

# PLOD ESSAY: Off to the Melbourne Show

Big Chief Little Wolf was the stage name of a part Navaho American wrestler who was enormously popular and high profile in Australia during the 1930s and 1940s. He eventually settled in Australia after service in WWII.

Professional wrestling was very popular in Australia. Before television, it was broadcast live on the radio and featured in cinema newsreels. Little Wolf was a 'goody' and the crowd favorite against 'Dirty' Dick Raines, Bonnie Muir and other 'baddies'. His signature winning hold was 'The Indian Death Lock', which we kids used to try to emulate in our childish bouts. Mum and Dad would often talk about his exploits.

I saw him for real, once, when I was about five or six. It was at the Melbourne Show.

Agricultural shows are as much a part of the Australian tradition as football, meat pies, kangaroos and Holden cars. All country towns had a regional show. And then there was the big one held in the Big Smoke each September (in Victoria; at other times of the year in other states).

In the city, they even got a day's holiday to go to 'The Show', but, because we were in the country, we did not get that holiday. As compensation, we got a half-day holiday for the magnificent Dalyston Show, which was eventually superseded by the Wonthaggi Show that still runs the second weekend of January every year.

One of the few perks of Dad's job with the State Coal Mines, which was part of the Victorian Railways Department, was that he got discounted family train fares and free travel when on annual leave. So, each year when I was little, we took the train to see the Melbourne Show at the Showgrounds in Flemington.

Not only did we get free travel; we got FIRST CLASS travel. Believe it or not, in those days the front end of the country train was first class and the rear part was second class. As a kid, I could not see much difference between the two classes apart from seat color, but I was assured that first class was more comfortable.

I looked forward to the Show trip to Melbourne with great anticipation for I knew I would get enough free goodies to make myself sick by the end of it. However, a trip to the city – especially to the Show – was a long day and poor Mum had to be on guard keeping track of all of us throughout the entire ordeal.

The morning train left Wonthaggi at about 7:30am and the return train left the city at about 6:30pm. The early part of the trip, from Wonthaggi until Nyora (and the return trip between the same two points) was a 'milk run'. There were many small stations only a few kilometers apart and the train would stop at each for a mail drop and pickup. At some they still loaded and unloaded milk cans filled with cream. While the entire trip to Melbourne was only about one hundred and thirty kilometers, the trip consequently took a slow three hours each way. So we never got home until 10:30 or 11 at night. No wonder Mum muttered, "Never again, never again", and needed a BEX and a good lie down by the end of it.

Our earliest trips to Melbourne were by steam train: the carriages had individual compartments and there was a corridor along one side of the carriage. I enjoyed those steam train trips very much. Alas, the passenger steam trains were replaced with trains run by diesel when I was still quite young, so most of my trips were diesel.

Jon and I used to rush into the train and claim the front seats. In that position, we sat next to the driver who had an open compartment and could talk to us while we travelled. Sitting at the front we saw things that other passengers did not. Passing through bush-land near Nyora I always kept watch for wallabies – we often saw them there. The down side of the front seat was that the train sometimes hit a stray cow, but fortunately I never witnessed that.

After we arrived at Flinders Street Station, herded us along as we changed platform and caught a train to the Showgrounds. Finally, We got to where we wanted to be: The Royal Melbourne Show.



Most of my memories of the show as a young kid are just a blur and one year was like another. We looked at animals and exhibitions – the cooking displays were always a favorite: amazing cakes. We collected many sample bags: free bags of real product samples, then. We kids gorged on free, sweet junk food samples. We had a few rides, but they were only a very minor part of the Show experience then. And we saw a few side-shows, like The Wall of Death motor cyclists.

There are a few memories that, for one reason or another, stand out from the more general blur:

For instance, it was at the Show that I saw my first demonstration of TV. This memory pre-dates the 1956 Olympics. I recall sitting on Dad's shoulders in a huge crowd of people who were all focused on a tiny screen with grainy, flickering images. Subsequently, during the 1956 Olympics, Mum and Grandma would take me to 'The Astor' café in Wonthaggi each day so that they could watch the games on the town's first TV while I ate lollies and drank milkshakes.

I remember my first view of a Linotype Machine. Now ancient and obsolete technology, this was state-of-the-art at the time, replacing manual moveable type that had been used for a thousand years or so. A machine was set up behind glass so that you could see how it was operated. For a small fee you got a red-hot name stamp engraved with your own name in a few seconds.

The most elaborate and amazing thing was a Cigarette Machine. It was huge machine and stretched for many meters from one end to the other. I demanded to see it each year because it was so complicated and fun to watch. Huge bales of tobacco dropped in at one end. Big rolls of paper, foil and cellophane, and sheets of cardboard fed in elsewhere. Packed cartons of cigarettes came out of the other end of the machine. It looked like something Heath Robinson had drawn in his cartoons as it chopped and blended and rolled and packaged. The entire process from start to finish was visible. Free cigarettes were handed around to smokers and lit by pretty ladies.

Wood-chopping was something I loved even though I could see the contests at home in Wonthaggi.

Then there was the annual argument, which was always part of the Royal Melbourne Show experience. Dad was a mad keen punter and they

had harness racing sometimes. He always wanted to see that, but it bored everyone else to death.

None of these sights were a match for the ELECTROCUTION of Big Chief Little Wolf, though.

We saw the wrestler's name on a tent in side-show alley, and so we went in and sat on benches. The tent was packed out. Eventually, the curtain opened, Little Wolf came out and started the show. He was everything that an Indian should be according to my vast knowledge gained from watching many cowboy and Indian movies at the Union Theatre. He was a big, well-built man with dark skin and black hair topped with an enormous feathered head-dress.

He did some dancing around the stage with lots of 'ya-haya-ya-hayaing' and drum beating, then he stepped up to the microphone and started spruiking for an audience member to come on stage so that he could demonstrate his famous death lock. When he grabbed the microphone, he started dancing again, only this time the dance was a strange epileptic twitch accompanied by grunting. Almost everyone thought that this was part of the act until someone started screaming out, "Cut the power – he's being electrocuted". There had been a short circuit and the microphone was electrically live.

When the power was turned off, Little Wolf slumped in a heap. The curtain was closed manually. The crowd sat there stunned and murmuring for a while. Eventually an ashen faced and shaky looking Little Wolf came back out onto the stage and apologized, but said that he'd probably had enough for the day and the show was over.

That was the first and last time that I saw Big Chief Little Wolf.

When we eventually had enough of the show we returned to the city, loaded up with sample bags, to prepare for the trip back home. One of Mum's paranoias was that of missing trains. Because she was always in a panic, we would go early to sit on platform 1 at Flinders Street Station and wait and wait. Mum only started to relax once we were on the train and it began its journey back home.

It was a long day. We never got home until about ten-thirty at night and I was a happy little traveler when I was finally tucked up in bed with a big stash of goodies awaiting me tomorrow.

**by Kit Sleeman**

