

12. Pedalling History

Conversations (June 2000), pp. 70–84.

Today as I left the Gwydir Square shops on my Speedwell Ladies Sports Bicycle (3-speed Sun Tour hub) I passed an elderly man in his battery powered wheelchair. Perhaps it is unnecessary to record such a small triumph; but I pass so few other wheeled travellers. We exchanged no greeting. He kept carefully to the left, and as I glanced back I noticed that he was still going steadily east along the bike track around the oval. I had thought he was on his way back to the old people's flats, but he was now well beyond those havens of the elderly. I hope I did not distract him and lead him into a wilderness of unrecognised streets and houses. At least his battery would have faded before he jolted on gravel tracks where capital becomes bush.

An elderly suburban bike rider, I think of other domestic journeys taken over fifty years and five hundred miles away. They seem so close.

My brother and I drove a horse and jinker to school. The jinker rolled along on car tyres, and over the tyres were high, wide mudguards, and we could sprawl across them and gaze at the neighbours' familiar fence posts, droppers and strainers rhythmically marking our passing. But the tyres punctured, or the tubes perished, or the valves failed. Dad fixed punctures by roughening the tube around the hole, clamping an oval patch in place, lifting some of the patch surface with a pocket knife, lighting it with a match, and watching the burning surface generate the heat that miraculously welded patch to tube. Dad got sick of fixing tubes and pumping up tyres, and changed the wheels to standard, thin, iron tyres. Our carriage then became a gig.

Each morning and afternoon we harnessed the reluctant Bunny to the gig. A sturdy black shaggy mare, Bunny should have been a placid pony pet. In fact she was wilful, cantankerous and sly. If you were half asleep as you reached up to unbuckle the collar, adjust a trace or shaft, she would suddenly snap her teeth on a shoulder or bum. Sometimes the jangle of the bridle or the clunk of the bit against her teeth would give warning, and you would have time to leap aside. The thickness of winter jumpers were some protection, but if there was only a flimsy summer shirt between Bunny's grass-stained teeth and your skin, then you wore a horse-bite tattoo for three or four days. Having left her mark, Bunny just turned away and resumed her apparent docile acceptance of being a gig pony. We were not fooled: the broody bitch was savouring her moment of triumph.

Bunny was almost impossible to ride. She did not waste energy on extravagant displays of bucking or bolting, but she would suddenly shy-slip sideways jolting the rider. Or she would stop suddenly and refuse to cross a bridge or go through a gate, snorting in simulated alarm. If tied to a fence while you checked the irrigation water, she would pull back and snap the reins or rub the bridle against a post and slip it over her head. After you had walked home she would be standing at the horse trough, waiting calmly to be unsaddled.

Even when burdened by the gig, Bunny liked to race. The school kids coming in from Barraport shared a crowded car. On days when they went in the car of those parents who had a modern sedan – like Jack Piccoli's Studebaker – the Barraport mob swept past with a scatter of quick waves, but when Neville Hawthorn took his turn in his old pre-war box-shaped tourer, John would stand up and like a Roman chariot driver, flick Bunny with the reins, and with a lot of yahooing urge Bunny into a canter. With exuberance flowing from boy to horse and the Barraport mob leaning on and shouting from Hawthorn's open-sided car, Bunny could sometimes extend her stumpy legs into a gallop. For a hundred yards we could keep pace with Neville's old car and cautious driving. But Bunny was no stayer. Soon her stride was so short that the shafts were rocking up and down, and that was about all the movement we had. Hawthorn's car pattered steadily around the salt lake and out of sight. Bunny settled to her steady trot, sides heaving at the unaccustomed effort.

The formed red gravel road was hard on horses' feet, and most of the time Bunny plodded along the side-track, following the three parallel tracks cut by the horses' hooves and thin gig tyres. She knew the way so well that where we crossed from the left of the road to the right at the top of the rise, she needed no guidance. On a drowsy day when we were both reading, John just gave a glance to see if there were any stray cars, and left the reins slack. Bunny crossed the road and trotted on.

Going to school we passed no farmhouses. There was just Maloney and Warren's slaughterhouse on the top of the rise. Sometimes we saw the windlass turn, and knew that the carcass of a bullock was being hauled up for skinning, cleaning and quartering. At their Godfrey Street shop with its flywire door, sawdust-strewn floor and heavy chopping block, Maloney and Warren proclaimed 'Fresh Supplies of Meat Daily'. In summer they killed after dark or before dawn, but in the winter we saw evidence of truth in advertising.

The first house, screened by struggling gums and threatened by drifting sand, was isolated from the rest of the town. It belonged to the Wardhaughs. Bob, who met the train and did the town deliveries, had an easy downhill run as he left his house. His doorless 1920s truck with its box cab needed that rolling start. Bunny might have matched Wardhaugh's truck for speed, but we turned off

the Barraport Road, crossed the Wycheproof Road and followed the dirt track that led into Wright Street, bouncing on limestone corrugates without startling good residents – who would have told Dad.

The *Champion* arrived regularly at Elliot's newsagency, and John picked up his order. I read many feet of its austere columns that came all the way by slow boat and empire ports from Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London. Rockfist Rogan, Captain Rogan of the RAF, climbed into his Spitfire, and watched for the Hun in the sun as Bunny jogged along. Rockfist's pal, Curly Hooper, gave a quick thumbs up, shoved the stick forward, and 'whoosh! There was a searing flash of light ...' Out of the habit Bunny slowed as she approached the crossing at the Wycheproof Road. Danny of the Dazzlers, centre-forward, 'hit the ball on the run, and sent it tearing towards the far corner of the goal ...' The 'footer fans' at Sunrays Park roared themselves hoarse. Jock McCall, skipper of the Dazzlers, said 'Nice work, Danny'. A cloud of dust from Pud Diamond's new gravel truck drifted across the double-columned pages: I did not bother to look up. Colwyn Dane, ace detective, and his young assistant, Slick Chester, searched the convict's clothes for clues. Dane was about to turn away when his eye caught something. He 'whipped out a magnifying glass from his pocket and peered at some hairs on the drab jacket'. The boy 'tec looked on anxiously. 'What is it, guv'nor?' Rabbits scrambled to their warren under the giant cactus as Bunny turned through the first railway gate. But I saw rabbits every day, and was not distracted. Ginger Nut, the boy who takes the biscuit at St Juke's, said 'Crumbs, just hark at old Greggy!' And Jumbo Merlin, Ginger's tubby pal, chimed in 'Corks, there goes Greggy again'. Ginger winked to his chums in the fourth form: 'We'd better hand in our lines in later'. And Bunny was slowing as she passed under the pepper trees, walked a couple of steps and stopped outside the gig shed.

I had never seen a soccer game, a detective, even the outside of a private school, did not know what a centre-forward was, never used or heard such words as 'footer', 'guv'nor', 'corks', 'crumpets', and 'hark at'. 'Hark at!' If Doughy Dwyer or Tud Storey had used 'Hark at' everyone playing kick-to-kick at Boort School would have stopped and jaws fallen open. Such an astonishing use of prissy, archaic language would have been an unprecedented lapse of taste or simply beyond comprehension. Yet I read the *Champion* avidly, entered completely its most English of English worlds, and I did that without ever confusing Ginger Nut and his wizard wheezes and jolly japes at St Juke's with the ruck and tumble on the top ground at school, and without ever wanting Boort School number 1796 to be like St Juke's. I did not doubt that Boort was a better school.

I identified most with Danny Roberts of North London United, forever young, forever on the edge of international selection, forever playing against the odds, and forever – with the final blistering kick – defeating cads, rotters and

bad sports. John and I tried playing a couple of soccer games using the oval Australian football and the mouth of an old galvanised iron tank lying on its side as the goal. But it was not a success, and we soon returned to using hands as well as feet and all the skills of Australian football. Hitting a ball with your head seemed abnormal, even stupid. It still does. Deep down I knew that if Danny tried a quick back heel into space, trapped the ball again, and in a blistering turn of speed tried to weave his way around Boort's fullback line, then Peter Chalmers would not have been taken in by the feint, Laurie Crump would not have let the ball pass through his outstretched fingers, and Morrie Boyle would have already been breaking into space knowing the Crumpie would be feeding the ball to him. Danny, still recovering from Pete's shoulder in the chest, would have watched this from ground level. Afterwards in the shed the Boort men would have talked about that Pommy mug. He was just a fancy dancer. A two-bob lair. They never learn.

There were other horses and gigs on the road. Hills drove one to school, and they came in on the Wycheproof road, so we travelled the last quarter of a mile on the same track. But the three older Hills soon left school and the two youngest switched to bikes. The Byrnes boys came in on the Charlton Road, so we did not see them. It must have taken them nearly half an hour in the gig. When the older Byrnes boys left and Mrs Byrnes got a job as a teacher at the primary school, John, the youngest of her sons, drove himself and his mother to school in an old side-curtained Oakland car. John was only about fourteen, and he parked discreetly under a broad pepper tree below Dunstan's garage. John and Mrs Byrne then walked the rest of the way, around the post office corner and past the police station, where the local constable was as discreet as they were. Jack Gould and Mr Hawkins still drove gigs around the town, and the elderly Misses Beattie, looking (as I later learnt) like Daisy Bates, wore boots and bonnet. And we might see Charlie Robertson driving a long-shafted break with a spirited young horse tied alongside; but he was training pacers and was in a different category. By 1951 when my brother left school we were the last of the children driving a horse to school, and the grocers, bakers and milkmen were abandoning their horses, carts and deliveries.

Sonny arrived from up north somewhere in about 1945. A beautiful black pony, he had none of the shaggy characteristics of the Shetland or the short legs and boof-head of many ponies. He was a well-proportioned half-horse. As a stallion, he was kept in his own yard with his own high-railed fence and galvanised iron stall. Dad had ideas of breeding ponies, but Bunny was as cooperative in motherhood as she was in most other parts of her cantankerous life. Whenever Sonny escaped his yard and ran free of human constraint, his stallion instincts drove him to herd and control mares and drive off any colt or gelding he thought was a competitor. But away from other horses, Sonny was always alert and gently

affectionate. He responded quickly to rein or heel, almost anticipating the rider's request. Often asked to carry heavy riders through the day, he was tireless, never expressing his fatigue in petulant stamping, head-shaking or mulish refusals. If a mad-eyed steer, tail in the air, broke away from a mob, he was off in pursuit, racing close and swerving left and right with the frantic beast.

As he was yarded, Sonny had to be fed and watered every day, a job that often fell to me. I scooped loose chaff from the barn into a five-gallon can that had once held oil and carried it across to Sonny's yard, knowing that there would be well-mannered enthusiasm for both the chaff and the carrier.

But once Sonny nearly killed me. One hot day I was riding him through an irrigation channel, and the water was just below his belly and lapping on the stirrups. Suddenly he stopped, pawed the water a couple of times, and gently settled and rolled. Something in his horse brain had told him that it was time for a dip. I just had time to fling my feet out of the stirrups and throw myself to one side into the water. I emerged spluttering to see Sonny holding his head up and rolling from side to side. When he had finished he simply stood up, scrambled up the bank and shook himself like a giant dog. I gathered the reins, looked at the oozing, mud-encrusted saddle, and we walked home together. Had Bunny done that I would have known that she had every intention of grinding the rider into the mud, and once free would have bolted for home. But Sonny was unconscious of the alarm he had caused.

Sonny stayed long after all the draught horses had gone, long after the swingle trees were eaten away by white ants, long after the heavy dray and wagon had rested for years in the one place and long after the team's harness had hardened and its buckles rusted.

When Sonny finally got so old his fine legs would no longer support his still willing heart and balls, Dad got his cousin Ian to take him down the paddock and shoot him. I do not remember Dad declining to shoot any other old injured (or just useless) animal.

As I ride down the bike track from Kaleen to Giralang, cross Maribyrrong Street, and roll down the easy slope through the tunnel of poplars, I wonder about mud. Canberra has no mud. There is mown grass, tall grass, asphalt and concrete, but no mud.

Boort was in dry country, but I remember mud. Mud that caked on boots and we walked an inch, even two inches, taller. All houses had mud scrapers; ornate at the front and discs or mould boards off ploughs at the back. At school just one shower of rain and the top ground had a skin of grey mud. It stuck to the football, and soon it had quarter of an inch coat on the leather. Old, worn and balloon-like with use, the footy quickly had the weight and toughness of

a mallee root. It burst through hands reaching for marks and wrenched and sprained thumbs. It thudded on chests. A mongrel punt hit high on the instep was the only safe kick. To try a drop or a fancy stab meant a stubbed toe and a jarring that went up the leg to the hip. Some kid might have a pocket knife, even a Rogers, and he would cradle the ball in one arm and slice away the mud like orange rind. That gave a light ball for just five or six kicks.

When we did our right turn and began the march into school that turned into a saunter, some would break away and scrape their boots. But the bare boards of the passage and aisle between the desks were soon covered in half an inch of mud. Great clods fell from heels and lay under desks. The mud dried quickly, and passing soles crushed it and turned the top layer to dust. After school Ma Burgess shovelled, swept and hosed it out the door.

The mud stuck to bike tyres and riders stood on the pedals as though on a hill climb. The space between the tyres and the mudguards packed with mud, and the strongest riders could not force the pedals to turn. They pulled the mudguards off, but soon the mud jammed in the forks, and men walked along the side of the road carrying mud-encrusted bikes. Kids with chilblained hands and bikes jammed with mud cried as they pushed their bikes slowly towards school. Mud defeated bikes.

Drought made mud. The average rainfall was 14 inches a year. But, as one cocky said, 'It was a bloody unusual year when we got the average'. When we traced a low with tight black concentric circles making its way west across the continent, the Victorian forecast was always 'Rain on and south of the ranges'. Just where the ranges began was uncertain. Big Hill south of Bendigo was one possibility and that was close to 100 miles south of us. Wherever the rain fell it was a long way from us. In 1943 we had just eight and a half inches, just a shower more than they had in 1902, and 1902 was a great drought, the year when they sent train loads of water up the Robinvale line, and when all the wheat varieties – Queen's Jubilee, Straight Vote and the Prolifics – withered. But this was a record drought on a drought. No grass protected the topsoil and by 1944 even the roots had withered in the earth. When the west and north winds swept across the ground they whipped the soil away and left clean red clay pans that expanded with each wind. The tops of rises, most exposed to the wind and drained of all moisture, were vulnerable. So were gateways where cattle and sheep tracks came together, and hooves trampled the dry grass and cut and loosened the dirt. The fans of bare ground spreading out from gates looked like careless townies had ignored the notice 'Please shut the gate and use Federal Fertiliser'. It seemed that winds seeking escape had seized the opportunity, rushed the open gates, and carried the topsoil with them. Only Godfrey Street in town was a strip of tar, all other roads were gravel or just banked dirt. In the long dry they corrugated and fine dust collected in potholes. Showers turned roads

into mud. Twenty or thirty points were not enough rain for seeds to germinate and keep growing, and it did not fill dams; but it was enough to make acres of mud. It was falling on clay pans, on earth skinned of all vegetation. Cars fitted with chains churned along roads. Drivers picked eccentric routes and left rutted wheel tracks as evidence. And when they struck hard gravel the chains clattered and banged and clods and sparks flew.

Mud has gone from most Australian lives. Men going to work and kids going to school or rabbiting do not wrestle bikes through mud. Kids do not walk on mud stilts. They do not collect the clod heels and with a relaxed flick send them in a skimming arc at some unsuspecting lounge. Barefoot kids do not walk with sausages of mud squeezing between their toes. Men do not divert left or right to the scraper before they go in the back door.

The tall grass beyond the mown edge of the Kaleen bike track dies brown, is bleached white and then turns grey with rot and age. It is perfect cover for rabbits. And once I saw a young one on the slope near the underpass. The genes in that half-rabbit were remarkable for their luck and their resistance to 1080 poison, myxomatosis and calicivirus.

Some mornings before school we slipped rabbit skins from the wires on which they had been stretched and dried, tied them in a bundle with binder-twine, and threw them in the back in the gig. On the way to school we diverged north into Victoria Street to the corrugated iron shed where Wally Evans, wool and skin buyer, carefully checked the weight and quality of our skins. When Wally's searching hand or eye found the skin of a nursing doe, or one that was ripped, he dropped the price, and with slow deliberation fossicked for the seven or eight shillings that he had decided was a fair price, handed them over, and we escaped from the heavy smell of skins, tallow and daggy wool.

Some kids said that they put stones inside skins to increase their weight, and old Wally never knew. We never tried anything like that and as Wally thought that the handing over of two bob was a serious transaction we doubted that he paid for many stones.

We killed thousands of rabbits, and had no effect on the total that burrowed in dam banks, were caught in car headlights, and were so thick in the distance that the ground rippled with their movement. In the morning we could lean a rifle on a post in the house-yard fence and take shots at the rabbits along Mercer's fence line. On winter evenings we set traps, carefully covering the jaws with paper and dirt, and hammering in the anchoring peg. We set them at burrow entrances and on dung hills, drawing mordant pleasure from the thought of catching some buck just as he squeezed out the first pellet. In the morning we had to 'go round the traps'.

We usually had three or four dogs, a couple of sheepdogs (prick-eared, intelligent and always looking for human companionship), a heeler (tough, single-minded in pursuit of cattle-hocks), and a greyhound (bred to chase). When the dogs put up a rabbit they worked as a pack. The greyhound, head low and fine legs flashing, led, but when the rabbit turned it careered past and the slower dogs, cutting across, took up the chase until the greyhound again came up through the pack and made another dive at the desperate rabbit. It might take four or five sprints and turns before the greyhound seized the rabbit. As Aussie, one of the greyhounds, grew old, he sometimes made a looping run straight for the nearest burrow. He flattened his brindle body into the earth, and we cheered on those times when Aussie chose the right burrow, and the rabbit, so close to safety, ran down his throat.

Whopper replaced old Aussie. Where Aussie had been fine of limb and skin and suffered when he slid on turns or staked himself on roots, Whopper was a tough crossbreed. Big and stupid, he never recognised insult or rejection, coming back for more when he was pushed, cuffed and kicked out of the way. He lacked Aussie's speed, but he would rabbit all day.

Once Aussie or Whopper had picked up a rabbit, the heeler, the boss of the pack, would claim it. If the heeler's jaws crunched the limp body of the rabbit there was no chance of selling the carcass and the skin might be ripped. When we were on foot, John and I would be left far behind and have to run nearly half a mile across the paddock to retrieve the mangled rabbit.

We poisoned, ripped warrens apart with deep ploughing, and hosed carbon monoxide from engine exhausts down burrows. Whenever irrigation or floodwater rose close to a burrow we dug trenches and sent a stream of water into the warren. Having thrown a few shovelfuls of mud into most of the entrances, we stationed ourselves above the other with an axe-handle and clouted the rabbits as they came out. Those that escaped our brutality were picked up by the dogs.

I must have killed thousands of rabbits. Once before a science lesson in which we were to watch a rabbit dissected, the teacher, Mr Fincher, handed me a rabbit and asked me to kill it. I thought nothing of it at and went to kill it right at my desk – grabbing it just above the ears with one hand, around the back legs with the other, and with a quick stretch and turn breaking its neck. Mr Fincher told me to go outside and do it. I thought this strange behaviour, but complied. I went one step out the door, came back without stopping walking, and gave him the warm limp carcass.

Myxomatosis was released at Gunbower in 1950, and soon the myxo had destroyed the rabbits and changed the lives of boys, farmers and skin and

meat buyers. It seems hard to believe that I did all that rabbiting before I was thirteen. Fifty years later my mother in-law was given a rabbit to cook, and she asked me to skin it. I wondered if I knew how. I got a sharp knife –how we had valued our skinning knives and how we had worked a fine edge in spit on the whetstone! I opened up the inside of one back leg, and never hesitated.

Snakebite Bartlett lived further out the Barraport Road, and rode a bike to school. Sometimes we would chuck him a piece of rope, he would hitch it to his handlebars, and we towed him along behind the gig. Snakebite knew a lot of yarns, and was the first person I ever heard recite ‘The Good Ship Venus’, verse after verse after verse. But Snakebite learnt no poetry in the classrooms of Boort School. The rope kept him within easy earshot, and he was a good travelling companion. We tried to coordinate our travels so that we met at our railway gate. If we got there first and decided not to wait we left a large white quartz stone on the gate post. But often it was uncertain whether Snakebite had been and gone or we were looking at the stone left from the previous day. In summer, as we looked up the road to see if he was coming, the first sign of Snakebite was the flash of sun on bike spokes. Then a black elongated rider and bike, distorted by heat haze, crossed a distant bridge over an irrigation channel and slowly a recognisable Snakebite came into view. I have not forgotten why he was called Snakebite: I never knew.

At various times there were three of us in the gig. Auntie Wilma was driver when I started school in 1943. Mum’s young sister Wilma was born in 1927. Only just turning sixteen when she came to live with us during the week, she was somewhere between John and me as kids and Mum and Dad as adults. Pretty and vivacious, she knew and could sing the latest songs – ‘My knees are a knockin, There is hole in my stockin’ – knew what was on the flicks, could dance the Hokey Pokey, and pushed the limits of the strict Methodism of her elderly parents. Because the men of the district had volunteered or been called up by the army, Wilma got a job previously taken by men; she became a teller at the National Bank. If you jumped up to look through the bars on the bank window you could sometimes catch a glimpse of Auntie Wilma in her blue uniform. If she could not get her balance out, she had to stay behind until all figures added up. If the balance was a penny out, and she had searched the columns for an hour, she might just get a penny from her purse and give it to the National. While we waited for Wilma and her lost pennies, we started harnessing Bunny, and John was adept with the winkers, even the heavy collar, but could not drag the jinker forward and get the shafts into the harness. We mucked around until Wilma appeared through the pepper trees, and quickly got us on the road.

Later, after Wilma had left, we sometimes had a cousin staying with us: Randal, Russell or Maurice. All of them lived at least ten miles out of town, and no

school bus went close to their farms, so one of them stayed four nights a week and travelled with us. So three boys chattered their way along. Sometimes we equipped ourselves with stones to throw at the white posts on the side of the road or any other suitable target. Our main protection against the weather was a stiff canvas-backed rug which we could curve around our backs and over our heads when rain was slanting the way we were driving, or when travelling into the weather we could pull it up to our noses and just have three half-heads peering on to a frosty or rain-soaked morning. With a few tugs on the rein John guided Bunny so that the iron tyres snapped through the thin ice on puddles and we left shattered shards of ice glistening behind us.

When John left school, after finishing his fourth year of high school and sitting for his Intermediate, I sometimes rode a horse to school. Not the cantankerous Bunny but one of the stock horses that Dad kept. If I was on my own, it was easier and faster to saddle and ride than to harness a horse in the gig and drive. But the horse had to be left in the long backyard of Auntie Lizzie's place in Victoria Street, and it had to have water during the day. Dad had never learnt to ride a bike, and there had never been a bike at our house. It was therefore a moment of revolution and liberation when Dad bought me a standard gent's freewheel Hartley bike. With a bike I could ride straight into the school yard, dump it without a thought in the bike rack, and when we played sport on a Wednesday afternoon I could take my bike down to the football or cricket ground or swimming pool, and leave from there. I could also ride it to the pictures on some Saturday nights. On the way home its battery powered light showed flickering, abnormal images on a familiar road. In the ten years I went to school in Boort I do not remember a bike, owned by adult or child, ever being stolen. No bikes had locks – no one had heard of a bike with a lock.

After I left home, Dad gave my Hartley to a nephew. He rode it to school, but one day decided to escape his known world. With a howling wind behind him he went for miles. He was well beyond the perimeter of the search, and it was a long time before he was found. He kept the bike. The fading silver Speedwell that has carried me around the capital's northern suburbs is my second bike.

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