
MEETING REPORTS

SEPTEMBER

Speaker: Les Dion: THE DION FAMILY.

At the September meeting Les Dion gave a fine overview of his famous family's long experience in Illawarra.

His Cantonese speaking ancestors came from China to Nerrigundah in the 1880's in search for gold. But the Di On family have even older Australian roots. Tom Dion (senior) had married a girl who had been born at Ballarat during an earlier gold rush before returning with her family to China. Her name was Annie and they married in 1898.

Brief mention was made of the early days of market gardening from about 1907 on the site of that is now the Fraternity Club at Fairy Meadow. Photos apparently exist, but instead we were treated to a talk focussing more on the legendary tales of the family's bus buying enterprises from about 1923 (a Model T Ford which Tom Dion bought at the age of 20) and their kindness to the unemployed during the Depression of the 1930's - a depression which nearly sent the Dion family broke too.

Les used his computer to project some fine images of the many buses the family has owned and provided the amazing detail; that not a single new bus was purchased between 1948 and 1989. Les told of how he would rush outside when told the family had obtained a "new" bus - only to find a very old "new" bus parked in the street.

Mention was also made of the family's fondness for dealing in cash and of their extensive property dealings. Les related the marvellous story of how the head of the family would make a decision to buy a property even if it wasn't on the market as yet. He requested the solicitor to search for the owner and make an offer.

On one occasion when he saw a Wollongong property which caught his eye he contacted his solicitor with the order: "Find out who owns it." The solicitor phoned back three days later with the news: "We've found the owner. It's you!"

Few addresses to the society have been so warmly received. There were countless questions. It seemed every one had a tale to relate of their experiences with either the blue buses or the family.

It was an enjoyable evening.

For those interested in more detail a book entitled "The Dions - Bus Pioneers of Wollongong" written by John Birchmeier and based on family recollections was published in 1997.

Joe Davis.