

PLOD ESSAY

The '34 Strike & The Emergence of a 'Real Community'

My favourite stories about Wonthaggi History are about the comradeship of the people here and the way they support each other, celebrating accomplishments as well as commiserating tragedy. Wonthaggiens are proud of their public spirit where the well-being of others is essential for the well-being of all. Historically, the most important institutions in the town aside from the mine itself, were the Miners Federation and the Women's Auxiliary. Although names may have changed, the Wonthaggi spirit is still celebrated in the Historical Society, the Neighbourhood House, the activities at the Rescue Station, The CFA, The Coal Mine Museum, Bass Coast Landcare, The Wonthaggi Citizens Band, The Bass Coast Chorale, plus readings in the library, volunteering and training of the Nippers at the Surf Life Saving Club, Film Society, sporting groups everywhere... and the list goes on.

It is a real community.

The most positive description of how this *real community* evolved sits with the way the miners, their mothers, wives, daughters, sons and all the townspeople supported each other during the 20-week Miners' Strike in 1934:

Humphrey McQueen, an historian writing in *The Age*, twenty years after the strike, remembered the comradeship amongst the people of Wonthaggi and called his article, *Red Wonthaggi: a real community*:

"The fount of public spirit in Wonthaggi was the Miners Federation. A trade unionist would likely also be a member of the Friendly Society Dispensary, the dental clinic, the co-operative store...and, possibly, a member of the brass band and in one of the town choirs. He would attend Federation and town meetings in the Union Theatre which hosted a cooperative cinema...

"The federation had been battered during the slide into depression in the 1930's. Indeed, the Co-op Store contributed more financially than could the Federation until a nationwide levy began to muster some strike pay. Typically, locals shared that pittance with non-members, who had lost their jobs during the strike.

"Women became increasingly active in maintaining services through their own committee, perhaps Australia's first Union Women's Auxiliary... some of whom toured the state to address public meetings."

Early on, when the strike was actually taking hold, *The Express and Victorian* newspaper, reported that the Ladies Relief Committee declared that they were 100% behind their striking men and "not ashamed to admit it." Within less than a week since its inception their Relief Committee had helped more than 100 families. They also explained that in a room on the second storey of the boot shop, a repair depot had been established where six cobblers drawn from the miner's ranks were busily engaged in repairing a pile of boots and shoes: 'We've only been going since Saturday morning, but we've already done 30 pairs!' explained one of the cobblers.

"The ladies also established a hairdressing salon and in two-and-a-half days four ex-barbers decked out in spotless white coats trimmed the hair of nearly 400 heads – men, women and children.

"The next week a distribution of food was made by the Miners' Relief Committee. Included in it were 1100 loaves of bread, 100 lbs of meat from a bullock donated by Banks Brothers, 3 tons of potatoes, 50 dozen tins of jam, 4 dozen tins of treacle, 200 lbs of dripping and many rabbits. This distribution effort would go on week after week as long as the strike lasted.

"The younger miners took off for the beaches to take care of themselves and collect food for all: crays, fish, and abalone were on tap. A group of twenty rabbiters went out and returned with a good catch. Twenty other workers went out to chop firewood at Pommy Town."

It is exciting and wonderful to read the heroics of the men and women of Wonthaggi in a time of serious trouble and to realise that so much of that ethos still exists here, but it wasn't until I came across a book amongst a pile of second-hand books being given away by a friend that I woke up to the fact that I really did not understand why the terrible strike, the one that stood down every

Wonthaggi miner and galvanized the culture of Wonthaggi, had taken place. The only thing I knew was that 1934 was at the height of the Great Depression.

The book was entitled *The Wonthaggi Coalfields*. It looked almost brand new, no bent pages, a clean spine, as if no one had ever opened it or read it, but it had a musty smell as if it had been sitting forgotten for years. In fact, it was published in 1984, which meant it was more than 40 years old. The author, Philip Harper, had signed his name on the inside cover, but other than that, it looked untouched. The chapter headings were ominous: 1. *Pioneer Township, the mines and their problems*; 2. *Frustrations and Disappointments in Early Mine Development*; 3. *Ominous Signs cause Fear for Future*; 4. *Early Misgivings*; 6. *Agitation for greater mine development*; 8. *Serious omens of Industrial Unrest*; 9. *Deteriorating Coal Markets in Victoria*; 11. *Chronicle of Strife and Disaffection...*

No wonder only a few would have had the courage to read this book, if anyone did. As I looked through it, I could see that it was thoroughly researched, and I felt that it might have good descriptions of the politics of the time at the State Coal Mine.

Here is what I learned:

It is important to understand that the catalyst for the development of the Wonthaggi Mine in the first place and in spite of misgivings, was the *Peter Bowling Strike* at Australia's most important coal mine in Newcastle in 1909. This strike caused the unavailability of Newcastle coal, the fuel the Victorian rail network needed for its engines to move goods around the state, and upon which Victoria's prosperity depended. Victoria would have to find another source of fuel to keep the trains running. It was known that there was good black coal near Cape Paterson, but it was difficult to access, and the quality was unsure. Nevertheless, the Victorian Secretary of Mines declared that the Powlett Coalfields were expected to develop into a significant mining operation. Soon, coal coming from the "Pioneer" mines next to Tent Town was being loaded onto to bullock wagons, hauled to Inverloch where it was loaded onto shallow draft vessels and despatched to Melbourne, but in February 1910, the first train load of coal was sent to Melbourne on the newly laid rail line. Only one month later, in March of that year, a total of 128,173 tons of black coal was mined by 730 newly employed men; and by June the new mine had dispatched 42,274 tons of coal by train directly to Melbourne. A year later, the production showed 376,070 tons for the year. There was little doubt on the haste and scale at which the State Mine developed.

The new and highly respected Wonthaggi Mine Manager, Mr Broome, was "cautious and considered" when he quoted a maximum of 540,000 tons per year, with 2350 tons of coal able to be produced daily from the, by then, four Mines at Wonthaggi. Sounds like a lot, but maybe not. The trouble was that a drop in price of the coal in New South Wales caused readjustment downwards in the price of Wonthaggi coal, which put pressure on the margins in the marketing situation. Mr Fitzpatrick, Chief Commissioner of Railways, which would soon take over administration of the State Mine, was "reluctant" but Mr Broome said, "There is less likely strikes occurring in the case of the State Coal Mine; the mine was going to be exceptionally good for the country and the railways in particular."

There were questions, of course: about the Coal – how good was it? how much slack was in it? was it duff or round? how accessible was it? And about the Money – how much was coal worth? how much pay could the men ask for? how much was the state willing to pay in wages? These were always at the forefront of any issue. Too often Mr Broome was forced to classify coal reserves as doubtful or unprofitable, thus wages were always an issue. But, he explained, "the geological difficulties of the Mine must be accepted, and the best endeavour must be made to exploit coal with a minimum level of losses on Workers."

The mine did operate on a profitable basis for all but seven years of the period 1909 to 1930. 1926 was the year of peak employment at the mine and the mine was providing an output of approximately 2,700 tons of coal per day. In 1928, however, there were signs of "coal market degeneration." In 1929 the *Sentinel* reported that "2,000,000 tons of coal in a 2ft-6inch seam in McBride Tunnel will never be taken out because it would not pay to do so..." Also, in that year

the demand from railways for Wonthaggi coal was an unfortunate event in as much as it occurred on the threshold of the 1930 coal market collapse. The problem was, miners in New South Wales had been on strike and prices had tanked. This affected the prices in Victoria. Miners were worried especially when the State Mine was forced to immediately reduce its prices and knowing that pressure on reduced prices and fallen coal demand would naturally mean a call for reduction of the miners' wages. Union action was in the air and there was a note of bitterness in the Miners Union's relations with the Bosses when they demanded a widely based enquiry into mine operations.

Broome did his best to mollify the Union but his comments indicated that there was a very critical situation at the mine where not only retrenchments were inevitable, but they would be very severe.

In February 1931, with the State Mine in a desperate marketing situation, problems were further exacerbated by a gas explosion at 20 Shaft when six men were severely injured with intense burns. (It was not the first or the last such explosion at 20 Shaft.)

Large scale reduction in wages and employment were on the cards. Immediate retrenchments were also on the cards in order to avoid closing down the mine completely. In the end, despite Union complaints, mine staff was reduced by one quarter. The talk of retrenchments caused "shock waves" to pass through the Township. Collapse of Victorian coal market was deepening: 400 men were dismissed from the mine in July and August. The Union was deeply aggravated and called for protest meetings in the township which were packed with citizens and were the forerunner of the bitter strike in 1934.

And then the unthinkable happened. General Manager, George Broome, died on August 9, 1932. "Mr Broome was not only a formidable figure in the life of the mine, but he also represented a fatherly figure whose decorum and conciliatory manner set a high standard of social life in the community. He acted most conscientiously and so far within his power for the best interest of the mine and the men and won the hearts of the miners in the field." He was succeeded by John McLeish, whose pugnacious personality, would come to the fore now that he was "the Boss". Conditions at the mine worsened; there was absenteeism, protests, arguments with the new General Manager who used retrenchment as a weapon. The men walked off the job on March 6, 1934 and went back to work on July 26, 1934, twenty long weeks later.



February 1910, the first train load of coal sent to Melbourne on newly laid rail