

Les Beaumont, Champion Axeman of Wonthaggi

Whenever there was an event in Wonthaggi – The Easter Celebration, May Day Carnival, the Agricultural Show, Christmas picnics, or any other kind of community gathering – the woodchop was always a feature. Men came from all over Australia to compete in the woodchops here especially at the May Day Sporting Carnival and at the Easter Celebration, which was the biggest event in the Wonthaggi Calendar. Both events held serious sporting trials with footraces, bike races and woodchops. So many axemen competed in the big comps at Easter and May Day that heats went on all day. The competitors were handicapped by Frank Myles and when the count started for each heat, the rhythm of men starting their chop on different numbers was exciting as more and more axes hit the wood until the percussive sound reached its peak. The crowds barracked for the champions, the Wonthaggi men and for the young ones just starting out.

The men from the mines, who all split their holidays between Christmas and Easter, competed for the esteem they gained in winning the woodchop as much as the money prize that came with it. These local competitors gained experience and skill at the weekly woodchops held throughout the year at the Workman's Club. Wally Purvis, whose brother, Jimmy, was a champion, remembers those competitions at the Workman's Club in the 40s and 50s, but he thinks they must have been running them much earlier than that. One of the reasons for the keen interest in these comps was the betting that went on each week.

The Beaumont family produced two fine competitors, the son trained by the father to become a true champion. George Beaumont was born in Zeehan, Tasmania 25 November 1878. He raised a family of six, one of whom was Leslie, born July 1906. In Tasmania, George was a wood contractor and bushman who enjoyed the competitive sport of Woodchopping, but around 1922 he left Tasmania and brought his family to settle in Wonthaggi where he worked in the coal mines.

George's son, Les, influenced by his father's past triumphs, became a top axeman who honed his skills as a bushman during times of strike at the mines, when he would help provide for his family by falling and stripping trees. He would ride his bike to Boolara, Sale to work.

Les competed in woodchop events in Wonthaggi and took part in events at shows in nearby towns, even travelling as far as Walhalla on his bike.

In what was supposed to be Les's last competition, he won the chop and after the final stroke took one foot off the block. He relaxed his arm and his axe came down to slice his heel almost off. He was on crutches for some months.

Les's final event saw him as a reluctant starter. He was urged to take part in a woodchop at the Wonthaggi Workman's Club. This event has been organised to raise funds for the family of his woodchopping mate, Jimmy Purvis, who had died suddenly (in 1957). At first Les refused to be part of the cop, but after his mates shouted him a few beers, he stood up on the block to take part. According to Les's son, Anthony, who was at the scene, he won easily and while he was waiting for the others to finish he rolled and lit a cigarette, laconically watching the other competitors before returning to the bar.

Julie Beaumont, Les's daughter, recalls the years her father was a competing axeman. He would spend hours sharpening his axes. He would spit on the blade then gently rub the oblong grey rub stone along the blade until it was razor sharp and shiny. The head of the axe was then wrapped in an oilcloth before he put it into a leather sheath which buckled over the shoulder of the axe. Les's axes were kept in a

wooden or leather case to take to the competitions. Axemen were very protective of their axes. No one else was allowed to touch them.

Both George and Les Beaumont are buried in the Wonthaggi cemetery. Five of Les's six children continue to live in Wonthaggi.