

# PLOD ESSAY:

## *Grunchers, Slack & Dog Watch*

*The Wonthaggi Sentinel Times & State Town Miner* first came out on 11 June 1910. One week before its first birthday, 2 June 1911, it changed its masthead so that the words, “Official Organ of the Miners’ Union”, sat to the left of the paper’s name and “Official Organ of the Wonthaggi Borough Council” sat to the right. Thus every week from then on, the paper reported every dispute, every argument, every concern expressed by the miners at the Victorian Coal Miners Association (VCMA) meetings and likewise at the Borough Council meetings. What went on at the Borough Council meetings often reflected what went on at the union meetings because whatever happened at the State Coal Mine impacted on every aspect of the community.

1912 seemed to be a particularly fractious year for the mine. The coal was turning out to be of lesser quality than first assumed and because of broken seams was difficult to get. The first sign in the *Sentinel* of any trouble between workers and management, which, heretofore had been fairly smooth, was this small report on 5 January: “A member [of the VCMA] reported that a couple of men were stood down on Wednesday for grunching, and wished to know if any objection would be taken to others if they went to work in the place where the grunching occurred.”

The members of the union, led by President, Mr. J. M. McMahon back then, must have decided that grunching was only a part of a more important issue they had to deal with and that was *Powder*.

But, wait... what is *grunching*? Is this one of those mining words that only miners know? Later, the term comes up again when, in March 1912, Mr Broome explains to the Union how he will decide whom to layoff when the Dog Watch is cancelled. It was reported that, “He intends to dismiss grunchers, stayaways and deficient workmen before others.” His ideas on who to dismiss rather than sticking to the ‘last on first off’ premise provokes serious dissent. But more on that later.

I rang Sam Gatto, who knows everything, to find out what a gruncher was. Well, it turned out that sometimes Sam has to make educated guess just like the rest of us. *Grunch, gruncher, grunching* is not in any dictionary including the OED, but we decided it seems to be related to *grudge, disgruntled* or *grutch*, an archaic word that means to grumble. It was known that Mr Broome worked well with the union and showed the men a great deal of respect, but it was also known that he had no time for Ideologues. Maybe the more militant of the union members were *grunchers* in Mr Broome’s mind.

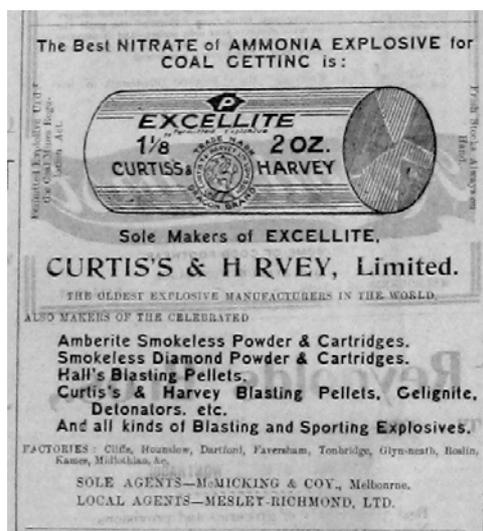
Sam and I were only partially right in that *gruncher* is a word with negative connotations. John Bordignon solved the mystery for us. The word has a very specific meaning. A gruncher is someone who uses his explosives to “blast from the solid.” Oh, dear, what does that mean? I am beginning to think miners belong to a secret society and speak in a language only they understand. Because the Wonthaggi coal is friable, it can be easily torn apart. Blasting the coal from the solid smashes the coal to smithereens thus creating from 60% to 70% slack or dust rather than big chunks of hard coal. In early 1912, coal dust was worthless and considered waste. A coal miner who finds a new seam first needs to cut the coal away from the rock it’s embedded in by making a splint along the bottom of the seam before he sets the explosive. This relieves the pressure on the coal that will be created by the blast. If the miner is lucky he will see a natural splint at the top of the seam, which is half coal and half clay, and is easier to cut away. In 1912 cutting a splint was hard and time-consuming work because it had to be done with a pick. The mechanisation for this job was only on the cusp of being invented back then. A gruncher is someone who does not take the time to chip out a splint before blasting. A man caught grunching is immediately stood down. But back in 1912, there were many disgruntled men in the mine who might be sorely tempted to grunch.

Okay, that settles the meaning of *grunch*, but not why the miners were tempted to grunch in 1912. To answer that question we have to go back to where we left off with the impending trouble of *powder*, *slack*, and *hewing rates*. In 1912, the miners’ wage depended upon a *Hewing Rate* – so much per ton of coal - set by the State, whereas, in 1911, they worked for a wage. The new system was put in place to get the production up and save money. In the light of this new system, it begins to make sense that grunching would become an issue in the tunnels. A miner made no money while he was taking the time to pick a splint, something which might take a day to do. Another problem with the new system was fairness. In some areas of the mine, it didn’t matter how hard he worked, a miner would never be able to hew as much coal as others working elsewhere. So, an equitable method was established where a *cavil* was held four times a year. Now *cavil* is another of those mining words that I can make neither head nor tail of. In the dictionary it means ‘to make petty or unnecessary objections’, but in the Wonthaggi mine, *The Cavil* was a ballot or lottery where names were drawn to determine who worked where in the coalfields for the next three months. Sam explained that to me.

And, he went on to explain that in order to understand how the men worked in the mine, there are a couple more terms to know. Once the Cavil was sorted, each area was divided into *Bords*, which were big enough for a team of four men to work in for three months and earn a living wage, so long as the Hewing Rate was fair. Pay was doled out to Bords according to how much coal came out of it. One of the four mates on the team would calculate how the pay was divvied up between them. The mates looked out for each other, often became fast friends.

Of course, there were many things, which affected the production in the Bords. These might include “hard and low coal”, the availability of *Skips*, the conditions of the rails and roads in the tunnels, or the frame of mind of the *Wheelers*. The job of the *Wheelers* was to pull away the coal from the Bord in skips. In late February 1912, dissatisfaction among the *Wheelers* grew to such a state that they walked off the job and the mine was “Hung Up” for a half a day so no coal was coming out. This was due to the bad state of the roads in Shafts 5 & 11 where the *Wheelers* asserted they were working “up to their knees in mud and slush”. The slow going meant a *Wheeler* had no hope of earning a day’s wage for a day’s hard slog. This new way of earning a wage caused all kinds of dissatisfaction and “grutching”.

A month before the *Wheelers* walked off, the miners had refused to enter the mine when they were forced to use *Powder*. The mine management, who, it was later revealed, had been forced to stockpile powder by the State, decided that no explosive could be used except *powder* during the month of January 1912. The miners balked. While Broome declared he was only testing the powder to see if it would minimise *slack* or dust, the miners said it was useless because, “it only finds the weak spots in the seam of the coal and is not half as effective as more powerful explosives”, which the men supplied for themselves (thus the advertisements for explosives on the back page of every issue of the *Sentinel* each week). Of course, this is



precisely why Broome wanted the men to use powder because to him it was a solution to the problem of grunching. A less powerful blast would create less slack, but it also made the coal harder to get, which infuriated men working at Hewing Rates rather than a wage.

An editorial in the *Sentinel* that seemed to come down on the side of the miners stated that, “Owing to the density and volume of smoke occasioned by its use, [powder] is dangerous and injurious to health.” Not only that, but Broome was requiring the miners to use forks to lift the coal into the skips rather than shovels in another attempt to minimise slack. This meant a great deal more work, less weight in the skips and less pay for the Bords. The men walked off. Once again there was a deputation to Broome, who, as usual, seemed conciliatory and reasonable as he protested that his hands were essentially tied by State regulations.

*Slack* was a problem. It ended up piled beside the railway tracks and was building up alarmingly, but on the 1<sup>st</sup> of March 1912, the following was reported in the paper: “On Saturday evening a large block of solid coke made from the State Mine’s slack coal or dust was displayed in Mr Gillespie’s shop window in Main Street Outtrim and attracted considerable notice. Two residents of that town have patented a process by which it is claimed the State

Mine's slack, or slack of any Victorian black coal, can be converted into solid marketable coal." At last there was a solution to the *Slack* problem and thus the problem of *Powder* and, possibly, *Hewing Rates* was solved for the time being.

The Town relaxed momentarily. *The Sentinel* knew its bread was buttered on both sides and it had to make an attempt to sit on the fence, which wasn't so difficult because the business people knew that without the mine and the miners they would have no business. *The Sentinel* editorials discussed the future of Wonthaggi with regularity. During the Powder Troubles, the *Sentinel* wrote about Slack thus: "On one point everyone seems to agree, something will have to be done to lessen the quantity of slack obtained or find some means of disposing it at market value." The editors realised that if Broome could not solve the slack problem, then the amount of coal taken from the mine would have to be reduced, the pay of the workers would lessen and the business people, along with the town, would suffer.

The paper, along with community-minded citizens made a great attempt to promote sporting events, picnics, balls, theatre, silent movies and all sort of entertainment to keep people's minds off Trouble and onto the future and the community. Luckily for the paper, the miners, the management and the business community all had a common enemy. The villain in any matters connected to the workings of the mine could always be the State, which inevitably held back funds when they were most needed. The Borough was constantly fighting the State and stood shoulder to shoulder with the miners on that level.

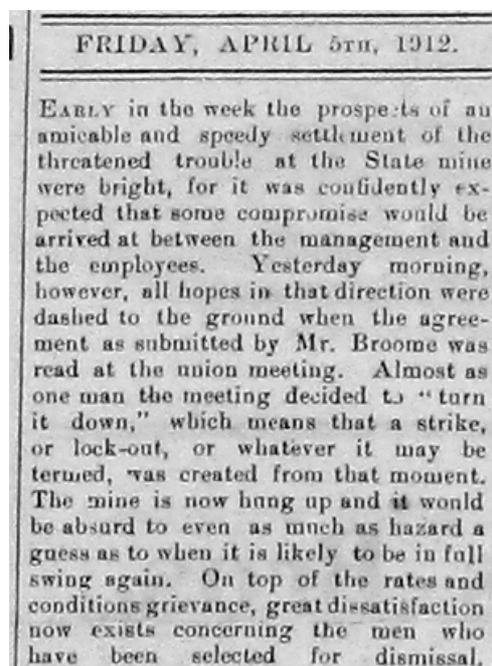
However, as the *Sentinel* realised, the Powder, Slack and Hewing Rate Troubles were portent of more Trouble to come. Another thing was bothering the men, which, when you look at it, you could conclude might not have bothered them so much if every other thing hadn't upset them. What was troubling them was the Dog Watch. *Dog Watch?* you ask. Even Jim Quilford was uncertain what the Dog Watch was when I first asked him. It turns out *The Dog Watch* was the night shift. For just over two years the mine had been run round the clock, but in March 1912, the miners decided that work would stop at night. Why?

According to John Bordignon, there exists a mythology or superstition or perhaps even a reality among miners that it is more dangerous to work at night because between one and two a.m. without fail the ground moves. When the ground moves it rumbles or growls. Thus the Dog Watch. Miners who worked the Dog Watch were always on tenter-hooks listening for a collapse in the tunnels as a result of ground movement. A cave-in might mean death for them all. When the unionists at the VCMA meeting of 4 March decided 'by a vote of 187 to 330 to abolish the Dog Watch at the expiration of the present cavil', there was foreboding throughout the town. Such a move meant, "200 to 300 employed would be dispensed with". The article in the 8<sup>th</sup> March issue went on: 'Mr Broome states that it will be of little use for the discharged

employees to remain here as it will be a full three months before they can hope to be re-employed at the mine.” The miners would not change their minds. The town held its breath.

*Sentinel* headlines in the following weeks were shocking: **400 men to be Dismissed, Reduction of Hewing Rate (22 March); Mass Meeting of the State Mine Held on Sunday Afternoon, Reduction of Hewing Rate to be Resisted, ‘Last on First off’ Principal to be Insisted Upon (29 March); Conference Unsuccessful, Mine Closed Down for 24 Hours, Mr Broome’s Conditions Not Acceptable; Ballot Taken to Decide the Issue.**

And this final editorial on FRIDAY, APRIL 5<sup>th</sup> 1912 announcing a strike: “Early in the week prospects of an amicable and speedy settlement of the threatened trouble at the State mine were bright, for it was confidently expected that some compromise would be arrived at between the management and the employees. Yesterday morning, however, all hopes in that direction were dashed to the ground when the agreement as submitted by Mr Broome was read at the union meeting. Almost as one man the meeting decided to ‘turn it down’, which means that a strike or lock-out, or whatever it may be termed, was created from that moment. The mine is now hung up and it would be absurd to even as much as hazard a guess as to when it is likely to be in full swing again. On top of the rates and conditions grievance, great dissatisfaction now exists concerning the men who have been selected for dismissal.”



A week later the paper reports, “Cessation of work at the mine is already keenly felt by the tradespeople. Over 1000 men are idle.” The Borough asked the government to bring about a settlement, but both sides stood firm.

Finally, on May 17 the *Sentinel* could report, “**The Trouble is Ended, Operations Resumed Yesterday, Hewing Rate 2s 9d All Round**”. Not a great win, but the men could go back to work.

Now the town knew what a real strike was.

Amazingly, even while the strike was on, the world kept turning. Ten days after the miners went on strike the Titanic sank in the Atlantic Ocean. People’s attention was diverted.

Isn’t it wonderful how the local paper tells history and how words used almost one-hundred years ago can re-enter the lexicon? It’s all sitting there in our Archive waiting for people to discover.

