

REPORT ON NOVEMBER MEETING

Speaker: Mr Les Dion.

Topic: A History of the Dion Family in the Illawarra.

Our Society was again privileged to receive an informative and often humorous talk about the history of this well-known family by Mr Les Dion.

Les told us that all of the photographs shown, and there were many, were taken by his Uncle Barney, who was great at keeping documents and memorabilia. Les' grandfather immigrated to Australia from Canton in the early 1880's to seek his fortune in the gold fields. He landed in South Australia and then proceeded to Bendigo – possibly walking all the way. It was cheaper to get off the ship in South Australia than in Sydney. When he was 48 he returned to China to marry his love, Annie, who was 16. They settled just out of Moruya originally, but moved to Fairy Meadow later. The Dion's family name was originally Chong and Les explained how it eventually became Dion. We were shown a family photograph in the very early days – there was the father Tom, his wife Annie, and 6 girls and 7 boys. Les is a grandson. Les' father, Les Dion, gave up driving the buses when he was 85 years old. He is now 93.

In 1923 Tom Dion, the eldest son, applied to the Northern Illawarra Council to operate a bus company. One of the photographs showed a 1920 Model T-Ford – chain driven – purchased from Harrigan Ford. Les told us that the Dion Company also had 'adventure tours' in the early days – so they were well ahead of the times there.

With the exception of Ivy, who married and went to Sydney to live, all of the Dion family members, brothers and sisters, were brought up to be industrious and hard working and they all worked in some part of the family business – driving buses, maintaining them or in some activity concerned with the business. As a young child I can remember buying fruit for my lunch on the way to school at the little shop on the corner of Keira and Smith Street, where a couple of the girls were in attendance. I think it may have been Rose Dion who was there then.

In the 1940's, due to petrol shortages during the War, some of the buses had gas burners on the front – charcoal burners.

In 1948 there were double decker buses being used, which were very expensive to run. One of these was restored by the Tempe Museum, but Les is not sure of its whereabouts now.

From the photographs shown it was clear that there were many buses and coaches over the long years since the business began. The vehicles dated back to the earliest ones in 1923 and when things were tough, many of the buses were remodelled by the Dion men to look quite different from the original, but were still used to great effect. The Dion boys were very good at improvising what they already had, to make it work. The various old buses and coaches in Barney's photographs were a sight to behold.

Les learned to drive buses when he was a young boy in Woodhill Street, where much of the surrounding properties were owned by the Dion family. He told us he was especially good at reversing them up the street!

The Dions were always community minded and they worked with Progress Associations of different suburbs in the early days as regards where bus stops should be, etc.

The local newspaper once reported that Barney Dion had received 56 fines for not running to the time table. Barney told Les that he did run to time table – it was his own time table! Barney drove the buses well into his 80's.

In 1942 the Dion Family made the newspapers again when there was an altercation between Keith Hill (John J Hill Bus Company) and Barney. Apparently there was strong competition in those days to pick up the crowds going home on buses from the movies, dances and so on. Remember, there weren't many cars around then and buses were the means of transport for most people.

After many years of doing up the old buses and going through hard times, in 1988 the Dions purchased two new buses and these were air-conditioned. While this was a great addition to the bus fleet, Uncle Barney would still have preferred the drivers to use the old buses up first.

Tom Dion did well in investing in property in Wollongong. At one time he asked his solicitor to investigate a property he wanted to purchase. The solicitor had to inform him that unfortunately he could not purchase it – he already owned it!

It is a well-known fact that the Dion family were sympathetic to people who were 'hard up' during the depression and would stop and give them a lift whether they had money or not. They were generous with their family and also with the community and this is why they have been held in high esteem and respect over the years.

A big thank you to Les Dion for a very enjoyable evening.

Jean Groves