

# PLOD ESSAY:

## “The Life of our Family was at Cape Paterson”

During school holidays, especially in summer, you can see kids in groups with their beach gear, wet suits, surf or body boards lined up on Billson Street waiting for the bus to pick them up and, for a dollar, take them to Cape Paterson where there is Undertow Bay (to be kept away from), Baby Beach and the Rock Pool, The Channel, First Surf, Second Surf, and, if you want to stretch it, F Break. The kids will stay down at the beach all day, swimming, surfing, jumping off rocks, sliding down sand dunes, wandering around, and looking after each other, but, just like in the old days, they'll be home by six because that's when the bus will take them home.

In the old days, of course, the kids used to walk to the beach. Not to Cape Paterson, but across the scrub to Wreck Beach. It was an adventure all the way going and coming. That's the same way Jim Legg and his wife and seven kids walked to the Back Beach on the weekends when they first came to live in Hicksborough in 1912. Shortly before the war they got a house in Campbell Street in Wonthaggi. Jim got to know Harry Hopner, who went around the town with a horse and cart selling fish. Harry told Jim that Cape Paterson was the place to catch fish. Jim was fond of fishing and liked the information. Harry told him, he would sell him the horse and cart, a good solid hut made of driftwood and tin situated near where the toilets are now at Cape Paterson, plus a dingy. £20 for the lot. Jim thought it was a good deal, but it took two pays to come up with the money.

Jim's daughter, Annie, who later became Annie Gilmour after she met Ron at a dance, said in a speech she gave to the Historical Society in 1986, “I was about nine years old when we got the hut. We never missed a Sunday going to the Cape after that, at least after the crays came in every October. We never left 'til Easter. You could say the life of the Legg family was at the Cape. From Campbell Street we used to go through the trees, past the cemetery, out to the wreck then round the back of the coast 'til we got to Cape. Us girls went in the cart with our mother, but the boys had to walk.

“Ours was the only hut there at that time. Different fellows used to be regulars at the beach, but ours was the only hut. A fellow named Peter

the Hermit was always there, too. He had long hair and a great big ginger beard. We thought he was shipwrecked. He lived in amongst the ti-tree on a big sand hill. He never had a hut, just lived in the scrub. You could live there it was that thick. It wasn't so strange that he lived out. Only we girls and Mum slept in our hut; the boys slept in hammocks made of chaff bags slung between the ti-tree. Peter the Hermit knew the weather and could tell what the clouds meant. Dad used to bring the bread to him.

“The way we came to the Cape took about two-and-a-half hours through scrub and over sand dunes. Dad got tired of that and so did the horse. One day when we went out that way there was a bush fire, so Dad thought he would make another track along the Oaks. So we went out across the flats – first flat and second flat – and, you know the creek where the water falls are? That's where we crossed the horse. We kids would run down by the waterfall. Still, Dad decided that way was too long, as well.

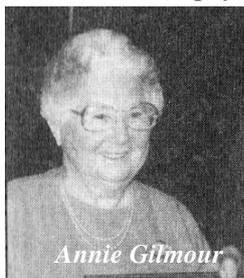
“So he thought he would make another track, and that was about where the road is now except Dad would veer off through Eastern Area on the way home to get us to Campbell Street quicker. You could go and make a track anywhere in those days. Our horse was a good, nice big ginger horse that was as honest as the day is long. Dad pushed the horse through the scrub and that's how we made the track. We went the same way coming and going until it was a real track.”

Jim picked the right place for fishing. He took the dingy out and caught couta and crayfish. He sold the couta for six pence and the cray for 2/6. He bought a 23-foot boat that let him go out further and catch more. He and his mates made a boat shed with a winch to wind up the boat. He had a slipway, too, that he made from all the rails lying around the beach from the days when they tried to make a go of mining the celebrated Queen's Vein in the 1880s.

While Jim was out in the boat with Aunty Em, whom he used to make go cray fishing with him, the kids used to catch them as well when the tide was out.

“You could get them easy then,” said Annie. “We had a stick with a bit of string and a lump of meat and a hand-held net. You'd see the cray crawl into the net after the meat. It was that easy.

“You were allowed to catch mutton bird then, too. You could get a licence to catch them at Philip Island. Dad and the boys would sail the boat to the



Island and then bring home a load of birds. We girls had to clean them. Dad would sell a bird for six pence. Mum would pickle a lot of them and also render them down for the oil. Mutton bird oil would cure anything. Anyone was sick, they'd get a bottle of mutton bird oil. All that work took us six weeks."

Norman Veal, remembers those days, and says that Jim Legg used to have pickled mutton bird in his crib everyday at the mine.

The water at the springs was a bit brackish but it was clean and okay to drink. Jim and the boys put in a tank at the waterfall that he had got from the mine – a big square iron thing –and put a pipe on it. Everyone used it because that was the only water available. "We drank it and washed in it. Mum used it with raspberry vinegar."

It got to be quite a community of huts out there, which meant there were a lot of kids and other people who needed to learn to swim and take care of each other. Annie said the way she learned to swim was her dad threw her into the water and that was it. "If he didn't the boys would have," she said. Harry Hazeldene started an unofficial Life Saving Club. He tried to teach Annie to tow the swimmers in, but it was no good.

By the early 1930s Annie had married Ron Gilmour and the two of them built their own hut up on the hill next to the springs. Her sister built there, too. There were lots of huts there, then another little community of huts near where the boat ramp is now. And lots of people walked back and forth to the beach along Jim's track now. So there was quite a population.

Davey Bester, an inspector of mines who had a large motorcar, reckoned there were enough people to start an official Life Saving Club that would eventually join up with Royal Life Saving Society so they could compete in carnivals.

They had to learn the ropes first. Davey got a core group of people together who came down to Cape early every Sunday morning if they weren't already there – twelve in his car and another bunch in Austin Skinner's car. This was about 1936. The road was still just Jim's Track so it was a bumpy ride. They spent the day doing their Life Saving and First Aid courses and swimming training.

"Davey was teaching us. He had a book and he was learning it out of that. He could hardly swim himself, but he learned. We all did. We eventually got our Bronze Medallions. In 1938, before we joined up with the Royal Society, Allen Newman, one of our fellows, drowned. He was practicing swimming out to sea with the belt

on when he got caught up in seaweed. He called for help and the team on the beach pulled him in, but they pulled him too quick so the weight of the seaweed pulled him under. We'd been taught resuscitation but it didn't do any good that day. Terrible day, but we still carried on."

In March 1939, the first clubhouse was built mainly as a ladies' change room, but soon extended to a kitchen and a men's change room. It was made from Wonthaggi's old Crystal Palace, first built in 1910 by Smith Brothers for roller-skating, dances and films. It then became known as the Cairo, then the Crystal Palace. The club bought it for £50 and as club members demolished it, Freddy Webb carted it out to the Cape. The Country Fire Brigade donated a tower and fire bell.

The clubhouse changed and grew. Finally in 1953, they made the current clubhouse. "The ladies and girls made all the bricks for that building. We borrowed a brick mould off the Lands Department. Making those bricks was hard work. It took us a couple of years. We paid for it all. No grants back then.

"When we had the Easter Carnival each year, we had teams from Melbourne and all over. They stayed the weekend. The Life Saving Ladies did the catering with camp ovens and boilers on an open fire. We cooked three hot meals each day. We fed them on tin plates out in the bush. We fed them fish and crayfish. It was wonderful."



*Senior Men's Reel & Line (1950s) R. Gilmour  
5th from left*

There is more to tell: about the making of the rock pool in the 1950s, the generations of kids who have gone through that club, the lives saved, the Carnivals and the Hospital Parades with the kids marching in step all dressed in white carrying the flag.

So...to be continued. Maybe next summer.

– C. Landon