

The Plod Essay: The Remarkable Memory of Charles Street

Joe Chambers recognised that the old man who lived in the small cottage on the corner of Watt and McKenzie Streets just across from the old Tech School had a remarkable memory for all sorts of details connected with the beginning of Wonthaggi. It could be one of the many school kids, who stopped to have a chat with the old fellow at the front gate of his yard where he often stood leaning on his crutches – border terrier at his heel – observing the ebb and flow of Wonthaggi humanity, knew long before Joe did that Charles Street was a town treasure because of what he carried in his mind.

The old man, who was born in 1883 at Baranduda Station near Wodonga, lived to be 97 years old with all his faculties in tact! More intact, it seems than most of us will ever be. Joe interviewed him in 1976 when he was 93. He realised that Charles Street was a willing talker and could answer questions precisely with no lapse in memory. Mr Street, on his part, was aware of the importance of telling what he knew while he still had time. What's more, he realised that while he was an ordinary fellow, his memory was not ordinary and he could fill in details of life in the State Town that would bring its past into sharp focus so that we in the present could sense the experience of it.

As a young fellow, Street remembered the terrible depression in the 1890s even to the point of recalling that it was the "City and Suburban, the

Mercantile and the Joint Stock Banks that closed permanently. The Bank of Victoria closed but opened again. The NSW and Australasian Banks remained open but wouldn't lend money." This drove his parents off the land and him into work milking cows for 5/- a week and later gold prospecting at Allen's Flat near Beechworth. He came to "Old Wonthaggi" five kms out of "New Wonthaggi" along what is now the Korumburra Road on "10 July, 1909" just before the state mine began when there was nothing here but "thick timber, scrub and fallen logs, where it wasn't swamp".

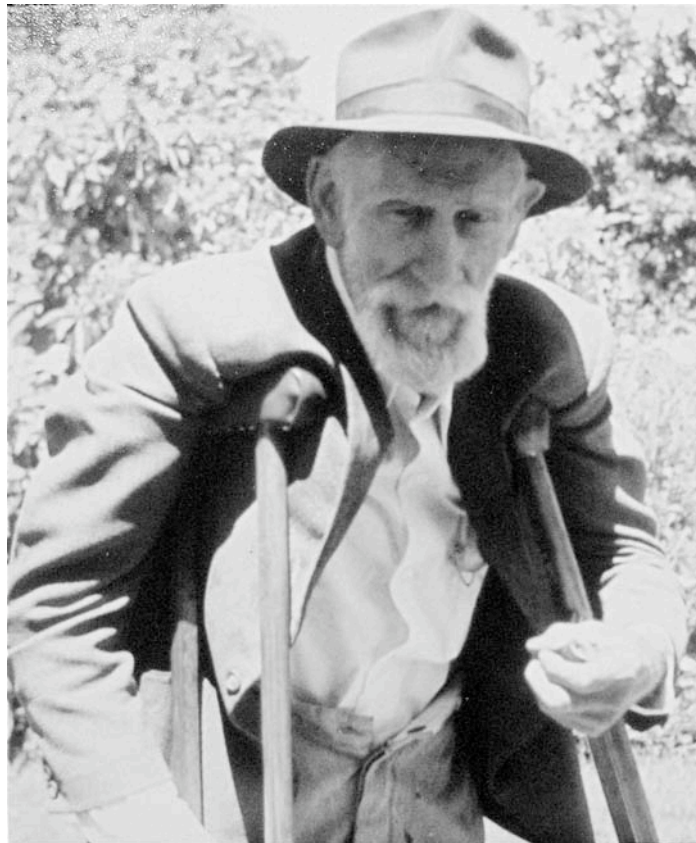
Street reckoned the whole of the present shopping area was "one large swamp". When the new station [our museum] was built the station yard was churned up with mud so deep you could find yourself bogged up to your knees if you weren't careful. Street remembered that the block where the High School buildings now stand was up for sale for £25 but no one would buy it because it was too swampy. According to Street, who drove

bullocks, helped to construct roads and bridges for the new town, and worked for the CRB, 700 truck-loads of waste from the mines were dumped on the swampy areas and drain pipes laid before any part of it could be developed.

During the Depression, the CRB closed down for nine months, Street returned to being a man of all trades. Turned his hand at running a small dairy farm, became a champion fencer, won medals (and even prize money of £1 at the woodchop held at Ned

Sheehan's Stadium, an open-air site for boxing and wood-chopping events on McBride Avenue) and finally falling trees in the Mountain Ash forests of the Strzeleckis.

In 1944 he met with a horrific accident, which crippled him for life. He and his mate were falling timber near Mirboo North when his mate's tree,



instead of falling, caught in the branches of another tree. "The men were working to free the timber when three trees crashed down together pining [Street] under them." He lay unconscious in Warragul Hospital for three months, then was transferred to Royal Melbourne Hospital where he remained for three-and-a-half years. Among his extended injuries were "a fractured skull, and multiple fracture of his thigh and hip bones. When I was discharged I was pinned together with metal plates." A doctor, who examined Street when he was well into his nineties, said it was a wonder he had kept going all those years.

But "kept going" is what he did. Street became active in the ALP where he served in a number of executive positions; was Vice-President of Trades and Labor Council, Vice-President of International Peace Council, Vice-President of the Australian Labor Party and representative of the Timber Worker's Union. Despite his injuries, which made him dependent on crutches for thirty-six years, Street was a well-read, active, alert and involved man.

What follows is some of what Mr Street told Joe Chambers on 1976. Note the detail. Some might call it trivia; I call it history coming to life:

"I drove Bullocks when I came to this district first. I usually had fourteen bullocks in the team, although you didn't use them all at once – usually ten or twelve at a time. Herefords made the best bullocks for long journeys in summer since they didn't need as much water as other breeds and they travelled faster. The two bullocks at the back of the team were called 'polers'. Their job was to swig the heavy wago pole to change direction. The next four bullocks were called 'claspers'. Then came the 'body' of the team – two, four or six depending on the size of the team – and then the two 'leaders', who were specially trained to obey the signals of the driver ('gee-off' to the right and 'come here' to the left). The driver always walked on the left-hand side of the team and carried his whip in his right hand. The whip was made of greenhide, the lash about six feet long and the handle usually just a piece of sapling. When the driver moved his whip to his left shoulder the team stopped. I never hit the bullocks with the whip, only cracked it over their backs... a bullock wagon could carry a big load: fourteen tons of grain perhaps or 2000 super feet of timber. I carted timber from Murphy's mill at Kongwak to Sharp & Taylor's wood yard [later Timber & Trading Co.] in Murray Street. It was a two-day haul and I camped about half-way to Wonthaggi each trip. Watson's Hill coming out of Kongwak was almost

impassable in the wet weather. If one wheel of the wagon got bogged you always had to 'dig in' the opposite wheel to keep the wagon level. If you didn't the whole load would overturn."

As more bullocks became available to more people, Street turned his hand to road making: "In 1910, this was a job for horse- and man-power. First came a team of four horses pulling a heavy plough. Two horse scoops were used to shift soil to low spots and form up the road – nine foot wide and raised in the middle. There were two different kinds of scoop: the ordinary skid scoop and the monkey tail scoop, which had small wheels and a hook for tipping the load of soil. Nine inches of road metal was put on the road and rolled with a four-horse roller. I worked on the Wonthaggi-Kongwak end of the Korumburra Road. The metal we put on it came from Knox quarry by rail. We used two-and-a-half screenings on that road. The screenings for the Inverloch Road came from Ruttell's quarry. It was carted straight across country past Dr Joyce's house and Near Cooper's farm. I helped build the bridge across Lance Creek on the Korumburra Road. We used local messmate for the piles. They were driven in with a half-ton pile driver which was raised with a hand winch and drove the pile half-an-inch at a blow. That bridge cost £465 to build. We were paid 10 shillings a day. Horse and Dray was paid 7 shillings a day."

Mr Street told Joe Chambers more than can be included here. Something that fascinated me was that he could remember the prices of just about everything from those days: "Prices remained the same for a long time. We bought flour in a 200lb bag that cost 10s. Beef was 3/6s. You could buy a shin of beef for 9d and a leg for 1/6. A 70lb bag of sugar cost 12/6. We bought tea in a 40lb chest at 1/- a pound. Bread was 7d for a 4lb-loaf. Bacon was 4 to 6 pence a pound. Eggs were 4 pence a dozen. Butter was 6 pence a pound – that's farm butter, factory butter was dearer!) Wax matches were 4pence; Cameron's plug tobacco was 4/9 a pound or 10 pence a plug (Parrot twist, cable twist or Irish shag) and you got a box of matches and a free clay pipe with every plug; Two dozen cigars in a wooden box cost 2/-. Good quality working trousers were 7/6 a pair, but dungarees (jeans) were sold at 3/6; a good pair of Glace Kid boots cost £1/1/1, but they would last for six years; Thompson's working boots were 15/- an they would last three years if you fixed them yourself. Board for a single man was 9/- a week, 12/- with the washing done; I had built a four-roomed house with a seven-foot verandah before I came to Gippsland and it cost me £96. Handmade bricks

were 25/- per 1000. An ordinary jinker or cart horse cost about £5 and a jinker would cost £17. Of course, wages were low then.”

Old Mr Street had a treasure trove of memories. How lucky we are that Joe Chambers took the time to discover them.