

# PLOD ESSAY:

## Handmade Wheelchair & Steel Frame

In November 1958 an invitation was sent out calling all interested Wonthaggi Citizens to a dinner at Taberner's Hotel to discuss the formation of a Wonthaggi & District Historical Society. The last sentence in the invitation, signed by J.W. Glover and J.A. Quilford, stated, "It is felt that the time is opportune to collect and preserve articles and documents of historical interest." Twenty-seven people attended the "Inaugural Dinner".

Two months later a formal meeting was held, and the W&DHS was formally begun with an election of office bearers: Tom Rahilly (President), Mr Shillinglaw and Arthur Quilford (Vice-Presidents) and Jim Glover (Secretary). A sub-committee (Joe Chambers and Mr Harris) was appointed to draw up a constitution.

Soon Arthur Quilford became President and Neil Simmons became Secretary and for almost 25 years, this essential core group of Wonthaggians stayed together one way or another through the ebb and flow of a changing membership, fulfilling the aims and obligations they had set for themselves in July 1959. These aims were: to awaken an interest in historical and geographical beginnings of our district; to collect, classify and enquire into historical events; to maintain records and relics; to carry out marking and designating historical places; to disseminate historical information and such other objects that our society may otherwise desire; to collect personal histories and document local "Characters" [which the Chambers did by recording interviews with many old timers]; to list and trace old roads, old pubs, original settlers and place names and early parish churches.

The collections grew and much of it was kept at Arthur Quilford's house on Merrin Crescent where the group often met. The house could be identified by the large bullock wagon, donated to W&DHS, sitting out front on the verge, which made people think that was the headquarters of the Society. But, finally, in 1983, the Borough Council deemed it practical to let the Society use the empty Railway Station as its headquarters and museum. This is when all sorts of incredible artefacts began to at last come out of Quilford's second lounge room to be arranged in perhaps the most important original building of Wonthaggi for all the town to see. And, with so much on view, more and more townspeople began to realise that they, too, had important historical artefacts to donate to the now growing Historical Society.



In 2007, Mary Mabin, a long-time member of the Society, decided it was at last time to bring out the old wheelchairs covered in cobwebs, sitting in the farm shed next to a steel frame that had been hanging with the old harnesses, left there ever since Fergie tractors took over from horses on farms. They were wiped clean and delivered to the Railway Station Museum where they stayed out on the platform waiting to be refurbished and labelled for exhibition inside the museum.

The chair and frame had belonged to Mary's mother's twin brothers, who had been struck down by Polio and admitted to the Isolation Ward at the Wonthaggi Hospital in

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February 1938. When Mary's artefacts turned up at the museum, members were not sure of their meaning, until the word Polio was mentioned and then people stopped to stare, trying to imagine the relationship a Polio victim had with the heavy wooden wheelchair and, especially, with a steel frame the shape of a very large human body. The frame, as it was, looked like an instrument of torture that belonged in a Medieval dungeon. Those onlookers old enough to remember the Polio Epidemic, which hit Australia in 1936 but had been moving around the world since the 1920s and would not be completely eliminated until 1955, must have been filled with dread. These were instruments that needed to be exhibited because the Polio epidemic was part of Wonthaggi History and a story had to be told.

Society member, Sam Gatto, wrote about the Polio Epidemic in his book *Accepting the Challenge*, published in 2010, and in January 2021, as part of the History Talks given by Society members every day that month, Irene Williams, précised his work as an introduction to the two objects she had brought out on display for the audience to see:

In 1936, news of the threat of an Infantile Paralysis epidemic reached Wonthaggi. The disease was still rather sporadic and localized mainly in the Melbourne metropolitan area so there was no sense of emergency in the country districts. That is, until August 1937, when Wonthaggi and other parts of rural Victoria were faced with the problem of some parents in Melbourne moving to the country with their children, despite the fact that Melbourne had been declared a quarantine area. Protests followed and Wonthaggi Borough authorities were pressured to shut the gate on these potential disease carriers. In late August an announcement in the local papers stated that all children under the age of 16 years coming from the metropolitan area or any infected area, as well as children under 16 years who visited a contaminated area, be quarantined for 3 weeks in their home.

When the new school term began in August, many Wonthaggi and district parents refused to send their children to school because their teachers had been to Melbourne or other infected areas during the term holidays. This was in spite of the fact that no local cases had been seen, although a case in Tarwin had been reported. A demand was made for teachers to undergo a thorough medical examination by a health expert before they returned to school.

By the end of September 1937, three cases of infantile paralysis were reported in Wonthaggi. Although these cases were reported as mild, increasing numbers of children were kept home from school. Within the following week there was one fatality and 10 more cases had to be isolated in Wonthaggi Hospital Isolation Ward, some at home, and one at Fairfield Hospital. The Wonthaggi, Nth Wonthaggi, Dudley and St Joseph's schools were closed, those who had contact with affected children were quarantined in their homes for 3 weeks. A guard was posted along the Inverloch road to stop people moving in and out of town. Ten State Mine employees, relatives of the infected children, were ordered to stay away from work for 3 weeks, on full pay. Early in November, there were 12 days with no new cases. Hopes were high. No increase on the 28 diagnosed. With the crisis seemingly over, the Hospital Committee turned its attention to providing the necessary rehabilitation treatment.

Hopes that the epidemic might be over were dashed when in February 1938, two new cases, twin brothers, were admitted to the Isolation Ward and Mr. McVitty, from the Charities Board, immediately ordered the authorities to carry out the necessary improvements which would separate new cases from those who were recovering.

In the end, fourteen to sixteen children required long term care and rehabilitation. Good food, rest and sleep were essential for recovery but of utmost importance were the apparatus that had to be made to support the children's weakened muscles, damaged tendons and nerves. Local craftsmen, especially blacksmiths, were called on to make this equipment to add to that which was manufactured. The masseur, Mr. Stillwell, demonstrated imagination and outstanding teaching skills when dealing with the children. Some of the children had to stay in care for up to a year and a half. For those old enough to go to school, the usual school calendar was adhered to and a teacher came to teach them each day. The mine whistle or school bell indicated play time, lunch time and the end of the day. Activities were organized, entertainers came, visits to the cinema, visits from family and friends,

some were able to go home for brief periods. Getting home, however, was not always feasible given the condition of the children. The state of the roads, the available transport and the distance from home, which for some children was over 20 miles, kept the children in the hospital.

Gerald Abrahamson joined Irene to talk about the McFarlane twins, John and William, who were some of the last Polio cases in Wonthaggi. The twins were his uncles, and he remembers them after they left hospital.

The boys were in the polio ward at the hospital for two years. There they learned to sleep upright, attached to the steel frame on display in the Museum so that their weight would be distributed in a way to help strengthen their legs. For William it seemed to work, but not for John. Of course, the boys were not put straight on the steel. The frame was padded in kapok and covered in calico. It had a leather backing, and leather straps to hold the boy in place. Once strapped in, the patient was lifted up in the frame and leaned at a calibrated angle that was thought to be therapeutic. And that is how they slept for two years.

John, or Jack, as Mary called him, had the worst time of it. He was paralysed from the waist down and no matter how many exercises he was made to do, his legs could never hold his weight. His legs had so wasted away he was never able to walk again. He was the one that the chair on display was made for. Although he couldn't use his legs, he was strong enough in his arms to turn a crank on the right side of the chair that moved a chain attached to both wheels. He could get along very well with that contraption. Mary said, despite his condition, he was "a happy chap who enjoyed a few beers at Taberners of a Friday, a game of cards and listening to the wireless." He lived 55 years, "and never complained."

William fared much better than Jack. He pretty much recovered, gaining the use of his legs and developing some strength in his body through lots of special exercise. Gerald remembers his uncle was not overly strong or robust but he could tackle a fair day's work and kept the farm going. He had a kind of uncomplaining courage to keep going, to keep up with the rest of the healthy people around him.

Gerald finished his talk about his uncles with a plea to the listeners about vaccines. He saw what happened to his beloved uncles when there was no vaccine to protect them. He knows that his life was saved by the Polio vaccine.

I grew up in Chicago, and when I was 10 and in Grade 5, a boy came in the middle of the year to join our class. His name was Ricky Steadman. I remember his name and exactly what he looked like because he was wearing calipers on his legs and using crutches, something I had never seen before on a kid my age. I remember him because he was one of the nicest boys in the grade. He spoke to us about his time in hospital and told us how lucky we were to get the vaccine that was coming. I remember lining up as a class and marching down to the nurse's room and being given a small paper cup with something like cordial in it. We did that more than once and we were told we never had to worry about polio again.

And we never did.

It's amazing what a profound story rests with a couple of artefacts sitting silently in the middle room of the refurbished Railway Station Museum. Those fellows who had a vision about the need for a Historical Society and a museum in Wonthaggi deserve our grateful thanks.

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