to the bowling green. Dot preferred golf.

‘Birchip was like no other place I’d ever come across before. The people were absolutely wonderful. They were so interested, and you became part of the community. We had so many friends.’

By all accounts, Beryl and Dot were useful friends to have.

The Hospital



Caption to come ...





A different world

After a fortuitous blind date, Betty McIntyre, a nurse, came from St Arnaud to marry Pat Connelly. She had not been in Birchip a week before the phone rang. Could she please, please, take up nursing in the town?

When she agreed, she may not have realised what she was taking on. Birchip was at that time ‘between doctors’ and she was soon delivering as many as three babies a day, quite often without a doctor present at all. She rarely encountered trouble because, she says, ‘women were different in those days. As often as not, they were used to being down on their knees scrubbing floors; as a result their pelvis was more flexible. It’s not the same sort of exercise that girls get today.’

Later she remembers Dr George Drieburg from Sea Lake, standing operating in a bucket of iced water when temperatures became unbearable.

Women top and tailed when the hospitals became crowded. It was a vastly different world from that of today.

ABOVE: Betty Connolly



The essence is the same

Christine Richmond is dedicated to her job.

‘When I began nursing in Birchip in 1978, I worked at the hospital. It was a designated Bush Nursing Hospital, and I suppose you would say that that was pretty accurate. Then, as now, we prided ourselves on providing the very best care we could.

Now I am in Wirrim Lodge, where I have been since it opened twenty two years ago as a ten bed, Aged Care Facility. We believe strongly in the care and services we provide, but it’s a different ball game. There are so many rules, regulations, specifications. I’ll give you a few examples: No Lift, OH & S, Infection Control, Wound Care and Aged Care. There are Campus managers, Unit Managers and Associate Charge Nurses. There is Standards and Accreditation Funding.

Some changes in equipment are also worth mentioning: lifters, electronic hi-low beds, weighing scales, electronic b/p machines, digital thermometers, syringe driver, not to mention computers.

We deal with the implementation of iCare, a computerised resident medical record system which is replacing all the extensive paper records. It’s a new world.

Despite the changes, the essence is the same. Our residents and their families feel comfortable knowing that they are close to home, it’s a familiar world, and the care is impeccable. We try to make Wirrim Lodge as much like home as possible.’

ABOVE: (from left) the late Jim White and Christine Richmond



A wider fraternity

District Nurse Mandy Moloney feels that her role as a health professional place her in a unique and privileged position in the community. She is always welcomed warmly into the homes and lives of her clients, whose gratitude for her support and assistance she finds very humbling.

She feels that she is a member of a wider fraternity of health professionals who, despite the challenges which come about inevitably as a result of rural isolation, strive to offer as much care as possible.

ABOVE: (from left) Mandy Maloney and Norm Kemp



Everyone is welcome

Every month, Division 1 and Division 2 Acute Nursing Staff meet for an hour long review of the past weeks’ progress at the Birchip Campus of the East Wimmera Health. The aim is to keep the meeting brief and to the point.

Any worries or complaints are dealt with, any new policies and procedures are discussed and means to implement them devised.

Helen Barclay says that the meeting is a ‘great communication point. Everyone has the right to speak, and all staff are encouraged to attend. We welcome children, because we see ourselves as a family and community hospital at which everyone is welcome.’

ABOVE: (from left) Rainey and Jeswin Chacko, Helen Barclay, Nita Wilson, Sharon Flowers, Penny Braine, Helen Casey and Cathy Bales

Hands on medicine, with God at their side

John and Bev Horton came to Birchip because it was just what they were looking for and because two people from the Hospital Committee were gifted with the personal touch.

Though city born, they were ready for country life. They wanted to go where they were needed, to a small town which would enable a doctor to ‘do something exciting, to do everything.’ There were other towns which fulfilled those criteria, but those towns didn’t have Rose Bennett and George Gould batting for them. As John Horton said, ‘They made you feel that you were wanted. Not for them the formal letter. They made a personal connection and that made all the difference.’

As it turned out, Birchip offered John and Bev everything it promised. When they walked down the street, people smiled and said hello. When the locals came to the surgery, they were happy to put themselves into the hands of the local GP. The hospital was a team: the staff worked together and afterwards sat down for a convivial cup of tea. The facilities were there: the theatre, the labour ward, and here was the man – and the woman – to do the work.

John Horton learnt his medicine in more robust times, when a young doctor could, with the help of a mentor or two, perform miracles. He practised medicine, performed operations, gave anaesthetics, and learnt how to read X-rays.

His first appointment was to Preston and Northcote Community hospital, where much was expected of the three young interns. They were extremely busy and they rapidly took on great responsibilities. As John says, ‘We learnt to cope with things.’

After that came a period in Ba, Fiji. This was practical, demanding, hands-on medicine, in which a young woman might come to the hospital days into labour. John learnt to deal with such emergencies, often ‘swotting up the night before’. For six and a half years, he expected to be called once or twice a night: to wake in the morning after an uninterrupted sleep was to feel that something odd had occurred. Bev helped in out-patients; his experience grew.

Throughout, John’s, and Bev’s Christian faith was central to their work in medicine. He never doubted that he always had someone by his side, guiding his hand and coming to his aid in emergencies.

Today, now that the Hortons are retired, they are happy to remain in Birchip. They like it here, they love the people; their friends are here. While droughts are not crucial to them financially, Bev and John experience the hurt with the community. They watch and admire the farmers and their families, their affinity with the land, their ability to keep going, their resilience.

Birchip is the Hortons’ home.

Birchip was lucky to have the Hortons, and they believe that they’ve been lucky to have Birchip. John Horton says: ‘If I had my time again, I wouldn’t go anywhere else.’



Never a question



From 1944, the Reid family travelled in to the Birchip Methodist Church ‘in the 1922 Buick weekly, except when the roads were too wet. The road was a track that went in and out of trees along what is now the Sunraysia Highway.’ The children never asked whether they would be going to church: they knew they were.

Sunday School teaching was a focus; children attended from the age of three, and continued through to Bible Class at the age of sixteen to seventeen. Barlings, Bennets, Hortons and Reids all took their turn; John Bennet taught for 42 years his last students being his own grandchildren.

Regular Bible studies, missionary nights, Adult Fellowship and lay preaching have all played their part over the years in maintaining an active and positive ministry, as has the Uniting Church Adult Fellowship in more recent years.

Dorothy Reid regrets that ‘most people in the community are no longer interested in attending church or supporting it financially. Sport takes the time and energy of young people, as well as TV and computers.’

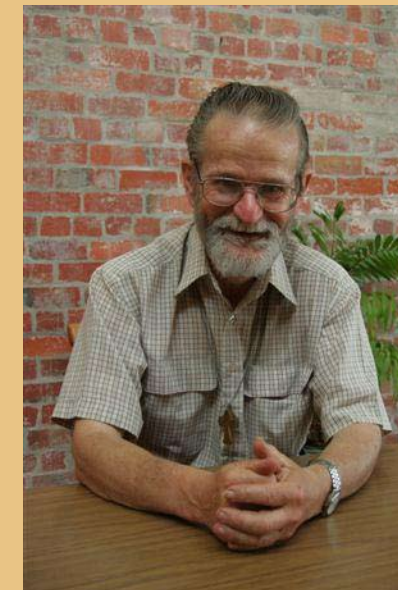
Not that the Christian road has ever been easy. She recalls an ‘old time’ preacher’s comment on Christ’s instruction to ‘feed the sheep.’ ‘Are we here to feed the sheep,’ he asked acidly, ‘or entertain the goats?’

Dorothy likes to tell the following story: ‘In the 1940s, one young Home Missioner and his bride, on their journey to take up the position in Birchip, took the dry weather Single Tree Road not knowing there had been rain. Their Buick became hopelessly bogged and they had to spend the night in the car. Not surprisingly, the bride sobbed that she wanted to go home (to Melbourne) to her mother! A farmer rescued them the next morning. The same Home Missioner joined the Birchip Cricket and Football Clubs and is still remembered for his skills sixty years later.

One Sunday morning he appeared at church sporting a black eye from the previous day’s football match. ‘Wait till Miss X sees you!’ he was warned. Apparently, the elderly spinster did not approve of God’s representative in the Mallee playing such rough games!’

Nowadays, the current incumbent of the Karyrie Parish, Rev Graeme Wells, is a gentle representative of his kind. Known for his concern for the sick, the aged and the grieving, his pastoral care is greatly appreciated by the nursing staff at the hospital and the community in general.

Like many things, the Church continues to survive because those who care make sure it does.



A kiss was not a sin

When Rosie Whelan was growing up, her parents took great comfort in the fact that, as a Catholic, you could go to church anywhere in the world and the service would be the same. You could respond to the Latin Mass with confidence and your response would be indistinguishable from anyone else's. She's not sure now that she knew what the words, but that wasn't the point: they were familiar, safe and reassuring.

Born of Irish Catholic parents on both sides, with relatives who were nuns and priests, going to Catholic school was as natural as breathing. There in Donald, where the nuns belonged to a missionary order, she learnt pretty much what anyone of the time learnt, with the addition of bookkeeping and short hand after school, as well as music. There was no particular stress on the Catechism, or on prayer? It was just school.

There was, however, the requirement of fortnightly confession of sins, such as lying or disobeying your parents. 'Fortunately,' Rosie reflects, 'kissing a boy wasn't a sin as far as I was concerned. We did have to fast after midnight on Saturday in order to be pure for Mass on Sunday and of course we ate meat on Fridays.'

As she began to grow up, school was something Rosie was more than happy to dispense with. When, during her Intermediate year, she was offered the chance to work at the local emporium, she 'couldn't get out the door quickly enough. I didn't even go back for my books.'

Now she thinks rather differently, reminding her many grandchildren that school's the best chance they get.

Though she rose from 'junior girl' to 'senior girl', and though she had two sisters already working in Melbourne, her expectations were simple. Love, marriage, and in due course, a family. The realisation of these ambitions came in the form of Bobby Rickard, encountered at the dances in Donald, to which the Birchip lads always came, no doubt with similar thoughts in mind.

The dream came true, and in 1957, when she was 21 and Bobby 22, they married. Soon after, Rosie began her family of five boys. Harsh reality intervened when, in 1986, at the age of 51, Bobby died of cancer after a protracted illness.

The initial reaction was to panic. How would she manage? The answer was 'to soldier on and get through,' and here her faith provided the support she needed, just as it did during two other crises of her life, the death of her daughter-in-law, Vicki, also from cancer, and of her sister.

A few decades ago, there was a perceptible sectarian divide in Birchip which Rosie believes is now largely of the past. Children of today may have other prejudices, but verbal abuse featuring Catholic dogs and Proddy frogs – or was it the other way round? – doesn't feature in their lives. But back then the Protestant/Catholic divide was very real, and at the time of their marriage, Bobby's coming from the other side of that divide raised inevitable problems.



Vatican II changed the Catholic Church in many ways, moving it forward, abolishing some of the more restricting aspects of observance. The Mass was no longer spoken in Latin, but English; nuns came out of their formal habits; the priest faced the faithful rather than standing with his back to them; lay people took part in the Mass.

Rosie fears for the future of the Church, partly a result of watching country schools close and numbers at mass dwindle. She feels that the hierarchy is not entirely in tune with the people, and sees marriage of priests as a real possibility. However, she takes heart from the numbers of those present at Catholic Youth Day, seeing them as an indicator of a revived and reinvigorated Church. She also believes in a church less concerned with dogma and tradition and more with social justice, with the greater needs of humanity.

'You can't just live in your own box, you have to get outside the square and look at the needs of others.'

When Bobby died, many people encouraged her to leave Birchip, to enjoy herself in a life 'of her own', to start a business, to move to Swan Hill or Horsham. She thought about it, but in the end she settled for what she had and knew. Since then, she has been there for Chris and Vicky, for the other children who see Birchip as their home, for her grandchildren, for the family, for the farm. She has never regretted that decision.

As she sits in her house in Birchip, in her garden which she has kept beautiful despite the droughts, Rosie Rickard still has that twinkle in her eye. She's still the girl who never thought that to kiss a boy was a sin.

I chose the place

When asked about living in Birchip, Col Grey had all the answers.

He was adamant about his claims to being a real Birchipian. Others, he suggested, were there because they had been born there, or had no alternative. ‘I’ve come back three times,’ he used to say. ‘I actually chose the place. I must really like it. Perhaps it isn’t quite the same as it used to be – many people have died or left - but nobody beats the Mallee people.’

From 1955 – 1960 Col was bookkeeper with Australian Estates; from 1962-1972 he was an accountant for Oakley and Thompson, doing tax returns for people from Sea Lake, Woomelang, Culgoa and Birchip. In 1991 he returned to the Mallee, finding a satisfying companionship with Rosie Rickard.

Col died on 25 October 2005 after a long illness. His was a much loved face around the town.



A long time playing

Val Hogan has been playing the organ for the Anglicans for fifty years, one way and another.

‘Of course, we don’t get many to church these days,’ she says, ‘not like we used to when the McCallums and Hogans and Watersons used to come, some of them with tribes of children. Times have changed, but this church is still important.’

That painting at the back of the church has always been a bit controversial. Not everyone liked it. When Canon Hammerston was here it was right up the front, but it was relegated to the back shed for a while. Now it’s here at the back. It’s quite symbolic: the figures on Christ’s left represent those who have turned away from the Church; the ones on his right those who have remained faithful.’

It was painted by Owen Spurway, who became an Anglican while he was in Birchip. Val is very fond of it.

‘It’s very special,’ she says.



Streetwalk one



TOP LEFT: Bourke's Butchery Steve Bourke and Josh Moloney
It's a great town. I think because it's a bit away from the action there's a greater sense of community. We make our own action.

TOP CENTRE: The Mallee Shearing Shed Rachel Ferrier
It's a fantastic business, but it's as good as the time you're prepared to put into it. Birchip's been kind to me. We'll be here forever.

TOP RIGHT: Commonwealth Bank Mary Cantwell
It's a satisfying job, interacting with people and keeping them happy. We provide a service that the town needs.

MIDDLE LEFT: IGA Natasha Hogan
I really enjoy working here.

MIDDLE CENTRE: IGA Peter Doyle
Birchip's better than most places probably because there are many more people who care about keeping the town going. It was a great choice to come.

MIDDLE RIGHT: Just You Casuals Janet Connolly, Bev Ryan, Frances Lee and Rhonda Cooper
We try to have a bit of everything to keep the people in Birchip. People have been pretty supportive.

LEFT: Grampians Wimmera Mallee Water Rhonda King
We've come a long way. There are improvements happening all the time.



Sharps' Bakery Gail and Kevin Sharp
It's the pride, love and passion in the community that keeps us going. It's inbuilt into our kids. We aim to produce the best quality food at a fair price and we try to be responsive to community needs.

Birchip Community Pharmacy Del Sladdin
I'm closer to my patients than I would be elsewhere. I get to know them as full human beings. This pharmacy was purpose built, first opened in 1898, and has been here ever since.

A.G. and J.M. Noonan, Builders
I came home to rear my family. There's no better place because I grew up here too. Community spirit and facilities are excellent.

Grampians Wimmera Mallee Water Peter Naughton
We empty out our water samples on the garden so that we don't waste a drop.

WHK Thompson Sue Davis
I love working with figures, bookwork; we have such nice people coming on here.

WHK Thompson Tara Lehmann
I the work environment is very satisfying and I work with great people. the clients are friendly and are glad that they can come to a local firm with their business.

Bernadette O'Donnell
We offer comprehensive financial services without people having to go out of town.

They formed my early ideas of courage

‘Sunnyside’, the original home of Jack and Bertha McClelland, located just out of Birchip to the west, is no longer standing. Even so, it lives on the memory of John Tulloh, their grandson, who made yearly visits of two to three weeks’ duration to his grandmother in the years before the War.

Each May (and perhaps one September) his mother Gwen would leave her journalist husband in Adelaide and bundle him and his three sisters into the old Armstrong Siddeley and make the trek to Birchip. After a nightmare drive over rutted and often narrow roads, John Tulloh remembers reaching Morton Plains - bleak, cold and unwelcoming. ‘I saw it as a land of struggle,’ he says.

Once arrived at ‘Sunnyside,’ however, these impressions were quickly dissipated: the tradition in the family was one of frugality, but never meanness. Though nothing was wasted, there was warmth and welcome at the farm, and the young boy looked forward eagerly to these yearly visits.

Jack McClelland had died of leukaemia in 1934, when his daughter was only twenty, so that Bertha ran the farm herself. John recalls young employees and contract workers arriving at the back door, collecting a basket of buttered scones and disappearing into the night. He remembers the daily progress round the farm, his grandmother in charge. Border Collie Lady at her side on the front seat, she would drive in what he thought was a cavalier fashion across the emerging crops, keeping an eye on things, checking the channels which seemed always to be full and tut tutting about the stands of noxious weeds.

‘Gran had a cow. Milking was considered a girl’s job, so I never had to do it. But I remember watching the milk foaming into the metal bowl, and the separator’s regular chime. There were orphaned lambs in the disused tennis court, especially Whisky, who we’d feed with a mixture of milk and bran. Bertha also kept a good house garden for fresh vegetables.

Behind the house there were tall gum trees which would moan as they shivered in the wind. That was where the dunny, with its newspaper on a hook, was. You never lingered long out there.’

Every Friday, Gran or Mum would hitch the old horse Tom to the two wheeled gig, the ladies would put on their crocodile skin gloves and their coats, and we would drive in style into Birchip. We’d tie up Tom under the peppercorn trees with a bag of oats and off we’d go. I remember being served by men in white aprons in Herb Taylor’s grocery with its smell of cheese. We’d pick up the mail at P.O. Box 32 and the paper, the Melbourne Argus. We’d take them home and read by the light of the oil lamps, round a big log fire in the lounge. We always knew what time it was from the mantelpiece clock which chimed deeply every quarter of an hour.

Sometimes we’d go to meet the McClelland relatives in town as well, perhaps at Elsie Gilmour’s.’

John Tulloh remembers his childhood fascination with Birchip people. He saw them as ‘enormously resilient people who would shrug off hardship and on whom you could count in any circumstances. They formed my early ideas of courage. And they were generous. Mum always said that, back in Adelaide, when the appeals came on radio for bushfire or flood relief, she would hear the Birchip names time and time again.’

And was there a Catholic/Protestant divide? ‘Oh, it was there, all right. The children from each side were always being advised to watch out for each other, for various reasons. My family was on the Protestant side, and therefore ineligible as a husband for any Catholic girl. Archbishop Mannix was always warning that if a Catholic married a Protestant, he’d rot in Hell.’

He remembers those visits with affection, and his grandmother with love and admiration. ‘She had a love of the finer things, but she managed that farm on her own. She lived till to one hundred and two, you know.’



Out of date Marmalade

Original story by Rachel Rudd

‘Pass the marmalade, thanks, Alisa?’ Nanna asks, surrendering to her inability to stretch her arm across the breakfast table and reach the jar, orange and sticky amongst a cluttered array of porcelain teacups, burnt toast and margarine speckled with crumbs.

‘Here you are,’ I, Rachel, reply, ignoring Nanna’s loss of memory to avoid embarrassing her by correction and reach for the jar, placing it in her reach. She nods a gratuitous nod and continues to scrape her toast, ensuring each burnt corner absorbs the margarine before the toast cools.

The kitchen is silent apart from the mutter of the radio presenting the morning news. My mind wanders as I try to visualise the face behind the dreary monotonous tone of the newsreader and search for some conversation. I watch Nanna curiously, wondering what she is thinking as the creases her wrinkled brow and, with shaky hands, places her teacup on the saucer, clattering the fragile china. I never want to be old, my mind thinks. My body smirks in reply. I spread my toast as Nanna watches with a curious eye, concerned at the lack of jam on my knife.

‘You’re not dieting, are you?’ she demands suspiciously.

Annoyed, yet patient, I smile. ‘No, Nanna. This is enough. Really,’ I assure her, and proceed to bite my piece of toast. Nanna looks on, dissatisfied. I occupy myself, avoiding her stare, tracing the pattern of the tablecloth with my eyes, wondering what stories each stain could tell if able to speak.

Nanna, from across the table, has over the years become not only older by noticeably larger. Her wrinkled hand shakes, grasps the knife fishing into the marmalade, disappears momentarily, then emerges with a clump of jam, wobbling, poised, ready to fall. As she spreads the marmalade, I pick up crumbs on the tablecloth with my finger, collecting memories from the corner of my mind.

I am five. ‘Who’s that man, Nanna?’ I ask, pointing to the portrait on the wall and screwing up my nose in objection to the stranger standing next to her. ‘That’s Harry, you grandfather, and my husband, dear,’ Nanna replies with a sentimental smile, staring at the handsome groom smiling back from the black and white wedding portrait. ‘Oh,’ I accept indifferently and turn my attention to the adjacent family photograph, giggling as I recognise my mother in the front row, her sandals swinging in mid air, unable to reach the floor.

I dunk my biscuits into my milk, watch each soaked crumb weaken, then plunge my fingers into the glass in a desperate attempt to retrieve them. Too late. I grab another from the jar, seeking Nanna’s approval with a questioning eye. ‘Have as many as you like, Rachel, dear,’ she replies happily. I smile and resume my game. My young mind is immune from thoughts of old age.



I am twelve. I lie beside Nanna in her bed listening as she prays in whispered tones. I am squashed; I change position. The flannelette nightie she lent me twists around me uncomfortably, like a cocoon; the lace scratches my neck. ‘Goodnight, Nanna. Don’t let the bed bugs bite,’ I interrupt her prayers. ‘Goodnight dear. See you in the morning.’ I bury my face in the pillow, disguising my laughter as Nanna snores.

How time changes everything! *I’m helpless against it, as she is.* My teaspoon collides angrily with the sides of my cup. I love everything about my Nanna except her age. She’s angry too. I notice her frustration when she forgets things, drops things, and when I remind her to take her tablets.

‘It’s natural,’ my mind consoles. My heart objects.

Nanna is fading like the dusty photographs of her generation staring down from the mantelpiece. Snapshots of her life, now only fading memories.

I am seventeen. I kiss Nanna goodnight. ‘Have a good sleep, Nanna. I’ll see you in the morning.’

‘I hope so’, is the reply from the wrinkled suit which has taken my cheerful, healthy, content Nanna hostage.

‘So do I,’ my mind says. My heart agrees. My lips lie as the words ‘Of course I will’ reassure both of us as I turn off the light.’



It was like growing up in a tribe

Rachel Rudd (née Wilson) remembers her Birchip childhood as idyllic. ‘Now that I’m a parent, I appreciate the freedom I had. It was like growing up in a tribe.

I see the simplicity of my early life as something I would love (my children) Monica and Michael to experience. We were able to walk to and from school, to play unsupervised at the park, at the big fig trees, the pool.

We revelled in sport, in the active, social lifestyle it promoted. Weekends were filled with tennis, swimming, netball and watching the boys play cricket and footy. It certainly doesn’t sound like a social highlight now, but I loved nothing more than playing netball on Saturday and spending the afternoon sitting on the boundary, eating pies and lollies, watching the Swans play. I can even remember watching my dad.’

School is one of her best memories. ‘It was such a nurturing environment.’

At the end of Year 10, seeking change and diversity, Rachel decided to move to Ballarat for her final two years of schooling. She soon realised her mistake. ‘I missed the sense of support and connection. I came back for year 12; I knew it was where I belonged.’ ‘

She has a sense of pride in her Mallee origins. ‘The network is amazing; it extends all over the place. Even in Sydney, there are connections, links to family and friends. Here, I look for a sense of community like the one I had and that I miss.’

Her grandmother, Kathleen Ryan, was the heart and soul of her childhood sense of belonging. ‘I loved Nanna, but as I grew up I could see her shrinking, like a piece of fruit. She was deteriorating, afraid of death, afraid of being ill, of being forced to leave her own place.’ Rachel’s Year 12 essay attempts to capture the essence.

‘I wrote what was in my heart. I loved my time with Nana, and had a really special relationship with her. I was frustrated that she was getting old and feared that we would lose her. Now I remember the good things I had with her. I would hate to think that my dear old Nana read that essay and thought anything else than that I loved her and enjoyed her company.’

Kathleen Ryan never did not have to leave her own home. She died when she was eighty three, at the hairdresser’s, having her hair done.



I did it my way

Gladys Cahoon, was born Gladys Lehmann in 1926 at Curyo West, hasn't moved very far since. She can't imagine life any other way. She doesn't know anything different from farming and doesn't want to.

'There have always been ups and downs, droughts and good years; that's the cycle. It's hard to sit and watch the farming when you've always done it yourself,' she says.

She had a natural love of animals, which translated into a kind of homespun veterinary service. She delivered calves, lambs, foals and pigs – nothing was too large or too small. Mastitis was summarily dealt with: as long as a bike pump and a piece of string were to hand.

After farming, her life was lived through sport. And she was good at it. As she says, 'The only thing I couldn't play was the piano. I wasn't an indoor person and that's still true.'

She lives in the house she came to when she was married 60 years ago, tending the fifty or sixty exotic, native and domestic birds left in her aviary, playing the odd game of golf at Hopetoun, looking after the retired thoroughbred horses, regretting the death of her Murray Grey bull and remembering how things were.

She exudes independence, strength, and self sufficiency.

'I came to this farm when I was six,' she says. 'They're trying to shift me, but I won't.'



A quiet achiever

Jean Smith's life has followed the pattern of many such lives in the Mallee.

After an early struggle, "somehow" her father was able to buy a 1400 farm at Kinnabulla. There the family remained, and there her brother Alan still farms today. She attended school at Curyo, a 'safe and comfortable' experience. School became the Church for the bi-weekly services, and the students would pack up the desks every week. She recalls Nell Barber belting out the hymns while those naughty twins sat there trying their father as far as they possibly could.

After completing Year 10 at the Birchip Higher Elementary School, she spent a year at Emily MacPherson College where she was suitably 'finished'.

Her secret ambition was to pull petrol at Baleses' bowser. Today she may well have become a mechanic, but instead she boldly walked into the central Commercial Bank (Westpac) and presented her credentials. She was promptly employed.

She married in her early twenties and stayed at home to bring up her two children.

In 1966 she successfully applied for a position of 'secretary' at the Birchip Hospital, but was soon using her banking experience to 'do the books'. There she remained until 1999. The Birchip Bush Nursing Hospital was a great source of satisfaction: it was a wonderful workplace, one without a disaster in the thirty three years she spent there.

With two children happily settled with families and careers after a sound education at their local school, and five grand children, Jean looks back on her simple life with satisfaction. Her hopes to remain 'happily and healthily' in her own home, playing bowls and reading her favourite authors. She revels in her daily routine, her church life, her attendance at Probus and her contribution to Meals on Wheels.

She believes in the future of her little town, though' there may be changes we can't even imagine.'



God provides

Mary Noonan has had nine children. She likes to name them off in order: Leo Patrick, Michael Francis, Bernard Joseph, Anthony Gerard, Greta Leanne, Josephine Mary, Maurita Anne, Monica Majella, Genevieve Mary (who died just after she was ten of a birth defect, transplantation of the great vessels of the heart.) She also had three miscarriages. All the babies were born safely in Birchip, but she remarks that it wasn't until the last one that she learnt how to breathe. And, of course, Leo was never there. 'The men never came in.'

'Having nine children was a joy. Nine children are easier to mind than a couple. It was a struggle financially, but God provides. I was never lonely, and I always loved working outside. It was different in those days. We killed our own meat, raised our own hens for eggs, milked cows, sold cream, sent chooks and turkeys off to the market at Bendigo. Now mothers have to work so that their families can have the same things.'

All the children had a job around the house and yards. Her husband Leo was a happy person, singing, telling jokes, always looking on the bright side. He was an animal man, rearing and training dogs, he had sheep. The secret 'to the whole show was that, once the children reached a certain age, they'd go out with him.'

She went back to nursing in about 1975. 'When you work at the hospital, you're friends with everybody.'

It was a simple satisfying life. There were lots of visitors, lots of cousins. The philosophy was simple but clear: 'be happy with what you've got and what you've got will make you happy.'

Mary Noonan now has forty seven grandchildren.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
Glenalvon, Windarra, Sunnyside,
Woodlands and Morton Plains

OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP
Kirsches' homestead (Juergens),
old Pole stables (Haslams),
Marlbed woolshed (Cullinans)
and the Joneses' dairy (Rickard)

The man who wouldn't make sixty and his wife, Judith

Norm Barclay's story is rather different from that of most farmers round Birchip. In a sense, it offers a telling illustration of the differences between the old world and the new.

Norm was born in Northumberland in 1926. When he was twelve, he and his parents and two siblings moved to Buckinghamshire in the south of England. His father managed the estates of wealthy landowners whose land produced dairy products, cereals and vegetables. Living next door to Lady Astor and such august people, he was allowed to play only with others from the estate, no doubt from fear of contamination from more lowly folk. She had four gamekeepers, and bred birds for the hunt. 'Mr Barclay's son' was, naturally, an ideal choice as a beater.

At 15, as a result of the labour shortages caused by the war, Norm began work on the farm. He rose to be assistant manager, but, at twenty four, persistent bronchial asthma drove him from England to a drier climate. The doctors had already told him that he wouldn't make sixty – he's now turned 82 – so his decision was made for him. Australia was more than glad to have him. As he says, 'I wasn't even a £10 Pom. I came free.'

A two year contract with the British Food Corporation near Emerald fulfilled, Norm began working his way through Australia with the intention of returning home. But it was not to be. Taking a job on a wheat farm near Horsham, he met the niece of its owner and decided then and there to stay in Australia. Looking back, Norm recalls that it was Judith's step-grandmother who suggested a drive in the hills.

Some time in his fifty eight years he caught the Australian male's sense of romance and way with words. Describing that first drive, Norm says 'I looked across at her and was bitten by something I've never been able to shake off.' But perhaps there's some of Old England there as well: 'We've been married for over fifty years and I still think she's special.'

Responding to an advertisement for help during harvest on the farm of John Rickard, near Curyo, Norm came to the place which has remained his home ever since, first as a labourer, and then as share farmer. In 1959, he 'started off with a second hand tractor, scarifier and combine. At harvest I bought a new PTO header.'

His life as a Mallee farmer had begun.

The contrasts between Australia and England were immediate and marked. Until he disembarked in Brisbane on his twenty-fourth birthday, Norm Barclay had never been addressed by his name. He had been, simply, 'Mr Barclay's son. Now, I hate being called Mr Barclay. In some ways, I'm not proud to be British; wherever they went they tried to make people feel inferior.'

Norm's lack of English accent has set him in good stead. He was the exception to the Australian prejudice against the Poms. When disparaging the English, the locals excluded him. 'Of course, we don't mean you,' they'd say.



Even so, he brought with him a few English notions, including an old fashioned one that he admits doesn't hold water today. As far as he was concerned, his wife wasn't going to work. Though Judith was a nurse, her friends were working and she missed the stimulation of her job, she complied. She stayed at home, took an increasing interest in the farm, and looked after the children, especially their daughter Jane, who needed very particular care.

Norm believes that a wife is vital to the success of the farm. 'I couldn't have done anything if Judith hadn't been such a good manager and hadn't been interested. She taught me other things as well. Even though I didn't hold a grudge, I used to be a fiery Scot; I was aggressive. Thanks to Judith, I'm not like that any more.'

What was so good about Mallee farming? 'I'm not sure really. Perhaps it was the large area, the space. And besides, I'd hated dairying back in England. I'm a machine man as well. I've always taken satisfaction from growing the crops, looking at them; it's not all about making money. I've believed in working the ground when it wanted working, not when we felt like it.'

Norm has surrendered responsibility for the farm to his son, Paul. 'It isn't easy. I remember the first time someone walked past me and asked Paul the answer to some farm problem. I thought, what's going on? Handing on is hard, but I didn't want to hold him back. There can't be two bosses. After all, when he came along, he sort of made everything worthwhile.'

I haven't been naturalised, but that's not the point. Australia's been good to me. Australians are interested in what you can do, not what your parents could do or were. When I think I considered Canada ...'

We were always into grain

The Connollys were always into grain, and Pat, born in 1928, was no exception. During the 1890s, Pat's grandfather owned a chaff store in Birchip and this interest progressed naturally through the generations. In the forty seven years Pat Connolly worked the grain business in Birchip, he saw many changes.

Pat's early memories include 'learning to lump' the four bushel bags, a skill not easily or lightly acquired. Pat tells the story himself: 'You had to learn to let the bag roll onto your shoulder (off the elevator) – too quickly and you'd overbalance. As the bag landed, you'd feel your ankles sink, and maybe you'd lose the skin off your shoulders. One way of toughening them up was to rub them with methylated spirits'.

The heat was often unbearable.

'In the burning summer sun, you knew that anything cold to drink would knock you over. You'd get a terrible pain in the stomach. Black tea with sugar was the thing. Or you could suck a stone'. It was hot, hard work, but you did it. 'There was one fellow from Queensland who could lump 1000 bags a day and more. That was something.'

Before the system went bulk, a good bag sewer was worth his weight in gold. A champion bag sewer could do 1000 a day. Again, he might 'toughen up his hands with methylated spirits or hold a penny in his hand to take the pressure of the needle.'

The memory of mouse plagues is also strong. What remains most in Pat's mind is the pervasive smell round the stacks, 'especially if the grain were wet. You'd tie your trousers shut at the bottom, hoping that the little blighters wouldn't get up any further, but if they did they didn't last long. You grabbed them by the head and you went crunch.'

When it came to dirty tricks, the twentieth century was no better than any other. 'On the way up to the weighbridge, a bloke might make sure that his dog was on the wagon, and equally sure that he wasn't on the way back. Of course, if you found him out, he'd get awfully embarrassed.'

People were proud of their horses. 'You'd see them driving into town on the horse and gig, their big families perched up behind. When trucks came in, a Fordson Major was considered big. There were Bedfords and Chevys; they might carry 25-30 bags, two and a half ton, maybe.'

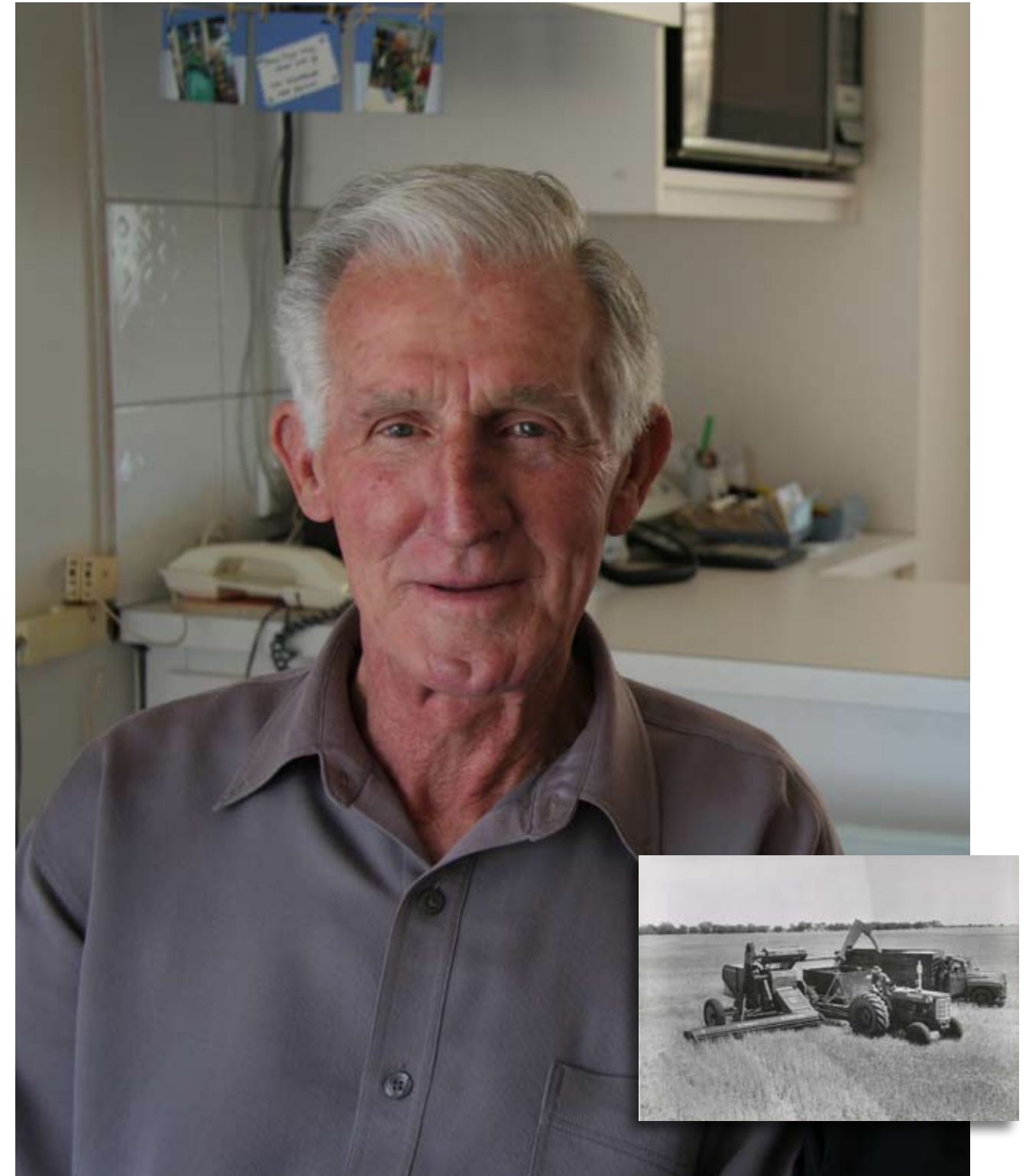
Bulk handling didn't come all at once. As Vernie Connelly, Pat's uncle and one of the first to introduce it to the Mallee, was heard to say, 'Do you think this bulk will take?'

The transition from grain trader to silo keeper was a natural one, and here too there were dangers. In the bulk storage sheds, weevils were a problem. 'You hated working amongst it all day. The smell was terrible, and you soon developed a sore throat and tight chest. I wonder about the long term effects, healthwise.'

Pat's life has a silo keeper enabled him to meet many people, which, over time has given him a great deal of satisfaction. As he says, 'People interest me.'

He believes that the break-up of the single desk selling system for wheat is a mistake. 'Those sharp buyers', he says 'will pick off the inexperienced like sparrows.'

Whatever happens, it won't be like the old days.



Grain handling



ABOVE: John Ferrier's headers
FAR LEFT: Lee Hogan, driving the first truck into AWB
LEFT: Greg Musgrove at the testing station



CLOCKWISE FROM
TOP LEFT:
Grogan's first articulated truck,
wheat stacks,
little Jean Trollope helping grade the seed,
Connelly's team,
Bobby and Jim Rickard with the last harvest before bulk handling,
Andy Cullinan's truck, bag loader

Quintessential farmer

Like many Birchip people, Ross Smith has lived here all his life, which in general has followed its expected path.

Born and educated locally, he returned to the farm after completing Intermediate (what we know now as Year 10) and has been there ever since. Ross can articulate some of his satisfaction in and enjoyment of the agricultural life. ‘I wouldn’t want to be anything else but a farmer. It’s the variety, not doing the same thing day in and day out. It’s a good lifestyle: you’re your own boss; you can take time off when it suits you. There is always plenty of hard work, but that doesn’t do you any harm.’

Reflecting on the past, Ross says that droughts are the only bad memories. Things may have been tough early in his life, but ‘we were always quite happy. We had our yearly holiday in Queenscliff (and continued doing that into the next generation). We were careful: you never bought anything until you could pay for it. Even so, the women did it hard.’

As a child, he made his own fun at home with his three sisters and brother Laurie. School was neither a pleasure nor a chore. He didn’t hate it, but ‘liked sport better.’ The children drove a horse and gig into town from the farm on the Sunraysia Highway, leaving them firstly at the Blue Store and later in the stalls at George Cartwright’s.

Unable to serve in the war because of the effects of rheumatic fever, Ross, who had never been to Melbourne, reported to Manpower to take his turn working at the wool store and later at the abattoirs. He and Roger Hogan would ride their bikes from Flemington to Footscray or walk to the wool stores in Newmarket. Ross did not take to Melbourne and nothing has happened since to change his mind. ‘You can talk to people in the country. In Melbourne you’re not game to speak.’

The 1943/44 drought took its toll, but for Ross there was an upside. Forced to sell the horses, his father was finally talked into buying the first tractor, a bone jarring Twin City with steel wheels and a kerosene light. 1945 saw the purchase of the first ‘real’ tractor: again a Twin City, ‘but with rubber tyres!’

Ross is an idealist. He was always been proud of the straightness of his rows, and, according to his sons, still loves to do things that give him satisfaction. ‘Money isn’t everything.’

Ross was very fortunate in his choice of partner, though he puts it slightly differently. By his telling, ‘school teachers were deadly on farmers,’ and two of his sons would confirm. His future wife, Mary, completing her term’s required teaching in the country, took his eye, but returned to the city, apparently heart whole. But when she found that she’d been posted to Whirily School, things looked up. There followed a meticulous courtship, which could hardly be called whirlwind, especially since it was conducted largely by bicycle. It was three or four years, according to Ross, ‘before I said “yes”’. The couple were married in 1949.

The honeymoon car was borrowed and a long married life began. ‘She was my boss for fifty two years,’ Ross says. Boss or not, Pixie, as most people knew her, was not a person for half measures. The early years of marriage saw her parked in the middle of the paddock at night as Ross sowed right round her.

Ross looks to the future. ‘Birchip is a great community which will continue to be so, but we need better years. You have to be optimistic to be a farmer; it’s getting a bit hard.’



I still call Birchip home

When Beverley Neil visits Birchip, as she does frequently, she likes to be remembered as Bev Rickard, the girl from the farm at Curyo.

When she tells her Ballarat friends that she’s going ‘home’ to Birchip, they can’t imagine what it is she sees in the place.

‘But what will you do?’ they ask.

‘I’ll be flat out,’ she replies, and she is.

Though Bev has not lived in Birchip since being sent away at fifteen to boarding school, she still thinks of it as home. Like so many, she has difficulty defining the essence of its charm, but knows that her heart lies somewhere out on that farm near Curyo. It’s something about being able to ‘dig in that beautiful soil and watch things grow’, about finding some of her father’s sweet pea or turnip seeds, about just remembering.

The farm remains a constant in Bev’s mind: it was a hub for what seemed to be a multitude of people, the family and the swaggies.

‘It may be that I see it through rose-coloured glasses because it’s my childhood home. It taught me that you roll up your sleeves and get on. If you don’t have it, you make it.”

She speaks fondly of riding to school at Curyo, then a lively place with shops and an active railway station. Sometimes the teacher wouldn’t come back after lunch, so that the kids would simply take the afternoon off, rabbiting, playing with speargrass balls, doing what kids did when there was no playground equipment and ingenuity was their best friend. The teacher certainly wasn’t.

‘This will always be my roots. I have a sense of history. My last resting place will be here in the Birchip cemetery. I want my grandchildren to be able to come back and say, “That’s my grandmother in there.”

Here, I can walk down the centre of the road. If anyone comes, they stop and talk or drive round me, as they choose.

My children call the Mallee home.’



Daughter of the stubble

Original story by Louisa Ferrier

School friends and teachers in line with their heads bowed. A man singing The Lord id My Shepherd. Two empty chairs next to a hole in the lawn cemetery. A bouquet of bottle brushes tied with my pink hair ribbon. These are the only significant things I can remember form my father’s funeral. My youngest brother was four months old. Mum was thirty two. I was seven.

My father died before he could present himself as a person to me; as someone who picked up his children after school, who took them to football, who loved and looked after his wife; who played tennis with his daughter or taught his sons to use a rifle. He did none of these things because he didn’t have the chance to.

Sometimes he seems more of a myth or a symbol of ‘what might have been’ than ‘Dad.’ At times, only photos remind me that he was in a human form. Did I actually sit on his knee on my first day of school? Did he actually take my younger brother for a ride on the header to cheer him up? Did I really crawl into his bed every morning for a hug? Did I trust with a childish dependency a man who now, at times, seems remote, a stranger?

The fact that I know he was a person and would have done these things is not only reassuring and comforting and motivational, but has made me determined to remember him. His lasting legacy, a farm, is the source of my strength.

My experience as a farmer’s daughter is special to me because, after my dad died, that farmer was a widow with four children. I have pulled at least ten calves and twenty lambs, devoted a month in total to cutting the horehound and Bathurst Burr, chased sheep up and down back roads as though I enjoyed it (I am so sick of looking at sheep’s bottoms), wrestled with pregnant ewes, crutched five sheep and lost my voice yelling at dogs and brothers alike while sprinting across uneven, dusty fallow.

Would you believe I’ve even attempted to pacify an angry bull with a piece of wood while trying to jump onto a moving trailer?

Seeing motherless lambs and calves makes me anxious, just mentioning 6.00 a.m. makes me tired and divisional of polynomials reminds me of the ute and watching a little tractor going round and round a paddock.

Completely successful attempts at most projects have been few and far between. We once, in our complacency, drove past a heavily pregnant cow who was down, only to discover that she and her calf had died during labour. A year later we discovered by the dam bank two cows which – again in our ignorance – we thought were sleeping. On inspection it was clear that one was barely breathing, the other, not at all. The coroner – my eight-year-old brother – decided that they were dead. The autopsy concluded that both had been affected by blue-green algae in the dam. Mum was supposed to be able to recognise it. Unfortunately (or fortunately, in population terms) both had hungry, frightened calves and I became a midwife.

Ours is ... well ... a creative way of farming. A few golden rules always apply: never leave home without dogs - children are not worthy substitutes; carry rubber gloves in lambing season, blow-fly oil, always, shovels for weeds

and baling twine for creative fencing; send ‘helpers’ off in opposite directions or face the consequences; always check for open gates when moving stock – or face more consequences.

The time and effort we have put into our farm has made us love the land more, not loathe it as some people may imagine. For me it’s a way of putting my memories of Dad into practice – of having something material to be proud of. Just knowing that he stood on the earth beneath my feet and breathed the same air and had dreams about the same land his children are still walking on is comforting. It’s an inexplicable connection which keeps feeding the soul. Each pen of fat lambs we sell, each piece of gnarled tin we pick up and every ewe we dip is one step closer to a better farm, peace of mind and the conviction that we can do this.

Sometimes, when we have been chasing sheep, or cutting weeds for too long, and dusk sets in, I look to where the sun has been to discover that the horizon is undefined. That, for me, is where Dad lives. In the somewhere that I know exists but cannot see. It isn’t disturbing because, like the horizon, he’s all around me. So each time we silently make our way back to the ute with our own train of thoughts but united in that ever familiar grey slumber, I know Dad is there beside us, watching over and guiding the dusty, tired, Rossi-clad feet of his sons and daughter.

One day, one of us might have the same dreams, the same house, the same family (not the same brothers), the same soil under our boots, the same horehound seeds in our socks – only, this time, we’ll live. We’ll take our children to the footy, be there for our spouses and give them a hug when they need it. We’ll be there to guide our sans and daughters of the stubble. Then I’ll know.

It’s all be worth it.





OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
Bulokes, digging for the
new pipeline and one of the
last channels

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
Goodwins' trough, remnants of the dog
netting fence, crab holes show the effects
of drought and MacKay gate

The number nine boot

Original story by Andrew Ryan

It was December 4th, 1989. I can remember this day because it ranks among the top five most stupid things I have ever done.

It was harvest time and I was on one of our two headers, with Brad, my twin, on the other. Harvest had gone along quite well, we hadn't broken down much and the crops were not too bad. Unfortunately, this was all about to change. At eleven years of age, I wanted to finish harvest first. It was vital that I won. But it seemed that Brad shared that point of view.

I had just passed Brad, who was going the opposite way. Looking back over my shoulder, I could see that there was a strip of only about two metres wide by about two hundred metres long, before - that's right - harvest was over for another year. I was eager, determined to finish before Brad did.

We turned, neck and neck, at opposite ends of the paddock. We were staring each other in the eyes, head to head. The harvesters were churning out the wheat, ch ... ch ... ch ...

Closer and closer we drove and I became more determined. The atmosphere was electric. Twenty, fifteen, ten metres away. I sensed doom. We were going to crash. Sweat was running profusely from my brow. I tried to pull out, but it was - BANG! - too late. We collided.

The sound of scraping and twisting metal as the harvesters were pulled against each other was appalling. The wheels dug in, making the headers growl. After a few second of shock, I turned my header off. Both of us got out and inspected the damage. What a mess. The header looked like a big Mintie wrapper. The drive shafts were twisted together, the slasher broken, dividers dislodged, comb bent.

After a session of swearing, we eventually reversed the headers apart, with the help of a twenty pound sledge hammer.

'Oh Jesus! Here he comes!' Big, bad Dad. I could see the ute in the distance coming up the track.

'The shit is going to hit the fan,' I thought, as Dad passed the crash site. He was hanging out the window, waving his hands, yelling out something like, 'You stupid bastards!' He pulled up and got out. In his hands were two ice creams and two cans of Coke. A few seconds passed. Dad turned towards the dogs, who were in the back of the ute, and gave them the ice creams. At the same time, he was shouting, extremely loudly, something that I cannot repeat or write down.

As I watched the dogs enjoy their unexpected meal, I felt a hardened, leather, number none boot in the direction of my bottom. It still hurts on cold days. Brad and I were told - quite sharply - to drive the harvesters over to the shed, 'without colliding into each other.'

Slowly and quietly, we did as we were told. The shed was only two hundred metres away from the crash site, but it took a bloody long time to get there. It was like making a duck at cricket and having to walk back

to the pavilion, all the time wondering, 'Why does it happen to me?' Or, in this case, us!

I pulled up at the shed and turned the header off. I was hesitant about getting out because I was afraid of the events that might take place, and very afraid of a certain number nine boot. Once again, I looked at the twisted and torn metal, hoping that this was just a bad dream. But all the pinches in the world wouldn't wake me up from this dream. It was as true as the dints in the harvester.

Dad was getting redder and redder. I guessed that by this time he was pretty pissed off. This was confirmed when he told us to find our own way home, and that was on foot in the stinking hot sun. Home was about twenty kilometres away, so we thought that if we took our time we could die of heat stroke, dehydration, or even a hit and run maniac along the road.

We set off. I could see the white ute approaching. It was Dad. He was hanging out the window and yelling,

'You two pricks aren't worth a ride!'

I will never forget that day in December, 1989, and, somehow, I don't suppose Dad will either.

The walk was good.

How could I ever forget that day?

Brad Ryan is Andrew's twin brother.

'Reading that story of Andrew's reminds me of how awful we felt. Dad was so wild.

We were in only about Year 7, and it had been a long harvest. It had been an okay crop and we were really looking forward to the end.

Looking back, I'm surprised we didn't blame each other. I suppose we just knew that it was our own fault, that we should have known better.

It made me realise that trying to win everything, all the time, isn't always a good idea. You have to lose a few to win a few. Somehow, that doesn't help with the football, though. The trouble is, some of the things I've done since have been just as stupid. I'm thirty-two - perhaps I'll never learn!'







Streetwalk two

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT:

MaD Mallee Crafts Di Burns
We've certainly expanded; we've gone along really well. The customers have led and we've followed

Westpac Jacinta Connelly (and happy customer 'Koopsy')
It would be very inconvenient if we didn't have a bank here. The oldies hate using plastic; they feel comfortable talking to us. We can do nearly everything here

Mailman Charlie Aspland
I love coming to Birchip!

Bull 'n' Pine Cafe Blencowes
The hours Are long, but it's financially rewarding. We've enjoyed our five years. People keep coming back for the good food and the clean toilets

Birchip Newsagency Lorraine Gow
Having this business has been like coming home. It's absolutely brilliant being part of the old community. It's a good business for a little place.

Birchip Post Office Pauline Bragg
I love running the business. I love communicating with people

CENTRE: **Postal Delivery Officer** Mark 'Frogga' Bowen
I work from 7.40 to 12 or 1 o'clock. On busy days I have to go back to the post office to collect more mail



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:

The Commercial Hotel Judy and Peter Bowen
We provide the hospitality and the people are friendly and easy to please

Buloke Shire Naga Sundararajah
Of course I like it here. I like the peace and quiet and it's a friendly, caring society Birchip's a dynamic town full of hardworking, helpful people

Birchip Historical Society Elaine McCallum and Dorothy Reid
It's so important that we preserve our history. It takes a lot of work. We're really proud that it's been judged to be as good as any in the state

Birchip Hardware Michael 'Mouse' Hunt
I enjoy working here immensely. I like being back in Birchip because it's home

ATN Antennas Ray Naughton
I've been here since 1952, and haven't regretted it. It's a great job. A lot of our customers come from over seas: we've supplied every continent and 103 different countries. It brings money into Australia

W.L. King Motor Repairs Warren King
The job keeps me happy and occupied. Though I was originally a farmer, I don't really miss it. Cars keep me going

Birchip Hardware Judy and Gary Living
We like the lifestyle: the peace and quiet, the slow pace. We hope that we are providing an essential service for the town and we intend to continue

CENTRE: **Smales' Farm Machinery** Owen Osborne
I come here daily from Warracknabeal, but I find the people to be helpful and patient and willing to share their knowledge. We all rely on the farmers. We've been here for more than forty years



Fit as a Mallee bull

When it was first proposed, the Mallee Bull was the focus of fierce controversy. There were two main areas of debate: the authenticity of Birchip's claim to 'ownership' of the legendary bull of 'fit as a Mallee Bull' fame and the question of whether such a 'statue' was even desirable.

Many regarded the very idea of a bull tasteless in the extreme. Others, notably the members of the Birchip Promotions Committee, weren't as fastidious. Research had shown that other towns with 'tasteless' attractions had found them to be just that: attractions! Why should Birchip not have its very own Mallee Bull?

George Gould researched the bull story, and came up with several documented pieces of evidence which suggested that there were creatures which were known as Mallee Bulls. He cited W.L. Morton of Morton Plains as stating that 'No other animals can put on a more fear inspiring aspect than a full-grown wild Mallee Bull.' Mr Steven Laver, who leased land in the area in the 1890s, often killed a wild beast for meat which he shared with the local Aborigines. The leader of the wild herd was known as Big Red. Mr Gould also discovered that Victoria Railways, in their official record of place names, acknowledged that such animals were the source of the name Kinnabulla when the rail reached there in 1899.

These bulls had snorted and stamped their way into local folklore. Big Red was magnificent: strong, colourful, cunning, and able to survive even the worst drought. 'Big Red will get you' was used to urge children into bed; students walked straight home from school rather than risk an encounter.

The arguments were sufficient to convince the Promotions Committee and the Shire, which promised financial assistance. On Friday, 8 February, 1991, a front page article in The Donald Birchip Times warned rate payers of what was to come. MALLEE BULL ON THE MOVE declared that 'The legend of the Mallee Bull is to take three dimensional form in the township of Birchip ... The statue will be life sized.'

Soon after, a 'debate', between Warrick McClelland, chairman of the Promotions Committee and Rob Sanders, avowed opponent, was engineered and put to air by Channel 9.

From that point, the columns of the Donald Birchip Times fairly snapped with controversy. 'Unemployed ratepayer', (Name and address supplied) objected to the 'callous indifference' of councillors who chose to support, 'with ratepayers' money ... this ridiculous structure.'

Another writer felt that the majority of people in the community, if asked, would say 'no' to the bull, but that it was going ahead because 'some members of this community place themselves on a pedestal and above reproach.' The erection of a bull was equated with 'the worshipping of false idols' and it was suggested that a



statue of the Good Shepherd would be more appropriate than 'a symbol of aggression.' A 'great grand daughter of very early pioneer families in the district' objected because Birchip was 'not in the Mallee.'

Defenders were not vocal, but one argued that despite the bull's being 'totally ghastly' aesthetically, it was, in fact, 'an innocent symbol of today's scramble for survival in an adverse economic climate.'

The bull duly in place, 'Rate Payer' of Johnson Street declared that no one in his right mind would ever mistake 'the monstrosity' for anything other than what it was – 'a water buffalo' - and went on to note that 'it would be more at home at the sewerage farm, the nearest resemblance to a paddy field' available in the town.

The line was finally drawn under the debate by the Times, whose editor closed all correspondence on the subject on Tuesday, 7 May 1991. The very last letter, Shane McLoughlan's, defended the bull on several grounds, one being that he would rather talk about it than drought or 'Collingwood winning the flag.' He had the last word: ' ... in favour or not, the bull is here, and there's no bull about it.'

There can be no doubt that Birchip's Mallee Bull is a tourist attraction. The proprietor of the bakery, Gail Sharp, can testify to his magnetism: from her vantage point across the road she sees many people, either passing through or visiting, who cannot resist the temptation to be photographed in his company, to climb on him – despite a sign specifically forbidding such activities – or simply admiring his many attributes, one or two in particular. Then, she says, with any luck, they make their way over the road for some refreshments.

The Mallee Bull, idol or not, buffalo or not, is now an accepted feature of the main street, and no-one has written to the paper about him for quite a while.

Enduring charm

The Shamrock, standing at the corner of Glowery Street and Cumming Avenue, is one of Birchip's most admired buildings. Originally built in the late 1890s, it traded continuously from that date for seventy years. It was de-licensed in 1969, and for almost a quarter of a century the old pub steadily deteriorated, almost to the point of no return. Demolition was a strong possibility.

But the Shamrock had, and continues to have, an enduring charm. Old photos show groups of seriously-clad patrons, some women, but mostly men, grouped ceremoniously outside in the street. The wide verandah, crowned with a decorative and elegant façade, gives it an air of distinction and records show that it was always a 'well-conducted' hostelry.

The removal of the decorations at the roofline deprived the old hotel of much of its distinction: in photographs from that period, it looks rather like an ageing woman, somewhat broad in the beam, wearing a very plain but dominant and unfashionable high brimmed hat.

In 1997, a 'Save the Shamrock' committee having successfully gained \$50 000 from the Partnerships for Growth Support Fund, the Shamrock was declared to be 'still sound' and a range of options was discussed. Finally, a decision was made. Stage one involved making the inside habitable, with a further two stages to follow. A \$30 000 grant from the state government enabled reconstruction of the original façade and parapet wall and the original verandah posts, restoration of three rooms for conferences and for use by youth and restoration of the bar.

Today the exterior of the Shamrock is as close to the original as possible. It is an impressive building with a strong personality, and the interior provides a number of vital community services. The Birchip Business and Learning Centre, a non-profit organisation, funded by the Department of Planning and Community Development and Adult Council for Further Education has its home there.

The BBLC is a centre to which people of all age groups, backgrounds and abilities can come to meet and talk, develop and share knowledge, join a class or support group, gain skills and confidence, participate in planned quality services, hire technology and facilities, learn about services in the area and generally be involved in the community.

As well as providing Birchip news for the Buloke Times, staff members are responsible for producing the local phone book, have developed a recipe book and provide secretarial and business support to the community.





A Mallee boy

Ian McClelland is essentially a Mallee boy. Born into a pioneering local family, Ian could never imagine himself living anywhere else – even in retirement, if it ever came to that. He points to a patch of open ground in the native bush to the north of his house, ‘Cambrae’ and says, ‘That’s where I’ll have my little house.’

Ian, Chairman of the Birchip Cropping Group since its inception in XXXX, says that his satisfaction in its success as a group lies in the fact that a committed group of people with a common vision can change the world. It gives him satisfaction that the group has been able to do a lot of things that no-one would have believed possible.

The BCG believes that opportunities emerge every day, and that despite the threats, the fears and the possibilities of failure, persistence, resilience and a strong community ideal will win the day.

And what of the future for Birchip and district?

In his inimitable way, Ian declares that Birchip will be bigger, not smaller, as many of the more fainthearted would predict. He does not suggest that the current trend to larger holdings will change. In fact, he believes that where once a holding of 640 acres was enough for a family to make a living, then 2000, soon it will be 10 000, and that farmers will need to be more professional, more knowledgeable, more entrepreneurial, more willing to look around in order to discover the possibilities.

He accepts that climate change is a great challenge. The continuing drought will determine the immediate future, and it may even be that farmers will have to turn their hands to something new, or develop further something that they now see only as incidental.

Given a return to ‘normal’ seasons, he sees Birchip populated by people who have left the city and are looking for a new life. They will be served by local, thriving businesses run by people who are here because they want to be.

Birchip has a responsibility for its own future. It must ensure that the facilities are there, that it is a great place to live. There will be opportunities for adding value to locally-produced products: secondary industry will develop to take advantage of resources within our own region.

“Production will rise enormously, aided by science, and we should be there when that times comes,” Ian says.

Everyone knows, everyone cares, everyone helps



Margaret O'Keefe has been working for the BCG for over three years. She is the Manager for Corporate Relations and Events.

When she decided that the time had come to leave Warrnambool, she was looking for a small country town in which her children could live in freedom and security. The second requirement was a school which would provide a high quality education for two of her children; the first was already at boarding school in Ballarat.

When she was offered a job at the BCG, she thought long and hard, explored the town and visited the school, and decided to accept. She has never regretted that decision.

Margaret says that Birchip is a special sort of community which allows for the formation of strong friendships and has a 'certain intelligence' which is rewarding. 'That sets Birchip apart' she adds. 'Not many country towns have it.'

'It also has an incredible ability to make you feel accepted – people know your name, and are interested in you as a person without being intrusive. They allow you to have your own space.'

The school has lived up to every expectation. While she realises that it is difficult for such a small school to offer absolutely everything, she believes that there are compensations. 'My children's education has blossomed. Small classes, taught by people who cared for them as people and not just as students, have done them the world of good. The new, young teachers are offering new programmes and projects, there is plenty of sport, and the Arts are being catered for.'

Margaret also revels in the professionalism and inclusiveness of the BCG workplace where she has found acceptance among the staff, most of whom are younger than herself. She enjoys the variety of the people who walk into the office, and the personal challenges which her work offers.

'I have yet to see a "good year". I've only seen Birchip in drought,' she says. 'People talk about a full lake, having more dollars to spend. I wouldn't know. But even now, we have such an active community. You could be out every night of the week if you chose, and there's plenty to do at weekends. It's so small, but it still manages to offer a really wide range of options.'

She also enjoys the fact that people of all ages mix so freely. 'Kids are happy to be where their parents are. They aren't exactly the "children should be seen and not heard" variety, but that's to their credit. Not only that, but the whole community looks after anyone who is disadvantaged, especially the children. Everyone knows, everyone cares, and everyone helps.

It's amazing.'



A man with a mission



See a cause and fight for it, see a wrong and try to right it, see an opportunity and go for it. Martin Luther King? Nelson Mandela? Mahatma Ghandi? In Birchip, it's William Edwin Lee.

Eddie Lee never doubted that he wanted to be a farmer. He was always going to 'come back' to the farm after his education, but his father's illness precipitated an early return. He has not regretted that instinctive urge to become a Mallee farmer, but he recognises that the life offers some stresses that are hard to avoid. Nevertheless, one of his declared methods of self preservation when things are tough is 'not to worry about things (he) can't change.'

In his youth, his family lived by the adage, 'You feast every day, you don't feast at all.' As Eddie says, 'People spent very little, and they expected very little. It didn't worry Dad much, but it did worry Mum.' He believes that the perception of hard times is stronger now because there are so many more opportunities for comparison with others who are financially more secure.

For Eddie Lee, public service was a family tradition; he was 'brought up that way.' At 17, he was already secretary of the silo committee.

Undoubtedly, one of his models was AD Hillgrove. Eddie recalls, as an impressionable teenager, riding around with in AD's Mercedes. A man of many and diverse interests, every detail stored in his head, always on the phone, he was never too busy to stop to talk. A man who began as a shearer and finished as a tycoon, AD Hillgrove is remembered as a personable gentleman who made no distinctions between a drunk and a king. He would shear in his suit, keeping his hand in, and keeping his heart in exactly the right place.

Over the years, Eddie Lee has been a central figure in the community, taking on a range of positions in vital organisations in the town. At one time he was, concurrently, president of the Football Club, the School Council and the Tennis Club. He looks back with satisfaction on the improvements which were made in the town during his period of greatest influence and interest: 'it was exciting being part of that time of expansion when the town was growing and developing.'

In 1986, the new Birchip P – 12 School was completed, together with the Stadium, which had been funded in conjunction with the Leisure Centre.

Eddie was committed to the building and development of the Leisure Centre, when many more prudent folk were ranged against it as too expensive. Today, he believes that the capacity of the Leisure Centre to draw together the many sports played in the town has established it as invaluable. Hockey, football, tennis,

golf, netball and squash are focused there, not to mention the range of other events. Eddie is particularly gratified by the fact that the Birchip Cropping Group makes such extensive use of its facilities.

Throughout this time and into the new century, Eddie was a shire councillor, firstly of the Birchip Shire and later of the new Buloke Shire. Like many others, Eddie recalls the years of the old shire as halcyon, when local people could look to the needs of the local community, when issues were more clear-cut and goals more achievable. Here in the shire, as in other arenas, Eddie fought for his own special brand of social justice. 'Always a shit stirrer', Eddie believes that to achieve the best for all, 'you must go your hardest, fight your hardest, and work together.'

You could have a great debate in the Birchip Council,' he adds regretfully.

Football is another passion, one in which, as a coach, he was able to indulge himself. For Eddie, football was the heart and soul of the town, and continues to be vital. The tradition was footy on Saturdays and Church on Sundays. He says, 'Footy's got drama, comedy and pathos. It's also got no justice sometimes. But that's life.'

When he coached the under 13s and 14s from 1978-82, he did it for the love of the game, but his philosophy was not for the faint hearted. Put simply, it goes something like this: 'Believe in yourself, never give up, pressure your man. It's not how brilliant you are that counts, but how much dedication you have and how much determination.'

He is genuinely proud that Desi and Steven Ryan, and Tim Barling, all made it to the League, and believes that he and Leo Lowry, coach of the under sixteens, can take more than a little credit. Their shared belief was that young players should never set their sights too low: that it was 'an achievement to be good in a little pond, but it was even better to challenge yourself to compete in that bigger pond.' Eddie recalls that 'Goo Lowry had them coming from all over the country because he taught them how to win.'

Eddie Lee has one more passion: horses.

From 1972 to the middle 90s, 'Lochlee' horses made their mark on trotting in Victoria, winning 130-40 races, including half a dozen in Melbourne, and the coveted Victorian Trotting Oaks for 2yo fillies. Eddie's father was by no means pleased when, despite having a worrying overdraft, Eddie and Haydn Hogan purchased Vicky Marie who proved to be, if not a godsend, certainly a strategic investment.

Eddie loves to tell how, during the 1967 drought, to make ends meet, he went to Rochester to cart hay, leaving his young wife and new baby Simone with her mother. Earnings of \$100 a week made up a princely sum by current standards, but could not compare with the \$1500 windfall which came after a particularly fortuitous win by Vicky Marie. He stopped carting hay and came home.

Breeding a string of winners made for excitement and sometimes lucrative rewards. Eddie sees his life at that time as existing in four separate circles: football, Council, trotting and the Church, fine independently, but not always compatible.

Eddie says himself, 'Sometimes I get too far ahead, but when I see things wrong, I want to right them.'

A rocky path

The Birchip Community Leisure Centre would never have come into being had it not been for some very vocal and determined advocates.

In 1982, the Birchip Recreational Reserve had been run for many years by a committee of management made up of local community-minded people. On 17th October, 1986, the Reserve the Birchip Community Leisure Centre was officially opened, to be run by a new Committee of Management whose members each represented the involved participating clubs: football, cricket, tennis, netball, basketball, hockey, the Immaculate Heart of Mary School, the Apex and Lions Clubs and the A and P Society.

The path between had been rocky, with a small but strong and vocal group opposing the very notion of such a building. Early advocates, convinced of the worth of the project, were determined to overcome the opposition and when it was finally achieved, it was, as Eddie Lee, the first President of the Committee of Management said, 'a dream come true.'

Today the Leisure Centre continues to enjoy a strong level of support from the community and the user bodies. Substantially refurbished in 2001, it confirms the predictions of Noel McInnes, the project manager of the original building when he described it was a 'centre ...that ... will service the sporting and social needs of the Shire in very aesthetic and comfortable surroundings ... It is a most progressive development in the provision of a major community based amenity.'



That enduring passion

A passion for, even obsession with, sport is a recurring theme in the lives of the people of Birchip. Many the teacher over the years has wished that their charges were as dedicated to their learning, or their homework, as they were to their sport.

Former residents dwell affectionately, nostalgically, even regretfully, on memories of the Saturday match up at the oval, when residents of the town and the surrounding area could be counted on to be present, standing on the hill as supporters or taking to the grounds as participants. Footy, in particular evokes reminiscent smiles as people bring to mind sitting ‘on the fence’ eating locally-made pies and pasties and cheering on the team. Even the annual stint in the kiosk, obligatory for all females associated with a footy player, seems to be recalled fondly – though not by all.

Those who still live locally look forward to their Saturday sport, which offers a respite from the grind of daily life and the worries of drought. The whole family is catered for; parents follow the games, teenagers strut their latest finery, and smaller children wander at will around the grounds.

Nothing inspires more animated discussion than the prospects for the team next Saturday or the chance of earning that ultimate goal, the premiership. The Thursday meal after training is also happily anticipated: the game is only two days away, and excitement is building.

The first question asked, directly or indirectly - usually directly – of a possible new resident, addresses the crucial possibility: ‘Do you play footy, or netball, or hockey, or golf, or tennis?’ depending on the interests of the speaker. Great is the disappointment if the answer comes in the negative.

Birchip people are known for their willingness to put in, to try, to aim high on the playing field, even to the point of inspiring a certain antipathy, and traditional opponents take great delight in defeating these irritating arch rivals.

There have been many notable sporting achievements outside the local arena, among them Des & Steven Ryan, Tim Barling, Hayley Warne, Sarah Coffey, Gary Living, Erin & Caillan Welton, Danielle Atkin, Kate Ferrier, Curtis Smith, Robbie Lee, and Con Hogan.

Birchip without its sport would be a sad place indeed, at least for a majority of the population. There are a few rebels who aren’t part of it all, but they are regarded with pity by the stalwarts. What could anyone possibly do on Saturday afternoon if there were no sport?



Stars



A man of action

George Cartwright had a long memory. When he was a young man, much needed to be done around Birchip, and he was just the man to get it done. Not particularly keen on school, he left after form three (Year 9) to devote himself to what he saw as more practical things.

Ever one to respond to the concrete, he took satisfaction in getting things done. As he said, “a man likes to be able to do and achieve.” This sense of achievement could come from both the little and the big things of life. Sometimes, it was enough to make something go, or save something from the scrap heap. Tinkering away at the latest project, he would say, “If I get this going, I’ll have achieved something today.”

Among the achievements with which George was associated were the Recreation Reserve, Taylor Park, the Birchip Lawn Cemetery and the Birchip Community Education Complex, now the Birchip P – 12 School.

Ever a modest man, George did not take credit himself for the various improvements. He liked to recall A.D. Hillgrove’s role in the realization of some of the bigger Birchip projects. When assistance was requested for the latest enterprise, AD would say, ‘Have you got any foreign capital?’

George recalled that ‘sometimes he had a surprise’, but almost invariably there was no capital, foreign or otherwise. However, it was a certainty that that AD would come to the party.

George recalled another man of action, Ron Lane, who with others had realised that, with the Birchip Elementary School down to thirty students and one teacher, it was time for the town to have a proper High School. And how was this to be achieved? For Ron, it was a simple matter of getting down to Parliament and lobbying the MPs. It was now or never. Alan Lee, A D Hillgrove, and George himself set off and the school was set to become a reality. Kids came from ‘all over’ and once the numbers were achieved the school didn’t look back.

One of George’s greatest loves was the shape of the landscape, especially that of Birchip. He remembered the ‘old shire’ with affection as a protector of his beloved public park areas: Taylor Park, The Recreation Reserve, among others. Many the hour George spent tending these areas and the school grounds, simply because he wanted to: it gave him satisfaction and a sense of ‘doing things.’ His daughter Yvonne recalls that when anyone came looking for her father, the inevitable answer would be: “He’s either up at the School or at the showgrounds.”

George loved his sport. He remembered particularly the Hogans, sportsmen to a man, outstanding at cricket and football, sometimes just excellent all rounders, and always hard working. They played hard, but never forgot that there was work to be done.

George was also a man of the Church. As he said, ‘That little Church is so important to the Cartwright family.’ He remembered how, at the times of the deaths of both his brothers, the church and local community

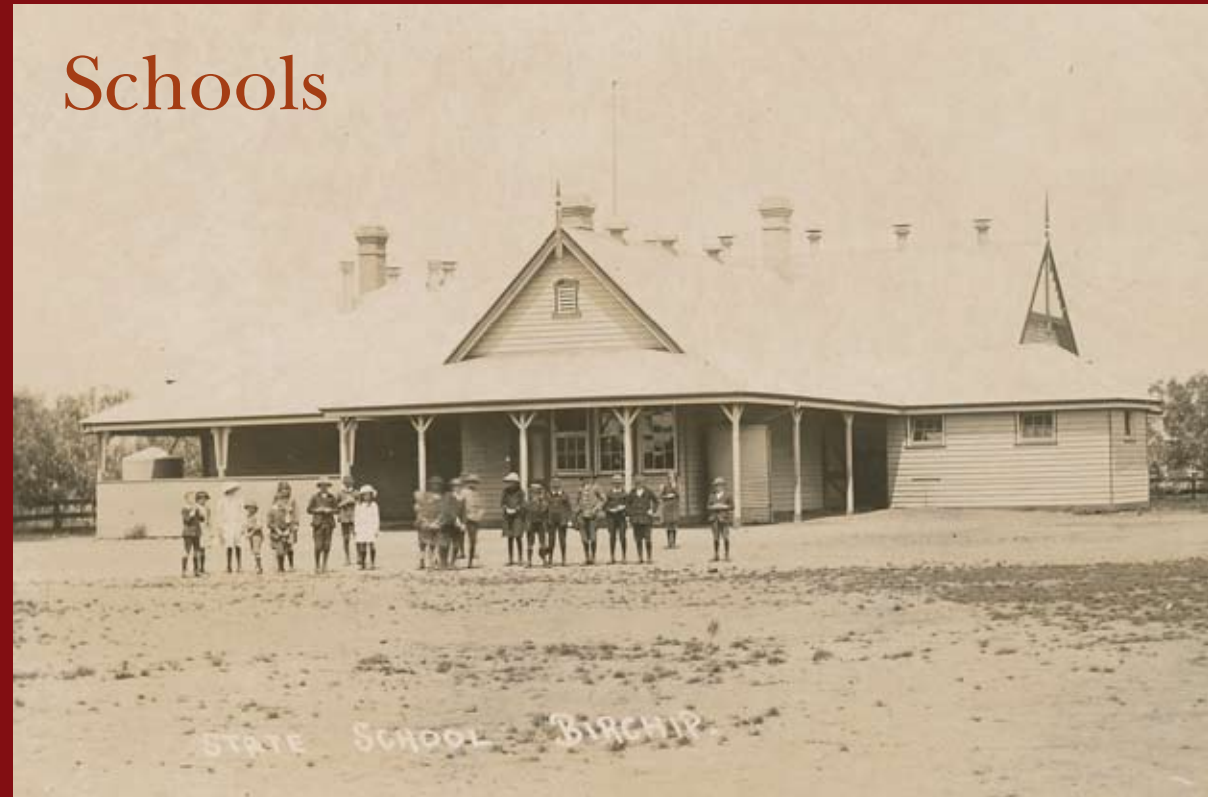
in general saw the family through the toughest times of grieving. These were the times when the sense of belonging was vital.

He admired the Birchip Cropping Group for its achievements. He loved to think of that group of young people working so hard to achieve a community aim. ‘We are so lucky to have them.’

Not long after this interview took place, George Cartwright died at the age of 91. At his funeral, a list of community organizations and projects with which he was involved was read out. It was breathtaking.



Schools



SEA LAKE	4
BIRCHIP	97 1/2
CHARLTON	30 1/2
WYCHEPROOF	54 1/2
RAINBOW	65 1/2
HOPETOUN	30



An equal share for all

The recently-appointed principal of the Birchip P – 12 School believes, not without some justification, that the school is ‘almost the centre of the town.’ There is an acknowledged mutuality between school and community: a sort of you-scratch-my-back-and-I’ll-scratch-yours co-operation which does not have to be spelt out.

John knows a great deal about local education. A Watchem boy from a family which valued education, he was educated at the local primary school, Warracknabeal High School and then the University of Melbourne, the last being achievable only because he had a scholarship.

Firmly committed to academic excellence, the school’s philosophy and curriculum have also developed as a response to specific local needs.

First and foremost, JR (as he is almost universally known) aims to build a caring school which excites and engages its students, one in which individual needs, ambitions and abilities are provided for, from students with limited resources to those more fortunate. While the school believes that each student is capable of achieving VCE, it also accepts that there are many paths which may lead there. Thus, the curriculum is as broad as possible, embracing diversity and making use of community resources to achieve its ends.

‘Our parents are committed community people,’ JR says.

‘I would like to think that kids can come to this school and know that they’re cared for,’ he says. ‘We are recognised at Regional level for our success in this area.’ Students know that teachers are concerned for their welfare individually, that they are alert for personal and learning difficulties and that the ultimate product will be a mutual achievement. ‘We encourage them to see the value of education, how it will ultimately be useful in their lives.’

Students must also respect each other, whatever differences they may have in values and background. ‘We endeavour to teach them tolerance and acceptance, especially since the school population is coming from ever more diverse backgrounds.’

These days, schools are of necessity data driven: the statistics are there to point the way to individual and whole school problem areas. ‘We must take into account our particular circumstances and ensure that what we offer is as good as, or even better than, other educational options. We cannot afford to lose the top end of our students to private schools, as has happened in the past and continues to happen elsewhere. I believe strongly in the State System.’

Support mechanisms are in place for the financially disadvantaged - in fact, over half of the students receive some form of assistance. Government and aid agencies together provide assistance so that each child has equal access to the opportunities the school is bent on providing.

The school is holding its own. Projected numbers are on a par with those of the recent past and traditional small school advantages help explain this. ‘Small classes ensure easy diagnosis of problems, individual attention; students do not become lost among the many. In some larger schools, the number of social and learning difficulties is daunting, complex and almost insurmountable.’

Teachers joining the staff become part of an invigorating, committed and supportive team, thanks in no little part to our previous principal, Philip Scambler, whose benign influence allowed people to grow into their jobs.

Teachers play a leading role in local organizations; they play their part to and above the call of duty.’

Finally, JR places firm belief in the value of high quality facilities and an attractive environment. ‘If the place looks good, people will want to be there,’ he says. ‘Our facilities are steadily growing and we continue to expect the community to share them with us.’

It is no co-incidence that in 1986 the decision was made to rename the Birchip High School the Birchip Community Education Complex. Though that name had to be discarded, if John Richmond has his way, the Birchip P – 12 School will continue to stand for equal opportunity and the shared values of a small rural community.





Teacher for all seasons

If you want to find out something about the recent history of education in Birchip, your best bet is to have a talk to Maureen Donnellon. Not only will she be able to tell you what you need to know, she'll have a store of information you would never even have guessed at.

There's good reason for this.

In 1968, convent-educated Maureen Giles arrived from Ballarat as the only lay teacher at the Immaculate Heart of Mary School. To her horror, she discovered that her class, rather than the grade 5/6 she expected, was in fact one of 44 Prep/1 students, three of whom were severely disadvantaged. Having only one teaching round at that level behind her, and there being 'no photocopiers, no black line masters or any of the things we take for granted today,' she turned to the state school for assistance. She got it from Ray Sanders and a mutually beneficial exchange developed: Maureen could draw; Ray could not. Ray had the resources, Maureen did not.

If Birchip came as something of a shock to Maureen, she in her turn gave her students something to think about. 'It was the swinging sixties, and if very short skirts were not what they were used to, they soon learnt.'

School was something of a challenge. As the only lay teacher amongst nuns, she was 'a bit of a dogsbody;' certain menial tasks were automatically expected of her. Lunchtime yard duty was always her responsibility: because the nuns, as their vows dictated, ate only at the convent. Maureen cleaned the girls' toilets and scrubbed and polished the classroom floors at the end of every term. 'It was a bit lonely,' she recalls, 'but the nuns were fun. Not the least prim and proper. They were interested, but had different preoccupations. In fact, they didn't quite know what to do with me and the other lay teachers who arrived from 1971/2 onwards.'

One of the more alarming aspects of lay teaching was the weekly trip to the pool. 'I would take about 170 kids; the Footes, the Ryans and the Tucks all cared for each other, but I didn't even have my Herald!' Again, the nuns didn't do that sort of thing.' She was better paid than they, however, and of course did not have to wear the long traditional habits which varied only in colour: black for winter, white for summer. In Birchip, 'it took a while for Vatican II to filter through.'

There was plenty for a young single woman to do in Birchip at the time. 'By 1972, I had a car, but I didn't have a licence; I didn't know how to drive.' Along came Dinny Donnellon, more than happy to provide driving lessons, and the rest is history. After they were married in 1974, Maureen continued to teach at the school until her first child, Claire, arrived. Even after that she continued to do the books, and returned to teaching in 1986, after the nuns left and the first lay principal was appointed.

2001 saw the closure of The Immaculate Heart of Mary School, due to lack of numbers, and to the regret of many. By that time, Maureen had been principal. She believes strongly in the capacity of a small school to provide for its students in ways in which a larger school cannot. She sees IHOM as one which taught caring and sharing, one which educated 'a lot of kids' Now a full time staff member at the Birchip P – 12 School, she sees similar values at work, built on Christian, not necessarily Catholic, values. She appreciates the support she has received from the school and the education it provided for her children.

Maureen Donnellon has been round for the last forty years of education in Birchip and looks like staying for a while. She would tell you that she has enjoyed – almost all of it.



If you have a go, they'll let you in

Gavan and Angela O'Donnell arrived in Birchip with their three children on Australian Day 1988. The previous two years had been spent trekking around Australia in search of the ideal place to live. Even the most dedicated Birchipian would find it hard to describe their little town as an Elysian paradise for a family fresh from beaches of Queensland and valleys of New South Wales. However, Angela, after two years on the road, was desperate to settle, 'to plant trees and watch them grow, to be able to put the children's paintings up.' She wanted to belong to a community rather than to be a fleeting visitor to other people's communities where travellers were people who caused suspicion. She was looking to be included rather than excluded.

What then was it that drew them to a tiny town over three hundred kilometres from Melbourne and far from the fleshpots? Perhaps it was just those two characteristics which tipped the scales. Their initial decision to return to Victoria, rather than the other states, had resolved into the three fs: family, familiarity and friends. Having settled that these were the most important elements, there was a further stipulation: their new home must be, Gavan said, 'north of the Divide. The further you go north, the warmer people get.' So there was Birchip, between Mildura, where Angela's family lived, and St Arnaud, Gavan's family home.

They have been living in Birchip for almost twenty-one years. Gavan says that the Birchip community has lived up to his expectations. 'People here are open, not mean-spirited; they ask you in, even to stay to lunch. Life has been good, normal. We've had our ups and downs, sometimes life's been humdrum, sometimes more exciting than you'd want. But the community's lively, and if you have a go they'll let you in. We never felt uncomfortable here.'

On a couple of occasions, Gavan had the chance of jobs further afield, in Bendigo on one occasion. Result: immediate outcry. 'I'm only just starting to belong!' wailed Claire, the eldest. 'The trees have just started to grow!', cried Angela. 'You should settle down, let your lads make friends' they were told. So they stayed.

Gavan gives the Birchip Players credit for opening up the community. There they met and became friends with people they would not otherwise have known. Their role as teachers at IHOM had established them in one group in the community and Claire's move to the Birchip P – 12 School opened up a further range of possibilities. 'We were good Catholics,' Angela says, 'but not sectarian. We were happy to meet everybody. The closure of IHOM made the community more cohesive.'

Angela adds, 'Of course, the knowledge that our children were receiving a quality education was also a positive. The P – 12 was a good school, with a strong reputation and a secular curriculum. It was what we wanted.'

Gavan believes that the BCG has also added to the appeal of Birchip, especially in that it has brought young people to the town. 'Young teachers, considering the school, see other young people around and they are much more inclined to come here,' he says.

For their children, Birchip is home. Claire is married to a local farmer, Chris Cook, and has three little locals to show for it. Sean, number three, in his last year of a medical degree, remembers that for many years, Birchip was his whole world. 'I knew everyone, they knew me. After I left, I even had a sense that I wanted to succeed in the eyes of the Birchip community. I can't explain it, really. The school and the footy club taught me about community and responsibility. You get resilience from belonging. I won't forget that.'

Elder son Liam's response is simple; 'Birchip's familiar; the people are passionate, and I like them'.

Genevieve, the youngest O'Donnell began her tertiary education in Melbourne this year. She says that, though she didn't always see it that way, 'Birchip to me is home. It is where I belong. After moving away, I thought I would not look back. It wasn't until I had left the small, safe, friendly enclosure of Birchip that I realised just how much I appreciated where I came from. I feel privileged and proud, when I am asked, to say that I grew up in a small country town called Birchip. There is nothing better than that feeling of relief and comfort, when I turn down Corack road and know I'm home.'



No-one was better than anyone else



When, in 1988, as the new principal of the Birchip P – 12 School, Philip Scambler came with his wife and young family to Birchip, they hardly expected to remain for almost twenty years. But remain they did.

His explanation for that lengthy stay is simple.

He says that Birchip offered much that a young family needed, perhaps most importantly its security. He and Marion were comfortable that their children were not in danger, that they could walk home from school safely, that assistance was always close at hand.

The ethos of the school also had much to do with their decision to remain. Students were willing to ‘have a go’, both academically and at sport: success was acceptable among their peers, who were friendly and amenable. They were able to both have fun and achieve. The staff was committed and hardworking, perhaps because many had children at the school. People saw the commitment of the teachers and were prepared to put their trust in the place.

Social life was pleasant and easy. Isolation, so common in the city, must be chosen in Birchip. Though small, almost incomprehensively small to some, the place was characterised by a feeling of community, a willingness to participate, a preparedness to support, particularly, in his experience, the school. Parent teacher nights with 90% attendance rates were almost unheard of in the city, let alone willing compliance with catering lists and working bee schedules. Virtually the whole town attended the school fête. Local businesses were also supportive: despite tough times, they were prepared to assist the school in any way they could.

Perhaps most usual of all was a community which seemed to be free of social stratification: ‘It was the most egalitarian social structure we had ever seen. No-one was better than anyone else; no-one appeared to feel superior.’

Philip and Marion became part of the community and they and their children contributed in a multitude of ways: it was a mutually satisfactory symbiosis.

Where are all the cars?



When Ellie Reid first came to Birchip from Fiji, she was apprehensive. How would people take her? She was moving from a third world to a developed country; her skin was a different colour from most of the people in the town.

‘When I arrived, I would look over my shoulder, wondering whether people were talking about me. Some people spoke really slowly to me, expecting that I couldn’t speak English.’

As it turned out, Ellie’s fears were never realised. ‘People were open, carefree, and usually friendly.’

The landscape was not so friendly. ‘It was so flat, and there were so few cars! I asked myself, where is everyone? I hadn’t seen a sheep in my life, or emus or kangaroos. I couldn’t believe the size of the farms. I was used to people in Fiji cutting cane by hand.’

Since then, Ellie had found Birchip to be ‘a great place to raise children, for them to be educated and safe.’ Her experience in the hospital, having her (several) babies, has been entirely positive. ‘The staff are gorgeous – it’s more like being with a family than in a hospital. In Fiji, there’s one big hospital, everyone goes there from miles around, there’s no privacy; here you have your own room and fantastic medical attention after delivery.’

It may come as a shock to people in Birchip that, by contrast with Fijians, Ellie finds Australians relatively uptight. ‘You people are always rushing, always on time. My philosophy is different: I say, wherever you are going, it won’t move. It’ll still be there.’

Moreover, she does have a slight sense of claustrophobia, that what she does is under scrutiny. ‘Everybody is noticing everybody else. It can be a bit scary. Sometimes I feel that if I do something good, not much is said, but if I do something bad, people are quick to judge. You have to be a bit careful.’

Ellie enjoys her life in Birchip. ‘I am happy here. Birchip is home. When I am in Fiji, and I’m returning to Australia, I say, I’m going home.’ Ruben, Ellie’s firstborn, had a ‘bit of trouble’ when he first arrived, but now he’s one of the cool kids. As far as he’s concerned, he’s Australian and for him, too, Birchip is home.

Never a dull moment

Apart from a husband and family, what is Birchip’s principal attraction for Louise Lee, formerly Louise Prendergast of County Kildare, Ireland? The answer is simple. Sun.

‘At home’, she says, ‘we Irish suffer from “sad syndrome” induced by the endless dripping rain and the lack of blue skies. Ask the Irish who live here: they wouldn’t go back. Australian sunshine is a positive, despite all the obvious difficulties. Of course, I miss the soft green, but soft green and lush grass also means wet.’

What else?

‘It’s the people, I suppose. They are community orientated, industrious, different from home. Everybody works for the town, and you can sit at anyone’s table. No-one’s better than anyone else, everyone’s treated the same. The assumption is that everybody deserves a go. You are accepted as an individual for what you are. There’s more to it than that. When the chips are down, people you may have had nothing to do with come out of the woodwork, wanting to help. The lack of formality suits me as well.’

She believes that Birchip people are resourceful because the environment demands that.

‘I also believe to a certain extent that less is more: when you have less choice, as we do up here, you aren’t tempted to want things all the time.’

Louise likes the sense of familiarity, the ease of shopping in the local supermarket and also the lifestyle her children can enjoy in such a safe, secure environment. ‘Ireland’s not like that any more. Even where my parents live, in the country, it’s more like an extension of the city.

‘I’m happy with the education they’re getting here as well. The school gives each child a go and looks out for his or her special skills.’

An essentially private person, ‘an Indian, not a chief,’ she initially found the tightness of the community daunting. Determined to be herself, she was put off by community expectations of what she should or should not be. When people found it strange that she didn’t watch her husband play football, she found it equally strange that this would be expected of her. She assumes now that there was an automatic connection made between herself and the family into which she married – no Lee would ever choose NOT to attend a football match if one were available. At the time, she saw the football club as sexist and its expectations unreasonable. Now she has changed her mind: she appreciates its ability to bring people together; to share in a family day; to get people out.

Louise feels that the close community also creates a sense that it is important to think before you speak.

‘You can know people too well,’ she says. ‘I like to be anonymous, to be able to separate home and work. Anonymity gives you courage; you can reassure yourself that if you don’t make whatever it is, no-one will know the difference. Here everyone knows; you feel you may be judged. You have to have a lot of courage to try. And yet, when you do, as I did when I went on School Council, there is a sense of affirmation when you hear yourself saying something sensible and people agreeing with you.’

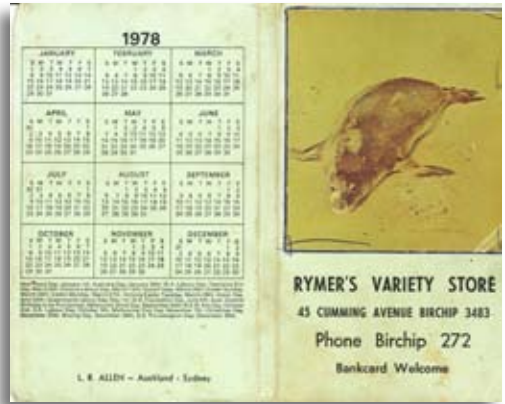
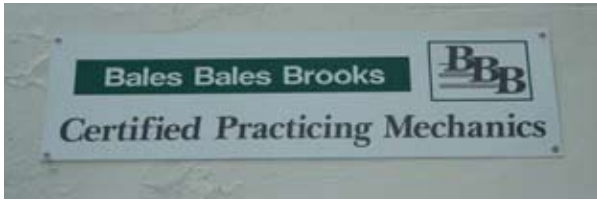


I don’t feel a great connection with the farm. I’m quite happy to have a path of my own, to contribute in a different way. I don’t know enough to be able to be part of the decision-making, I don’t have the history. But farming’s a great way of life when things are going well. It’s a terrific lifestyle; you can have the best of both worlds. When things are tough, like now, you see people worried, stressed, it’s hard work. I feel close to the landscape; I hate to see the trees dying. I wish it would rain more – just not as much as it does in Ireland. I must admit, I’d like the girls to have a career independent of the elements.’

‘Please God, we’ll get back to the good times.’ Louise says ‘Please God’ often, and she means it.

When she first married, one of the more forthright locals shrugged his shoulders. ‘Well, you’ll never have a dull moment with Chris Lee,’ he said.

She hasn’t.



Tradies then and now

Graeme Taylor pic to be scanned
The grocer store – Taylors Emporium

We were never bored

William John (Jack) Dwyer lived in Birchip from the 1940s to 1962. Married to Kathleen White, a local from Whirily, he and his family have fond and fascinating memories of their time in the town. One of the strongest is of the ‘rabbit drives’ conducted during the forties, when the little pests were herded into wire cages, and ‘half Birchip would go out shooting rabbits.’ During the 50s, Jack recalls selling rabbits which he kept in the ‘chiller’ to HH Bodley who would ‘come up three times a week’ to collect them. Sometimes the chiller would break down and Sparks Harris would be called in for emergency repairs.

Many of the rabbits were trapped, hung on the fence and brought into town by a group of Aborigines who lived a nomadic life in the surrounding district. The Dwyers remember them coming into town, selling their catch, having a celebration and then ‘off they’d go again.’ They were well-known round the town, some even playing football. Kathleen remembers sometimes asking one of them, Cedric Harrison, to share a meal with the family. ‘I’ll be right, Mrs. White,’ he would say shyly and disappear back into his own world.

Colleen their daughter, remembers Birchip as a vital place where the children were free to roam at will, as long as they were home by five for tea. ‘We often didn’t make it,’ she recalls. ‘We were having too good a time. I was a bit of a tomboy, and I especially enjoyed Friday nights when the town was buzzing. I remember playing cricket on the PMG oval with the kids from Curyo. It was very exciting. We had such fun.’

She remembers with particular fondness riding bikes to the pool, playing on billycarts made by the Quirks, and around Youngs’ Blue Store. They would build cubby houses in the PMG yard and sleep out in them overnight by the light of kerosene lanterns. As members of the active Swimming Club, in summer they were expected at the pool at 7 a.m. in preparation for competitions against St Arnaud, Wedderburn and Boort.

‘It was a fantastic childhood. We were never bored,’ she says.

Colleen also has clear visual and aural recollections which come to her mind when she thinks of Birchip: Alf Schofield’s red horse-drawn bread delivery van; Bob Lockwood’s voice at the back door shouting ‘Grocer!’; Perce Phelps standing in his shop declaring, ‘I’ve ordered it but it hasn’t arrived yet. It’s on the boat’ and Claudie Croft, the town legend, shuffling along the street, everyone looking after him.

Harvest meant long lines of trucks at the silos and the opportunity to take a bucket down to collect the spills for the chooks.

Also clear in the Dwyer family memory is what they call the ‘Italian influence.’ In about 1960, Joe Bisetti, Ru Negri and Ralphie Dorigo gained the contract to build the silos. With their almost total lack of English and flashing good looks, they seemed ‘so foreign and exotic’ to local families.

For much of the time, Jack was the Post Master. Life was busy at times, even hectic. A normal week finished at lunchtime on Saturday, and Jack was able to indulge his passion for golf. One day was particularly frantic. Back in the days of telegrams, it was the custom for those not invited to a wedding to send the obligatory telegram. ‘Once we had a double wedding, and we were rushed off our feet with over 200 telegrams,’ he recalls.

The Dwyers left Birchip in 1962, but their memories of the Mallee are strong and affectionate.



Farmwalk

Darky

I love the lifestyle; it's good for the family in such a safe, country environment

Georgie Cullinan

I've just always been here. That's the way it is. 2008's just like '48. There was no moisture in the ground.

Peter and Trevor Haslam

When you farm here, you're always looking for rain; you're always looking for that extra good year.

Leigh and Lachy

In front of Jolly's – where else would a man and his dog want to be?

Neil Davis

So this is what they call safflower.

Lee Hogan

Farming's such a great way of life, though the financial rewards aren't always there.



The lonely streetlight

Original story by Natasha Case

A beacon from childhood. I had never understood, nor asked it why we had granted it such a singular, poignant name. Nights driving home in wakefulness were spent in anticipation of who could spot its fostering beam first, and a childish ecstasy of contradictory shouting would deny its haunted atmosphere.

It wasn't that it was scary. One night, waking, I rode pyjama'd, to its isolated standing. In the warm darkness the bitumen slid away beneath my bare legs and feet. Once there, I gazed up, strangely calm, at the dead darkness of the insects that striped its bottom, at the suicidal flutterings of those it attracted – few now compared with the swarms of the early season. The night was quiet: even the local mopoke and the few curlews were silent. It was a waiting of infinite patience, I was sure. But then, sensing but not comprehending, I felt sad, an empty, forgotten sadness that was not devastating or anguished, but more accepting of inevitability.

There remained not even enough the tiny town to play in. Our cubby was an old storeroom and neglected pig shed further up the road. All that was left was a cement foundation, some toilets, a tiny, uninteresting box-like oven of a public hall. One of our few, unencouraging archaeological expeditions had uncovered a green twenty cent piece from the dried-up plumbing of the toilets. After this, we didn't return, except in passing.

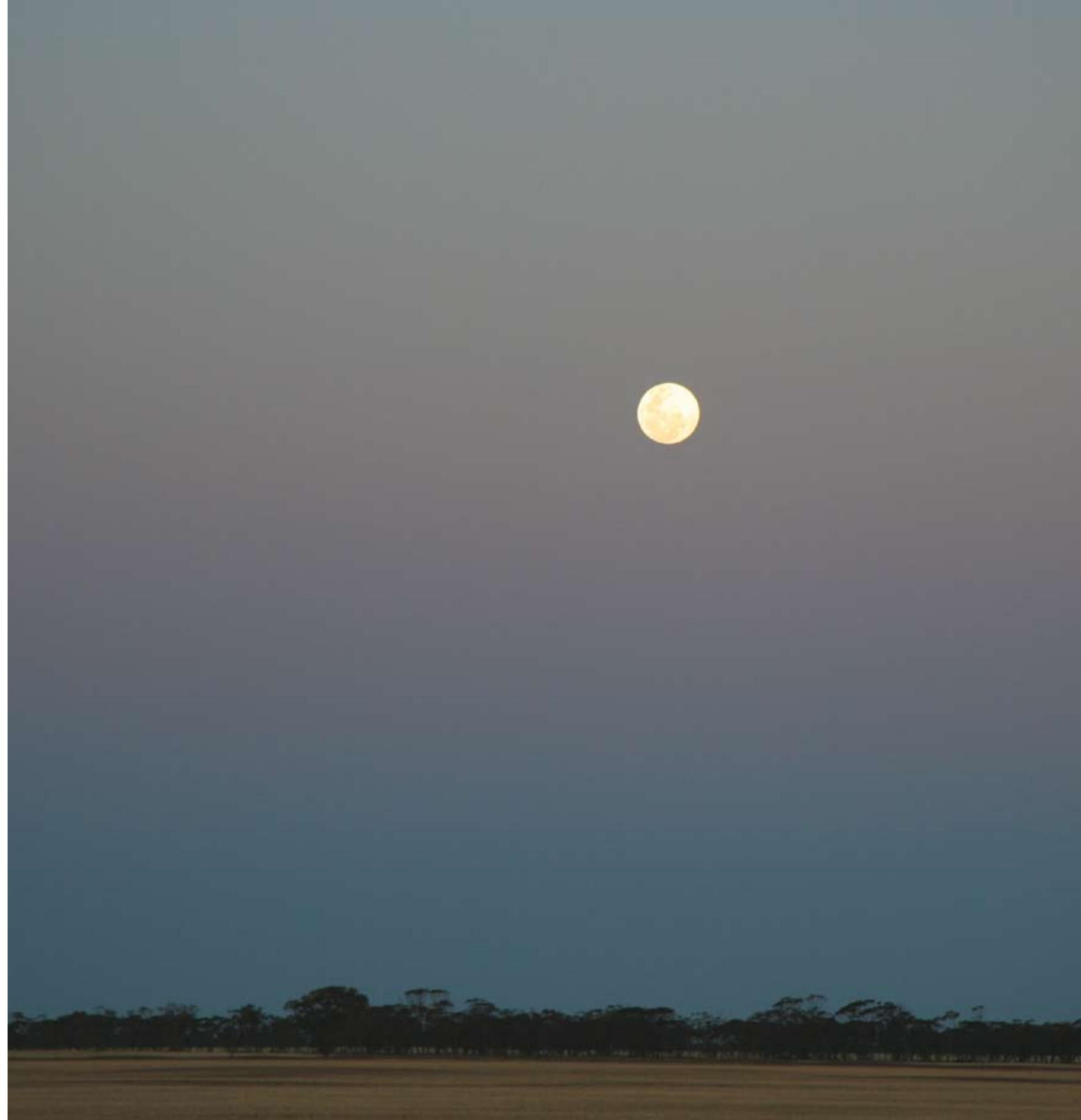
And so Curyo. The hope of the shop, the wine shanty, was burned down and rained out and blown from physical recall. Scratchy brownish-yellow grass and paper flowers, spots of low scrubby stuff and rubble disguised what was left of the footy oval. We once went fishing in the reservoir, but didn't catch anything.

A skinny rough-edged bitumen road squares off the town block, a bump off the main highway, a loop in the snaking smoothness of the Sunraysia. We remember it now for the dry white flowers we picked in the summer, careful of snakes, for the mistletoe that grows in the scrub, the fascinating bigness and the musty, toxic smell always emanating from the silos.

We remember too the white electric streetlight that represented the half-realised dreams of a generation. It stood testimony to the brutality of the bush, yet a symbol of the valiant front of civilized Australia.

They're turning it off now. The Council has noticed the cost of its burning and declared it a wasteful luxury. The half-fulfilled glow of the visionaries and politicians will be swallowed by the primal darkness of the land, save for the intermittent sabre of car lights and the all-seeing perpetuity of the stars and the moon whose own silver was momentarily overcome by the too-bright hopes of still whiter men.

It is the end of an epoch, the passing of one millennium into another, to an as yet unknown destiny.



A symbol of the past

When Natasha Case was in Year 12, the requirement to write folio pieces for her English course was a bit of a chore. ‘You had to think of something to write about. Our childhood out at Curyo seemed to be an obvious starting place. We lived there from when I was about five or six, till I was ten.’

She remembers how all four Case children – Georgina, Shannon, Monique and herself – would often ride down to the ‘town’ and just ‘hang out, mooch around.’ The place held a fascination, especially on hot summer nights, when she would jump out the window and ‘take off. It was all so completely forbidden, so tempting. It was a kind of archaeological site which held its own fascination.’

Her father Ken, tried to explain Curyo’s past to her. When she decided to write her essay on that remaining street light, she set about trying to make an almost political statement.

‘I tried to put our experience in its historical context. It was a very isolated place. I interpreted the memory of the trains approaching along the track, especially at night, when we could see, hear things coming, as a symbol of what had happened in the past. I realised that even though I couldn’t remember all it had been, others could. I realised, living there, that everything must decay.’

When she returned to the area, in Year 10, she felt a real nostalgia for the old Curyo, the old isolation.

But the family lived in Birchip and that was different: ‘It was a real town. In retrospect, it was better than I thought it was then. There was a sense of freedom, and perhaps we were lucky to avoid some of the consequences of that freedom.’

Natasha didn’t specify how that freedom worked, or what consequences were avoided, but she was quite precise about how the school operated.

‘It played such a huge part in your life. It wasn’t a rigid school, and that was one of its real advantages. The flexibility benefited a lot of kids; there was an acceptance of our individuality, it wasn’t as mono-cultural as larger, well-off city schools. We all knew we were different, could make different choices. It wasn’t Melbourne Uni for all of us and that gave us leave to be ourselves. We got a lot of individual attention.’

Contrary to what many people may perceive, Natasha believes that people can be more eccentric in a small place. The individual is better looked after in a small town.’

She lives a long way from Birchip now, in both geographical and social senses, but she still remembers that lonely street light and all it stood for.



The good old days and the bad old memories?

Tom McLoughlan says that the best thing about the good old days is when you’re talking about them. If those conversations are on the subject of shearing, Tom is an expert. From 1970 to 1972, and again from 1985 to 2006, he had something to do with most of the shearing that went on around Birchip. It would be fair to say that there was a lot of it.

In the early nineteen seventies, thirty five to forty shearers would set out from Birchip, sometimes as many as eight teams under different contractors. ‘Every farm had some sheep in those days,’ Tom recalls, ‘because everyone had a three year rotation. For some people, like Ashley Lindsay, shearing was a vocation, for others just a way of making a living, or of supplementing the farming income. A lot of shearers just fell into it, because farming wasn’t enough.’

There were good things about shearing, especially the companionship amongst the team, but ‘it was a hard job physically, one that takes its toll.’ Some – like Tom Lee and Ned Quirk - lasted until about sixty five, and Jim Retallick even made seventy. Fifty six was enough for Tom McLoughlan.

‘True, there used to be some folkloric glamour about it, when Australians were told that Australian rode on the sheep’s back. But conditions were – and still are – pretty ordinary. Anything that depends on piece work is hard going.’

In the past there were some concerns about the treatment some shearers dealt out to the sheep, ‘but it’s not like that nowadays. The training’s better and so are the techniques. Slight changes, like the wide combs, have made a world of difference.’

Even so, Tom’s glad that his shearing days are over. “Most people get out when they can,’ he says, ‘and I did.’



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
Daryl Cooper and (daughter) Davidson at ‘Lenrich’,
Tom Cullinan with one of the tribe, Daryl McLoughlan skirting,
Tom McLoughlan taking a well earned rest,
Tom McLoughlan and Ashley Lindsay flat out at ‘Kenley’

OPPOSITE: ‘Blokes what worked in this shed’ at ‘Marlbred’

A family affair

Ward Davidson hails from Whakatane, in the Bay of Plenty on the North Island of New Zealand. He now lives on the corner of Johnson and Simpson Streets, Birchip, Victoria, Australia. It's a bit of a contrast, but there were reasons. 'It was tough at home, so we came here for the work, and sort of ended up staying. We like it here. There's plenty of work, it's a nice friendly little town, even a bit multi-cultural. It's a good lifestyle, better than New Zealand.'

WJ and MT Davidson, Birchip, employs two of Ward's sons, some nephews and nieces and sundry others, making a total of 'about twenty, some in Balmoral. It's a family affair.'

Back in New Zealand, it's said, Ward's famous for poaching and pig hunting, as well as for his more conventional role of shearing contractor.

He says that the work's tougher over here, there's more dust, but the bosses are good and so is the pay. 'Mallee farmers are really good,' Ward will say, if pressed. 'We miss the beach, but we can go there for a break, for the diving and the sea food.'

Then back they come to this funny little town Birchip that they're starting to call home.



LEFT: on the board at 'Windarra'

OPPOSITE TOP: Ward Davidson at 'Shelton Park'

OPPOSITE BOTTOM: Mallee Shearing logos, front and back



A self made man

For the Lowry family – Leo, his wife Margaret, and sons Danny and Paul – farming is a way of life. You don’t even contemplate leaving, even when times are tough, because the Mallee is in your blood.

Leo knows about tough times. In his youth, his family was forced off the land, to try all sorts of options, one a farm in Gippsland. As he says, ‘There was no future there, unless you liked milking cows,’ and Leo certainly didn’t. During his school days, the family even ran a confectionary shop in Melbourne, – ‘a total disaster’, in Leo’s opinion – but a line of action chosen by his mother, a Colac girl for whom the Mallee meant war, drought, depression and the death of her husband.

After the family was ‘kicked off’ the original Corack property which had been pioneered by Leo’s grandfather, his older brother gave him some advice which today would be called ‘(very) tough love’. ‘Shut yer bloody ballin’,’ he advised the sobbing Leo. ‘You’ll never see this place again.’

Whatever the potential difficulties, Leo was drawn irresistibly back to the landscape of his birth. Determined to purchase some land for his beloved sheep which had ‘got into his blood’ while he was working in the early years for the Brennan family, near Corack, Leo set about achieving his aim. Almost entirely without funds, he persuaded the agent, misgivings and all, to take on his proposition.

Leo had his 631 acres east of Birchip and the beginnings of an empire. At the peak, the Lowrys owned 16,000 sheep, despite droughts, bushfires, floods, record interest rates and the collapse of the wool market.

While Leo Lowry lays proud claim to his status of self made man, he also gives credit to others. He says that he was ‘very lucky to have worked for the Brennans’ and declares that he couldn’t have had better neighbours than those whose farms surrounded his: the Sheahans, Lees and Hogans, among others. ‘They were a fine lot of people,’ he says. He also recognizes the role of his workman and friend Maxie Dillon. ‘Me wife’s done everything,’ he adds.

A list of Leo’s most admired people is revealing: John Wren, Ned Kelly, Bob Santamaria, Mary McKillop, Ned Kelly and Sidney Kidman. An Internet search reveals that each came from struggling backgrounds, each, in his or her own particular way, was highly successful at what he or she did – even Kelly, whose life became the stuff of legend – and each was Roman Catholic. Another man much admired was A. D. Hillgrove: a ‘man and a half, a very humble, great man.’

Leo says that the Church has been a very powerful force, giving him strength: he knows that “there’s more to life than what’s here on earth’. His big hope is that he makes it to Purgatory, where he can redeem himself and eventually find his way to Heaven.

Leo’s maxims are clear and simple, if not exactly politically correct.

Be optimistic and persistent; don’t extend yourself too far; be smart and honest. Don’t socialize too much and keep off the grog. Don’t go away from the country for fear of ‘drifting into city ways.’ Don’t bother about



getting an education if you’re going to be a farmer: you’ll just have to unlearn everything and anyway, you only need enough knowledge ‘to be able to count your money’. The government needn’t bother giving a farming boy a computer: better a second hand tractor or a truck.

At the bottom of it all, Leo’s voice can be clearly heard: ‘Cheap sheep. Cheap land and the Big G.’ If you don’t know what the big G is, forget it. He believes that you should.





‘Twas an evening in September

‘Twas an evening in September	I lay there in the gutter
As I very well remember	Thinking words I couldn’t utter
I was strolling down the street in drunken pride.	When a colleen walking by did softly say:
My knees went all a-flutter	‘You can tell a man that boozes
And I fell down in the gutter	By the company he chooses.’
When a pig came up and lay down by my side.	And the pig got up and slowly walked away.

Ross O’Donnell: borrowed from a spruiker on the Yarra bank post Second World War, late ‘40s

The Aussie Bloke

With apologies to Dorothea MacKellar

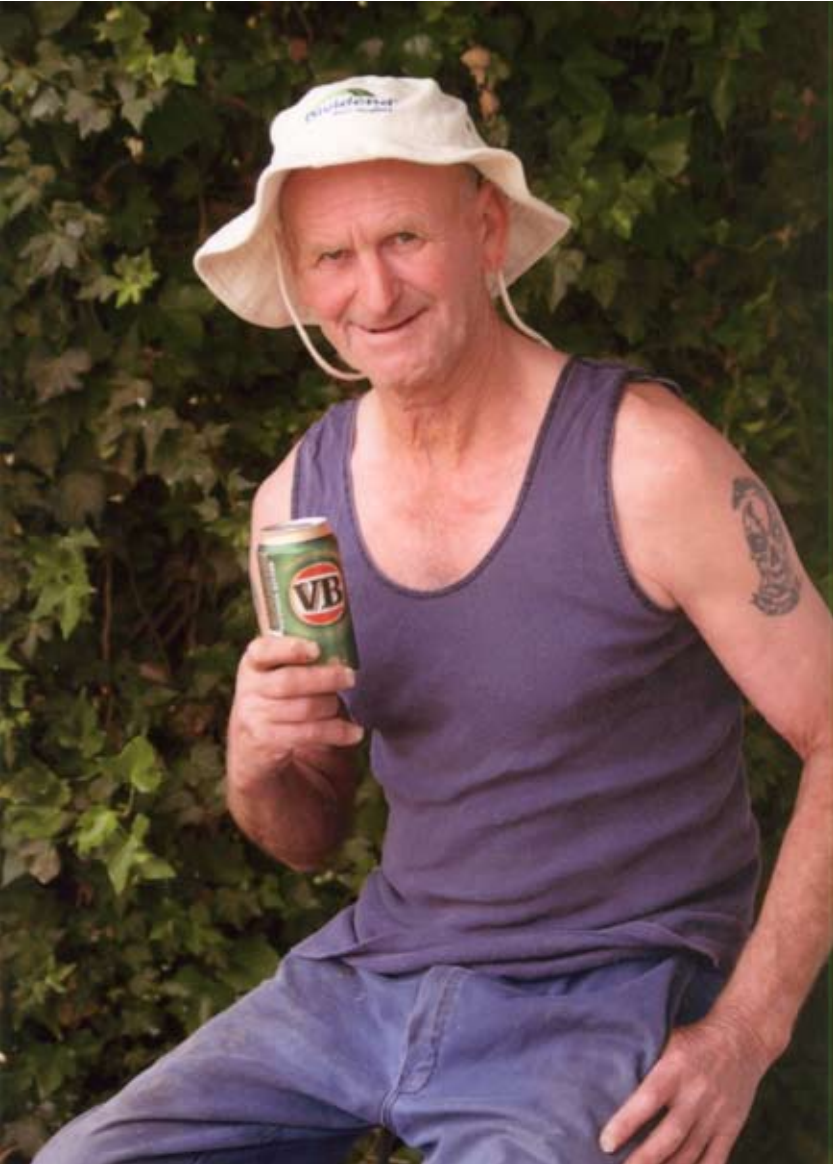
The love of beer on ice,
of green and shiny cans
of ordered froth and amber.
It’s sitting in his hands.

I love a shearer’s singlet,
A shirt a woman dreads,
Of ragged waistline stitches,
Of holes and running threads;
I love his rubber thongs,
I love his towelling hat,
His short and stumpy body,
With hair on all the fat.

The single, wife-less Aussie,
Drunk alone beneath the moon,
The opal-flamed bonfires,
The hot gold sun of noon.
Brown tangle of his hairs
Where persistent blowies lie,
And mozzies buzz the ear-holes,
He swats, the mozzies die.

Pride of the bush, the Aussie bloke!
His pitiless big gun.
When shots are heard around us,
We see the rabbits run.
But when the brown plagues gather
and he can shoot again,
The drumming of an army,
The cull – till none remain.

Pride of the bush, the Aussie bloke!
Man of the Mallee farm!
Through flood and fire and drought,
He works without a qualm.
There, the trusty favourite,
Watch for, every day,
The trusty head of the sheepdog,
That’s thinking as they play.



An open-hearted Aussie,
A wilful, robust bloke,
You all cannot be like him,
A man that loves a joke.
This bloke holds many wonders,
Wherever he may die,
A special spirit rests there,
A true-blue, Aussie guy.

Rohan Russell



Man's best friend

Music has been my life

Roger Hogan is a Birchip boy, born and bred, a man who likes his space, an outdoor man. Try to keep him indoors, or in the city, and you're in trouble. As a boy, try to persuade him that school was a worthwhile activity, and you were on a lost cause. But put a guitar in his hand, and the world lights up.

Born in 1924, Roger can remember when Birchip's population was 1300, when there were four grocery shops, two doctors, three hospitals, a power station, two picture theatres and 3MB Birchip, the Brighter Broadcasting Station. The power station, pumping electricity into the town, provided a steady boom boom background noise, so that when it broke down in the middle of the night, everyone woke up.

Roger likes to recount the history of his type of music. Its beginnings lie in America, when people were poor, made their own instruments and, charged up on home brew, sang their own brand of hillbilly music. Then the cowboys took it up and it became country and western. Now it's simply country. Roger parts company at country rock, which is often too noisy and lacking in the essential 'sound' he loves.

Bing Crosby, Gracie Fields were and are favourites: 'you can understand what they are singing and the melody and beat are familiar.'

Roger first mastered the guitar the age of nineteen, one of his tutors being films which featured close-ups of Gene Autry's hands playing. Though he never learned to read and write music, song writing has always come naturally. 'I hear the melody, and then the words come; they just bubble up, like a spring.' Often, a song is related to an experience or event in his life.

Roger's early show biz career was typical of its time: hard knocks in a tough, unsympathetic world. He was advised to adopt a stage name: Dusty Rankin would be able to open doors that Roger Hogan could not.

Perhaps the big break came in 1946 when Roger won the 2SM Amateur Hour which was broadcast Australia wide. This was followed by a tour of Tasmania the following year which really set things up for the budding C and w star. In 1948 he began recording and his career was on the way. By 1962, he was touring Australia, performing six nights a week, twelve months of the year, an exhausting but rewarding schedule which gave him the opportunity meet 'so many wonderful people in our wonderful country.'

But really, it was all too much. Roger was married, with two daughters, and he believed that the road was no life for a wife and family. It was time for Dusty Rankin to return home.

In 1963, Roger took a job at 'Windarra', the McClelland farm, where he remained for the next twenty nine and a half years. He did so on the understanding that he could maintain a singing career at the same time.

After he had been fencing for two years, Alan McClelland came to him with a proposition: "If I buy a tractor and plant, will you work it?" There was an additional carrot: "It'll have a radio, because I know you like music.'



Roger has lived in Birchip ever since. Now, retired from both singing and farming, he enjoys his life in Birchip. Though the memory of a much bigger town is still with him, he believes that "it's good the way it is. The people here are good; it's a pleasure to go to the stores.'

He says that he loves the casual life. He likes the way he can go down the street and have the kids gathered round the tables greet him. 'It's very special,' he says.

He still loves his music. But the hands aren't up to playing the guitar, and he says openly: 'One of the reasons I gave singing away, I looked in the mirror.'

Time moves on, but Dusty Rankin's great achievements live on in Birchip's history.

In the blood

There are some people for whom music is instinctive and necessary to their lives. Robyn Ferrier is one of these. From the beginning of her life, entertainment was a family tradition, fostered at the traditional Sunday night sing around the piano, and especially at Watson (her father's) family gatherings.

Her early childhood experiences both created and endorsed her love of music, and she was always encouraged by her parents. At ten, when her brother was learning to play the guitar, she picked it up, tried a few notes, and on she went from there. Robyn, her sister Sue and her brother John made up a family trio which sang together, in harmony, 'but nothing complex.' The essential sound came from the familiar church chords and harmonies.

Piano followed the guitar. Robyn can recall singing, in the late 1960s, at Hospital Sunday, a charitable event run by 3DB. She can even recall that the song was 'Cottonfields.' The commentator's remark, on completion of the performance, she can also well remember. After the usual patter, he concluded, 'and they can even sing in two keys.' She wasn't too sure how to take that.

Later, Robyn continued to sing duets with her brother. Meanwhile, during her secondary schooling, her career continued: she sang in the choir, entertained at concerts and later at kitchen teas and weddings. Later again she took roles in Sea Little Theatre Company musicals. Singing lessons at Swan Hill developed the range and quality of her voice and gave her more confidence.

Robyn has always seen her music as a form of self expression, easier than speaking, and of giving pleasure to others. She has sung throughout the district, and providing the National Anthem at various football finals, race meetings and naturalization ceremonies has given her particular pleasure.

In 1986, she began teaching two hours weekly for the Country Education Project in the Primary section of the Birchip P – 12 School, then later moved to Primary and Secondary Instrumental Music. This continued until 2006, during which time she was not only elected to the Shire Council, but also completed two? terms as Mayor. Other community commitments included playing and umpiring hockey, as well as taking on the roles of secretary and president at different times. She also chaired the Parents' Club Catering Committee, and recalls Deb Balls with affection. The Birchip Players' melodramas gave Robyn an opportunity she particularly relished: playing characters quite different from herself and from her public persona.

Robyn likes to think that the local community provides an ideal audience for singers young and old. 'If you like to sing, do it,' she says.



As natural as breathing

Joan Glenn grew up in a family in which 'making music was normal: playing and singing round the piano was as natural as breathing. Music was encouraged by the nuns at school in the form of choirs and concerts; post-school local amateur productions led to later solo gigs in Melbourne.

Just as Joan grew up with the model of her father's family band, Storey's Orchestra, her children have followed in her footsteps by creating 'Severed,' in 2001, their successful working band. As she says, "Children do as children see" is as authentic with music performance as with other pursuits.

Music is natural to children - they're all born with it. It does, however, need to be continually tapped along the way. I'm just one of the tapping points in the community to encourage a life-long love of music in young people. As a music teacher, my ambition is to see a true music culture in our community.'

Danny and Brodie Glenn, together with Simon Sharp, shared a passion for fast rock'n'roll, especially Australian bands. Though opportunities were necessarily limited in such a small community, they 'practised a lot and sometimes managed to start and finish at the same time.' Realising that their chosen genre was never going to get them too many gigs, they settled for more popular songs and their career was on the way. Songwriting led to a win in 'the local 'Battle of the bands,' a little money to record a CD which 'received local critical acclaim and some airplay on several radio stations.'

Success bred success, and soon the band was playing regularly in a number of venues and to larger audiences - even to one of 6 000 one New Year's Eve. Today they play regularly in pubs, back yards, sheds, sound shells and halls. Highlights of their career include sharing the stage with successful acts such as Mark Seymour and Killing Heidi.

As Brodie says, the band 'plays out most weekends and usually plays well, but we don't make any promises!'



Entertainment



Fool's Gold cast and crew

The citizens of Birchip and district have always been good at finding ways to entertain themselves. They have used their ingenuity to organize and create diversions ranging from the artistic to the bizarre. People comment that there is always 'something to do' in Birchip. These pages give some idea of the diversity of the 'do it yourself' entertainment available.

OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
Angus Barber and the late Mrs Bob Crosbie,
Birchip Ball c 1955, Sean Cahoon and Tim Barling,
Jazz Band with Alby Trollope and Mike Smith,
Keith Barber and friends,
Sheep races 1990s with Andrew Barber, Cliff Ryan,
Terry Arnel, Normie Hogan, and Liam Richmond,
Quarter Horse races 2007

CENTRE: Brass Band



Making a difference

Hugh Alexander is a convert to the Mallee, and an easy one at that.

These days, as he drives down the hill into Charlton, his heart leaps: the land opens up and he revels in that special feeling’ derived from the consciousness that he can see from horizon to horizon.

Hugh first came to Birchip in 1994 hang gliding. McClellands’ crossroads paddock on the Berriwillock road offered the perfect venue for a competition entitled Flatter than the Flatlands and for those seeking ‘that incredible feeling once you’re up there in the thermals, seeing the vastness, flying with the eagles.’

Hugh has come back to Birchip time and time again to ‘drive out to the paddock, open up the gate, stand there and know it’s all about to begin.’

But there’s more to Birchip for Hugh than the opportunity to indulge in one of his passions. Or even to indulge in another type of passion – the company of his Birchip-acquired partner, Alex Gartmann, CEO of the BCG. Hugh is fascinated by the Birchip community. He loves to watch and be a part of the jigsaw of human interaction and emotions which is not so clearly observable in the city.

Ever a sociable fellow, he loves the feel of the place. He loves to walk down the street, to be greeted and acknowledged, to able to say hello, especially to the old people. As he says, being recognized is a wonderful thing, perhaps not for everyone, but special for him. He recognises that there is a downside. People can become obsessed with small concerns. Some love to ‘take the opportunity to take exception to whatever offends.’ But being reminded to cut the lawn by a concerned neighbour doesn’t worry him too much, especially when it’s the truth.

‘Some people are a bit grumpy, as they are everywhere, but most are happy to see you. There’s also a certain toughness about the people that I like, as if they’ve seen a few things and learnt to cope with them.’

Hugh can offer a further explanation for his affection for Birchip. He likes to feel that, in the country, he can use the range of skills he possesses – and they are many. He loves to paint, to plumb, build, fix people’s backs and help with CERT jobs using his fire brigade skills. He likes to feel that he’s making a difference.

Contrary to accepted wisdom that it takes years, or even generations, before a newcomer is accepted into a small country community, Hugh has a sense of belonging: ‘It doesn’t take long before you feel you’re part of it all.’

He speculates about nature of the Birchip community, wondering whether the openness, the willingness to share, the hospitality, have their source in a sense of personal security derived from a world in which the threats come, not from people, but from the environment.

When Hugh is in Melbourne, he likes to relate how one day he left a brand new angle grinder in the back of the ute for a whole afternoon with never a thought of its disappearing. ‘Where else could you do that?’ he asks.

He also loves the generosity which seems to come naturally to people. When the hang gliders were first here Stan and Marlene Fraser offered their shearers’ quarters for accommodation; the McClellands offered their paddock, refusing any payment. ‘They just wanted to help.’

So Hugh looks forward to his frequent visits to Birchip, to the community – and of course, to Alex.



Showtime

Perhaps better than anything else, the passing of the Birchip Show exemplifies the effects of time on small country towns like Birchip.

For many years, beginning in 1883, it was a yearly highlight, much anticipated and thoroughly enjoyed. Everyone went. Children thronged around the sideshows, the boxing tent, where locals were brave enough to take on the professionals. They loved the challenge of trying to throw a table tennis ball into the mouths of the rotating clowns, the fairy floss and the toffee apples, the cha cha and the shooting gallery and the merry-go-round.

For some, the ring was the most exciting of all. There were many riders who would compete in the equestrian events, in which riders from towns far and near would challenge the locals. Farmers could come to inspect the horses, cattle, sheep the compare them with their own, and to salivate over the latest machinery. The women's pavilion was genuinely impressive: the range of skills displayed there was astonishing.

Eddie Lee remembers that the local paper told of romances that began at the show, 'nurtured by the show dance.'

Traditionally, show week was always crucial to the prospects of a good crop: rain during show week, of course, was what everyone wanted. Just as often, or even more often than not, Show Day would exhibit all the characteristics of the summer to come: a clear blue sky, soaring temperatures, even hot winds.

Doyens of these old shows were Punter Connelly and Jack Coffey, whose voice could be heard over the loudspeaker announcing the various events. That voice will live on in many memories.

But many children today hardly know what the show was and certainly have no understanding of its importance in the annals of country life. Speed and Longerenong field days now cater for the avid machinery freak, and self-help organizations like Birchip Cropping Group run field days, expos and special events to provide agricultural education, and research and development programmes. Keen horse people join pony clubs, undertake cross country events, or simply ride around the farm.

Those who take time today can reflect on the shows and what they represented by taking a look at the Pioneer Man who stands in Cumming Avenue. He was unveiled by Kath Smith in XXXXXXXX? and commemorates the work of the inaugural committee and all subsequent workers and supporters of the A & P Society and the annual Birchip Show.

Pioneer Man is the creation of artist Alan Boromeo of Lockwood. He took 150 hours to build and his exterior sheet metal panel was recycled from the interior linings of a railway guard's van. Some of the original metal paint remains, and the moustache and rear hairline are constructed from old five-inch nails.

He is there to remind both visitors and locals of the courage and resilience of the original pioneers and of those many organisers who ran the Birchip Show for the good of the community.



Scotty unloads 'Dryazel' horses at Birchip station for the show, 1920s

You can't turn the clock back

John Bennett was born and bred a Methodist, He was a youthful steward and a dedicated Sunday School teacher and has been a committed Christian all his life. He feels sad that popular interest in religion is diminishing, but believes that 'you can't turn the clock back.'

One of the great interests of John's earlier days was an organisation which was neither religious nor political: Young Farmers. Nor was it particularly agricultural either. All that was needed to be a member of Young Farmers was to have a declared 'interest in agriculture,' which in its turn meant, in the end, young people 'getting together and having fun.'

Its three pronged agenda was 'cultural' (debating and learning meeting procedures); 'social' (running balls and other social events; the annual conference) and 'agricultural' (cattle judging, tractor driving and field days). Promoted by the A & P Society, in the 1960s it became the 'biggest marriage bureau'. As he says, it was the 'social' aspect from which he really benefited, in that it was there that he met his wife, Val.

On reaching twenty five, when membership of Young Farmers must cease, John transferred his community interest to the A&P Society. This was equally rewarding.

The Birchip Show, he recalls, stimulated a healthy rivalry between families and neighbours in their efforts to enter top Jerseys, sheep and fleeces and he says that 'we put on a good horse arena.' There were always plenty of volunteers, but the impetus died after one hundred years and sadly, the show is no more.



Dan Hillgrove's team

OPPOSITE: from left, Young farmers Modelling representatives: Rodney Hogan, Di Rickard, Susie Phelan and Dean Connelly, 1980s

Born, not bred

Aidan Hogan loves to talk about horses and horsemen. He has been a student of animal behaviour for most of his life. Gentle and patient, he has trained many working dogs and horses. He responds instinctively to the challenge of taking on a raw recruit and shaping its behaviour.

He is particularly proud of the achievements of his son, Desi., and his locally bred mount, Gregor. Together, these two competed very successfully in the show jumping ring throughout Victoria, even taking on challengers like the famous Roycroft family.

He says, 'They both knew how to jump. You can't really learn this. You have to be born with it.'

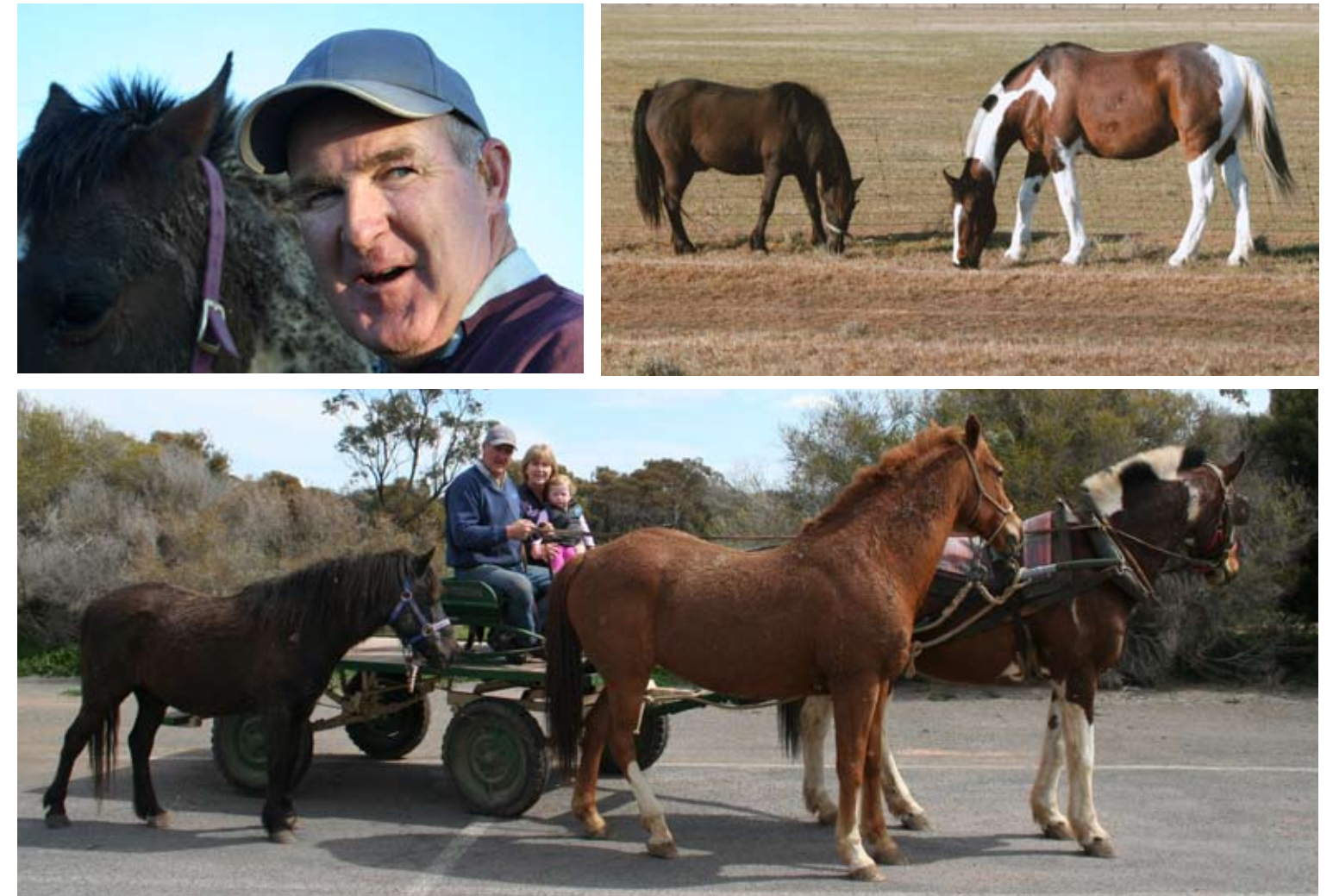
Aidan is happy to impart his stockmanship to anyone interested, especially grandchildren. What better end could there be than to see history repeating itself?



The place to be

Ted Coffey speaks clearly and simply: he has thought about what life is all about. 'People go away from Birchip and they say that when they hear the sound of horses' feet, they think of me. That's what I want to be remembered for. That'd do me ... the sound of horses' feet on the bitumen. Hell, I've had some fun outta horses. They're my passion. I've been on every race track in Victoria.

Let me introduce you to Tobe. I don't know how I'd go without him – he's a real little knock-around pony. We had the best time growing up with those gymkhanas at Berriwillock and Culgoa and so on. We were lucky. We're still the lucky country, the place to be.'



There's no such word as can't

When Bryan Hogan looks back on his life, one of the things he most clearly sees is the difference between his own life and philosophy and those of his father, Con, who was 'not a public man.' He believed in sport and Christianity, in working hard – incredibly hard, perhaps by today's standards – and in 'keeping yourself to yourself.' When Bryan decided to take on the position of President of the Football Club, his father was not encouraging. 'You're bloody mad!' was all he had to say.

Bryan formal education ended when he was thirteen and a half. He had been driving tractors since he was nine; not strong enough to lift a bag of wheat. 'Times were tough, but we didn't know any different. We all worked for the family and didn't expect or get much in return.'

In 1971, Bryan bought his first piece of land. Located on the Corack Road, it cost him \$25 an acre, and 'wasn't exactly the Elysian Fields.'

'You bloody fool,' said his father (again), 'A rabbit'd have ta take a cut lunch ta get across there.' When Bryan added insult to injury by taking on share farming (as opposed to contracting) Con wasn't impressed. 'You'll go broke,' he predicted.

Work meant work, for twelve hours a day. 'We had no lights on the tractor, but we'd be there waiting for sunrise, ready to go. We'd leave our tucker on the fence, and sometimes the crows would eat it all before we got there. Those were hungry days.' As it turned out, Bryan didn't go broke. In fact, he went on to become a successful farmer.

'I love farming,' he says. 'That's been my greatest achievement. It offers you an opportunity every minute of the day; your problem is not knowing which one to take up.'

Something he did take up, fortunately, was the chance to marry Peg Mullane from Rochester. They met in 1960, and were married four years later. 'I was lucky with the women in my life. My mother was a great woman, and my wife was as good as a man can get.'

And then there was football. 'I've also always loved my football. As a kid, there was some pressure to be as good as my dad. I began training at thirteen or fourteen. Dad had played at Nullawil. I moved back to Birchip at nineteen and played till I was thirty seven. Everyone else stopped when they were about thirty, but I could have gone on for ever.

Football's always been my great salvation. When we had young Con sick in Ballarat (their first son had a mysterious illness which no doctor seemed to be able to diagnose) we'd come home and it was like an injection. After all the pressure, we could recuperate. In fact, footy and farming have kept me sane.

Footy was good for me in lots of different ways. When I was President of the footy club, I had to learn to speak in public. I'd be terrified. But I learnt that there's no such word as can't. If somebody says you can't, you just dig deeper, go harder. When Con was sick, I felt, if my son can't, I can.

'The opportunity to go on the shire was like that. I was determined to do it on my own. When the nominations came round, I decided that I wouldn't rely on my Catholic friends and relatives. I decided that if the Protestants would have me, I'd be accepted.' As it turned out, Bryan's time on the Birchip Shire Council enabled him to meet many people he would otherwise not have met and to develop tactical skills he would not otherwise have had.

Bryan knows now that he has always been determined to prove himself. He knows that sometimes his determination takes him a little further than he would want. 'I try to curb some of my ways, not always with success. My kids are great levellers, though.'

He has also come to appreciate his better side. He enjoys seeing others getting ahead. 'I love to see people succeed. I get pleasure out of them doing things, making things happen. I've always tried to help people who needed it.

I'm glad that I got out and joined things. My dad didn't agree, but I reckon I've learnt a lot from doing it.'



Better off without September

Les Ferrier has lived almost his entire eighty eight years on the family property, Dryazel, to the north of Birchip. Les worked with his three brothers on the farm, while his sister Maggie, married the local grocer, Herb Taylor.

It was common during the twentieth century for the Bureau of Meteorology to request the assistance of those interested in recording the weather data of their local areas. For fifty years, Les has religiously recorded weather statistics at 9.00 a.m. daily. He has forwarded these details monthly to the Bureau so conscientiously that he received a certificate of recognition for his trouble. Now that Les has retired to Birchip, his nephew Richard continues the tradition which originally began in 1907 with Richard J Ferrier.

Many years of patient observations have led the family to conclude that the Mallee would be better off without September. ‘It makes or breaks us,’ they say. 2008 certainly was no exception.

Of course, there could be no topic better canvassed in this part of the world than that of the weather. Not even the perfidies of the Labor Party come near it. In these days of the Internet and computer models, perhaps the old theories have lost some of their adherents, but those that believe truly believe.

Greatly loved is the ring around the moon. For some, any sort of ring does the trick. ‘It’s going to rain,’ they say, ‘There’s a ring around the moon.’ Others go further: the larger the ring, the further away the rain. Some are even more precise: the number of stars inside the ring tells you how many days will pass before it rains. And so on.

Then there’s the Alan McClelland of Windarra’s ‘New Moon’ theory, stubbornly held till the end of his life. ‘I-i-i-f it r-r-rains on the new moon,’ he would declare, ‘I-I-i-i-it’ll be a w-w-w-et m-m-month.’

Col Russell says that if you see a pair of mountain ducks, there’ll be rain in two weeks.

If the ants are building, rain’s not far away. A sudden increase in the number of baby rabbits is also said to be a good sign. Somehow, the ants and the rabbits know.

Some would say that it wouldn’t be hard for even a rabbit or an ant to know more than the Bureau of Meteorology, but that could be just a prejudice.



That tasty soup

Come drought, depression, dust storms and war, Mallee families survived with courage and determination. Jean Reid is proud of the resourcefulness with which she clothed and fed her family. Today’s city children would be amazed how many products came from that one cow: milk – not from a carton – some separated and made into butter. The residue cream was sold: placed into cans and loaded on the train every Sunday night. Refrigeration? Forget it.

One might be excused for dismissing even the possibility of intelligence in a mere milking cow. Think again. On one occasion, the current cow – let’s call her Bessie – refused to go into the bail. One might say stubbornly refused. No cajoling, tempting, or bribery would get Bessie into that bail. Only after much confabulation did the family come up with the explanation: Jean wasn’t wearing her usual Hessian milking apron.

Indian hawkers provided a break from routine. ‘Lady want any broomers?’* they would ask. No fool, Jean’s favourite timed his visits just as Bessie was being milked, and he cherished turnip tops from the garden to flavour his pancakes.

Of course, Jean’s husband killed their own sheep for mutton.

The following recipe may fill the modern reader with horror, but not so the fresolute Mallee housewife of last century.

Recipe: Sheep’s Head Soup.

1. Take one sheep’s head, recently slaughtered
2. Cut off the nose with an axe
3. Clean the remaining head portion, reserving the brains
4. Toss the cleaned, noseless head into the stock pot
5. Add vegetables (from the extensive garden), season with salt
6. Simmer for a time
7. Serve soup

Other sheep remnants – tongue, flaps, etc., - became potted meat or shepherd’s pie.

‘It was a battle and we wasted nothing,’ says Jean, as a gentle reminiscent smile crosses her face. ‘You’d be surprised how tasty that soup was, too.’

* An article of ladies’ attire, too intimate to be translated here.



As free of money as a frog of feathers

The landscape of Marge Case's (née O'Neill) early Birchip memories was barely recognizable in the one we know today. 'It was a different world.'

She was born on the 8th of November, 1916, possibly at home, like her brothers, with the help of Mrs Phelps, the midwife. It was said that this admirable woman had assisted at the birth of three hundred babies and never lost one.

Marge could picture the shops lining the main street of Birchip then, including the Coffee Palace, the chief function of which was to act as a boarding house. She could detail Lockwood's shop, Miss Coots's lolly shop and library; the blacksmith's, and the premises of the undertaker who was also a plumber. Funerals, she said, were 'impressive affairs': black plumed horses' drew the carriage taking the deceased to the cemetery.

'People did what they could to make a living,' she recalled. 'We were never hungry. There were no other houses in our street, and we had our own cows, fowls and a garden. We took billies of milk round town, 3d a pint. We were self-sufficient.'

She was proud of the education she received in Birchip, though in those days no-one was educated to continue to university 'unless they were monied people. We had the best education. We had to learn for ourselves and we never forgot what we learnt. We had ten minutes' mental arithmetic at the beginning of the day; you never knew when you would be called on, you just had to know.'

When school days were over, girls worked wherever they could, usually as domestic help. Marge found a place at the café which could seat 60 people and prided itself on serving a plentiful, satisfying meal. The working day began at 8.00 a.m. and finished at 10.p.m, commercial travellers who had arrived by train were fed as they arrived. Night shift was from 10.00 p.m. until the last billiard room had shut and the last customer had been satisfied. The café was a haven for locals and visitors alike: after the footy, families treated themselves to a home made pie or pasty, and as much tea and coffee as they could fit in, all for 9d. A pie on its own cost 4d.

Work was hard for the girls. Floors had to be scrubbed on hands and knees, customers pleased, uniforms -brown with fawn collars and cuffs in winter, pink in summer, – bought, all for the 12/6 a week, raised after a year to 15/-. Marge O'Neill's vague dreams of being a school teacher were remote, but there was little room or time for regret. This was what girls did.

There was plenty for the young to do in those days, probably more than there is now. There were picture shows, euchre games, girl guides, tennis, Guy Fawkes Night at 'The Flat', an open space on the corner.



By her early twenties, Marge was married to Clyde Case, an amateur radio enthusiast who had come to Birchip from Sydney to be part of Herb James's 3MBS Birchip. Soon, there were two sons, Neil and Ken, and Clyde was away fighting. In fact, Ken was born on the last day of Clyde's leave and was over three years old when his father returned, thus missing the early babyhood bonding with his father. Marge tells of a family of four girls who lived not far away. Upon their father's return from the war, one was heard to ask, 'What's that man doing in our house?'

3MBS proving unsuccessful, Clyde turned to managing a fruit shop, his passion for radio reduced to the sale of batteries for the console radios of the town. At several pounds a pop, it was not surprising that these batteries were carefully preserved, radios turned on only at news time.

The Cases were 'as free of money as a frog of feathers.'

Then came Clyde's chance. A transport load of kerosene refrigerators, sold for cash, formed the beginnings of the family business. The Cases were able to buy their first Holden car, £100 c.o.d. She and Clyde ran the shop and earned a 'comfortable enough living.'

In the last weeks of her 92 year life, Marge Case enjoyed reminiscing about her past. In her last days in Birchip, she described it as 'a happy and tolerant community, where people are welcomed and accepted.'

The bombers: hour of infamy

Part of the entry in Wikipedia under ‘Russell Street Bombing’ reads as follows:

The Russell Street Bombing refers to the March 27, 1986 bombing of the Russell Street Police Headquarters complex in Russell Street, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. The explosion was caused by a car bomb hidden in a stole 1979 Holden Commodore.

The blast seriously injured 21-year-old Constable Angela Taylor, who died on April 20, becoming the first Australian policewoman to be killed in the line of duty. A further 22 people were injured. The explosion caused massive amounts of damage to the police HQ and surrounding buildings, with damage estimated at more than A\$1 million

Though the reference concludes that the motive for the bombing was unknown, an Internet site entitled ‘Melbourne Crime Underworld news On the Net since 2000’ states that the perpetrators were a ‘group of armed robbers with a pathological hatred for police.’

On the day before Good Friday on March 27, 1986, the stolen Commodore, loaded with 50 to 60 sticks of gelignite, some detonators and a timing device, had been parked outside the Russell Street police station. At 15 seconds past one o’clock, just as Constable Taylor was crossing Russell and LaTrobe streets on her lunch run, the car exploded.

Four people were charged in connection with the bombings: Peter Michael Reed, who was arrested on 25 April, 1986 at 5.45am in his Kallista home; Stanley Brian Taylor in a 2am raid on his Birchip home on 30 May and brothers Craig and Rodney Minogue in a Swan Hill motel at 5.15 am later that day.

The crown did not allege that any one person played any particular role in the bombing, but that each of them was a member of a team. The evidence was damning: gelignite and detonators

used in the construction of the bomb were of the same type known to be stolen; gelignite was found at Reed’s house wrapped in newspaper containing fingerprints belonging to Rodney Minogue; Craig Minogue owned a pair of side cutters which produced cuts similar to those found on detonator wires; a file with traces of brass deposits matched those found at the bomb site; a block of wood from which a wooden part of the bomb had been sawn was found at Craig Minogue’s premise as was tinned copper wire, similar to that used in detonators found at the bomb site; residue of gelignite matched residue found at a previous address of Craig and a witness stated that Minogue called around, to ask about the use of detonators.

Taylor was convicted of murder, burglary and theft, car theft, intentionally causing serious injury and causing an explosion. He was sentenced to life imprisonment on August 24, 1988.

Craig Minogue served time in Pentridge Prison’s high security Jika Jika wing and befriended celebrity gangster Mark ‘Chopper’ Read. Read said he heard another prisoner offering multiple murderer Alex Tsakmakis \$7,000 to stab him. He had also set his sights on Minogue. Minogue decided to get in first. In July 1988, the bomber caved Tsakmakis’s head in with a pillow case full of weights. Tsakmakis died in St Vincent’s Hospital.

The site suggests that, after his death, the greatest concern to prisoners was whether or not they would lose their weight-lifting privileges. In any case, Minogue was found guilty of killing and ordered to serve a lengthy jail sentence concurrent with his minimum 28 year Russell St bombing term.

In an exclusive interview with the Herald Sun in June 1990, Minogue said: “I killed him and I don’t regret his passing. He was a stone killer and a head hunter, and my head was next. I’m guilty of wishing to live, in the face of a plot to kill me. I rest well in my bed knowing I sent him to a better place.’

No-one’s all bad

When John Evans arrived in Birchip late in 1985, he quickly ingratiated himself into the community. He was affable and incredibly generous, always willing to contribute to whatever was going. He seemed to have plenty of money, but it did not escape notice that his resources invariably came in cash form. Peter Gee, (Rodney Minogue) it was noted, paid his football subs in \$50 bills. Footballers being notoriously slow payers in the subs area, some eyebrows were raised.

Nor did the name S T A N tattooed on Evans’s knuckles pass without notice. Asked the obvious question, he replied that Stan was a ‘good mate’. He became head trainer in no time, accepted by the footballing community for his skills and financial support.

Keith Barber was on committees of both the Football Club and the Lions Club at the time. He recalls that Birchip viewed John Evans with some doubt. ‘We wondered where the money came from,’ he says. ‘We thought that perhaps it was drug dealing because the money was always there, in cash. One day, KD , Evans I had been out selling tickets in the hotel for a footy raffle. We had sold about \$150 worth and KD and I watched fascinated as he counted the money. He was amazingly fast. KD winked at me and said, “Perhaps we’ll have a shootout in Cumming Avenue” He didn’t know how close he was to the truth.’

At 4.00 a.m., on Friday, 30 May, 1986, in faraway Cope Cope, farmer Robert Bugge returned home after a hard night’s work on the tractor. Climbing into bed, he informed his sleepy wife, Margaret, that two helicopters had flown overhead,

quite low, just a few minutes previously. ‘Oh, Robert, go to sleep,’ she replied, turning over. ‘You’ve been working too hard!’

Roger Hogan’s wife, Mary, commented the following morning on the ‘funny noise’ the train had made in the night.

In the event, the *Donald BirchipTimes* reported on Tuesday, June 3, 1986, that ‘Detectives from the task force investigating the Russell Street bombing arrested Craig and Rodney Minogue and Stanley Taylor early on Friday morning ... (after) ... More than 60 police and two helicopters left Melbourne earlier in the night in a secret operation co-ordinated by the Bomb Task Force.’

Simple words to cover the flurry of horror, alarm, excitement, humiliation and sheer disbelief that ran through the hearts of Birchip residents that morning. They could not believe that they had been so duped, so naïve, as to be taken in. That three blokes who had lived in town amongst them could have been the perpetrators of such a crime was simply too much to contemplate. Reports in the Melbourne papers that the trio were ‘local’ to Birchip rubbed salt into the wound.

Never letting an opportunity past, some wag crossed out Peter Gee’s name on the selected team for the Seconds, adding the words, ‘Not available until further notice.’ Despite the humour, Minogue’s mother returned his football jumper to the club.

Bryan Hogan believes that, in retrospect, Birchip’s brief acquaintance with John Evans, aka Stanley Taylor, went a long way to destroying, at least for a while, the town’s essential innocence.

‘People became much more security conscious, and much more wary. Before, we just trusted everybody. In a way, it did newcomers to the town a disservice; it made it harder for anyone moving in because the trust had been broken.’

Roger Hogan puts it differently: ‘Those Russell Street bombers really upset the appplecart for a while.’

It is interesting to try to imagine why Stanley Taylor chose Birchip as a bolt hole after committing such a serious crime. Did the 300 km distance from Melbourne appear to him as a barrier over which no police investigation could possible climb? Did the patent honesty and perhaps naivety of the locals convince him that they were so simple and innocent as to be devoid of all suspicion? Or did he simply enjoy the sense of being in a society whose members were so far removed from those he was used to? He had been heard to say that “the further north he went, the friendlier people became.” If this were the case, then he found what he was looking for – a friendly town willing to take on all comers.

But there is a postscript. Bryan remembers that at one Lions Club event, John Evans won the raffle prize, a crocheted rug. ‘ He found out that it was made by my old aunt, Kath Kelly. She was in hospital at the time, and what did he do but go and see her to thank her for it, and spend a long time talking to her about this and that. No-one’s all bad.’

Streetwalk three

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT:

L. P and S M Noonan, Fuel and Tyre Sue and Leo ‘George’ Noonan
Birchip’s been good to us. We’ve been here since 1986. We’re our own bosses and we like talking to good country people

Donnellon’s Bulk Haulage Billy Donnellon
The feed industry’s good, growing bigger and bigger each year. I don’t think we’re doomed. I manage the business, providing some employment

Blair’s Panel Shop Les Blair
I’ve been at it since 1963. I started up my own business in Birchip because it was necessary that the service stay in town. I like the challenge. SES and RACV and good too

School Bus drivers John Wegner, Pat Connolly, Aidy Connelly
It’s a responsible but enjoyable job. The kids are pretty good and we can rely on the bus monitors

J.J. O’Connor and Sons Dennis O’Connor
Of course, with the seasons as they are, we have our moments, but the farmers stick with us. Birchip’s a loyal town; the customers support local businesses. Being a major sponsor of the BCG since its inception has been very rewarding

Mallee Steel Robert ‘Cozo’ Cousens
It was a great decision to start out on my own in Birchip. It keeps the business there. I feel useful most of the time. I like the interaction with the farmers and there’s a lot of variety

CENTRE TOP: **Mick Turner Hard Facing** Mick and Sue Turner
Working in Birchip is quite rewarding. I love the way of life, getting pats on the back from the farmers. It’s a real buzz. Sometimes I work seven days a week, but it’s great running our own show

CENTRE: **J.P. and E.M. Casey** Jim Casey
I began my driving career when I was sixteen. I enjoy meeting people; they get better as you go further north



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:

Birchip Engineering Bob Darby
After 20 years, Bab and I have handed over to our son Steve. I’m a shy person, but I’ve always felt comfortable in Birchip, where people are friendly and inclusive. We’re here for the rest of our lives

Brenda Doran Fitness Brenda Doran
I’m here to keep up the health and ell-being of the community. I aim at stress relief. The men aren’t as proactive as the women and they should be. I love the oldies class; it’s fun rewarding

Drama Queen Beauty Salon Sarah Doran (and Mildred Dickie)
I’ve just started here. I’m providing a service: everybody needs special treatment especially in the hard times we’ve been having lately

Greg’s Digging Greg Rymer
We saw an opening six years ago, took a huge gamble and it’s paid off. Birchip is well located for a roving business and there is a lot of local support for which we’re grateful

Builder Kevin Weinert
There’s plenty of carpentry here – too much sometimes!

Painter Roger Bragg
I’m a full-time painter now. Pauline does the Post Office.

Elders Birchip Shane McLoughlan
What better job is there than a stock and station agent or a bloke when there’s no room on the farm? I wouldn’t still be here after twenty four years if I didn’t like it. I’m still looking for that better season

M and P Jolly Peter and Jenny Jolly
The shop’s a bit of a focal point for the locals. We’re reliant on the rain, like everyone else. We enjoy the contact with people



It's like being part of a family



Dorothy Jolly believes that one man – or woman – is just as good as any other. She has never been able to understand social divisions of any kind. She believes that everybody has something good about them, though sometimes that good is rather hard to find.

When she first arrived in Birchip, fifty years ago, she was immediately conscious of what she calls a Catholic/Protestant divide. ‘I wasn’t used to that,’ she says. ‘I hated the sense of division. I couldn’t understand it; I thought it was stupid.’ She believes that that divide has now all but disappeared. ‘Perhaps it’s because we’ve had some hard times, we have had to work together more.’

A great deal of Dorothy’s time has been spent in an effort to balance the inequities of life. Since moving to Birchip, she has been a member of a range of groups aimed at helping those who are unable to help themselves. Twenty years ago, she was there when the Birchip Support Group was formed to help people who came to the town, people who weren’t managing their finances.

She was part of Wimmera Community Care training until ‘you needed a piece of paper’ which she didn’t have. She has worked with family support advocacy at the school, in the Court Network, ‘which worked really well for a while, and in probationary work. Of course you didn’t talk about such things. You kept the confidentiality, but I still keep contact with some of them.’

She is proud of her contribution to the George Gould units, which she believes have been ‘good for Birchip. It’s been interesting to see them grow. I’ve been part of it since the first tenants moved in.’

These days, the public face of Dorothy Jolly is in the Op Shop at the Shamrock, which she’s kept up since 1986. There she encourages others to live by the precepts with which she was brought up. ‘In my day, if you didn’t have the money, you didn’t buy something. I say to them, ‘Do you really need that? If you don’t need it, don’t buy it.” I always try to be honest and I like to be fair.’

Now there’s less call for such work: there’s more social security, bigger organisations like the Salvation Army and St Vincent de Paul.

These varied experiences have created a woman who is broad-minded and understanding. Though she says that she’s ‘a pretty staid old thing,’ she isn’t easily shocked. ‘Nothing surprises me any more.’ She is independent and enjoys living what to others might seem a limited life in such a small community. ‘I have

things here, I’m involved. It’s like being part of a family. I’m fortunate, I have younger friends.’

I’m a practical person. I like to get things done. I’m not tolerant of wasted time and I can’t be bothered with a lot of idle chatter. There’s a difference between news and gossip. Perhaps I feel like that because I’ve done some welfare work.’

At a personal level, Dorothy likes to feel that she has contributed, both publicly and to her own family. ‘I have a supportive family, grandchildren; I’ve travelled, had good holidays, and enjoyed generally good health. There are things I might change if I had the chance, do differently, but who wouldn’t? A least, I don’t think I have any enemies!’

It would be surprising if she had. A more blameless life cannot be imagined. From early life in Patchewollock, to marriage and Ballarat, then back to share farming, to the farm and then into Birchip and the stock and station agency, Dorothy has performed her part to perfection.

Any early dreams of becoming a nurse had been lost during the war years, and like many women, she married at twenty one and settled down to performing the tasks expected of a young wife: looking after the children, milking the cow, feeding the chooks, scrubbing the floor on hands and knees.

Perhaps her favourite time was share farming with Dr and Elizabeth Maxwell at ‘Woodlands’. The Jollys were welcomed by that part of the Kinnabulla community which centred on the church and she likes to recall how Dr Maxwell, strictly forbidden to smoke, would beg her to ‘buy him some cigarettes. So, off I’d go to the Blue Store, and do as he asked. I had a little cache there for when he wanted them.’

She reflects on the considerable changes since those days on the farm. “We had half the house at Woodlands. Dr and Mrs Maxwell lived in one half and we lived in the other. The day we arrived was really hot. The SEC was there but not turned on. We had this great big old stove, at least seven feet long, with an oven on either side and hobs to keep things warm. We called it Black Bess. We had to stoke it up in the winter, and close it down overnight so that it smouldered till morning. We used to clean it with Zebra cleaner. We had what we called a fountain for hot water, and out in the detached bathroom, we had to heat the copper for a bath. The toilet was way down the back of course.

We didn’t even have a radio in 1963 when President Kennedy was killed. By that time we had our farm and house, and it had an electric stove, running hot water and a septic tank. I thought I’d died and gone to heaven, or at least on a wonderful holiday.

We sold because we had a good offer. We didn’t know what we were going to do, but that’s when we started the stock and station agency.

I was lucky to be able to work in the shop. I learnt such a lot about human relationships and about dealing with people. Sometimes I would have liked to say something, but in the end you just grit your teeth and smile.’

So Birchip became Dorothy’s home, its life her focus and the less fortunate her special concern. She may be a ‘staid old thing’, but she has contributed an impressive amount to the life of Birchip and the community.

Here to stay

Frances Lee's recollections of 'catering' constitute a potted history of eating in the country. She can remember when it meant taking heed of the Miss Bennetts and dutifully constructing 'plates' of cold meat and salad – lettuce, tomato, beetroot and grated cheese – securely enclosed in Glad Wrap, charge \$6.

From about 1985 onwards, it was *much* more sophisticated: food for the masses had advanced to smorgasbord casseroles, turkey or ham on the bone, and salads – *in bowls!* Dessert was Pavlova, chocolate ripple cake, trifle and tinned fruit salad. Charges for the ubiquitous 'plate' of cold meat and salad were raised about that time – from an exorbitant \$6 to an outrageous \$7.

Today, her repertoire is much more varied, her own knowledge and her customers' tastes having broadened considerably with the years. Now, she and her team provide from an eclectic range of cuisines, which people are more than happy to eat.

It all began almost forty years ago when the new hockey club, established largely by Frances and her sister-in-law, Jenny Beacham, needed funds. It has grown from there, with a variety of groups 'doing the work', but the essence is the same: providing for a community need and raising money at the same time.

Currently, twelve women from Uniting Church Ladies, together with large numbers of netballers, form Frances's team. Before that the co-partner was the Kindergarten. While for the immediate recipients the funds are important, there is an underlying philosophy which unites the workers.

'It's all about serving groups like the BCG, keeping money in the community, rather than having it lost to outsiders. We buy as much as we can locally: we use the baker, the butcher, the supermarket for our supplies. It means that Birchip often attracts functions, like Shire events, which we wouldn't be able to otherwise,' Frances says. 'We've had to give up the smaller functions to other organizations like the school, because the demand was just too great.'

Sometimes, if the cause is particularly worthy, the work is done without charge.

When asked why she continues to perform such an arduous task, Frances's answer is simple: 'Because I live here, and always have. 'Every year, I say I'm not going to do it any more, but then I think, what would happen? So I keep going. It's my way of contributing to the community. It's very easy to walk away from things, but not if you've got a conscience. But I wouldn't do it if I didn't like it.'

Probably one of the reasons Frances 'likes it' is that she's so good at it. Glenys Ferrier, one of her faithful helpers, describes in awe Frances's ability to direct a team to prepare meals for one hundred, two hundred or more people. 'She's amazing. She's everywhere. She has it all organised, and if you're not sure how to do something, she materialises and shows you how.'

Ian McClelland, chairman of the BCG, is equally appreciative.



Frances's history in the area is lengthy. At the age of four, she and her family moved from Navarre to Curyo, where her father, a lumper, had been recruited to play football. In 1962, she left school after Year 10 to undertake a one-year course with Venus hairdressing. Qualified, she purchased the Creative Salon, and three years later, after some equally creative matchmaking, married Edwin Lee. She was twenty years old.

'It won't last,' said Nanna Lee. 'You're too young.'

Contrary to such a dire prediction, it did last, and forty-four years, five children – four of them living in Birchip – and a dozen or so grand children later, Frances Lee is still here.

'It's a very caring place,' she asserts, 'a fantastic place to bring up children. People in bigger places miss out on the values we have here. Mind you, the young people should go away to broaden their horizons, and I don't even feel that they have to come back. It's just that most of mine did.'

Frances has led a very busy life. She has worked hard looking after her family, supporting a range of clubs and groups and playing sport. It's no coincidence that she is a life member of both the hockey and tennis clubs. Today, she is interested in the Community Forum and other development groups.

'I'm in those organisations because I believe that we must preserve and develop what we have. The last few years have been tough, and I've watched others leave. Sometimes I've wondered, but I know we won't – leave I mean. We're here to stay.'

Good fun and great value

Sharee Dobson is a handy person to have about town. She might be said to have a finger in lots of pies. Since returning to Birchip in 1990, she has become involved in a range of community activities. Initially, her very arrival had a beneficial outcome: her son, Derek, constituted that magical number which meant ‘another teacher,’ for the school.

She believes that Birchip was a ‘great town to bring kids up in,’ and that its influence extended well beyond its borders. When Derek was away completing a primary teacher’s degree in Ballarat, the grapevine worked highly effectively: ‘Something you do in Ballarat will always beat you home.’ Unlike others, she doesn’t find the information cycle threatening: ‘I like to know.’

She admits that though she hates conflict, she sometimes causes it. ‘I’m very happy here. Sometimes you get something from out of left field, but you grin and bear it, get over it and on you go.’

Sharee believes that the town has ‘gone ahead’ in recent years, and that both the BCG and the combining of the Birchip and Watchem Football Clubs have contributed to that prosperity. ‘None of us can help the drought, though of course it doesn’t make things any easier. New people come, and fit in, and bring young families, which helps keep it all going.’

Sharee Dobson also keeps it all going.

Over the years, she has played and organised tennis and been a member of the North Central Lawn Tennis Association. She’s been secretary of the Football Ladies Football Auxiliary; a member of the Leisure Centre Committee for six years and League Secretary as well as helping run Junior Football. She’s assisted in organising the B and S balls, the Quarter Horse Races and the Ute Muster. She attends Birchip Forum meetings.

Currently she is a member of CERT, which provides prompt first aid response to the community of Birchip and district. With sixteen volunteer members, the group has completed 132 jobs since its formation. Apart from feeling that this is a valuable community service, Sharee also recognises the organisation as a source of close and valuable friendships

If all that weren’t enough, Sharee spends over half her working week as a family day care provider. ‘I enjoy looking after my kids. It’s rewarding and a good service to the community.’

Sharee looks back into the past, and remembers when the community was not as cohesive as it is now. ‘There was a Catholic/Protestant divide which used to be quite important, but now hardly exists,’ she says. ‘It’s a great spot to live, especially my little part of it. I can look over the fence at the sport, and drive my car in to get a spot on the fence. It’s good fun and great value.’



Volunteers



The Mallee tree

Glenys Rickard

As I was following yet another mob of ewes and lambs along a back road, a thought occurred to me. I had plenty of time to contemplate if the struggle against this drought was worth it. After all I knew that I was simply giving the ewes a change of scenery rather than moving them to fresh pastures. This practice seems to wear me down week after week and now year after year. The sheep too!

The paddocks have struggled to maintain some cover. Our crops have died, despite their courageous fight, and now our quest is to care for our stock and to hold the land so that erosion is contained.

The drought is silent, insidious and unrelenting and I know that this will not be the last one yet something drives me and many other people on the land to keep going. I cannot define this unwillingness to give up despite my frequent lack of courage.

It was then that I cast my eyes towards the Mallee tree as its shadows dappled the red hardened earth along that back road. There was a quiet beauty which was enhanced by the happy ‘business as usual’ chatter of birds as they travelled from one tree to the next. The drought it would seem hadn’t won here! The trees were strong. They showed courage.

Like the Mallee tree my roots are deeply set into this red earth. You see, the tree has some confidence to meet its challenges because there is something unshakeable in its faith in this land. It wants to live here as I do. The Mallee makes sense to me. The tree has spent thousands of years of evolution to survive in this Mallee country. I haven’t done that but I am from several generations of Mallee stock and my admiration and respect for their past determination grows daily.

The Mallee tree is multi stemmed. No stem is superior. Each protects the other and if any part of the tree becomes damaged or destroyed, even by fire it will re-shoot. There is some truth in this for me as an individual and as a community member. We might stumble but perhaps we can fight back another way as the Mallee tree does.

The tree sheds any possible excess during harsh times though its appearance is modest. It even manages to blossom despite the drought. Most telling of all is the recognition that, although the tree survives alone, it finds strength in the company of others and lives well.

I haven’t given up hope. I have my family and my community even though neither is finding this drought easy. The sun will rise and the sun will set and the mallee tree will remain and somehow, so will I.



Only sixty-two remained

By 1862, official numbers of aborigines, once widespread in the Birchip area, had diminished to sixty two. From an area which once teemed with kangaroos, black swans and wild fowl, they were forced further north. There is little recorded information about relationships between the settlers and the wandering tribes, though some anecdotal evidence suggests a limited, if wary, contact.

Records show that, by 1902, a certain Anthony Anderson was regarded as the last descendant of his kind in the area. While Europeans at that time were 'tolerant,' they were also patronising, as the following anecdote suggests:

Early in 1902, the council made a presentation to the old man of a brass plate on which was engraved an iguana, two snakes, an emu and a wild dog and an inscription which read 'Anthony Anderson, King of Morton Plains, Donald and surrounding country.'

The next year he was presented with a 'well-preserved' Victorian artillery uniform suit, which made him 'conspicuously happy.'

As late as the 1960s, as people like the Dwyers recall, small numbers of aborigines were still a presence in the area, and while they were accepted as part of the landscape, there was no notable difference between Birchip and any other area where civilization had destroyed the hunting grounds and way of life of the aboriginal people.

Reminders of their occupation take the form of canoe trees and of scattered tools dug up by the ploughs of local farmers.

