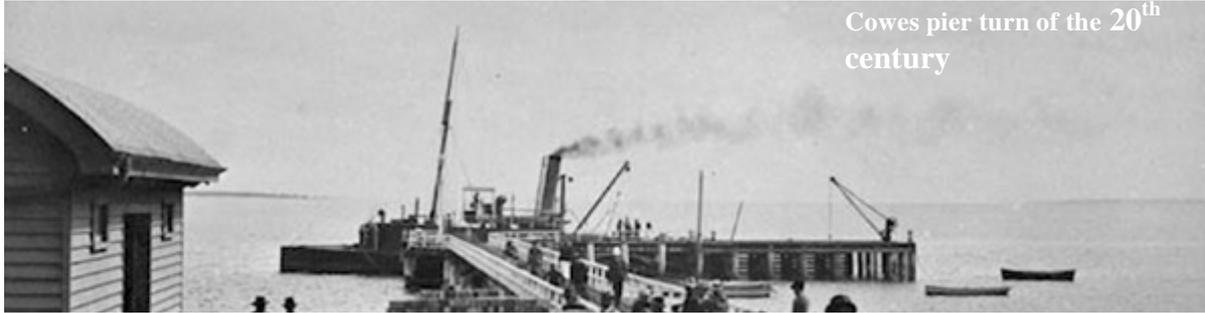


PLOD ESSAY: Gerry Gee at the Picnic



A great old Australian tradition was that of the trade picnic. At a time of year when good weather was anticipated, each trade would declare a half day or day off work and staff and families would gather to celebrate, at management's expense, at a picnic. These picnics could be quite small and simple or large and complex depending on the business size and their largesse. There were bank picnics, butcher's picnics, builder's picnics and so on.

The State Coal Mine held an annual miner's picnic, and because of the size of the workforce, it was a big one. Often, it was a beach picnic at Kilcunda, that location chosen because a special train could be put on to get people there and back: Kilcunda station is on the cliff top directly above the beach.

One year, when I was about six, they decided on a more ambitious plan. The picnic would be near Cowes beach and to get there, the Westernport ferryboat would be hired to travel between San Remo and Cowes. This was before the bridge was built.



The current website for the ferry includes the warnings: "Weather and sea conditions can make operations difficult.....some passengers may have difficulty boarding or disembarking." I don't know whether they advised those warnings back then, but if they had, maybe the picnic plans would have been different.

As well as this exciting new transport plan for the picnic it was decided that some 'top class' entertainment would be provided. Dad was on the picnic organizing committee, and it just so happened that an old mate of his from army days was Ron Blaskett, the ventriloquist who operated Gerry Gee.

Ron Blaskett and his scurrilous dummy, Gerry Gee were one of the first acts when Channel Nine commenced TV broadcasting in January 1957. They appeared on Happy Hammond's children's show and were extremely popular for a few years. Gerry Gee became a syndicated toy: you could buy a Gerry Gee Junior doll and become a ventriloquist yourself, except that they were horribly expensive.

Unbeknownst to most of the kids and parents watching the Happy Show, Ron and Gerry had a dark side. Ron and Gerry moonlighted in RSL clubs mainly, and the script they used there, based on crude army gutter humour, was quite a bit different to the one they used on the Happy Show.

Dad was successful in getting Ron Baskett's services, and the boat was booked: all was good. The committee also organized catering.

The day arrived and the weather was only fair, not as good as hoped: a change later in the day was forecast. I think that the picnic was set up on Cowes' football oval, not far from the beach. It was an open space where there were kid's and adult's races, sack races and so on. There was a stage set up where Ron and Gerry would appear, as well as tables handing out fairy floss, hot dogs, a lucky spinning wheel and all the other stuff that you normally find at fairs and fetes. There was also a large tent set up off to the side where men were congregating for a few beers.

There was a ripple of excitement when Ron Blaskett turned up, but there was no sign of Gerry Gee. Ron was shepherded away from the kids who mobbed him and was taken to the 'refreshments' tent. The day proceeded with races and games. The weather was starting to close in a bit and a wind started to spring up.

Quite some time elapsed before the announcement was made that Gerry Gee was about to arrive on stage, and the formal entertainment was to begin. All the kids crowded to the front of the stage, the curtain went up and the show began. At about the same time, it started to spit rain.

After the show had been going for a while, I couldn't help thinking that live shows were quite different from TV. I found Gerry Gee very funny when I watched on TV, but I could not get any of his jokes this day. None of the other kids seemed to be laughing much either, but I noticed that some of the men were, although, the women were strangely quiet.

Soon someone came onto the stage, hustled Ron and Gerry off and indicated that his show was over. Odd, I thought, I was expecting a longer show than that. I did not understand what was going on.

It was only years later that I understood. Ron had gotten half drunk in the refreshments tent and, in his confusion, had started his Gerry Gee act with his 'blue' army style script rather than his kid's script. The matrons were shocked and had him dragged off the stage.

From there the day went downhill. The wind had picked up and the rain was getting heavier.

By the time we got back to Cowes' pier to embark on the ferry back home, a swell had gotten up. There was a heavy chop to the sea as well, and the moored ferry was pitching up and down several feet by the pier-side. There was a gaggle of people, ferry sailors presumably, gathered around the gangplank lying on the pier and scratching their heads.

Eventually, they tried to lay the gangplank between the pier and the ferry deck, but were unsuccessful and almost finished up in the drink. They tried again a few times and then gave up. The sea was now so rough that a gangplank could not be used.

They had a conference to come up with a plan B. Eventually, two sailors stood on the deck and two on the pier. Then watching the waves and trying to time things so that the deck was mid-pitch they would pass passengers, one at a time, from the pier to the deck. This was pretty hairy stuff and took ages, but it worked and everyone eventually got on board.

The trip back to San Remo was a pretty rough one. The ferry is quite small and pitched and tossed all over the place. The motion did not worry me too much, and in any case I was far too interested watching sea-sick people vomiting over the side to feel sick myself.

We eventually got safely home without any further adventures. The picnic organizing committee did not use a ferry or Ron and Gerry ever again. I hope that Dad had negotiated good 'mates-rates' for that performance.



Cowes pier on a rough day

**Story by Kit Sleeman, son of Beau,
proud union man who organised the Union picnic in 1958.**