

## PLOD ESSAY: Sam Joins the Citizen's Band, pt 1

My father absolutely loved music, especially opera, and had taught himself to play a few tunes on the flute. He had never had the chance to learn to play a musical instrument properly and was keen that we children, especially my brother Peter and I, did so. When the Wonthaggi Citizens Band played out 'in the street' usually at 'Bond's Corner' or on the Powlett Hotel balcony on Saturday morning, we knew where to find Dad. He would always be there ready to applaud and to put a little change in the collection box. When, sometime in 1954, Frank Scimonello, a family friend, who was playing the cornet in the band at the time, mentioned that they were urgently recruiting youngsters to train and that instrument, tuition and uniform were free, Dad immediately asked me if I was interested. I was, and how! I too loved music and often sang to myself, sometimes out loud, pretending that I was a great Italian tenor. I remember walking up the rickety steps, one Sunday morning, into the old run-down band room that seemed to be on the verge of falling down in the otherwise empty paddock at the corner of what is now Murray Street and Biggs Drive. I immediately felt welcomed. I sat down next to Dad on the bench near the door and listened to the band practising. The room seemed to change character as the band played. It became warmer, much less drab. I was hooked. At the end of the rehearsal Matt Cameron, the bandmaster, whom I learned to love and admire, and who was to have a great influence on my life came and asked me if I was still interested. He then handed me an old brass cornet, showed me how to blow it, corrected my tendency to blow out my cheeks and then told me to practice, trying to hold the note I produced as long as possible. He then informed me where he lived in Billson Street and when the next lesson lessons would be.

I felt so privileged and important when I took the old battered cornet out of its dilapidated case and began to blow it at home. The farting noise that I got out of it amused my brother and sisters no end, and amid laughter they begged me to let them have a go, which I did making sure that they would not damage the already battered cornet as they fought over it. I soon got the hang of getting a good note out of the instrument and looked forward to the weekly lessons at Matt's



place and the occasional lolly or slice of cake that Mrs Cameron would give us at the end of the practice session. Later on in my life, I found myself saying to my students all the encouraging things that Matt would say to us kids when we got discouraged such as 'Come on; have a go; you can do it; just go home and practice', 'Practice makes perfect.' 'There is no such word as can't', 'Good, nearly there.' I

can never remember him raising his voice and telling us off in anger when we had not practised or blew a wrong note, but he did make it quite clear that we had to practice if we wanted to be part of the band. I certainly did not want to let him down, and neither did anybody else. He was a great musician and when he played with us we certainly lifted our game.

In the early 1950s the Band was going through one of its recurring crisis periods. There was an acute shortage of players: the band had lost fourteen players out of a total of 20. Matt Cameron was desperate. If something were not done the band would have to fold up. But, as would happen again in the future, with the help of the community it rallied. Appeals for new players were made and answered; money for new uniforms was raised. A programme to train children between the ages of nine and twelve was made. The long-standing 'Males Only' tradition was broken when Louise Fuller asked to join the band. By the end of 1954 there were about twelve of us learning instruments and getting ready to make the big jump into the senior band. Sometime in 1955, I began practising second cornet with the band. I sat at the edge of the row and struggled through marches, hymns, jazz music and other favourite pieces. I was particularly thrilled when we played music by Italian composers such as Rossini, whose music Matt must have loved. By the end of the year, even though I was nowhere near ready, I began playing out with the band. Mum and dad were most proud when they saw me in my ill-fitting band uniform.

All through 1956 the band continued to improve as we kids got older and more proficient. Since there was a shortage of tenor horn players, I was moved to the tenor horn section. I was not keen at first since the tenor horn is not as glamorous an instrument as the cornet and the chance to play solos is much less likely, but it

was very consoling sitting next to Mr Arthur Constable, who must have been in his fifties at the time, was a little on the stout side, had been in the band for a long time but sometimes had to be reminded by Matt what key we were playing in. Since I was still blowing a few wrong notes, it was reassuring to know that I was not alone.

At the beginning of 1957, under Matt's careful tuition and direction the band was sounding much better. Matt and the rest of the committee considered the young band was ready to participate in the competition for D grade bands organized that Easter on the occasion of the Leongatha Centenary Celebrations. Three months of hard work ensued: band practice twice a week, on Tuesday and Thursday evenings; compulsory practice at home; special tuition for us kids in Matt's home; and meticulous and demanding marching practice at the oval almost every Sunday for an hour or so. It was great fun. My brother Peter was also keen to learn to play the cornet, he always came to practice with me and soon joined up. Our neighbour, Max, 'Darby' Bremner, played the Eb bass in the band and most evenings he would give us a ride in his very old, rather dilapidated 1920s model car. We thought it fun when, with an unlit self-rolled cigarette sticking out of the side of his mouth, his breath betraying that he was somewhat under the influence of a glass of beer or two too many, he would weave and swerve on the way to the band room, where he would make an abrupt halt just before the big open drain. We usually got home after ten o'clock, when the rest of the family was in bed. Famished after a hard night's rehearsal, we would run straight to the kitchen cupboard, cut four thick slices of bread, thickly butter the bread and then look in the fridge to see what we could put in the sandwich. Never satisfied with only one layer of filling, we piled on whatever was available - cheese, leftover meat, spaghetti sauce, salami, vegetables, salad etc. - and ended up with a Dagwood type sandwich, the size of which was made famous by an American comic character of the same name. We could hardly get our mouths around the thick sandwich, but somehow we did. And we did not have any trouble getting to sleep on a full stomach either. The next morning it would take Dad many calls to get us out of bed to milk the cows.

The Band scooped the pool at the four-band contest - we won the quick-step, hymn, selection and aggregate, and were second in the street march. The day after our triumph, led by my twelve-year-old brother Peter and John McDermott, who were carrying the trophies, the

first trophies won by the band since 1932, we paraded through the town. 'I'm particularly pleased with 'the kids'- eight 12 year-olds, who rose to the occasion in a manner none of us expected.' Matt Cameron commented to the press. On Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> April, as we had done the previous year, the Band travelled to Melbourne to participate in the Anzac Day parade, the only country band to do so. Going to Melbourne with the band was the first outing of its type that I had ever been on and I remember enjoying every minute of it. I was extremely moved as we marched down St Kilda Road in front of the old diggers; I identified with them and felt fully Australian. Their story was my story. I also remember the white sauce on the cauliflower that was served with the slice of roast pork, potatoes and peas, a foreign, bland but interesting taste to my still Italian taste buds. I ate the sweets, too, but I remember not thinking much of the custard on the apple crumble.

In September the band held its annual concert in the Town Hall to raise funds to cover the costs of the Band's participation in the Ballarat South Street Band Competition. According to the Powlett Express reporter the Band displayed 'some excellent musicianship' in our part of the rich and varied programme. He must have known something about bands because we were most successful; we scooped the pool, the first band to do so in 28 years. We not only won the aggregate for the D grade bands, but got the most points in all four sections - test piece, own choice, quick step and hymn. All the hours that we had spent marching, practising turns and counter turns really paid off. We marched the 100 yards in 58 seconds, the aim was 60, which was also better than all the A, B and C grade bands had managed to do.. And we had 12 junior members, the only band to have any junior bandmen playing. Although we did not know how well we had done when we left Ballarat to return home, I remember a lot of singing in the bus. A small crowd of supporters greeted us with the news when we got back to Wonthaggi later that night. Somebody had telephoned Mr and Mrs Taberner at their hotel and they must have organized the welcome home party. We were given cake and soft drinks and sent home to bed. The adult members of the band were not so conservative in their celebrations, which went on until the early hours of the morning.

**(This is the first of a two-part story by Sam Gatto.)**