

PLOD ESSAY:

Mushrooms by Kit Sleeman

I didn't like eating mushrooms, but I eagerly anticipated Mushroom Season each year in Wonthaggi. I used to spend lots of time wandering paddocks and scrubland near our house on Murray Street and was always on the lookout for signs of the start of mushroom season. Sometimes, the start of the season would be signaled by a few mushrooms growing on our nature strip: there were a couple of patches that produced a handful of mushrooms each year. The paddock between our house and the train line was also a good barometer and produced some good crops in some years.

As soon as these signs appeared, the next weekend would be devoted to a mushroom hunt, and off we'd go with our baskets, billies and knives. Dad would also take his whacking stick with him to deal with any snakes that crossed our path. The whacking stick was about five feet long and made of five or six strands of plaited fencing wire. Dad always carried it whenever we were out walking and dispatched many snakes with it.

Usually, our mushroom hunts were within a wedge of territory between West Area mine, Dudley mine and our place. Sometimes, though, we also hunted them in the paddocks around Kirrak or East Area mines. At that time in the late 1950s, with one notable exception, landowners did not worry too much about people trespassing or accessing their land. I don't recall ever asking for permission from any landowner before going onto their property. Certainly we all respected things like closed gates and never caused any property damage or frightened livestock. I guess, at the time, everybody knew everybody, so it was generally no big deal.



One particular property owner near one of the mines was a different kettle of fish, however. According to the stories and urban legends of the day, this particular farmer was dangerously loony and did not like trespassers. He was said to shoot at trespassing kids with shotgun and birdshot if he spotted them. From a distance, the farm looked a bit run down, but we knew there were some perfect mushrooming, blackberrying and rabbiting spots on the farm that were worth the risk of being shot at to access. The farm backed onto mine-owned land, so we kids could and did

safely approach the farm boundary and sneak onto the forbidden farm land. This was always done with great trepidation however.

Apart from that proscribed place, we pretty much went wherever we liked. Usually we returned to places that we had previously found to be productive and at other times we stumbled onto

new productive areas by chance.

Mushrooms are mysteriously contrary beasts. Some paddocks never produced any, some paddocks produced each year and yet others had bountiful flushes of thousands one year, but nothing thereafter. I had an annual argument with Dad: I theorized that the new season's growth could be predicted by the fact that mushroom growth rings expanded outwards and that spores would be carried in the direction of prevailing wind. Sometimes I was right and sometimes not, so the argument was unresolved.

We had our own identifying names for some of our regular mushroom producing locations. These names were based on particular incidents:

Umbrella Paddock: We were walking along the railway one day and near the South Dudley

road rail crossing and noticed a small paddock with a dense flush of mushrooms. We had not expected mushrooms – it was out of season, so we did not have baskets. We did have an umbrella with us though, because the weather had been threatening, and so we upended and filled that.

Underground Paddock: In a corner of the Mine Paddock near Nobby Smith's house, I once found heaps of mushrooms growing a meter or more down into old rabbit burrows.

Hay-bale Paddock: Near the scrub bordering the golf course lots of mushrooms sprouted from rotting hay-bales abandoned in the paddock.

Mushroom Hill: We were on our way home from a very unsuccessful mushroom hunt – not a single one. However our luck changed. A small hill overlooking where the South Dudley wetlands now are was absolutely covered in mushrooms and we soon filled all of our containers.

To this day I feel guilty about that last harvest. Frank O'Brien was again buying mushrooms at his Graham Street delicatessen for resale in Melbourne. We did not use any of the mushrooms from mushroom hill, but sold them all to O'Brien. Unfortunately, I suspect that all was not what it seemed.

Mushroom gatherers were generally conservative and only took what they were sure were safe, edible mushrooms. So field mushrooms and Swiss browns (*Agaricus campestris* and *A. bisporus*) were the usual ones collected. I suspect that there may have also been some wood mushrooms taken (*A. silvicola*). All of these are perfectly safe and good. Unfortunately, I now think that the ones we picked on mushroom hill might have been yellow stainers (*A. xanthodermus*).

Yellow stainers were colloquially known as 'conkers' (from the verb, 'to conk' = to die). On this particular day we managed to convince ourselves that they were good mushrooms rather than conkers, but I felt uneasy. Some people can eat conkers without discomfort, but others have quite nasty digestive system issues after eating them. So I hope that we didn't poison too many people: at least conkers are not generally deadly poisonous, just discomfiting.

I did pick one other sort of mushroom for financial gain. On the road verge opposite our

house and at one or two locations in the mine paddock opposite the mine offices grew horse mushrooms (*Agaricus avenis*). These appeared each year in approximately the same place and grew in a fairy ring of up to about six or eight individuals. If left to develop, they became huge and a fully grown flat could be up to about eighteen inches in diameter. Apart from the mentioned spots, we did not find them anywhere else and considered them rare.

Historically, horse mushrooms were valued as food by farmers and some others, but no-one in our family liked them. However, our next door neighbor, Webby's, friend, Mr Trelawny, loved them. When I saw him visit, I'd go in search of horse mushrooms, and if I found any, it was my lucky day. Because of the huge size of the things, Mr. Trelawny used to give me a shilling (or even two shillings for a very large one) for each substantially sized specimen. At the time, I could buy forty-eight rainbow ball lollies for a shilling, so I thought that was a good business deal.

Our mushroom hunts sometimes seemed like an urban archeological expedition. For one thing, we often searched near old mine ruins or that of the brickworks, but there were other ghosts of the past as well. We often made use of the cinder track. This was a pedestrian, and perhaps bicycle track, which ran from South Dudley to Dudley mine, roughly following the axis of McBride Tunnel via thirteen and fourteen shafts. It was constructed with ash and cinder from the powerhouse and was used for access to and from work by miners in the 1920s.

In the mine paddock, opposite the offices, I discovered two cracked and long out of use concrete cricket pitches. Subsequently, I found another in a paddock north of South Dudley and opposite the golf course (There must have been quite a few unused grounds about town. Our own house was built as part of a post World War I soldier-settler estate. Prior to that the area had been a sports ground and the old concrete cricket pitch lived on next door as part of Webby's backyard footpath.).

Many miles were walked around the surrounds of the town over the years in search of mushrooms. I enjoyed those times and the pursuit of the quarry very much, and even made a few bob of pocket money while I was about it.