REMINISCENCES OF JACK DEVITT

(continued from November Bulletin)

With good seats and pneumatic tyres all around the trip was now almost enjoyable.

Within a few months Prices of Austinmer bought a Reo bus and just started up in business after the Dions had had to buy the business.

Mary Price owned the bus with her brother Jack doing the driving. She was followed shortly by Charlie Price on the run, then Matt Agnew, Mick Kowles and later Harry Hensen all in business for the cost of a bus.

It wasn’t long before they all started to jack up on the Dions, complaining that their bus was not up to scratch. The various Councils appeared to side with this crowd but the Chinamen took the wind out of their sails by procuring two Fagcol Coaches, the best buses in the country, from the U.S.A. The Dions were never challenged again and today are still servicing the Austinmer - Wollongong run.

In Depression Tom Dion and his brothers often picked up people down on their luck, waiving the fare.

There was a very good timetable in the heyday of the bus era, with a bus either way every 1/4 hour, starting at about 6 a.m. until about 10 p.m. with a special picture bus from Wollongong after their shows.

At Christmas, Easter and Holidays there was often an extra bus on each run to cope with the crowds.

At about the time Dions took over, a run began from Thirroul to Clifton by Tim Hill who later sold out to Crowthers. This run was very popular with the Northerners and for visitors to Coledale Hospital which was somewhat isolated.

As there were comparatively few private cars the buses were often hired for funerals, picnics etc. The Rugby League competition in the early thirties included Albion Park so a bus had to be hired to take teams to the Park.

Most clubs ran raffles etc. to raise enough cash for a hired bus to towns over the mountain for an end of season game and picnic. Corrimal club always favoured Dions who had two crack drivers Ellis Jones and a chap named Green who was a wizard playing the gumleaf. We generally were able to afford a trip each year to Camden where we had a picnic game, a feed of steak, eggs and onions at the Greek’s, a few beers at the pub. A hell of a good day out for no more than 10/- a head. For the boozers there was generally a stop at Appin pub on the way home.

We had to be home in time for those of us who worked at the Steelworks and happened to be on Dogwatch to be able to get to work.

We certainly didn’t feel like going to work, but jobs were scarce. If you had one, you looked after it.

"Vale Ten Inch Mill"

Published in Illawarra Mercury

Yesterday, 29th October 1982 we said farewell to “Old Annie” as the old hands called the 10/13” Mill later up-dated in name to ”1 Merchant Mill” in the good times.

I stood on the Mill floor with my old mate and sparring partner, Jack Matthews and watched the last bar go through the Mill with, I must admit a lump in my throat and a tear in my eye.
I spent 43 years in that old Mill. Jack spent the whole 48, her life span. She saw come and go many characters, she broke the hearts of a lot of us but somehow we all got to love the old bitch in a funny sort of way. There were times when she would have us Rollers on our knees, on walking about punchy trying to get her to go. Other times she would smile and purr like a kitten, you couldn’t knock her over with a “dog” spanner.

She helped make Kembla great, did a mighty job during the War then made them a fortune in the boom times. The Accountants, that heartless terrible new breed, couldn’t see fit to give her a kick along with some of the oil with lucre so she had to take the chop.

Farewell Annie, my old love you will live as long as we oldies can spin tales about you and your foible - you old bitch.

**Turpentine Jack**

**The Bulli Doctors**

There were two doctors in the town. Francis Crossle at Park Road, Bulli and Charles Palmer on the Main Road opposite the Police Station.

They were as alike as chalk and cheese in appearance and temperament but both were excellent medics.

Crossle, also a skilful surgeon, was a very capable G.P. who got about his rounds in a horse and sulky generally dressed in a Harris tweed jacket and a cloth hat. He was a chain smoker who often laid down the law about smoking to his patients telling them to do as he said not as he did. He was an irascible character who could not suffer fools. If you were ill he was kindness itself but woe betide the hypochondriac or malingerer. They would get the sharp edge of his tongue for wasting his time.

He finally got rid of the sulky buying an Oldsmobile car which marque he favoured for years.

He went to Macquarie Street later as a Surgeon Specialist but still charging his old patients only a nominal fee with the result that at his untimely death his wife and family were left in rather straitened circumstances.

To their credit the miners struck a levy amongst themselves, raising a very considerable amount for the family of their beloved Crossle.

Charlie Palmer was a gentle, refined gentleman who never raised his voice. His surgery was at the front of his very substantial residence on the Main Road. A small room attached to the surgery was fitted up as a pharmacy where he would dispense bottles of cough mixtures, salves etc. for his patients.

He was not the surgeon as Crossle but a most competent physician who would come out on call at any hour of the day or night no matter what the state of the weather.

His original transport was a sulky fitted with a hood, he later bought a 1927 Morris Oxford and then an American Stutz a great tank of a thing that only went out once a yeat, unless the Morris broke down, to take the family on their annual trip to holiday at Katoomba. Today that Stutz would be priceless as a vintage car.

His residence had large grounds plus a considerable orchard and vegetable
garden at the rear which was kept in shape by his gardener.

Tom Shurack, quite an old character in his own right who kept mar­
and ing kids at bay with his salt petre gun.

Most of the produce from the orchard and garden was dispensed
by the Doctor to his patients down on their luck.

The acts of charity performance by the Doc in his own quiet way
were legion. He was a friend, confidant and father confessor to many,
an old lovable gentleman.

Two of his sons became doctors. He lost his first wife, later marrying
the matron of Bulli Hospital.

In those days there were no medical funds, medicare or the like.
Those in industry, the mines, brickworks, railways, etc. could elect
to pay about 1/- per fortnight to a nominated Doctor. A cheque
was sent each quarter from the industries to the nominated doctor.
This entitled them and their families to full care by the doctor, 24
hours a day every day of the year. The doctor charged a fee to others
not contributing through industry but more often than not service
was rendered according to their ability to pay often, no fee at all.

The Doctors’ lifestyle was better than most but being dedicated
men money was not a great consideration.

Later on hospitalisation was covered by a contribution of 6d per
fortnight, 9d for Doctor with 3d per fortnight giving ambulance
cover.

This scheme carried us right through World War 11 and into the
early fifties when Medical Funds began to appear as a result of Govt.
interference.

The first motor Ambulance in Bulli was a 1923 Buick car converted
to an ambulance waggon attached to and garaged at Bulli Hospital.
The driver was Jack Nixon, the Hospital wardsman and handyman.
Previously they had a horse drawn ambulance which was only taken
out on very special occasions. Patients were usually transported to
hospital by whatever transport was available.

Very few people were really treated in hospital as most sick were
put to bed at home with the Doctor visiting daily if necessary.

Things were a bit grim at hospital. Food was basic and sparse. No
menu, a la motel style, we enjoy today. Breakfast, a dollop of thick
bergoo porridge with a slab of toast plus cup of tea. If you wanted
a boiled egg, they brought one from home, writing your name on it
in pencil.

Most people handy enough, sent up a hot dinner in a plate covered
with a serviette. They would warm it up for you if you were lucky.

Lunch was generally a sandwich and cup of tea. Golden Syrup
or Treacle were great sandwich fillings. You were much better fed at
home, for cure.

The Coal Carters

The miners were allowed a load of coal every six weeks only having
to pay the cost of cartage hence the need for a coal carter.

Tom Evans was the Bulli Coal Carter who did his deliveries with horse and tip dray.

Bulli and South Bulli miners had their coal picked up from mine trucks shunted on to sidings at the colliery. Coal from Excelsior, Coledale, Scarborough and Coalcliff was shunted on to the Goods shed siding at Bulli where it was shovelled out into the dray and delivered to the respective miners.

The cartage cost the miner about 6/- and any coal left over in the truck was sold by the carter to non miners for about one pound a load, so the carter had a regular, profitable little business.

One horse was generally sufficient but on hilly sites an extra horse was brought along to haul the dray up the steep tracks.

Later Tom purchased a Chev motor truck with a tip body, operated by a winch, to replace the old faithful horses. The truck body was divided by a partition so that two loads could be taken out at a time.

Later on Waggie Webster, from Bellambi using a Bedford with the same type of body took over deliveries from South Bulli and Corrimal mines leaving Tom to do the northern end.

Everyone had a fuel stove - electric models were unknown and there was no gas outside Wollongong where it was reticulated from the Gasworks.

The fuel stoves were kept in first class order, cleaned regularly and polished to a shiny finish with Zebra stove polish, finished with newspaper.

Before retiring to bed, the housewives would wrap up a parcel of slack (powdered coal) in dampened newspaper then place this on top of the remains of the coal fire, shutting off most of the draught by adjusting the damper in the flue.

During the night this slack would smoulder away and first up in the morning would open the damper, give the fire a few prods with the poker and hey presto there would be a ready fire to cook breakfast and boil the kettle quickly.

The cast iron kettle, generally with a marble inside to keep down the rust, was a universal utensil in all households. Some hold about 1 gallon. There was another unit called a fountain which was really a kettle of about 5 - 10 gallon capacity fitted with a brass tap. These fountains gave a continuous supply of hot water for washing up, floor washing and often filling the galvanised tubs for Saturday baths.

If the weather was cold, the tub was often set up before the fuel stove so that the kids didn’t catch cold.

Many of the miners adopted this procedure to have their bath after coming home from the pit as black as the ace of spades - no bath-houses at the pit. Mum was generally called to scrub their back although some of the old Pommy and Scots miners had a theory, that washing weakened their back so what didn’t come off on the towel was left there.
Teddy King, one of the local Plumbers and Tinsmiths did a roaring trade making galvanised tubs and dippers for the laundry coppers.

Although we had laid on water in most parts of the town, rainwater tanks were still popular. Teddy also made these in various sizes up to 1000 gals.

The Fire Brigade

The Fire Station was about 50 yards north of the present station and consisted of a hand hose reel which had been the original appliance and a 1922 hard tyred Garford motor, magnetic ignition, with a small extension ladder was purchased. The brigade was a volunteer force under a Captain named Nottley.

There was an alarm bell on a very tall pole operated by a rope.

The old Garford had a cone clutch that took a very strong man to operate. The gear shift and handbrake lever were on the outside of the vehicle. The crew sat on seats running along the side of the engine whilst the pumps were at the rear.

Each week there was regular training for the crew who gave yeoman service to the town.

Later the present Fire Station was built and after some years the Garford was updated by a Dennis pumper which served the Brigade until a Bedford took over.

The present International replaced the Bedford. Bulli is now fully manned by an Officer and three fireman around the clock. Time marches on.

Davidson’s Polytechnic Store

For as long as I can remember, Davidson’s store has stood on the northern corner of Main Road and Campbell Street, Woonona.

My Dad began dealing there in 1921 and Devitts have dealt there ever since.

In those early days you could buy anything from a needle to an anchor. If they didn’t have what you wanted they would get it for you in record time.

As I first remember, Mr. Davidson was in charge later assisted by his son Bruce who finally took control. In his latter years Mr. Davidson ran the mercery section while Bruce, Tom Reese, Fred Harris and Ray Langlands looked after the hardware and building supplies. They kept pipes, cement, feed, you name it, they had it. Fuel stoves, baths, pedestal basins.

Service and civility was their motto, you just had to give them a rough idea of what you wanted for a job and several articles would be produced for your selection - often a tip how to do the job.

I remember there were tins of bean and pea seeds displayed in front of one of the counters. One day when Mick was a toddler I had him with me into the shop. Whilst I was engaged buying something, he was merrily mixing the different bean varieties. I didn’t tell anyone but I’ll
bet some of the gardeners scratched their heads when a motley array of beans matured in their gardens later on.

They sold kitchen ware, crockery gifts etc. so that you could buy many of your needs at Davos.

I have been told that the original Mr. Davidson’s store sold groceries but after being burnt out, on reopening, he concentrated on hardware, it was certainly a polytechnical store.

Still trading, I hope I can call Bruce a personal friend.

Naturally all my hardware needs come from Davos.

On the southern corner of the Main Road and Campbell Street stands a brick shop that has been there as long as I can remember run then by Everitts.

It has always been a fruit shop. Included in the building on the southern side was a smaller shop which was occupied by George Karocz the “Parisian Barber”.

George was quite a character. Standing all of about 5’2” he had a head of luxurious black curly hair and snipped away, dressed in a snowy white coat with a cigar always in his teeth. He smoked them until they almost burnt the hairs in his nose.

He had a Ladies Salon but often talked women out of letting him crop their long tresses. He was a Lebanese but took a bit of poetic licence and called himself a “Parisian Barber”.

My Dad and George were very good pals, in fact George kept the old Chev on the road for years.

He was a genius, a motor mechanic by trade, there wasn’t a car that could beat him if he couldn’t get a part he would either improvise or make it.

A wizard at watch and clock repairs he kept half the clocks going in the town.

He would get you to save your old battery, pull it to pieces, take out the good plates and rebuild batteries with these good plates.

In Dad’s time George had a 1923 Buick on which he rigged up a compressor to pump up tyres.

One Sunday whilst in the vicinity of Wandandian he came across a joker with two flats on a jinker loaded with a great log.

Pulling up, as was the custom for anyone in trouble George remarked that the chap had a couple of flats. This I daresay, didn’t go down too well with the 6’ odd bushie, especially when 5’2” George told him he would pump them up. As he told Dad, he thought the bloke was going to thump him.

However, opening up the tool box on the running board of the old Buick, George took out a hose, attached it to the compressor and a tyre of the jinker, started up the Buick and up went the tyre. George said the driver just stood there with his mouth agape not uttering a sound. After pumping up the other flat, George rolled up the hose, and after making a friend for life, bade the bushie goodbye as he set off for Nowra.
I still believe he made the first mixmaster in the country.

On to the motor shaft of an old Keaxon horn he welded the beaters of a hand egg beater, made a frame to hold it vertical and hooking up a 6 volt battery had a mechanical beater for Mrs. Karocz on the kitchen sink. I ate cakes made by that egg beater.

George would never join the Barbers’ Union always cutting hair 6d cheaper than anyone else and a good haircut he gave too.

He raised a fine family of which any man would be proud, a truly remarkable man.

Almost next door to George’s saloon was Billy Pitman’s grocery shop which seemed to give him a living although he had the Coop almost opposite and Richardson & Lewis a few hundred yards further on at Gray Street corner.

Approximately where the BP Service Station now stands Mr. Polglase had a Boot repair shop. He had lost a leg. I believe in the 14-18 War but managed quite well to do his work on a crutch. What a tradesman he was, turning out boots and shoes like new.

The nuns always had their repairs done by him. Many a time I took up their shoes to Mr. Polglase, the smell of leather, and watching him buffing and polishing on the great lineshaft he had, driven by belt from an electric motor on the floor.

There was another old German bootmaker, named Hart who had a stone shop almost opposite the Masonic Hall. He was an irascible old fellow and finally hanged himself on a hook behind the door of his shop.

The Steam Trains

All things considered we had a good service to Sydney. The trains ran dead on time. One of the popular trains to Sydney was the 9.13 a.m. from Bulli all stops to Central. It arrived at Bulli at 9.13 a.m. you could set your watch by it.

The Station staff were clean, smart and efficient. When he came on duty the Station Master was always resplendent in his uniform the same holding for the Night Officer on the back shift.

The points and signals were operated from the building on the eastern side, the down side. The lever handles shone like silver, never being touched by hand, a special cloth being used.

Thirroul was the Railway centre. The big glass roundhouse that would take twenty or thirty steaming locos was always a hive of activity as fires were ashed, locos greased and oiled, fitters making any necessary repairs on adjustments. The yard was a maze of lines, points, crossovers etc. There was a coaling bay where the tenders were topped up then watered and sandboxes filled with hot dry sand to help the loco over a steep or slippery piece of track.

The track itself was kept in immaculate condition. The line was sectioned off, each section the responsibility of a ganger plus 3 or 4 fettlers, who checked the section daily, on a trike. Any loose fishplate
bolts were snugged up, sleepers changed where necessary, ballast packed tightly under sleepers, not a weed allowed to appear. Each gang, had a small shed beside the line to house the trikes, trollies and their gear. Wet or fine they worked, just an on going job.

In the remote areas especially around Lilyvale, Otford and Waterfall as the train chugged by the fettlers would cry out "Paper, paper". Any used magazines or papers would be thrown out. As kids we loved to be able to throw out the papers.

As the tunnels approached the windows would be closed to keep out the smoke. The glass would frost up on the outside then suddenly a burst of day light and we were out. Sometimes the flyash would cause us to close the windows but it was great to feel the whoosh of air, tinged with the smell of burning coal as we hurried down towards Como knowing that soon the girders of the bridge would flash by as we crossed the river.

As we neared the City, especially in the late twenties, there was the magic of the electrics going by, then the great Eveleigh Yards and workshops with snub-funnelled lazy lizzies snorting steam and smoke as they were made ready to take a Mail or the Melbourne Express. There was just something about steam that charmed more than small boys. Oh to be an engine driver on the Melbourne Express, every kid's ambition.

Finally we would pull into Central dead on time. We would drag back a bit as we got level to the loco with its smell of hot oil, steam and burning coal just to see the monster that had hauled us up from the Coast. The fireman and driver, sweat rags in hand would be fussing about, ready to take the loco back to Eveleigh for service whilst the cleaners came in to swap out and dust the carriages ready for the next trip away from Central.

Mum generally took us straight across the concourse to catch a tram waiting on the other side above Eady Avenue. A day in Sydney was something we looked forward to for months then talked about the adventure for as long afterwards.

The Royal Theatre
This theatre was the last thing when it was built. It had the Gods, boxes attached to the walls entered from the upper Circle, the Dress Circle, the Stalls and downstairs the cheapest seats - Peanut Alley. The foyer was quite ornate with a marble ticket box. A double staircase led to the upstairs sections. A modern projector was housed in a fireproof room.

When Mickey Mouse came on the screens, old Mr. Catt who ran a concrete tubs business at Organ's Road corner, made a concrete model of Mickey on thin steel legs. This was painted in quite garish colours and had pride of place on a stand near the ticket office.

Once the Talkies arrived, the Royal became a goldmine. It was necessary to book seats for any good shows especially Saturday nights. It wasn't necessary to book in Peanut Alley but it was often full house down there too.
Some had a permanent booking for Saturday nights. It was a real dress up occasion, the girls in their best frocks, the chaps in their Sunday go to meeting suits, you were not dressed unless you had on a tie. Hair was short back and sides, slicked down with Brylcream or Coconut oil. Shoes shined to a mirror finish.

Most people walked to the pictures, there were very few cars. After the show an army of people set off north and south breaking off to their respective side streets. It was nothing to walk from Pass Road or Stanhope Street in the south. The first picture I saw at the Royal was called “The Iron Horse” about the building of the railroad across America. As a special treat mum took me to see this show. We were living in Farrell Road at the time.

Pop Freestone had a shop a few doors up from the theatre. This was a bigger goldmine than Weigolds beside the old Princess.

There was also a shop in the theatre building which supplied the lads who sold ice cream buckets, chocolates and sweets in the theatre on commission - 2/- in the pound.

The Royal belonged to a chain of theatres Arthur Byron was the manager for years and years, retiring on the job. His place was taken by Ron Evans who remained in charge until the theatre closed up. Television rang the deathnell on the old Royal that had become rather run down and a bit tatty - just not worth spending money on a dying business.

In its heyday some of the town’s louts gave the old chap who policed Peanut Alley larry dooley. They would kick up a shindig start fights and make mayhem in general.

The local cops didn’t seem too interested in the fracas but when Dutchy Holland arrived from West Wyalong things changed dramatically.

Dutch was a mounted man, a fine physical specimen who always wore black leather leggings. He proved to be quite handy with his mitts and I think would rather have a fight than a feed.

Dutch would sneak down the alleyway on the southern side of the theatre, wait till a brawl started then the old chap would open the door, shine his torch on the culprits and Dutch would do the rest. Dragging a couple of louts outside he would give them the rounds of the kitchen and send them on their way with a kick up the Kyber as they made for the side gate. It didn’t take long for the message to get about.

Dutch commanded plenty of respect in Woonona Bulli. Pity we didn’t have a few like him today although now he would be charged with assault.

Digger Round

Digger an ex Royal Navy pom was quite a character. Sober he was an inoffensive sort of joker but when he got on the rum, which was often, he was a fair bugger. His wife was a poor downtrodden little woman who somehow put up with his tantrums and abuse.
He would come home, full as a fart and after giving her a hiding would set about smashing the crockery and anything that he could lay his hands on.

The cops would often be called by the neighbours who I suppose feared he would do her in.

He would be locked up and on fronting the beak at the Bulli Court would always elect to be locked up rather than pay a fine.

Mrs. Mcintosh had to cook for the prisoners, she was a good cook, so I suppose Digger thought it worthwhile to do time instead of paying.

He would often be put to work cutting the lawn outside the Court House with an old hand mower, being locked up at about 4 o’clock.

Sometimes his mates would drop in for a chat whilst he was lawn mowing. On occasions he would sneak off with them up to the pub for a short snort then refreshed, come back to continue serving his sentence. I’m sure the authorities knew about this but turned a blind eye.

Major Keegan who ran the Bulli Times was his own reporter, often getting a bit of copy from Court cases. There was a detective named Becker stationed at Bulli at the time who asked Keegan to let him write up one of Digger’s court appearances where he was charged with beating up Mrs. Round.

He headed it “Round after Round” a real classic, Becker had a good turn of phrase, writing a humourous masterpiece.

That copy of The Times sold like hot cakes. Mum cut it out and put it away, alas it was mislaid.

Poor old Mrs. Round died first and Digger went downhill fast but every year Sergeant Mcintosh would invite Digger for Christmas dinner, a drink and a cigar to smoke. Digger died an old man, in all probability well pickled by the rum he had consumed over the years.

The Bulli Times.

The Times was a weekly published by Major Keegan who ran a one man show.

Besides the paper he did job printing, cards, dodgers, pamphlets and any small jobs.

He was his own reporter, compositor, printer and bookkeeper. You name it he did it.

His shop was next to Cec Williams butcher’s shop almost opposite the pub at Bulli.

The Times covered the immediate district with often some interesting article taken from another news source.

Advertising was the lifeblood of the business but it was quite newsy well worth the 3d per copy.

Mr. Keegan was a good friend of my Dad. When I left school he gave me a character reference dated early 1936 which I still have in my possession.
The Newsagent

Billy Dunk ran the Newsagency at Bulli which was situated where the Bottle Shop now stands.

The papers came down by early train, were picked up, taken to the shop, rolled up and delivered by horse and cart. The paper would be lobbed in the same spot every day.

Once a fortnight Billy rode about on his pony to collect the account money.

Besides the Sydney papers he sold The Bulli Times and The South Coast Times, printed in Wollongong.

There was a very popular publication called The Sydney Mail which was always full of pictures which we cut out to paste into our scrap books. Every Kid kept a scrap book - any interesting events, especially photos, were cut out and pasted into used exercise books with flour paste.

I remember pasting in a report of the N.Z. earthquake at Napicer in 1931 and the opening of the Harbour Bridge in 1932; another was the sinking of the ferry Greycliffe when run down by the steamer Tahite on the way to New Zealand, in 1927 if my memory serves me correctly.

On cracker night Billy Dunk did a roaring trade. We would save our pennies for months before. You could get a great paper bag of all sorts of crackers for 5/-.

Old Charlie Moore from the top of the Pass would come down and buy every kid that had no crackers 10/- worth. You can imagine the load you got for 10/-. Bonfires were taboo unless out in the middle of a paddock and we had to be careful not to frighten horses when letting off our crackers. Our parents supervised the operation so that there was not much risk of accident. Everyone enjoyed the cracker night displays, grown ups included.

(to be continued)