

MORWELL HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

PUBLISHED BI-MONTHLY

MEETINGS: 3RD TUESDAY of the month at 7.30 pm

OLD MORWELL TOWN HALL

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Welcome to the November Newsletter

This month's Newsletter comes a bit earlier than usual, to advise readers of the venue for our final meeting for 1995. This will take the form of a dinner in

The Coach Room, Tower Gardens, 11 Savige St Morwell

on Tuesday, November 21, at 6.30 pm.

Cost will be \$15.00 a head (set menu) - drinks extra.

★ Important: Please let Elsie McMaster [(051)341149] know by **Tuesday November 14** if you will be attending.

Family and friends are most welcome.

Guests for the evening will be Gloria and Glen Auchterlonie, who will display and discuss *The Auchterlonie Collection*.

It has been decided to postpone further cataloguing work on the Society's collection until the beginning of the new year.

A decision is yet to be made regarding the opening times of the museum over the summer period. This will be discussed at the November meeting.

The first meeting for 1996 will be in February. You will receive a Newsletter in January or early February to remind you of this. Meanwhile, (although it seems rather early), since this is the last Newsletter for 1995, the Committee wishes all readers a safe and happy Christmas break and we look forward to your company again in 1996.



Picnic at Billy's Creek, early 1900s.

THE FORD

Written by Mr Murray Thompson, October 1977

In the early days the only means of crossing Billy's Creek, where it cut the Jumbuk Road at the foot of the Jeeralang Hills, was by fording the stream. The bank was dug to a slope on either side and, with a vehicle, meant the use of the brake going down and a good pull for the horses up the other side. Mostly, in the drier months, the horses were pleased to rest in the stream and drink the cool water, but when rain came it was quickly in flood and impassable. On quite a number of occasions, friends of ours living on the other side returned to stay at our house until the waters receded. The ford was a popular picnic spot, both for public and private meetings and was known as 'The Ford' for miles around. The trees and native scrub growth was also an attraction.

Sometime about 1909 it was decided by the local council to place a bridge across the creek. A contract was let to a man named Dave Mortimer to supply the necessary timber. He was a good bushman and a wizard with a broadaxe. It was a big undertaking for one man to supply nine piles, 15 inches square and 15 feet long; three bearers or girders, 12 inches square, thirty feet long; enough decking planks to cover the span of thirty feet - these would be fourteen feet long, varying widths and four inches thick. Then the gravel beams, thirty feet long and perhaps 10 inches square. The beams were placed on each end of the decking planks and carried the post and rails of the side rails.

Fortunately good timber country was close by with a good selection of trees, which was important as trees were chosen to suit the size of the beam required. The fallen tree was sawn off to the desired length, the bark removed, then to get a straight line down the trunk, a string, having been dipped in a tin containing some charcoal and water, was stretched and fastened at either end. The string was then raised with the fingers and allowed to drop, thus forming a straight line right down the log as a guide to the axeman, who, standing on the log, cut scarfs every few feet along its length. The sections between the cuts were then split off leaving a rough, square side. The broadaxe, with a ten-inch face, was then used to trim and neaten the cut up to the marked line. The log was then turned and the same procedure used on the other three sides, leaving a neat square of timber.

This was slow, hard work, but eventually the pieces were bolted together, the decking spiked down and the bridge completed. One had to get close to the finished job to see that the timber was hewn and not sawn. The bridge was replaced a few years ago but it was there for about sixty years and stood as a tribute to the prowess of an artist in the use of the broadaxe.

The Ford was a popular place for camping fishermen, Billy's Creek being known as a 'blackfish' stream. This was before the introduction of trout, which was reputed to have killed off the native fish. I have seen a weekend catch of blackfish by three men almost filling a seventy pound sugar bag.

The Ford (cont)

I was one of a working bee which cleared the bend in the creek, now used as Billy's Creek Reserve. It is many years ago and the gum trees growing there now were saplings a few inches through at that time.

As I have written previously, this area was used by fishermen and picnickers throughout the year, but each year the annual general picnic was held, everyone attending, from grandparents to toddlers, from all round the district. It was usually held in January when harvesting was over and people felt like relaxing. However it was a busy period for the women folk who probably spent the previous day baking biscuits and cakes for the occasion, and, the morning of the picnic, making scones and cutting sandwiches, packing up and trying not to forget some vital article. Most folk arrived in time for a midday lunch, setting out the eatables on tablecloths spread on the ground. The teapots were taken to the fire where two kerosene tins were suspended above the fire, attended by someone previously appointed, and as they boiled, tea was made. It was not real billy tea but different in taste to what we had at home.

After lunch the children would be called together for a lolly scramble, when these boiled confections were thrown on the ground and eagerly gathered by the children. Next would come the races, first the toddlers who, shy and bewildered, were called to and coaxed by parent or sister, to run the short distance to the finishing tape. The rest of the children, in their various age groups, were also given the chance to compete in foot races right through to the young ladies, young men, married women and menfolk. The siamese, or three-legged race was also a feature. This was a pairs race, partners having their two inside legs tied together with handkerchiefs, generally ending in a fall at the tape. The winners of each race received a coin, perhaps a shilling, while others were given sixpence or threepence, but it was contrived that every child attending would receive through the day some coin or other - winners or losers.

Other games and competitions were held, perhaps nail driving competitions for men and women, bowling at one stump of a wicket, stepping the chain to see who was nearest the twenty yards. Woolwinding was also popular! This was for two persons, one holding on outstretched hands the skein of wool, while the other wound the wool into a ball. This could be somewhat frustrating as some skeins were inclined to tangle, which caused the winder to pause and undo the error. The first to finish was, of course, the winner.

Around four o'clock afternoon tea would be served, then horses would be harnessed to the various buggies, gigs, spring drays etc. and the folk were homeward bound. It was a simple afternoon's fun, but I am sure everyone would consider it well worth while; at least they would all be there for the next Annual Picnic!

THE WAY IT WAS (cont) Arthur Fish

So I came to Casterton one morning in September. Down the long street I went, past the shops and the theatres and the hotels, to the bottom of the valley where, under a bridge, the Glenelg River ran by slowly in the sun. It had been a fairly dry winter. Over the bridge and along the river flat, and here, by a bit of a lagoon, stood a real camp, the first one I had seen. Built by the local unemployed for the travelling out-of-works, an iron structure with a fireplace, real windows and a door. No floor, but a plentiful supply of good clean straw. On the still waters of the lagoon, ducks were swimming. On the green grass and around the doorway were men, a dozen or so, loafing or yarning, lazing in the sun, or sleeping.

The ducks swimming on the still quiet waters was one of the things that caused us to be moved out of Casterton, but it is a bit early yet to be talking about being moved out before we are fairly in, so more of that later.

I was right among the knights of the road here, and fitted in so well that I never, after a while on the road, returned to loning it. But first, a bit about the town and The Way it Was Then. A bit of a backwater, but a town of good friendly citizens. Some good hearted people in this place. One of the hotels was always good for a large billy of hot soup. Every evening one of the men would do the soup run, taking up a large billy can and bringing it back filled with hot, thick soup. And over at the butter factory one could get a great block of butter for only sixpence. Nor was anything lacking in the way of entertainment. The manager of the local theatre, when it appeared that all all seats that would be sold were sold, would come out and call us in to enjoy the show. Of course, it did not cost him anything.

Down along the river side there was ample supplies of firewood, even if we had to walk a good way to get it, but this was a task shared among the men, who joined in in good heart. No bludgers among them. We might have stayed at such a place for a long time had it not been for the ducks. But perhaps partly to blame was the man they called Dirty Dan. Now Dan was a real character, a fine fellow and a tradesman. The trade that Dan followed - or pursued - as one had to move fast in those times - was that of mat mender. Now, nothing that I can say or write better illustrates the poverty of those days than this, that a man could make a living by mending mats. Nowadays carpets are the in thing, even in bathrooms, kitchens and lesser places, but in those days it was mats. And when the mats began to show signs of wear, they were not dumped out, they were just kept until such a one as Dan came knocking on the door and then they would be mended. Thus Dan made a shilling or two; then he went and had a drink or two, or maybe four, or more. And when he got plastered he would come down the street, walking in the centre of the road, singing at the top of his voice. And his song? I think it was one of his own composing:

“Dan, Dan the lavatory man
He doesn't care a rap
All among the(deleted)!”

And so it went on for several verses, and when he was in good voice he could be heard a couple of blocks away

THE WAY IT WAS (cont)

But then, all the same, the blame might possibly have been shared by Jim. But perhaps it was not all his fault either. Jim was a saw doctor. He had a way with saws, and with people. He would hold the saw, business edge up, and place a needle along the teeth and, tilting the saw, watch the needle slide down between the points. Then he would look at you with his blue eyes in a quizzical way, as if challenging you to dispute, and say "Now, that's a bloody well set saw." A fine looking man was Jim, an ex-serviceman, well built, tall and broad-shouldered-

"Hairy chest and iron jaw,
Broad of shoulder, long of limb,
Strongest man you ever saw - that was Jim"

More of Jim, by the same author, (A.R.Fish) -

"Always looked you in the eye,
Everbody trusted him,
Swore he'd never told a lie - Honest Jim."

Well, that is what he called himself. Jim Arnold. Honest Jim Arnold. Being tall in stature, most of his stories were tall, but he was a good mate to have around a camp. Pulled his weight at the wood gathering, was clean and tidy in his habits and he had a never-ending fund of stories - not the kind, I am afraid, that I can relate here, but they were not all the unprintable kind. But all the same, though I was but a youth of tender years, I had been around, as they say, so in spite of Jim's reputation of honesty, I kept handy a bit of salt.

But not so Lofty. Being something of a city slicker and very much a young man of the world, you would not have thought him the type to be taken in by the smooth character which, under the rough exterior, was Jim. Lofty was a young fellow in his late teens, quite grown up he appeared to me, and he stood six foot two in his socks. His old man had some sort of business down in Prahran somewhere and he had a disagreement with the old boy, so took to the road. He was an athletic type who fancied himself as a wrestler and was a fitness fanatic. In no time at all he had me running up the steep slopes of the Casterton hills and often indulging in friendly tussles, which he invariably won, being much bigger and stronger than me, but none-the-less I learned a few things about the grab-and-graon art, which sometimes came in handy in later life. He later in life, under another name, became one of Victoria's champion mat-men.

But in those far off years he was full of life and told me tales of the city lights and nights down in Little Lon, which stirred the imagination of a boy from the bush. But for all his sophistication he was just a little naive. Also among the group was a young fellow named Gerard Something-or other - his surname slips my mind - probably an assumed name anyhow, as he told us he was supposed to be working somewhere up country. He was a budding author, having just completed a small book entitled 'The Christ On The Open Road'. A couple of his poems I can still recite. While there in camp at Casterton he had received the proof from the publisher and was going through them. A little later he was going from door to door hawking the first edition.

(To Be Continued)

RABBITS!

With the spread of the rabbit calicivirus making headlines this week, many of our older residents must be finding it hard to believe that the destruction of one of Australia's worst pests could be so simple.

Stephen Legg, in "Heart of the Valley", records the efforts of locally organised Rabbit Destruction Leagues in the Morwell district. Commencing in 1913, these organisations held regular meetings and tried various strategies to get rid of rabbits which were threatening the livelihood of local farmers. These included suggestions for the wire netting of farms, elimination of rabbit holes, strychnine poisoning and the forming of Vigilance Committees to report any landowners who did not comply with the compulsory destruction legislation enacted by the Victorian Parliament. During 1914 and 1915 new Leagues were formed at Jeeralang, Jumbuk, Middle Creek, Hazelwood North and Morwell, but shortage of manpower caused by the war made most attempts to control the rabbits unworkable.

Lou Bond, in a talk given to Morwell Historical Society in 1990, described the situation in this area in the twenties:

' In the '20s and '30s, when the basic wage was £2-14-0 to £2-18-0 a week, you could make that much in a night by trapping rabbits, which brought sixpence to eightpence a pair. We (my brothers and I) would set sixty to eighty traps at a time, starting about 11 o'clock in the morning. If they were set too early the earth would dry out and run under the plate and the trap wouldn't go off when the rabbit stood on it. We would set twenty traps on about a one mile front, then move on and set another twenty and so on. My father would drop us off at the various locations, using the horse and cart. At night when we went out to check the traps and reset them we used a lantern and we always had a little trap dog that would take us to every trap, whether there was a rabbit in it or not. We used to check the traps before sunrise in the morning because once the sun rose the rabbits used to "leg" - try to get away and pull a leg off. When we had collected all the traps we would clean and pair the rabbits and hang them over a long pole slung between two trees. This would be covered by a hessian screen to keep out the blowflies. The rabbits were taken to the railway station for transport to Melbourne every day in summer or every two days in cooler weather.

Later when we had a T-model Ford we were able to go further afield. People would ring us and say they were being eaten out by rabbits and we would go and trap at their place for perhaps a fortnight.

Sometimes rabbits were so thick on the ground that the farm dogs got tired of chasing them and at night there would be so many rabbits feeding it looked as if the ground was moving. Sometimes we would drive round and round with the super-spreader behind the tractor, herding the rabbits into the centre of the paddock before catching them.

The most popular method of catching rabbits was trapping but we also used to poison or gas them. Poisoning was done by ploughing a furrow about a mile long in the area where you thought the rabbits were feeding. We would give them a couple of 'free' feeds of carrots and apples without poison, then put the poisoned food down. The poisoned carcasses were buried after being skinned. We also used cynogas which was pumped into sealed burrows and we sometimes used a tractor pulling a deep ripper to rip up warrens - one warren might cover perhaps half an acre of ground and contain thousands of rabbits. All this sound very cruel, and in a way it was, but it must be remembered that, in seven months, a single pair of rabbits could produce a thousand descendants!