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Wheat silos of NSW

Abstract
My association with silos goes back to my early childhood. From my bed as a five-year-old I had a view of the town silos a short block away. My bedroom was the front verandah of a small cottage in Parkes in central western NSW. The verandah was a few metres from the footpath and completely open to all weather. We had moved from Wagga Wagga to Parkes when my father was appointed secretary of the Wheatgrowers Union, Parkes then being the geographical centre of the grain belt.

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My association with silos goes back to my early childhood. From my bed as a five-year-old I had a view of the town silos a short block away. My bedroom was the front verandah of a small cottage in Parkes in central western NSW. The verandah was a few metres from the footpath and completely open to all weather. We had moved from Wagga Wagga to Parkes when my father was appointed secretary of the Wheatgrowers Union, Parkes then being the geographical centre of the grain belt. It was not long after World War II. Hot bread arrived by horse and cart, we put a billy with money out at night for the milkman and ice arrived twice a week in large blocks for our ice-chest. Sometimes we accompanied my father to conferences, staying on farms with no electricity and for the most part self-sufficient. The novelty of these stays was like holidays for me and my sisters. I would relieve the farmhand of his tractor-driving duties while the others went into town in a horse and sulky. But the real highlight was the afternoon tea with its selection of cakes made from cream, eggs and butter off the farm.

The central wheat belt is called locally the Golden West, a reference to ripened wheat ready for harvest. During the harvest, from my camp on the verandah I experienced the long queues of trucks as they waited overnight to offload their wheat at the silo. It was before bulk transport so each three-bushel bag was cut open and emptied into an underground chamber at the silo. From the cellar the grain is elevated by machinery in a central workhouse to the superstructure where it is distributed to the cylindrical concrete towers known in the trade as bins. The lifting of the grain is such an important part of the whole operation that the label grain elevator is used synonymously with silo. With the arrival of bulk transport, the truck queues disappeared and a huge steel shed, a bulkhead, was built alongside the rail out of the town. It was one of the many to be erected across the wheat belt to meet the demand of increased yields. If space permitted, they operated alongside the original silos, sharing loading and hoisting facilities.

Silos and the railway are inseparable. Early last century the wheat industry was almost wholly dependent on rail. The NSW wheat belt was patterned by railways in zones approximately 50 kilometres wide to service the farming community. Before the advent of silos, bagged wheat was loaded directly into waiting rail wagons. An increase in grain production outstripped the availability of wagons, necessitating temporary storage by stacking bags, up to up to twenty high, in the railway yards. In 1916 across NSW a huge amount of grain that had accumulated during the war, was lost through wet weather, rodents and insects. The loss prompted the government to propose the construction of bulk storage

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facilities, resulting in the Grain Elevator Act 1916, with a program to construct sixty-eight silos at select points along existing railway lines, plus a Sydney terminal. Construction of the country silos began in 1917 and the first to operate was at Peak Hill, near Parkes, in August 1918. These original silos with their cylindrical towers in line are the landmark buildings we see today.

During the 1950s when Prime Minister Robert Menzies was in power, my father’s enthusiasm and dedication to the World Peace Movement lost him his job at the Wheatgrowers Union. His empathy with the farmer settlers who were struggling to live on the small holdings granted to them following war service did not help his case against the wealthy landowner faction. However, we stayed on in Parkes. By the time I reached my final year at high school my two parents were teaching my class half of the Leaving Certificate subjects.

A career in architecture sustained my admiration of silo structures. The simple geometry and sheer bulk of these functional buildings are very much part of the Australian landscape. Often they have pride of place in the town centre; shops on one side of the main street, silos on the other; or they will stand proudly as landmarks in the open landscape, often the only building in sight. Glider pilots use silos especially during competitions when a dipped wing and a photograph is proof they have rounded the predetermined mark (although the introduction of GPS is superseding the camera).

Finally I tired of the business of architecture with its mounting paperwork and regulations restricting the creative process. A switch to photography opened the possibility of revisiting silos. An approach to the NSW State Library was met with a response that went something like — ‘Photograph every wheat silo across NSW? You must be crazy. When can you start?’ The NSW wheat belt stretches from Victoria to Queensland, a distance of 1000 kilometres as the crow flies and is on average 250 kilometres wide. The belt straddles the 500mm (20 inch) per annum rainfall contour. This is the same rainfall as London’s average but there the comparison ends. The timing and intensity of rain in the wheat belt is crucial. It can be the difference between sowing or not sowing if the seasonal rains do not arrive. Too much rain at the wrong time will bring on rust in a crop or a locust plague.

To photograph over three hundred ‘public’ silos across NSW is proving to be at least a four year project. Each expedition inland from my home on the south coast needs careful planning. Each day on the road needs to be manageable in terms of the most efficient route — taking in as many silos as possible without covering too many kilometres and having somewhere, perhaps a farmstay, to spend the night. Finding silo locations such as Nelungaloo, The Troffs, Moonbooldool, Ginginbung, Cryon or Burrumbuttock is not difficult. A report from the Library’s own archives lists all the silos and importantly the railway line where each is located. On the way I pass through the likes of Wait a While, The Drop, No
Mistake and Square Bush. Some of the silos are so close together that I can see the next one ahead while observing the previous silo in my rear vision mirror.

Most locations have the original silo with its central workhouse and a number of bins. Usually more bins were added later and with the introduction of bulk transport any number of bulkheads were built alongside. These latter are huge sheds with roofs that follow the natural angle of repose of the grain. The latest storage facility is simply a low perimeter wall of concrete to which is fixed an enormous tarpaulin covering a mound of grain sitting directly on the ground. Ironically another system borrows from the original method of loading straight into the rail wagons. It is loaded directly into containers at the rail yard and transported to mills anywhere in the world.

Sadly one by one the branch lines are closing, unable to compete with truck transport. All the hard labour and materials that went into building the rail infrastructure over a century has gone by the board. Political expediency and lack of foresight is resulting in the abandonment of a perfectly good transport system, mainly on the pretext of the costly maintenance. This is hard to believe when the impact of a truck tyre on the road is almost ten times that of a laden wagon on a rail. When I came to Sydney from the bush to study architecture it had a functioning light rail system — the tram. Sydneysiders now regret that ‘the rattler’ was abandoned.

The fear that silos may be headed for the same fate as the railways was a major influence in my recording their present status. What is their future when they no longer function as grain stores? Concrete silos were built to last and they can endure for centuries. In the cities they are now recycled as residential units. In the countryside they could simply remain as landmarks, a reminder of times past. If impractical to recycle, they should at least attract heritage recognition. These are our treasuries, repositories of the golden grain — our daily bread.
Parkes
Wheat Silos of NSW

Noonbinna
Bush Damper (with or without a camp oven)

INGREDIENTS
3 cups of SR flour
or
ordinary flour with baking powder (1 teaspoon for each cup of flour)

METHOD
1. Mix enough water with the flour to make a dough.
2. When mixed and kneaded put it in a camp oven or wrap in greased foil and cook, in fire for 20 to 30 minutes.
Beer can be used instead of water for variation and to give the damper a lighter texture. In the bush a fire with plenty of red-hot coals is the best for cooking damper.

This simple recipe I use on extended bush walks of a week or more when it is easier to carry the flour than bread which can go stale or mouldy and takes up too much room in a full backpack.

Farm Scones

INGREDIENTS
250g SR flour
50g butter
25g raw sugar
1 egg
125 mls milk and yoghurt (mixed)

METHOD
1. Rub butter into flour and sugar.
2. Whisk egg into milk and pour into well in flour. Gently mix to form a dough but don’t over mix.
3. Roll dough out on a floured board to 2.5 cm. thickness.
4. Place on oiled baking tray and bake at 200°C for 15 minutes until golden.

I call my recipe ‘farm scones’ because the result approximates my childhood afternoon tea experience although I remember being more impressed by the jam and cream than the actual scones.