

PLOD ESSAY SEPTEMBER 2026

GORDON HOUSE
McBride Avenue, Wonthaggi
1926 – 1932

THE UNION CAFE
Graham Street, Wonthaggi
1932 – 1937

"Celebrating 100 Years in Australia" is a recent autobiography of the Grieve family, compiled by Anne Hargreaves (Stirton / Grieve).

Excerpts from this family history are the basis for our PLOD Essay. It is a personal account by members of the extended Grieve family, of Gordon House and life in Wonthaggi.

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After arriving in Australia by boat from England in 1926, widow Frances Grieve and five of her children, plus a grandson, finally made their way to Flinders Street Station and caught the train to Wonthaggi, their final destination. Tom met them at the station. He had organised for them to go to a friend of his for a welcome dinner.

With all their bags and belongings, they walked from the train station all the way to Merrin Crescent, about one and a half kilometres away. Tom took them to Granny Chambers' house, where they were made to feel more than welcome. Granny was a good friend of Tom's and they were both members of the local debating society. Granny Chambers showed great hospitality and filled their empty stomachs with a beautiful dinner.

After dinner, Tom took them to the house where he lived, which was in Broome Crescent. Bessie describes Tom's place as a small miners' shack. It had hessian lining the walls inside, and the hessian used to sway with the breeze, or perhaps we should say the roaring south-westerly winds that come through Wonthaggi! There was a copper out the back to do the washing, and of course the dunny down in the back corner of the yard.

In the first weeks that the family were in Wonthaggi, the miners were on strike. The men would go out near the cemetery and chop firewood to be distributed throughout the town. The family all used to go along and help. When they had finished chopping wood they would go home and eat a whole loaf of fresh bread with Aunt Em's beautiful fig jam. Tom was working in the mines, but Bob was unable to find work, and it seemed that Tom was the only breadwinner in the family. Towards the end of 1926, it became apparent that the family was too large to fit into the small wooden house. The widows' pension was not introduced into Australia until 1942, so Frances (known in her family as "Nannie") had to find some way to support the family. Perhaps also, the wage that Tom earned was not really sufficient to sustain them all.

Tom suggested to Nannie that he knew of a boarding house that had just become available to run, and with her talents, he believed she would be able to run it successfully. It would not only provide them with an income, it would also provide them with a home, and the family would be able to stay together. So, they moved into Gordon House in McBride Avenue, next door to the Powlett Hotel. They decided that together the family could operate the business. Nannie, Emily, Bob and Nancy ran the boarding house, and Nellie and Bessie went to the local school. The boarding house was an old building with no mod cons. It consisted of two bedrooms at the front. Behind was the dining room and kitchen and there were another 12 to 14 rooms going towards the back of the house. The family slept in one front bedroom, the policeman in the other, and they had up to 20 boarders who paid 30 shillings a week board.

The facilities in the boarding house were the bare essentials. There were two coal stoves in the kitchen, one bench, no sink and no running water. Hot water had to be heated on the stove. The kitchen was clad in corrugated iron and had a dirt floor.

The boarders were mostly miners, but there were two railway workers and a policeman – who came in very handy. Nannie was a beautiful cook and each day she provided a cooked breakfast, lunch and dinner.

If the men were on dayshift at the mine, they also had a cut lunch made up for them, which in the mines was called 'crib'. When the miners were on afternoon shift, they were fed their supper when they came home. Linen and towels were washed once a week. Also, the 5-yard-long tablecloth for the dining table had to be washed, starched, and ironed twice a week. All of this was done in a copper, with no washing machine. Nancy was delighted when they finally had a hand wringer attached to the troughs. Washing had to be hung out to dry along the back lane as there was no room in the premises.

It was certainly not an easy life. Nannie cooked the meals. Emily, Bob and Nancy had to wash the linen and the tablecloth, wash all the floors, make all the beds, and had to help with meal preparation and cleaning up. In 1928 Nellie left school and began to work in the boarding house. Bob got a job in the mine and started there on the 20th of May 1929.

Emily had been keeping company with one of the boarders, a railway worker named George Speed. In 1929 they were married and Emily, George and Billy moved into a railway cottage in Baillieu Street.

While the family lived and worked in the boarding house, Bessie had been a young girl attending primary school. She remembers that her Christmas holidays were often spent with Granny Chambers and her family on their block in Grandview Grove, Inverloch. She recalled beautiful summer holidays, swimming and exploring all along the coast.

In 1932, after running the boarding house for about five years, the Health Department closed it down due to it not meeting health regulations. After it closed, the family sold all the furniture and were able to get a little bit of money. But then there was the problem of how to survive again.

Solution. Nannie bought a fish and chip shop and cafe in Graham Street opposite the Union Theatre. It was named The Union Cafe. It was a rented premises, which also included living quarters at the back, consisting of two rooms. The cafe was very popular. They couldn't keep up with the demand for their pies and pasties.

The Great Depression began in 1929 and in the early 1930s Bob lost his job in the mine, as did many others. This meant that Bob was now able to help in the shop. Nannie and Bob made the pasties and once she left school, Bessie helped. She probably helped on weekends and after school even when she was still at school. Bessie said that Bob rolled all the pastry, while Nannie and Bessie formed the pasties and the pies.

The people would come out of the pictures and come to the shop to get fish and chips. Nancy says she used to enjoy working because the shop was such a popular place and a lot of their friends used to come on a Saturday night. It was always good fun, and they didn't miss out by being at work. There was a social club in the town, which was held in the large first floor

space up above the building opposite the Post Office. They used to have some great nights. When they closed up, friends would come down to the shop, which was usually after 12 o'clock. Nannie would close the shop and feed them all their supper. It was always such good fun.

The cafe prices were very fair. Steak and eggs cost two and six, pie and chips and a cup of tea cost one shilling. A pie and chips, just ninepence. School kids came in to buy their lunches, a pie with some chips for threepence. During the Depression, kids from the Tech school would come to the shop and ask for a penneth of chips and then whether there were any stale pies or pasties.

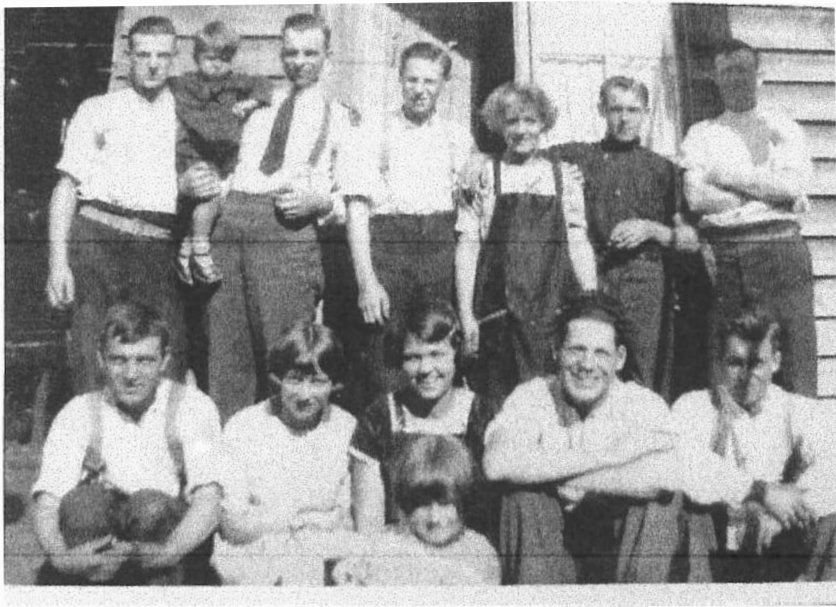
People from the whole community frequented the shop. Many miners came into the shop, perhaps on their way home from the Workingman's Club, which was just a few doors up the street. A lot of farmers too, who came into town to do their shopping and stayed in town to eat their lunch. The family made some lifelong friends.

After returning home from a holiday on Ocean Island, Nancy told Nannie that she wasn't going to work in the cafe anymore. Nannie was almost 60 years of age, and had worked very very hard all her life, so she was ready to ease her workload. In 1937 the cafe closed and they moved out to live in a typical miner's cottage, two bedrooms, sitting room and kitchen, and a smaller bedroom and bathroom on the back porch, an outside washhouse close to the back door, and of course the dunny way down at the back of the block.

During all the years at Gordon House and at The Union Cafe, no one was paid a wage. The business only ever made enough money to sustain the family in food, clothing and accommodation. Nancy says that they never gave a thought even to being paid wages. They loved being in the businesses, particularly The Union Cafe, as they spent days and evenings meeting with friends, chatting with customers and being very social.



Gordon House



Back: All male boarders, one holding Billy & Nanny
Front: Bob, Nellie, Nancy, Bessie & 2 boarders



Boarders with Nellie, Nancy & George Speed (front right)