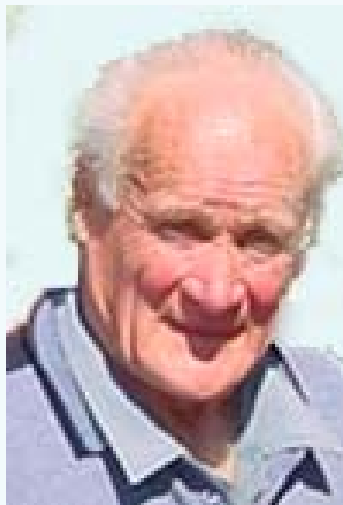


# The Ha' to Wanganella!



The Memoirs of John Ferguson

and

## Reflections . . . Past and Present

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Composed and Produced by

**JAMES TAYLOR**

2006

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# John Ferguson Memoirs



## The Ha' to Wanganella



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## P R E F A C E

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It gives me great pleasure to produce this book from the memoirs and notes supplied by Mr John Ferguson, who spent his early days at The Hall on the Greenock Water, where he spent several happy years. The family later moved on to Lanarkshire where John the Department of Agriculture Scotland as a driver based at Lanark.

After several years he decided to emigrate to Australia in 1952. Eventually he started working as a sheep shearer, and so much time and effort did he put into this work that he soon was shearing alongside some of the top shearers of that country. John Ferguson's efforts and achievements are truly remarkably, and the following pages can only but impress the those who read it.

I am grateful to Kenny Baird for his expertese and work in making it possible for this publication to be read on the Web

JAMES TAYLOR

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## GREENOCK WATER MEMORIES

Dear Mr Taylor,

I have recently received a copy of "Cairntable Echoes" via Mrs Helen McLean, of Edinburgh. She obtained a few copies on behalf of several family members. Allow me to congratulate you on producing such an informative and interesting work, certainly topical to the vast number of people like myself, who spent time being educated, first at Wellwood, then to Donald School on Main Street, and finally to Furnace Road, finishing there in June, 1940. When first I went to school, in 1931, we were resident in "Wee Dalfram," walking to and from Wellwood School. I remember that Nancy Alston, daughter of Teacher, Mrs Alston, started on the same day. My older sister Mary was also a pupil there. Our father worked for Mr Simpson of Dalfram.

The May term, 1933, saw the family move to the Upper Hall (and Lower Hall). This meant a change of schools from Wellwood to Main Street and a decent walk from over the hill, through Bankend down past Middlefield Drive, then down the Stile, over the road to School. For years that was our route. On changing to Furnace Road we went down the Glasgow Road instead. From 1935 four of us made our way to school, rain, hail, wet or shine. In order of age Mary, John (myself), Thomas and Elizabeth. Our neighbours at that time were Sandy and Mrs McGarva, whose family were James, Gilbert and Nancy. They were at Middlefield. Duncan McCallum was in Linburn, wife and family were Grace, Sarah and Donald. I cannot recall Mrs McCallum's name. The Thomsons were in Blackside, and their family was grown-up. The Clarks occupied Greenside, and had a milk run in the village, as did Duncan McCallum. The Borthwicks had Bankend. Lawrence was a widower, the family comprised Jean, Walter, Lawrence and Joan. Frank McKerrow was the farmer at Burnfoot, youngest of three sons, David, John and I think Mrs Semple from Tardoes was a sister. Frank and our father were close friends, and the two work forces often worked together at harvest time. Father did all the stacking on both places. The Woodburns were in Netherwood, they were older than us. I remember Robert, Alec and Cathie, a good-looking red-head. Mr and Mrs Robert Renton were in Greenockdyke with their daughters Moira, Nancy and Margaret. The Hills from Aitkencleugh had Alex. and John. Up at Forkings Mr Armstrong was the gamekeeper. Way up near Garronhill Alex. Semple and his wife were in Tardoes, their only daughter was Margaret. The McGillivrays at Auldhouseburn also had one daughter. Further out the Lawsons at Lightshaw had two daughters, Margaret and Helen. Nearer Glenbuck were Chalmers of Airdsgreen. Their two were Jack and Jenny. Early on in our time at The Hall the depression was still evident in everyday life. I clearly remember hundreds of miners lined up to "sign the broo" once a week to qualify for assistance to bring up their families. Every hay-time we would have a few extra workers working hay. They all liked to go to Fergusons, our mother always sent out enough scones, oatcakes, and small pies to cater for everyone, all home-baked. Laigh Hall was quite a large holding in its early days. I remember when we moved the thrashing mill from Laigh Hall up to Upper Hall in 1934, swapping them over. It took a bit of doing to wind it on to a

rick-lifter then double race it up one steep hill, along the flat, then down a steep hill to the Hall. The problems were all overcome, and we used to thrash a stack about every ten days in winter time to keep up the feed. We would use around 50 tons of turnips as well, every winter.

The Greenock could flood in times of heavy rain. I have seen it flow over its banks over the two holms at times. Quite a lot of folks used to go "dookin" in it in the summertime. There was one deep hole known as the Rock Pool halfway between the two Halls. Another one was the "Cairt Pool" near our stack yard, used occasionally to soak the cats in to "tighten up their joints" with a soaking for a day or so. There used to be some nice fish in the Greenock, of which we caught our share. We would use a "girn" made from one strand of snare wire. Strictly illegal, of course, but that didn't seem to bother Tom and I. One Saturday morning, in the Rock Pool, a shoal of grayling were swimming up and down the length of the pool, and we were lowering their numbers when Armstrong the "Gamie" chanced upon us. After lecturing us and destroying our girn, he ordered us off the water. Once he was safely away we retrieved our catch from a big whinbush only two yards away from where he had been standing—six nice grayling about ten inches long. We would often guddle some decent sized trout up near the "watergate" near Mansefield.

Towards the end of the 30's there would sometimes be a musical evening at The Hall. Our father would play his melodeon, mostly the old Scots favourites. I can recall some recitations of Robert Burns' poems by various neighbours. I can recall also, Jimmy Shaw, a young violinist, playing "Danny Boy" at the conclusion of one such evening. The ladies in the company, and some of the men, were very emotional by the time Jimmy had finished. He had a rare talent.

It is only in fairly recent years that I have appreciated the value of education to pupils in a typical Scottish school system such as that followed in the 30's and 40's. The long list of former students who have made careers in teaching, mining and other spheres of commerce and industry tells us that the basics of knowledge were well distributed to any pupil prepared to learn. I have good memories of my former teachers, some of whom were Miss McDougall, Miss Anderson, Miss Sunderland, and a great favourite, Mrs Fettes. Some of the male teachers were Mr Parker, Mr Davis, Mr Murdoch, and the woodwork-technical drawing teacher, Mr Burrows. Mr McAullay was history teacher at Furnace Road. Headmaster was Mr F. J. Glashan. I am sure that the same high standards were adhered to by their successors.

Over the years of our time at The Hall the family formed a few close friendships in the district. None were more welcome at our place than Morah and Hugh Love and their daughter, Annette. To visit them at their residence was always a joyful occasion. They also assisted numerous persons who were less fortunate, and quite a few were in that state in these times. Will Rowe from Garronhill was the livestock remover. Minnie, Jim and John Brown were fruiterers in Main Street. Dickie Wilson was the newsagent and tobacconist. Alex. DaPrato had the shop opposite the Donald School—his daughter, Vittorena, was in my grade through school.

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Quite a number of Muirkirkonians whose names appear on the War Memorial were known to me. Andrew McSkimming was a classmate, though quite a bit older than me. He used to talk about growing up and joining the Fleet Air Arm. Alan Parker was shot down over Berlin right near the end of the War.

Our family left The Hall in May, 1941. The people who came there were a family named McIntyre. I never returned to the area. I worked for a time for two different farmers, but as soon as I could I joined the Department of Agriculture Scotland workforce, based in Lanark, which operated a huge pool of tractors and machinery leased out for ploughing, seeding, and harvesting, etc. Soon I became one of their main operators, remaining there till the end of 1948. From then onwards till the end of 1951 I worked for a private contractor, till I emigrated in 1952.

Hardly had we boarded the "New Australia" at Southampton when we heard George VI. had died and Elizabeth was Queen. One month later I disembarked in Melbourne, became employed in the Mallee, a hot dusty area of Northern Victoria. I stayed there about four years, then took up shearing. I could compete with just about any of the "gun" shearers, and worked for some of Australia's biggest shearing contractors. The job took us to some of the most remote areas—Outback South Australia, the River Darling area, Riverina, North Western New South Wales, even into Queensland. We'd go wherever sheep were shorn. In those days flocks of 50,000 were quite common. 30,000 was about the regular "big" flock.

A typical team to shear that number would be 14 shearers, with about the same number of shed hands who would include pickers-up, wool rollers, chasers, and of course pressers, but the shearer was the key worker. After sixteen seasons I had decided to quit shearing, and now with a young family, had settled into a regular job in Ballarat, where I remained until retiring at 65 years in 1991.

I had returned to UK in 1986, then again in 1992. Earlier that year, my brother Tom, now resident in Nottinghamshire, with his daughter and grandson, decide to visit The Hall, coming off the Strathaven Road at Linburn. They were met at Linburn by some sort of manager who informed them that they could go no further. Some foreigner had bought the estate of Linburn, Hall, and Laigh Hall, and had enforced a "no-go" policy, even cutting the right-of-way through Middlefield. Undeterred, Tom and his family left the car at Mansefield, walked down the Greenock as far as Burnfoot, photographing as they went. They discovered that almost the whole place had been planted with trees, Laigh Hall was a complete ruin, Upper Hall's roof was missing, and everything else was in a sad state. I have photographs of the place. In later years, after we left The Hall, two additions to the family, Helen and Christine completed the family. All still survive, except Mary, who died young. Helen's daughter, Tina, and son-in-law, Andy, are due in Australia as migrants in two weeks' time. My parents, Thomas and Helen Ferguson, died within weeks of each other in 1990. They had been married 64 years.

JOHN FERGUSON

## LEAVING THE HALL

Dear Jimmy,—Thank you for your letter received last month and for photos of Rock Pool and Teacher's Group. The Rock Pool one seems to date from before W.W.1. Note the wide collar worn by the lad in foreground. In the school group I can recognise only Mr Joseph Murdoch, centre back row. This must have been a few years after 1940, my last year, and I can only guess at the identity of most. F. J. Gordon was still at the helm in my time.

The Blackwoods were at Waterhead, I believe, for many years. Father was Jake, and Mrs Blackwood was a pleasant person. Family consisted of Mary, Jim, John, Jenny and Peggy. They walked to school further than we did, though often we would join them in Glasgow Road, and the whole troupe would make for Furnace Road. Other pupils from the country were the Simpsons from Dalfram and Rentons from Greenockdyke. John Foster was farming Kames at that time. I can remember that one of his sons was named Peter. Glenbuck pupils were catered for by 'bus travel. I can remember various Bains and Bones, the McKerrows from West Glenbuck, and many others. The advent of war in 1939 brought a big influx of evacuees from Glasgow and other crowded areas. There was a bit of pressure on class sizes, but eventually all the newcomers were fitted in. Also, the call-up for Armed Forces soon thinned the ranks of Muirkirk's young men. Those who had belonged to the Volunteer Yeomanry in the years previous to 1939 were among the first to be called up. From 1938 Greenock Water young bloods, and some not so young, would gather down on the flat at Mansefield. Two football teams would be selected on most nights, then we were into it with a will. Our referees were nominated, usually by themselves, on their past experience as players. Some came regularly from Garronhill. We even had a game on a Victory Park pitch on one fine evening in 1940. I don't think any talent scouts were present at that fixture. Too bad, their loss! Jimmy and Gib McGarva, the Borthwick lads, and a few ringings from Garronhill were the backbone of the Greenocks. At that time I was a skinny twelve year-old. Tom Rowe and Jim Cannon were regulars for Garronhill.

In May of 1941 we left the Halls, an event which changed our respective lives forever. In a very short time, Tom, my brother, and myself were working on farms a few miles apart, in the district between Douglas and Lesmahagow. My employer, William Agnew from Glasgow, who owned about a dozen retail fish and poultry shops around the Clydeside/Paisley area. He had bought the farms of Reddochbraes and Waterhead, put managers into them, and from that base built up a pedigree herd of Ayrshires. In my early days there I was mostly working horses. Mr Agnew had a pair of beautiful Percherons, which he had purchased from somewhere "down South." This was the team that I learnt the art of ploughing with. Using a Ransomes double furrow, after much hard work, I could competently do a day's ploughing without getting too far "off the straight." Came the day when Agnew bought a tractor. It was a Fordson, advertised for sale in the local paper, at some ridiculous price, as new tractors had become nearly non-existent, owing to the makers having gone over to munition manufacture. A phone call to the owner, a trip down to Alton Heights, taking two workers with him, including me, a short inspec-



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tion of several implements not advertised as for sale; Agnew made an offer which was accepted and we returned home with the Fordson, trailer, double furrow Cockshutt plough, and a set of disc harrows. Thus, at one stroke, his two places had become mechanised. Horses were soon part of the past, and I had to get a provisional licence which allowed me to drive "from one farm to the other," about a quarter mile along the Lesmahagow/Strathaven Road. I was all of 16 years at that time, in 1942. After another 1½ years, I had started to think of the years ahead. Farm workers did not have much say or anything approaching good conditions in their daily lives, they were often taken for granted; it's just the way things were at that time. Not long before this, the Government had formed a Tractor Service, run by the department of Agriculture, which consisted of pools of machinery and tractors in various situations in central Scotland. The aim was to keep up food production at cheapest rates to farmers. After a hard winter, most farmers were behind in their ploughing and seeding. An ad. in the Lanark paper advertised for "experienced tractor drivers" to add to their work-force. I applied for the job, expecting to be rejected as "too young" for the job. Much to my surprise I was given one of the vacant jobs and became one of D.O.A.S drivers, working mainly in Carnwath, Forth, and Auchingray districts, though sometimes in Lanark, Biggar, and Abington area. In busy times we would work 12-hour days, harvest-time every day. Nearly all the operators would run a motor-bike to and from work. At one stage there was a total of more than 40 bikes owned by D.O.A.S. drivers in Lanark depot. They ranged from 1920's up to just pre-war, A.J.S., B.S.A., Ariel, Triumph, Norton, were among the makes most common. Petrol was rationed, but we always seemed to manage on our allocation. Just belonging to essential services helped in this respect.

As the family were now located at Woolfords, I had usually longer drives to work than most others. Our starting time was 7 a.m., this meant sometimes a very early start to the day. As the years passed, I really did become an experienced operator, also one of the first to drive the new Fordson Major of 1946. After several years of the familiar sequence of ploughing, seeding, drilling, hay-cutting, harvesting (mainly oats), potato digging, then stubble ploughing, we would be thrashing and baling through the winter months until spring came once more. Eventually, the day came when rumours that the D.O.A.S. was to be disbanded were soon to become a reality. Many drivers took this change very badly, as a few would not find work to compare with conditions they had enjoyed for years. Just before this time, the DOAS had taken on a scheme of hill draining. This was in accord with Marginal Lands, many of which required draining. A huge draining plough was coupled to a D2 Caterpillar and the selected route of the drains were taken by the operator, often in boggy conditions. It was a dirty, muddy job most of the time. Sometimes we would be bogged for hours, requiring much wire-rope work. Only one other operator and myself had volunteered to take on this new job. I liked it, mainly because it was a challenge, and something different. By the time we had completed a few months' work, the end of 1948 was close, and the end of the whole operation came shortly after. The sales of tractors, ploughs, binders, disc harrows, mowers, potato diggers, balers, thrashers, etc., kept auctioneers busy for a few days at the two-acre site near Lanark Stock Market. By this time I

had found myself another job as a tractor driver with Mr Templeton, near Carluke. This was when I began seriously thinking of emigrating. Oddly enough, New Zealand, which was at that time severely limiting migrant intake, was my first choice. I, with others, was put on a large waiting list, likely meaning years of waiting. As a fall back, I applied to Australia House regarding prospects of emigrating there. After some time, perhaps nearly eight months and two interviews later, I had reached the stage of having the medical examination required. By this time it was late in 1951. Early in January, 1952, I received notice to prepare to join the ship, "New Australia," at Southampton on 6th February, 1952. A flurry of paper work and last-minute good-byes took up my last two weeks, then the day came to depart. It was 35 years before I set foot in Scotland again, but more of that later.

## **SETTLING IN AT MELLEEE**

Dear Jimmy,—Thank you for copy of teachers' photos and their names. It has refreshed my memory of a few of them. I had decided to present a more detailed account of my early days in Australia, after arriving here in March, 1952. Upon arrival in Melbourne, I, with many others, was housed in a Government-owned building in Carlton, inner suburb of Melbourne. We were all registered with the Commonwealth Employment Service, which could direct migrants to where workers were most urgently required. On my early morning walk down town I bought the "Age" newspaper, glanced through the "Situations Vacant" section and found something quite promising—"Tractor driver re-quired, must be conversant with large machinery, able to operate without supervision, must be single, sober, with a strong work ethic." There was a phone number provided and address, simply—Manangatang. On my return to our quarters, I approached the Employment Officer regarding the advertised position, and my interest in same. He was very supportive of my intention to apply for said position, even assisting in establishing phone contact to the advertiser, which was a lengthy procedure these 55 years ago, to one of Victoria's more isolated areas. The outcome was that I travelled by train from Melbourne to Nanangatang via three changes of train, arriving at Manangatang after 9 p.m., having left Melbourne at 8.15 a.m. On my arrival at the station, the most imposing sights were three giant wheat silos, the trademark of the Mallee area, wheat growing. Just as I had gathered up my luggage, a dusty grey utility came into the yard, braking and stopping within a few feet of me. Out stepped a tall young man, held out his hand in a friendly manner, says "Giddyay, you must be our new man, welcome to Manang, she don't look much now, but she's a good old town." This person was John Cullen, jnr., who, in partnership with his father, farmed four settlers' blocks, including the home block. All of these blocks contained 650 acres, a square mile. Jack Cullen, senr., was a survivor of World War I. A Gallipoli veteran, later in France, and when repatriated after the Armistice, applied for and was granted a soldier settlement block from the Crown Lands Department. The block, like all of the others in the scheme, was covered with dense Mallee scrub, which required rolling, burning and clearing before there could be any crop planted. This was the task facing Jack and fellow settlers when he took possession on April 25th, 1920.

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I have moved ahead of myself in describing how the Mallee was settled, but first things first. As John drove up the main street, en route to Winnambool, about eight miles out of town, and the location of their home, he gave a running commentary on many subjects. The state of the gravel roads irked the settlers, the corrugations were six inches deep, and the best way to handle them was to speed over them. Arriving at the Cullen home, I met John's wife and family of two toddlers, but would have to wait till next day to meet his father and mother, whose house was located on an adjoining block. The following day was taken up mainly as a tour of the boundaries and work in hand regarding the planting of next season's crop, which would extend to 1200 acres. My quarters was a built-in part of the verandah, it suited me OK. I also met Jack and his wife Edna. He was a short fat man, never at a loss for a few words, and I sensed that he did not suffer fools gladly. He commented on how difficult it had become to find anyone who wanted to work among the younger generation, and especially a self-starter who could handle tractors and machinery. They were amazed to learn that I was a non-drinker, non-smoker, a rarity in that part of the country, where the drinking culture was widespread among young and old. The war in Korea had caused a huge demand for wool, prices had been sky-high for two years, even third-grade wool was making £1 per pound, though a downward trend had recently set in the market. Farmers could sell all the wool and barley they could produce. Such was the general state of Mallee farming in 1952. The contents of the large open machinery shed were much to my liking. Firstly there was the big International WK40, in these days the largest kerosene powered tractor around. The second tractor was a Massey Harris 744D, a product of Kilmarnock, in Scotland. A 15-foot cut header was the main harvester, with a back-up 12 foot header. A large disc plough, which had a ten-foot cut, and a ten-foot scarifier took care of most of the cultivation. A most important part of the plant was the 24-hoe combine, which was large for these times, and which would soon be in action sowing that year's crop. Fuel for the tractors was stored on a strong platform in the open, kero and diesel. Petrol was kept in an adjacent small shed, to fuel two utilities, two cars, an ex-army 3-ton Ford truck, and a stripped-down Bren carrier, which was handy at times on the sandhills. 44 gallon drums were the containers used for all fuels and thousands of them could be seen in the country areas in those times.

One of the first impressions I found of the Australian way of life was the perceived importance of sport. For instance, in the Manangatang area, there were ten football clubs, all of them competent and with a very loyal local group of supporters. The huge distances required to travel to "away" games did not detract from their presence and their vocal support. This was Australian Rules Football, as distinctly different to Rugby League, played in most other States. Cricket was well represented in the Mallee, at that time eight clubs, including Winnambool thrived with strong support. Scarcely a family in the entire Mallee area did not have at least one family member involved in sport. Tennis was popular, and the dry climate ensured that there were few "wash-outs" to interfere with the conduct of the many tournaments. Having come from a background where no sport was even considered (you were there to work), I did not take long to follow up an invitation to join Winnambool Cricket Club. I had a lot of leeway to make up. However, I always

had a high degree of fitness, and by concentrating on training, my reflexes soon surpassed most members of the team, becoming a "slips" fielder after a few games. My most memorable game was in a one-dayer against Annuello, a cracker-jack side of that era. Being one of the lesser lights in the team, I came in at number 11. We still required 21 to win, with four overs to go. Les Baker was the other batsman, a recognised big hitter, and I was expected to just survive at one end, while he made the runs. I was more than a little wary, facing one of the fastest bowlers in Mallee cricket, but decided attack was the best plan. The first ball was a missile coming head-high at about 85 miles per hour. Seeing it clearly, I timed it, with a bit of luck, hitting it high over slips, away to the boundary for four runs. Les was batting well and we finished the game with a two-run victory. My contribution was nine not out. The football season had come around again, and I was keen to try out for a place in one of the local sides. Kulwin was the team most Winnambool district people supported. After a lot of hard work at training I was beginning to get used to handling the oval ball, and despite showing an improvement in every facet of the game, could only total three games in my first season.

It was now winter time and everyone was busy putting in the crop. I worked a twelve-hour shift from midnight till mid-day, the other twelve hours split between John Cullen and his young brother Kevin, who was home on holiday from Teacher's College down in Bendigo. This made short work of a very important part of my Mallee farming. After sowing was finished, back to ploughing next year's fallow, ripping rabbit burrows, of which there were plenty. This was a job for the big Inter, with its big 6-cylinder engine and a massive differential, it could withstand the heaviest work better than any tractor of these times. The two ripping tines made short work of even the deep burrows, sometimes a live rabbit would come to the surface, between the tines, more often a half-rabbit was the unfortunate victim of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. I had a real surprise one fine morning, while ripping several deep burrows on the north boundary. With the rippers at full depth, they had hooked on to a large snake which was obviously searching for rabbits, the smaller ones of which they swallow whole. This was a king brown, a highly venomous species, and still dangerous at close quarters, even though its back was broken. It was jammed against the front tine, unable to move much. Fortunately I had a long-handled shovel on the tractor, and despatched it in a couple of hits. It was close to seven feet long. The year was getting well advanced, and there had been only a sparse of rainfall. The older farmers feared that another drought was on the way. A few weeks fencing before harvest was to start, completed the boundary between two of the new blocks. Fencing costs are quoted by the mile here, as against the chain in Aeroplane countries.

Harvesting had kicked off in most of the Mallee about mid-November, and the average yield was shaping to return no more than seven bags per acre. We kept the header, which was pulled by the Massey, going until well after sunset each day, and the aim was to finish by Christmas. Whilst carting was a continuous job, taking 60 bags per load (no bulk handling just yet). As the silos began to fill, trains with up to 40 wagons would be heading down to Geelong, where shipments of wheat would be despatched all over the world. Christmas Day was a highlight every year at Cullens. After the traditional dinner had been despatched, and

impromptu cricket matches had given everyone a hit, tennis balls were used to make things safer for the children, as the Cullen clan had several families in Melbourne.

The summer had moved into autumn and preparations for sowing was well advanced in April, 1953. Usually, there would have been a fall of rain by this time, setting off a general start in sowing. Not this year, however. With little moisture in the follow, there was a big risk of not enough rainfall to "spring" the seed. As the year advanced into late May, it became evident that the best that could be hoped for was a "lean" year. This would affect badly the large number of farmers who had outlaid substantial sums of money on new machinery. Eventually there was enough moisture in the seedbed to encourage sowing, though on a smaller scale than the previous year. Contrast this position of the Mallee farmers with those in the Wimmera, a large tract of land directly south, which was usually far more reliable as regards rainfall. They had an exceptional break, completed sowing and had a series of follow-up rains guaranteeing a good year. Most would expect a return of close to 20 bags per acre. Wimmera land was much less sandy than the Mallee, and the general land values of the time would put Mallee land at £4 per acre, Wimmera up to £12 per acre.

The dry autumn and winter did not affect the sporting habits of the younger generation. A few of the established farmers had proposed a new club be formed to keep an even number in the Mallee League when Nandaly dropped out. Eventually the Bolton Football Club was established, consisting of a few young players, some rejects from other clubs, and myself, the only player not born in Australia. Our first match was against Nanangatang, a power club in those days, and surprisingly only lost by 21 points. In our early days some awful defeats came our way, but gradually a competitive team was built mainly of up and coming young players. The best win, in my time, was a 5-point last-gap result against the League leaders of that year, Chinkapook. By this time I was one of the strongest players around, and never known to take a backward step.

Once more harvest time had come around, and the poor crops were common across most of the Mallee. Nearly two years had elapsed since my first days in the district, and though I had recently been offered a share farming agreement, decided that the parting of the ways was best for all concerned. I left the Cullens amicably, and much to the surprise of everyone, took on the job of crutching and shearing with a small-time two stand portable machine. I was on my way.

Regards from JOHN FERGUSON



6 Park Street, Ballarat

14th June, 2006

Dear Jimmy,

Please find enclosed continuation of my early days in Australia. I have had a few interruptions in penning these lines, however hope that enough people are interested to read same. So far several people have contacted me as a result of memorabilia from 65 + years. Through my sister, Helen, I have received the excellent works *Lost Ayrshire*, *Muirkirk and its Neighbourhood*, *Old Muirkirk and Glenbuck*, *Wheels Around Ayrshire*, to name a few. I also appreciated the *Guide to Muirkirk Martyrs*, as I know that Ferguson was a name strongly associated with Covenanters in the Galloway area, where our ancestors once lived.

I note that you are almost neighbours to Lawrence Borthwick, people who always had our regards. I think Lawrence left school the year I commenced, so he's no spring chicken. I turned 80 a few days after the Queen did likewise.

My best regards to everyone.

JOHN FERGUSON.

P.S.—I have started to outline my journey to becoming a professional shearer. Will forward the same.

## **START OF A NEW ADVENTURE**

From about Easter time in 1954 I had set about the task of becoming a shearer. In the Australia of that era the shearer was regarded as the elite of all workers who relied on their ability to turn out workmanship which was of a high standard. This standard reflected on whether a "clip" of bales of wool was accepted by the eagle-eyed wool buyers who inspected the open bales on the selling floor, just previous to auction. Any evidence of skin cuts, for instance, would send the price rocketing downwards as much as 20 pence per pound for the whole bale. However, to return to my immediate plans as of that time, I managed to secure a trial period as a "rookie" shearer with Henry Salter from Kerang, a township close to the Murray River, and the centre of a thriving agricultural area. Henry was regarded in Kerang as one of its favourite sons. During the previous year he won the Open Australian Championship in Melbourne. He was as close to a perfectionist as one would find anywhere, in any trade, and anyone who worked for him was expected to have the same attitude. There was a time when Henry sported a bit of advertising on his utility, "Henry Salter, Master Shearer." I started off as a second shearer on a two-stand portable plant. My first few days took a bit of getting used to, and only a grim determination to succeed kept me going until "knock-off" time every day. Crutching was the main job at the time I started, but full shearing would be starting soon. At that time there were no fewer than ten "two-stand" plant owners in that area known as the Mallee. Most employed locals who had learnt to shear at an early age, often in mid-teens. At 28 I was a late starter. I

had one thing in my favour. This was being a strictly non-drinker, and an athletic ability which kept me up with any opposition I was likely to encounter. I also had a keenness to improve every day as regards the day before. With this combination I managed to improve to such an extent that one farmer wanted to book "the one that shears like Henry" for his next season. A short time after that, Salter went out of shearing. His son had just bought a large dairy farm at Cohuna, in which I think he was a major stakeholder. He was also part of the local tourist industry, which was just kicking off then. Another 3-stand plant was operated by a shearer who had his name on the plant, though everyone knew the real owner was Salter.

The end of the crutching season was just about there, and harvest was about to start. There was no shortage of jobs in those days and I obtained one as a truck driver-tractor driver with Norman Nalder, a large wheat farmer near Swan Hill. He had just bought a new Bedford "S" Model and this was my job for the duration of the harvest—hauling the new bulk body, eighty-bag capacity, plus trailer with sixty-bag capacity—it was a top-class piece of machinery. On top of Norm's 3,500 bags, I would occasionally cart for other producers, a lucrative return for Nalder. On the few days that the silos were closed, I would be working up the next year's fallow with the scarifier, drawn by the big Australian-made Chamberlain tractor. His International header was kept going 14 hours a day to finish in the shortest possible time. This job lasted seven weeks until end of harvest, though I got an invitation to come back and do the same job in the following harvest. Just about this time I received a phone call from Pat Ryan, a farmer from Chinkapook, a few miles nearer to Melbourne than Nanangatang. Pat was one of the sons of James and Olive Ryan, retired solid citizens who had been among the Mellee pioneers of the 20's. Tom was the eldest, also at Chinkapook with his five blocks he was a large producer of wheat and wool.

He also owned a shearing shed with overhead gear, with three stands, which was much used shearing his own and several neighbours' sheep. Jim had his own place near the River Murray at Ribinvale, and irrigated a large area for fixed cropping. Pat was youngest of the family, still a bachelor, mid 20's, who owned three blocks, also took on crutching and shearing with his portable Cooper shearing plant. He had a house half-built on one of his blocks. The framework was all up, but no roofing iron had been set, no lining had been done when the ancient builder had advised Pat that he would not be able to finish the job. To address this state of affairs Pat had decided to finish the job himself, with help from a worker, namely me. This was just a spare-time project, at least until Pat finished his barley harvest, which was going 20 bags an acre, one of the finest in the district that year. These bags had to be weighed and carted to Manang, delivered to the agent in town. Pat's harvest was finished and we started on the backlog of crutching and lamb shearing which had built up to a large amount by this time, though we caught up with the backlog just before Easter, 1955. Straight after we put the iron roof on Pat's house. It was a 90 degree day and the iron felt red hot, but I stood up to the heat better than anyone. We finished the roof in one day, which meant that now the liming could be done anytime, even if it rained. Our next job was Tom Ryan's general shearing, and with three stands operating — it was a speedy job.

Approaching the end of shearing, Tom asked me to stay until the seeding was done. As this meant a further 6 weeks at least, I started on the job the following Monday. Both brothers owned a Minneapolis Moline tractor, a big powerful machine for those days, and I would drive one or the other on mostly night shift. After about six weeks the job was completed, it was now mid-winter, end of June. Glancing down the job vacancies in the "Weekly Times" of that week, I had noticed a job in the Wimmera which stated "temporary position for tractor driver, up to two months' work for competent operator. Having made phone contact with the advertiser, I found that the job was near Warracknabeal, a town in the Wimmera, south of the Mallee, and a much better area as regards rainfall. The land had been settled much longer, and the crop yields were on a higher level, which made Wimmera country more desirable, and of course, much more expensive to buy. By this time, I had my own utility as transport, and on a fine winter Sunday early July, made it to the property owned by Jack Inkster, a third generation owner. Having met the owner's wife and family we next made a tour of the machinery sheds. Jack was a great Lang Bulldog enthusiast, as were many in the Wimmera in those days. He owned three of these tractors, two 1950's models, and one from 1936, made in Mannheim, Germany. So popular were Bulldogs in the Wimmera, you could hear the thump of their single-cylinder engine echoing for miles day or night-time.

Many of the farm owners in the Wimmera were the descendants of German immigrants who had fled their homeland to avoid religious persecution. Concentrating in the Adelaide area, they had become small farmers and wine producers. In about 1870's many overlanded to Victoria, settling on the then scrub country. Through sheer hard work, which they were used to, they soon had the land producing good crops, and spread eastwards across Victoria as far as Warracknabeal and south to Harsham. They were a law-abiding community, and soon had their Lutheran churches in most areas. Jack's immediate problem was that a wet Autumn had delayed his sowing time by a few weeks. To catch up, he had decided to work two Bulldogs in tandem on the seeder. This system overcame one tractor slipping on the heavy soil. I was the driver of the tractor hooked up to the seeder, Jack drove the 1936 model with a tow hitch to the one in the seeder, using an old truck tyre to make the tow flexible. This set-up worked so well that we would often work a whole day without any problems. Eventually, the cropping was completed, including that on Jack's father-in-law's property, which was about three miles away. A short time before, chisel ploughs had become the latest machinery in the Wimmera. They were used in heavy soils to create small channels which held the water from rainfall near the surface, and also acted as miniature drains. Several neighbouring farmers had seen just how well Inkster's plough had worked, they booked up for some of their fallow to be done in the same manner. By the time I caught up this work, the springtime had arrived, and it was time to move back to the Mallee to resume shearing. Few farmers kept permanent workers in those days, which led to a constant workforce moving on to somewhere else. Contrast this with Britain, where workers were much more "permanent." I remember some, mainly shepherds, who were presented with Long Service Medals after a near-lifetime on one place. Wonderful people, but not for me, that



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lifestyle. Back in the Mallee, I resumed with Pat Ryan on his two-stand, where he had enough work to last until harvest time.

That season brought a bumper harvest to the Mallee. Huge crops of barley were recorded. It was a fairly new crop for many farmers, and more profitable than wheat. More difficult to harvest than wheat, the Barley Board required barley to be presented in three-bushel bags sewn securely, then delivered to the bulkheads at the railway, eventually being shipped for export. I was one of a number of bag sowers, who had weeks of work ahead, and I used to start at 4.30 a.m., take an hour off, then work till darkness set in around 8 p.m. Not many young men were attracted to that job, too much like hard work. Like crutching and shearing, it is strictly piece-work rates, this was one of its attractions for me. For a solid month I rammed and sewed barley bags, usually working alone, though sometimes I would have one or two others working with me, most of them disliked the idea of working such long hours without managing to get to the pub. Hotel closing time in those days meant six o'clock closing, and most of these young men hated missing out what was their daily habit of socialising and drinking. To me, a lifetime tee-totaller, it was wasted time being side-tracked into drinking in the first place.

After harvest of that year, I was again busy for weeks on end, as a lot of farmers were adding numbers to their flocks on the strength of improving wool prices. It was in this period that I first travelled into N.S.W. to shear on properties which had 3-stand and 4-stand "overhead" gear, which means fixed gear, as opposed to the portables. Under these conditions, one was likely to compete with more of the professional shearers, some of whom worked with the big contractors who had a mortgage on the large stations mainly situated in the Riverina, a long time stronghold of the best merino stud flocks in the world. As 1956 was getting under way, the Graziers' Association, which held at that time huge support from the Menzies Government, had the shearers' award rate cut by 15%.

This unnecessary act caused great dissent in the workforce, bringing about the declaration of an Australian wide shearers' strike by the members of the Australian Workers' Union, of which I was a member. This development meant that a reaction was not long in coming. Many graziers attempted to have their sheep shorn at the "old" rates, putting them at odds with their fellows, and teams of "scabs" were recruited in New Zealand and in Sydney and Melbourne, to strike break throughout the main wool-producing areas. These proved a spectacular failure, damaging more wools clips than anything, and the participants found themselves locked out of the industry when normal times returned. As for myself, I looked for and found a suitable job as a road grader driver at Gunnedah, N.S.W. Six months later the shearers' strike ended and after a month or so I returned to the industry.



Australia, July 26, 2006

Dear Jimmy,

Please accept enclosed material, which I have been rather tardy to complete. We had a very busy week just past. There was a huge Ferguson Tractor Rally at Wentworth in N.S.W. The object was to attempt a Guinness Book of Record attempt in having the most Ferguson tractors in one place at the same time. The venue was Wentworth Racecourse, and a huge turnout was the result. With Betty's brother and myself driving the big Iveco Transporter the 400 kms to Wentworth, we had on board two Fergusons belonging to him—a diesel and a petrol model, both with implements. The ladies followed in the car, and once we got up there we displayed the tractors among hundreds of others. It was a great two days, and I am not sure at this stage if we broke the record. Will keep you posted.

Regards to you and all Muirkirkians,

JOHN FERGUSON

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## **BACK ON THE WOOL TRADE**

As the strike in the wool industry was declared over in November, 1956, many shearers and shedhands, pressers, and classers were vastly relieved to be resuming their chosen occupation. It had been a long lay-off for many, as the majority of the people were members of the Australian Workers' Union. There had been confrontation between shearers who were unemployed during this period and a few would-be "strike breakers" brought in from New Zealand to take the place of the regular shearers. Some shearers broke their Union rules and shore during the strike, they were "black-balled" by the Union from employment in most big sheds in Australia, and any wool shorn by these men was declared "black" by the Wharf labourers in Sydney, and could not be loaded aboard ship until the industry returned to normal. This strike set up animosity between graziers, contractors and shearers, in many cases setting members of the same family one against the another. The blame lay squarely with the executive of the arrogant Graziers' Association, when they declared a 15 % cut from the then award rates per hundred sheep. As shearing is strictly a piece-work payment system, those persons at the lower numbers in any shed are clearly disadvantaged at any cut in an award rate agreed to in one of the world's toughest occupations. At the resumption of "normal" times when the strike ended, a small workforce was available to catch up on backlog, many older shearers just quietly left the industry, creating a shortage of competent shearers. Rates for shed-hands and pressers had also been cut and many of these experienced workers found themselves other jobs. Fortunately there was an abundance of work in Australia at the relevant time. In my own case, I had enough sense to find myself a job as an operator of a road grader. This was a new challenge, but as always, I was determined to carry it through successfully. Located at Gunnedah, N.S.W., the job was mainly formation and grading of gravel roads, which were more common than tarmac in those days. Within a few days I had settled into the job and remained there until about mid-November. Heading back to Victoria I joined two competent and steady shear

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ers, Jack Cocks and Charlie Murphy, as a three-man team, which proved in great demand, as we shored non-stop in numerous sheds almost until the end of February. When I say "nonstop," I mean every week-day, as shearing is a five-day week, Saturday wasn't a working day, and on that day the washing was done, other chores like tidying the huts were caught up with. Accommodation was of hut style, two men to a hut, the owner provided the frames with mattress, while the worker always had his own blankets, etc. Not many places had power to their huts, instead of electricity we'd have kerosene lamps. Most of these smaller stations had the station cook provide the workers' meals in addition to the regular station workers, who would number up to three in most places in the fifties. The shearers/shed hands working day is divided into four two-hour periods of the day, thus 7.30 till 9.30, half hour break, 10 till 12, one hour break, 1 till 3, half hour break, then the last run 3.30 to 5.30, end of day. By the way, morning and afternoon half hour breaks are known as "smokos." On that particular run we worked on stations both sides of the Murray River, which is for much of its length the boundary between the states of Victoria and N.S.W. Our last shed on the run was Giraly, near Balranald. 1957 was a strange year in many respects. The disruption of '56 had upset the usually routine calendar of work for many graziers and the workers in the shearing industry. Many sheep carried months of extra wool growth, and stained wool detracted from the value of most clips. Crutching, the art of removing the wool from the breech area of sheep, had not been carried out on most stations, and fly strike was common as a result.

Gradually the lost time from the previous year was caught up, and some areas were back to normal by about Easter, 1957. Harvest had finished in the Mallee, the almost total use of bulk handling of grain meant that bag sewing was used only in the handling of seed wheat which had been cleaned. While on my travels through the southern Mallee, I happened to stop at Birchip, where the big-time operator of seed cleaners, Arthur Hilgrove, had his headquarters. I learnt that he was on the lookout for operators of his seed-cleaning machines, which were built onto the back of a variety of 3-ton trucks. In all, Arthur had ten of these outfits, comprising Dodge, Bedford, and Chevrelot. After a short interview with Arthur, who was a man of few words, he was convinced that I had enough knowledge of machinery to be trusted with one of the two outfits already out working in the wheatfields. This was an early-fifties Dodge with a Hannaford seed grader and pickler, which handled the flow of wheat to be treated and cleaned at a good pace in one operation. The truck was set up in front of rows of open bags usually in five-wide rows where they had earlier been bagged from the harvesters. Possibly around one-fifth of wheat was in this manner dressed for seed, the rest bulk handled loose to the silos in trucks. As the weather at this time of the year is usually hot and dry, by working long days and sometimes weekends, Hilgrove's team soon had a very large backlog of work under control. After almost six weeks' work the seed cleaning was complete, and the time had come to move again, though Arthur reminded me that I could return at any time when vacancies came up in his various operations. These included land clearing, dam sinking, etc., his machinery included three bulldozers, scrapers, and tree pushers, etc. Every time my temporary jobs came to an end, I would take stock as to where work would most likely be

found and head for such areas. In this case, I headed to Cobar, in central N.S.W. Arriving there one afternoon, I had almost completed a short walk to take in the small business part of the town. Near the end of the main street, there was a stock and station agency, which carried all manner of graziers' requirements. In the centre of these was a notice—"Shearers Required," phone number provided. On following up this lead I found that the person with the phone contact was Steve Power, of Power & Bradley, shearing contractors. Following directions I easily found his residence on the outskirts of the town. He was busily organising a ten stand team to start the following day at Meryula, a station about 30 miles southeast of Cobar. Also, his partner Trevor Bradley, was busy sorting out the workforce to also start a four stand shed about 60 miles away, nearer to the Darling River in two days' time. Meryula was the biggest of any sheds I had shorn in. As the team assembled on the board before starting time, we drew from a tin small paper slips numbered from 1 to 10. In this way no one could claim that he was less favoured by drawing a better or worse stand as regards slight differences in distance that sheep in the catching pens had to be dragged to the shearing position. Some of these shearers were from Queensland and north N.S.W., we also had two from Tasmania; I was the only shearer not born in Australia that Power & Bradley had employed, at least up until that time. In sheds the size of Meryuba everything has to be run to a strict time-table. At the end of every two hour run, the sheep in every shearer's counting out pen are carefully counted and recorded in the Tally Book, kept by the boss of the board, in this case, Steve Power himself. At the end of the day a tally sheet is posted in a prominent position with each shearer's name opposite his daily output. At the end of the first day I was running fourth in the count, and knew that I could hold my own shearing these very big wrinkly merinos. At that time the flock numbered 26,000. The hut accommodation was good and we had a good cook, Denis Spragge. He presided over the cookhouse and catered for twenty people during the four weeks we were there. On "cut out day," every shearer collected his cheque, every rouseabout and presser was paid up. The wool classer was always paid by the station owner, and was usually employed by one of the wool stores on a permanent basis, even when not out on the stations. All of the shearers and shed hands in this case had sheds to go to, and in a couple of days we had an eight stand busy at Tilpilly, on the Darling River area, where the sheep are mostly large and tough shearing, often covered with burns and broken pieces lignum. Steve had three teams going now, and he was a master of organising his work force to keep abreast of his work load, especially if rain halted proceedings. With a four, six and eight stand all going at the same time, he had to have three "experts" to do the grinding (sharpening) of combs and cutters, as no shearer is allowed to do such work for himself, at least in the well-run sheds. Distances in this district, North Riverina, are so great that you could be working in one of Power's teams nearly 360 kilometers from another team, being run by the same contractor. We had a good dry run in that season, and kept going through until winter was almost over, with only a few days down time between sheds. Being part of a team which completed five sheds in good time, we were faced with a lay-off of several weeks' duration. This meant killing time in a place like Cobar, which suited some of the shearers, who hung around

the pubs until shearing restarted. This view was not shared by myself, so, when the run came temporarily to an end, I was on the trail of more work.

Driving to Walgell, further north in N.S.W., I was fortunate to be in the right place at the right time, picking up a "pen" in three large sheds, losing only a few days work in travelling from one to another. This was a good result for me, as it brought the year close to the end of 1957. As harvest was now started in the Mallee, I again made my way back to that area, picking up a truck-driving job with a small-time operator who owned two trucks, one driven by himself, the other by me. Bulk handling was now the norm, and the two trucks were kept busy carting to the silos until the end of January, when harvest was completed.

At the end of the harvest I accepted an extension of the job to cart fruit from Robinvale to the Melbourne Fruit Market. This was a new experience for me and I got used to the almost 300 mile journey each way. We would load up the fruit on tray trucks during the day, set off in the afternoon, and usually reach the market about 1 a.m., when Melbourne streets would be quiet. After unloading, we would drive up to the Truck Parking Compound in North Melbourne, sleep in the truck till about 7 a.m., have a shower and go for breakfast in the drivers' canteen, or one of the early morning cafes then common in that part of the city. Next step was to check at the Depot for any back-loading available. You could end up with a load of bagged manure, even a new tractor, to be picked up and taken to its new home. The variety was interesting, though sometimes no loads were available, which meant a long home run empty, the bane of a truck driver's existence. The fruit season slowed down to a stop after six weeks or so, and I was mindful of another shift looming. I had visions of stringing together enough shearing jobs to keep going most of the year, if that was at all possible.

## **HEADING TOWARDS FULL-TIME SHEARING**

As 1958 was getting under way, I realised I had been in Australia now for six years, and in that time had seen more of the country and taken on more of the tougher jobs which were available in these times, than most Australians. I had decided to build up an almost continuous run of shearing in different districts and states which would mean up to ten months of the year. There was a small number of shearers in those bygone days who were classed as "itinerant," that is, continually on the move from one district to another, hoping to pick up work enough to keep them going until the next job was found. I had been in that category myself, but with a knowledge of machinery and a flair for improvising, I had a much better chance of surviving. Very much in my favour was the fact that I was strictly a non-drinker. From my early days as a worker in Scotland, I had seen the results of heavy drinking among farmers and miners, even although to many it may have been only occasional. Here, in country Australia, the "bush pubs" of bygone days were the mecca of the shearers and shedhands, especially after "cutout," when

everyone was paid up. Many would entrust their cheques to the publicans, and “shout” their mates on an endless run of drinks. Some would be broke within a day or two, others would carry massive hangovers onto their next shed, then it takes several days to recover. Once the next “cutout” comes round, the same pattern unfolds. Many contractors have suffered setbacks through engaging “big name” shearers into their teams, only to find a weakness for the demon drink made them sometimes totally unreliable, which would affect the timing of completion of the shed, often a vital factor where a starting date for the next shed invariably had been given to the graziers. As graziers had to organise musterers and drovers often over hundreds of thousands of acres, the starting date of shearing concerns everyone involved. The whole problem in those days was tackled like a military operation, with timing the over-riding factor of success or otherwise. Surprisingly, most sheds were completed more or less on time. Even to people outside the shearing industry, obvious by reliable high output, dependable workers are the key to a contractor's successful operation. This, then, was my reasoning in 1958 or thereby, to become a regular member of a larger contractor's ongoing operation.

In the late 1950's the task of finding a contractor who had a continuous run of sheds without too much down-time between them was becoming ever more difficult. As 1958 season was now under way in some districts, I again headed off to northern N.S.W., finding shearing jobs at small properties in the Walgett district, mainly through the wool-broking agents, I put together about seven weeks' work. As the local shearers in these districts all had the easier and better shearing booked up, those that were left were the roughest, most wrinkled flocks of sheep anywhere, and anyone who took these jobs had to be able to handle such tough conditions.

I actually looked forward to these challenges, and soon gained a reputation of being able to turn out big numbers in the toughest, biggest merinos. I always had a great pride in turning out well shorn sheep, no skin cuts, no second cuts, no ridges or wool left between neck flaps, and this operation carried out at top speed, or as fast as the machine could handle the going. These few small one-man sheds took me as far as Goodooga, near the Queensland border, and close to some of the famous cattle-raising areas of Thallon and St. George. As I found myself with a spare few days, I decided to visit Malanga station, where I knew Sandy Mayes was employed as an overseer. He and his wife, Peggy, had emigrated from Newbigging some months after I had, in early 1952. They had been at Malanga now for six years, and in the last two years he had progressed to the position of overseer. We had both been tractor drivers in the Lanark D.O.A.S depot for years, and had always been friendly. He was a wizard at motor bike repairs, and more than once assisted me keeping an ancient Ariel on the road. It was great to catch up again, and I spent two pleasant days in their company, also saw some of the station, which consisted of about 80,000 acres. Now it was time to return to Victoria where contractors were planning their teams for the Riverina shearing season. I had heard of a contractor from Meredith who usually began his run of sheds from a small town named Wanganella, right in the heartland of the best merino flocks anywhere in the world. I knew that most sheds would have their regular shearers

booked up. and in those days it was difficult to find a space in teams which varied its workers little from year to year.

In those days "The Worker" newspaper was received by all members of the Australian Workers' Union, of which I had been a member for quite some time. An advert. in "The Worker" was from C. D. Mooney, Shearing Contractor, for shearers and shedhands to work in the Riverina and Victoria areas. His run started near Wanganella, N.S.W. in early July, and finished late December in Victoria. I contacted him by mail, never expecting any success regards employment. To my surprise, I received an answer in a few days offering a run of sheds commencing at Booabula, Wanganella on 5th July, then follow-on sheds till December. This was a good long run and I was prepared to make it a regular part of my working year. How to find work for the eight weeks until July? As I have observed before, work was plentiful in the farming areas in those days, and I easily found a job fencing near Birchip with Mr Rickard, who required someone reliable to complete a mile of new fencing on one of his boundaries. Bob and Rose Richard were progressive wheat growers and it was there I first experienced fencing with the use of concrete posts. The property was well run and the fence replaced entirely one which had been erected about 80 years before, in the days of the Mallee pioneers. The old fence had broken wires, barbed and plain, hanging in stretches, and I wondered just where seven strands from a mile stretch of fence could be dumped safely out of sight. The answer was to excavate a deep trench in the ground, and that was done by an excavator which Bob had hired with driver from a local contractor. After three or four days the wire had been stripped and rolled up into dozens of various sized bundles, the next step was to load them on the truck, take them to the trench and throw them in. Once the wire was dealt with, removing the posts was the next step. These were red gum posts, and still had a strong hold of the ground. By using the hydraulic lifting system on the big Chamberlain tractor, I had improvised a strong chain which held loosely around the bottom of the posts, then carefully made the lift. Without exception, these posts came up easily, were cast aside, then on to the next one, until all were out and lying on the ground. These posts were to be taken back to the woodheap near the homestead, more than half a mile away, and I made many trips after loading Bob's five-ton Ford truck, then unloading the posts to stand on end stacked around an ancient gum tree. Firewood for many years ahead. Next stop was to clear off fence line with a dozer blade, just deep enough to leave a small slop towards the roadway, about three yards away. This done, the next move was to dig the post holes in a perfectly straight line. This was done with a mechanical post digger and left every hole at exactly the right depth to take the posts. The fence was to consist of one concrete post, two iron posts between, another concrete and so on to the end. Four straining posts were spaced at even distances over the mile. The concrete posts at that time were a new innovation, and had to be carted from St. Arnaud, 93 kms distant. I worked out a system whereby I'd make two trips on one day, load and return, then use the following day to erect the posts. By doing so, I had all posts in place and rammed, ready to take the new wire. The iron posts between the concretes were no problem, and I finished the wire leading out and straining in a couple of big days, job complete. When I made the final straining of the wires, I was con-

scious of the closeness of the start of Mooney's run of sheds, in which I had been guaranteed a start at Wanganella. This date was only four days away when I bade farewell to Bob and Rose. I had a few odds and ends to attend to in the following two days, then set off to Deniliquin where I, with many others, were to meet at the Court House Hotel, which was Christopher Daniel Mooney's unofficial headquarters when he had teams shearing in the vast areas of the Riverina. Chris, as he liked to be known, turned out to be a friendly type, much different to some contractors. He was large and sixty-ish, and been contracting since 1924. He hailed from Meredith, a town near Geelong in Victoria, where apart from his contracting, he owned the local hotel and some property near the town. Once the largest contractor in the area, he had recently lost some big sheds to rival contractors, which was an ongoing problem in the industry. Graziers thought nothing of switching to another contractor, often for the quote of a few pence less per sheep.

Our first shed was at Booabula, only a few kms from Wanganella. This was a large station operated by Wallace Crothers, descendants of Scottish settlers from the 1860's. Their shearing shed was a large corrugated iron and timber building. Inside it had two floor levels. The building measured exactly one hundred yards long by forty yards wide. The sheep came inside from the holding yards, up a ramp onto the second level, where the shearing took place. From the engine room, which held the power plant, a large three cylinder Southern cross, a system of drive pulleys drove overhead shafts, which held the drive heads and down tubes to which the shearers' hand-pieces were attached. The sheep filled catching pens spaced all the way down the shearing board. This shed was one of the largest of those in the whole Riverina district, providing fourteen stands, seven each side. Once shearing was under way, the busiest workers were the rouseabouts picking up the fleeces in a lightning movement, sometimes one "rousie" picked up for seven shearers, racing down to throw the fleeces flat on the wool tables, one each side, where the wool rollers and classers kept thinks moving towards the wool bins and the huge wool presses. As the wool room was downstairs from the shearing board, the wool tables were level with the second floor, and this set-up was one of the best in use.

Wanganella was, and still is, central in the district which contains many of the world's best merino studs, such as Boonroke, Carroonboon, Windouran, Old Cobran, Pooginook and many others. Mooney at one time contracted for six months in that area every year, but cut-throat competition in the industry had seen other contractors moving in, and his remaining sheds would be "cut out" in less than three months. At the same time his Victorian operation had expanded, and it was there that I, and many others, were destined to spend many weeks late in the year. On completion of shearing at Booabula, our next job was at Bundilagumbla, on the Billabong. This was a ten-shearer shed, and in those days ran a flock of 18-20,000 sheep, whereas Booabula, just completed, ran 30,000 plus. "Bundy" was a good shed for anyone who liked shearing big rough merinos, as also was our next shed, Murgha. This was a six-stand shed with about 10,000 to shear. I was in the workforce at these sheds, and the run was now "cut out", I was heading for the big sheds in Victoria. It was now October.



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Australia, 7th October, 2006

Dear Jimmy,

Greetings from Victoria. Trust that Muirkirkians are enjoying a lot more rainfall than we have had here. In the last six months we have had the lowest recorded rainfall in five of them, data collected since 1892. Many lakes have disappeared, and even the subterranean aquifers are starting to recede at an alarming rate. We are now on a Grade 3 Emergency stage, with Grade 4 looming by New Year, unless there is a massive weather change. Currently from ten days ago, more than sixty towns in the Wimmera and Mallee areas are serviced by huge water tankers, every alternate day. Most of the water is taken from the Murray River near Swan Hill, in the north of the state, where the flow there is much less than what we once looked on as normal.

Last weekend I received a printed out photo of Lawrence Borthwick and Johnny Clark. Helen had worked out how to do this, and the result was great. Good to see Lawrence hale and hearty at his age. Away back in the 30's Lawrence, snr., used to occasionally visit us at The Ha'. Our father and Mr Borthwick would converse for hours about the quality of Clydesdale horses and Blackface tups of the "modern style" (1930's). compared to when they were young. Sandy McGarva and Jake Blackwood were also to the fore at this time.

I have come almost to the end of my memoirs, and will send a shorter summing up of the remaining time soon.

Best regards to all from JOHN FERGUSON.

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## **LOOKING FOR A LONGER SHEARING RUN**

Towards the end of September, 1958, Chris Mooney's team had completed the sheds of Booabula, Bundy and Murgha, and had now to organise the remaining sheds in his Victoria run. In that year he had three teams operating in Victoria, two in the famous Western District, plus one in the Beaufort and Wycheproof areas. Most who had shorn at Booabula had gone on to "The Gurns" at Peshurst, one of the "plum" sheds remaining on Mooney's list. This shed was always a prized job, and was usually filled with "gun" shearers, some from Tasmania, a few who did not like the big Riverina sheep, but were at home in places like The Gurns and Mawollok. I landed in a team of six shearers at a place called Springwood, near Hamilton, a town known as "the wool capital of the world." This flock numbered 22,000 all up, but had recently gone over to "half spring—half autumn" shearing, which meant a huge re-adjustment for owners, shearers and contractors. On this occasion there was a "cut-out declared" agreement signed by shearers and shedhands who belonged to the Australian Workers Union, which meant all workers other than the woolclasser and "expert," the person responsible for tool sharpening, shearing tallies, and the general running of the shed. With 2,500 shorn, the shed was declared "cut-out," shearers, shedhands and pressers were paid up,

then we headed for the next job, shearing about 15,00 for five shearers. This was at a place 30 kms. from Ballarat. Here, we lost a few days with wet weather, but managed to finish two days before Christmas, giving everyone time to head home for this occasion, much more valued by Australian workers than say Europeans. Such was the finish at Lawaluk, Mt. Mercer, on the first of seven occasions on which I shorn there.

Over the two weeks including Christmas and the New Year I did quite a bit of sight-seeing, travelling down to Geelong, and the Great Ocean Road, which follows the Southern Ocean's cliffs and beaches. Taking in a bit of swimming and sun-bathing was rather different from the days when I would be operating a thrasher and baler up around Crawfordjohn or hill draining Mountainblow, John and Jim Smith's property at Auchengray. Another post New Year job was in the '47 "big snow," digging out a Caterpillar from a 10 foot snowdrift on the area close to Troloss homestead, where I had left it, all taped up, a few days before, ready to be transported. The towns of Elvanfoot and Wanlockhead were cut off for a few days at that time. Late in 1951 I was again in the Crawfordjohn area, operating Will Clarke's thrasher. Some of the farmers there were out of straw, and the thrasher was a matter of urgency. I had a few hair-raising shifts on the road, with ice covered by deep drifting snow on the roads. Finishing the run at Balgray near end of January, I only had five days left before my immigration. Once again I have digressed from a thread of facts and background onto a subject which seems to have little relevance to one from another. In this case my aim was to stress the vast differences in climate and surroundings I had experienced at the same time of year in areas roughly twelve thousand miles apart. However, back to the year 1959. Through contact with Mooney's shearers, I had learnt of a contracting partnership known as Murfett and Worrall, which had been operating only a few years at that time. Both had been longtime employees of Jimmy Brown, almost a legend in the history of contractors. Reg Murfett had been a wool classer, while Stan Worrall had been an "expert" for many years. Both had great experience in the far-flung stations of the Riverina, parts of South Australia, and also at least eight Victorian locations along the Victoria-South Australia border. After Jimmy Brown had died, Reg and Stan had formed a company. They would usually have three teams operating in an area bounded by Ivanhoe, Broken Hill, Pooncarie, Menindee Mildura. In South Australia the areas were Naracoorte, Tailem Bend, Murray Bridge and the Coorong.

My first meeting with Reg was at his home in Searmonth Street in Ballarat, on the second day of January, 1959. Before he decided to give any shearer a guarantee of work in any of his sheds, Reg liked to meet prospective workers face to face, quite a sensible outlook in the shearing industry, where it was possible to engage unsuitable workers, who could mess up an otherwise good team. I have seen rough shearers who would cause a grazier to charge his contractor, which would cost the latter dearly, as, once lost, it was near impossible to win it back. Although Reg lived in Ballarat, most of his work took place hundreds of miles away, starting at Woolcunda, near Broken Hill, in the outback of New South Wales, on about 5th January every year. This was about the hottest time of the year, and the extreme heat in shearing sheds in the area kept many away until

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later, near Easter, conditions became somewhat more bearable. The team for Woolcunda that year set off from Ballarat on 3rd January on the first leg to Mildura, a large town on the River Murray. We would make an overnight stay there, at a large house run much like a B and B of more modern times. The proprietrix of this place was a lady of mature years, who provided clean accommodation and home cooking in the old German style. She was a descendant of Lutheran pioneers who opened up much of the Mallee, through sheer hard work. Now a widow, Mrs Kranz presided over her rambling old home in a manner which was a credit to her and her employees. Early next day we set out for Woolcunda, more than 350 kms distant. Although we had an early start, only a short distance indeed had been covered before the temp. reached 40 degree C. There was a convoy of nine vehicles carrying the entire team and their belongings. Most of these were old American cars and utilities, proven to be much better than English-made vehicles on the mostly gravel roads of those days. By that time most who had bought English cars had found they had a woeful habit of boiling, radiators not nearly large enough to survive the awful conditions here, and suspensions came apart on road corrugations.

Remarkably, we reached our destination shortly before sundown. having stopped twice to deal with punctures, and once to have lunch at one of those forgettable bush pubs. The station owners had the quarters tidied up, the kitchen, including the big old stove, was all in working order ready for Jack Freeman, our cook, to take over. This was the hottest shed on the run, and that year was no exception. Tests made on shearers since these far far-off times have shown that a shearer expends about the same amount of energy as a runner taking part in a marathon. On top of this, add stifling hot conditions, and the heavy physical work involved. This year the six shearers involved finished in record time, 15,000 plus in one day over three weeks. From there we went on to Wellington Lodge and then to Jockwar, both properties near Taillem Bend on the Murray River, going towards Adelaide. Both places had eight-stand setups, and each was owned by a McFarlane brother, descendants of Scottish migrants. These two properties were bounded on one side by Lake Alexandrina, which is a large stretch of water wherein the Murray River flows into the sea. Wellington Lodge is a Georgian style mansion built perhaps in the 1860's, even the shearing shed and shearers' quarters are stone-built. This was quite a popular place on Murfetts shearing round, as, often, some of us would spend some time after work, fishing from the bank of the lake. There was a plentiful supply of redfin and yellowbelly, both excellent fish, and a welcome addition to our diet. Our cook had a way of baking then in the huge oven which was an addition to his everyday skills. By the time we had finished at Jockwar the month of April was almost half gone. Easter was a convenient break, in which Victorian workers could go home for a few days. As I did not have either home nor family, I took advantage of a few days to explore the Mount Gambier district. A day or two spent in Adelaide saw the time pass pleasantly, and as our next shed was near Naracoorte, I rolled up there the day before we were due to start. Already the cook was installed, the "expert" was preparing the machinery for a next-day start. This place was named Wirralie, another of the McFarlane clan, a younger generation. This six-stand team was now one of the three operating large dis-

tances apart, one of the other two was in the Pooncarie district, and the other away out near Ivanhoe. The weather now had settled down to about 30\* C, and with fine weather we did not take long too finish, then over to Fairview at Lucindale. After this shed was completed, there a reorganisation of shearer and shed hand personnel, to cater for two separate four-stand sheds, one of them demanding an immediate start. This sort of thing happened quite regularly back in those days. A certain number of graziers were so arrogant that their needs and wishes had to be catered for, regardless of the inconvenience suffered by others, such as the contractor.

However, both Stan and Reg were by this time used to chopping and changing team sizes to suit the needs of the immediate demand. By bringing in another two shearers and shedhands both teams were ready on starting dates required. I must state here that all contractors had a list of names of shearers and shedhands, also cooks, on whom they could call in an emergency. I finished up at Harcourt, near Menindee, first of the three sheds which also included Haythorpe, also at Menindee, then on to Belparjie, near Darnick. This was the end of the run for me, as I had to start at Booabula on 14th July, only a few days away. With an assured run until late December, I had achieved my aim, an almost continuous run of shearing for a whole year, something that few shearers ever aspire to. In hindsight, I realise that a less calendar of work in such a demanding occupation is desirable. However, in these days I was used to pushing toward the limits, and gave such matters little thought.

On the day before Booabula started, I met up again with the shearers I had not seen in almost a year. There used to be almost a brotherhood in the shearing industry whereby you would find yourself back at the same stations, working with the same shearers in successive years. Wanganella, a small town off the Billabong Creek, was only a few kms. from Booabula, and the old bush pub in town did a roaring trade when Mooney's and other contractors' shearers were in the district. Closing time was "flexible" with old Joe Thomas, publican, and I think the law enforcers must have had blinkers on when they passed that way in the "wee sma' 'oors."

During the next few seasons, time passed for me quite pleasantly. Working with either Murfett or Mooney was my regular occupation. On any occasion I had enough broken time between their main runs I would head off to the areas which many of the old-timer shearers avoided, due to rough and wrinkly merinos. There was usually a shearing job there for someone who could not care less about tackling such sheep. It was all part of the job, and a challenge. During these years I had become well established in an occupation not taken up by immigrants, and on a later occasion, reflecting as I once had reviewed my past years, it's a long way from The Ha' to Wanganella!



## A TIME FOR REMEMBRANCE

In late 1959 I had completed almost a year's continual shearing. This was done by merging my employment by one contractor's busy time into another contractor's main run. By doing so I would start in the "hot run" from early January with Reg. Murfett up near Broken Hill. This was a run dreaded by most shearers and to be by-passed if possible. In a typical four or six-stand shed in parts, the heat generated inside was indescribable, the nature of the job was constant exertion and effort. Quite often the outside temperature would be 108 degrees F, or 40 degrees C. Inside would be worse, and a constant hot wind always seemed to keep conditions unpleasant. Surprisingly, even under these extreme conditions, the work went on at a fast rate, and I discovered that I could stand up to the heat better than anyone else. Part of that ability was due to physical fitness, and the fact that I had always been a non-drinker, scarce as hens' teeth in the shearing industry. Once I had migrated here, in any spare time I had (which wasn't much), I'd go on a run and time myself against the clock. A measured mile I could cover in about 4 minutes 18 seconds. Not anything wonderful, but I was competitive to a point close to a professional of those long gone days. On the football field I was as fast off the mark as anyone, stronger than most, without being big and clumsy. These athletic movements I worked into my shearing style. As soon as the starting bell went at the start of the two-hour run, all shearers would be like "Jack-in-the-Box" with their speed into the catching pen, grab a sheep, then take a half-dozen or so lightning steps backward to their stands, pick up hand-pieces, then the contest's on. Many times, near the end of a trying day, I would have to call on reserves of stamina and endurance, just to get to the "knock-off bell" at 5.30. At all times, a very high standard of shearing and skill had to be maintained. I always liked work, right back to my schooldays, when I would have plenty to do before and after school. During my years with D.O.A.S., I would have such a variety of work during the year, that the time seemed to fly past.

The situation in the shearing industry is different to any other that I am aware of. The shearer is paid on a piece-work basis, where other employees are paid by the day or weekly. I have been in large sheds where the pickers-up each had to pick up fleeces for six or seven shearers, some of whom would be shearing around 180 daily. Not a job for loafers. On the other hand, one picker-up for four shearers was a more reasonable task. By 1959 I had worked with many of the best shearers around. Some come easily to mind, such as Bob Cutler, Cec. Bunting, Peter and Roy Kelly, big Norm Fehring, Alan Cushion, Tom Byfield and others. These were in the top category who worked for the big contractors, but I've known hosts of others in Queensland and N.S.W. sheds who were good everyday shearers. A handful were forgettable for one reason or another, they did not last in well-run outfits. One observation I made was that shearers from about age 50 would start to deteriorate health-wise. At some stage I determined that I would be doing something else before I reached the half-century. I have seen some come on board in the mornings, waiting for the 7.30 a.m. starting bell. A few would be half bent over with back problems, others would have "the shakes," a condition that was brought on by the continual vibration of the hand-piece. A fair number who had been

shearers most of their lives died young, quite a lot did not make 60. The industry has totally changed in the last two decades or so. The use of the "wide combs" from about 1983 led to a downgrade in the quality of shearing. The influx of New Zealanders, many of them Maoris, caused disruption in the industry. In this "transition period" of some twenty-odd years which included the introduction of "wide gear" combs and cut-price teams which the graziers favoured over the more traditional contractors. There was confrontation in public places around Queensland, N.S.W., and in Western Australia. Even Victoria hosted an ugly incident on the streets of Hamilton, a conservative town in Western Victoria often referred to as "the wool capital of the world." When the incomers clashed with locals who felt that their way of life was being threatened, the police often were the final adjudicators. These events reflected badly on the Graziers' Association, who were mainly responsible in bringing about this situation. It became apparent that this body had hoped to cut the cost of shearing, and, in the process, lessen the influence of "The Australian Workers' Union," to which all self-respecting shearers then belonged.

By this time I had long gone from the industry, though I had a more thorough knowledge of the issues involved than almost anyone else. The end result was a partial disintegration of a once well organised scene. Many older shearers left for greener pastures, younger men would not commit themselves to such a demanding occupation, and the graziers lament the grave shortage of shearers, seemingly now in a permanent state of affairs throughout Australia.

## **THE PRESENT DAY STATE OF FARMING IN DROUGHT-STRICKEN AUSTRALIA**

As we hasten toward the end of another almost rainless year (2006), many farmers are facing the tough decisions of whether to completely de-stock or attempt to hold on in the faint hope that we will have enough rain to at least have a partial recovery throughout the dairy, cereal growing, and stock raising pursuits. The crucial word is water, a commodity fast becoming scarce, and where available, very expensive. Many places in Victoria's central and northern areas have no livestock left on their properties. The wheat crop has largely been a disaster, not enough rain to allow crops to mature to harvesting stage, resulting in those being cut for hay in an effort to at least save something.

In the rich dairying area of Goulburn Valley, the once plentiful irrigation water rights have been cut to a miserable less than 20%. Cows that were once as recently as six months ago worth \$1500 per head are being sold to the American hamburger trade for as little as \$300. Add to this the bush fires in the high country, with more than two million acres already burnt out, and the general state of affairs deteriorating. These fires have been spread by hot north winds and up to 52 degrees C. Unless heavy rain falls in the huge affected area, these fires could burn for weeks, if not months. More than 3,000 volunteers and professional firefighters are involved.

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## CHARACTERS I HAVE KNOWN

During my years of following and chasing work in the Australia of the 1955 to early '60's, I must have come in contact with more people than others would in a lifetime. I can recall many of them in their daily role of surviving and just continuing a life-style that was either chosen by them or had been thrust on them as an immediate matter of necessity. In the lower stratus of Australian society existed a work force which could loosely be described as "unskilled." During a spell of working for Reg Murfett, shearing contractor, I worked in a team composed of shearers who had not previously been employed by Reg. This is usually a risky situation for the contractor, as he could easily lose sheds through rough shearing. Just after Easter the team assembled at a Wentworth Hotel, to move out in convoy to Boola Boolka station, halfway between Broken Hill and Menindee, real outback country.

This was an eight-stand shed, and the property belonged to Power and Larkin, two long-established identities who also jointly owned Haythorpe, another large property situated on the banks of the Darling River, upstream of Menindee. Reg Murfett and his partner, Stan Worrall, already had two teams operating in the upper Darling area, and the urgent request for a start at Boola Boolka caught them on the hop, but they, like other contractors, could not risk losing two of their sheds, which explains why a third team had to be put together in a hurry. Through adverts in "The Worker," the Australian Workers' Union newspaper, Reg was lucky enough to secure six replies, some of whom seemed promising enough. With the addition of myself and Harry Dawes, he just might cobble together a team competent to see the emergency through.

The reason for the early start was that the fly-strike season was one of the worst on record, and they could lose hundreds of sheep unless they were quickly shorn. I have shorn in sheds where up to a third of the sheep had been fly-struck, and shearing them was unpleasant business, but you had to take this task in your stride, a case of just get on with it. The shed hands for this team had been easier to find than shearers, as many workers in the Darling River district spent a large part of their lives "rouseying," or mustering and droving sheep. Many liked this as a change to their usual lifestyle, where they were at the mercy of a camp cook, as against enjoying the efforts of the contractors' cooks. Those who cooked for Murfett's team shed had a well-earned reputation, certainly in my years in their workforce. On the first day, with a start on the second run, some of these shearers who came from Queensland, New England, and Bourke areas were quick to complain about the wrinkly sheep, the fly-struck numbers and other ailments. Somehow the contractor managed to keep them going, and they knew anyway, that once the work agreement was signed, it was better to continue until the end of the shed. They well knew that, by "pulling out," after signing an agreement, they were legally on thin ice. Slowly the team output improved daily, and after the second week we had almost a respectable number shorn. At the end of a month's work, Murfett and Worrall had come through well from a crisis they could well have done without. I

have mentioned this episode as an example of a shearing contractor's continual need to be wary of the pitfalls in this industry.

In 1962 I, and thirteen other shearers, plus a full complement of shed hands and pressers, were informed that the contract which C. D. Mooney had held for many years was now non-existent. This related to only one shed, which was Mooney's first start every season. Much later the truth of the matter came out, namely that a rival contractor had undercut Chris Mooney by fourpence per sheep. The owner showed a lack of integrity in an underhand deal, though it was a fact that contractors had to survive many a crisis in their life-times. These and other instances removed my one-time ambition to become a large-scale contractor at some future date.



## **Distances . . . .A Few Comparisons**

Perhaps the most enduring impressions which visitors to Australia experience is the vastness of the areas outside the capital cities and more rural towns of inland Australia. I have known American visitors who admitted that their previous belief that "The States" were bigger and better in everything, did not apply to land areas. The sheer expanse of many private properties, particularly in Queensland and northern N.S.W., would amaze anyone from European countries including Britain. There is a vast track of land contained in the area loosely termed, "West of the Darling," in which are still situated many grazing properties of 500,000 acres or even more. Looking at one such place near Louth, a small settlement on the Darling River, is the sheep station named Dunlop. This was one of four properties owned by Samuel McCaughey. The extent of Dunlop was over 1000,000 acres and its "back station," Nocoleche, was just on 8000,000 acres. Down river on the Darling was Toorale, also one million acres. Fort Bourke, next to Toorale, much smaller at 400,000 acres. These properties were all owned by McCaughey. One fence on Dunlop was 43 miles long, and if its extension on Nocoleche was included, the total was 90 miles. The distance along one bank of the Darling on McCaughey's stations was 95 miles as the crow flies. These properties have long been dispersed, sub-divided and more closely settled. Within the last thirty years or so, huge irrigation systems now grow rice and a few other crops, pumping so much water from the Darling that it is now dry for many miles of its course, depriving many further downriver of enough stock water. The present drought (2007) has further complicated conditions, leading to almost no water allocation for the current season. I used to go into that area every year, shearing in Menindee, Brokenhill, Bourke and Pooncarie districts. Fort Bourke was a hard shed for shearers. I was there in 1957. The Darling was flooded over its banks, miles wide in places (shallow water). The drovers and musterers were at their wits ends finding enough dry land on which to get the sheep up to the shearing shed. The same conditions applied later that same year as shearing commenced at Murtee, a large



station near Wilcarnia, a town lower down the Darling River. The present day graziers would welcome just a fraction of the flooding which they experienced all these years ago. The aforementioned places are suffering from a decade of record low rainfall.

In the late 50's, a long-proposed scheme, initiated by the N.S.W. and federal Governments combined to build several weirs on the Darling. The main aim was to divert much of the river's flow on to a large area of former station country near Menindee. The result was that a very large man-made lake was formed, at that time paving the way for intensive irrigation. Citrus growing, vineyards on a massive scale, and many other crops flourished, while hundreds rushed to the district in an unexpected large number. This created an inflationary situation as regards land prices, the population of Menindee rose markedly, and created a mini building boom. A side effect of the water benefits, once the lake became established, speedboats by the hundred could be seen any weekend, and fishermen flocked for the best fishing available for hundreds of miles. The famous old station named Haythorpe, which was owned by Power and Larkin, was totally submerged as the water reached its maximum depth. I have fond memories of shearing at Haythorpe on two occasions, the second being the last shearing before the old shearing shed and homestead were submerged. One wonders just how much compensation was paid to Power and Larkin for the relocation of their stock to other areas. These two gentlemen owned another large station inland from Menindee. This was an old established run named Boola Boolka, a place on which I have shorn several times all these years ago. These properties are all situated in far Western N.S.W.

Early on in the days of the great pastoral leases, a new threat appeared to make life for the settlers even more difficult. This was the hazard of wild native dogs, known as dingoes. These blood-thirsty animals would attack by night, in packs of as many as a dozen. Apart from killing for food, they had a habit of wanton killing, tearing the throats out of their victims, which were left to die. Worse still, some of the settlers' dogs escaped into the bush country and interbred with dingoes, resulting in massive killing machines, worse than the original War was declared on dingoes by government and graziers. As part of this war a 6,000 mile fence was proposed, and gradually this became a reality. This runs from Eucla, on the W.A./S.A. border, across the Nullorbor Plain to Ceduna, then winds away inland to the Coober Pedy opal fields and Marree, forms a boundary fence between S.A. and N.S.W., till it reaches the Queensland border, near the Simpson Desert, describes a vast zig-zag course up into the north west, and runs south again past Charleville and Cunnamulla to the Macintyre River, only 150 miles from the Pacific Ocean. This barrier of wire netting and steel posts, never less than six feet high, runs almost as far as from Sydney to Los Angeles. Some sections of it date back as far as the 1880's. The job was finally completed at a cost of £2m—to keep it in order costs another £3000,000 per year. One small sector of this fence, 377 miles in the Corner Country is where three states meet, north of Tiboollurra. Sometimes drift sand piles up against the fence, allowing dogs to cross over. The doggers usually account for them, but a large maintenance force is continually employed, just keeping up with renewal. I have stated the costs in pounds, as the fence was still being extended just previous to decimal Coinage being introduced.

Ballarat, 14<sup>th</sup> May, 2007-

Dear Jimmy,

As we head into the winter, your summer should be well on its way. Roddy had a rough time after returning home from here. Yesterday, I learnt from Helen that he was now on the mend. Tina was greatly concerned about his illness, as they were always close prior to their immigration here.

Congratulations to you on an excellent job reproducing my memoirs. The Ha' looks abandoned and unwanted. The big old hayshed is gone. It used to occupy the space immediately to the left of the buildings in the photo. I note the old footbridge over the Greenock still looks O.K. Our stack-yard was the area between the bridge and the homestead. We would usually have 18 to 20 stacks.

Enclosed is an account of an experience belonging to the period of a few years prior to coming here. I intend to contribute occasional articles mainly about Australia, hoping they merit inclusion in your publication.

Regards to you and Betty  
from John Ferguson.

## **EARLY DAYS OF CAR OWNERSHIP**

Recently I read in a rural newspaper, letters from mostly mature aged readers regarding their experiences, good, bad, or otherwise. Some told of a time when they even drove while still attending primary school. Many were early teenagers when entrusted with driving the family car within the confines of the family farm. This situation, of course, could only happen in the vast, almost empty expanses in countries such as Australia. One can just imagine the limited opportunities of, for instance, a teenager in Scotland becoming proficient in the art of driving. Looking back through the years to the wartime era of the 1940's, I realise that I was fortunate to be employed by Mr Agnew, a businessman who owned two farms near Lesmahagow, and a fishmonger and poulterer base in the Glasgow area, consisting of 14 outlets. He insisted on his employees learning to drive, whether it be delivery trucks, of which he owned a half-dozen, or one of his small fleet of private cars, some of those were used by his managers. I learnt to drive in a Ford Pilot, complete with trailer, which was used to ferry all manner of goods to and from the farms and his mansion home in Mount Vernon. Came the day when I parted company from working on farms, taking up employment as the youngest driver employed by the then D.O.A. This was a job which required a vehicle to cope with a large amount of travelling. To this end I bought myself a 1929 Ariel motor cycle, the first of four machines used over five years. They were, in order, the aforesaid Ariel, 1936 Triumph, 1937 B.S.A., and finally an Ariel Red Hunter, which was my pride and joy, and owned until just before I emigrated here.

On many occasions I would be driving to and from work in pouring rain, on icy roads, and other poor conditions. This was the downside of the job, and by war's end I was considering buying a car to cope with the travelling. At that time,

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no new cars were available, and the few good second-hand vehicles which came up for sale, were in the hands of unscrupulous dealers who knew they could extort inflated prices from the well-heeled part of society, to which I did not belong. Late in 1947 I happened to be digging potatoes in the Cleghorn area, near Lanark. I had been there earlier in the year, ploughing new rough ground on which potatoes were now being harvested. The owner was a friendly person, and I knew him quite well. He had two cars in his garage, a Morris 12, which was the family car, and a Morris 1931 two-seater, which Joe owned before his marriage. This vehicle had been on blocks for some years, owing to petrol rationing. He had decided to sell the two-seater, and was thinking of advertising it in the Lanark paper. I had seen the car in the garage, and noticed it was in good condition. Talking to the owner, I asked him how much money would buy it. To say I was amazed at his quote would be the understatement of the year. Twenty-five pounds and the purchaser could drive away with the ownership papers. It had recently been registered and had a new tyre. I did not take long to arrange payment, which was completed the following day. Now I had two ways of going to work, though I used the bike on most days. Once I had a chance to do some minor repair work, such as new leads, points and plugs, a small amount of tuning brought the vehicle's performance up to as new.

During those post-war years many shortages still persisted. Rationing was current on many items, petrol was in short supply. It was almost unheard of that workers could own or even afford to run a car. Most of the contemporaries around the same age as myself spent a sizeable part of their earnings in the many hotels which welcomed their custom. Noticeably, a culture had grown in a short time in which the younger generation of men measured their acceptance in the community by being able to outlast each other in the "drinking stakes." I had always been averse to this so called "social" outlook, and had enough sense to evaluate the fact my car ownership cost me much less than trying to outdo others in the popularity stakes. I do not, even now, criticise anyone who enjoys social drinking as part of their life-style, in fact I believe that in some cases a moderate intake of alcohol can be beneficial.

A few months after I acquired my car I was in the early stages of courting a young lady from the Carnwath district. She was the second of three daughters in the family of a prominent cattle dealer and a socially aware mother. I had completed a lot of work on their estate over some years. However, I was agreeably surprised when she accepted my offer to accompany her to a live show in Lanark, to which I had already purchased tickets, in anticipation. Calling at their home in good time, before our departure I assured her mother that I would have her safely home by 10.30 p.m. As we progressed towards Lanark, among small talk, I was informed that Daddy had bought a new car, a Wolsley no less, and it was so up to date and comfortable as to put all other cars in the shade, except maybe a Rolls Royce. Somewhat of a fashion leader, she told me of her latest purchase, a pair of Saxone brogues at an exorbitant cost. Mentally placing myself outside of her league, I still hoped to enjoy the evening, and to that end had progressed over Hyndford Bridge, past the Race Course, and almost opposite the D.O.A.S Depot, when disaster struck. It came in the form of possibly the only puddle on the road, left over

from the previous day's rain. With a swish the water came through a space in the fire-wall, seriously wetting the precious brogues, also a fair amount of stocking on the way. A moment of stunned silence was the first reaction from the lady, then she used a few words which would have shocked a wharf labourer. Nevertheless, we progressed onward to the theatre, and even considering the chain of events past, I endured an icy silence for most of the evening. Once curtain calls had been concluded it was a case of "home James and don't spare the horses." On reaching home, Mummy was informed quickly about the unfortunate calamity. All of a sudden, I could not have been more unpopular if I'd stolen the Crown Jewels. Beating a hasty retreat, as soon as I could decently do so, I reflected on an observation of Robert Burns, i.e. "The best laid plans of mice and men gang aft agley," etc. . . . Back to the drawing board.

JOHN FERGUSON

Ballarat, Australia, 3rd June, 2007

Dear Jimmy,

Thank you for letter received last week. I am pleased to say that recent rainfalls have altered the grim outlook for the season to one of optimism, coupled with urgency, to sow for crops of mainly wheat and barley. Ten days ago grown men were splashing about in their rubber boots in delight at receiving enough moisture to go ahead with planning for the season. The dust has gone, everywhere the land is greening fast. Speaking to John Mowat, from Manangatang in the Mallee the other night, I learnt that his sons were sowing at the rate of 400 acres a day with his big John Deere Tractor (430 h.p.) and compressed air seeder, 36ft wide. They plan for 6,000 acres plus under crop this year, and are well on their way.

Best regards to you and Betty, JOHN FERGUSON.

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## PERSONALITIES

### **I have encountered on my early days in Australia**

Around mid-1960 the contract shearing teams operated by Reg. Murfett were nearing the close of a very tough run of sheds in the West Darling area of the Riverina. The Graziers' Association were at their usual occupation—attempting to have shearers, shedhands and pressers' rates of pay reduced. They had the financial resources available to influence the outcome of Industrial Court rulings of the time, and had members of Parliament elected to the then Menzies Government. This was a long running, contentious state of animosity between the Graziers and the Australian Workers' Union. Historically, the Union was formed to protect the interests of those employed in the Pastoral Industry. From a small beginning around the early 1870's, A.W.U. membership had grown to such a sizeable force that by 1891 they were the key players in the calling of the massive shearers' strike of that year. The Queensland Government, predictably, sided with the graziers, and banned Union members from all sheep stations in the State. There was an attempt to recruit "scab" labour to cope with the huge backlog of unshorn sheep which was soon apparent to sensible people to be a very big minus for even the most anti-

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Union graziers. As in all such disputes, the extreme views of both sides had resulted in a forced compromise after several large contingent of troops to harry the encampments of the Unionists. As the dispute was centred on Barcaldine, a dusty outback Queensland town, the State was the main player in the resultant prosecution of several Union officials. This resulted in the jailing of seven members of the Union, following legislation hastily pushed through the grazier dominated Government. Shortly after this outcome, an election was called in Queensland. Surprisingly a number of Union Officials put themselves forward as candidates. To the dismay of the Government, five men were elected to the Assembly, all of whom had been directly involved in the recent dispute. This sent a message to the "born-to-rule" brigade that their fortress was not invulnerable, and in fact caused the formation of the Labour Party, which in its turn, dominated Queensland's political scene at later dates. This early success of the Unionists took place approximately ten years before Federation of all Australia States, which came about in 1901, giving Australia its present Federal-style type of government, with all the States having their own separate Governments.

These facts I have described merely outline the conditions which existed in the shearing industry in the late 19th century. I now have moved to a 1955 to 1972 period during which I was a financial member of the A.W.U. While shearing at a property near Kerang, I had reason to meet Don Mackintosh, who was at that time organiser for A.W.U. interests concerning membership and conditions in the industry. Organisers were allowed to approach workers during meal breaks, or at the end of the working day. Their job also included inspection of accommodation where provided, provision of washing facilities, etc. Most owners co-operated with organisers and standards were generally good. The occasional owner who failed to keep up certain standards would be warned that they had a certain time to bring conditions up to standard. In the course of conversation with Don, I learned that, in the large sheds run by contractors, there was a no ticket-no start rule, strictly adhered to. As the A.W.U. employed a Queen's Counsel to present their case to the Industrial Tribunal on behalf of the workers, much expense was accumulated in just keeping the status quo, with an occasional improvement won. As I progressed on the way to full-time employment in the large sheds, I marvelled at the wide variety of the workers who made up the contractors work force. They had one common bond, they were all members of the A.W.U.. The Cutlers from Belmont, in Victoria, father Bob, sons Ian and Dem, were regulars with C. D. Mooney's teams for many years. Cec Bunting, Jack Kettle and Arthur Smith hailed from Colac. Ian Laskey, Bob Maroney and Chancy Watley all made the journey from Tasmania to Wanganella for years. Some of the best Riverina shearers I knew were Jack and Graham Rose from Conargo, the Kellys from Buningyong in Victoria. A few Queenslanders were regulars, including Tommy Tighe, Jimmie and Charlie Gibbs. One of the best was Tom Byfield from Cassilis, N.S.W. Not many West Australians came east to shear. Few of them embraced the principles of the Union, giving them access to only non-Union sheds. The Union insisted that, apart from its usual rules, all members present their best efforts in workmanship, be they shearers, shedhands, or pressers. In my years as a shearer, I met scores of people who followed the industry as a way of life. The best of these were dedicated to one

job, though I always held the view that an ability to take on any job when shearing wasn't available, was a distinct advantage. At some stage I had determined to be out of the shearing industry by age fifty. I had a first-hand look at the problems which most shearers suffered from. Some would come on to the board before the starting bell, bent double with back and muscular problems. Another dreaded condition was that known as "the shakes," only found among the really hard working top shearers, who worked at the maximum possible speed. Doing eight hours of this grind and handling the continual vibration of the handpiece brought this eventually into the equation. I must confess that at one stage (around 1963) I suffered from the early stages of this affliction, but a short spell doing some completely different work corrected the situation, and I was never troubled again. I left the industry while still in my late forties, having now a young family to care for, also by settling in Ballarat, there was opportunity for permanent work only a short distance from home. Now long retired, I rarely meet anyone from the "old days" in the large sheds. Most of those I knew will have passed on, and the passing of Tom Byfield last year left only myself standing from amongst the aforementioned persons, plus a few others now long gone, who were known far and wide as "Mooney's guns." What I regard as a privilege to work with on a daily basis, amid an outlook of friendly rivalry, some of the best shearers anywhere, has now become family history.

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Dear Jimmy,

Once again we have had a major change in the weather cycle of this vast land. Here in Victoria the last six weeks have brought welcome rains, enough to cheer the hearts of the wheat farmers in the north. The huge tractors and machinery worked round the clock to take advantage of the best fall in ten years. Already the new crop is up to six inches high in many districts, the best start in the last ten years. The dairy farmers are smiling again, after several disastrous seasons. Most dairy herds here would average around 400 cows, though it is not unusual to find a trend to much larger herds around 1,000 and more. This is to be seen mainly in the north eastern part of the state, around Wangraatta and Benalla. A recent price rise of 35 cents per litre awarded to producers was a huge bonus, and this will ensure that the cost of land and good milking will continue to rise.

Winter is showing us that this year has had so many extremes in weather patterns. Yesterday, for the first time in ten years, we had snow falling for two hours, though it's almost disappeared, the sun is shining again. Our top temperature yesterday was 7 deg.C, while Perth reached 25 deg.C. At the end of January we had a week of + 40c.

Recently, Helen forwarded to me a list of people who had attended a ball sometime in the 1920's. This brought back great memories of people we were later acquainted with in our time at the Halls. There are some of whom I have only a faint memory, others, like the McKerrows and McCallums and W. McGillivray, I can remember well. This list was one you had compiled from the "Advertiser." Trust that you will find some interest in following annals.

JOHN FERGUSON (2007)

## THE LIGHTER SIDE OF THE SHEARING INDUSTRY

Back in the days when I was shearing for Reg. Murfett, a regular team mate was Stan Parsons, who hailed from Currabubula, a small community in New England, which is part of N.S.W.. We had completed five sheds on the run, and were now at Boola Boolka, which was notorious for its tough shearing wrinkly merinos. This particular season my hutmate happened to be Stan, who made hard work of shearing at any time, but was an honest battler who managed to keep up an average which was acceptable to the contractor. Stan's background, like many of his generation, was of harsh conditions and next to no education. Consequently, he had reached adulthood with just enough reading ability to get by. Writing was a laborious task. He had a small "selection" of about 100 acres, on which he ran about 40 sheep and possibly a thousand rabbits. Stan's wife, Mag, looked after the place when he was away, which was about six months of the year. Mag had plenty of spare time on her hands, as their two sons, Lyall and Richard, were also shearing for Mr Murfett. Some time before this, she had taken up a sideline, now she was a regular rabbitier, using ferrets to trap them. So successful was she, that her income rivalled that of Stan. In those days the custom of the "rabbit Agents" was to have a refrigerated truck stationed in a district receiving the catches brought in by rabbitiers. Once they had a full load, the truck was driven to H.Q. in Sydney, an empty truck replaced the one which had left, and kept things moving.

Some time before this, Mag's brother had given her a large buck ferret as a birthday present. She promptly named him Erroll Flynn, after the actor, on account of his amorous ways with the ladies. The short term result was a population surge in the ferret quarters, enough to cause alarm for Mag. Her ferrets were looked after like family, and all had names. She had run out of names and in her weekly letter to Stan, had appealed to him to provide some suggestions. Stan wasn't all that quick off the mark, so he promptly asked me for assistance. Keeping as straight a face as possible I came up with "Why don't you name them after the Seven Dwarfs?" Next week Stan's letter from Mag informed him he had a clever friend who was responsible for Sneezy, Dopey, Doc, etc. She even named one Snow White. Late in 1960 I was shearing at the property of Bill Ryall, who was the owner of Spring Plains merino stud. Having just recently completed my annual contract stint with the big contractors, I found myself with two spare weeks before Christmas. I had shorn at Spring Plains at the same time the previous year by myself. This time I had been asked to find a second shearer, to ensure that we would finish the job before Christmas, as Bill and family hoped to head north to Queensland to visit family. This suited me also, as I had a very early start lined up for the 1961 season, namely January 3. Having contacted Stan some time before, I was pleased that he accepted the job, and 10th December found us starting on the job. It was a good set-up, the two-stand overhead gear was almost new, and shearing without the presence of a contractor was more relaxing. Our accommodation was very good, and our meals were provided by the family's cook. Came the

day of "cut out," we were right on target to finish mid-day on 24th December. Having done so, and after farewelling the family, we took ourselves into Cooma, a sizeable town, and headquarters of the Snowy Mountain Scheme, which was still in progress at that time. Having cashed our cheques, and after a leisurely walk around the shopping centre, I casually asked Stan what he had in mind for Mag's Christmas present. He was noncommittal, a man of few words, though he was deep in thought. I had called into Dangar Gedye, stock and station agents, with the object of purchasing new combs and cutters. While I was completing my purchase Stan was surveying the vast stock displayed on the floor. Finally he selected what looked like a large box with leather straps attached. With a knowing wink and a cheeky grin, he confided, "Mag'll be tickled pink when she gets this in her stocking in the morning." Soon we were saying good-bye and going our separate ways. Stan was stowing the ferret box in his utility, happy as a sandboy.



## **SCOTTISH PLACE NAMES**

### **Found in Many Parts of Australia**

During my early years in Australia, I had occasion to travel widely. This was not something I took part in as a sight-seeing pastime, rather it was usually to pursue the chance of employment in a time it was difficult for "itinerants," particularly migrants such as myself. As white settlement in many parts of inland Australia only moves back in time to span four or five generations the earliest records in regards to the settlement of the vast Riverina and Darling River areas only date back to about 1830. Only a short time later, it is recorded that Benjamin Boyd, owner of a whaling industry at Eden, N.S.W., became lessee of almost the entire Riverina, an area containing millions of acres. Into this area Boyd poured vast herds of sheep, as he hoped to take advantage by selling wool to the English markets, at that time the world leader in the manufacture of woollen goods. There was not one single fence in this huge area in these days, and the mobs of sheep moved about anywhere there was enough grass to sustain them. They were loosely "shepherded" by a few of Boyd's employees, mostly ex-convicts and "ticket-of-leave" men. In a few short years Ben Boyd had departed, losing most of his sheep to the dreaded catarrh, a disease which was rampant then, but today scarcely heard of. The Riverina experience bankrupted the man, his whaling interests also collapsed. The only evidence remaining of his colourful lifetime now is Boydtown, a settlement adjacent to Eden, his whaling base. There is no evidence left of even his occupancy of the Riverina area.

Where now are the prosperous areas bounded by Deniliquin, Jerildere, Narrandera, over to Hay, Balranald and Moulamein, are situated many of the best merino studs in the world, the name Boyd is not even known, except in history. Wanganella, which is roughly central to these towns mentioned, was the headquarters of Boyd's operations, though they were tiny settlements then, some



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have come to exist since that period. Later there was a much more regulated movement into this part of Australia.

Through the 1870's, 80's and 90's the Riverina became the mecca of sheep breeders from all parts of Australia, even some who made the long journey from England and Scotland, a six months plus hazard in those days. Most of these settlers were already people of substance in their native country. Some owned or part-owned the ships in which they transported their families, livestock and implements to a new land, a new life-style in the land then referred to us "The Colonies."

Fast forward from these times to the mid 1950's, I had been shearing for a short time, and finding the going quite hard. Most districts had their local shearers, and anyone travelling on the off-chance of picking up casual shearing jobs frequently found if there was a job going it was usually because the locals steered clear for one reason or another. I had my regular round in the Mallee, which left some fairly long spells with nothing in that line. On the way to Deniliquin from Swan Hill I had just passed over a cattle ramp, then glanced at a large white painted board proclaiming the station name in black letters, it simply said "MOSSGIEL." This must have been a large station, and I idly thought that the occupants or their ancestors may have had some connection to that famous place in Ayrshire, once home of Robert Burns.

Later that season I found myself shearing at Bairnkine Merino Stud. Another place in that area was Glengarry. Further along towards Walgett was a Breadalbane. Just here and there, among the mostly Aboriginal names, there is a selection of station names suggesting that the Scottish migrants quite often chose to name their new home for one left behind. In the Western District of Victoria the city of Hamilton is central to an area which contains a great number of Merino sheep flocks. Driving through that district you will find Glenthompson, Dunkeld, Glenisla, Balmoral, Macarthur and several other places reminiscent of Scotland. In the background, close to Hamilton, is the imposing mountain range known as The Grampians, an enduring reminder that the Scots played their part in the settlement of Australia.

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Ballarat, 10th October, 2007

Dear Jimmy and Betty,

As the year moves along, I am mindful of the fact that I have slowly but surely had increasing problems with the onset of arthritis in my right hand. Not to worry, though, I'm thankful that I have come this far without too many trials along the way. Trust that you are both well and enjoying life. As you are heading into autumn, our springtime is upon us. This year started off with some good rains, which was the cause of much optimism throughout the farming community. Wheat farmers completed a record in the area sown, believing that this time there would be sufficient follow-up rains to ensure a decent crop. Sadly, since May, scarcely any rain has fallen, the crops which for a time grew well and looked good, have begun to wither and fade long before maturity. The only option to a total loss is to

cut and bale up what's left of the crop as hay. This means very little wheat to harvest, and not much to export. Water storages are at a record low in most parts of the country.

Congratulations on the occasion of presentation of your Veteran's Badge. I received a copy via Christina recently. On the subject of the bunker, I seem to remember that, at the time, quite a touch of security was attached to a chain of these posts in locations in southern Scotland. Many were hurriedly built in 1940 when the Germans were preparing to invade on a daily basis. Just at the time I left school in 1940, the evacuation of most of our army was completed, through Dunkirk.

Regards to all at Muirkirk from

JOHN FERGUSON.

## **ON PEOPLE AND PLACES, Circa 1940's**

Recently I learnt of the tragic helicopter crash at a site near Lanark. The place name, Jerviswood, brought back distant memories of my much younger days. In the course of my work as a D.O.A.S. driver, I was directed to Jerviswood Mains to commence harvesting, duly arriving there late in the day. My outfit was a typical example of the times, Fordson Major, fuel trailer, and with the binder on transport wheels bringing up the rear. The farmer at that time was Mr Findlater, prominent breeder of Clydesdale horses and also Ayrshire cattle. Having been shown the first field to be cut, I was pleased to see the crop was still standing high and straight, much different to some that year which had been "laid" with rough weather. This resulted in "one-way cutting," a tedious job, but often necessary. After unhitching the trailer, setting up the binder for an early start next morning, I headed off home, which at that time was Cobbinshaw, quite a way away. We transported our motorbikes on a small platform built onto the fuel trailer. I recall having a good straight run at that place, then on to the property of Mr Tennant near Hyndford Bridge. He was the Fiscal at Lanark Court in those days. It was 1946.

Earlier that year I had been working not very far from Lanark, cutting hay for Arthur Mather, owner of Cleghorn Mains. On and off I had done a lot of work on his place. Arthur was a progressive farmer and into such things as improved pastures. As I recall, he had sown a mixture of rye grass, clover, and vetches, which had grown into a dense crop long before the time for mowing. When I set up the mower, a new Massey Harris 6 foot cut, I expected some problems with the tangled crop, and did not have to wait long for some to appear. With many stops to clear the cutter bar, I was forced to work in low gear, though the stops became less frequent the further I got away from the outside boundaries. This field was almost on the banks of the River Mouse. On the other side of the river lay a sizeable farm, where I could see four people singling turnips. They were working at a good pace, and though it was a hot June day, they seemed to breeze along without stopping. From the distance, there appeared to be two men and two Land Girls. About mid-day I made my usual stop for lunchtime, just half an hour for D.O.A.S. drivers. With a spare few minutes left after greasing up, I decided to walk

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over to the Mouse. My object was to check out a fairly deep pool there, which I had heard from reliable information, contained some nice fish, which had a habit of hiding among the tree roots growing near the bank. I had noticed that the turnip singlers had disappeared, obviously gone for their mid-day break. Moving quietly, I got close to the bank, and indeed, there lurking among the tree roots were some decent-sized trout. Filing away this discovery for future use, I decided on a quick inspection of the lower reaches of the pool, which curved sharply round a bend. Moving slowly and quietly around the turn, I was suddenly confronted by the sight of a girl standing waist deep in the water, almost as still as a statue. Almost beside the opposite bank was another, sitting on the sandy bottom, with just head and neck visible above the water. They saw me in the same split second that I spotted them. With a shriek and a bit of splashing both went over the opposite bank like Olympic hurdlers, to the safety of a grove of trees, where they would have stashed their clothing. Obviously, two of the turnip singlers cooling off. One feature of the job driving for D.O.A.S. was that it was never boring. As the seasons changed so did the work, the people, and often the places. You got used to coping with icy roads and foul weather in wintertime, summers were usually a bonus. As Jimmie McSporrان used to say,

“It’s a great life if you don’t weaken!”

How right he was.

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This photo was taken at Bundiyalumbak station, Wanganella, in October, 1960. I’m busy with the last and 209th for the day. These were stud ewes on this famous property. The total sheep count in these long gone days averaged 28,000. At that time 12 shearers were employed, plus ten other workers, including rouseabouts, classer, cook, expert, pressers and woolrollers. A good shed if you liked big wrinkly merinos, which I did. Contractor was C. D. Mooney.

Ballaret, 12th November, 2007

Dear Jimmy and Betty,

As the year gallops along we have recently enjoyed an event which has, of recent years, become something of a rarity in our part of the world. We actually had a wet day, and the rain fell in most parts of Victoria, even as far afield as the Mallee. Harvesting has begun in that district, even a much reduced crop yield is better than having none. The fall was the first here since early July, and thankfully has replenished stock dams and domestic rain water tanks. This relief does little to rebuild reservoir stocks, but at least may be the sign of better times ahead. Everyone believes that we are due such times again.

Even at this early stage, preparations are full on for most people in regard to end-of-year holidays. In days gone by our family holidays would include a two-week stint with our own caravan, which would be sited centrally at Geelong. From this base we would take day trips to beaches at Torquay, Apollo Bay, Ocean Grove, Warmambool and other venues, where our two girls and ourselves would swim or paddle in the shallow water. Beach cricket (using tennis balls) was popular. Nowadays, even pre-teeners demand, and often receive, trips to Bali and Gold Coast in North Queensland as their idea of a holiday. How things have changed.

Even though they have been here 1½ years, Tina and Andy are thrilled that some of their annual holiday including Christmas and New Year will be spent on the beautiful beaches near Geelong.

Regards from John and Betty Ferguson.

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This picture was taken at Boobula station, near Wamganella, about mid-September, 1961. The wool being loaded is near the end of the 1100 bale clip. The shearing workforce there was 14 shearers, plus about the same number of other workers. Most of the sheep on that property cut about 15 pounds each of wool, one of the highest averages in Australia. Owners were Wallace Bros. The simple lift was built by a worker on the station. An old Land Rover (out of sight) provided the lifting power. Sheep numbers varied from year to year-35,000 upwards. Contractor was C. D. Mooney

## **Standard of Workmanship .... Then and Now.**

Quite recently I was driving to a steam rally and vintage tractor meet, near to the Victorian town of Beaufort. This area is famed for producing large quantities of fine wool and the properties are mostly held by the descendants of the original settlers, who in their time, were pioneers in an unsettled land. Previous to 1836 there was no such thing as closer settlement, which dates back to about 1870. Victoria in these early times had yet to be recognised as a sovereign state, and was administered from a distant Sydney. Tasmania was already well established, especially around the fertile areas of Hobart and Launceston. Government officials had a monopoly on the granting of land to those who were prepared to risk their fortunes, and perhaps make more. History records that both sides of these deals were made by entrepreneurs—a nice civilised word which hid the vast maze of corruption connected to the land grants act.

By about 1850, some semblance of order had prevailed, and the “wool barons” held sway. The competitive attitude prevalent between rival graziers gave rise to the situation where the best shorn sheep were a visible proof of a well-run organization. This in turn affected the employment of shearers who were or were not capable of turning off a top job invariably, the only acceptable standard set by these graziers, who by this time had become their local districts’ main employer. The end result was that no roughly shorn sheep were seen in the district, in contrast with the more relaxed outlook prevalent on the large outstations of New South Wales and Queensland. Nobody was around to see these sheep except shearers and musterers anyway, and most owners were just thankful to find enough of these men to handle the many thousand of sheep involved. At this stage there was no such thing as a contract system in the wool industry, this came later, around 1900. As recently as the 1960’s and ‘70’s the old established families still had the attitude that shearers were much inferior to them, and would have an employee patrolling the board to observe any imagined misdemeanor, then report back to the boss who was up to standard and who wasn’t. I must point out that this anomaly was met with only in privately run sheds, as no contractor who was worthy of the name would tolerate having his own standards questioned by such persons. Nowadays, the standard of shearing on even the best-run properties is deplorable. Ridges of wool are left, clumps of wool left between the skin flaps of merinos are unsightly. No one cares now about standards of workmanship. In my early days shearing for Henry Salter, part of the unwritten agreement was that every sheep was “shorn to the best of your ability.” It was a standard that in later years I never deviated from, whether I was shearing for big contractors hundreds of miles from the more populated areas, or down in Victoria where the end result was much more under scrutiny, especially the merino studs. Such were my thoughts as I drove towards Beaufort a couple of weeks ago.

### **BACK IN 1947**

In my early days as a D.O.A.S. driver I had a set goal of being as good as any of the more experienced operators were. To that end I concentrated on the advice from Jock McEwen, the travelling foreman who had been one of the best operators

before his promotion. Jock was a top plough-setter, and spent much time, in the course of his job, imparting his vast knowledge of the subject on to all of the operators who still required improved efforts to measure up. By the time I was in my second season I could and did take on any ploughing job without requiring supervision or assistance. I always strove to have a dead straight furrow, no weeds or "trash" left on top, and all furrows even. By 1947, although still only 21, I found myself assigned to ploughing in an area designated as "marginal land" between the towns of Forth and Fauldhouse.

By this time I already had experience on the hill drainer and Caterpillar operated by the department of Agriculture. As I had driven my motor bike to the venue, I only had to wait a short time for the transporter to arrive, sent in one lot from the Lanark Depot. The equipment consisted of a D2 Caterpillar, a large single furrow American "Prairie-Buster" plough and a trailer with fuel tank containing 2,000 gallons of diesel fuel. Just previous to the arrival of these supplies I had been driven over the area by the owner, who pointed out that fact that 20 acres which had been ploughed the previous year was still infested with rushes which had not been properly ploughed in and covered. There and then I decided to improve on the efforts of last year's operator, who, I suspected, had been ploughing too fast. On the day I had marked off the area into three "lands" with straight opening furrows.

My immediate problem was disposing of rushes three feet high. Suddenly it dawned on me how it may be done. By using the wire rope in the winch which was then attached to a strong short chain I could anchor it from the plough frame at a 30 deg. angle which would drag the rushes under the furrow. Now all that I required was a weight to keep the chain rigid. Returning to the homestead, I had no trouble convincing the owner of the commonsense of my plan. As we searched his scrap heap I spotted just what was required. It was an old window weight, about 18 inches long, and quite heavy. Returning to the job, I set up the chain and weight so that it dragged in the furrow, and the chain's angle flattened the rushes, which were turned over and completely buried by the heavy 15-inch furrow. By using low gear and giving the set-up time to work properly, I had completed the job in less than a week, and disposed of the troublesome rushes at same time. This area that year grew a very good oat crop, and I was back with tractor and binder in mid-September.



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## COMPARING TWO VASTLY DIFFERING CULTURES

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As another year fades into that section of our lives known as “the past,” I feel inclined to ponder how much different my lifestyle would have been had I not emigrated to Australia 57 years ago. At that time I had gained a lot of what is known in the right circles as “work experience.” Perhaps the war intervened as to the course that my life followed from 1941, when I was 15 years old. I always liked work, and could never fathom the attitude of the mainly young generation who would go out of their way to dodge anything that looked like hard work. It was deemed smart by many of that ilk to smugly say that they used their brain power to land an easy job, usually for life. There was an unseen but very real attitude that full-time tractor operators such as myself (in the years I spent as a D.G.A.S. driver) had little or no ambition as regards that area known as “self improvement,” Apprentices to the various trades were viewed as people with “their head screwed on the right way,” even with the pitiful wages which many of them endured for most of their teenage years.

Towards the end of my long stint working for the D.G.A.S, I'd just finished ploughing and disc harrowing an acre of marginal land on a bleak looking flat just off the Forth-Fauldhouse road. The tenant farmer, Bert, had high hopes of growing certified seed potatoes on a part of this area. They had proven to be a valuable cash crop for many farmers with land areas similar to this, and he had teed up a work-force to carry out his planting over Saturday/Sunday. Everything seemed to be under control late Friday when I finished with the disc harrows. I had plough, harrows, and tractor all packed up ready for the transporter to shift to the next job. At that stage I'd noticed Bert's old Hillman approaching slowly over the rough ground. The driver was Bert's wife, who informed me that he had suffered something like an appendicitis attack, which caused acute pain, and that he must rest up for some days. The family doctor had forbidden him from doing any work pending at least a week or more. This messed up his plans to carry out the drilling work required in planting his crop. He had planned to drill with his horses, have the manure sown by hand, potatoes planted, then the drills split again to cover the potatoes. A straight forward procedure, except that a key part was missing a competent horseman to carry out the drilling. Calling in at the homestead before heading off home, I found a despondent Bert in bed, and with orders to stay there, not even to think about doing any work, far less drilling. After some discussion, I managed to convince him that there was no need to postpone his operation for the week-end. I wasn't due to start my next job till Monday, so, by starting early on Saturday morning I would have enough drilling done to start the manure sowing, the potatoes planted then covered. Come Saturday morning I made a very early start, nice and straight on the drills, later a little character named Dougie broadcast the manure by hand. Once he had a decent start three women, recruited from the miners' row nearby, soon made short work of planting the bags of potatoes. It



was a warm day, and the horses, a bit flighty at the start, settled down to a solid day's work. I had unyoked them for an extra long spell over lunch time, knowing it would be near dark when we finished covering. All went well, the job was completed in one day. Eventually, a decent crop was harvested from this land, but by that time, the D.O.A.S was disbanded and I was working for a private contractor. In the following years, and several jobs working for contractors behind me, I eventually emigrated to Australia, working in one of the driest areas of that country. Coming from outside the community I could perhaps better judge for myself just what made the community "tick over" in the pursuit of their daily life-style. There was no doubt that the residents of the Mallee country were a more relaxed and friendly society than any known area of Australia, where the predominant ancestry were largely British, certainly European in the case of the German settlers. The Mallee, which was named for the type of gum tree which was the dominant species before the land was heavy rolled, burned and planted. Most of this work commenced about 1920, when returning servicemen were being offered 640 acre blocks of land, complete with weatherboard house. Many "new chums" came from England, Scotland and even Ireland. They were numbered among Australians who had more knowledge as to how dry land farming should be carried out. Despite this disadvantage, many original Mallee settlers were well to the fore when I arrived there in 1952.

The early decades of struggle had left its indelible mark on some families—droughts, low wheat prices, rabbit plagues, World War Two., had all left their mark. Many young Mallee men were trapped when Singapore fell, and as prisoners, were treated abominably by the Japanese barbarians. One impression which I remember most, was of the optimism of all age groups that the bad old days were well and truly behind them. They were, on the whole, a physically active people, enjoying cricket, football and tennis. Even the dusty golf courses had their enthusiasts.

Weekends in the Mallee were dedicated to sport. In the football season, April to September the games were played on Saturdays. Sunday was recovery day, as a general rule. A typical Sunday would eventuate thus in Nanangatang, capital of the Mallee. Early morning church, attended by most women and girls to celebrate Mass, as Catholics were much in the majority in those days. A little later in the morning, the Presbyterian group would head up to their small brick church, at the top of town. Finally, Church of England members, led by the formidable Mrs Barnes, would primly proceed to their Church beside the Consolidated School. While this rather mundane chain of events took place, the surge in population of young men was astonishing. They came in their cars, utes, or even trucks, and all seemed to head in the same direction—past the silos, then turn in the direction of the football field. Once in that area, a designated vehicle would make an unobtrusive visit to the rear of the premises of the Nanangatang Hotel. Here, the proprietor of this establishment, old Bert Leroux, would supervise the loading of a nine-gallon keg of beer, carefully packed in padding, then conveyed out of sight to prying eyes, to a bush location adjoining the football ground. This was the Mecca for that generation's young hopefuls.



Those of us who were not drinkers, and there were few, passed the time in practising kicking and marking footballs, also improvising sprint races. A few were surprisingly good sprinters, and I appreciated just being accepted as a competitor in that group. There were rules in force as regards illegal drinking, but the local arm of the law turned a blind eye to the popular pastime. The end of the church services and the demise of the "miner" came roughly about the same time of day, then the citizens, with their different interests catered for, drifted homeward to enjoy an early afternoon Sunday luncheon. Democracy at its best in a self-contained community.

These days I seem to find little time to revisit the Mallee area. On the rare occasions I return to Nanangatang, I am humbled by their attitude that I am "one of their own." Also, the few remaining ex-players and original officials of the now defunct Bolton Football Club remind me that I was a member of their inaugural team in 1953.

## ON WINTERS LONG AGO

Within the last week or so (February, 2008) I received a slim, interesting booklet titled "Little Book of Scottish Winters." The sender was a friend from East Kilbride. The photography, much of it dating back to the early fifties, is magnificent, and says much more than words. Oddly enough, when this booklet reached me, we were in the middle of an eleven day hot spell with the top temp. each day of 41C. The area in the far north of Victoria, known as the Mallee, has recorded even higher figures on several occasions this past summer. On most of these days the authorities issue an order "Total Fire Ban" between sunup and sunset. No fire is to be lit outdoors under any circumstances. Even farmers are not allowed to operate machinery on such days, as the chance of causing sparks will lead to a massive fire in seconds.

Almost sixty years have come and gone since I emigrated from Scotland. In that time I have ventured no closer to the Australian Alps in that area known as the High Country, than a few hundred kilometres. I am always amused to hear young and old Australians excitedly call out "We're off to the snow." The nearest snowfields to this area are situated in the Bogong High Plains and Dargo High Plains, neighbouring areas well up, thousands of feet above sea level, and three hundred kms. or more from Ballarat.

In Mid-November, 1946, I had been operating one of the D.O.A.S. potato diggers at Westraw Mains, Pettinain, not far from Hyndford Bridge. We had two large fields to dig, there was a crew of 24 pickers, mostly Irish girls who stayed at a hostel in Lanark, travelling out to the farms in canvas-covered trucks. After a good run, there was a half day's work remaining for Friday. Heading towards Pettinain, looking for a 7.30 start, I was surprised to encounter a light cover of snow about two miles from the potato field. This rapidly became deeper, and my old Ariel was making heavy work of just going ahead. By the time I got to the

homestead, the owner was out to see just what a mess the snow had made of his plans to finish the job later that day. After a consultation with the pickers' foreman, the owner called it off for the day. I headed for the Depot, and had only been there a few minutes when I was asked to step into the office to receive further orders. A request had been made for the use of the Hill Draining Machine, under the Marginal Lands Act. Earlier that year I had done two stints with this machine, one near Auchengray, the other at a place called Birthwood, near Biggar. The upshot was that I was to leave the Westraw job for someone else and take myself to Troloss, away up near Elvanfoot. The transporters took the Drainer and Caterpillar out to the worksite, left them near Troloss homestead with fuel drums, spares, etc. Monday saw me up bright and early, organised and set up ready to start as soon as the Dep. of Arg. Inspector made his appearance. By the end of the week I had almost completed the amount of work the owner requested. Apart from some sleet showers, the weather was good for that time of the year, and the last drain finished late Friday. Reaching the homestead area, I had everything packed up, drained the Caterpillar and block, tarped it up all ready to be transported back to Lanark Depot workshop, to have some alterations to the power winch system. Over the weekend there was a massive fall of snow in southern Scotland. This lasted several days and the snowploughs were busy on most roads. By Wednesday the roads were in a fit enough state to use the transporter. Jock Stoddart, was the regular driver of the W9 which did the transport work. We knew that this would take all day when we set off. As we came to the Elvanfoot Road we found quite deep snow and drifts on both sides of the road, but were going quite well until we reached Troloss. The Cat. had a drift about five feet deep piled up on one side. About the only visible parts were the air-cleaner and exhaust pipes. Luckily we had shovels on board, and set about the task of clearing the Cat. enough to remove the tarp, refill the radiator, check the oil, and at last got it started. Loading up the Cat. was an every day job for me in those days, and we were soon to be under way. Before we left, the owner, his son, and the "in-bye" shepherd, who had been interested spectators of the "rescue mission," asked us to come up to the homestead for refreshments before facing up to the long trip back to Lanark. They were hospitable people, and we did justice to Mrs Wilson's home baking. The draining plough would just have to stay there till the snow melted. It was late and dark when we reached the Lanark Depot and left the Cat. and W9, parked with water drained from their blocks, to prevent freezing. All we had to do then was head homeward, Jock to Carnwath on his old A.J.S., while I had twice as far to Cobbinshaw on my even older Ariel.

The start of 1947 brought in the worst snowstorms seen for many years. Day after day the drifts were getting bigger. The hard frosts caused hundreds of water-pipe bursts in town and country areas—you could see the plumbers out and about every day, they could scarcely keep up with the repairs. Shepherds everywhere were kept busy pulling buried sheep from underneath deep drifts of snow, and struggling out to take "backfuls" of hay out to their flocks. We at the D.O.A.S Depot filled in many hours repairing all manner of ploughs, disc harrows, binders, etc. At one stage two threshing crews were sent out to catch up on the demands from farmers who were out of feed and straw. It was a hair raising job shifting

these large threshers on the icy roads from one place to another, but at that time it just had to be done. Finally, the snow melted, the frosty ground thawed enough for ploughing to start, nearly two months late. There was a mad rush to catch up with anxious farmers all wanting work done at the same time. I worked many twelve-hour days in a one-month period once the snow disappeared. Most other operators did those hours, the main aim was to catch up as quickly as possible.

## On Shearing Team Rivals

Quite recently I had occasion to read an article which was compiled by an old-time shearing expert, whose duties in the contract shearing teams included the grinding, or sharpening, of the shearers' combs and cutters. The expert also had the job of counting out the shorn sheep at the end of every two hour run, keeping these counts, then transferring them to the shed "tally board" after the last run of the day. Against each shearers' name would be his total output for the day, then the progressive total as days moved on. This was a most responsible job, and left no space for error, as the more experienced shearers all knew just how many sheep they had shorn at any stage of the day.

The former expert also touched on the subject of bitter rivalry between individual shearers which sometimes lasted for years. I have a first hand knowledge of the subject, as an observer, not a participant, in my years of working for various large contractors. One observation I made was that these contests took place where the sheep were easier shearing than most that existed in the Riverina, home of the wrinkly merino. Therefore most of these unofficial duels took place in Victoria. C. D. Mooney, contractor, employed a large number of shearers, some of whom were certainly considered to be as good as any in Australia in the '50's and early 1960's. As a member of these teams through the years, I recall the rivalries which built up between Peter Kelly and Tom Byfield; Ian Laskie and Cecil Bunting. These four were regularly in Mooney's No. 1 Team, and would extend to great efforts just to be ahead, by even one sheep, at the end of the day's count.

I was never one to worry about besting anyone, and invariably turned out well-shorn sheep, shearing by the clock. In the well-run teams of these far-off times, any observer who was present when the 7.30 a.m. bell was rung, would have witnessed a flying start, into the catching area pens, out with the first sheep, and a tearing hurry to stay ahead of the opposition for the rest of the day. For the next two hours it was a contest probably not seen anywhere else in the world, as regarding a mix of sheer hard work and skill. Every well run team in the time of which I refer to, had a shearers' representative, known as the "rep." This was one of the shearers who was elected by popular vote by his contemporary workers, and whose duties were mainly to speak on behalf of the shearers and shedhands if and when issues were in dispute between the owners and employees. Many times have I been voted into that position, mainly because I had a rational outlook and approach to any situation which may arise, as also my ability to present the facts in any contentious issue. There was usually very little friction in most sheds, though I was never slow to act if the occasion arose.

In that era there was a small number of well travelled shearers who believed they were “shearing royalty.” They would regularly travel inter-state to the big sheds to add to their reputation of “ringing” the shed. Near the end of 1961, after a hard season in the Riverina, we had “gone south” to one of the larger properties in Victoria’s western district. This was a ten-stand shed where I had shorn in the previous three seasons. Also amongst those engaged for that shed was one Ewen McBeth, all the way from Queensland. His people were farmers on the Darling Downs and they were third generation Australians who had left Scotland in the early 1840’s (The ancestors). Ewen had made a name for himself as a top shearer. He also had a fair touch of arrogance, and looked down on roustabouts and other shed workers as second class citizens. I did not know him prior to his coming to this shed, though I soon became aware of his macho outlook. After our meeting and appointment of a “rep,” in this case yours truly, we drew from a hat to decide which stand of the ten we were working from for the duration of the shed. Although I was second last to make my draw, I drew No. 1, and as we dispersed to our respective stands, McBeth complained to the boss of the board that he should have No. 1 as he would be the fastest shearer. That’s how they did things where he came from, he pointed out. I assured him I was retaining my stand, at which point he challenged me to a first run match race, the winner to have No. 1 for the rest of the shed.

We were all set for a ten o’clock start, first run ending 12 noon. The starting bell saw all ten shearers into action as if their lives depended on it. The roustabouts were the busiest they would ever be, until the pace settled down a bit. Some were having small bets among themselves as to who would prevail. I actually was first off and onto my second sheep before McBeth finished his. I knew that I had my work cut out to keep such a cracking pace for the full run, but was quietly confident I could do so. Right on 11 o’clock I changed to a fresh comb and cutter, they would see me through the next hour. Nearing 12 noon I knew that I was well ahead, and just a few seconds before the “cut-off bell,” took my last sheep for the run. It was lunch-time, and while we were in the mess-room having lunch, our expert, as usual counted out the shorn sheep, and posted the numbers opposite each shearer’s name and stand number. All were eager to see the result of the “match-race” challenge. It was posted up for all to see:

- 1 — J. FERGUSON 57;
- 2 — E. McBETH 52.

These were the top numbers, the rest of the crew varied from 40-48 McBeth stayed till we finished about 2½ weeks on, but never came back in later seasons. His arrogant outlook had diminished from the time the tallies were posted at the end of that fateful run. In the succeeded days we had conversations about our respective ancestors. His ancestors were victims of the Highland Clearances, though they prospered after coming here. A family trait was that they had retained their love of piping and pipe bands.



Ballarat, May, 1908

Dear Betty and Jimmy,

Having been very busy these last few weeks working on my exhibits at Lake Goldsmith, fencing out at brother-in-law Ken's place at Waubra, and a few more small diversions, I was rather unaware of the passing of time. Only on reflection the other day did I realise that in three months' time I will be over there, all going well. Looking forward to that time we (or rather, Betty) have been quietly organising and doing what has to be done before embarking on such a trip. We are very interested to hear how your journey to Egypt went. No doubt you both had a few "eye-openers" about how the other half live. I remember calling in to Port Said en route to Australia early 1953. At that time Brits were most un-welcome, the dispute over the operation of the Suez Canal was in its early stages, and actually lasted for several years before resolution.

A day or two after we arrive in Edinburgh is the occasion of Roddy's 80th birthday. I think most of the family will be there for the occasion. To-day is Tina's birthday, and although she doesn't know yet, we are taking her and Andy out on Saturday evening to mark the occasion. Working for Ballarat University, she has only a few minutes' drive to work—Andy has a ten minute journey to reach his work-place in Sebastopol, in the opposite direction.

The season here is late autumn, winter begins 1st June. We have light frosts followed by sunny days, not much good for the man on the land, hopefully it will turn around soon. Only four years ago we cruised on the lake in a paddle-wheeler, hard to believe now, but such is life.

Regards from John and Betty Ferguson.

## **WATER PROBLEMS**

### **(Mainly Scarcity)**

As we head toward the end of another dry autumn, there is great speculation in this, and other locations around Australia, as to whether it will ever rain again, at least in our life-time. All of the lakes have long since gone dry, even Ballarat's once plentiful water supply, Central Highlands Reservoir, was reportedly down to 7% of capacity as of last week. A few light showers are the total from the last two years, nothing of note to run into the reservoirs. In this district, known as the "potato capital" of Victoria, only huge reservoirs of underground water has kept the key industry afloat. This water has accumulated over many millions of years, but in the long run, will certainly not be an endless resource, as some may look at it in that light. For those farmers depending on water for stock, situated in the northern areas of the state, it's been an almighty struggle for a long time. One bright spot in their lives is that the Wimmera-Mallee pipeline will be operational in early June, with water supply coming from the Murray River. Another project to try to "drought-proof" Victoria is a proposed desalination plant costing billions of dollars. This will be built just off the coast of Mornington, east of Melbourne, to a pattern of an existing plant off Dubia. The popular view, and the opinion of the "main in the street" is, "if it works for them, it should work for us."

## LAKE GOLDSMITH STEAM RALLY

During Saturday and Sunday just past, our bi-annual rally was held at its location near Beaufort, about 40 kms. from here. Originally, this was mainly a steam rally, though now it has expanded into all branches of vintage machinery. The steam engines, which number between twenty to thirty, make a strong impression when they take part in the Grand Parade. Large numbers of vintage tractors also take part, the largest contingent is always the Ferguson, mainly consisting of those manufactured in England by the Standard Motor Company between 1946 and 1953. In that year two companies, Ferguson and Massey-Harris of Canada merged into Massey Ferguson. This merger was hugely successful, and instantly a world-class competitor in the agricultural field, as it remains today. A good selection of the famous Farmall from America is always represented here. A strong Larry Bulldog following in days gone by has resulted in many well-restored examples of the make still to the fore. Old Fordsons are quite numerous and popular, they were easier to work on than any other make. Apart from the tractors, there is a huge number of stationary engines always on show, possibly 200 or more, varying in size from about two horse power up to ten or more. Leading up to last week-end, I had decided to take part in the display section.

To this end I'd done quite a lot of preparation. Firstly by undercoating, then gloss finishing two boards of 4' by 20''. On one board I had wired on my best ten Lister hand-pieces in order of their respective age and model. For the casual observer many models have a similar appearance, so this meant that the year and model description was clearly marked to its relative era. On my second board, the same procedure was followed, wiring my best ten of the famous Cooper and Sunbeam models, which ranged in age from about 1935 (Cooper) to 1980 Sunbeam Supergrip. Sunbeam Corporation took over Cooper in 1955, and kept Cooper's high standard intact. Even older models were in my Lister collection, one about 1890. Other Listers shown included one from 1905, one 1910, one 1914, another was the famous Lister ace, also the first wide-comb model. Surprisingly, no one has ever before shown an exhibit consisting of hand-pieces, and I was amazed at the interest shown by the public. Old time shearers, young and old farmers, and a wide selection of general public were among those interested. All of those machines were brought back to working order by myself, one had not run since 1922. Already I am working on a display to show early in November, which I hope will include a Wolseley. At present I have more than thirty, mostly Sunbeams, awaiting restoration.



## Headlines from THE COURIER

Ballarat, April 30, 2008



### CHANGES:

What a difference four years make. These two photographs show how Lake Wendouree has changed from 2004, left, to to-day



# Time for action

earth matters

By Angela Carey  
editor of The Courier

NOW more than ever, Ballarat must act on climate change.

We cannot ignore the science. Climate change is real and we are now experiencing a period of

accelerated global warming — and human activity is contributing to the rate of change.

With global warming comes the consequences of changes to weather patterns, biodiversity and ocean levels, to name but a few.

But we needn't despair. Just as humans have adapted to climatic and environmental change in millennia gone by, we can manage the impact of global warming. We just need commitment.

Continued page 5  
More stories pages 4-6

**TIME FOR CHANGE:** With water levels at regional storages down to below eight per cent, the time has come for Ballarat residents to take action  
Picture: Damien O'Brien

## **WORKMATES I HAVE KNOWN (And Others)**

As the years roll by, I find myself quite often thinking of the days now long gone, since we left Hall Farm in 1941. Mainly due to the nature of my employment in that period of time (1941-1971), I had occasion to work with literally hundreds of people. As a very young operator in the D.O.A.S. Depot in Lanark, I had to learn quickly that you had to be your own man, disregarding influences from others in the workforce who could tend to lead younger workers astray. From my earliest days I had a strong work ethic, mainly because of the fact that I had certain jobs to do every day, both before and after school. I would never understand the reasoning of people who shirked their work, or who put in less than solid effort in their allotted tasks. The best advice I ever received from anyone, as far as work was concerned, came from Jock McEwen, who was field foreman at the D.O.A.S for all of the years I was there. Short and to the point, "Keep your tractor going right, get your plough furrows exact, keep a good straight line and you won't go far wrong." Sound advice from an ex-tractor operator who was promoted from the workforce to foreman in only his second year in the job. I always appreciated Jock's advice, and applied these standards, plus a few of my own over the years.

Fast forward to a fine late spring morning in 1948. By this time I was up with the more experienced personnel in D.O.A.S. workforce, and had been on the hill-draining scheme for some time. We had completed a successful result on a marshy place near Fauldhouse, another at Auchengray. On this occasion our equipment, including Caterpillar, draining plough, fuel trailer, etc., had been transported by low loader to a place situated in the hills near Coulter. I had put in time the previous day getting set up for an early start, something I always aimed for, wherever possible. At that stage there was a requirement for a Department of Agriculture overseer to be present whenever the drainer was in action, to direct the course, depth, etc., of the drain plough. I had been used to a regular employee of the Department at our previous jobs, though he had been transferred to a different job just days before. Consequently, I had orders not to start until a replacement came, and he was on his way. The owner of the property was "away," but would return by the end of the week. I had been there, ready to start, by 7 a.m., as always our regular start time, when on this type of work. I had parked my Triumph near the trailer, and was looking forward to a fine day to get a good start. As time went by 8 o'clock came and went. Now it was nearly 9 a.m. when I spotted a car leaving the homestead almost a mile away. There were two gates to open and close on the way to our site. Eventually a battered old Rover swung out and around the equipment, coming to a halt, with a few backfires and a cloud of blue smoke swirling in the breeze. Out stepped a thin wizened character, cursing and complaining, mostly about the gates, but also the Department for sending him here. They'd get a piece of his mind next time he was in Head Office. He had stayed at a hotel in Biggar the previous night, and might even run in for a "nobbler" later in the day. Before we even got a start I had to listen to his woes. He had a bad night at the "dugs" at Carntyne, but would catch up at Hamilton races next Saturday. No wonder he had a cough, smoking Full Strength Capstan one after the other would make an alligator cough. Eventually we got going, and I must say he went better than I had expected. After four days we had just one junction to



make to complete the job, and I put in an extra hour to finish on Friday night. Alf was delighted, he would get to the races on Saturday. He would also be in line to receive extra petrol coupons, and the Department were paying for his hotel stay. I never saw him again, though I remember him as one of the "odd" workmates in my early days.

## **A TEAM EFFORT NEAR GOODOOGA**

Some time before I built a regular full-time shearing run, I found myself working in a mixed shearing team at Brenda Station about twenty miles from Goodooga. This property had once been part of the old Galway Station, which in its heyday totalled more than a million acres. The contractor was a man named Kelly, who hailed from Hebel, a small remote settlement close to the Queensland border. After a few days busily engaged in rounding up a team, mainly from Walgett, Pat Kelly and his team headed for Brenda, where we found the station owner and his workers well prepared for a next day start, a Tuesday. The workers' huts were clean, a rare occurrence in remote areas of N.S.W. in those days. The cookhouse was also clean and tidy. This was a six-stand shed which had recently been updated with new Lister machinery. The shearers were a mixed lot. Four came from Walgett, some of them had shorn with Kelly before. There was myself, a real "itinerant" shearer back in those days. The remaining shearer was a big Maori who was a native of Auckland. It was quite a rarity to see New Zealanders over here in those days. This one was a man mountain, and I estimated his weight at about sixteen stone. The rest of the team consisted of two wool-rollers, a presser, three rouseabouts, classer, and of course Kelly himself, who was boss of the board as well as "expert," in charge of sharpening combs and cutters. After a day or so, everything was going well, and despite the very hot weather and the big wrinkly sheep, we seemed to be heading for an early "cut-out." One of the Walgett shearers, who we had voted as our "rep," and myself, were heading the tally board. A few complaints had started to come to the rep regarding the Maori, who was on No. 6 stand, close to double doors which were kept open to reduce the awful heat. Apparently, at the end of every run, the Maori would, without fail, pick up the rouseabouts' drink bottle, which they kept near the door, and gulped the contents, leaving the lads without a drink until they could find a refill. Kelly knew what was taking place, but wasn't game to do anything about it. Our rep was a hard working family man, obviously no match for any nasty confrontations. Finally, during a meeting (without the Maori) I pointed out to the others that there was more than one way of tackling the problem. The presser was the one who finally came up with a possible solution. The plan was put in place to coincide with the last run on Friday, the end of the working week. As soon as the finish bell rang at 5.30, the Maori finished off his last sheep, laid down his handpiece and made a beeline for the rousies' bottle which just happened to be larger than any of the previous models. As the contents of the bottle rapidly lessened, a look of stunned surprise took over on the big bloke's face. The raucous laughter from the rousies' ranks confirmed he had made a huge error of judgement. With a disgusted look around, he headed for his hut, not to be seen by anyone till late the following day. The rousies had won some sort of a victory to which all of them had contributed!

## THE CONCLUSION

6 Park Street,  
Ballarat West,  
Australia

22nd January, 2007

Dear Jimmy,

Thank you for letter received a few days ago; also thanks for Christmas Card depicting frost and snow, now a distant memory to me. As the first month of the year races to its close, a change in the weather pattern has extinguished all but one of the 19 bush fires which were burning strongly two days ago. Much of Victoria has welcomed almost 50 mm of rain, which came in a 24-hour period. Many of our fire fighters were becoming very weary and exhausted when the heavy down-pours came on Fri.-Sat., some lasted until early to-day. Apart from the fire menace easing, most farmers received enough water to at least partly fill their stock dams, and hopefully to set up soil moisture for 07 seeding season, about April-May.

It's now closing on 55 years since I left over there, and on looking back I sometimes reflect on the times and conditions of the 50's and 60's. How times have vastly changed in Australia, which currently has a shortage of skilled workers. This situation has evolved through the world-wide demand for base materials—iron ore, copper, nickel. etc. The mining industry has never been so busy, consequently very high wages are offered to workers competent enough to maintain high production. One side effect is that many skilled workers, the bulk of them from Victoria, have sold up and taken themselves and families to West Australia, Queensland, and Northern Territory, where the big mining concerns are. Now employers in other industries, manufacturing, etc., find it near impossible to hold on to their work forces. Probably this state of affairs will last as long as China, Japan, South Korea, and others create an insatiable demand for raw materials. China has got in early as far as uranium supplies go, they are already the bench-mark regarding just about any type of manufacturing. The old days when the West, and I speak collectively here, Britain, U.S., Germany, and France, looked down on the Chinese people as being unable to run their own economy, or to ever have any influence in world affairs, are long gone.

Australia Day is fast approaching, the actual date being January 26th. This date vies with Anzac Day as the national day to be celebrated by all Australians, a day which marks the anniversary of the founding of the penal colony of Port Jackson, later to be named Sydney. Really, this was the bare settlement of a country which was founded mainly on personnel from English prisons from the 1870's. The English Government was pleased to organise a one-way passage for hundreds of prisoners who were, at that time, overloading their resources. A simple solution, in one word, transportation. Anzac Day commemorates the landing of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps on Gallipoli on 25th April, 1915.

I will be pleased should you compile my memoirs in book form. They comprise my early years here, and I hope that some idea of the times and trials of a migrant gives anyone interested an insight into which was a completely different

society. I also hope to continue to send anecdotal material occasionally, as I believe many of your readers still are interested in events happening in this outlying part of the world.

Regarding your enclosed photograph, I do not recognise the homestead. These days I spend a lot of time adding to my collection of old shearing handpieces. Pride of place goes to my 1910 Lister No. 3. I've got Coopers, Sunbeams, Listers; all told about 25, most of them repaired and restored by myself.

JOHN FERGUSON

Ballarat West, Victoria, Australia.

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Ballarat, 6th March, 2007

Dear Jimmy,

Greetings to you and Betty from all of us at Ballarat. These last three weeks have just flown since Helen and Roddy landed in Melbourne. A lot of sight-seeing trips have been fitted in, many reminiscences have been gone over in a short time which comes to and end when they fly out from Melbourne on 12th March. Tomorrow we are taking them to Hall's Gap, which is in the Grampians, a smaller replica of the Scottish one.

I was very pleased to receive, via Helen, a copy of "The Ha' to Wanganella." A neat, well-put together publication. Thank you for attention to detail, and trust that many others are interested.

A major setback has befallen most areas of Australia in this long drought. How we would welcome just a few of your wet days to happen here. Oddly enough, almost daily, they have downpours and thunderstorms in the tropics of north Queensland, where a dry spell would be welcome, making banana harvesting easier.

As we are now officially into Autumn (commencing March), everyone here is hopeful of a break in the drought pattern. Failing this, the immediate future is grim, especially for farmers. Irrigation quotas are low enough now in these areas that are thus catered for. Outside these areas the results are unthinkable. All we can hope for is an early break.

Regards from

JOHN FERGUSON.

## John Ferguson Memoirs

# Reflections . . . Past and Present

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## EARLY SETTLERS IN VICTORIA AND THEIR LEGACY

The State of Victoria was not a separate entity of the Australian mainland until almost the exact midway year of the 19th century. The present day boundaries of this State were once lumped into New South Wales, which began its existence as a penal colony around Port Jackson, now Sydney. There were also penal colonies in Tasmania, notably around Hobart. Free settlers from mainly England and Scotland had come in a steady stream from early 1800's. Early on the settlers realised that woolgrowing was the basis of a most profitable trade with the English mills. Around the late 1830's the best of Tasmania's land had been occupied and settled, causing a shortage of land for future expansion. At about that time a group of graziers and sailing ship owners formed a company known as Clyde Co. Shortly after the founding of Melbourne, the earliest Governments consisted of wealthy men who were in a position to give land grants of many thousands of acres to relatives, friends, and anyone who was prepared to risk large sums of money in the business of setting up "sheep runs" on a massive scale. The earliest sheep owners who took up these runs soon stocked their runs with sheep from Tasmania, a few from north of the Murray River, and apparently some from Europe. This new class of land owners were described as "squatters," and the term implied that such a person wielded complete control over the personnel employed on his run. Convicts from Tasmania and Sydney, known as ticket-of-leave men were the main labour force which provided the shepherds and other workers required in the early days. Gradually the population of the future Victoria became established in Melbourne, where there were few other settlements of note. As most of the settlers on the new big runs began to build dwellings on their properties, a severe shortage of skilled tradesmen became obvious. The only way to overcome this drawback was to import skilled workmen from Europe, and many Scottish stonemasons left their native land to take up the opportunity of a new promising life in Australia. Mansions were built in spacious surrounds, some were designed along the lines of the English grand houses, to remind some of "home," as they referred to England, even after a generation here.

After a long run of prosperous years a new hazard presented itself to the now well established squatter society. Gold was discovered in large quantities in several areas of what had now become the State of Victoria. The small settlement of Buningong brought the first big rush. Within weeks an even larger rush was the result of a lucrative strike at Golden Point, almost the centre of present day Ballarat. In central Victoria another strike brought thousands in to dig in the area now occupied by the city of Bendigo. These two main areas had a sudden population explosion, there was no other word to describe how thousands of people descended on hitherto quiet rural areas. Tent cities sprang up, and all sorts of "humpies" became home. "Gold Fever" was evident even among the well established in Melbourne. Small businessmen sold out and joined the mad rush to the diggings. A side effect was that most of those who worked on the squatters' runs left, or, as their bosses complained, "absconded." Graziers complained in Parliament that the shortage of workers would ruin them, thus doing the same to the country. The more rational and forward thinking of the gentry had enough sense to realise that rather than a hindrance, a huge positive was the potential sale of vast quantities of mutton, and to a lesser extent, beef, to communities willing and able to pay top prices for same. Thus another phase saw the combination of drovers and butchers in constant demand. The carriers of goods to and from the diggings made a good living, bullock teams were busy on the tracks which passed for roads between Ballarat and Bendigo on the way to Melbourne or Geelong.

In a few years most of the alluvial gold had been taken. This, however did not deter the relentless chase for more gold. Syndicates were formed to pursue the Deep Lead method of mining which

employed many men. Shafts were sunk hundreds of feet deep, the ore was brought to the surface then passed through huge stamping batteries. The rubble was separated into various containers, then washed by streams of water. This last operation left the gold by itself, then easily collected. So great had the demand for gold shares become, eventually the Ballarat Gold Exchange was formed, much like the present day Stock Exchange. The large building still stands today in Central Ballarat, having now become a tourist attraction, testimony of the countless millions of pounds traded in shares over the years. Colonies of people eventually settled down as farmers and storekeepers, labourers, etc, with tradesmen in great demand. Builders, especially stone masons, had resumed their chosen trade, and in the latter half of the 19th century, built the most outstanding examples of edifices in the Southern Hemisphere. In this period most squatters had their mansions built, many existing today.

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## **A GARDENER'S DILEMMA**

Just over fifty years ago I was shearing with one of Chris. Mooney's teams at a property known as Springwood. Situated as it is, bounded on one side by the Warnon River, this was one of the earliest settled stations in the Western District, only about 25 kms. from the city of Hamilton. The area is renowned as a centre producing large quantities of fine merino wool. Indeed, Hamilton residents proudly refer to their city as "The wool capital of the world." Springwood was then owned by Max Mercer, not the most affable character around. He would patrol the shearing boards, eagle eyes on any shearer he thought wasn't up to his standard of workmanship. He had been in the Air Force during the 1940's, and like many of his contemporaries he had grown a "handlebars" moustache. To keep the board boys on their toes he would appear from nowhere, often going into the woolroom to check up on the pressures. At some stage, due to his long moustaches and red hair, he was referred to as "The Red Steer." This title remained with him until the end of his days. At that time there were three permanent employees on the station. One of those was a Dutch migrant whose main job was to tend the large garden; he also looked after fence repairs.

In this particular season he had used his skill to produce a fine display of tulips in the borders which surrounded the large mansion-style house. Using red, yellow and burgundy flowers in alternating order in single file, they certainly made an unusual talking point with people who saw the pleasant scene. About the time the tulips were at their best, the Dutchman came to work to find a large part of the garden well and truly flooded. Tracking down the cause, which meant two garden taps had been turned on and left to run overnight, the gardener suspected that he knew who the culprit was. Max had two schoolboy sons, and the younger one of these, Sandy, delighted in upsetting the gardener. After some interrogation, he admitted to the misdeed, with an "I can do as I like" attitude. A few days passed without incident and everything had quietened down, when an early morning discovery by the gardener just about sent the poor fellow into hysterics. Every tulip had been beheaded, only the stems still stood. The same culprit was responsible and I have no doubt the gardener would have soon removed himself to a more amenable situation. Today, and for quite a while back, Sandy has been the owner of this property. His record of getting along with workers has not improved, some locals have lost count of the number of workers who come and quickly go. Some of the old "squattocracy" would be proud of him. Luckily, they are a disappearing saga.

## ON SWAGMEN AND TRAMPS

Several years ago, driving between Wanganella and Hay, in the Riverina country, I was astonished to see, just ahead of us, a lone walker making quite a smart pace. Forty miles from nowhere, he was obviously not just there for the fun of it. As I drew level, then carefully passed, I took a close look at how the walker was dressed. Even such a fleeting few seconds of time was enough to assure me that this was a "swagman," kitted out with the traditional few belongings that such gentlemen possessed, and obviously treasured. The overcoat was always worn, even on warm days, while a wide brimmed hat was essential as shade for the fierce rays of sunshine present for most of the year. A blanket, tightly made into a roll, usually covered with some waterproof material, made the outside cover of the swag, which was usually suspended over one shoulder by straps or thin ropes for carrying. A few meagre supplies of tea and sugar would occupy the coat pockets, and a blackened billy can would hang from somewhere around the waistline. A strong pair of boots just about completed the gear required by anyone "on the road." In the early days of last century, there was a large number of "itinerants" who were constantly on the move, looking for work of any kind, either on the sheep stations, or where wheat farmers were clearing scrub country for planting. The "Swaggie" was quite different from most of these men, he actually avoided work by arriving at the homestead at sundown, too late in the day to be given any work. He would make his presence known, especially to the station cook, from whom supplies were usually obtained. This habit earned swagmen the title of "sundowners." Usually they would have departed before sunup the next morning, continuing their trek to "nowhere." There were a few swaggies still around in the 50's and 60's, now I am certain they have gone for ever. This one on the Hay road about six years ago, could have been a "one-off."

During the years we resided at the Hall, we would have occasional visits from people known as tramps by the wide cast of everyday folk. At that stage of my life I gave little thought as to what circumstances these people had experienced to bring about their present low status. The depression certainly had hit hard by that time, and there was also the aftermath of the Great War. Even though more than fifteen years had elapsed since the conclusion of that conflict, I strongly believe that what was officially termed as "shell shock" had a lasting effect on its many victims. No doubt some entered post war employment in a mentally fragile state, and when the depression struck, loss of jobs was the last factor to complete their misery. Some must have given up, then taken to the road.

About 1934, we had several callers, later the same faces would appear in late spring till about the end of September. Bobby Tosh used to come alone, walking in from the Strathaven Road. One year he appeared with a female companion, who carried a shoulder tray from which she displayed packs of needles, purns of thread, and quite a selection of coloured ribbons. I can clearly remember our mother providing the pair with a generous "piece" after she had made a few small purchases. Another who occasionally called was "Sorn Danny," who spent the winter in that village. He could step out quite smartly and always seemed to have his toes visible where the uppers had worn away. I can recall the time when two gypsy women called. They were selling artificial flowers, which looked like carnations. Their caravan had dropped them off at the Forkings, they called at Middlefield, Hall and Laigh Hall, then rejoined their caravan at Burnfoot bridge. That was their story, so I suppose that was true. "Wilf" was one who came our way only about once a year, we last saw him in 1940, just after the evacuation of our forces from Dunkirk. Believed to have been on the Western Front most of 1915-1918, he would sometimes mention the Somme was his worst "experience." Anyone who survived that conflict could scarcely be criticised for being a "bit different." A few used their skills to make a small income. A saw sharpener from Muirkirk kept our saws in top condition, another from the same trade came from Cumnock, but we favoured the local. Both had houses and

families. Another occupation of those times was the travelling shear-sharpener. Going home from school one day I was half-way up Glasgow Road when I spotted a one-man operated machine sending out showers of sparks while the operator pedalled a drive to a fast spinning carborundum cone. His mate walked up and down the road shouting "shears to grind" in a penetrating voice which seemed to have drawn plenty of attention. A line-up of at least half a dozen women awaited their turn, carrying an assortment of shears. Business was apparently brisk. At an earlier time, even before I had begun my schooldays, there used to be a tall thin character known as "Paraffin Johnny," who used to bring his old truck around the countryside. He had the truck kitted out with containers which looked like milk cans with taps from which he filled his measures. His customers were wary of his habit of lighting up his cigarettes with a lighter. His waistcoat was always covered with burn holes from the lighter sparks. Careless or just lucky, we never heard of him catch fire.

### **A MATTER OF SOME URGENCY**

Just over fifty years ago I had taken on the job of crutching about 10,000 merinos at Benanee Station. This place is situated about 45 miles from Mildura, a large irrigation area on the Murray River. The station is quite isolated as it's well off the main road from Robinvale, another large fruit growing district on the same river. At that time the owners were Jack and Mrs Gill, who were on the top side of being middle-aged. They ran the station with the aid of one worker. The main shearing was done by a Mildura contractor, using the four-stand shearing shed. This time Jack had decided that only two would be employed, so that the musterers could keep the sheep up to the shearers. At any rate, that particular contractor had more lucrative jobs in mind just then, and a lot of his shearers did not like crutching. I had managed to secure a second shearer (part of the bargain) on a short term basis. At this time Jack, like many others, was in the process of changing from Spring to Autumn shearing, and only required half his flock attended to by us. We were in line to finish on Thursday, and enjoying afternoon "smoko," when Alan, a.k.a. Porky, dropped a bombshell. This was Wednesday afternoon, and he casually told me he had been invited to a wedding, his own, as it turned out. More importantly, the ceremony was to take place in Mildura at 7 p.m. that evening. Rather hurriedly, I passed on the glad tidings to Jack and Bell. Just as well both of them had a strong sense of humour, and we started planning the best way of sorting out the crisis. Jack pointed out the fact that even without Porky, I would easily finish Friday afternoon. Porky received his cheque for work done, I called it off for the day and prepared to drive the bridegroom up to Mildura. This was on a rough gravel road, where the corrugations were rather large, making it a slow journey. Jack had offered me the station Landrover to make the trip, however I used my own Ford Utility with Porky as passenger. He had a large brown paper parcel which, he explained, contained his blue suit, socks, shoes and tie and plastic flower for a button-hole. His preparations seemed complete. We reached Mildura shortly after 6 p.m., where we located most of the bridal party at one of the hotels. He booked himself in and had enough time to shower and dress before the ceremony. The bride was nowhere to be seen, she was "resting." Next stop was the Catholic Church. As I stopped there I slipped him a few pounds as a wedding present, then the old priest came out to greet him. Making myself scarce, I headed back to Benanee where I managed to finish the job mid-afternoon Friday. It was a win all round. Jack appreciated a good job done, Bell had many a laugh at the situation, and I had still finished in good time. On Sunday night I was again crossing the Murray, stopping at Porky's father's place at Euston to pick him up on the way to Ossie Grayson's Tammill station. I had teed up two weeks' work on his place. As we drove along in the moonlight Alan brought me up to speed. The wedding had gone off well, everyone was happy, and there was a party at Euston the following Saturday night, to which I was cordially invited. Quizzing the reason for the party, I could sense the pride in his voice as he informed me, "We got a baby." Apparently this happy occasion was on the Saturday.



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## REMITTANCE MEN — AN AUSTRALIA - ENGLAND ANOMALY

I had been resident in Australia for some time when I first heard the term "remits." It was used by a cocky Mallee farmer to describe the efforts of an ageing worker, who was obviously past the first bloom of youth. At that time I was working for Pat Ryan, carting sewn bags of barley to the railway at Chinkapook. The silo operator organised the loading of the 16-ton capacity railway trucks. As the farmers' trucks came into the yard, they would sometimes have to wait until the earlier truck was emptied, then reverse close to the railway truck when the bags were manually loaded and stacked, then tarped before being joined up for a train to Melbourne, sometimes forty trucks. To keep the work going at a good pace the yard operator had hired an extra hand to assist in the "lumping" (carrying) part of the loading. I had started to unload when I noticed the lumper was making heavy work of his task, I reckoned too old for a start. At my suggestion, I had him change places with me if only to give him something of a spell. Ending off was a much easier job for him, and I soon had the 60 bag load stowed in the railway truck, part of another 16-ton load. In those days I could handle barley bags easily, also the much heavier wheat bags. After unloading, I was moving out to give space for the next truck to move into position. As I did so, the owner-driver saw fit to give me a lecture about helping "remits" at any time, and that they showed be kept in their lowly and subservient place. This harangue from a 20-year-old who had never been anywhere other than his immediate district. Big and beefy, he was used to having his own opinions listened to and acted upon. By this time three others from the waiting truck drivers had drifted up to listen to their hero. After having giving him about half a minute in which to deliver his rebuke, I flatly told him to mind his own bloody business. The small crowd of truckies seemed a bit taken aback by the fact that anyone would address such an important member of the community in such a manner. Not then, nor at any other time, have I backed down from a confrontation. As the shock showed on the big boy's face, I slipped the Chevrolet into gear and drove off. I had work to do, another load to bring in.

In the latter years of the 19th century and up to about 1914, a new small class of people were appearing in the more remote areas of Australia. These were "remittance men," who all had one common factor identifying them. Their families had made the decision to send them on a "holiday" to the "Colonies," preferably one lasting a life-time. Some had come through the courts in Britain, and the removal permanently from the family circle was considered an easy solution to avoid embarrassment. When the Mallee was opened up after 1920, many of these men, mainly from the top half of society, were quietly transported to Australia. To keep them there, arrangement was made that a "remittance" was collectable at whatever Post Office. Even into the 1950's there was still a number of these long-term guests in the less populated areas of Australia. Some lived alone in humpies, some looked for casual employment on the sheep stations, a few became rabbit trappers. A few became swagmen, and a guarantee of a pick up remittance every month must have made up somewhat for becoming isolated from their previous life-style. Most, if not all of those who came to these shores will have long

row. There seemed to be always an air of sadness and resignation surrounding the few "remits" that I came in contact with. Just another small chapter in Australian history, they left little imprint.

## **FEBRUARY BUSH FIRES LIVES LOST AND A SAD AFTERMATH**

February 7, 2009, dawned in Victoria as a blustery morning, and those listening to the early weather forecasts felt a sense of foreboding regarding the message contained. It was much more of a warning than the standard everyday utterance to which we had become accustomed. In the previous week the state had sweltered in several days of 45 degrees C heat, high winds of up to 90 kms per hour wind gusts and a fire danger approaching 100 per cent. As early as 9 a.m. the mercury had registered 38 deg C, and still rising fast. At about that time there was a marked wind change, now seen to be coming from the north, directly from central Australia. During the previous day our fire fighting force had controlled a large blaze at Whittlesea, an outlying northern suburb of Melbourne. Suddenly this fire was out of control, racing straight for Kinglake and several smaller settlements adjacent to that area. Around mid-day the fire went through hilly country taking everything in its path, no fire fighters in the world would have a hope of stopping fireballs, driven by the wild wind, outstripped cars fleeing on the roads. People were incinerated as their cars crashed, and at one scene, five cars had crashed within a few metres, all with victims trapped inside. Those fleeing by car had to contend with a dense wall of smoke, which caused almost zero visibility. Later in the afternoon the township of Marysville was hit by a holocaust, burning about 90% of the buildings, killing many people. This fire was suspected to have been deliberately lit by a "firebug." As the Government, the general public, and the survivors of this tragic event take stock, it is realised that the rebuilding about 160 houses is a core job that can be tackled and eventually completed. It is a much harder task for families of the 210 victims to come to terms with their sad loss.

## **EASTER, 2009**

The "Easter Spell" has come and gone, and the good citizens of Australia now settle down to their normal pursuits, mainly back to school or work commitments. When first I came to the Mallee all those years ago, I became aware of the importance of the Easter break in the calendar of events in the social order of most members of the community. Firstly, the Church groups renewed their efforts to keep us mere mortals on the straight and narrow path to eventual salvation. No doubt a worthy cause, though the average young Australian had more pressing goals at that time of the year. These events were the finals of the cricket and tennis associations, and, even more important, the beginning of the football season. Almost every League in Victoria had Easter Saturday as their starting date, and Church-going was mainly limited to Good Friday. The highlight of sport in Australia every Easter Monday is the final of the sprint footrace known as the Stawell Gift. This race began as the highlight of the mainly miners' foot

race meetings in Stawell, a small city some seventy kms. from Ballarat, about 130 years ago. Today, and for a long time now, it has been recognised as the most prestigious sprint race held in the southern hemisphere. Some of America's best sprinters have competed in this race. Scots have taken part, a New Zealander won in recent years. Why would it not be a draw card, with this year's prize-money \$20,000 dollars.

The last few weeks have consisted of a weather mixture. From pleasant days of around 25c to dull days with a light drizzle, not nearly enough to improve the low levels at present in the reservoirs. Most of the wheat growing areas have already sown their crops, more in hope than conviction that the drought will finally give way to a decent season. Floods in Queensland decimated much of that State's banana and pineapple industry. The general flooding also allowed many crocodiles to leave their usual confines and wander overland in search of new territory. This is a new hazard and already several people have become victims of these predators. These things have been fully protected in the last fifty years, now their numbers are in pest proportions. Once upon a time crocodile shooters made a decent income from the industry, also skin tanners from the fashion industry.

### **ON RODEOS — IS THIS CRUELTY?**

Returning to Ballarat from a day out, we happened to bypass a place which figured prominently in the State news on several occasions in recent times. The occasion which had brought about such fierce conflict between the "for" and "against" factions concerning rodeos. More to the point was the fact that a section of the public were intent on having all such events permanently banned. To this end, there had been an ugly clash between the two warring points of view, with police much involved in allowing the event to proceed. There are many rodeos held in Australia, most are in Queensland and Northern Territory, where the large cattle stations are situated. Some contestants even make the trip from United States, Canada, Argentina and elsewhere, so one must believe that the prize-money is, at least, substantial. The wild bull riding is the prime event in most of these contests. A few stations provide bulls which qualify for their time on this circuit by being mean and vicious. The most successful bulls appear to be mainly Brahmans or Short-horns, though the occasional Hereford sometimes takes to the arena. Some years ago a Brahman named "Chainsaw" had attained his eighth birthday without anyone staying on him for eight seconds (the required qualifying time for prize-money).

On a more modest scale, I clearly remember an Ayrshire bull which came to the Hall in the summer of 1938. Our father had purchased this two months' old bull calf, his choice of two which Mr Foster of Kames was selling. He came with a pedigree as long as your arm, his dam was a Lessnessock bred cow, his sire from a place near Maybole. Right from the beginning this animal showed that he had a mind of his own. He could jump any fence, which meant that he was most often kept in part of the old stone-built mill ring, or sometimes tied in a stall in the byre. On the occasions that he had to be out, the only way to get him back inside was to set old Sweep, our bearded collie, onto him. He would have trampled or

gored anyone foolish enough to get in front of him. One fine day in summer of 1940 we had a new John Wallace mower all set up to begin mowing in a few days' time. The engineer from Lanark's Ladyacre works had supervised putting the machine together, ready for action. On this occasion, the bull was out, he had no intention of returning to the byre, despite the efforts of old Sweep. Suddenly he spotted the mower, and decided to attack it right away. From a safe distance we watched him move it around, then somehow he tangled his horns in the wheel spokes, and with a mighty heave pushed it over on to the cutter bar. Seeming to lose interest, he quietened down and Sweep went into action again, we once more had him under control. The damage to the machine was a cracked casting which held the draw pole and a bent lever. Only a short time later he went to Lanark Market. I remember young Tom Rowe having two assistants to get him on the cattle float. He always looked a mean type. Once he was grown, he resembled the Spanish fighting bulls that we now see on TV newsreels. Alex. Semple, on a visit one day, made a prophetic statement, "Aye, Tam, ye'll no have to go far to get some bother with that yin!" How right he was.

## **RESURRECTING THE OLD FORDSON**

Many years ago, pre 1960 in fact, I happened to be shearing at a soldier settlers' property in the Corrowa district of N.S.W. This job was a good fill-in between two contract sheds which were not continued one after the other. The two weeks down time meant that shearers going to the second shed took this as down time, unavoidable, but a spell from the continual hard grind. But not for me, that attitude, instead I was into the local stock and station agents', who at once put me in touch with one of their clients down near the Murray River. This settlement required only one shearer, as he classed the wool himself, and only employed one shed hand. There were 1,200 merino wethers to be shorn, the owner paid above award rates which were then about £8 per hundred. Apparently, he had difficulty finding shearers who would take on these big merinos, hence the extra incentive. The quarters were good, my utility even in a shed under cover, something new for it, usually parked in the open, one year's end to the next. The owner had been a prisoner-of-war since the fall of Singapore. He came through horrendous cruelties and privation while working on the Burma Railway. Only a fraction of the Australian prisoners survived, Reg. was one of the few. After repatriation at War's end he applied for and was successful in obtaining the right to a soldier settlers' block in about 1938. Since that time he had made a success of the venture, mainly wheat and wool growing. His wife was a capable person, a first-class cook, and when time permitted, also swept up in the shearing shed. Once I had completed two days work, I estimated that with favourable weather I would finish the job in good time to start the second contract shed. Reg was the owner of two tractors which graced his machinery shed, adjacent to the shearing shed. One was an International rowcrop, and did most of the lighter work. The other was a Fordson N Model which he had bought at a clearing sale two years before, mainly to do the heavier jobs, like scarifying and ploughing. The tractor had worked OK for a while, but had become difficult to start, and mis-fired a lot while working. After it had kicked back the starting handle and broken a man's wrist, it was relegated

to the back of the shed, where it stood half covered with old empty superphosphate bags. It had been out of action for some months. The local Ford agents had quoted an unrealistic price to come out to fix the problem, so Reg had put off the day when he would tackle the job. After I'd heard his tale of woe, I quietly asked to have a look at the tractor, as I thought I knew what was amiss with it. After work one night, we unearthed it from the super bags, and put some petrol in the start tank. Carefully bringing up the starting handle a couple of times, I found that what I suspected proved correct—it was badly off the timing. Not to worry, to me this was comparatively simple to correct. In my days with the D.O.A.S I had done this more than once, the last time while ploughing on the lower slopes of Tinto in 1947. That was a day to remember, with rain and hail driven by a high wind. This was different, under cover, and with my own tools to hand, inside half an hour I had done the adjustments and started up. The engine fired and ran as it was designed to. Once it had warmed up, I switched it over to kerosene, its working fuel. There it was, all ready for work, like all the old Fordsons of its day. They were the backbone of the "War effort" food production drive during World War 2. I was lucky with good dry weather, finishing midday on the tenth working day. Reg had completed a wool classing course at Albury some time before, and for the first time had used this skill on his own behalf. The wool pressing was done by a part-timer from Corrowa. I departed there on Saturday morning, having farewelled the owner and wife. As I drove down the track leading to the main road, the Fordson was back at work with the scarifier, sounding like it meant business.

## **GOOD OLD DAYS REMEMBERED**

Back in 1992 Betty and I were about one week into a month long visit to Scotland. It was early August and we were enjoying a nice dry spell weatherwise. We were based in Edinburgh and on this occasion had been taken on a car trip by a family friend who liked driving and taking visitors on quite long tours. Leaving Edinburgh our route took us down the Langwhang, a road I was quite used to travelling away back in the 40's. As we neared Tarbrax the huge old mine dump from the long gone shale workings stood out on the horizon. I was back on old familiar territory, and after a short detour through Woolfords we headed for Carn wath. Just before we came to Auchengray our driver, David, announced he was making a stop at the hotel there, just for a "wee refresher." We duly visited this establishment, which I noted had expanded with a beer garden some time since I last came that way, all these years ago. I used to pass there on my motor bike every working day. David was a convivial fellow and was soon in conversation with a few locals. I was never at ease in pubs, and after a decent spell I excused myself to have a look at the scenery. From outside the hotel there is a very fine view across the valley over the Dipool River. The evening sun showed up the countryside on the other bank at its very best. Taking my bearings from the Pool Farm I could see Bob Orr's place not far from there. Higher up, bordering Pool, Mountainblow was a place where once I had operated the hill drainer, the year the war finished. Further along, on the way to Braehead and Forth, Kilnpothall could be seen. This was a place which changed hands in 1947 when people named Sellars bought it. I was ploughing there the day Sellars took over, and he came

down to see if the tractorman was making a good job. Must have passed muster as he had measured my ploughing depth, how wide the furrows were, and how straight I was holding, before stopping me at one end. Without introducing himself, he informed me that I was doing a "fair job," but tractor ploughing "wasn't nearly as good as the horses," and that next year he would be using that method. I was back there harvesting in September, and the shoulder high oat crop had not suffered from tractor ploughing. The Pool at that time belonged to the Hamilton family. Harvesting there was an annual event for me, also Bob Orr's further up the river. On the way down past Tarbrax we had passed Lawhead, where I had ploughed some stony ground for Alex. Gibson. Near Auchengray lay another place I had harvested on, Campbells of Kings Inns, also Willie Dick's just out of Auchengray. Eventually we were en route to Carnwath, passing on the way "The Calla," John Strang's place, where I had ploughed and harvested more than once. Nearing Carnwath we passed the entry to Kersewell Estate. This was where I had ploughed for the first time with the new Fordson Major, circa 1946. From Carnwath we headed through to Hyndford, then on to Lanark, past the area which housed possibly millions of pounds worth of machinery and tractors, belonging to the D.O.A.S. How the area had changed, though it was good to see the nearby Laurie & Symington, Auctioneers, was still to the fore. After a brief stop in Lanark David decided we would head homeward through Biggar, Skirling, and West Linton, Carlops, to Edinburgh. Just travelling on that route with David brought back great memories of other times, other people, now part of history, but still to the fore in my memory. Few jobs had a constantly changing scenario as this, finish one job then straight on to the next. In these days many farms had several workers, a ploughman, byreman or orraman. Some employed land girls, dairymaids and housemaids. In the course of one year, D.O.A.S. operators would come in contact with dozens of farm people, who, all in their own way, were part of a rich pattern which made up the rural stability of the times.

BOOABULA SHEARING SHED, WANGENELLA  
N.S.W. 1958



## OTHER DAYS . . . . OTHER WAYS

Recently, I had occasion to meet up with a former work-mate from 1950', 1960's era. A couple of years younger than me, he was showing the results of having spent too much time as a contract shearer. Once a strapping 14-stoner, he has spent the last two decades suffering from "the shakes" and a chronically painful back. This is often the end result for many ex-shearers who just remained in the industry longer than their physical fitness continued. Still quite a cheerful soul, he was more than happy to recall some of our younger days. A few of his topics were wrinkly big merinos "up the Darling," and in the Riverina near Wanganella. Less than competent shearers' cooks came in for a blast, though he had to admit most of them were very good, considering the surroundings in which they operated. The appalling heat in the kitchens was only exceeded in some sheds by the temperature on the shearing board. Still, the conditions did not last forever, and from end of March onward the temp. was quite moderate. Commenting on the standard of quality shearing, he put the blame squarely on the advent of the "wide combs" being introduced in early 80's. This historical event led to the end of his shearing days, as many older shearers left the industry.. The level of quality once required in wool clips has drastically lowered in this space of time.

In recent years, the drought has caused a vast reduction in the numbers of sheep in Australia. Stations which once handled 30,000 or more in the 1950's/60's would have as few as 12,000, a few would have been completely destocked. Of the big sheds built in Australia (where numbers of sheep shorn each year were often as high as 200,000) many in the Riverina district of N.S.W. employed between 50 and 100 shearers. In 1899 at Brown Downs, Queensland, 364,742 sheep were shorn and this was for some time considered the biggest sheep station in the world. Brookong shed near Lockhart, N.S.W., built 1900, had 97 stands and shored 8,000 to 10,000 per day.

Reputedly the biggest shed was Tinnerburra, Queensland, with 101 shearing stands, but this claim is also made for Burrawang, N.S.W. Burrawang utilised two Fowler steam engines which were brought overland from Adelaide to drive the machine shears and two wool presses. Classers worked above the presses and fleeces arrived to be classed via a conveyor belt. The shearing board was so long that two overseers were employed, one at each end of the board. Other large sheds equipped for machine shearing included:—

|                       | Stands |                         | Stands |
|-----------------------|--------|-------------------------|--------|
| Mahonga, N.s.W.       | 88     | Northampton Downs, Qld. | 58     |
| Canonbar, N.S.W.      | 88     | Wingadee, N.S.W.        | 54     |
| Tuppal, N.S.W.        | 80     | Kallara, N.S.W.         | 46     |
| Killarney, N.S.W.     | 72     | Toorale, N.S.W.         | 48     |
| Coree, N.S.W.         | 66     | Grong Grong, N.S.W.     | 44     |
| Goonoo Goonoo, N.S.W. | 66     | Narromine, N.S.W.       | 42     |



In 1984 Dunlop station shored 284,000 sheep, and the adjoining station, Toorale, put through 220,000. Both of these places were owned by one man, Samuel McCaughey. Since the end of World War I. many of these stations were divided into much smaller units. Now only a few stations carry more than 30,000. I once shored Gundabluie station back in 1956. The following year it was purchased by the N.S.W. government. Irrigation channels were built, and the area now contains 26 separate properties, perhaps one of the more successful examples of the "closer settlement" system.

The system where contractors entered the shearing industry began just before 1914. This was when Australian Workers' Union had been operating around 25 years, and this led to a much more organised and fairer system regarding shed hands, pressers, cooks, etc. Everyone must belong to the Union, the Union guaranteed minimum wages and conditions, enforced through the Industrial Court findings, despite opposition from some owners.

## Melrose wins Ford Memorial Trophy

WARREN Russell achieved a long-held ambition when he won the Ford Memorial Trophy at the 2009 Ballarat Fine Wool Ram Sale.

Rams entered in the sale are judged in the pre-sale competition.

This year's judge Sam King of the Beaumont stud, Tatyoon, awarded the trophy to a ram from the Russell family's Melrose stud.

"I am very pleased to win the Ford Memorial Trophy," Mr Russell.

"I have been wanting to win it for a long, long time."

Mary-Liz Ford awards the trophy each year in honour of her late husband Gordon, who was a great supporter of the Ballarat Agricultural and Pastoral Society.

The winning ram was also champion superfine poll merino ram at the Australian Sheep and Wool Show, Bendigo.

The 26-month-old ram had a fleece of 15.9 microns with a standard deviation of

2.2, a co-efficient of variation of 13.8, a comfort factor of 99.9 and a spinning fineness of 14.7.

Later he sold for \$3000.

Mr Russell described the ram as very well balanced and put together, with very well nourished wool with excellent style and lock structure.

The ram is a half-brother to the ram sold for \$3000 last year at the Glenelg ram sale.

Melrose will hold its annual on-property ram sale on October 1.

**STAND-OUT:** Mary-Liz Ford sashes the champion ram in the pre-sale judging competition at Monday's 2009 Ballarat Fine Wool Ram Sale. The ram is held by Warren Russell, right, of the Melrose stud, Nurrabiel, who exhibited the ram. At left is the judge, Sam King, of the Beaumont stud, Tatyoon. The ram sold in the auction for \$3000. **Picture:** Ray Frawley





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## **A STORY OF ZIMBABWE**

I have been in contact with Sandy Guild, a first cousin who emigrated to Rhodesia in mid-1952. He was a very successful farmer, having cleared virgin country of large timber, then introducing irrigation systems from one of the nearby rivers. This operation had resulted in many farmers following suit, then a large area was producing 200 - 300% more tobacco, mealies, corn. etc., than nearby areas without the blessing of water. He expanded on a regular basis, helped by his brother, Bill. The war which was waged in the 'seventies curtailed their operations somewhat. By this time his sons were serving in the armed forces. Eventually the war ended, Mugabe came to power, and the white settlers, at least most of them, were on borrowed time. About this time, Sandy, with wife, Sybil, moved away from farming into consultancy, acting as taxation agents. This business thrived due to Sandy's acquaintance with a wide range of people in earlier times. With a large new house just built only a short way from business premises, the future was rosy, or so it seemed in the early days of that post-war era.

About this time Mugabe was sizing up the situation, whereby he could gain even more power in the running of the country. In a short time he was surrounded by a large number of supporters, many who were driven by the promises of receiving land which would be wrested from white farmers. Once the violence persisted for a time they knew the only alternative was to leave Harare, hence they shifted into a heavily fortified compound of half a dozen houses, then worked the business in a more limited form for about 18 months. The worsening violence caused them to make plans to quit the country, and they did so by moving to South Africa. At this stage they discovered that Zimbabwean currency was worthless in the sphere of international business circles. To cut a long story short, they arrived in England, bought a cottage in Warwickshire, and now live a quiet retired life there. He is now 83, Sybil is 80, and they have some family in U.K. Our mothers were sisters, hence the connection. We correspond, and at present he is compiling a family tree. Helen's son, David, is carrying out a similar exercise. Will be interesting to see the end results. In his spare time, of which he has plenty, he has compiled a record of his interest from age 10 right through to leaving Zimbabwe. I received a closely-typed copy consisting of the family's farming experience in Scotland, the decision to emigrate, establishing a sound base in a new country, moving into irrigation, then into consultancy. Finally, the time of disillusion, combined with a very real menace to the lives and life-styles of ordinary people, was the factor which determined their last move, leaving the land which they called home.

## **THE DISTRICT BETWEEN WANGANELLA AND HAY**

The One Tree Plain is a vast area in the Riverina with few fences or dwellings visible to travellers on the lonely road. Yet one could scarcely write of shearing without including the desolate area of mirage where the scorching north wind blows, for it has been commemorated by shearers and drovers in verse, song and story for over a century. Today it is no less desolate, and twelve years of drought

conditions have only added to the less than welcoming scenery. Here and there you may see small lots of sheep feeding on saltbush, a small shrub which grows well in the Riverina and in a few other areas of Australia. The tough merino breed have survived on a mainly saltbush diet since sheep were first introduced here. This was just before the 1850's. By that time a few squatters had acquired enormous holdings of land, comprising most of One Tree Plain and surrounding country. T. F. Patterson had Merool, now Wonga, from 1870 until he died in October, 1902. By 1885 he had 60,000 sheep on the plain. His woolshed, ten kilometers from One Tree had fifty-five stands, all bladesmen. Weeks before shearing started, men would be seen tramping over the plain to congregate near the woolshed and single tree growing on a clay pan near a shallow fresh water well. They camped near the woolshed, some came on horse-back, a few in sulkies, bicycles, and many walked, carrying their swags. Many came hundreds of miles to this famous flat land. They were to carry little, and that little had to be water. By the time shearing began up to a hundred men, sometimes more, would apply for work as shearers, shed hands, cooks, or pressers, For those who were not selected, it was out again on the blistering One Tree Plain.

The town of One Tree sits on part of old Wonga run, but never consisted of more than the hotel. The tree was quite a famous landmark, but the historic gum crashed to the ground during a gale on New Year's night 1900. Many of the shearers, drovers, bullock teamsters and swagmen were heard to say "so the old tree's gone." It's shade had been appreciated by many over the years, as they headed on their journey either way up or down the track. The famous Cobb & Co. Stage Coaches also used this as a regular route from Deniliquin to Hay. The old runs like Wonga took in more than 200,000 acre on average size. Euroli, Walgrave, Boooroban and Bundiyaburnbak are all adjoining properties, though most are reduced in size to the original runs. Travelling west from One Tree you would pass through North Bundy and Murgha while heading for the town of Moulamein. At the Nine Mile Box Hotel between Booligal and Hay, the proprietor used to alert those in the bar that wanted to see something special to come outside and see the coach turn into Booligal along way up the road. Right on time the light on the distant coach could be seen turning sharply at right angles into Booligal. The distance from where they observed was 45 miles up a flat straight road. Since the end of World War I. most of the original runs have been reduced in size. The Sheaffe's family at Euragabah, out from Booligal, have battled as hard as any settlers did. In November, 1979, both Bill Sheaffe and wife Jenny suffered burns in a huge fire near the homestead. In November, 1980, a grass fire again threatened the same area. The family and few fire-fighters took refuge in the woolshed after they had made a successful back-burn which stopped the fire's progress towards the homestead. A dangerous place in the hot summers of most years.

I have shorn quite a lot in and close to the area mentioned above and can verify that shearing teams were mostly relieved when they finished up there and headed back to more "civilized" sheds in Victoria. Personally, this was my favourite district to work in. If you can shear, you can shear anywhere. The people around there have a distinct ability to accept and overcome hardship.

## **THE ONE TREE PLAIN**

I've shorn at Burrabogie and I've shorn at Toganmain,  
I've shorn at Big Willandra and on the Colleraine,  
But before the shearing was over I wished I was back again  
A shearing for old Tom Paterson on the One Tree plain.

All among the wool boys, all among the wool,  
Keep your blades full boys, keep your blades full;  
I can do a respectable tally myself, whenever I like to try,  
And they know me around the back blocks as Flash Jack from Gundagiy

I've pinked them with the Wolseley, and I've rushed B-bows too,  
I've shaved them in the grease lads, with the grass seeds showing through,  
But I've never shunned a pen me lads, whatever it might contain,  
When shearing for old Tom Paterson on the One Tree Plain.

I've shorn at Big Willandra, and I've shorn at Tilbaroo,  
And once I drew me blades boys upon the famed Barcoo;  
At Cowan Downs and Triada as far as Moulamein,  
But I was always glad to get back again on the One Tree Plain.

I've been whalin' up the Lachlan and I dozed on Cooper's Creek,  
And once I rung Dadjungee shed and blew it in a week;  
But when Gabriel blows his trumpet lads, I'll catch the morning train,  
And push for old Tom Paterson on the One Tree Plain.

1—B-bows were a well-known brand of blade shears.

2—“Toslum” a pen is to avoid tough shearing sheep, leaving a rough job.

3—“Whalim” describes looking for jobs in the off-season.

Poem by Henry Lawson, Australia's bush poet, written about one hundred years ago.

## **PERSONALITIES, MANY AND VARIED**

There must be few occupations available in the course of a person's working life-time to meet with such a wide variety, as in the case of the professional shearers. Having worked for several contractors in various states, I have come in close contact with a wide collection of different people, many of whom had come from a much different background to where they were currently employed. Some were more rational in their behaviour than others, a few were downright obnoxious, others varied in their efforts to provide for their respective futures. Looking backward in time, more than fifty years in fact, I recall my first stint of shearing for Power & Bradley, contractors from Cobar, N.S.W. We had completed two sheds near Cobar, then on to Tilpilly, near the Darling River. It was Easter time and we had finished on Thursday evening with still five thousand wethers to shear after the holiday. Most of the team had gone home for the few days off, only five, including myself, remaining in the quarters. The cook, who was hired for the duration of the shed, had an easy few days for a change. Yarning in the mess after evening tea was a common pastime in those days, and most of the workforce took part in these conversations, sometimes debates, and others just plain arguments. I had known

and worked with "Big Les" from Goulburn, near Sydney, for a few weeks by this time. He had been a shearer for some years and always talked of having "other sources of income" as a "supplement" to his regular job as a standby. With the beer flowing and his mood becoming more convivial, Les produced a newspaper cutting regarding a court case in Parramatta, dated about four years back. The defendant, Leslie ——, was accused of unlawful possession of a quantity of metal, in this case, lead, which had been removed from a Presbyterian Church in Parramatta. He went on to say that in a short space of time covering a month or so, he and his mate had relieved a Goulburn Catholic Church and then a Church of England of their roof burden. You would have to give him credit for being truly "non-denominational."

There is a tendency regarding ram shearing nowadays that rams should be sedated before shearing. There is a widely held belief that this procedure would be beneficial to both man and beast. I have doubts about this theory, having shorn quite a few of these sheep in my time. Some merino rams have up to four large flaps between the jaw and the brisket. It is not unusual for a weight of up to 14 kgs. from one fleece to be recorded from merinos. On the other hand, many English breeds like the Dorset Horn and Border Leicester have a large body weight, with comparatively light fleece weight. Either breed can pose a problem, especially for learner shearers. I can recall shearing near Balranald in the 50's where the owner always had around 600 rams. Some shearers just cannot handle flappy merinos and these were at the top end in that category. One shearer in that team was renowned for using his own method to quieten a struggling sheep, simply by hitting it on the forehead with the tension nut part of the handpiece. This treatment usually stunned the animal, certainly such a cruel habit could not pass unnoticed, and some owners and boss of the board had "chipped" him more than once. Eventually he had worn out his welcome in too many sheds, then had to look further afield for work. This was a predictable result when you were known as "Tension Nut Tookey!"

Having contacted a shearing contractor by phone, I was assured by him that he was putting together a team which had several weeks work ahead of it. He stressed that yes, he was always short of competent shearers, and that I could make my way to a place near Burren Junction in one of the more remote places in N.S.W. He also mentioned that his regular cook would be absent for the duration of these sheds. I had worked with him before and on the strength of that he asked me to pick up another cook to temporarily replace the regular. This person had been contacted on the previous day and had agreed to take the job. Kelly's old truck was so crowded with shearing gear, workers, luggage, etc., that it seemed a sensible solution for me to pick up the cook and his gear. After learning of the cook's address on the outskirts of Walgett, I soon found the location. Donnie had just got back from a session at the pub, and was more than a little merry and talkative, though not intoxicated. His wife insisted on providing afternoon tea before we got under way. Our destination was about 150 kms. to Nowley, much of it on gravel roads. We were due to start next morning. No sooner had we cleared Walgett, when a one-sided conversation was begun by Donnie. First, he outlined the importance of the cook in all shearing teams, a fact of which I was already

aware. Hitting his stride, he reeled off his qualifications. Under chef at a leading hotel in Sydney, which led to a series of top jobs in that line of business. Some of the hotels he mentioned were really top drawer, and he implied that losing his services put them at some disadvantage. There was much more in this vein, and I patiently heard him out until he was in sight of his new domain, the kitchen at Newley shed, where I am sure the clientele would be less demanding than once was the case. The team reached the shed just after we got there, all of them, except Kelly, under the weather. Donnie was already at work getting ready for tomorrow. Such was my first meeting with Donald Iain McIvor.

### **GOLF COURSES. . . . HERE AND THERE**

One fine evening recently I happened to be watching a television programme known as Getaway. This is a popular weekly feature which usually has a segment included which has been provided by a roving reporter. This particular item raised a question: Is this the longest golf course in the world? The explanation followed with a few facts and figures which would take some beating now or in future times. We start by teeing off at Port Augusta, a coastal city in South Australia known as Iron Ore City, which describes the source of the city's wealth and its economy. Once we completed the first hole, our progression to the next means that we get into the car and drive to Cedura, a largish town on the Great Australian Bight, part of the Southern Ocean. This is a mere 468 kms. along the Nullarbor, the route following the coast for hundreds of miles. Once Cedura, hole 2, has been played, its on progressively up the Nullarbor, into West Australia, at Eucla, then taking in small stops on the way, Madura, Cocklebidy, Balladonna, and Norseman, then up to Kalgoorlie, the gold town which contains the 18th hole and, thankfully, the clubhouse, just 1,650 kms. from Port Augusta. The fairways in some holes are of more than 500 metres, the putting "greens" consist of claypans, or a levelled area of sand. Heaven knows what "the rough" would surprise you with. Other hazards are wallabies, crows that fly off with the balls, and the oppressive heat which lasts here for much of the year. This project opened for business just recently and is run in conjunction with Tourism Australia. Just a few details, it's a proper 18-hole course, par is 72, and several days are allowed to participate and finish. I cannot help but compare this unique course with the traditional gold courses in the home of golf, Scotland. Golf was the pastime of the upper classes. Many people were employed to keep the courses and greens in pristine condition, greens were tailored to perfection. The clientele consisted almost exclusively of prominent business men, politicians, doctors, and other professional people. Workers who played golf were few and far between. I cannot remember any. The press made great copy of the important visitors, some from overseas. The "season" circulated between St. Andrews, Gleneagles, and various other famous courses. I think the old Muirkirk course beside Auldhouseburn would have hosted a much more friendly group of members than those who attended and played the "prestige" courses. Even here in Australia there has evolved a view that it is an honour, after waiting years in many cases, to be accepted as a member of one or another "top drawer" courses. I was once acquainted with a

stock and station agent in far north Victoria whose only claim to fame was the fact that he was allowed to play a round of golf on Royal Melbourne course. This highlight of his life was obtained through the auspices of an extremely wealthy grazier friend who had inherited his own membership. I have quietly pondered as to how these pampered members would approach tackling a round on the Port Augusta/Kalgoorlie course!

## **AN ENCOUNTER TOO CLOSE FOR COMFORT**

Back in 1956 Australia had a most unreal season. Rain almost every day for several months on end caused the unusual conditions of flooding in most areas of the country, even the Mallee was in flood stage on most of its roads. On this particular Saturday night I was driving from Swan Hill to a property near Chillingollak where I would start shearing the following Monday. The roadway was covered with water which was mostly shallow, though in some parts up to eighteen inches deep. To prevent having a flooded ignition system I had taken the fan belt temporary off the drive pulley, thereby stopping water being thrown back over the engine. Making slow but steady progress I was almost clear of the last flood stretch when I felt the steering jar and the wheel spin quite wildly. I knew I had hit one of those ironstone rocks, which had become displaced and was hidden in the flood water. On inspecting the damage once I had cleared the deep water and out on to the dry road again, found I had a fractured tyre wall and a punctured inner tube slowly deflating. Nothing else for it but to jack up the vehicle, off with the damaged wheel/tyre and on with the spare. This was a straight-forward task I was used to, without further ado I had my Ford all jacked up, the spare out from under the utility tray, and just about to make the switch when I suddenly experienced a strange feeling that I wasn't alone. I had stopped near a dense clump of Mallee gums lining the roadway on my near side and only a few yards from where I was busy. Making a few cautious glances around, I spotted a man standing not five yards away, leaning on a heavy stick and apparently taking a keen interest in proceedings. Just imagine my apprehension on making this discovery, miles from anywhere and a giant noting your every move. He must have been the biggest man I had ever seen, and I made a mental note that if there was an attack, it would not be a one-sided contest. I had on board my vehicle an assortment of fencing tools which were more or less permanently part of my workman's arsenal of everyday use. Go anywhere, do anything as long as it was a job. There was a long-handled shovel which I used for digging postholes, and a four-foot long iron bar which could be very useful in self defence. As I made progress in my wheel replacements, I kept a wary eye on any movement on his part. The sheer size of the man made me think back to childhood story books about giants, few of which had a friendly demeanour toward ordinary people. After what seemed an eternity I had the wheel nuts tightened, the damaged tyre stowed away and hands cleaned. I was ready to go. First push on the starter my trusty old Ford came to life and off we set. Almost at the same instant, whoever this person was, began walking in the same direction. I passed within a few feet of him and he deflected his head away



from my scrutiny. In a short while I had turned off the road and reached the place where the owner was expecting me. The rain had stopped earlier that day. The sun dried everything up on Sunday, and I had a shedful of dry sheep to start shearing on Monday. I was in my element again. Once in a while I had heard of people driving at night in the Mallee catching a fleeting glimpse of someone walking but keeping in the shelter of the scrub. This was no illusion, even if the Mallee was an eerie place to drive in, especially at night. If I had to give a description of this person, I would estimate at least 6 feet 9 inches, about 20 stone, a secretive behaviour surrounding him. Who was he?

## One Oak's dynamite duo

**FOR** Graham and Mary Wells, the national pairs has proved an elusive title – but one they've finally hauled in.

On Saturday the Wells claimed the prestigious Merino pairs crown with a dynamite duo from their One Oak stud at Jerilderie, NSW.

And on Sunday Mr Wells was still walking about 10 feet off the ground, thrilled with the hard-earned victory representative of years of careful selection and breeding.

Mr Wells admitted he'd had his eye on the title for many years – "It's one I've wanted to win ever since it was started".

Last year One Oak placed second in the NSW pairs at the Sydney Royal, just missing out on the chance to represent its home State in the national final.

This year the stud went one better at Sydney and earned its berth at Bendigo.

"It's the first time we've made the final," said Mr Wells, pictured with wife Mary and the winning pair.

"It was a thrill to be up there – and a bonus to win."

Judges said it had been a unanimous decision, praising the length of staple and style of wool on the One Oak pair.

Bendigo proved a successful hunting ground



for One Oak, with the ewe from the pair claiming the grand champion fine-medium wool ewe sash.

The stud also claimed the best group of three in the Merinos and was the most successful exhibitor of the

Australian fleece competition.

Notably its fleece entries came off last year's One Oak show team.

– SALLY WHITE

■ Full sheep show report starts p11.





Peter and Jacqui Bandy and John and Betty Ferguson's memorabilia at Goldsmith Steam Rally, May, 2008



John Ferguson's Handpieces ready for the Goldsmith Steam Rally, 2008



## WA's \$6 million fleet on track to plant 40,000ha



PLANTING is a challenge in logistics for the Joyce family – more so than for most.

The Joyces, based at Varley on the eastern edge of Western Australia's Lakes District, this year set their sights on achieving their 40,000-hectare (100,000-acre) planting target with the minimum amount of down-time.

It involves a "fleet" of Challenger tractors – three, tracked-style A series MT885

tractor (pictured) and three B series machines, all purchased in the past five years – linked to matching DBS air-seeder bins and Bourgault 18-metre bars fitted with knife-style points. Daily fuel consumption of the fleet – and its support crew of trucks, sites and sprayers – comes to about 10,000 litres.

On top of that, a steady flow of liquid fertiliser, plus seed and chemicals, must be on hand to ensure each driver and his

planting rig spend no more than an hour undertaking the necessary "top-ups" at the end of each 12-hour shift.

"Yes, there's a real sense of urgency in the air," said Trystan Joyce.

"With all six machines working around the clock, we are averaging about 1200ha/day.

"Once we start, we try not to stop because the teams like to stick to their shift routines."

Each tractor/planting rig combination represents an investment of about \$1 million – making it key that they earn their keep.

The family's planting program roared into life in April, kicking off with canola on the back of rain on one of their south coast properties.

The expectation is that the WA wheat belt will receive top-up rain that will permit the family to complete its winter cropping

program which is some 20,200ha up on last year following the recent purchase of another property.

– SHARAH PULLER

[www.stuckinland.com](http://www.stuckinland.com)

Find more about the Joyce's planting operation at [www.stuckinland.com](http://www.stuckinland.com)

## **AN EARLY CONFRONTATION — BULLIES EVEN THEN?**

A topic which has gained much discussion in the media, and even more between members of the public, is the question loosely presented:—"Is bullying an acceptable part of life endured by many less fortunate people in the course of their life-time?" In my adult years I did not encounter much of this noxious practice, possibly as I had a built-in aversion to anyone taking, or trying to, take advantage of another person's lowly position in society. Personally, any attempt to bully me was short lived, as it brought about confrontation on my part, a consequence of which would-be bullies do not bargain for. Casting my thoughts back 71 years to the time when I was a twelve-year-old pupil at Main Street School, Muirkirk. One of the pastimes then popular was the playing of five-a-side football. The best players from these contests were then adjudged by Mr Parker as to whether they were good enough to represent the School Team, an honour in itself, and a step in the right direction for the likely lads thus selected. This particular day Mr Parker, a teacher, was otherwise engaged, though the usual game was in progress. Dave Gibb, a big lad in my grade had assumed control of the game, supported by his cronies, picked by him and laying down the rules as the game progressed. Dave was the heaviest lad in the school, and liked to throw his weight around. It was strongly believed by many that "Hibs" and "Hearts" both had their scouts on to his ability as a future player. In this game he dominated the full back position to such a degree no one was prepared to tackle him. Just about this stage, Dave was clearing the back line as usual when I had the temerity to try to take the ball off him. Showing off his fancy footwork and superior dribbling ability, Dave was in his element showing off to the adulation of his army of supporters. Tackling him head on, I was either just lucky, or Dave had mistimed some of his footwork. There was disbelief as he crashed to the ground, landing with a thump on his large backside. From all sides came the shout, "Foul," though everyone there knew it was a fair tackle. Red faced and as angry as anyone I had ever seen, Dave got up and informed me that there was a fight to take place after school in the lower shelter shed, the venue of a few such stouches. He was one of those people who invade the space of others, and fronted up with his face about two inches from mine, not forgetting to say "be there," to which I replied, "you be there." As we were both in Mr Parker's class, the talking point among the boys was the impending fight after school. At last school was over for the day, and I strode purposefully (I hope) down the old familiar steps to the "bottom shed." Dave's army of supporters were there to see him dish out a lesson to me, and maintain his record of one-sided victories, four or five up to this stage, no losses. My support was less obvious. My close friend, John Blackwood, had taken charge of my school bag and raincoat while I was otherwise engaged, and was backing me up like a true "second" in the world of boxing. Down to the first bay of the old shed, I found myself in a roughly round section of "ringsiders." Nothing now but to await my fate, as applied by big Dave. Five minutes had passed, then another spell had elapsed, possibly ten. Shortly after that, 4-15, the crowd slowly began to melt away. The dispersal was completed in a hurry with the appearance of Mr McCartney, the janitor-cum-truant catcher, who had belatedly heard of the impending contest. I was the only one left in the "challenge area." I still don't know whether I was disappointed or relieved at the non-appearance of Dave—he never even wished to continue hostilities.

## **“BLACKBIRDING”—**

### **A Notorious Australian Occupation**

Travelling in Australia as an itinerant shearer in the 1950's was one of the most "hands on" occupations in which one would meet and work with many types of people. Some of the lesser lights in the contracting line could not afford to be too choosy when they were forming a team to shear on the outback stations, especially in that area north of Walgett and up to the Queensland border. Finding competent shearers was a priority, also, the same problem presented every time that a grazier demanded an almost immediate start. In this situation there was the additional problem of finding shed hands, comprised of wool rollers, pickers up, piece pickers and at least one presser. A cook was a priority. The wool classer was usually found and employed separately by the grazier. Pat Kelly was one contractor who usually found himself with a deadline to meet and building a team in a hurry was second nature to him. I had worked for him before, and on this run the station was situated close to the Queensland border. At any rate, we had managed to start on the due date, a six-stand shed setup with Lister gear, about half a mile from the homestead, "Jamara." After a few days the team was getting into its stride and turning out a respectably tally, considering that the sheep stock were mostly big wrinkly merino wethers. At that time of the year, early March, the district around there always looks its most forbidding, endless miles of space where only a handful of people ever visit there. A few hardy kangaroo shooters, sometimes professional musterers, and the odd station hand may pass that way. Few of the people who made up a shearing team would ever dream of changing jobs to work on these outback stations. The mess setup on this station was well ahead of many I had endured, having been updated only a few years before. As there were no bush pubs within many miles of this place, there was no where to go "grogging up" at night as most of the team would have done had they been closer to any of the bush shanties which were common in some areas in those days. The most common pastime between evening tea and bedtime was a great deal of yarning about around the mess tables. Some recalled other times gone by. They were usually older men who had come a long way from the pitiful conditions under which they had endured their early working days. One with whom I had many discussions was a Queenslander who hailed from Beenleigh, a town in the heart of the sugar growing industry. He was Dana Hana, a name which I thought was unusual in Australia. He had taken up wool rolling as a change from being employed as a labourer on a large cane growing enterprise. I learned that his grandfather had been "imported" from Fiji amongst a sailing ship's "cargo" of young fit men who were lured aboard by some pretext, usually alcohol. Once they were "under the weather" the crew could up anchor, sails up, and set off for Australia. Few of these unfortunate "passengers" ever saw their homeland again. The usual procedure to deal with these "immigrants" was to induce them to put their mark on a "contract" which bound them to work for years on the sugar plantations. The conditions were appalling on most of these places, with brutal overseers just as bad as these awful types who lorded over the African slaves in the Deep South cotton plantations in America. It is an indictment on the Australian Governments of the time

that they not only tolerated this barbaric practice, but encouraged it over a long period of time, the objective being to give the sugar barons endless cheap labour. Several sailing ship captains were involved in this unsavoury trade, the most infamous of which was "Bully Hayes," looked upon as some sort of a hero by those who benefitted from his actions. As some young women and girls were sometimes included among those transported, families were formed, thus giving the owners access to future stocks of cheap labour. They became known as "Hanakas," a term used to describe descendants of people taken from various islands to the north of Australia. They were a sorry lot, no citizenship, no vote, no rights, and consequently no hope. Australian historians to this day give little space regarding a blot of this magnitude on the country's reputation. As late as the 1930's, these large stations would advertise "good overseers' jobs," even in the British press. Many sons of English aristocracy, too useless for anything else, ended up in one of these occupations. They were known as "Kanaka Whackers," and this derisory term kept them company for the rest of their lives.

By the time Dana had become a teenager, most of the sugar industry had become regulated, conditions for workers were on the improve, a revolution had gone the full circle, and now the main players were Italians. They had quietly bought up properties which were run down, pooled together to purchase equipment, and even to-day there is a strong Italian influence in this vital industry. The good part is that they are "Aussie Eyeties."

Dana had worked at a number of labouring jobs after severing ties to conditions which dominated his ancestors' lives. He had married and settled in Hebel, an outback town in the South Queensland area. He was one of the best and most reliable wool rollers anywhere, and was never out of a job, a personal credit for someone who came from such lowly origins.

Those ship masters and others who were involved in the afore-mentioned unsavoury trade were known as "Blackbirders," and were proud to wear that description

## **SHEARING CONTRACTORS . . . . .**

### **A PRECARIOUS OCCUPATION ?**

During a quite lengthy spell of working for various contractors over close to twenty years, my lasting impression was the fact that a business depending on so many unknown factors could be swept away in a very short space of time. I was fortunate that my main employment consisted of two separate main runs of sheds. One run was operated by Reg. Murfett, the other by C. D. Mooney. These two outfits were well known in the industry and generally held most of their respective workers at a capacity which kept all concerned in regular work. The most common threat to those stable conditions came from would be contractors who would secretly tender for a contract simply by undercutting a fixed price. Some graziers responded to this underhand method by putting pressure on the contractor to meet the rogue tender. Others ignored such requests, preferring to hang on to the status quo. I have known of contracts being lost simply by the average cost of sheep being cut by three-pence per head. I have a letter from Chris Mooney in which he informed me that he had acquired a firm understanding to contract a

well-known Riverina station for the then (1963) season. In his message the details were outlined: 55,000 head to be shorn commencing early September: a good set-up consisting of 16 Lister stands, work for 14 shed hands including two pressers. This would compensate for losing Booabula at Wanganella in the previous season when Mooney was informed that he no longer was the preferred holder of the contract, and this after 32 years of continuous service. One can imagine his consternation when this promising replacement was also reneged at a late stage of preparations on the contractor's part. These two setbacks, on about one year apart, set the stage for the end of a business which C. D. Mooney had begun in 1924, and had expanded successfully until about 1958, when the downhill trend set in. By 1966 the run of sheds had almost gone, with the remnant being operated by two employees, one a classer, the other an expert. The end came soon after. Reg. Murfett was a "hands-on" contractor. He had been a well respected wool classer for many years working for Jimmy Brown who contracted on a big scale in the Broken Hill, Pooncarie, Menindee districts and out as far as Ivanhoe. When Brown passed on, Reg and Stan Worrall formed a Company known as Murfett and Worrall. They retained all of Brown's former clients; the business prospered to the extent that occasionally three teams were employed to stay abreast of the work schedule. For several years the business made good. Disaster struck when Reg died in mid-sixties. He was the heart and soul of the whole organisation. The business went downhill fast when his skills were no longer available. In a short time, with the loss of many sheds, two experts ran separate teams. The end came fairly speedily, with a wind-up in the late sixties. Power and Bradley of Cobar were a well organised outfit, but even they found it difficult going into the late 1950's when demands by graziers for cheaper shearing rates could over-rule an established high standard of workmanship. Patrick Kelly, who was better known as "Rough an' Ready Kelly," operated mostly in the Walgett/Goodooga and towards the Queensland border. He presided over an outfit which was always struggling to make a deadline, or often just to scrape together a team. Surprisingly, Pat survived where a lot more competent people did not. He just had a knack of falling on his feet, coupled with a lot of luck at the right time. His teams were also the booziest lot of the many that I ever worked in. In my early days as a shearer, I had an ambition of eventually becoming a contractor. Several years later I had seen enough of the downsides to rule out forever any chance of that coming about.

## **JOHN FERGUSON**

Born Scotland, April 30th, 1926.

First began shearing and clutching in 1954, as a 28-year old. First worked on the "wrong" side of a two-stand portable shearing plant. The owner, contractor Henry Salter of Kerang, had several of these machines, and his outlook was always the same regarding shearing and shearers. "Turn out every sheep shorn or crutched as well as it's possible." He steered clear of loud, boozy shearers, and insisted that anyone working for him should present themselves on the shearing board in a fit and competent manner, also to be strictly punctual as regards starting time. At that time the Mallee area was farmed largely by soldier settlers from early 1920's

returning from 1914-1918 war. A second generation of Australians returning from the 1938-1945 conflict had also more recently set up farming ventures, some taking over from the older generation. Without exception their incomes were directly dependent on production of wheat and wool. The sheep flocks were not large, a few hundred ewes would be run manly on stubbles and pasture. The wool boom of 1949-1952 was well and truly over, and most farmers concentrated on producing prime fat lambs, which were trucked to Newmarket, a suburb of Melbourne, where the main sale was conducted every Monday, during the season. Shortly after I began with Henry, one of his sons became involved in a large dairying venture near Cohuna. Henry also joined in, and gave up his shearing interests. This left me minus an employer, though I joined Pat Ryan from Nanangatang and his brother Tom from Chinkapook. Both of them owned two stand portable plants, having a flood of work at various times of the year. Both also grew wheat on a large scale. They had their regular round of shearing work and required reliable workers for both operations.

After spending most of two years with Ryan Bros., I had decided to try to break into a more professional type of shearing, namely working on a permanent basis with the big contractors whose main runs were in the Riverina and other districts in N.S.W. In the larger sheds I shored with Power and Bradley from Cobar, whose run extended from Tilpa near the Darling River, right over to Ivanhoe, hundreds of miles away. At times they operated three teams to keep abreast of the work. At about this time the industry was hit by the Australian wide Shearers Strike. This event led to divisions in the workforce, caused in a large degree by the Graziers Association, who had friends in Parliament, to pass their recommended 15% cut in Shearers' Award. I had enough sense to get right away from shearing for the duration of the strike, finding myself a job as a road grader driver for some months until the strike was over. Just to survive in the Australia of these long-gone times you had to be adaptable.

At various times between shearing work I have been employed as truck driver, header operator, bag sewer, jack hammer operator, and on several fencing operations, once as the contractor. Another job was working as an asphalter resurfing school playgrounds in and around Kerang, shovelling salt from the sediment in a salt lake in the Mallee onto trucks which then headed to the process factory. Did this for two weeks straight. Worked for A. Hilgrove as a seed-cleaner operator, traveling ground properties in Culgoa, Wycheproof, Sea Lake, and Nullawill areas. Put in a stint as a dozer operator, dam sinker when Hilgrove had a large contract clearing scrub on the Victoria-S.Australia border, and this was for the purpose of establishing farms which were administered by the A. M.P. Insurance Company, to selected buyers. Worked for Albion Quarries in Lysterfield, Vic., as maintenance/repair member of a small gang who worked while the plant workers were on annual holidays, giving us a clear go to repair and/or replace the heavy machinery involved in crushing operations. This was a rather dirty job, but was well paid if you were a reliable worker. These were temporary jobs which kept one going between shearing jobs, though latterly I did not have to put in much time otherwise than shearing. It was a way of life where you met all kinds of people. In



early days in the Victorian Mallee, these were mainly ex-servicemen from the conflicts of World Wars I. and II. Most did not have shearing machinery, and relied on the travelling operators who ran two-stand portable plants. Some owners did have fixed overhead shearing gear, but they were much in the minority in my time there, though they were quickly catching up. Most of the following people came through hard times, quite a few were friends, and I class them amongst the finest people I have had the pleasure of knowing.

|                              |                                     |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| John Young, Kulwin           | Paddy Walsh, Bolton                 |
| Bill Turner, Kulwin          | Syd Barnes, Bolton                  |
| Charlie Christie, Kulwin     | Ivan Barnes, Bolton                 |
| D. O'Callaghan, Owyen        | Doug. Mason, Bolton                 |
| Jack Curran, Nanangatang     | Andy Betcher, Bolton                |
| Vin Dillon, Nanangatang      | George Morris, Annuello             |
| Claude McNichol, Nanangatang | Larry Tuck, Annuello                |
| Jim Roberts, Nanangatang     | Ted Kiel, Annuello                  |
| Tom Ryan, Chinkapook         | Ernie Pickering, Annuello           |
| Pat Ryan, Chinkapook         | Len Plant, Annuello                 |
| Duncan Heron, Chinkapook     | Mick Taggart, Annuello              |
| Jack Barrie, Chinkapook      | Alan Kitchcock, Bannerton           |
| Jacko Griffin, Chinjapook    | Jim Buckley, Bannerton              |
| Jack Shawyer, Chinkapook     | George Austin, Bannerton            |
| Wally Power, Robinvale       | Paddy Walsh, butcher, Robinvale     |
| Jim Ryan, Wemen              | Jack Mowatt, Winnambool             |
| Bob Connell, Wemen           | Jack Cullen, Winnambool             |
| Neil McFarlane, Wemen        | Joe McDonald, Winnambool            |
| Bob McMonnies, Wemen         | Wally Summerhayes, Winnambool       |
| Dick Fityzgerald, Bannerton  | Dinnie Horan, Winnambool            |
| John O'Connor, Bannerton     | Sid Cadwallader, Gingimrick         |
| Jack McKay, Chillingollah    | George Leahy, Depot Shed, Swan Hill |

#### Robinvale, Euston and Balranald Districts

|                                    |                                       |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Euston Station, Jim Spittal        | Willowvale, Balranald, D. Gorman, Jr. |
| Tammit Station, Ossie Grayson      | Giraly Station, Adrian Gorman         |
| Oakdale Station, Alan Matyard      | Yangalake Co., Balranald              |
| Benanee Station, Jack & Mrs McGill | Waldaira Station, Ben Johnson         |
| Meelamon Station, Dick Gormn, Sen. | Arthur Woodlands, Euston              |
| Prungle Station, T. & S. Boynton   | Bob Coppock's, Goodnight              |
| Cringadale Sation, Bill Gorman     | Kevin Kyles, Wood Wood                |

#### Power and Bradley, Cobar, Shearing Contractors

|                           |                            |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| Merryula, Cobar           | Innesowen Station, Darling |
| Nymagee Plains, Cobar     | Tilpa Station, Darling     |
| Cubba Station, Cobar      | Elsinore Station, Cobar    |
| Tilpilly Station, Darling |                            |

## Murfett and Worrall, Ballarat/Geelong, Contractors, N.S.W. Sheds

|                                |                                |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Womberra Station, Mildura      | Boola Boolka Station, Menindee |
| Woolcunda Station, Broken Hill | Haythorpe Station, Menindee    |
| Albernarle Station, Menindee   | Harcourt Station, Pooncarrie   |
| Popio Station, Pooncarrie      | Overnewton Station, Darnick    |
| Moorara Station, Pooncarrie    | Manfred Station, Ivanhoe       |
| Karpakora Station, Pooncarrie  | Orana Station, Ivanhoe         |
| Dalmarion Station, Pooncarrie  | Roger Lambs, Darnick           |
| Beilpajak Station, Poobcarrie  |                                |

## Murfett and Worrall Sheds, Victoria and South Australia

|                            |                                     |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Murroa, Hamilton, Vic.     | Wellington Lodge, Tailem Bend, S.A. |
| Marroa East, Vic.          | Jockwar, Tailem Bend, S.A.          |
| Moornong, Camperdown, Vic. | Waltowie, Meningie, S.A.            |
| Wirralie, Naracoorte, S.A. | Fairview, Lucindale, S.A.           |

## C. D. Mooney, Merdith, Shearing Contractor, N.S.W.

|                              |                          |
|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Booabula, Wanganella, N.S.W. | Bundiylumbak, Wanganella |
| Murgha, Moulamein            |                          |

## C. D. Mooney, Victorian Sheds

|                          |                               |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Springwood, Wannon       | Hopkins Hill, Chatsworth      |
| Yera Foxhow              | Weering, Cressy               |
| Baagal, Skipton          | Mount Hesse, Winchelsea       |
| Boaryaloak, Skipton      | Lawaluk, Mount Mercer         |
| Bannongill East, Skipton | Mooramong, Skipton            |
| Ninuenook, Wycheproof    | Mawollok, Stockyard Hill      |
| Gums, Penshurst          | Saint Marnock's, Beaufort     |
| Darra, Meredith          | Terrinallum South, Darlington |

## Sheds shorn in while travelling "on spec," mostly north N.S.W.

|                              |                                 |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Gundablue, Collarenebri      | Caloona, Mungindi               |
| Brenda Station, Goodooga     | Nowley, Burren Junction         |
| Bangate Station, Goodooga    | Bairnkine, Walgett              |
| Murtee, Wilcania             | Spring Plains, Cooma            |
| Curlewis, Gunnedah           | Warraweena, Bourke              |
| Fort Bourke                  | Roto, Hilstone                  |
| Boobaroi, Cunnamulla, Queens | Quinyambie, N.S.W./S.A. border. |
| Peronne, Coonamble           |                                 |

## Early Days shearing with Vic. Krahmert, Swan Hill

|                             |                                  |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Wilson Bros., Waitchie      | Norrie Frew, Quambatook          |
| Arthur Mesleys, Mystic Park | Laurie Free, Quambatook          |
| Aub Palfreymans, Boga Road  | Murray Downs Station, Swan Hill. |



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Last Shearing Run, No Contractors Involved

Harold Sharrock's, Vite Vite  
Stan Sharrock's, Vite Vite  
Snow Anderson, Vite Vite  
Jim Amery's, Bookar  
Tony & Tim Tabart, Kurweeton

Leo Fitzgerald, Derrinallum  
Tom Albert, Mount Elephant  
Ron Homan, Derrinallum  
Bill Trewin, Pura Pura.

For some time when approaching what we often term "middle age," I had thought of the grim possibility of ending my working days as a casualty of the shearing industry. During my time as a shearer I had occasion to meet many who suffered from bad backs and numerous other ailments directly connected to the job. With this in mind I opted for regular factory work close to home which allowed other pursuits to be entered into. As a migrant battling to become established in an industry not usually connected to "outsiders," I met many wonderful people, just a few less desirables, though some have remained close friends to this day, even though their numbers are slowly ebbing away.

JOHN FERGUSON

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BUNDY WETHERS, 1962

## **THE LIGHTER SIDE OF THE SHEARING INDUSTRY**

Back in the days when I was shearing for Reg. Murfett, a regular team mate was Stan Parsons, who hailed from Currabubula, a small community in New England, which is part of N.S.W.. We had completed five sheds on the run, and were now at Boola Boolka, which was notorious for its tough shearing wrinkly merinos. This particular season my hutmate happened to be Stan, who made hard work of shearing at any time, but was an honest battler who managed to keep up an average which was acceptable to the contractor. Stan's background, like many of his generation, was of harsh conditions and next to no education. Consequently, he had reached adulthood with just enough reading ability to get by. Writing was a laborious task. He had a small "selection" of about 100 acres, on which he ran about 40 sheep and possibly a thousand rabbits. Stan's wife, Mag, looked after the place when he was away, which was about six months of the year. Mag had plenty of spare time on her hands, as their two sons, Lyall and Richard, were also shearing for Mr Murfett. Some time before this, she had taken up a sideline, now she was a regular rabbitier, using ferrets to trap them. So successful was she, that her income rivalled that of Stan. In those days the custom of the "rabbit Agents" was to have a refrigerated truck stationed in a district receiving the catches brought in by rabbitiers. Once they had a full load, the truck was driven to H.Q. in Sydney, an empty truck replaced the one which had left, and kept things moving.

Some time before this, Mag's brother had given her a large buck ferret as a birthday present. She promptly named him Erroll Flynn, after the actor, on account of his amorous ways with the ladies. The short term result was a population surge in the ferret quarters, enough to cause alarm for Mag. Her ferrets were looked after like family, and all had names. She had run out of names and in her weekly letter to stan, had appealed to him to provide some suggestions. Stan wasn't all that quick off the mark, so he promptly asked me for assistance. Keeping as straight a face as possible I came up with "Why don't you name them after the Seven Dwarfs?" Next week Stan's letter from Mag informed him he had a clever friend who was responsible for Sneezy, Dopey, Doc, etc. She even named one Snow White. Late in 1960 I was shearing at the property of Bill Ryall, who was the owner of Spring Plains merino stud. Having just recently completed my annual contract stint with the big contractors, I found myself with two spare weeks before Christmas. I had shorn at Spring Plains at the same time the previous year by myself. This time I had been asked to find a second shearer, to ensure that we would finish the job before Christmas, as Bill and family hoped to head north to Queensland to visit family. This suited me also, as I had a very early start lined up for the 1961 season, namely January 3. Having contacted Stan some time before, I was pleased that he accepted the job, and 10th December found us starting on the job. It was a good set-up, the two-stand overhead gear was almost new, and shearing without the presence of a contractor was more relaxing. Our accommodation was very good, and our meals were provided by the family's cook. Came the

day of "cut out," we were right on target to finish mid-day on 24th December. Having done so, and after farewelling the family, we took ourselves into Cooma, a sizeable town, and headquarters of the Snowy Mountain Scheme, which was still in progress at that time. Having cashed our cheques, and after a leisurely walk around the shopping centre, I casually asked Stan what he had in mind for Mag's Christmas present. He was noncommittal, a man of few words, though he was deep in thought. I had called into Dangar Gedye, stock and station agents, with the object of purchasing new combs and cutters. While I was completing my purchase Stan was surveying the vast stock displayed on the floor. Finally he selected what looked like a large box with leather straps attached. With a knowing wink and a cheeky grin, he confided, "Mag'll be tickled pink when she gets this in her stocking in the morning." Soon we were saying good-bye and going our separate ways. Stan was stowing the ferret box in his utility, happy as a sandboy.



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Ballarat, 10th October, 2007

Dear Jimmy and Betty,

As the year moves along, I am mindful of the fact that I have slowly but surely had increasing problems with the onset of arthritis in my right hand. Not to worry, though, I'm thankful that I have come this far without too many trials along the way. Trust that you are both well and enjoying life. As you are heading into autumn, our springtime is upon us. This year started off with some good rains, which was the cause of much optimism throughout the farming community. Wheat farmers completed a record in the area sown, believing that this time there would be sufficient follow-up rains to ensure a decent crop. Sadly, since May, scarcely any rain has fallen, the crops which for a time grew well and looked good, have begun to wither and fade long before maturity. The only option to a total loss is to cut and bale up what's left of the crop as hay. This means very little wheat to harvest, and not much to export. Water storages are at a record low in most parts of the country.

Congratulations on the occasion of presentation of your Veteran's Badge. I received a copy via Christina recently. On the subject of the bunker, I seem to remember that, at the time, quite a touch of security was attached to a chain of these posts in locations in southern Scotland. Many were hurriedly built in 1940 when the Germans were preparing to invade on a daily basis. Just at the time I left school in 1940, the evacuation of most of our army was completed, through Dunkirk.

Regards to all at Muirkirk from

JOHN FERGUSON.

Ballaret, 12th November, 2007

Dear Jimmy and Betty,

As the year gallops along we have recently enjoyed an event which has, of recent years, become something of a rarity in our part of the world. We actually had a wet day, and the rain fell in most parts of Victoria, even as far afield as the Mallee. Harvesting has begun in that district, even a much reduced crop yield is better than having none. The fall was the first here since early July, and thankfully has replenished stock dams and domestic rain water tanks. This relief does little to rebuild reservoir stocks, but at least may be the sign of better times ahead. Everyone believes that we are due such times again.

Even at this early stage, preparations are full on for most people in regard to end-of-year holidays. In days gone by our family holidays would include a two-week stint with our own caravan, which would be sited centrally at Geelong. From this base we would take day trips to beaches at Torquay, Apollo Bay, Ocean Grove, Warmambool and other venues, where our two girls and ourselves would swim or paddle in the shallow water. Beach cricket (using tennis balls) was popular. Nowadays, even pre-teeners demand, and often receive, trips to Bali and Gold Coast in North Queensland as their idea of a holiday. How things have changed.

Even though they have been here 1½ years, Tina and Andy are thrilled that some of their annual holiday including Christmas and New Year will be spent on the beautiful beaches near Geelong.

Regards from John and Betty Ferguson.

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This picture was taken at Boobula station, near Wamganella, about mid-September, 1961. The wool being loaded is near the end of the 1100 bale clip. The shearing workforce there was 14 shearers, plus about the same number of other workers. Most of the sheep on that property cut about 15 pounds each of wool, one of the highest averages in Australia. Owners were Wallace Bros. The simple lift was built by a worker on the station. An old Land Rover (out of sight) provided the lifting power. Sheep numbers varied from year to year-35,000 upwards. Contractor was C. D. Mooney

**AFTER THE FLOODS** (May, 2011)

At last I have managed to practically catch up with some writing. After more than two months suffering from a hacking cough, it's gone as suddenly as it came. Oddly enough, several people in our area were affected in a similar manner, none of them having any previous history of this virus. At the present time, people in the Murray River area are being harassed by a mosquito-borne virus which so far has caused four deaths. Mosquitos have had so many stagnant pools of water, left after the January floods, to breed in, that they are now in plague numbers. A particularly dangerous sub-species, usually found only in the warmer northern areas, is spreading fairly recently across S. Australia and Northern Victoria. The locust threat petered out after the cooler weather arrived, thankfully. Only a very small portion of green crops in Victoria were attacked, though in N.S.W. around Wagga Wagga and Condobolin, anything green and growing was devastated. One farmer, who had grown an acre of cauliflower destined for the Sydney market, in a few days time, had the misfortune to have a migrating swarm descend on his prize crop. Three hours later all that was left were a few stumps that the airborne pirates had not demolished. Most of these swarms depend on wind movements to migrate, often winds take them far over the ocean, then there's no way back. They plunge into the ocean in their billions, and one can imagine shoals of fish enjoying a free feed — nature at its best.

Lake Goldsmith vintage machinery and display days have come and gone once again. This year the main theme was "Shearing Machinery then and now." We attended on one day of the rally, when I had a good look at the handpiece display, which was the main drawcord of both days. One competitor from Owyen had probably the best collection in Australia on show. He had no less than 200 exhibits wired on to blackboards—Lister, Wolseley, Moffat, Virtue, Sunbeam, and Cooper, also some American brands. Though I did not display this time, I hope to be back in six months' time for next meeting. By then I will be more organised. I did not see a better Wolseley example than my superb 1929 model which I acquired a few months ago.

Many of the permanent display sheds were flooded in January, some to one metre flood level. Some owners had stationary engines covered with water, one had a 1930's display of a boot and shoe shop with the stock floating around. Even some of the smaller tractors had their magnetos saturated. Most affected was the printing premises, where the owners had a lot to do before catching up.

Gold mining has made a comeback in Ballarat. At present the underground operation is carried out more than 700 metres below the surface. Entry is by a tunnel at a point near Bunningong, and progresses all the way to be directly underneath Ballarat. Recently the Castlemain Gold Co. purchased the whole operation from Lihir Gold, a company which has large operations in New Guinea. This city was literally built on the proceeds of the world's most productive gold-bearing area, similarly to Bendigo's claims that their strike was better. The "easy" gold was quickly taken, then deep-lead mines were sunk and exploited, coming to an end about 1920. For decades gold mining was something that belonged to the past, then the value of gold (now \$1500 per ounce) became attractive to these latest operators. The stable condition of the strata in the district makes this method possible.

**FERRY OVER THE DARLING RIVER**, circa 1955

During my early days as a shearer on the lookout for work in an industry which was, just by its nature, almost a closed shop, I had to adjust continually to just survive. I did not look on this as a disadvantage then, rather, to me it appealed as a challenge. The big established shearing contractors usually were able to pick and choose their regular work teams, few were prepared to take on learners. I sized up this reality, knowing that most contractors ignored large numbers of small owners who would employ only two or even one shearer. I had before then learned that an area known as "West of the Darling" was notorious for its "rough sheep" reputation. In my travels I had reached the district adjoining the Lake Arthur area. Here, there was a small run known as Halyluya, occupied by descendants of Scottish migrants. Learning that they would be shearing "as soon as they can get a shearer," I made my way out there to meet Gus (Angus) McGill, who confirmed that he had nearly nine hundred head to be shorn, and I could start on them next day, as soon as he could muster. Accommodation was no problem, and we got going one fine Tuesday morning. The stock there were large merinos, just the type that local shearers in most areas avoided, which explains why they weren't already shorn. There were two overhead gear stands driven by a Lister petrol engine, but apparently only one was used. Once I got going I knew that I could finish in nine working days, which proved to be the case. The McGills were a hard working hospitable family, and it had been an enjoyable two weeks working there. My next destination was the town of Bourke, and I was advised to cross the Darling at South by ferry, thereby cutting off many miles by this means. Late Friday afternoon as I approached the ferry I was surprised to find I was splashing through shallow water close to the river bank. Apparently there had been a lot of rain in catchments farther north, causing the river to run a banker, even though no rain had fallen this far down. The ferry was of the type cable driven, and with the high river, care was required to approach the ramp. I negotiated this safely and was directed to move up to the front position of the three car space. The ferry operator was a seedy looking fellow who stank of alcohol and tobacco. Just as he was about to commence the return journey he spotted a big old car being driven recklessly toward where the ramp adjoined the ferry. More by luck than good judgment the Buick Straight Eight landed more or less squarely on the deck. As soon as it stopped, out poured six rowdy, drunken men, even the driver was well under the weather. It transpired they had cut out at Trilby station that afternoon, and were heading for Bourke via South. The ferryman apparently knew some of them, and was happy to join the carousal. We had reached a point around mid-stream when one of the revellers reckoned Nobby, his mate, was missing. Hurriedly making a search of the car, they could not locate him, and the general fear was that he had fallen overboard. This view had a partly sobering effect on all of them, including the ferryman, who could be in strife if he lost a passenger. The mood of the group had changed, now they were awaiting his apparent loss. They were busy exchanging views and condolences, the general view was that Nobby was such a good little fellow and they would not see him again. By this time we were approaching the South off-ramp, and I had just entered my vehicle preparatory to driving off. Just then, howls of rage took over, and there was an altercation amongst

the passengers. One of their number had been up near the front, glanced over the side and spotted Nobby on a narrow ledge, just finishing off a bottle of beer which he had nicked from the car. He had slipped unseen onto his hiding place. The language sent in his direction would just about burn his ears off. Last I saw of them, they were piling into the car to disembark, most likely at the nearby pub. Coming off the ramp, I set off up the river road toward Bourke.

## **ON 1940's "TRAVELLERS"**

One stormy morning in 1947 I was on my way to work in the Carnwath area. From Cobbinshaw to Carnwath is not a long lead in a car, but long enough when you are on the motor bike at 6.30 on a dark morning with rain slanting down and a strong wind to battle against. On this occasion I had completed two days' ploughing some rough ground which had once been "the rough of an old forgotten golf course." The new owner was taking advantage of the subsidy which applied to such parcels of hitherto unproductive land, and was adding to his already extensive estate. The equipment I was using consisted of a D2 Caterpillar and a rugged American type single furrow plough known as the "Prarie Buster." In the two previous days I had encountered a few rocks but the going was becoming better as I came to the area where a host of gorse and other plants had thrived for generations. The owner, who had never before seen a "Cat" working at close quarters, was very taken with the way the huge furrow buried the whins and any other rubbish that was encountered. I had estimated that another three days would see the ploughing finished. Then I would be dicing the big furrows flat, then seeding in oats. With any luck, a decent crop would be harvested by September. First things first though. As I came close to my destination my headlight picked up the outline of what at first I believed to be a truck. As it came close to passing I picked out the mistakable shape of a gypsy caravan. In the fleeting moment of passing I could see, behind the dark coloured horse, and outlined by a dim light in the caravan interior, a middle-aged man and what appeared to be a young girl sitting in the driver's position. The driver sat in a high position as he seemed to be sitting on something green, now there was enough light to just make out a colour. Coming close to the gateway where I turned in to the property, I had forgotten about the caravan and drove slowly up to where my fuel trailer and Cat. sat together, on a small rise on the headland. The rain still fell, and something told me that all was



JOHN FERGUSON  
Shearing at "Horkins Hill  
Chatsworth Vic. 1960

Also  
Brian Hardy  
DiclmcIntosh  
Bill Gray  
Charlie Gibbs  
Charlie Gwynne  
Shed Hand—R. Morris



not well. For a start, there was no tarpaulin covering the Cat., which, as always, I had securely tied on after refuelling the previous night. The seat area was saturated, but fortunately, being diesel, there would be no problem with magneto and wires as found in a petrol tractor. Exploring a bit further along the headland, I came upon a small heap of horse manure, and the remains of a small fire. There was also a distinct track which could have been made by a horse drawn vehicle. All at once everything clicked into place for me. The Tinks had obviously come off the road, looking for a place to camp overnight. Getting away early in the morning, they had removed the tarpaulin from the Cat., folding it and using it up front as a driving seat. Such was my theory as I drove round the main road to the owner's main entry, to inform him operations would be slightly delayed. From there I phoned headquarters (no mobiles then), and got onto the D.O.A.S. manager. His advice, as always, was sound. Report to the Carnwath Police, go back and make sure nothing else was stolen, and continue work as usual. Calling at Carnwath Police Station, I made a statement pertaining to stolen property, signed it and was advised to go back to work and await developments." The rain had almost stopped, and I got going again, everything was going well, and it was into the early afternoon when I had a visitor, the storeman from D.O.A.S with a replacement tarpaulin. Straight after, Carnwath Police advised that they had apprehended a "travelling person" on the Langwhang. He was still sitting on the tarp., which he claimed was his own, except it had the damning evidence D.O.A.S stencilled on both sides. He had a court appearance a few days later.

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This photo was taken at Bundiyalumbak station, Wanganella, in October, 1960. I'm busy with the last and 209th for the day. These were stud ewes on this famous property. The total sheep count in these long gone days averaged 28,000. At that time 12 shearers were employed, plus ten other workers, including rouseabouts, classer, cook, expert, pressers and woolrollers. A good shed if you liked big wrinkly merinos, which I did. Contractor was C. D. Mooney.



**SOME NOTES** (Penned in July, 2011)

Weatherwise we are having a cold winter, with enough rain to see the end of the drought. The mouse plague in the Mallee and parts of the Wimmera caused a situation almost unheard of before. Many farmers have completely resown their crops a second time, as the first sowing was almost completely eaten within days of going into the ground. That was even after baiting/poisoning on a massive scale. So much zinc sulphide has been used in the past few months that the two factories who manufacture this product cannot keep up with demand. Just imagine the expense of resowing 1,000, 2,000, or 3,000 acres. Some farmers have even more than that under crop.

Fairly recently, the Lihir Gold Company sold out to the Castlemaine Gold Company. The latter commenced mining in existing underground operations where Lihir had only enjoyed a return of two pennyweight of gold per ton of quartz crushing. They had only done a month's work when lo and behold, a sizeable vein of quartz was encountered which on crushing showed a return of fourteen pennyweight per ton, with a large mass of similar quartz ahead of the drills. These operations are being carried out about 550 metres underneath Ballarat City area. The entrance to the mine (no vertical shaft) is taken from ground level to the drilling level via a gentle slope over several kilometers. There is a small amount of mining gold being carried out in various locations in Victoria. The current price of \$1600 per ounce is enough to keep many fossickers busy, and the sales of gold detectors at an all-time high.

At about the time of the end of the Second World War, I was drilling up for potato planting on the lower slopes of Tinto Hill in Lanarkshire. On completion of the job, I walked up to the house to have my work completion order signed, usual procedure. They were a hospitable family, and I was invited to stay over for tea. The owners, who were aged about 60, still had their father, who was 90 odd, living with them. He was a mine of information, and had lived there all of his life. As a boy he was brought up on a croft of about 20 acres. His father eventually bought two adjoining places. The place they wished to live in had a dirt floor, so they decided to put down a cement floor. Part of the work meant carting gravel from a nearby stream. While mixing a batch for the floor, he spotted an unusual looking stone among the gravel. Picking it out and giving it a good wash, he decided that it was a gold nugget. Completing the laying down of the floor was a priority at the time, but when he next visited Lanark on market day, he obtained advice from a geologist that it was pure gold. This eminent gentleman was most anxious to know the exact location of the find, no doubt to further his own interests. Old Bill chuckled when he reminisced that he mentioned some other stream as the source of the gravel. Shortly after, various locals mentioned seeing the geologist and two burly workmen taking a keen interest in the stream which Bill had carelessly mentioned. They even used a sluice for some days before giving up an apparently futile exercise. The old man had a faraway look in his eyes, telling me how he sometimes had a dig around where the gravel came from, but had long since given up that pastime, since he found no more trace of gold, as he put it, "not even a bloody skerrit." The time frame when the cement floor went down was, in Bill's own words, "just before the Boer War."

## **WALLACE — A POPULAR HERO**

Late in 1947 I had occasion to be sent to a property on the Forth-Lanark Road. On this place a mechanical drain digger and tile layer had been working for some weeks, coming close to finishing. Only one of these outfits was operated by the D.O.A.S. It consisted of a Fordson tractor modified by having instead of drive wheels, a six-section on both sides which gave a track-laying action known as the Rotaped. The power drive operated the digger, and a series of pulleys and roller chains kept the automatic pipe layer going. The two speeds were 1/8 M.P.H. and 1/4 M.P.H. The regular driver was absent on this occasion, and his replacement was a rather slap-dash operator who resided in Forth. The owners of the estate had long been on the "non-preferred" list of farmers who had their work done by D.O.A.S operators. The drivers absolutely detested the owners, also the manager, who seemed to go on the wrong side everyone without even trying. At any rate my instructions were clear and had nothing to do with the drain digger. The field being drained consisted of about forty acres and was drained in two sections, the first having been finished some weeks before. The remaining half was to be drained at a different angle to the other owing to the fall of the land. The first section, which had been completed, was to be ploughed, the second was to be returned to pasture at a later date. On this date I arrived at the property with a Ford Major and fuel trailer. Just after came Jock Stoddart with the low loader carrying the Henderland plough, a double-furrow, nice and heavy, which I would be using. The owner had stressed that he wanted the ploughing done square across the now filled-in drains. No problems there, I soon had the two lands struck out, nice and straight, and ploughing at the depth which was requested. By mid-afternoon you could see the pattern emerging, a well-ploughed piece of land. Every once in a while, one or another of the workers would come down from the bighouse, walk along the furrow, and measure the depth at which the plough was working. There was a certain aloofness about all the personnel on this place, including the owner. None of them would talk to you except when complaining about something. This made no difference to me, as I knew that doing a top class left no avenue for complaint. At the completion of each day's work, I would head down to the bottom gate from where I'd come in each morning. I would pass the time of day with Harry as he would also be heading home after the day's work. He was less than impressed when he learned the owner had spied on him with field glasses from a distant hedge. He had spotted this behaviour accidentally a day or two before, but decided to ignore it. After all, he would be finished next day anyway. We each kicked up our motor bikes, Harry on his big Panther to the Forth, me on my old Ariel to Cobbinshaw. The following day turned out quite well. Harry was going to finish mid-morning and pack up the plant and await the transporter to pick up and return everything to the Depot. A Caterpillar with dozer blade was brought back into action from where it had been left when it had finished backfilling the trenches where I was now ploughing. This machine took less than two days to complete the backfill leaving a nice even surface ready for grass sowing. The dozer operator, plant operator, transporter driver and myself gathered together for a yarn over our ½-half-hour lunchtime. On enquiring as to why each and every DOAS operator was offside with the owner of this estate, Bob put it in a few words. "These are the descendents of the dirty mongrel who betrayed Wallace to the English." The name Monteoth still drew scorn with the people of Lanark more than 600 years after the event.



A PRIZE-WINNING AUSTRALIAN MERINO