

PLOD ESSAY: Authentic Wonthaggi Voice, 1916-2013

Nell Sleeman generously welcomed Irene Williams and I into her life at the beginning of this year by allowing us to interview her and record her words for posterity. We saw her over several weeks. On the last day, she handed us about twenty sheets of closely typed pages that held the story of her early life. It had been written in her own hand and typed up by her son, Jon, in the early 1990s.

The stories in this autobiography are priceless because they are told by someone who has never lived anywhere else and still uses the original language from the early days in this town. What a treasure this is. If only we'd had it in time for some of these stories to go into the Memory book!

She was born Nell Peters in St Arnaud where her German father, who was in the German Navy, landed in about 1906 after jumping ship in Melbourne. He had taken refuge on his cousin's property there. In 1910, her father came to Wonthaggi to be an engine driver at one of the new braces being constructed. He left the family in St Arnaud until he could manage to buy a house on 3-Acre Blocks.

Nell was only a tiny baby, the youngest of eight children, when the rest of the family came to Wonthaggi. This means she has been living in this town almost her entire life, and she has been here almost the entire life of the town as well.

Nell, who married Beau Sleeman just before WWII, is 97 now and sharp as a tack. Let's see what she has to say about life in a Coal Mining Town:

The stories come and go in my mind. Probably the things I will try to recall will be all out of sequence, but I don't suppose that really matters as long as the stories themselves aren't lost.

The old miners seemed to have the habit of dobbing nicknames onto everyone and most of Hughie's [*her older brother*] mates had these weird names. A few that come to mind are: Gunner and Jidder Hughes, Tiger Ward, Hookem Halligan, Chook Cunningham, Pump Hardy, Happy Gough, and Blacky Nichols. Mum used to talk about a Mr Wilson who was called Lardhead for obvious reasons as he was as bald as a coot.

Dad used to sit on the veranda when we lived in Merrin Crescent. There was a sort of wooden sofa on it and the different old blokes – probably not so old but to us kids they seemed old – used to call in for a talk and they would sit there by the hour telling yarns about different men in Wonthaggi. Mr Geach from next door and Mr Gibson would call in on their way to the street; sometimes the milkman,

Mr Gates, would join in and Mum always used to say they were a bunch of old liars telling yarns and going one better than the other.

Sometimes I would sit on the floor and listen to them. I remember Dad had them in fits one day talking about Jack Keady. Jack ended up as the town's undertaker, but when he was young, he was learning to be an engine driver and Dad was one of his instructors. Jack had an awful stutter and he always wore a bowler hat to work. He loved that damn hat and you can imagine the ribbing he used to get for a wearing a bowler of all things to the mine! One day they pinched his hat and planted it and had Jack racing all over the place in a terrible state asking this one and that one, 'Have you s-s-s-seen my b-b-b-loody hat?' When he told the story Dad would give a demonstration and Mr Geach and old George would laugh like mad, but we kids didn't know whether they were laughing about the hat or Dad's rendition of the stuttering in his broken German English.

Old George always wore bow-yangs around his legs and Dad told me that it was to stop the snakes from running up his pants. The rubbish they used to tell me. I must have been a stupid sort of kid because all the tales they told me went down hook, line and sinker. They told me that a Bulliphant lived over on Tank Hill and ate all the naughty kids and the only thing that would be left of them were the buttons off their clothes. For years I was scare stiff of the damn thing and on Sunday nights when they would start the air fans going at Eastern Area mine, I always thought it was the noise the Bulliphant made when it was on the prowl looking for someone to eat. If Dad took us over to East Area, which he did quite often, he always cut across Tank Hill and *always* went to the trouble of pointing out the 'cave' where the Bulliphant lived and strangely enough, there were a few buttons about there. I used to be petrified and cling onto Dad's hand. As I grew older, I woke up that the 'cave' was where the kids used to dig and play in the sand, but I never worked out where those buttons came from.

Another tale told to this gullible kid was the story about the pigeons! Mr Stock lived in Broome Crescent and kept racing pigeons and I was always puzzled as to how they got home again because I knew they used to take them miles away and then let them go. I could never get a ready answer from Dad who used to tell me to ask Mr Stock. So, one day I finally plucked up enough courage when I met him coming home from school. It took some doing, too, I was a silly kid, frightened of everything, but I asked and he told me a tale about how they carried a little map under their wing and when they became tired, they would land somewhere, have a rest, then have a

look at the map and take off again. He had a silly look on his face that made me a bit suspicious. So I asked Mr Powell, who lived a couple of doors from us, and that old fool kept it going saying, yes that it would be the only way they could find their way back. So, stupid me believed it for years and years and thought how clever the damn pigeons were!

Dad was a clown and he was always kidding up one fellow or another. He told one new chum, a Pom, who must have been as stupid as me, or else as thick as two planks, that the Kookaburra's laughing was actually his pigs calling out for their dinner. He also made Mum hopping mad by having another newcomer running all over town trying to get a set of 'goanna eggs'. Dad and Co had him kidded up that the best breed of hens were goanna hens and he thought Mrs Goldsmith kept them so he went careering up to Mrs Goldie, who was as cranky as Dad, and she told him that she had just sold the last setting and sent him somewhere else, and they had him running everywhere until Dad said to try the Missus, that she had some and he might fluke a few eggs from her. Of course, when he got to Mum, and she put the show away by telling him they were having him on. Mum didn't seem to have a funny bone in those days.

That's the sort of nonsense that went on amongst the miners. There always seemed to be some mad story going around that had them laughing their heads off. They had to, I suppose, because things were tough and accidents happened down below and they never knew when they would happen and men were killed.

When a fatal accident happened, the mine stopped for a funeral, and all the miners marched behind the hearse. The Union Band would lead playing 'The Dead March' – awful thing – and the drum would go 'boom' every now and then, and the miners, hundreds of them would march from the church, up Cameron Street to the cemetery. Then after the burial, back would march the band, playing jazzy tunes! We kids always ran down Cameron Street corner to watch the procession go by.

Talk about processions! What about Happy Gough? Drop you hat here in the early days and there would be a procession. They used to have them for anything. Old Happy used to organise them and lead them on his white horse. There would be the Union Band, a few scruffy decorated carts and bikes, sometimes kids marching and old Happy at the front twirling a stick about the horse's ears and crowds would come from all over town to watch.

There were other means of entertainment. There were three picture theatres in the early days of the

town: The Union, The Soldiers and Smith's Crystal Palace that was next door to Bond's corner and was always known as the Flea Palace. Mum wouldn't go there, so we went to The Soldiers. Hard damn seats, benches really, like the seats in churches and they would be packed in until you could hardly move and then they would bring in chairs and put them down the aisle. God knows what would happen had a fire broken out.

The Union Band, made up mostly of miners, used to always play outside the Union Theatre every Saturday night and at the Crystal Palace, Gus Keupher used to be the spruiker. He was as ugly as a hat full of snakes, but he would be dressed up in a real flash uniform and a top hat and stick, yelling at the top of his voice what would be on the program inside and who was acting in it.

Another form of entertainment happened in the street. Just about every Saturday there would be a fight all over the road outside one of the pubs when 6 o'clock came around. Mum and I walked to town to go to the pictures and as we walked down Church Hill we would be able to see the men fighting and Mum would get into a state in case Hughie was in the middle of it. Gunner and Jidder Hughes were Hughie's mates and they were good on the beer and always seemed to get into trouble and if anyone hit either of them, well, our Hughie would hop in, so you can see why Mum used to get toey.

Pikey's was another hotspot for brawls. It was a billiard saloon plus a Two-up School and also an SP Bookie. Many a pay didn't get past Pikey's. The police raided it now and then, but he always had a couple of lookouts on duty: one in Graham Street and the other in the lane running down the side of the place. They were called 'Cockatoos'. Hughie used to say when the raid started, all the lights would go out and the players would grab as much money out of the ring as they could get and go for their lives. No wonder there was a lot of hardship in the town.

When the strikes were on, the Union used to run Pleasant Sunday afternoons. The Union Theatre used to be packed because it was free and no one could afford to go to the pictures. I can still remember the songs we sang, old favourites that you hear on the radio even today! Eric Snell used to be the compare – he went off to Melbourne and was a big noise on 3DB or 3UZ, but he always came back when they had the community singing.

- edited by C. Landon

