
NOVEMBER 2012 MEETING

Date & Time: Thursday 1st November 2012 at **6.30pm.**
Venue: Illawarra Museum, 11 Market Street, Wollongong.
Speaker: Les Dion.
Topic: The Dion Family.

REPORT ON JUNE MEETING.

Speaker: Mr George Edgar

Topic: History of BHP

It was the speaker's career experiences in the Port Kembla industry that made up the local history, and his knowledge of BHP and its activities from 1898 to 1921 under the leadership throughout of a Mr G D Delprat, its General Manager that gave this address its much broader focus.

Mr Edgar was recruited in 1957 by Australian Iron & Steel (AIS), then 100% owned by BHP, as a trainee. He married and did a university degree and noted that these moves were highly recommended by those in authority. He progressed up the career path. AIS was managed on a tight hierarchical chain of command and each one knew his place, what dining room/canteen was open to them, and the rules for each. It struck him as quaint that at senior level coats were a must in these rooms, a practice that was to change in his day. The Port Kembla works was under the control of a Mr Gus Parish, and with the company led by Sir Ian McLennan there was a strong work ethos promoted. Meetings with senior staff at the venues of Greenhill and Springhill were intimidating affairs for the less experienced staff. Tours of inspection by visiting head office people ere no less so. Every opportunity was taken to train and test performance, interest, and competence for a managerial career. You were expected to know your stuff and watch out if you did not. Mr Edgar survived the ordeal and was to be plant manager at Wollongong and Whyalla in South Australia.

The formality was a burden, he said, and found expression in the important area of industrial relations. He was to learn first hand at

Whyalla that employees and every one of them should be encouraged to belong and make a contribution to the plant's concern and not be admonished to leave their brains at the factory gate. That was awful, he said.

He then moved to a broader theme by stating that BHP did not commence overseas recruitment of top personnel in recent times, but had done so for over a century. A Mr G D Delprat (**GDD**) arrived in Broken Hill in 1898 to become the General Manager of BHP. It is worth noting that the assets and undertaking that **GDD** was to direct included the underground and open cut mines at Broken Hill from which silver, lead, zinc and copper ores were won, the smelting/refining works at Port Pirie, large deposits of iron, both stone and ore, outside of the town now known as Whyalla and the Bellambi Coke Ovens. The refineries at Port Pirie were the largest of their kind in the world, using iron as a flux, and all the coke made at the Bellambi Coke works. Not only was it a large undertaking but an outstanding profitable one. It was under the control of men, pastoralists and their employees mostly, who were in the area when discoveries were first made and the mines and metal recovered had made them and a large group of British shareholders very wealthy.

GDD was a Dutchman by birth, had training as an engineer, and was a mines manager in Spain in the late 19th century, working for an English Company and very familiar with the range of minerals available at Broken Hill. To digress, in Spain he came to know others at work for Rio Tinto, a mine established near the Rio River there.

Our speaker referred us to a published biography of **GDD** titled **A Vision of Steel** published in 1958 and while not in our library, became available remarkably through the Lithgow Municipal Library. It was published with a foreword and introduction respectively from Mr Menzies, then Prime Minister, and Mr Essington Lewis, **GDD**'s assistant manager, and then successor who himself had a 50 year career with the company. It quotes directly from diaries and speeches of **GDD**. Our speaker referred to them specifically and further reference will be made to them in my concluding remarks.

Mr Lewis made reference to his great contribution to non-ferrous metallurgical practice with lasting and beneficial effects worldwide. He and others developed a flotation process for the recovery of zinc from mine tailings. While a large producer of zinc concentrate, Australia had not manufactured spelter (impure zinc), until BHP initiated it at Port Pirie in 1922 for which **GDD** was largely responsible. Similarly, **GDD** played a big part in establishing The Broken Hill Associated Smelters Proprietary Limited, formed to own the Port Pirie smelters already referred to and make that facility available to all Broken Hill mineral ore miners. His most abiding memorial will always be the establishment of a modern iron and steel industry at Newcastle, NSW and his selection of Mr David Baker, an American, to be the works first manager. Furthermore he saw the benefits of BHP iron ore assets at Iron Knob in his early days, with their comparatively high iron content (68%) and played a large part in the development in Whyalla and surrounds of the rail and port facilities there, all highly mechanised for the day. Mr Lewis said that the episode of BHP as a miner had been diminished. But from our standpoint, we all realise that in commerce and industry nothing is forever.

Mr Menzies was likewise full of praise for the efforts of **GDD**. He referred to him as an explorer and a person of imagination enabled to see over the horizons. The movement by BHP from silver to steel was in large measure **GDD** achievement. Writing 40 years after the establishment of the iron and steel industry in Newcastle and 20 years after the establishment of the works at Port Kembla, and appreciating the ever growing industrial base of the nation as a whole, Mr Menzies emphasised the beneficial outcomes of these industries, in the times of the great wars but more importantly in contributing to manufacturing, construction and the associated activities, and adding to the country's population, and the rising living standards for all. In every way this was **GDD** legacy to all.

P Daly