

## PLOD ESSAY:

# WELCOME TO COUNTRY by Frank Coldabella

In 1892 Australia was six separate colonies each with their own postage stamps and tax system, but nine years later, without shots being fired or battles fought, these colonies came together to become the most dynamic and democratic nation in the world. How did this happen so far from the civilised world?

In his book, *Born in a Tent*, Bill Garner suggests that the camp is where some of our social progress originated and where we evolved our national virtue of a fair go.

Of course, people have been camping in Australia for tens of thousands of years. For millennia the campfire community protected the ancestors against dangerous animals and evil spirits and supplied most of their needs in a seasonal rhythm.

Camping is the single defining experience of pioneering life that connected people to country. When the first British fleet arrived in 1788 they brought 600 tents with them. There were six convicts to a tent. Some were teenagers and children, the youngest a nine-year-old boy. This was the first Colonial Village. Two years later most were still living under canvas

In 1840 Paul Strezlecki and Charlie Tarra explored from NSW to what we call Corner Inlet to Corinella via Korumburra. He and his companions were immersed in the vegetation for weeks camping at night absorbing the sounds, smells and life of the forest. He developed deep empathy for the indigenous people he met, who were also camping as he was. He wrote this plea on their behalf:

“Leave us our habits and our customs.

Do not embitter the days that are in store for us by constraining us to obey yours, nor reproach us with apathy to that civilization which is not destined for us. And if you can still be generous to the conquered, relieve the hunger which drives us in despair to kill your flocks. Our fields and forests which once provided us with an abundance of vegetable and animal food now yield to us no more. They and their produce are yours, you

prosper on our native soil and we are starved.”

By the end of 1850s camping was a common way of life. One third of Victoria’s population – selectors, miners, shearers, drovers, bullock drivers, tree clearers, trappers, unemployed – lived in tents. At a campsite, help and advice are easily exchanged as are collective family experiences, knowledge, history, ideas, successes, failures. A miner’s camp, like any camp, was the sorting place of ideas. A stranger arriving at a camp provided a new topic of conversation and news from

other places. He may even have rolled in his swag the latest reading material to be passed around

In 1851 goldminers, who were camped at Buninyong, called a meeting to discuss the possibility of getting a fairer go. Over the next three years people had numerous

small meetings around evening fires. Interpreters mined the multicultural knowledge. Ideas sprang from collective wisdom of thousands of people from twenty countries. Small meetings fed into big meetings, which discussed the problems and potential of this rich, underutilised and mismanaged land.

These gatherings, discussions and debates culminated in the writing of the diggers’ charter, which petitioned the governor for a fair tax, the right to vote and the right to own land. In 2006 this “Diggers Charter” was inducted into the UNESCO Memory of the World register of significant historical documents

In 1870 the Gippsland forests were opened up for farming. The first settlers camped on their blocks until they had the resources to build a hut

40 years later 800 workers, half with their families, camped alongside the railway line they were building from Nyora to Wonthaggi where they were already sinking shafts for the State Coal Mine. Having a goal to work towards collectively is a good and essential part of a healthy community. The camps encouraged understanding, unanimity and egalitarianism. Pomposity or presumed superiority was ignored. Week after week on the job and around the



camp, close friendships were formed that got the workers through a harsh winter. In 1910, it snowed on the beach at Kilcunda where they were camped.

Even when supplies were short, when clean, fresh water was running out, and when dysentery was rife, and the workers felt isolated, cold, damp, sick, fearful, they knew they and their wives could rely on their campmates for support and care. The friendships that evolved – one mate helping another, one woman cradling another’s child – lasted a lifetime. Physical endurance, shared hardship, self-help and a shared responsibility for others must have boosted confidence in the ability of Australians to get things done.

In 1909, when the State Coal Mine set up in Wonthaggi right in the middle of a wilderness area on the shores of Bass Strait, the new town, which sprang up, was inevitably a Tent Town, with regulation tents lined up along newly formed, unsealed ‘streets’, and an instant population of 1000 men – and some wives and children. With only the essentials of life available, teamwork, self-regulation and the common good became the norm. People worked, ate, suffered, sang and laughed together, just as in our tribal evolutionary past.

As Tent Town became more and more established, campfire conversations evolved into the public conversation. The miners who came from the gold diggings to Wonthaggi had brought with them the spirit of Eureka. In the camp, there was time and space around campfires and on the job to discuss the possibility that things could be done better. Success in communal self-reliance made a culture of activism inevitable.

The women who accompanied their husbands in tents must have been self-confident and hardy. Their opinions about what needed to be done must have counted. After more than a century of gatherings around campfires mutual assistance and communitarianism had evolved as the most effective social ideology for reinforcing social relationships and a civil society. From its beginning, this ethos became imbedded in Wonthaggi’s cultural activism. It spurred the campaign for our publicly funded hospital and health care system, possibly the first in the world.

The co-op spirit became part of the town’s cultural mindset. Wonthaggi was to become, according to Professor Rae Frances, “A town that would punch above its weight in shaping twentieth century industrial relations in Australia.”

By mid 1912 the camp had become a flourishing institution. Even the state schoolteacher was living there. When it came time to disband the camp and move into newly built houses, people were very reluctant to go and in some cases had to be evicted. Arthur Heeney said for many years in his youth many people still lived in tents from Graham St to the Dudley Campus.

The old people remembered their camping times when co-operative citizenship and communality was the norm as the best days of their lives. In spite of the rollercoaster of chaos and sorrow, they remembered with fondness the joy and splendour of the time they and friends and families slept on bracken beds while camped in the snow by the railway line, when they were all moving forward together as a team with a shared purpose.

Background smells can unlock good memories that ignore hard times. When the weather got warm and tea tree flowered, an urge to be out there waking to a chorus of birds singing, insect and frog sounds, the fragrance of rain on eucalypt and leaf litter grabbed at the heart. The longing to breath in the microscopic particles of coast and bush air, seemed to have a positive effect on people’s state of mind to the point of addiction.

My neighbour Lavonia Coleman, who was born in 1881, always said, “Food tastes better if its cooked outside.” The soundtrack of her memory included cicadas, crickets, frogs and birds. Drawn by memories and nostalgia some Wonthaggi clans still camp together every year just a few kilometres from home. One family has done for five generations. Camping areas where people of different backgrounds and beliefs can unclutter, intermingle and share ideas should be part of the coast zone. Only by inhabiting a place where we are calm, free of distraction, clutter and pressure can we do the mental housework necessary for a balanced and meaningful life that makes us the best versions of ourselves.

Henry Lawson who was born in a tent and spent most of his life camping had written:

**They were hard old days, they  
were battling days;**

**They were cruel times but then, In  
spite of it all, we**

**Shall live tonight in those hard old  
days again.**

