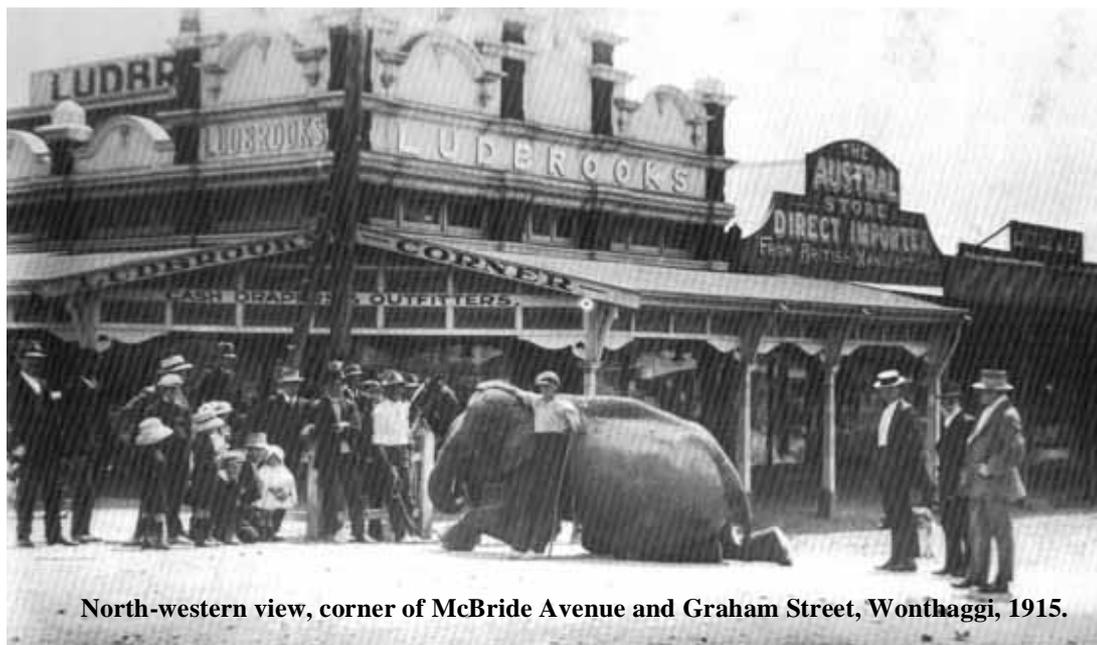


PLOD ESSAY: Elephant hunting in Wonthaggi



North-western view, corner of McBride Avenue and Graham Street, Wonthaggi, 1915.

TRAVELLING circuses still exist in Australia, but by and large they belong to the past. Public safety and animal welfare issues make them largely anachronistic today, and those that do exist are a mere shadow of those that have gone before.

When I was young, a number of travelling circuses visited Wonthaggi. In fact, it was possible to have schoolyard arguments debating which was the best circus: Sole Brothers, Ashton's, Wirth's or Bullen's.

The ones that came by rail set up their circus tents on a vacant block of land next to the railway station. The ones that came by road set up at the recreation reserve, and they were the ones of most interest to us little boys. Circuses of the time had the usual complement of clowns, acrobats and trapeze artists, but it was the animal acts that attracted the biggest following. All circuses had performing horses and some had camels to go with them. No circus was complete without lions and there were sometimes tigers too. Monkeys were mandatory. I don't recall bears, but there must have been some. Best of all were elephants.

Elephants were long-time visitors to Wonthaggi. I have 100-year-old photos of elephants wandering down Graham Street to publicise a circus visit, surrounded by kids, women in bustles and men in boaters.

To the north of the recreation reserve is a several-hectare area of ti-tree scrubland, now a wildflower reserve. When the circus arrived on site

and began to set up, the elephants would be unloaded from their trailers, hobbled and set loose into the scrubland for some R&R. They had a minder with them, but he was never very conscientious and was more interested in dozing under a tree.

Free-range elephants are a great attraction to little boys. The southern approach to the scrubland was cut off by the circus being set up. However, access from the east and north through the Wonthaggi North Primary School and incomplete velodrome was easy. Access from the north and west through the cotton mill plant site was easy, and access from the west through suburban houses was easy. There are some things that elephants don't like very much. They don't like burning camels for example: Timur routed the Mughal war elephants at the Battle of Delhi in 1399 with a charge of flaming camels. They allegedly don't like mice (or other small things making sudden movement within their peripheral vision), and they don't like surprises. And they probably don't like being annoyed when resting up after a long road trip or traumatic circus show performance.

Nevertheless, groups of little boys made their way to the recreation reserve scrubland and went creeping through it like ninjas in search of elephants. It was exciting stuff to creep slowly and ever so quietly through the ti-tree. It was also scary, because the growth was dense and visibility was limited to a few meters.

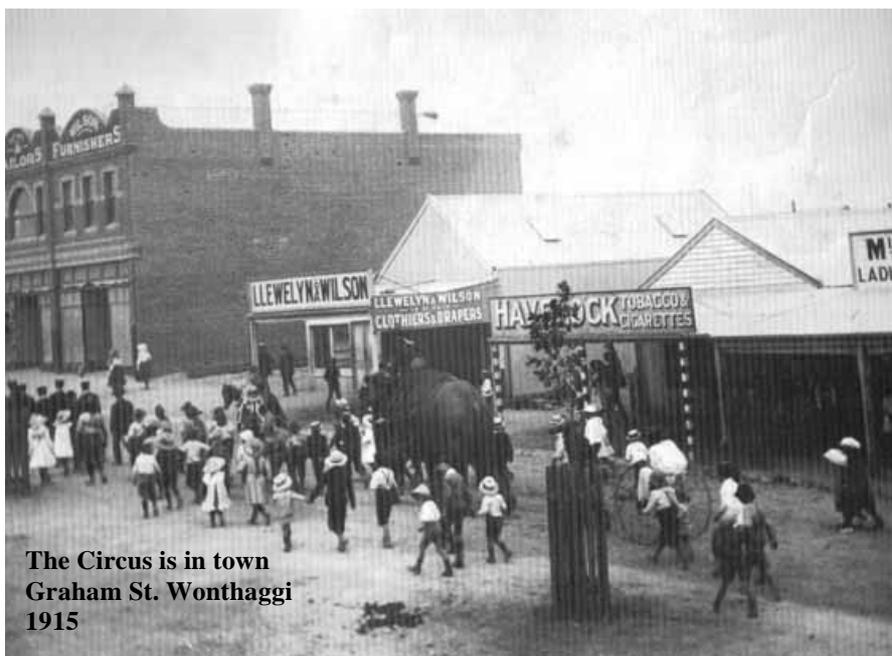
I managed to creep within five or ten metres of an elephant a couple of times. That was near enough for me and the five-metre case was actually a bit too close for my liking. It only occurred because the ti-tree was so thick that I did not see the elephant earlier. It was a great experience to watch the huge beast from up close, so I simply observed for a while. I was always worried about a second elephant coming up between me and my escape route, so I did not stay more than a few minutes. The more foolhardy approached closer or even threw rocks.

Groups of boys would join up afterwards for bragging sessions. Fortunately no-one got hurt during these little ventures, but that was luck rather than good management: a case of God protecting idiots, maybe. One of Ashton's elephants, Abu, killed three people in separate incidents during its circus career and two Sole Brothers' elephants killed two people in one incident. There were others injured by getting too close to elephants.

It was partly those early adventures that made me very fond of elephants. I used to ask to go to Melbourne Zoo and we sometimes did day trip train rides to do so. Sometimes it was as a birthday treat. Until 1962, the zoo had elephant rides and that was always part of my day. At the time it would have been Betty or Peggy who did the honors. They took over from a very famous elephant, Queenie, whose statue is near the front gate of the Zoo. Queenie gave rides for decades but was retired after she killed a keeper.

The elephant slowly walked around a circular enclosure and back to the mounting station where you got off. Hardly very exciting, but it was nice to be close to such a large and powerful beast.

In more recent times I renewed my acquaintance with elephants while holidaying in Thailand, especially at Koh Chang where a group of working elephants has retired to live at the edge of the jungle with the people who bred and raised them. They have taken me for several jungle rides and I have swum with them in a creek and scrubbed them while being drenched by their playful trunk showers. They are wonderful



creatures, especially my favorite, a relatively small and gentle lady, Noi (meaning 'small' in Thai).

My brother, Jon, bought his first car in 1965, an Austin A40 convertible, green with a red cloth roof. It was not very attractive and was older than me, made in about 1950. Like most lower tier British cars of the time, it was heavy, clumsy to steer and under-powered. Jon did all the repairs and servicing, using parts obtained from Albert Berryman's car graveyard. Parts of the engine were held together with super glue. Top speed, flat out, downhill with a raging tailwind was about 90 kilometers per hour. Regardless of all this, the price was right – less than \$50.

One day Jon decided to drive to Melbourne and I went along for the ride. It was a slow trip, it was raining and the cloth roof leaked. From Wonthaggi to Dandenong, many cars passed us, but we did not pass a single moving vehicle. Then we suddenly started to gain on a vehicle in front. Closer and closer we got, then beside it. The car was a huge powerful Mercedes, yet we were slowly edging past. We got past and edged further away. Jon was ecstatic: he had actually passed a vehicle, and a powerful one at that!

How was this possible? The Mercedes had a heavy load. It was towing a huge trailer and in that trailer were three large elephants: it was part of an Ashton's Circus convoy.

This essay is by Kit Sleeman. It was first published in *The Bass Coast Post*.