

## PLOD ESSAY: Frederick Thomas Webb, part 1

*On Thursday evening, 20 September 2018, Fred Webb's daughter, and other members of his family, came to the Railway Station Museum to share some memories of her father. When people heard they were coming, they swarmed to the Museum to hear about a legendary Wonthaggi character who has not been around physically since 1985, but who's the presence is in the mind every midday when the Mine Whistle blows in the middle of town or whenever anyone passes "Webb's Shed" to drop the kids off at the Old Tech School on McKenzie Street. Here is his story. Keep in mind that, as a great local storyteller, Nell Sleeman, has said, "Probably the things I recall will be out of sequence, but I don't suppose that really matters as long as the stories themselves aren't lost":*

Frederick Thomas Webb was born 1908 in Merrigum, a small town about 25 kms west of Shepparton; his father, George, was born there, too, in 1875. His grandfather, Thomas, was born in 1838. He sailed to Australia, deserted the ship, had no luck on the gold fields so turned to the wheat belt as a farm hand. He worked with a scythe going from farm to farm before the days of binders. Women followed behind, tying sheaves with straw and stoking the sheaves. He met Fred's grandmother, Eliza Coulston, who was born in Melbourne in 1846 but grew up in Castlemaine, and married her. They settled in Merrigum and started a family.

Fred's grandfather on his mother's side was a builder named David Aubrey. He was an American who came to Australia because there was demand for craftsman, builders, and designers in Marvellous Melbourne as a result of the Gold rush.

There is no indication in Fred's notes about how his mother met his father, but they married and settled near George's family in Merrigum in "a two-storey brick colonial like a fort with cellars, bannisters, etc." built by her father, David.



It seemed that Fred's parents were well to do because they sent young Fred to Miss Prior's Private School in Ripponlea. He was only seven years old. Fred wrote that he was "a late starter" which may mean that he didn't like school away from home so much. That didn't seem to phase his mother at all because when World War I started she took him away

from Miss Prior's and sent him to a religious college in New South Wales where she thought he might find a vocation and become a minister. She left him there and it seems he could do nothing about it until 1922 when he was fourteen years old.

In that year while he was making his way by train back to Victoria from the college for Christmas break, he had a layover in Melbourne. Fred had a few shillings in his pocket and decided to go over to Excell's Labour Exchange, which was near Spencer Street Station. It was the farmers' recruiting centre. He found out that if he could get himself to Leongatha there was a job waiting for him. He paid 5/- for a ticket to South Gippsland and never looked back.

*(From here on in, there is no mention of Merrigum, or the religious college or his parents in Fred's story)*

He arrived in Leongatha station at 9 pm and at this point we can hear Fred telling his own story:

"There is only one woman and a baby left on the station. She approaches me and asks if I am looking for someone. 'Yes. A Charlie Millet,' I say.

"She nearly has a fit. 'He wanted a man to milk cows, but look at you!' she said.

"I am suddenly conscious of my patent leather shoes, my knickerbockers and school jumper and a skull cap. I know she has a point.

"'I can milk cows,' I tell her.

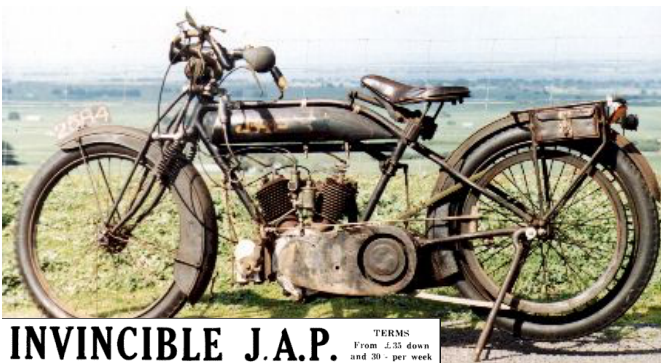
"Next I am on a wagon driving a horse in the dark with no lights. I've never driven a horse in the dark before. 'It's okay,' I tell her, 'I was born on a farm.'

"I was fairly game at fourteen years. What a road, I mean, track! Eleven miles and an hour or so later, I meet Charlie Millet [*possibly in a pub*]. He has been

waiting for me. The air is blue. These returned soldiers know more words than I knew existed.

"I am shown my bare room, no lining, typical soldier-settler's hurricane lamp, matches, alarm clock on petrol case set at 6 am. Nail on door for clothes. I had not eaten or had a drink that day, but I slept.

"Morning. Well, I knew the routine, although I was born on a wheat farm, not dairying. I worked hard. My shoes rotted off; my knickerbockers were cut down to shorts and my ears and nose were all burnt on account of the skullcap. One day Charlie comes home with boots, blue denims, and a hat out of my handsome pay. Charlie Millet got a good 25/- per week's worth out of me. He even told me so.



**INVINCIBLE J.A.P.**

TERMS  
From £35 down  
and 30/- per week  
Any Machine taken in Part Payment

**TURNER BROS.**  
313 Swanston Street  
(Opp. Public Library)

Sole Agents  
Great Britain  
Cycles &  
Wagon Hire  
Licentiate

*Champion of the "Australian Motorist" when writing ensures premier attention*

"We got on very well. One day, I fix his J.A.P. belt-drive

motorbike and he takes me to Inverloch and we have a beer. We go to Wonthaggi and have another beer and home for milking. It's Christmas Day. He gives me a bottle of beer to take to bed, but I don't like it and don't drink it. When Charlie comes to my room early the next morning he asks if there is any beer left. He sees the full bottle and asks if he can have it. 'Of course,' I say. It's his beer anyway.

"Charlie had been a soldier with his two brothers for the past few years before I met him. When the brothers come back to their farm in Leongatha South, they are a bit behind in the farm machines. I am able to help them with binder repairs, twine knotters, etc. We get on well.

"One day we see a Melbourne Yellow Cab coming up the driveway. My mother somehow traced me and hired a cab from Melbourne to come get me and take me back home. 'I'm not going back,' I tell her. 'It wouldn't be right to leave Charlie on his own in the busy part of the season.' So, she turned around and went home without me. I often think of that.

"I did leave towards the end of the season when Charlie could manage. I got a lot of experience working for him. It did me the world of good.

"I stayed in Melbourne for a while, going to Melbourne Tech (RMIT), the Working Man's College. I did engineering both day and five nights a week leaving classes at the top of Swanston Street at 9 pm. One Friday night I left the Tech and saw trams turned on their sides and most shop windows broken with people helping themselves to shop contents. I saw a person picked up, hands and feet, and thrown through a shop window. I just managed to get to Flinders Street Station to catch the last train to Ripponlea Station. The streets were so crowded the trams couldn't move.

"It was the Police Strike.

"Next, in New South Wales, Dad has land and a store. I help. I get a new motorbike when I am 16. To get orders, Dad buys a new Ford truck on my 17<sup>th</sup> birthday. It is the only truck around for miles and I drive it 12 or 15 hours a day. We do very well, but after two years the truck is 'old hat' and we buy a Ford T single seat 1918 model and I go off to Queensland in it. It's a big country.

"I meet a Gundawindi girl named Nell from McIntyre River... I remember mother-in-law in the rear seat."

In the early 1930s Fred found himself in Wonthaggi working for the State Coal Mine. At first he was road building, but soon took over responsibility for all mine transport: shifting mine drilling rigs through paddocks using over a mile of heavy cable and tackle; carting mine poppet legs 90 feet long, two at a time from Noojee and Rokeby forests on earth roads with no trailer brakes and only his off-sider, Mine Engineer Dicky Graham, calling the odds on getting around the next bend...

When Fred went to work at the mine, he immediately felt he had found a responsible, challenging and happy association. He felt he belonged to and trained with the most dedicated body of men he had ever known. At last he was where he wanted to be

**POLICE STRIKE IN MELBOURNE.**

**MARTIAL LAW PROCLAIMED.**

**UNPRECEDENTED RIOTING AND CRIME.**

**BUSINESS CENTRE OF CITY LOOTED.**

**DEATHS AND MURDER.**

On Thursday night, 29 policemen mutinied in Melbourne, and following the instant dismissal of the mutineers, practically the whole of the metropolitan force struck work. Unprecedented scenes of violence and riot followed on Saturday and Sunday, and at 2 a.m. on Monday martial law was proclaimed in Melbourne.