

PLOD ESSAY: Lyn Came with Joe in 1951

A few years ago Lyn Chambers and I began to work on gathering information about the Miners Women's Auxiliary. We didn't get very far before other projects interrupted our progress, but the interviews I did with Lyn about her impressions of Wonthaggi when she came to live here with Joe in 1951 were interesting. It is a shame they have never been used. Re-reading them made me realise much of my interest in Wonthaggi's social history came from these few talks I had with Lyn.

The Chambers family came to Wonthaggi in 1921 but Joe stayed back in Scotland with his grandfather and sister, Nellie, until she finished her studies. They came out in 1925: "Joe went to school in Billson Street. Nelly went teaching in a rural school over in the Gippsland area and that's when she met Mr. Bickerton and became a farmer's wife. After

Billson Street, Joe went to the Tech and he loved music and he learnt the piano. He used to practice a lot. Then when he went teaching, he studied music as well."

Lyn met Joe at Teachers' College. They seemed to be opposites. He was tall and lanky, jovial and outgoing while she was small and serious, but, they connected on deeper levels of politics and social justice, and it seems that Lyn never left Joe's side once they agreed they belonged together.

While they were courting, Joe brought Lyn to Wonthaggi to meet his parents: "Well, I remember when Joe first brought me down to meet the family. They were up in Three-Acre Blocks then and we walked in the door and Agnes didn't come and hug me or anything like that, but it was just her manner and her face and everything that made you feel accepted and comfortable. You knew she was interested and concerned about family members. And here I was, Joe's girl."

Both Lyn and Joe taught in Primary Schools before they were married. Finally Joe got a



placement at Billson Street, his old school, and they moved to Wonthaggi in 1951 a married couple: "Wonthaggi was a very different place then. It was more down to earth. I had grown up that way, and that's probably why I got along. Wonthaggi was a place of dirt roads and small houses and people did for each other. There were a few in the business area who thought we were a bit... The well-to-do who went to the Gentleman's Club — and they used to look down a bit on the rest of us, but... the rest of the town,

everybody was friendly and cooperative. And in those days, you could go out without locking your door and you were sure nothing would happen. Wonthaggi is still a pretty safe place, although you hear more about stealing these days. Most of the young people you meet in the street are just ordinary kids."

One of the most important things Lyn brought with her to Wonthaggi was her piano, the one that now stands in her lounge room on Broome

Crescent: "That piano was brought out by my Grandfather Condon from England. They lived in Glenfyne in England. And that was about 1870. My mother was given piano lessons but when Grandfather Condon died, my grandmother had to work around and eventually when my mother married the piano came to her because Granny didn't play. Then it was brought to me and Joe played it."

Lyn says that by the time she and Joe came to live in Wonthaggi, the Chambers had moved from Three-Acre Blocks to Dunn Street. Lyn says it was a little house just like the one they had left: "Every Sunday night we'd go over there for dinner at night and she and Aunty Tilly would have a nice meal — mainly a roast, red meat, lamb mostly — She's serve it up for us and it was good. You were just sort of part of it. Families told what they were doing and what they wanted to do and go where they were planning. Let's see... The Hamiltons were there. She was the daughter. She started off teaching at Billson Street and she married Robert Hamilton, who was a miner. They lived on the corner of Drysdale and Hagglethorne and during his spare time he made that cement brick wall. That's

where they lived. He used to come over and do work on the house like emptying the guttering. Then there were Joe and I and our two daughters; and Elsie and Hammy and their three kids; then Agnes and Jim and Tilly. That would be about it. Twelve. That's a big enough family."

Lyn and Joe moved into a miner's cottage straight across the lane at 6 Mathew Street: "When we bought down at Mathew Street, we cooked on a little black iron coal stove. I was amazed at how the black coal dust accumulated on the curtains. We had to clean up often. We didn't really notice the coal smell because everyone used it. It never got smoggy like London because of the wind. You'd see the coal smoke coming from everyone's chimneys. It wasn't black, a darkish colour, not white. Most people had their stoves going on coal in the open fireplace. There was a washhouse, detached from the house, with a copper and troughs and a mangle. In these houses ... Well, in our house, you came in the front door and on the left there was a lounge room with an open fireplace and on the other side was our bedroom and the girls bedroom was there and down the passage it opened into the kitchen which went right across the back. We spent most of our time back there. Joe built on another area that became a bathroom and laundry. Before that... well, when I was growing up at the farm house, or when I was first teaching up at Strathhuen and places like that, they had a tin tub and you heated up the copper and got the water and took it out to the wash house. When I was young my mother used to bring it in the kitchen near the stove and open the oven door. Quite a lot were doing that here, too. You only had a bath once a week. That's what everybody did. Most of us – the Chambers did – had a garden and quite a lot of us had a cow tethered on the nature strip."

"We had Italians on both sides. Jack Campagnola had been taken by the Germans to Russia to work on the mines and roads when the Germans were attacking Stalingrad. When the Russians defeated them and they left, they took everything with them and left the poor devils with nothing. A lot of them died in the wintertime. Jack Campagnola met these peasants and they were struggling too because the Germans had taken their cattle, but they took him and gave him shelter and

told him where to go so he managed to get away and he got into the group that were brought out here as miners. He was a kind of refugee after the war. When he heard that Joe was leftwing, he came over and talked to him and asked him how to vote. He was anti conservative and hated Mussolini. He became a good friend. We had a lawn out the front and when we went away for the school holidays at Christmas time, the grass would grow up and up and it was too high for Joe to mow, so Jack would come in with his scythe and he would cut it for us. He couldn't understand why you grew grass to have to cut it; he had potatoes in the yard. They made their own sausage, and wine. Our other neighbour, he had the grappa down in his back shed."

"When I came here in 1951, people were no longer using horses, but they used bicycles. There weren't as many cars as there are today but a lot of people walked, but the miners had buses. The mine ran the bus to pick the miners up in the morning to take them to the different shafts. The Italians didn't have cars. Joe taught them English when they came out in the fifties. It was down in the little pre-school part at the primary school. He used to have a lesson there. I know he used to go over to a door and say the English name and ask them what they called it. They worked for an hour and then they had a break and then another hour. During the break he'd get them to sing some of their folk songs. He learnt quite a few from them. He would play his recorder and sing, too. It was Frank Scimonello, who loved the lessons, when they married when they invited us to the wedding and we were amazed when we were sitting at the long table full of food and one of the women breast fed her baby! No body worries about that now."



Thank you, Lyn, for such wonderful storytelling.

- C. Landon