

PLOD ESSAY

Danny Carr, The Man Who Could Make Anything

A version of the following essay, written by Frank Coldebella, was first published in THE CURRENT in 2006. At that stage Danny Carr was in his mid-70's. Now in his 90's, he is still going strong.



Wonthaggi Power Station powered the town from 1912 to 1966.

COAL mining was classified as a vital industry during the Second World War – the miners didn't have to go to fight – but a shortage of just about everything, including money, made operating the State Coal Mine ever more difficult. The men in the mine workshops salvaged, reused, repaired and recycled every piece of metal available to repair the mine's and power station's ageing equipment to keep the coal moving and the power on.

An assortment of men from different nationalities worked in the mine workshops alongside the old Wonthaggi Power Station, now the Donmix site on West Area Road. There, in a ferment of ideas and machinery, they replaced, repaired, altered, adjusted and made just about everything – winches, bearings, skips, clutches and shafts – needed to keep the mine operating. Sometimes they even had to design and build their own machinery to make the parts.

These welders, blacksmiths, turners and fitters had been taught by some very good engineers as well as by practical tradesmen. They would patch and repair boiler tubes, skips, chains or any moving metal piece. They flattened shovels so the miners could work in narrow seams without skinning their knuckles.

When the old smokestack at the power station rusted out, they built a roller to roll a new six-millimetre steel-plated smokestack. The stack was 10 metres high and almost three metres in diameter, and erecting it was an enormous task in the days before cranes were around. They also found a way to reopen a collapsed shaft, a dangerous and difficult job.

One of the surviving legends of the workshops is Danny Carr



Danny migrated from what was then part of Italy but is now Croatia to Australia as a young child. His first experience of the mines came in 1937 when he was in Grade 4 and his mother told him to bike to 20 Shaft to see if his miner father was all right. His father was safe, but 13 of his workmates had died in a gas explosion, Wonthaggi's worst ever mine disaster.

A born prankster, Danny was rated in the bottom third of the class at the start of Year 8. Deciding the rating system wasn't fair, he determined to complete his Junior Technical Certificate. By the end of the year, he was dux of his class.

Convinced that he had had enough schooling, he went looking for an apprenticeship in turning and fitting, despite the best efforts of his parents, teachers and the mine manager, Mr McLeish, to persuade him to return to school. Mr McLeish finally relented, realising he could lose a potential star recruit if he didn't take Danny on.

Danny began work as an apprentice in the mine workshops in 1942. From the start, he loved working there. He was absorbed and amazed by the skill of his masters and the mixture of nationalities, cultures, ideas and skills of the tradesmen.

The whole district benefited from the problem-solving skills developed by these men in times of shortage. When the mines closed in 1968, Danny and five of his co-workers used a Fergie tractor to tow away five machines from the workshops that would otherwise have ended up as scrap metal, as so much from the defunct mine

did. The machinery, including a lathe and giant cutter, was used to establish their own business – Carr’s Engineering, now MWC Engineering – in McKenzie Street.

Carr’s workshop was never a model of tidiness but the engineering skills and inventiveness shown by the workers there became legendary throughout the district and, indeed, throughout Gippsland

When they needed a special part or piece of equipment, everyone from the fishermen of Western Port through to the managers of factories, quarries and briquette works turned to Danny and his crew to weave their mechanical magic. At the Wonthaggi Power Station, Danny had machined the turbine bearings – which ran at 5000 revs per minute – to an accuracy of less than one-thousandth of an inch. He brought the same skill to replacing a rare part for a local farmer’s tractor. He built drum reels for shark nets and replaced propellor shafts on fishing boats.

From a 230mm square block of steel, he could make a 330mm diameter pinion for a winch or complete a new bearing housing for a 100mm shaft.

“He was no mug, our Danny,” says Vic Benetti, an old mate since technical school days.

“I’ve never seen him make a blunder. He always knew the easiest way to do a job.” Ralph Piasente, the production manager at the Archies Creek Butter Factory, describes Danny as an ‘unsung hero.’

“Everything he and his gang did was done to perfection,” Ralph recalls.

He says Danny designed and built 25-ton milk powder bins for the factory, as well as conveyors and milk silos. “He and his gang were totally professional. They would build a broken overseas part overnight if you needed it.”

The size of the job was never an issue. Whether they were seeking a part for a skateboard, a large church crucifix or a hay baler, clients were all treated with due respect. Anyone who showed himself willing and capable was likely to be invited to help in the task.

Ralph says Danny’s motivation was never monetary. “He could have been a very rich man, but it wasn’t about the money. His loyalty was to the community.”

Danny now lives a simple retirement in a small neat house almost across the road from his old workshop. But on rainy winter afternoons when there is no chance of catching a fish, he often heads down to the shed for another turn. There you’re likely to find him behind a cutting machine set at an odd angle, a page full of numbers and calculations beside him, working out how to solve a problem.

Danny's continuing involvement with the State Coal Mine

A huge meeting held at the Workman's Club protesting the lack of government support for the continued operation of the State Coal Mine, in particular the resumption of underground tours, was held in March of this year. Danny stood up to clearly express his opinion at that meeting. Four months later, on the 1st of August 2023, the current State Minister for the Environment, Ingrid Stitt, announced, that the State had found "\$1.5 million to restore tours and bring the Heritage site back to life." People like Danny standing up and being counted certainly had something to do with the Minister's decision. Let Danny return to the mine and remain strong and alert for years to come.

(What follows is the article published on Page 1 in the *Sentinel Times* August 1, 2023 announcing the Minister for the Environment's decision to bring the Heritage site back to life:)

STATE COAL MINE STRIKES GOLD!!



Politicians & Friends of the State Coal Mine Heritage Site

THERE were rounds of applause and high emotions after Minister for Environment, Ingrid Stitt, announced a \$1.5M lifeline to finally restore tours at the State Coal Mine in Wonthaggi. Minister Stitt visited the coal mine café last week surrounded by Friends of the State Coal Mine volunteers as well as former miners and Parks Victoria staff. The funding will pay for vital maintenance and upgrade works on the track and carts that take visitors inside the mine, as well as support training for volunteers and Parks Victoria staff to safely operate the system. After tours at the site were shut down during the pandemic, and with the café also closing up earlier this year when its previous lessee moved on, there has been a strong push by volunteers and the community to bring everything back to life.

During March this year, more than 200 locals turned out to show their support for the coal mine, calling for tours to resume and the café to be leased. In attendance was Member for Bass Jordan Crugnale, who then went through an extraordinary effort to open up talks with Parks Victoria and volunteers, as well as organising the Minister to visit the site. And to make it even more promising, Parks Victoria had begun the process to seek a new operator for the café, with the expression of interest period closing just last week and confirmation there had been numerous applicants. While the final details of getting the cart back up and running are still underway, Friends of the State Coal Mine, Steve Harrop, was delighted by the funding commitment. "A lot of people come here and say it's amazing what you get for the price," he said when explaining how significant getting the site up and running again was. He highlighted the funding was crucial to also keep volunteers motivated. "The longer this dragged on the more disheartened they've become, so this will really give it a boost," he said. During the announcement, it was also highlighted to the Minister the need for ongoing funding so the mine wouldn't be reliant on significant boosts every few years.

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