

PLOD ESSAY: Wild Times in a Mining Town

At the beginning of an interview conducted in 1983 with, by then, old timers, Alan Bremner and Harry Haddow, Joe Chambers asked, "What do you remember about the Broad Committees?" That was the only question he had to ask. These two friends were natural born story tellers and tried to outdo each other with one whopper after another. After an hour, Joe had to stop them since the tape was running out. It seemed these two fellows could have gone on for a few more days without taking a breath. What follows is most of their conversation in their own words.

The Broad Committee & the '34 Strike

Alan: Well, during the '34 Strike, the Union established a system of keeping the strikers afloat. There were lots of different committees and the Broad Committee run the whole lot. There was the Hall committee, the Relief committee, there was the Woodcutters committee, and another committee digging and making up sacks of potatoes, and the committee running the Barbers. All sub-committees. The potato diggers, for instance, relied on different farmers like old Bolding who had paddocks with leftover spuds that were still in the ground and if they didn't get them up they would rot, so they asked us to dig them up and then we could use them. Then another farmer would offer wood that needed chopping up and carted off. Sometimes we would go to the dairy farmers and buy a cow that was old and no longer of use to the herd and then one of the butchers would slaughter it and cut it up for the Committee and we would put it in parcels. You'd be surprised at the men we had in the union – the miners who were digging coal – who were butchers, cobblers, builders, frankers, all sorts of things who could take on the jobs for the Committee because they had worked all sorts of jobs before they came to the mines.

Harry: We all did all this work for nothing for the miners who were on strike. We were on strike ourselves. We were doing this for the Union. Only in strike time. Otherwise they wouldn't stand for it at all. I remember a fellow named Mike Lace, who could snob boots. [*'snob' is 18thC slang for 'cobbler'*] I had offered to snob his boots for him and he said, "Give me the leather and I'll do me own." So that's what he did. They had a Committee who would repair the boots, but I also thought I could do me own.

Alan: Another thing that was interesting was going to the Union Theatre to collect your rations. If you went there, you lined up in order of rows: the front row first and then people after you would fill up the second row and the like. You couldn't just go in and sit anywhere. Then when it was time to pick up your order, they'd say, "Right, A Row come in." so A Row would get up and go down the stairs with their gunny bags and you'd have your ticket saying what you had come to collect – sometimes you were collecting for more than one family – and the different ones would put a shovel full of whatever for the amount of people. Well, I was never collecting for just myself but for my parents and

my two brothers, so there had to be enough for five people. So they might give me two shovels full of spuds and then I'd come to the jam table and they'd say, "how many?" I'd say, "two tins of jam." Then you'd go along and get other things and the last that'd go in was the meat. You wouldn't want to put the spuds in on top of the meat. As you were walking out the door the last thing they'd give you was a couple of loaves of bread. You'd walk out with a bundle of goods on your back and the bread under your arm. This was all from the Broad Committee you see. You'd go get your goods twice a week.

Harry: We used to go camp at Eagles Nest. There were quite a few people camping out there as well as us. This was during the strikes. On Tuesdays we'd go into Town with the gunny bag and get all the things in it and then go back out to the beach. And we lived pretty well because we were living on garfish, crayfish, ducks and everything else. Nobody would stop you from doing anything on the coast back then. We were living like royalty. I think everybody did. Plenty of food and plenty of vegetables. We had everything but money. We used to go into the town after hunting rabbits. There were rabbits galore in those days. We used to sell the skins. And got a few bob. We averaged about 6 pence a skin. It wasn't much. But we had lots of fun.

I remember during the '34 strike, the weather the whole time was beautiful. None of us wanted to go back to work. We really enjoyed ourselves for five months! I remember we would go up the mountain every day and pull some sand behind us to see who could go the fastest. We didn't have any money, but we had a good time.

Alan: During the strikes, the businesses stood by us. Old Man Wishart, Jimmy Wishart, had a store and he stood by us. I met a bloke when I was in the fire brigade some years later, who said his name was James Wishart Brennon. I said I knew a fellow named James Wishart in Wonthaggi, "You wouldn't be any relation to Jimmy Wishart would ya?" And he said, "Not exactly but I was born in Wonthaggi." And I put two-and-two together and thought about the strike, and a bloke coming down for six weeks, and meeting up with old James Wishart who listened to his story about having no money and having a pregnant wife and asking for work. Old Jimmy would have said to him, "Don't worry, Mr Brennon, you can come here any time you want, and I'll fix you up with whatever you need. When you get back to work you can fix me up when you can."

I reckon Old James saved that man and when his little one was born, he named him for Old James Wishart. I'll bet you a quid that's what happened.

Mrs Greta Bremner (who added only two stories to the whole conversation between Alan and Harry that night in July 1983): It cudda been a different story, if you had a different frame of mind.

Alan quickly stopped her: Well, I don't think like that. It was a good story. Old James Wishart was the good kind of man he was, but I'll bet you, if young Brennen's dad was alive, he still owes Wishart for his kindness.

Greta: There was another story that's similar. A chap out of Wonthaggi called his newborn Wishart, too, didn't he? That place where Mrs Howitt went out to deliver the baby and she got pneumonia out of it? Wishart was very good...

Alan: A good man, Mother, but no that wasn't his story. You're talking about the Singleton baby that Mrs Howitt delivered. They were an English family. He was unemployed when the baby was born and they christened it, William Depression Singleton. If he's alive I'll guarantee he still carries that name

Weekend Entertainment

Harry: Aw, on Friday, Saturday and Sunday this town was alive. Really alive. Friday night, after they got their pay, the men used to walk down to the town with their wives. The wives would go off shopping and the men used to go to the pub. About 9 when the pubs were shut up and then they'd pick their wives up and go home with the women and the kids. Then there would also be the pictures and the dances. They had seven dances going. You couldn't move in the street. Everyone would be dressed up. On Friday night at Christmas and at Easter, there were that many people you couldn't walk on the foot path but had to wind your way through the horses and carts in the streets. There were several thousand people living in the town at its height.

Alan: We used to meet all the people coming off the trains, too. There were no cars in those early days. Since then the town has built up and buildings are good, but in the early days the houses were a bit rough, never mind it was great in the old days.

Harry: There weren't only dances, but house parties....

Alan: You know we were the only place in Australia that had the pictures of a Sunday. They used to turn shifts, you see, in the afternoon on Sundays, fortnight about. So, a man could see a show on Saturday night and then comeback on Sunday night and he wouldn't miss anything.

And, there was a concert on Saturday nights at the Union. I remember an English fellow who used to sing in a really high voice, and he sang about a tramp and of course they were all laughing at him and so he stopped his singing and used language I won't repeat and then walked off the stage. It made everyone laugh even harder. There was another bloke named Bill Robinson who used to swallow swords and fire and all sorts of things. There would be a group of them come on the stage and they'd sing. They'd have a comedian with 'em. I remember he told us about Noah and the ark and whenever there was a leak in the boat, Noah would take the dog and put his nose in the hole and that's why a dog always has a cold nose. Then the hole

got bigger, so he put his wife's elbow in it and that's why a woman always has a cold elbow. And, anyway, the hole got bigger and so he shoved his behind in it and that's why a man always has his back to the fire.

Harry: Another one, too, named Ivan O'Geary. He used to come on the stage and put some beauties over. He'd be standing there with a case in his hand and a bloke would come across the stage and say to him, "You've been stealing beer!" and he'd ask to look in the case. Ivan would put the case down and open it and out would jump a cat. Everyone would laugh. And then there was Tiny Snell who would dress up like a woman. He was amazing. He really was good. He was a good singer. He used to sing a comedy song about what sort of a noise annoys an oyster.

Two-up School at Pikey's & The Workman's

Harry: One of the funniest things I ever saw here was the time when they raided Pikey's. This Pikey used to have a Billiard Saloon and one of the biggest gambling rooms in Wonthaggi. The police raided it that day. I'll never forget. In comes the police and some of the fellows was trying to run out the door but there were police standing there with baseball bats banging the fellas as they came out the door. Well, you never saw so many blokes heading for the hospital to get stitched up. That was the finish of Pikey's. Good thing, too. Oh, he used to have big business going on there. I seen men go in there with their full pay on them – Alan will vouch for this – a fortnight's pay thinking they are going to make big money – and some of them did – but most came out with nothing. Scandalous. They wouldn't be able to give their wives a penny to keep the household together. Pikey's gambling saloon lasted for years. But it got so bad they had to stop it.

Alan: I think one of the things that might have stopped it was old Bill Wilson. He was a Deputy in the mine and making good money. Anyway, his son, Percy, went down to the mine office and drew his dad's pay out as well as his own and instead of going home with it, he went to Pikey's. He was doing quite well that night. He stayed until late. His dad was in bed by then. Percy had a pocket full of notes at the billiard table where they were playing two-up. The notes were falling on the floor and people were picking them up and betting against him with his own money. He wound up broke that night. He'd done the lot.

Harry: When I was working on the Brace, I was only fourteen or fifteen and I would get the fortnight's wages and the boys who were the same age a me, they used to go down to Pikey's with their money. They weren't supposed to let anyone in under eighteen but Pikey let them in and took all their money off 'em. It was terrible. Pikey was a billiards man, but on a Friday night it was all Two-up. You could hear the pennies dropping after they'd been tossed as you went down the street. A "cockatoo", someone who would be on the look-out for the police, was always hanging around out the door.

Harry: When the Workmen's started up they had SP bookies and used to play. I was the doorman – not "cockatoo" – this night when a bloke comes up to me at the door and he says, "I am going in. I'm the police," and walked past me. Usually, I knew all the police, but I didn't know this fellow. Before I could blink, all the bookies came out in a group and were shoved into a room. I was shoved in, too. The policeman looks at me and says, "Buzz off. We don't need you."

What happened in Wonthaggi was, at first the pubs were wide open. The police took no offense and they were tolerant of the gambling. They give 'em an open go, but as soon as the mine began to slow down and the veins were getting smaller and it was harder to make good wages, the police started to step in and slow everything up because there was real hardship when blokes lost their money.

Alan: You know the police used to stand on Bonds Corner and they used to meet all the trains and see all the trains off and eventually they got to know everyone in the town. But today you wouldn't know one policeman from the next. I remember the 1923 police strike when they were called to Melbourne, and they refused to go because too many of them were well known and if they had gone, they would have been looked on as scabs. They weren't willing to scab on their mates.

Street Fighting

Harry: Pikey's was a hotspot for brawls. The only time I seen police having a run with someone was when they were drunk and disorderly. And then they'd stick him out in the garden and the next morning he would work it off. They were fair. They would have a go at blokes who were brawling. They'd watch the fighting until it got too rough and then they would stop 'em and sometimes throw them in the clink, but no one really wanted to give the police trouble nor did the police ever over-step and try to ruin a man's life. It was basically a law-abiding town. Men were drinking and betting.

Alan: What about Tiger Ward and Hook'em Halligon and Chook Cunningham, and Duker Field? There was quite a mob of them. They were all pugilistics. Tiger Ward was about as broad as a table and 6ft 6in tall. When he had the blues, they'd send in four coppers at once to arrest him. They had to go at him with trudgens to stop him. I worked with Tiger in the mines and he was good to work with. I was as good a friend with him in the mines as I am with anyone, but if I saw Tiger coming towards me in the street, I would promptly cross over to the other side because if he'd had a skin full he would want to knock you down. He'd yell out something like, "Hoowah, you Bremner!" and then go "BOOM!" and pound his fist into his hand, but I was already going the other way before he got to me.

Harry: I remember going down the main street one night and right on the corner you shoulda seen him then. He was thumpin' right and left and coppers

flying every which way, but they got the best of him. They dragged him half-conscious to the cop shop. Anyway, there he was next morning with plaster all over his face. I said, "How'd you go?"

He said, "Not bad. They gave me breakfast and I worked it off in the garden." They let him go... How the police thought of it was they were saving him from himself. Someone would have eventually been killed if they'd left him to himself.

Alan: Hook'em Halligon used to get into a lot trouble. He'd get boozed up and have a fight. One day he turned up and half his ear was missing. "What happened to your ear, Hook'em?" I says. "Aw I got to fighting with [an Italian] and he took a bite out of me ear." "Strike a light, Hook'em," I says, "he's taken a piece right out. What did you do when he let you go? Ya kill him?" "No!" he says, "I run for me life."

Down in the mine

Harry: I'll say this, the miners are the best lot of people I've ever worked with. Sometimes down underground while they were working there would be arguments and you'd hear them roaring around saying what they were going to do to one another, but nothing ever came of it. They were good. They would do anything to help ya. We all worked as a team.

We had a Deputy in the mine who used to kick up a bit of trouble. One day one of the miners "jobbed" him and knocked him down. So, the Deputy run out to report him. The next day a mine inspector came around and asked, "Did you punch him?" The answer was, "I never punched him." Down in the mine the men worked in twos. The bloke being questioned turns to his mate, "You see anything?" His mate says, "I never saw anything. I heard squealing, but I never saw who was doing the squealing." The inspector turned to the Deputy and said, "I can't do anything about this because you got no witnesses." The Deputy turned and walked out. The inspector then looked at the men and said, "You bloody liars," before he followed him out.

Do you remember a bloke called Wiggins? He was put on the night shift but he couldn't sleep in the daytime. So, he complained to Brydon, the night shift deputy. So, Briden tells him to get some blackboard paint and put it over the windows. The next night Wiggins comes into work, and he tells the Deputy that he's had a good sleep, that the blackboard paint worked well. "I got plenty of sleep out of it, but I slept in so I'm running a bit late," he says. "Don't worry about that," says Brydon, "but where did you get to last night?"

Alan: Old Ted, you know...the men who were miners had a dream of getting their boys into trades... something a bit better, but old Ted Wilson always said, "Nothing like that for my boys. As soon as they turn 14, they're on the brace and when they're older they can become miners." He had no ambition for them to become anything more than miners just like he was..."

- c.r. landon, ed.