

PLOD ESSAY: Rich and Complex Social Fabric



Wonthaggi Historical Society members at their railway station home, standing left to right, Arthur Quilford, Lyn Chambers, Joe Chambers, Mike Kirschner, Brian Clancy, Enid Hayes, Bill Hayes, George Simpson, Allan Bremner; seated Pauline Kirschner, Sylvia Chisholm, Jean Bremner, Gwen Opie, Alison Brooks, Irene Williams, Mary Mabin, Margaret Rixon and in front, the two youngest members, Matthew Clements and Simon Longstaff, both 12. The two boys have made several finds while fossicking around the old mine sites and Simon has researched a book on the 1924 McBride Tunnel fire which killed two men, one of whom was his great grandfather, John Johnson. Matthew has also taken on a project on the mine's history. Members unable to be there for the picture were secretary, John Bordignon, president Peter Brooks and Val and Alan Birt.

*About the time of our Annual Dinner in 2019, Wonthaggi & District Historical Society turned 50 – fifty years old. What follows is an edited overview of the first 30 years based on material written up by Noel Maud for the **Sentinel Times** in 1987 and augmented by some more current information:*

It came as something of a surprise when one of the Wonthaggi Historical Society's foundation members, Arthur Quilford, announced at the 30th anniversary dinner that their group was the third oldest such society in country Victoria, particularly as Wonthaggi's history is among the most recent. Although Wonthaggi did not come into existence until 1909, the social fabric is richer and more complex, its high and low points more dramatic than many much older towns. Since forming in 1959, when Jim Glover and Arthur Quilford got together and decided to organise a dinner with the intention of creating an Historical Society, the Society members have managed to accumulate a formidable array of material that graphically charts the peculiarities, paradoxes, ironies and uncertainties of a mining town.

Almost immediately, a wealth of artefacts found and donated by the people who worked and lived in the town and were anxious to have their lives documented for posterity found their way into boxes of material stashed in any spare corner of the houses belonging to Society members since for eighteen years up until 1977, they had no permanent meeting place. Arthur Quilford's home, in particular, became crowded with Society material. Not just inside either. For years people were directed to the Quilford home by the bullock dray (now on the station platform) parked on the nature strip. It was a gift from local

bullocky, Bill Shandley, but became a symbol of the Historical Society and meant that over time Arthur's name became synonymous with that of the Society.

Over the first thirty years members had collected between 700 and 800 photographs (by now many more) of the town some of them so impressive that the Arts Ministry gave the Society a grant to have them enlarged and mounted. Perhaps even more importantly, the early members recognised that the stories the people themselves told of their lives should be collected and treasured. It was, in particular, Joe and Lyn Chambers who took on that responsibility, hauling their large tape recorder from person to person and making sure speakers at the meetings were also recorded. Back in the days before cassette tapes followed by digital recorders it was Joe who asked the questions and Lyn who took notes and controlled the recorders. Early on, Lyn, the Society Secretary, would transcribe her notes and the recorded voices in her careful Librarian's hand then she would file them away in cardboard boxes donated to her by the National Archives in Melbourne. Later John Bordignon was in charge of the recordings, stopping the speaker to change the cassettes in the middle of a talk. Thus, in the first thirty years, between 90 and 100 tape recordings were made to build up an impressive oral history library of the coal town and its residents. Since then digital recordings have been made and put on CDs carefully filed by Secretary, Irene Williams. They now number in the many hundreds.

One of Joe Chambers' favourite collected stories concerns the mining town's 'Doc' Sleeman, who arrived when it was a tent town and died on the very day the mine closed. In the early days the doctor got

about by horse and buggy and sometimes he carried a saddle with him for when the going got too rough for a vehicle. One night he was called out the back of Hicksborough to a confinement, but he was too early and rather than trek back, he settled by the log fire and played poker with the woman's husband.

Joe, a natural story teller himself, said, "The doc was not doing too well and started wishing the baby would arrive. Eventually it did and the husband asked the Doc what he owed him. 'Oh, the usual half guinea,' said the Doc. The husband did some quick calculations and said, 'Well, you give me three shillings and nine pence and we're square.'"

The Society has not only collected information about some of the town's great characters, it has collected the characters themselves as members. One of them was Jim Glover, who, as well as founding the Society and being an art teacher, was a conservationist before the word was ever used. According to Joe Chambers, he was a beach and bush wanderer and an expert on orchids, Aboriginal middens and artefact scatters. "Once," said Joe, "Jim found the jaw and thigh bones of an Aboriginal. He took the jaw to Frank Turner, the dentist, to see if he could identify its origins. The next thing the police arrived at his door wanting to be taken to where he found it." (The story goes no further, but some still in the society might know it.)

Since then the Shire and the Society worked together to write the oral history of Wonthaggi based on these collected recordings extended by many other interviews, letters and talks over the years. It was published in 2009 in time for Wonthaggi's Centenary. But before that, people like Joe & Lyn Chambers, Arthur Quilford, Jon Sleeman, Sam Gatto and more have written many books about aspects of the mining town. With the books, photographs, recordings and artefacts, the Society has gathered together a most valuable archive.

The Society's members have not only been collectors of stories and artefacts. They have been activists as well, working to keep the history of a unique town alive and relevant. In 1960, a local builder got on the Council and persuaded it to agree to remove all verandah posts within ten years. He

thought, "Run down, broken verandas would lead to people driving straight through Wonthaggi. Eventually, all verandas were gone except for Ludbrooks on the corner of McBride Avenue and Graham Street, and Taberners Hotel. When Ricky Pryor of Ludbrooks finally gave into the Council the Society swung into action. It organised a petition and got 2000 people to sign it and led a large deputation to the next Council meeting where they persuaded the Council to leave Taberners intact.

In 1968 when the mine closed, the clear-out of buildings and materials was so rapid that the Society could not retain a building for its own purposes and neither could they get any authority to reserve significant sections of the mine for posterity. They fought a rear-guard action to have the government preserve 5-Brace as a tourist attraction working with the Lions Club to have architectural plans drawn up, but to no avail. For the rest of his life, Joe Chambers would not let drop the dream of a replica being built at Eastern Area. At least the pressure from other people and the society resulted in the entire area being reserved as a flora and fauna refuge. In the end Joe marvelled how rapidly the blackened site returned to bush: "There are now blackboys growing within a foot of where the mining skips used to run," he admitted.

In 1978 the Society was granted the disused railway station as its regular meeting place, which would eventually become its museum where all the artefacts in all the members' homes would come to rest. But, this eventuality was ironic in that the Society had been one of the strongest advocates for retaining the passenger and goods rail services. Society members had taken part with many other Wonthaggians marching right up to Parliament House in Melbourne wheeling prams, waving placards in support of retaining the line.

So much more has gone on since the Railway Museum has become the Society's permanent home.

We will attempt to listen to and transcribe some of the old stories gathered over the years to publish in the PLOD over this 51st year of a very important Wonthaggi institution.

- edited by C. Landon