

PLOD ESSAY:

Beau's Poetry with a little help from Nell

Jon Sleeman writes of his Dad, "As a clerk, Beau Sleeman manipulated figures for a living, but he manipulated words for his amusement and that of others. While most of his poems were meant for fun, some are introspective and some provide valuable record of a time and lifestyle now long gone."

Beau used to entertain his kids with funny rhymes about anything. Here is one:

WHY NOT CHOOKS?

Why do they call them chickens
In current recipe books?
If they weigh more than a kilo
Their proper name is chooks

We knocked them off at Christmas
When they were too old to lay
And we were too poor for turkey
To celebrate Christmas Day.

And some too tough for roasting
Were put in the pot to cook –
Stewed up with spuds and onion
To a recipe not in the book.

But back to these so called chickens –
If they are as young as we're told
And not the age-old boilers-
Then I am about ten years old!

He had a poem or two always on the ready for his kids:

SOME CHRISTMAS CAROLS

The shepherd's smock was far too tight,
For he could not sit down,
And so he said, "Oh, pig's to this!"
And headed off to town.

More?

It's the night before Christmas-
I feel like a louse...
There isn't a thing to eat in the house
The dough that I had
I put on a horse
That never even completed the course.

And finally,
Christmas is coming-
The geese are getting fat,
Fatter than Peter Membrey
What do you think of that?

And this effort arose out of a vigorous discussion on whether it was necessary to dot your 'I's and 'j's these days...

GRANDMA!

I don't care what anybody says;
I never dot my "i"s or "j"s...
Maybe I did when I went to school,
But then, if you didn't,
You'd be nuts
And end up getting lines or cuts.

Here is a memory:

THE GRAHAM PAIGE

My in-laws owned a Graham Paige, way back
in forty-seven
To be taken for a ride I was the nearest thing to
heaven
When the speedo went to forty, it really was a
thrill
Tho' I oft thought she'd never make it up the
old Bass Hill.
Sometimes the radiator boiled as the engine got
too hot
And we had to wait on the roadside for the
'bubbling' to stop.
It didn't have any seat belts and seated only
three.
My favourite was the 'dickie seat' as the wind
blew over me.
The side curtains were a sort of celluloid, but
the windscreen it was glass,
And the lads in their jaunty sports cars would
toot as they went past.
There's much more I could tell about, but I am
running out of time;
For there's many other poets who can put their
old cars to rhyme.
And now, as like my in-laws, the Graham Paige
is laid to rest
I wonder if our Kingswood would pass the
'old car' test.

Nell, Beau's wife, had a great memory for detail. While Nell made her memories into stories, Beau wrote poems. Here is Nell's view of Friday nights followed by Beau's view of Saturday nights:

"Friday nights were late night shopping nights and the shops were open until nine o'clock and they were always busy. I think everyone in Wonthaggi used to go down the street, some to shop but mostly just to meet up with anyone they knew and have a talk. Bond's corner used to be the Aussie Corner and Ludbrook's was the Italian

corner. There would be dozens and dozens of men gathered around talking and it was difficult to get past. They all used to give the girls the glad eye as they tried to get by.

“I remember we kids used to look forward to Friday night shopping. We would run around the street and spend our money – not much – on lots of rubbish. At Christmas time you could get lots of bargains, especially fruit and we would buy cherries by the mile.

“The Union and Salvation Army bands would be playing songs and hymns. In the middle of all this noise would be Ernie Howell, who had a funny sort of faith all of his own, trying to convert everyone without much success, but he always had a good crowd listening. While he was preaching the Irish Queen and her friend, Mrs Tarpot, would be dancing around the silent cop on the corner of Graham Street and McBride Avenue to the music of the bands.”

Here is Beau’s version of events down the street on the weekends:

CHARACTERS

There was Jimmo and Jacko and Hookem
And Plantie and Tiger Ward...
We needed no other amusements.
With them no one ever was bored.

On Saturday nights outside Pylies’
A good stoush would end up as an eight
When Chook got stuck into Tiger
And the others joined in as their right.

So you passed on the way to the Plaza
There the show of the night was Tom Mix,
But with action like this on the footpath,
Who needed to go to the flicks?

And the Salvos – they played on the corner
Battler Nelson in the midst of the ring
Calling on all of the sinners
To join with the Lassies and sing.

Ernie Howell, on the opposite corner,
Wildly brandishing Bible in hand,
Preached a peculiar religion
Of a sort seldom heard in the land.

These characters gave entertainment
And each one of them acting their part –
But when you desired to avoid them
You head for old Christie’s pie cart.

And here is Beau’s poem about a man who didn’t mind being ‘on the min.’ According to Jon, Beau’s son, “A contract miner working in a reasonable bord was expected to produce well

and make good wages. The minimum wage (the Min), which was 19 shillings 7pence per shift at the time this poem was written, was intended to be paid only to those miners working in difficult conditions where it was impossible to produce at a normal level. To be ‘on the Min’ for a significant time was to invite dismissal for incompetence and so the miner’s reply in this poem to Jim Byrne, the Mine Manager at the time left him flabbergasted and without ready reply.”

THE MINER

Now he was never flustered
And his skin was not so thin
That he couldn’t stand admonishing
For being ‘on the Min’.

While others toiled with vigour
To avoid the dreaded Min.
To him it was a way of life,
And not a deadly sin...

But when he cavilled this new bord,
Regarded as the best,
It was thought that he’d be trying
And the Min would get a rest!

No, no, that did not happen...
He was on the Min again,
And the deputy told the manager
He had reason to complain.

So down below came Jimmy
To come don thick and hard.
He said, “You’re not trying!
I’ve seen your Min Wage card!

“The party you took over from
Made forty bob a day,
Yet, we’ve had to make you up.
So what have you to say?”

“Well, Jimmy,” said the miner,
“That’s the Min Wage twice.
If we all got two pounds a shift,
Well, wouldn’t that be nice?”

Thanks to Nell Sleeman for donating Beau’s poems and her own childhood memories to the Historical Society. You’ll hear more.