

PL O D E S S A Y :

Frank Coldabella's Sweet Memories

1968 - a revolutionary year (full email version)

My father arrived in Kilcunda from northern Italy in 1950. My mother arrived in 1951. They lived in a shed. Dad worked at the Mitchell mine until it closed, then started work at 20 shaft.

In July 1952, my parents moved to an old four-roomed cottage. The previous occupants were the Chambers family. My parents shared this place with another Italian family and a Dutch family.

In 1956, when I was three, my father paid about a week and a half of wages for a rubbish-filled block at Number 76 Reed Crescent. The adversity of mining life had fostered neighbourliness and co-operation in the town and we were made very welcome.

In the days before television, families sat in the kitchen around the black coal stove talking, telling stories, mending, knitting, reading, writing letters or podding dried beans, a winter routine dating back centuries. Other Italians would call around to visit to see if there was any news from "over there", which is how they referred to Italy, probably because the Italy they grew up in was run by the Pope, monarchy and popularly elected leaders who had brought misery and death to millions.

My first memory of the mines was at 20 shaft, where my father was working. He would dink me everywhere on his bike. One weekend when we were riding past, he gave in to my nagging and took me in for a look. There was no fence or barrier around the shaft, and my impression was of a large scary black hole in the ground. I'd seen enough to last me a decade. Nearby, I can remember a more pleasing sight, a large cage of colourful canaries.

I can remember riding on the bus to the Miners Union picnics at the Glade in Inverloch with Frank Coleman, the MC, organising the races and throwing lollies to a swarm of us kids like he was feeding the chooks. He organised races for everybody, even for the men and women over 60. Back then, ice creams were a luxury. I can remember licking them very slowly.

Frank Coleman delivered our bread in a horse and cart. His mother lived across the road from us. She and her house

came from Outtrim to Wonthaggi by bullock team. In an old trunk in the bedroom she still had the old thick canvas tent from the tent town days. When she arrived, they got their water from the spring at Tank Hill.

Our neighbours were all brilliant. Mr Goldsmith at No. 80 had represented the Miners Union overseas. Norm Legge had sailed around the world for years. At No. 63 lived Henry Williams senior, a father of 10 who had worked at Outtrim before the turn of the century,

living in a humpy. He told me that at that time, most men there went barefoot because it was impossible to buy boots. Wages were 2 shillings and 6 pence a day for a 12-hour day - that's 2.5 pence per hour, which helps explain why so many went off to the First World War.

My father caught Jungles bus at the corner of Matthew and Reed Cres with other neighbourhood miners: Nigga Undy, Mr Gervasi, Alec Stevenson and Paddy Sleeman. We didn't find out until after he died that Paddy Sleeman had been in Italy during the war. I don't know if he knew that my father was on the other side. Paddy was a great neighbour - he and his family were always very kind to us.

Life was mostly domestic - dads went to work, mums stayed home.

There was a lot of sharing of kids in our street. In my early primary years, my mother led a picnic excursion of neighbourhood kids and their dogs up Brown Street and through East Area, up to the top of the stone dump. It wasn't the Dolomites but for us it gave a great view towards the town and the sea. It was a memorable adventure for us kids. As we got older and our world

expanded, it became - along with the tip and Tank Hill - part of our regular entertainment itinerary. We could go anywhere as long as we were home by 6 o'clock.

I was in grade 5 when the fire in the engine room at Kirrak left all the miners stuck down below. On TV that night we got to see some of those we knew climbing out into the daylight.



1968 was a huge year of change not just for Wonthaggi but for the whole world. I was in Form 3. I was also doing a paper round. There were no current affairs shows on TV so lots of people got *The Herald* to read what was happening. And lots happened that year. Fires in the Dandenongs destroyed 34 homes. The Tet offensive in Vietnam convinced Australian voters that the war was un-winnable. In Melbourne, mounted police charged 2000 anti-war demonstrators in the city's biggest day of riots. Gough Whitlam was elected leader of the ALP.

In the US, Robert Kennedy was assassinated, then Martin Luther King. King's death sparked rioting and fires in 100 US cities in which 39 people were killed and 20,000 were arrested. Students protested all over the world. Apollo 8 went round the moon. The Russians invaded Czechoslovakia.

All this strife and turmoil, excitement and disbelief made it a boom year for selling papers.

I'll just remind you of what the town was like in 1968. All the shops were in Graham Street and McBride Avenue, which had veranda posts and open bluestone gutters. In Reed Crescent, we still had our bread and milk delivered by horse and cart. One shop in Graham Street still had the original dirt floor. There were no water meters and no real estate agents. There were two barbershops, two banks, no supermarkets and about eight milk bars. It seems to me there were about five kids for every two adults.

The mayor was a 31-year-old schoolteacher, TV was black and white, as was the content of most of the news. You were either with us, that is the US, or with the commos. You were either a Catholic, a Proddie or a heathen.

The Powlett Hotel was still going and on Thursday and Friday nights the mine bus stopped out the front. Inside you could play quoits, darts, hooky or pool. There was worn lino on the floor and a brilliant painting of a drover and his sheep hung over the large open fireplace. Like most pubs, it had a piano in the ladies' lounge and on Thursday and Friday nights a group of seniors would gather around it singing the songs that made them feel like teenagers again.

We saw "To Sir with Love" at the Union Theatre, where Tilio Moresco was the bouncer, and boy could he bounce!

Norma and Kevin Moresco and their six kids were in the Astor cafe. In one corner they had a jukebox. It must have weighed about half a ton and had about 40 songs on it - Beatles, Rolling Stones, Simon and Garfunkle, the Beach Boys, Creedence Clearwater Revival, Aretha Franklin Diana Ross, Neil Diamond, the Bee Gees, Bob Dylan.

The times were definitely a-changing - it was a great time to be a teenager. At 14, we didn't know where we were going; we just wanted to be doing what everybody else was doing. There were still shacks at the beach if you really needed to escape from the world of adults.

Opposite the Powlett Hotel at No. 102 Graham Street there is still a small shop. Back then it had a much smaller window and the sign above it read Tony Gazzola's Boot Repairs. It was a tiny shop, dark, chock-a-block full of boxes of shoes and boots, rolls of leather and bundles of leather

laces. It was so dark inside that you had to stop just inside the door and wait for your eyes to adjust to the lack of light.

Tony, a small, round, smiling, old cobbler peering over his specks. He could be hammering hobnails onto a boot or putting new soles on a favourite pair of shoes. With the dim light shining on his specs and bald head, he looked like a Rembrandt painting or a character from a kids' storybook

Nesci's (Nessie's?) wine salon stood where the Telecom site is in Mackenzie Street. Here after school on Friday you'd find Jim Glover, Mr Osborne and a few other school teachers, together with a couple of Italians, deep in discussion about everything and anything. Mr Osborne copped a lot of flak around town for being a conscientious objector. I think he only lasted one term. It was Jim Glover, my art teacher that year, who first warned me about commercial newspapers and what they did with stories.

The teachers who arrived at the tech/high in the late 60s had a Renaissance-like effect on the whole district. Schools were starting to give up the use of physical violence and verbal abuse as teaching aids

New teachers and others coming to Wonthaggi have always been like the king tide that replenishes a stagnating rock pool at the beach, disturbing the torpor, bringing fresh nutrients of ideas and imagination. These new arrivals helped us get our library and swimming pool. How do you thank those who light the way out of the dark? We owe the teachers a lot.

For me, the best thing that happened that year was the moves to get our library.

The Workmen's Club, referred to by some as "The Red Shed", had a small library. On Friday nights, a kind and learned old Scot called Joe Foster was in charge. He had a hut at Cutlers Beach. Joe told me that John Steinbeck had died and suggested I read his book *The Grapes of Wrath*. It wasn't until about 15 years later that I did.

Old Joe would have agreed with his fellow Scot, Andrew O'Hagan, who said, and I quote, "Great literature helps you to live your life. Great literature never goes away. It tells us what our culture has done, and what it has failed to do. Literature is not lifestyle, it is life. Literature is there at the going down of the sun and in the morning. Like history, it is the news that stays news."

But most blokes at The Red Shed in those days preferred to drink beer - lots of beer. It was medication after a hard day's work. On Thursday, Friday and Saturday, all three pubs and the Workmen's Club were full. In the warmer months, with beers passing overhead, it was a job to squeeze myself and a bundle of papers between the forest of noisy boisterous smoking men.

At The Red Shed, there were lots of different varieties of accents - Calabrian, Cornish, Dutch, Scots,

Yugoslav, Australian, Veneto, Welsh, Yorkshire, all loudly sounding their different pronunciations. A few had been on opposite sides during the war. Here with the thick blanket of smoke above them, the debates and discussions went on, as they must have at the pit. Remembering back, the combination of those accents sounded like singing. Like some European choir of hard life, their song could have been "Come all ye faithful, whatever your faiths, for we are the world, we are the ones to make a brighter day."

Some of these pub blokes worked at the abattoirs, Cyclone and the cotton mills. There was the comic and the tragic. Some were tough, gruff and surly, no doubt hurt by deprivation, war and hard physical work. There were some who thought fighting with your fists was a useful life skill, others were cheerful, kind and generous. The rest moved somewhere in between, depending on how things were going. I was called Mate, China, Magoo, Lad, Paysan, Jock, Nugget, Sunshine, Bello, Bastia, and some preferred not to speak at all.

We weren't allowed to finish with *The Herald*s until 7 o'clock. So in winter, with all the sales and deliveries done, I'd head for the Workmen's or Tabeners to read the paper and have a sarsaparilla in front of the fire. There was no shortage of advisers giving their version of life, politics, money lenders, religion or war. Some of their yarns would start with "When we was kids ..." Two of my favourites were Eddie Pellizer and a crusty old Scott called Sandy Dunbar.

Friday morning, 20th December, the day that the Kirrak mine closed, was overcast. My mate Robert Legge and I rode our bikes out there. I thought about asking John Bordignon if he'd like to come but thought, "Naagh, he won't be interested."

At the mine I can remember an air of solemnness, and apprehension about the future. Men were going to be out of work for the first time. I went into the engine room to watch the cable wind in. The inside of the engine room still had blackened timbers from the fire of 1964. There were several Italians on that last shift, but none of them seemed too concerned. A few joked around. I know for certain that some had seen and survived a lot worse in Europe.

When the last cage came up and the miners had walked away, someone called out to Harry Haddow, "Have you locked it up, Harry?" Harry didn't reply. Maybe he was lost for words.

I can remember some bloke scooped some helmets and all the time tokens off the board into a cardboard box. Someone gave a speech, thanking the workers. Some bloke gave me an old drill bit as a souvenir. The men from *The Sun* newspaper took some photos. When that was over, men started to leave. A few hung around silently as if they'd just buried a good old mate and didn't know what to say. Sometimes silence can say a lot.

That was it. As we rode home for lunch, the sun came out. It would soon be summer.

At about 5 o'clock, I was at the Workmen's Club doing my last day of selling papers when the word went around town that Doc Sleeman had died.

The union blokes came up to the Workmen's Club and got a couple of barrels of beer and set them up in the meeting room behind the Union Theatre.

Those of us who have lived in the town for a long time probably take its union influence for granted. The union had a heritage going back to the first miners' meetings at Bakery Hill in Ballarat, where miners had met and agreed to petition the Governor for a fair tax, the right to vote and the right to own land. The media would have us believe it was only about licences.

The union had a far-reaching effect on the social and community life of the town - the miners and their leaders accepted their responsibility for the community. With confrontation, negotiation and sacrifice, they and their families established a medical benefit fund, built the hospital, established the dispensary, started a brass band, built a public theatre and established the co-op store and bakery.

The Davidson Royal Commission of 1945 stated, "The Wonthaggi branch of the Miners Union, especially its president Idris Williams, have furnished the best example in Australia of self-help in the provision of living amenities for the mine workers."

Without unions speaking the truth to those in power, the work and social conditions that people have today would be just a dream.

Andrew O'Hagan said, "There is no nation but the imagination." The union men enriched our lives by imagining a better society.

Can we imagine a society where schools have everything they need, where garments are created by fair trade, where there is no military spending, where the planet is not degraded by commerce and there is uncontaminated water and food for all?

That Friday night behind the theatre, some of the miners stayed there until it was very late. I know I would have.

Their message can be refined down to eight simple words, "We are all here to help one another."

