

REMINISCENCES OF JACK DEVITT

(continued from February Bulletin)

The Rifle Range

The Rifle Range was situated in the valley between Park Road and Sandon Pt Road with the targets adjoining the sea dunes. The firing positions were in several positions west of the targets the farthest almost at the railway line 440 yds, if I remember correctly.

There was a very enthusiastic rifle club who shot every Saturday afternoon. There were danger flags flown to keep people on the beach from the area behind the targets which were manually operated by a couple of chaps in a bunker provided.

As kids we were forbidden to go anywhere near the range when they were practicing. Often we found slugs on the sand which meant that there really was a danger in the area when practice was taking place.

During the war an Airocobra Army plane crashed in the range trying to make the beach for an emergency landing. It clipped a wire fence approx. behind the Catholic Church. In fact Fr O'Farrell was the first to reach the wreck and pulled the dazed pilot from the cockpit.

When the Housing Commission took over Point St and its environs to erect hundreds of cottages, the Range was closed down.

In the Bulli Park there was a circular area about 100 yards east of the Catholic Church which included a flagpole, palm trees and a collection of 1914-18 war guns including a German trench mortar, a field gun, machine gun, mounted on a concrete plinth and a mountain gun. As kids at the Convent School we played on those guns. On special occasions "Gutty" Hiles who lived opposite flew the flag from the flagpole. In the twenties there was compulsory military training for the young chaps at weekends, generally Saturdays. Gutty was Officer in Charge and Gunner Marsh the Sergeant Mayor — we could hear him roaring over in Farrell Rd.

With a chap named Glass, Gunner later opened a liquor store at Nicholson Lane corner and Main Rd opposite the present R.S.L. Club. There was a war memorial statue and honor roll on Hopetoun St—Main Rd corner. A car ran into it some years ago and our City Council dumped it in the depot yard in Montague St, Fairy Meadow, where it still lies. When the R.S.L. expanded they included an honour roll at the front of the building. The old memorial has since been re-erected at Slacky Flat.

The Bulli Mine Disaster Memorial & Churches

Just over the Park Rd Railway overhead bridge on the northern side stands a rather fine memorial to those miners and boys who perished in the mine disaster on 23rd March 1887. Many are buried, some in unnamed graves, in the churchyard of St Augustine's Church of England. A gang of 80 men was employed digging graves. This is a lovely old church somewhat spoilt by the addition of a porch-vestibule in recent years.

The Catholic Church some distance further east was built in 1899 and opened and blessed by Cardinal Moran on 1.1.1900. It was in the same old classic style of churches of the era "shooting gallery churches" as one "modern" priest calls them. This beautiful old church has been mongrelised so it's lost all its charm. It's not the church the Catholics of years gone by could recognise. So much for change and the whims of so called moderns who go for churches in the round where the priest can enjoy eye contact with the congregation.

The Convent of the St Joseph Sisters is still standing between the old school and church. As the nuns have long since departed it is now rented out to Uni students distinguished only by an appearance of neglect and the want of a coat of paint.

The original Presbytery was pulled down and replaced by a modern building by Mgr. O'Reilly in the fifties. This building was added to and incorporated into the present conglomerate by the present parish priest.

Another beautiful old church stands at the corner of Point Street and Main Road, Old Bulli. This is now the Uniting Church originally the Methodist Church. Its stained glass windows shine with a lovely warm glow when lit up at night.

"Midnight" Fahey

Fr. Power had a good looking young curate at Surry Hills named Fahey. Once a week the curate would spend his night off playing cards with some local parish-oner friends. The game generally broke up about 11.30pm and by the time he got back to the Presbytery it would be around midnight.

The entrance porch and room that led off it was done in parquetry flooring, quite noisy when trampled on. Fr Fahey had a heavy foot and tramping across the parquetry floor when the place was in dead silence kicked up one heel of a din, generally waking up the household.

Fr Power's reproofs didn't seem to have much effect on the curate so Peter Power named him "Midnight Fahey". He once told dad that he didn't mind the curate having his game of cards with his mates but he strongly objected to his tramping across the floor in his great bloody clodhoppers waking up everyone, so I christened the bugger "Midnight".

Fr Fahey was made a Monseignor later on and at Bishop McCabe's installation walking down the aisle dressed in his finery was "Midnight Fahey". I had to smile as it all came back, those many long years ago when he was just a curate who wore great bloody clodhopper boots that woke up half of Surry Hills as he clomped over the parquetry floor at St Peter's Presbytery.

The 10" Mill Bomb Scare

Coming into the Mill on a Dog Watch shift we found everyone assembled out in the Billet Yard with cops and dicks everywhere and the General Manager speaking

He grabbed the Shift Foreman, telling him to get all staff men together, keeping the Wages men in a group outside. It soon became apparent that there was a bomb scare and we were each assigned to a policeman whom we were to take around various parts of the Mill.

I drew a great hulking dick to take through the Roughing Line Motor Room asking him what we were supposed to be searching for, he replied "Buggered if I know mate, it's some sort of bomb I'm told, but you know as much as I". Great help he was but I suspect he was as windy as I. After a careful search of all sections the G.M. declared the Mill OK and after putting on the furnace gas we were away in about half an hour.

The cops hung about for a while more to see us start up I suspect than look for the bomb.

Nothing unforeseen occurred and after a few days it was history. However some time later we got a clue. It appears a couple of blokes were having a drink in the Open Hearth pub at Warrawong when during the conversation one asked the other where he worked when he said the 10" Mill a chap standing next to them said "They should put a bomb under that bastard of a place". The barmaid, just catching 10" Mill and bomb must have thought she was on to a few terrorists, rang the police who took it from there.

It at least livened up the shift for us that Dog Watch but we were as safe as apples as it turned out.

The Annabel Strike

Early in 1936 George Annabel, a rougher on the 36" Mill refusing to work an overtime shift, was sacked by Les Davison the Super. As a result Paddy McDonald the Ironworkers Sec brought the entire workforce out on strike for some thirteen weeks, the longest strike in the A.I. & S. history.

Conditions at the Works were pretty grim at the best of times under the Hoskins who themselves must have been under terrible strain financially. The tail end of the Great Depression still had the country in the doldrums, jobs were scarce, wages at poverty level when available.

The Firm's policy was to do as much work as possible with casual hire labour as the need arose.

There was a labour pick up twice a day at a place just inside the works gate, at 7 a.m. and 3 p.m. There was a small hut with a wooden verandah for the employment officer who would appear on the verandah, survey the often times hundreds of poor wretches hoping for a few days work, then picking out the brawniest - it was brawn that counted - say I'll have you and you and you and the rest of you piss off which they would do, some to cast a line into Allans Creek, others to trudge off along Five Islands Road to try their luck at the M.M., E.R.&S. or the Fertilizers then to come back for the 3 p.m. pick up.

Those picked up would be sent to the various Depots needing labour, which was generally for a break down such as a caved-in soaking pit, an Open Hearth reline or a break out at the Blast Furnace. Sometimes the Winch Mill would need a few extra bundlers but the 36 inch Mill usually had permanent crews who worked like horses but being mill-wise were really indispensable but Davison and Co would

be the last to admit it.

On this particular Sat afternoon Annabel had something planned for the evening and on being asked to do a double shift from Day, refused with the result that Davison who lived in a Company house up on the hill was informed by the Foreman. Coming down to the Mill he sacked Annabel with the result that the afternoon shift refused to work and the whole Works came out on strike.

The Union hadn't much reserve. A bit of strike pay was available while it lasted. Parties went rabbiting and fishing. Stores gave what credit they could afford but as the strike dragged on people started to feel the pinch until after thirteen weeks the men were starved back to work. Not long after Paddy McDonald lost a leg in a motor bike accident and was dumped by the Union.

With jobs still as scarce as hens teeth the Company really laid it on to the workers, knowing that after the hiding they had taken there would be no more strikes for quite a time.

The 36 inch Mill being the largest mill in the plant rolled all the heavy sizes such as rails, beams, channels, angles which had to be manipulated manually on the floor plates by great forks and tongs as they went to and fro through the mill rolls.

This was murderous work when you consider some shapes weighed 3 - 4 tons, and 2200 F was rolling heat. Men's clothes would smoulder from the radiant heat and hands often bled from handling the forks and tongs.

The moment an order was completed it was often necessary to change the rolls in the mill for another size, the change taking some hours to complete. There was just no let up, it was generally head down arse up for the whole shift.

The Staff men had it just as tough. Hoskins Staff were paid no overtime. Some of the Superintendents were regular bastards giving the Staff a rough passage. They had no union and as most were unqualified for other work, had to take it on the chin.

Davo ruled his Dept by fear of the sack yet for the few who stood up to him they often got a better run. He seemed to take a fiendish delight in reducing grown men to total sycophants and crawlers.

A Happy Memory of Tom Devitts Kindness

My dad travelled for the Singer Sewing Machine Coy. Machines were sold for cash or on terms. The customer, if she elected to buy on terms, was issued with a coupon book into which Dad pasted coupons in multiples of 2/6 depending on the amount the customer wished to pay each fortnight.

He would stick the coupon into the customer's book, initial it and add the date with his indelible pencil. The customer had a record of her payments and how much she had yet to pay. Ordinary treadle machines cost £24.10.0 while the Cabinet model cost an extra £10.

Singers, although a tough Yankee based company didn't charge interest for terms.

As the tally grew, the women would often remark to Dad that they only had so much to go before the machine was theirs, a treasure.

Part of the deal was that they had a life time guarantee for maintenance, only having to pay for any parts necessary. The machines were so well made that this

was not very often necessary. It was the agent's job to keep it in shape.

On one occasion I accompanied Dad to one of his customers who lived in the bush at Coledale near the burning slack heap of the mine..

The husband was blind and the wife by dint of good management had been able to buy a machine with which she did sewing for her own family and neighbours. I have a suspicion that now and then when they were really hard up Dad put in a 2/6 coupon to keep them up to date. I know he did it for others.

The woman was making her final payment on this particular day and after Dad had done all the clerical work, she would have us sit down for a cup of tea. She apologised because she had only bread and dripping to offer us.

As we left one of her small daughters took Dad's hand as we walked down to the slip rails of their fence, chatting away to us both.

When we reached the fence, Dad took a 10/- note from his pocket, folded it up into a small square and pressing it into her tiny hand kissed her goodbye telling her to give the note to her mother and to make sure that she didn't lose it.

As we walked on he said in his quiet way "You know, we most likely ate their tea, just then down there."

It's something I never forgot about my Dad that day on the bush track at Coledale many years ago.