

The Hospital Garden Party by Frank Angarane

EARLY HISTORY

I will begin this story of the Hospital Garden Party by exploring our hospital's history. From the beginning of the creation of the State Coal Mine in 1909, the original miners made it clear that "health and safety were matters of prime importance."¹ This attitude resulted in the early establishment of a public hospital and health care system that was decades ahead of its time.

Within three weeks after the arrival of the first miners, a Benefit Unions Scheme funded by weekly subscriptions from the miners was established. It was a scheme that would pay a weekly wage to miners who, because of illness or injury, could not work. The fund also paid for the services of a medical officer, and in 1910 Dr. L.O. Sleeman was appointed. Doc Sleeman, as everyone called him, served Wonthaggi for 57 years and needs no introduction. He began his practice in a tent that he called "Hospital," which made it obvious that the need for a proper hospital was immediate. The Benefit Union took the bull by the horns and drove the idea home.

However, it wasn't until April 1910 that the newly formed Wonthaggi Progress Association (WPA) made up of local businesspeople, State Mine Management, and miners, "took up the battle with zeal," and declared that on Sunday 4 September 1910, **Hospital Sunday**, the first of many public processions and mass meetings, would take place.² This was the beginning of a long history of street parades and marches supporting the construction of a hospital.

On November 1, 1910, the editorial in the *Powlett Express* proclaimed that "The citizens of Wonthaggi & District have made up their minds that a hospital must be built..."³

Thus, the ultimate development of the town's hospital, from the beginning, was community driven, with the community accepting responsibility for much of the cost of its construction. Pretty much for its entire history the hospital has relied on the fundraising efforts of the community with, for instance, the **Ladies Committee** playing a huge role. In November 1910 not long after Dr Sleeman was appointed, the Ladies Committee organised the first Hospital Ball the proceeds of which went straight towards the construction of a hospital. These balls were held regularly, were eagerly attended and became good money earners.

As one can imagine with such a massive project, the hospital endured many challenges during its early history as did the Ladies Committee, which, exhausted and ready to hand over the baton, disbanded in 1948 after more than 35 years of community work. However, the Wonthaggi women couldn't stay quiet for long and in 1953, the newly formed **Ladies Auxiliary** ran the inaugural **Hospital Garden Party**. The idea was to start with a parade and end with the equivalent of a "gentrified fête" on the new hospital grounds. The original Garden Party was a huge success and raised over £1000 which in today's currency would be more like \$50,000 to \$60,000. Thus, the women were fully involved again, and the original Garden Party became the forerunner of an event that, like the Hospital Balls and Easter Festivals of the past, helped unite Wonthaggi Society.

The Garden Party continued until 1974 and served the hospital well as a major fundraiser as well as an event that brought the town and community together in celebration. These annual events were colourful and enjoyable demonstrations of what this community was capable of and brought it together to help support a most important community asset. The organisation of the garden parties

¹ Gatto, Sam, *Accepting the Challenge*, pg9.

² *Ibid.*, pg. 12.

³ *Powlett Express* 1 November 1910.

was a major undertaking and required enormous amounts of work and imagination not only from the Hospital Secretary/Manager, who acted as the coordinator, the Committee and Ladies Auxiliary, but also from many of the local service clubs and businesses. Planning for the next event would generally begin immediately after the previous one had finished. There were significant expenses in their organization and success and, as with all outdoor events, was at the mercy of the weather.

The Garden Parties were traditionally held around the middle of March when Wonthaggi was thought to have its most consistent weather. Regardless, the good weather rarely eventuated and many an event was cold, wet and windy. Nevertheless, it was always a great day and the attendees' memories of the event were not tainted by the weather conditions. In its final few years, the garden party began to stagnate. To its credit the final garden party which took place in poor weather still raised over \$1,700 for the hospital. In 1975 with many of its pioneers gone or too tired to keep the event fresh and alive and with no one ready to take their place it was decided to discontinue a long beloved event. Times had changed.

However, the significance of the Hospital Garden Party in our town was such that it was decided to re-enact it for the town's 100-year celebrations in 2010. I was working at the Shire at that time when a community committee was put together to organise the celebrations and in particular the Garden Party. To emphasise how big a job it was to put on a Garden Party as grand as the ones in the past, it must be pointed out that the planning for the Wonthaggi Centenary Celebrations Garden Party took three years (!!) with a heap of people involved and a significant budget. I'll talk more about that later.

In order to re-enact the Garden Party of the past, it was important to search the extensive



Early Street Parade. What a sight!

archives at the Wonthaggi Historical Society as well as information at the Shire and at the hospital itself. Here is some evidence of what we found. Over its 20-year history the Garden Party included heaps of sometimes novel but also very entertaining activities. It ran to a format which started off with a street parade.

THE PARADE

The parade was one of the Garden Party highlights and hundreds of people lined the route. Floats and marchers congregated in McKenzie Street and proceeded down Graham Street making its way to the hospital. All up the march was over a kilometre in length. The procession was generally led by a brass band and included other brass bands, followed by marching girls, decorated bikes, floats, unique cars and all sorts of novelties.



Wonthaggi Marching Girls in 1966



Marching girls 1965



ABOVE: Children with their decorated bicycles lined up before the procession. From left: Keith Shepherd, 12; Garry Hasson, 11; Kerri Sloan, 12; Maxine Hasson, 10; Anne Clarke, 10; Debbie Bone, 9; Daryl Cuddy, 11; Lynette, Conn, 8.

Youth Club decorated bikes 1967

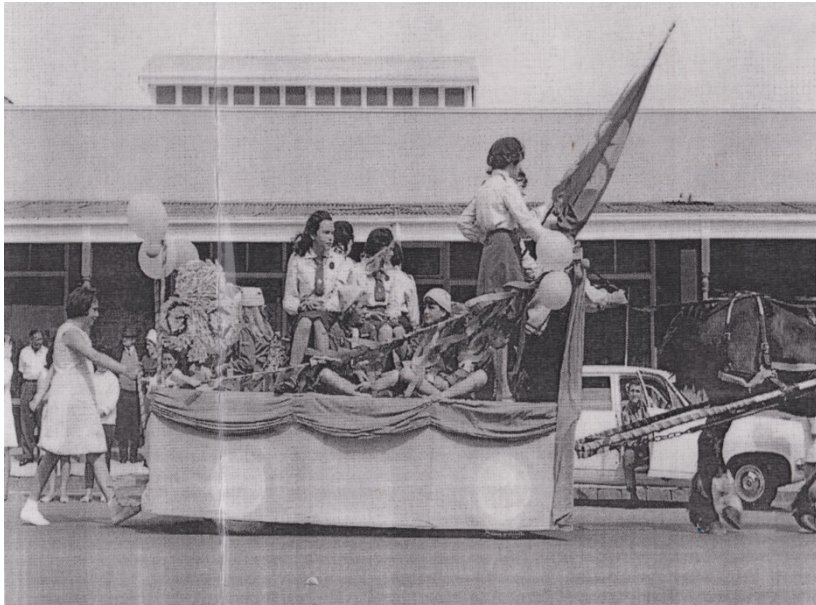


Decorated bike 1966

The floats were a real highlight and a lot of work went into creating some amazing floats.



Moyles Float (also featured in the 2010 centenary celebrations)



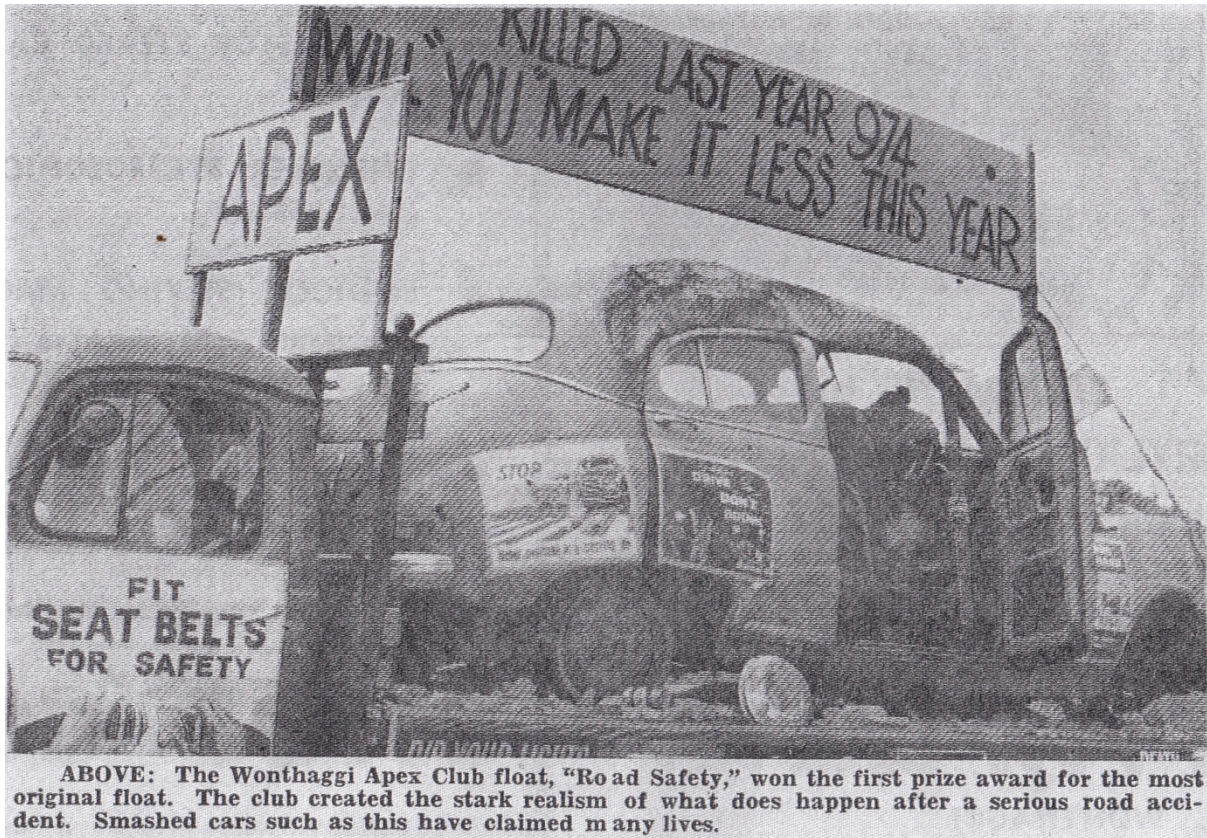
Girl Guides Float around 1966



*Warraee Elderly Citizens Float
1974*



*The Archie's Creek Dairy Produce Co.
floats were always very elaborate*



The parade gave groups the ability to promote a social message – Apex float 1967

The parade also involved plenty of high jinx with flour bombs, streamers, water bombs and other missiles being launched at certain groups in the parade. To give you an idea of a typical parade here are some extracts from the front pages of the March 28, 1963 editions of the *Powlett Express* and the *Sentinel* both of which described the procession as one of the best: "Bandmaster Matt Cameron ran a critical eye over the Wonthaggi Citizen's band standing stiffly to attention at 1.30 last Saturday. He blew a shrill blast on his whistle and Wonthaggi's 1963 garden party procession had begun. Along the $\frac{3}{4}$ mile route to the hospital grounds hundreds of spectators cheered, laughed and admired one of the brightest processions to date. A group outside the Powlett Hotel threw streamers at the marchers. There was a diversion outside the hospital grounds when members of a burlesque fire brigade and the Wonthaggi firemen squirted water at each other with hand pumps and hoses as bystanders ducked for cover."

Another display that drew laughs was the 1910 vintage Wonthaggi Bathing Belles. Beneath neck to knee bathers and gaudy frocks were male members of the teenage Wonthaggi DJ Club. Cinderella was the theme of the Wonthaggi CWA Younger Set float. Wounded soldiers from the Crimean War were tended by Florence Nightingale and nurses in 1844 uniforms at one end of the hospital float. At the other end in a theatre a patient received a blood transfusion. An 11 foot lion dominated the spectacular float entered by the Wonthaggi Lions Club. Showboat days were recalled by the Milk Boards Float the Milk Queen entered by the Archies Creek Dairy Produce Co.

The Cape Paterson Surf Life Saving Club exhibited the surf rescue ski the club won that season. Mouth to mouth resuscitation was demonstrated on the Wonthaggi Life Saving Club float which won second prize for local floats. The Andersons Inlet Angling Club was represented by 2 sleek runabouts. Other floats were entered by the Wonthaggi Girl Guides which won 3rd prize for

local floats, the second Wonthaggi Scouts, Apex and Wonthaggi Bakeries. There were marching squads from the Wonthaggi Marching girls, Tech School, St Joseph's, Junior Red Cross and the Wonthaggi Police and citizens Youth Club. The Victoria Police Brass Band was a popular feature of the procession and played later at the hospital for the marching girls display."

THE WHEELBARROW RACE

Another feature of the day was the wheel-barrow race. The first float reaching the hospital signalled the start of the wheelbarrow race which took in a course that went from Graham Street to McKenzie Street, White Road and South Dudley Road back to the hospital. It generally took around 45 minutes and while that was taking place the marching girls would put on a display for the crowd that by that time had gathered at the hospital.



Terry Donohue winning the 1967 event. His team included his brothers Dennis & Neil and cousin, Gerard.

After the race finished the winners of the Procession would be announced. Categories included **Best Group Entry**, **Best Local Entry**, **Most Original Entry**, **Best Traditional Costume** and the **Most Original Juvenile Entry** with prizes awarded for each category.

THE GARDEN PARTY

The garden party came after the parade. It was a huge event in itself. It was like an upmarket country fair and a massive family day. It gave women a great reason to dress up and high tea and fashion played a big part of the afternoon. There were fashion displays with the highlight being the judging of the Misses Garden Party: Categories included Miss Tiny Tot, Miss Junior, Miss Garden Party, Matron and Grand Matron. I spoke to Wilma Foster who as a 19-year-old Wilma Dent was Belle of the Gardens in 1965. She also led the Wonthaggi Marching Girls at that time. She remembers marching to the hospital where her group performed in the grounds. She then changed into her finest to enjoy the afternoon where she was invited to join the competitions.



Wilma Dent (Belle of the Gardens), Mrs Mrs Forsyth (Grandmother of the Gardens) Leonie Williams (Junior Belle). Marchesi (Matron of the Gardens, Debbie Haines (Tiny Tot)

(Sadly, in those days women lost their identity when they married and became Mrs whoever their husband was.)



Eira Griffiths and Carmel Smith 1960



Carmel Sainsbury 1963

The Wonthaggi Hospital Queen Carnival was another important component of the day. Entrants were sponsored by different organisations and raised money for hospital improvements. The entrant who raised the most money was crowned the Queen and significant funds were raised this way over the Garden Party history. In 1966 it raised over \$9,000 with the Rotary Queen Pam Allen raising \$2530. In 1966 this was a significant amount of money.



1966 Rotary Queen Pam Allen



1966 Rotary Float

There were heaps of stalls, games and activities for kids and though there were quite a few formalities with speeches and invited dignitaries it was all about fun and if didn't have a good day you were not trying. I think it's the last time I ate a toffee apple or fairy floss and have seen bobbing for apples.



The band led by band master 1966



Part of the crowd 1966

For 20 years the Wonthaggi Hospital Garden Party was the most significant event held in the town. It brought the town and district together and was a major fund raiser for the hospital. It also brought thousands of people into the town, which was also very important for local businesses. The event was a huge logistical exercise, and it took a massive community effort to bring it together. The Wonthaggi community can be rightly proud of what it achieved.

The 2010 Centenary Garden Party

As mentioned earlier, as part of the Wonthaggi Centenary Celebrations the Garden Party Complete with the street parade was re-enacted in 2010. Thankfully it was held on a beautiful March day and thousands came out to enjoy an iconic part of the town's history.

BUT, MORE OF THAT IN PART TWO OF THIS ESSAY, WHICH WILL COME AT A LATER DATE.

Report researched and presented as a **15-Miunute Talk** in January 2024
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