

PLOD ESSAY

A Woman's Vision; Clara's Story

by her son, Geoff Johnson, the youngest of her seven children
(Clara Letita Johnson 1883-1972)

Clara Letita Ah Chow married Julius Johnson on 10 November 1910 at Bruthen. It must be recorded that 'Jule', as my Dad was known, was a happy participant in all of the lifetime endeavours of Clara. They accomplished so much in a long lifetime together.

Bear with me, for what I now relate has a bearing on my parents' lifetime of endeavours.

I start with Clara's honeymoon in 1910 at Blackwood in Central Victoria. Here, in a short time, she and her new husband, Jule, unearthed gold to the value of six-hundred English pounds. This was a sizeable amount of money for 1910. It enabled the newly weds to come to Wonthaggi and purchase several blocks of real estate on the corner of Graham Street and Billson Street. Back then a person could buy a house block in Wonthaggi for £8 and build something on it for another £5. Clara and Jule built shops that they rented out for business interests. Once established, this locality became known as Johnson's Corner and remained Johnson's Corner for many years to come.

The couple kept one shop for themselves to operate, trading at the front and living in the back. It was where Clara ran a business called "The Hamburger Shop", the first business of its kind in Wonthaggi, or possibly anywhere. An innovator, Clara commissioned round, flat rolls from the Co-op Bakery to use for her burgers. They were a hit.

I spent the first twenty-three years of my life living at the back of The Hamburger Shop, but that wasn't the end of Clara's business enterprises. It was the beginning of an incredible venture for Clara and Jule into the business and social activities in the new Borough of Wonthaggi, the seaside hamlets of Inverloch and Cape Paterson and the farmlands



of Drouin.

Clara's entrepreneurial ventures extended to Inverloch. She purchased a large tract of land opposite what is now the boat ramp and car park encased by three roads North, East and West. She then purchased several business blocks now identified as the Inlet Hotel site and also all close-by parcels of land available. She had a different shop constructed on each parcel and during summer holidays she employed as many as sixteen girls and a few men to run businesses for tourists' convenience.

Clara showed flair for progress, actively pushing for an Inverloch water supply and electricity. When the electricity supply was delayed, she had a wind tower erected behind her premises to supply energy to batteries, which powered the shops. With the advent of the SEC (State Electricity Commission) power, Clara had a very large refrigerator installed. This proved a revelation to the customers who bought ice cream that was made on site. Soda fountains and other delights progressed into a



new era for retail cafes, milk bars and lolly shops.

Soon Clara and Jule, along with the Fultons, were the first to select farmland at Cape Paterson. Their 540 acres was later developed by their youngest son, and that was me.

Clara and Martha Fulton took Borough Councillors in their 1928 Chevrolet Van along the Track* to “The Cape” on a “progress development mission”. On the way the Councillors were required to push the van out of the bogs while dressed in their best at the time. Surely, this convinced them to construct a real road of built up metal to The Cape.**

Regardless of road problems, Clara, along with her sister-in-law, Alma Mackieson, (Clara’s sister-in-law, Jule’s sister), established the shop at Cape down near the beach. Their respective hubbies built the impressive footbridge over what was then a creek near the shop entrance. The bridge provided the final link to the sand dunes and beach.

In the difficult depression years of the early 1930s Clara and Alma became part of the Welfare Committee who gave assistance to so many in need. These two girls prevailed upon local traders who willingly donated materials such as roofing iron, a black coal burning stove, a galvanised fireplace and more. The two girls even set to and constructed a galvanised iron shed to take the place of a tent situation that housed a rather poor large family. This abode was located in scrubland, which is now the Wonthaggi Football Ground. The details of this somewhat remarkable achievement are so heart warming and typical of many stories of these hard times of the depression years.

The start of the Second World War saw the three eldest sons of Clara join the services. Along with all residents left at home, Clara was active in serving her community on Welfare and Support Committees and they simply did whatever they could to help. Many warm friendships were developed during this time. Clara took over the café owned by her eldest son, Mel, when he was in Malaya – Changi and Burma – in order to keep it open for his return.

Upon his return Mel then built the Astor Café on the site that is now the Miner’s Dispensary.

Clara always had an eye out for yet another enterprise to invest in, and her entrepreneurship and vigorous pursuits for progress during her time had a huge influence on her children’s lives. For instance, during the War, she and Jule purchased the dairy from Drouin South, which was then farmed by daughter, Doris, and son-in-law, Ken McMaster.

She and Jule were foundation members of the Wonthaggi Baptist Church. Their seven children had attended and all had their early education in Wonthaggi Schools. When they grew up, Clara and Jule actively engaged in the children’s own extensive business activities established in and around Wonthaggi.

Clara’s business acumen, advice and guidance were keenly sought and thankfully put to action. She was an exceptional role model in her time to her family and an outstanding citizen to her community with strong desire to help and show concern towards others.

Her final years were spent in one of the early brick residences built by her sons and situated at 186 Graham Street. She passed away on 24 September, 1972 at the age of 89 years. Her husband, Jules, had passed earlier on 11 June, 1966. He was 90 years old. Both were put to rest at the Wonthaggi Cemetery.



**The track initially pushed its way through tea tree scrub by Legg’s Horse-and-Cart and then by others who made their way along it to the shacks and the Life Saving Club at Cape from 1920 to 1950.*

***This stone road was made by Moyles, et al, but not until the 1950s after the War.*