

Rejuvenation: The Gunning of My Childhood (1958-59)

My earliest memories of my childhood are of moving houses as my father was posted around the state whilst working for the Railways. We uprooted from Nyngan to Locksley near Bathurst, then to Fish River just north of Gunning and finally to the big smoke in Sydney

By the time I was in year 4 I had been enrolled in 4 schools, ranging from one teacher establishments to inner city schools with multi classes per grade.

When my dad was posted to Fish River it was to manage a siding about 3 miles (we oldies still talk in miles) north of Gunning on the old Hume Highway just over the bridge that crosses the river there. There were two or three houses there at the time, of course now they have been totally removed with very little trace that families lived, loved and prospered there. Such is progress.

Dad and mum involved themselves with the local Gunning community and throughout those cold winter weekends we would travel to places from Crookwell to Yass and to Captain's Flat to Goulburn and other places in between as he played Rugby League for the Gunning side.

I attended Gunning school for my Year 1 and 2 years (1958-59) and have clear memories of some of my experiences. I fondly remember playing the role of Rumpelstiltskin in the school's end of year play night. Not so fondly I remember my bus travels to and from school.

Going to school was great, just a 3 mile trip into town in a bus filled with noisy children eager to enjoy a day of learning and play together. However as the bus travelled in only one direction, anticlockwise, the trip home was much longer. Just out of town, almost within sight of our home, the bus would turn right and drop off all the kids who lived along on the road to Collector. The bus then continued on towards Yarra before finally travelling back down the Hume Highway dropping kids off until there was just myself, and my little sister who was in Kindergarten who were left.

I particularly remember the smell of stale orange peels on that bus and for years after would gag on that citrusy smell. In Year 2 one day I determined to hitchhike home, leaving my sister to fend for herself on the bus. A friendly truckie kindly obliged and I was soon home, a full hour early. I was quite pleased with myself on this achievement. Mum however was not. After many stern words and a few well placed spanks I decided that the bus was probably the best way to go in the future.

On the hot summer days we had the opportunity to swim and paddle in the nearby river. A number of my classmates were invited to my December

birthday and we had great fun splashing and playing in the river before having to pluck off all the leeches that decided to join us in the celebration.

As I said, dad worked for the railways operating the siding there to allow farmers to load and off-load stock and supplies. There were many steam trains at the time. And we gladly accepted the free coal on offer for our solid fuel cooker and the open fireplace. We would all sit around the fire reading, playing and listening to 'Life With Dexter' on the radio. Of course there was no TV back then.

Having the steam trains come through offered us another opportunity. They would take on water from the water tower that was there beside the tracks there before continuing their travels. Once they had done so, and if the weather happened to be warm enough, we would climb up the water tower with mum and dad to swim in the 'pool'.

Of course there wasn't the opportunity we have nowadays to buy all your food requirements back then so everyone had a chook yard and vegie patch and numerous fruiting trees. Mum like all the ladies of the time became an expert at making jams, fruit pies and pickles. We had wonderful bumper crops of tomatoes and vegetables, no doubt helped along by dad burying the outdoor toilet waste under the garden beds. This task had to be done as there was no septic or sewer available then.

We would spend weekends collecting blackberries, wild cherries and mushrooms to add to our larder and dad would take the old 22 out and bring back a few rabbits to stew. Farmers we got to know would let us glean their paddocks after harvest for a basket or two of missed vegies. And how I learned to loath those turnips.

Now after a lifetime of work my wife and I have downsized and retired to Canberra in 2019 and so we now have had the opportunity to travel to and through Gunning a number of times over this past year.

Although I look at the town through my ageing 67 year old eyes and see that a town that struggles a little to thrive with the highway now bypassing it, I also can see myself sitting on the gutter outside the Telegraph Hotel with many other children after a footy game all those years ago. The men would be loud and raucous in the main bar whilst the ladies were adjourned to the lounge to sip on their shandies. No respectable lady would dare to be seen in the public bar in those times.

Gunning will always hold fond memories for me and we will continue to make the occasional drive to Gunning to soak up the country hospitality. I hope that Gunning continues to be a place where life can be enjoyed memories made.

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