

PLOD ESSAY: Pitching In by Mark Robertson



Bill Robertson in his early teaching days with wife Barbara and sons Mark, Ian and Geoffrey

WHEN Bill Robertson arrived in Wonthaggi in 1958 to take up his first teaching position at the Wonthaggi technical School, he wasn't too keen about leaving Melbourne to live in the sticks. But then something wonderful happened: he fell in love twice – first with Barbara Dakers, his partner in marriage for 59 years, and second with this community. So much so, that within 10 years, he was Mayor of Wonthaggi.

That year 1968 was probably the most challenging in this town's history. The last coal mine was closing and Wonthaggi was expected to die, but due to the vision of Bill and a few other determined men and women, it survived and became perhaps the most vibrant town in the state with an indoor heated swimming pool, a sewerage scheme and a library.

During his mayoral year the allowance was \$500 to cover expenses including travel, catering for visiting dignitaries (Mum made a lot of sandwiches and cakes that year), even stocking the Councilors' drinks cupboard. Bill was the epitome of community spirit: don't expect government to provide improvements, roll up the sleeves and make it happen, and treat your fellow man with kindness and respect.

Bill had a very hands-on approach. He even built the borrowing desk for our first library. It was in service until quite recently.

There is also a story regarding a road roller, which was "borrowed" from the Shire of Bass depot. I'm not sure if they ever knew it was missing but it saved the Borough of Wonthaggi a lot of money.

Bill was a dedicated and skilled teacher in charge of the art/craft department. He was very proud of the brand new high school, especially his woodwork room – and the locker keys. He was also the first aid officer, dealing with everything from fake headaches to broken limbs. He was the official starter for every school athletic and swimming carnival for this region and organised the school buses. During the summer holiday he wrested the school timetable into shape on our dining table – a huge job before computer assistance. The table was always covered with certificates and awards which he carefully lettered with ink and pen.

Legendary Wonthaggi art teacher Jim Glover was a big influence on him during his early years at the technical school.

Bill could relate to all students – treating them firmly but fairly. I'm sure that supervising a classroom of long-haired teenagers using lathes and power saws tested even his patience and skill. He always looked out for struggling “problem” kids, guiding many out of trouble.

There was only one type of student he couldn't abide: smart-arsed teenage boys who tormented young, inexperienced teachers, usually female. Bill's justice was swift and I can guarantee the bully never upset another teacher.

He was always pleased to hear that a former student was doing good things in the world and that this little country school could produce many good citizens.

His arts and crafts training was in constant use outside school. Every school holiday he would renovate part of our crumbling old house in Cameron Street, with Mum and us kids as labourers.

Coffee mugs and casserole dishes fresh from his home-made kiln were highly

sought after. I'm amazed that the shed never caught fire. Mum would be left in charge of the 1200°C inferno while Dad popped down to the Wonthaggi Club “briefly”. She took it all in her stride.

Our homes contained many of his art and craftworks: furniture, metal work, woodwork and sketches. They are all aesthetically pleasing but more importantly practical and useful. He taught many of us to have a go at making, creating and fixing.

He was a president and life member of Apex, raising funds for all sorts of local causes and enjoying the spirit of mateship.

He became quite skilled at home brewing beer with his neighbour and mate Alistair Stirton. Their quality control sessions in the shed were exhaustive.

In 1987 Bill retired from teaching after suffering a bad heart attack. After interacting with about 700 people a day he was a bit lost at first. Catching up with his mates at the Wonthaggi Club over a few of “the best beers in town” was important. He would solve the world's problems with Gus, Dabba, Bobby, Murray, Alf, Rug, Russell and many more.

He began helping me at my Volkswagen workshop, dispensing coffee and conversation with customers. He also taught himself spray painting, turning out many beautiful Beetles and Kombis, including one that won Best Body and Paint at a major car show. It still looks wonderful 15 years later.

Bill taught us the importance of doing a good job, being honest and helpful, putting into the community and not aiming for personal gain.

He spent his life nurturing his family and community, and had the satisfaction of watching them both blossom.

Mark Robertson is Bill Robertson's son. This is an edited transcript of his eulogy to Bill at a celebration of his life in St George's Anglican Church, Wonthaggi, on Friday February 8.