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AUSTRALIA

Illawarra Unity - Journal of the Illawarra Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History

Volume 7
Issue 1 *Illawarra Unity*

Article 4

October 2007

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Recommended Citation

Borrow, Doreen, *The Wagon of Dreams - Reminiscences*, *Illawarra Unity - Journal of the Illawarra Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History*, 7(1), 2007, 26-31.

Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/unity/vol7/iss1/4>

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The Wagon of Dreams - Reminiscences

Abstract

The greater part of my childhood was spent in Captains Flat, a small mining town in the Monaro District of NSW. The prosperity of the town was short-lived and like so many other communities its inhabitants became victims of the Great Depression in 1929. The Lake George Mining Company that had economically sustained our little community ceased production and the clang of the ore buckets, the shrill call of the mine whistle, that had segmented our lives into day, afternoon and dingo shift, fell silent. Machinery rusted and rotted on the mine lease. Notices threatening any trespasser with prosecution were affixed to the heavy padlocked gate leading onto the mine site. Despondency and hopelessness settled into the hearts of the unemployed, and anyone with the means to do so left the town in search of work. Those who remained behind shared a common, soul-destroying poverty that would persist for many years. Lacking the means to leave our family remained waiting for the good times to return.

The Wagon of Dreams

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I was young and immune to the anxiety bred from financial insecurity. I never felt the deprivation that blighted the lives of so many, and, although poorly clad, I never went hungry. The old iron bed shared with my two older sisters was warm and comforting. Mum's eternal optimism sustained us all throughout the hardship years and kept alive a hope of better times ahead. Dad sang ballads, recited poetry and told wondrous stories as we sat before the glowing coals of open fire during the bitter cold winters. He held us enthralled by his tales of a carefree youth when he worked the Darling River paddle steamers, and of the characters he met during his roving days in the hot dry outback.

Time was unbounded where we played in the tussock-covered hills cradling our little world. We swam in the cool, clear water holes of the old Molonglo as she gurgled to silence in our favourite secret places, sang in air sweet with a dry grassy infusion of eucalyptus and wattle, to an accompaniment of

currawongs and magpies. The word 'bored', so much a feature of the lexicon of today's youth, was never part of our vocabulary. Each season followed the one before, dividing our natural surroundings according to the cyclical rhythms of nature. There was always something special for us to look forward to. We had nothing and craved little. The games we played were usually collective like skipping, marbles, spinning tops and hopscotch. These games were not solitary, but required the participation of other children. Certain rules and guidelines had to be followed and respected by all.

I had a best friend during those carefree days. Her name was Joycie Murphy. She had two sisters, Mary and Bubbie, and a brother I knew only as 'Spud'. Their father was the local barber who plied his trade in a shop constructed entirely of corrugated iron, behind which was a small dwelling where his family lived. The shop contained the usual paraphernalia of the barbering trade: barber's chair, hairbrush and comb, shaving brush and mug, scissors, and a menacing Bengal cut throat razor. Bars of Sunlight soap were always on hand to lather the faces of those with enough courage to brave the shaky hand of a hung-over Murphy.

There were long slender wax candles, called tapers, used to singe the hair after cutting, for it was commonly believed that hair bled when cut and would lose its strength if the ends were not sealed. In truth, it was the customer's face that was more likely to be flecked with blood from the innumerable small nicks delivered by the blade in Murphy's trembling hand. This Spartan establishment was furnished with a barber's chair, a cracked mirror and a stool that rested against a wall. It was here that waiting customers or anyone who came in to yarn with Murphy were accommodated. The only reading matter available was a well-thumbed copy of the "*Miller's Guide*", the punter's bible. The red and white spiral stripes of the barber's poles supporting the front verandah had faded with time, and the smell of bay rum and singed hair mingled with the pungent aroma of onions wafting from Mrs. Murphy's kitchen.

Danny Murphy, or Murph as he was known, was a wiry little Irishman who expended most of his meagre earnings on grog. His drinking mate was the local postmaster, Jim Beasley, also an Irishman, who had also fallen on hard times. Arm in arm they made their way to the pub and after a round or two began to sing the long, sentimental refrains of old Irish ballads. '*Danny Boy*' or '*I'll Take You Home Again Kathleen*' could be heard drifting up Foxlow Street to where my family lived. Mum would wryly remark '*Paddy and Mr. Beasley are on the scoot again*'.

As the Depression deepened into the early thirties, the plight of many in the town became very desperate. Rabbit, which we referred to as underground mutton, became a very scarce, coveted commodity. Many families had been reduced to eating native fauna, such as wombats and rosella parrots. Predictably, professional haircuts became an unaffordable luxury and families resorted to cutting their own hair. A proliferation of exotic hairstyles embellished the heads of town folk. Children, whose parents lacked sufficient skill with scissors, became the abject targets of ridicule. The “basin cut” emerged as the most popular hairstyle. It was fashioned by fitting a suitable sized pudding basin over the skull of the unfortunate subject, and snipping away any hair extending below the rim of the bowl. This ‘en vogue’ styling depleted Murph’s small clientele, and he was eventually forced to close shop and go on rations.

Murphy’s wife was a thin, dark woman with long black hair that she tied back with brightly coloured scarves. Because of her comparatively flamboyant mode of dress, my mother firmly believed she was of gypsy descent. Mum also assumed that because the Murphy family were not Catholic, or “*of the faith*” as she would say, they must have been descendants of ‘souters’. This was a name Catholics bestowed on other Catholics who had ‘turned’ or renounced their religion, in order to qualify for a bowl of soup during famine in the old sod. The local custodian of law and order in the town was a despicable individual named Constable Grogan. He didn’t share Mum’s opinion of Mrs. Murphy’s bloodlines, and when the Murphys presented themselves at the police station for dole rations, Grogan ordered Murph to ‘*bring in his gin*’. Murph, silenced with fear, desperation and hunger, obeyed without objection.

My father was not so compliant when challenged by Grogan. On one occasion Dad and his cobber jointly purchased a sheep for five bob, and were preparing to slaughter it in our backyard. Grogan arrived just as the unfortunate animal was about to be dispatched. He pushed open the back gate and entered our yard. He made several threats to my father regarding the illegality of backyard slaughtering of animals. Dad carried an inborn hatred of the police partly because of his Irish roots, but mainly because of his run-ins with them during his wild youth. He listened to what Grogan had to say then opened fire on him. He called him, among other things, a poor apology for a man, and shaping up in classic fighting stance, threw down a challenge to Grogan to arrest him if he were man enough to try. The knuckles of Dad’s clenched fists turned white, and his face was suffused red with temper, giving it a complexion that

complimented his ginger hair. I clung desperately to his leg, expecting him to be carted away and imprisoned forever. But his assessment of Grogan proved to be well founded. Grogan never uttered another word, but turned and fled the scene, *'like the mongrel dingo he is,'* Dad later recounted.

As the weeks passed, Murph became increasingly edgy under the harassing eye of Grogan. Grogan was a bully and had the power to stop Murphy's rations if as much as a hint of a thimbleful of the 'creature' passed his lips. Visits to the pub ceased, and Murph began to dream of escaping into the outside world. However, he lacked the means of doing so and judging by the raised voices coming from the Murphy home, Mrs. Murphy had no intention of allowing him to leave without her and the kids. Murph, still on the water wagon, and as broody as one of Mrs. Beasley's hens, conceived an idea that would put him on the road to freedom.

Winter was drawing to a close, and as always winter was made bearable by keeping alive the thought of spring. Almost overnight the earth threw off her burden of frost and ice, and patches of green appeared on the sullen grey landscape. The branches of old quince, pear and crab apple trees, leaf-bare for months and hung heavy with frost and the weight of birds, were transformed into clouds of pink and white blossom. Willow and poplar displayed the vivid greens of early spring, and the ancient pines bordering the park gave birth to a patchwork of new growth. Birds busied themselves constructing intricate nests among the higher branches of trees. Briars, blackberry and tussock sprang alive with birdsong and beneath the wooden bridge spanning the Molonglo, swallows refurbished old mud nests deserted the autumn before.

As inured as Murph appeared to be to the invisible magic of spring something moved within him. His desire to leave the town became stronger as winter receded. In the Murphy's backyard a strange object began to grow amid the fresh growth of blossoms and new foliage. Murph and Spud were hard at work with hammer and saw building a structure roughly modeled on the covered wagons that once crossed the great prairies of North America. The material covering the frame of the wagon consisted of chaff bags sewn together by Mrs. Murphy. The rest of the material, from which this weird contraption was being constructed, had been scrounged from God-only-knows-where. Questioned as to what was the purpose of this conveyance, Murph confided to his mates that he thought there was still a quid to be made outside the town and he was off to find it. Finally, the wagon was completed, loaded with the Murphy's

few possessions and hitched to a skinny old grey horse. Before heading out of town with the family aboard, it stopped at the pub where Murph downed a pint of beer shouted by the publican. Following handshakes, backslaps and cries of *'good luck mate'*, Murphy took hold of the reins, and the old horse lurched forward on the journey into the outside world.

There was always a strong sense of loss whenever a family moved on irrespective of who was leaving and the laughter and banter of the small group farewelling the Murphys, dissipated into sadness and gloom, as the strange conveyance wound slowly over the brow of the southern hill. It slowly faded from sight among the tall gums and wattle, and the barking of Spud's dog could no longer be heard. The unconventional mode of the Murphys' transport reinforced Mum's opinion of Mrs. Murphy's ancestry. Later that night, as she plied the old flat iron to a garment, she triumphantly announced: *"I was right about Mrs. Murphy being a gypsy."*

My sister Peg and I were desolate and filled with envy and longing to be part of the great adventure our mates were undertaking. Pleas to be allowed to go with them had gone unheeded by Mum, and our sense of loss was alleviated by promises to write to each other. Those promises were not kept, and the hours we spent speculating as to the whereabouts of our friends lessened as the months rolled by. The following summer, a strange light was seen flickering in the darkness on the Jerangle road, and people came out of their homes to witness this strange phenomenon and speculate as to what it might be. Mickey Donoghoe, who was very fleet of foot, bravely volunteered to investigate. He sped into the darkness as we waited on the pub verandah for his return. A brief time later, Mickey appeared breathless, and gasped the news that the *"Murphys were coming home."* Elated at the prospect of seeing our friends again we raced off to escort them down the main street. The old horse and wagon, with its lantern swinging on one side, finally halted at the pub, and Murph alighted. Again there was laughter and hand shaking, and a genuine feeling of relief that this little family had made it through the long cutting, escaped into the wider world and returned to us unharmed.

The Murphys settled back in their old home, and life continued its usual course. The horse, looking old and worn, contentedly grazed on whatever grass it could find on its familiar ground. The wagon remained stationary in the paddock. Drinking was no longer taboo for Murph, as the hated Grogan had been transferred out of the town to the relief of all those in receipt of susso. Murph, content to be back on his old

turf, regaled the men on the pub verandah with stories of his adventures on the track. Strange places were mentioned, such as Cooma, Goulburn, Michelago and Yass, which seemed as exotic to us as the Arabian Nights. The Murphys left the Flat for good before the mine re-opened, leaving the wagon and the old horse behind them. They were last heard of in Goulburn, and like Shakespeare's poor player, were heard no more. The wagon remained in the paddock and became the plaything for boys acting out stories of the American Wild West. Grass and weeds sprouted among the wheel spokes, and Mrs. Beasley's fowls took to roosting in its interior. Finally, when the mine re-opened, both it and the little dilapidated shop where Murphy plied his trade, cutting hair and faces with his shaky hands, were demolished to make way for a new hotel built on the site.

Captains Flat prospered briefly during the Second World War. Men again toiled in the bowels of the earth for lead to be fashioned into bullets and bombs to kill others a world away. The mine closed again in 1962 due to the fall in lead prices and a rising cost of extracting ore. Captains Flat reverted to a ghost town, in yet another cycle of boom and bust. A new generation of families drifted away in search of work, but their leaving never evoked the romance and adventure felt when the Murphys' wagon of dreams creaked its way over the southern road into the unknown.