

5. Dad's Work

Charcoal Burning

Before and after he was married, Dad spent years working on burning charcoal and this work would take him to Barmah Forest and Coomboona, with men, young and old, like Alf 'Boydie' Turner (William Cooper's grandson) who was just a teenager at the time driving the horse drawn lorry, Uncle Stan Charles, Uncle Les Briggs and Mr James, a white bloke from Barmah.

In those days charcoal was used to power cars with combustion engines, especially during the war years when petrol rationing was in force. It was also used in factories and hospitals for their furnaces. Dad and his gang of three or four men would go into the forest and cut 10–20 ton of wood into five-foot lengths with axes. This wood would be loaded onto a rubber tyred trailer pulled by two draught horses; that is about 5–6 tons to each load and it would be driven back to the work site where four steel kilns, which were eight feet high by about nine feet across, were located.

Each of the steel kilns had a man-hole in the top through which one of the men would lower himself so that the other men could pass the wood down for him to stack it neatly in layers until the kiln was full. When all of the kilns had been filled, which was always at the end of the working day, Dad would light fires under the edges of the kilns which were sitting up on two inch galvanised pipes. These pipes were used as breathers. As soon as the fires were burning properly and no smoke was pouring from the top, the hole in the top of the kilns and the gaps around the edges of the kilns were sealed with sand; this left only the pipes to supply air to the fire. As soon as the steel kilns were burning properly the steel sides would start turning red hot and then the pipes were sealed with sand to contain the gases in the charcoal. The fires were left to burn themselves out overnight.

In the morning the kilns would be cool and the men would lift off the steel kilns with an overhead crane leaving a heap of charcoal. The mechanical grader would be pulled up to the heap of charcoal, the motor would be turned on, then, while two of the men shovelled charcoal into the end of the grader, the other men would bag the graded charcoal that passed through to the other end of the machine. When all of the charcoal had been graded all of the men would be engaged in sewing each of the bags by hand using a packing needle and twine.

Dad was employed by two prominent business men from Shepparton, Mr George Ross who had a garage business in High Street, and Mr George Wickes

who had a menswear business in Fryers Street. Dad would work on a per piece rate system; that is, according to the number of bags of charcoal he and his men produced. He never had to wait for his money as his two employers were very punctual, driving over from Shepparton every two weeks to settle up with Dad so he could then pay his men.

Every time Mr Ross and Mr Wickes came to pay Dad they always brought a box of fruit and vegetables for Mum, Keith and me which was good of them and it really helped us a lot. Sadly this job burning charcoal would eventually be responsible for Dad's all too early death from emphysema before his 61st birthday.

Woodcutting

When Dad wasn't charcoal burning he was woodcutting with Pop Mackray under contract for the SPC and Ardmona Canneries, Goulburn Valley Base Hospital and local butter factory boilers, all based in the Shepparton/Mooroopna area. They usually worked in the Barmah, Nagambie, Axedale, Echuca, Wahring or Rushworth Forests. For each ton of wood they cut they were paid about 14 shillings (\$1.40). Dad could cut from eight to ten tons a day of five-foot lengths by hand with an axe and between 20 to 30 tons of one-foot blocks a day with a buzz saw.

The types of trees in the Nagambie and Rushworth areas consisted mainly of ironbark and grey-box with a little red-gum and stringy bark. The ironbark had a very hard bark usually about three inches thick which took the edge off the axe as soon as it started to cut into the bark even before it reached the wood. This thick bark caused the wood-cutter to be continually sharpening his axe with the axe only lasting about one season of 3–4 months, because the file and stones used to sharpen the axes wore the metal away very quickly.

Occasionally Dad would head off alone, or stay with family while he worked. For instance, he would stay with his sister Iris and her family in Echuca while he worked on a farm at Echuca West; during this time we would stay on the Flat in our hut, or with others.

Every now and then Dad would have to take a break from woodcutting to recuperate. It was really hard work and took a huge toll on his body so we would head over to stay with Granny Kitty (Mum's mother) in her home at 11 Anzac Avenue, Shepparton. Cousin Jigger (the son of Mum's brother Uncle Watson Atkinson) was staying there then too. So we ended up going to Fryers Street State School together and sitting next to each other in class. It was nice to stay in one place for a couple of weeks, catch up with family, and make some school friends, but then all too soon it was time to go again. Over his working

life Dad worked a lot of different types of jobs other than charcoal burning and woodcutting, including fruit and vegetable picking, shearing and farming; Mum, Keith and I would usually go with him.

Fruit and Vegetable Picking

During the vegetable and fruit picking season in the Goulburn Valley, up to 20 Italian, Turkish, or Albanian growers would line up their trucks on the highway between Shepparton and Mooroopna (the causeway) looking for Aboriginal pickers to hire to pick their crops. The market gardeners always preferred the Aboriginal pickers because the whites didn't seem to like to pick vegetable crops; it seemed as though they thought it was a job for the lower classes.

Our people would walk along the row of trucks asking the growers what price they were paying and how much work was available; when they reached the highest price and the grower with the biggest crop, the pickers would agree to work for that grower.

The smart growers would walk down into the camping area to the best pickers' huts and knock on their doors, then the grower and picker would bargain until both were satisfied with the price and the amount of work available. Some of the best pickers of tomatoes, peas or beans I had ever seen were Uncle Stan and Auntie Lily Charles because they could pick as much in half a day as most other families would pick in a full day. They always had growers knocking on their doors first, offering them the best price. By 1946, the price of a case of tomatoes to the picker was one shilling each and peas and beans were about one pound ten shillings (\$3) for each bag. While out picking some pickers got smart and put a little dirt in the bottom of their bag before loading it up with peas or beans. But one day, young Charlie Muir overdid it and loaded his bag of beans up with a little too much dirt so as soon as the weigher picked it up he knew. He tipped it upside down and out poured all the beans and dirt. All of us, the adults the kids, Uncle Charlie and even the weigher, roared with laughter. Shame!

One of the best pear pickers I had ever seen was Dad's brother Uncle Keith Nelson who could earn as much enough in a day's pear picking as the ordinary worker earned in a week. He always had a continuous stream of pears hitting his chest and dropping into his bag, from the start of the day to the end of the day. He could pick about 150–200 cases of pears a day and in those days the pickers had to stop work to help the driver load their own cases of fruit onto the horse driven lorry. The price of each case of pears was about nine to ten pence each to the picker.

The other great picker I saw was an 18-stone Indian man named Singh who could pick 18–20 bins of pears a day working from sunrise to sunset, at \$15 to \$16 per bin. Most ten-stone pickers would use a 1 to 1 ½ case bag to pick with. Singh carried a 2 ½ case bag.

Dad was always keen to work. I remember as a little fella having to walk with Dad all the way from the Flat out to Sali's tomato farm at Congupna 12 km away from Mooroopna and then pick tomatoes all day. We had nothing to eat so we would take salt and have tomatoes for lunch when we got hungry. Then we walked home again at the end of the day.

Shearing

When the fruit picking was finished, some of the men would turn to shearing to earn their money. Uncle Charlie 'Mudgie' Muir and his son Tom, Henry 'Ngum' Charles, Billy Briggs and his son Ken, and me and Pop Mackray were the most consistent shearers and shedhand workers from Mooroopna. Some men made a consistent living travelling all over Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia to obtain work. The regular shearers from Cummeragunga were Mick, Dennis and Des Morgan, Dan Atkinson Snr, John 'Herb' Walker, Freddie Walker and his sons Barney, Colin and Roy.

Weekends in Barmah

While living up at Barmah Lakes Mum and Dad would head to Barmah at the weekend to do their shopping and stay with Uncle Dowie Nicholls and his wife Aunty Gladys at Cummeragunga. Dad and Dowie were the best of mates and Dad always said that Dowie was one of the most honest men that he ever had the pleasure to know. Dad didn't hand out compliments unless they were hard earned. Tragically, poor Uncle Dowie was killed in a car accident at Murchison and Aunty Gladys went on to marry Uncle Dowie's brother Doug.