



DRINKING IN THE RIVERS

Colin Whelan



VOL I: THE MEMORABLE PUBS AND UNFORGETTABLE CHARACTERS
OF THE MURRAY AND EDWARD RIVERS

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	9	CHAPTER 12 – THE WYMAH FERRY MOST CERTAIN PUNT I’LL HAVE TODAY	65	CHAPTER 24 – BARMAH ONLY VICTORIAN PUB NORTH OF THE MURRAY	129	CHAPTER 35 – PRETTY PINE HOW TREES GROW AND HANGING (OUT) FOR A BEER	201
CHAPTER 1 – BENAMBRA THE BEGINNING OF THE RIVER AND THE END OF NOT JUST THE WORLD	13	CHAPTER 13 – THE HOTEL GRANYA BROKEN DREAMS AND SHATTERED LIVES AND REDEMPTION	69	CHAPTER 25 – PICNIC POINT THE WATERS SPLIT	133	CHAPTER 36 – THROUGH MOULAMEIN ALONG THE EDWARD	209
CHAPTER 2 – CORRYONG MORE MYTHS OF MEN, HOTELS, DOGS AND HORSES	19	CHAPTER 14 – GRANYA TO BETHANGA ON A BACK ROAD TO A UNIQUE BRIDGE	73	CHAPTER 26 – ECHUCA ‘HAPPY AS ...’	135	CHAPTER 37 – KYALITE CAMELS, DIVORCES AND MORE SHOOTINGS	211
CHAPTER 3 – CORRYONG TO TOOMA THE LUSH, THE SCARRED AND THE RIVER OF MUD	27	CHAPTER 15 – BETHANGA THE FINE ARK OF BEING A GREAT PUBLICAN	77	CHAPTER 27 – TORRUMBARRY DOES ‘WEIR’ COME FROM ‘WEIRD’?	145	CHAPTER 38 – THE MURRUMBIDGEE CONFLUENCE THE RIVER GAINS STRENGTH	217
CHAPTER 4 – TOOMA COULDA BEEN THE CAPITAL	29	CHAPTER 16 – ALBURY SURVIVAL	81	CHAPTER 28 – GUNBOWER NICKNAMES, ALIASES, A KILLER DOG AND SHANKS PONY	149	CHAPTER 39 – MOUNT DISPERSION HIDDEN HISTORY	219
CHAPTER 5 – TOOMA TO TINTALDRA BEAUTY ON A BACK ROAD	37	CHAPTER 17 – HOWLONG NEVER LONG ENOUGH	85	CHAPTER 29 – BARHAM DON’T TAKE YOUR GUNS TO TOWN, SON	157	CHAPTER 40 – GOL GOL A MEMORIAL TO BRAINS AND STUPIDITY	221
CHAPTER 6 – TINTALDRA DEAD HOUSES, INTERSTATE NAKEDNESS, CAPITALISM, AND NIGHTS THAT END AT MIDDAY	39	CHAPTER 18 – THE EMPIRE HOTEL, WAHGUNYAH FAIRYLAND	93	CHAPTER 30 – THE ROYAL HOTEL, KOONDROOK MAAAAATE, I’M STUFFED!	167	CHAPTER 41 – MILDURA THE LONG ESCAPE FROM TEMPERANCE	225
CHAPTER 7 – WALWA SAVED BY THE BULL	47	CHAPTER 19 – COROWA THE NEWMARKET HOTEL (AND A LOOK BACK AT THE GLOBE)	101	CHAPTER 31 – COMMERCIAL HOTEL, LAKE BOGA THE WRITING’S ON THE WALL	171	CHAPTER 42 – MERBEIN MARNGROOK ON THE MURRAY	229
CHAPTER 8 FOLLOWING INSTRUCTIONS	51	CHAPTER 20 COROWA TO MULWALA	108	CHAPTER 32 – FEDERAL HOTEL, MURRAY DOWNS WHAT’S 308 YARDS BETWEEN FRIENDS?	177	CHAPTER 43 – RUFUS RIVER SOBERING	233
CHAPTER 9 – LANKEYS CREEK A MAN’S NOT A CAMEL	53	CHAPTER 21 – MULWALA ROYAL MAIL A LUNATIC AND A SWINGING TIT	111	CHAPTER 33 – SWAN HILL TO THE EDWARD VIA NOT THAT SPEEWAH, THE NYAH BRIDGE AND TOOLEYBUC	185	CHAPTER 44 – RENMARK INTRODUCING MEGGS’S ‘FIRST LAW OF FRUIT PICKIN’ BEER DRINKIN’ SYNCHRONICITY’	239
CHAPTER 10 – JINGELLIC WHERE A BEAVER LODGED FOR LIFE	57	CHAPTER 22 – COBRAM GRAND AND CENTRAL: MONGREL TALES	117	CHAPTER 34 – DENILIKUIN THE BUNCHA, THE GODFATHER AND THE EFFECTS OF BAD BRANDY	193	CHAPTER 45 – BERRI AND LOXTON PASTS WITH NO PRESENT	245
CHAPTER 11 – DORA DORA GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN	63	CHAPTER 23 – TOCUMWAL EUCHRED ... A TOWN THAT CAME UP TRUMPS	123			CHAPTER 46 – MOOROOK AND COBDOGLA NON-PUBS OF DIFFERENT TYPES	251

CHAPTER 47 – NAPPER'S LAKE BONNEY HOTEL FAITH JUST AIN'T ENOUGH	255	CHAPTER 57 – MURRAY BRIDGE UNPROVEN NEEDS	306
CHAPTER 48 – OVERLAND CORNER THE RIVER, AND THE PUBS, TURN THE CORNER	261	CHAPTER 58 – TAILLEM BEND HOTEL THE CHALLENGE OF DRINKING YOUR WAGES	309
CHAPTER 49 – REST AND BE THANKFUL ODES, SONNETS BUT NO BENDER AT THE BEND	269	CHAPTER 59 – WELLINGTON SPITFIRES, SMOKE AND THE LOWEST PUNT	313
CHAPTER 50 – AROUND THE BEND THE RIVER HEADS SOUTH THE PUBS HEAD NORTH	273	CHAPTER 60 – MENINGIE HOTEL CLOSE TO THE BEST, CLOSE TO THE END	319
CHAPTER 51 – MORGAN A FAMILIAR FACE AND ROOTS IN THE RIVER	275	CHAPTER 61 – POLICEMAN POINT HOSPITALITY, JUST NOT ON YOUR TERMS	329
CHAPTER 52 – VON RIEBEN'S, NOR' WEST CORNER A TRUE SHRINE TO PUB HISTORY	283	CHAPTER 62 – NARRUNG AND RAUKKEN A FIFTY-DOLLAR VIEW AND INLAND LIGHTHOUSE	331
CHAPTER 53 – BLANCHETOWN DEAD PUBLICANS' SOCIETY	287	CHAPTER 63 – MILANG GOOD PUBLICANS AND SMART PELICANS	335
CHAPTER 54 – SWAN REACH ENDURING BEAUTY	291	CHAPTER 64 – THE GOOLWA HOTEL WRECKS AND REPROBATES	343
CHAPTER 55 WALKER (OR WALKER'S) FLAT	295	SUPPORTERS	349
CHAPTER 56 – MANNUM THE FINE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A BOGAN AND THE BOGAN	299	CAPTIONS	350

DEDICATION

Just two days before the manuscript deadline for this book, my mother,
Helen McDougall Whelan, died – peacefully and without pain.
More than any other person or factor, my mother was the instiller of my spirit and my passion.

This book is dedicated to her memory.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

On 31 December 2019, New Year's Eve, the Upper Murray was hit with the first of three horrendous waves of bushfires. For almost a month the people on the river east of Albury lived with choking smoke and fought continuous ember attacks to save their properties and stock.

I had already visited all the pubs in this area several times but felt compelled to return as soon as the roads were reopened. The devastation that I found toward the end of January was as mind-numbing as the resilience and the spirit of the people I met were inspiring.

Then, of course, in early 2020 COVID-19 changed the landscape. Forever. The entire country took the hits but few communities suffered more incomprehensible and arguably inappropriate restrictions and difficulties than the border communities, especially those along the Murray.

New Holland decided to delay this book's publication from August 2020, firstly until Christmas – when the pandemic would be a memory, right? – and then until August 2021.

Another run along the length of the majestic river, another visit to so many wonderful pubs, was in order.

No pub, and few publicans, licensees, managers or patrons were left unscarred. Thankfully only a very few of the marvellous old mates whom I'd encountered had passed away. Tributes to them are within the rewritten chapters. But COVID and legislative bastardry had killed off one pub – the Grand Central in Cobram – and so chapter 22 is the most heavily changed from the original.

But through all these challenges the resilience and the strength of the pubs' owners and the loyalty of their clientele won through. The fires of 2019–20 and COVID have, if anything, reaffirmed the centrality of pubs to communities, and the importance of communities to pubs. And these events also caused this book to grow from a recognition of these places to become a true celebration of them and the people on both sides of the bars within.

This project had been planned to read as a single trip along Australia's greatest river, but the return to the burn zone and the very necessary coverage of the immediate aftermath of the bushfires, plus the post-COVID lockdown updates, make some of the chapters a little jumpy. I hope the reader will understand and will forgive.



INTRODUCTION

Since time immemorial the rivers have been the arteries of Australia's red heart.

Defining 'a river' in a very different way to subsequent peoples – not differentiating between the flows and the banks but including the totality in their concept – the First Nation people of this continent used them as a food source and as a navigation aid.

When whites arrived and began venturing out from the coastal fringes, the rivers and the fantasy of a rich inland sea preoccupied most of the explorers from Mitchell to Leichhardt.

And as the nascent Australian literature and poetry developed, the words of the artists reflected the pre-eminent role that rivers played in the thinking of urban dwellers and those pushing into the interior.

Banjo Paterson exemplified this state of mind. His 'Man' didn't come from the Snowy Mountains, he was 'from Snowy River', just as Clancy wasn't from Condooblin, he was 'of the Overflow'. Banjo hadn't met him in Cowra or some town like that, he, 'met him down the Lachlan' and didn't imagine him gone a'droving around Tambo or Charters Towers – his mind saw him 'down the Cooper'.

The bush christening took place where 'churches were few and men of religion were scanty' – but that wasn't Isisford or Yaraka, it was 'On the outer Barcoo'.

And of course the 'matilda' wasn't waltzed at any town or roadside, it was unfurled as the billy boiled beside a 'billabong'.

When 'Banjo' took on the persona of a shearer, he defined where he'd

shore in terms of rivers, boasting that he'd:

*... coasted on the Barwon—low down the Darling, too,
I've been on the Murrumbidgee, and out on the Paroo;*

Before finally explaining that:

*so you can understand, my boys, just from this little rhyme,
I'm a Murrumbidgee shearer, and one of the good old time.*

The rivers defined not just the landscape but also the people.

These flows were sustaining but also dividing: they facilitated exploration but also acted as obstacles to be overcome, to be crossed; they brought people together but they also became barriers.

And no river has played a more important role in the development of this nation than the Murray. For around 1850 kilometres it defines who is a Victorian and who is New South Welsh; but if it divided the colonies, this river, known to first nation people as the Milawa, also unified the new occupants.

The inter-colonial tariffs of the late-19th century brought about the construction of customs houses at all crossings of the Murray east of Renmark, and the outrage at the imposition of these taxes gave birth to the Federation Leagues, which originated along each side of its banks. They became the irresistible flood tide of sentiment which brought about the unification of the continent into a single country.

The Murray and the obstacle its waters constituted to travellers, especially drovers and bullock teams, represented a special money-making opportunity to a special mob of astute businessmen.

In 1846 the Bell brothers opened the first punt across the Murray at Wellington. It was rough, it was hand pulled, it was barely buoyant but it was beside the pub they'd built the previous year. In doing so, they became the foundation members of the 'Pub 'n' Punter' club. They were soon joined by a ragtag mob of opportunists, exploiters, mean-spirited hard-headed capitalists, and a few social altruists and canny businessmen.

From Tintaldra to Jingellic to Howlong to Wahgunyah, Corowa, Echuca, Moama and beyond they realised that travellers needed to cross the river, and those waiting to cross needed feeding, their thirsts quenched, and a

comfortable bed to break their journeys.

They soon appreciated that drovers needed pens for their sheep and cattle and the bullockies needed spelling yards for their beasts. And so, cheek by jowl beside their punts they built pubs on large grounds with paddocks and yards out the back for the animals and rooms with not much more comfort inside for the workers.

The crossing places grew and as business flourished the publicans would inevitably fight losing battles against the applications for the second and then the third pub in the settlement.

Before the railways came, the rivers were the trade routes of much of the interior. For almost a century from the late 1800s daily newspapers would carry a column on the 'shipping news' which would give equal coverage to the ports on the coast and to those on the major rivers. As the port towns along the Murray and the Darling grew, so too did the pubs.

Governments which oversaw the killing of the riverboat trade by the introduction of the railways, were in turn followed by legislators who facilitated the death of those same railways. With the river trade gone, and rail tracks rusting all over the country, all that seems left for politicians to kill is the river itself.

The pubs – the hubs of the towns – felt, and still feel, each body blow to their communities, but these places which provide such social glue have faced their own challenges – some more than others.

In 1885 Alfred Deakin, who was to become our second (and fifth and seventh) prime minister, caught up with George and William Chaffey, a pair of brothers in California, and convinced George to come to Victoria. George duly arrived in Melbourne and headed up to the Murray, liked what he saw, called his brother to sell everything and join him down under.

In 1886, in what was probably the first instance of this country 'selling the farm' to foreigners, the brothers signed a deal for control of a quarter of a million acres of prime riverside land. In 1887 Victoria passed the *Chaffey Brothers Irrigation Works Act* granting them extraordinary rights and privileges.

The Chaffeys were irrigation pioneers and they undertook to develop an irrigation industry on the Murray around Mildura, and in a similar deal with the South Australians, they nabbed the same amount of land around Renmark and Berri.

But the brothers weren't just irrigators. They were also wowsers – strong temperance fanatics – and the deal included making the entire half a



million acres devoid of hotels. It was fine for the young of the colonies to work up thirsts in the scorching heat of summer. They just weren't permitted to quench it.

By 1893 the Chaffeys were insolvent, but over a century later the open wounds they inflicted on the pub culture along the river Murray are still unhealed and weeping.

These brothers grim weren't the last wowsers threat to the health of pubs along the river. In 1916 early closing was forced upon the nation by the emboldened temperance movement. Slated as a necessary war measure to keep the soldiers sober, it remained a hobble – especially on working people – until 1955 in New South Wales, 1966 in Victoria and until 1967 in South Australia.

That so many memorable pubs along the Murray, and its anabranch the Edward, survived these challenges – so many hotels both rich in their

own character and filled with other characters – is a testament to the core values of the bush and to the continuing role pubs have in their local communities.

Their stories today are inevitably intertwined with the river and with their yesterdays. Savouring the pubs, enjoying them and soaking them in, necessarily involves swimming deeply in their histories and refreshing in their waters.

I hope I've managed to do the places and the people justice. These are their stories, not mine. I hope they will entice, encourage, tempt and motivate you not just to visit and have a drink in the pubs, but also to, in a different sense, *drink in the river* and its people.

Because one thing can be guaranteed: when you push your money across the bar to the publican for a drink at a country hotel, both of you'll get just a fraction richer.



CHAPTER 1 – BENAMBRA

THE BEGINNING OF THE RIVER AND THE END OF NOT JUST THE WORLD

Myths – if you don't love 'em you're on the wrong river.

Ava Gardner came to Australia in 1959 to star as the local love interest of Gregory Peck's character in an adaptation of Nevil Shute's post-apocalyptic book, *On the Beach*. Two years earlier – having divorced husband number one actor Mickey Rooney due to his incessant adultery in 1943, and then divorcing jazz musician Artie Shaw in 1946 after just a year of being hitched – she'd divorced her third husband, a singer named Frank Sinatra.

The film also had a young up-and-comer by the name of Anthony Perkins (who went on to star as Norman Bates in Hitchcock's *Psycho*) playing an Australian Navy officer. His and Ava's Aussie accents are right up there on the credibility scale with Sean Connery's Russian (from Edinburgh) accent in *The Hunt for Red October*.

Anyway, so Ava knew a bit about apocalyptic endings, but she grew bored of Bleak City, and her dalliance with a local jazz singer wasn't all she craved so she called Ol' Blue Eyes. Sinatra was free and had cancelled a tour down here a few years earlier, so he organised some new gigs and headed to Melbourne.

Sinatra's concert at the old Festival Hall was recorded by Max Hull, but it was almost forty years until the record was released as *With the Red Norvo Quintet: Live in Australia, 1959*. It's described as 'one of the wildest performances he ever recorded'.

It was while she was waiting for her ex-husband, now gigolo for hire, Frank, to arrive in early 1959 that one of the truly great and enduring myths of (semi) recent Victorian history was born – the one that goes: 'Ava

Gardner said that Melbourne is an ideal place for a film about the end of the world.'

Well, er ... she didn't.

It was an invention by Neil Jillett, a hack for Sydney's *Sun Herald*, who inserted the line into his story on the making of the film as 'a joke' that he knew would be appreciated north of the Murray because Ava wasn't giving interviews and the best thing to do in such circumstances is follow that indispensable journalists' policy known as 'MSU' – Make Stuff Up.

Melbourne might have a history of hosting big-budget productions (like *The Castle*) but towns across Victoria have had their share of the limelight too – places like Muckleford, Craighburn, Little River and Dimboola.

And also on the list is Benambra – closest pub town to the western end of the Black-Allan Line, that straight bit of the border between the Port Phillip District and New South Wales, which stretches from the east coast at Cape Howe to the extreme headwaters of the Murray at Indi Springs. Population around forty, it's a village with its own connections to thespian arts – and it's not without its own odd myth or two.

I pull Super Ten, my motorbike, up across the road from the pub at the southern end of the village. I'm right outside Slim's Barbershop – its venetian blinds down and closed, four old tyres resting against the peeling paint and the wooden front door is bolted. No red and blue pole out front, and no price list in the window. You get the feeling that nothing much has happened here for yonks and I'm thinking the only locks around this barbershop are those on the doors.

Turns out that it's not so much that Slim's has been a long time closed: more like it's been closed forever.

In 2010 Aussie film director Patrick Hughes rode into Benambra with a posse of actors and a film crew to shoot what would be his breakthrough movie, *Red Hill*. In place of an insatiable Hollywood diva and make-'em-swoon leading man, the film starred Ryan Kwanten and Claire van der Boom. (She went on to star in stuff like *5 Flights Up* with Morgan Freeman and Diane Keaton, while in same year Kwanten would be the voice of the title character in *Blinky Bill the Movie*. Now that's what some call career path divergence!)

Anyway, *Red Hill* had a bloke named Christopher Davis, who played a barber named Slim, whose shop was set up right where I'm parked. No-one in the town can be bothered to remove the sign from the window of what actually, many years ago, was a tiny store selling 'lollies and ice cream and milkshakes'.

They must like the old signs in this place. Hanging over the entrance to the bar at the pub across the road is an old faded advertisement for Courage beer, which was launched in October 1968, struggled against the Carlton United juggernaut (in a time when the breweries owned most of the pubs) for just under a decade, and then was taken over by Tooheys, which closed all the brands in 1978. So that sign over the public bar entrance is around fifty years old and it's been irrelevant for over forty of them. That's half the lifetime of the pub in roughly its present shape.

In 1928 Margaret Canny, the publican, had been issued an order to rebuild the hotel by Licensing Inspector Ashton and she fronted the court that August. Mounted Constable Collins testified that the pub had been erected in 1880 and:

The walls ... were of hessian and paper, and there was sawdust in between which was full of bugs and fleas ... the galvanized iron roof ... had rotted and every room in the hotel let in water during wet weather. The foundation blocks were almost eaten away with white ants ... Thousands of bugs were nested in the saw dust, and they could not be got out. In the bedsteads ... there were nests of bugs and 'knits' [sic].

Okay, who's itching just reading that? Coulda, shoulda shot a horror movie there.

In the background the leaders of Victoria's temperance movement were

mobilising their followers in a campaign to outlaw all liquor in the state. Margaret Canny's case was adjourned for a month and when she returned to court she 'asked the Licensing Court to allow temporary improvements to be made. She explained that a modern building would be put up in 1930 if prohibition was not brought in.'

The court agreed and in December 1929 Premier Hogan announced that 'the referendum on prohibition would be taken on March 29th, 1930. Voting would be compulsory.'

For prohibition to be introduced, it had to be supported by at least 60 per cent of the vote. The Drys came nowhere close, managing just 43.3 per cent. The *Sydney Morning Herald* toasted the victory with a three-tier headline:

THE WETS
Sweep the Polls
VICTORIAN REFERENDUM

And the pubs – which were still shackled by six o'clock closing – were out of danger from total annihilation.

Margaret Canny had gambled on this result and had advertised for tenders for the building of her new brick hotel. She was forced to have it constructed down the road from the original place and, though it's been modified a few times since, as I head inside, it's pretty much as it was eighty years ago.

Chris is the only out-of-towner in the bar apart from me. He reckons he first came to Benambra about ten years ago, and by then he'd been fascinated by this area and the source of the Murray for, probably five years.

'I've had a few bad years. Four strokes and a triple by-pass and I could hardly walk. Walking became an aim for me. Just trying to take ten steps. And then fifteen and then twenty. I just tried to do a bit better each day. Then I got to do 300 metres, 150 out and 150 back and the next day my wife took out an AVO against me and had me kicked out of home. I had two kids with her – they're four and eight now. Anyway I went to live with my adult son from my first marriage and his place was a kilometre and a half from the shop so I set that as my goal and eventually could walk there and back.'

Chris hasn't been permitted to see his kids since the day he left.

'So I was living with my son and was getting the hang of walking again and I had no-one who cared how I was or where I was so I thought if I can't be with the people I want – my kids – I might as well be where I wanted.





THE WETS.

VICTORIAN REFERENDUM.

Polling throughout Victoria on Saturday resulted in a sweeping victory for the opponents of "no license."

The "yes" votes numbered 43.32 per cent. of the total, whereas 60 per cent. was required to carry the proposal.

Only in seven of the 65 State electorates, each of which was regarded as a licensing district for the purpose of the poll, were there majorities in favor of no license. These were:—

Boroondara, 55 per cent. of votes polled; Brighton, 50.1 per cent.; Gouldburn Valley 51 per cent., Kew,

FAR BACK HOTEL.

Tourists' Complaints.

According to evidence given before the Full Licensing Court yesterday the surroundings of the Benambra Hotel, Benambra, are not giving complete satisfaction to those venturesome spirits who penetrate the country between Omeo and Tom Groggin's Crossing near the foot of Mount Kosciusko. An order had been served upon Mrs. Margaret Canny as owner and Mr. Arthur H. Tuckwell (licensee as agent pending probate) calling upon them to rebuild the premises. The matter came before the Full Licensing Court yesterday. Inspector Ashton appeared for the police, and Mr. J. P. Minibus appeared for Mrs. Canny and Tuckwell.

Mounted-constable Colin Campbell, of the Benambra district, in evidence, said that the place was built 48 years ago.

So I packed some stuff and got my son to drive me to the train station and I headed to Omeo.'

And started walking.

His plan is to walk to Indi Springs and stand astride the Murray.

'And then down the Murray as far as Kerang and then down to Ararat' and after that he's not sure.

He walks in open scuffs – no socks – because 'I can't stand my feet being bound up', and pushes a small four-wheeled cart which 'helps me stay upright'.

No tent, no sleeping bag, no water-proof gear, no thermals. And no shoes.

'But every step's a victory for me. I keep falling over – you can see the scars – but I keep getting up ... and just maybe each step gets me closer to the places I want to see. And to my kids.'

I wish him luck as we move outside. As I get some drone shots of the pub, Chris pushes his cart down the side to the room he'll be staying in for a couple of nights before he makes tracks north for a place he's long wanted to be in but in circumstances he wishes he wasn't.

Johnno behind the bar came up from Hayfield around the time the Slim's Barbershop opened for non-business, liked the town, saw the pub was for sale, and bought it.

You get the feeling early that he runs it on his terms: opens around 5.30 most days and closes when the last person goes home. When I ask about meals, the response makes me glad I'm not hungry. The food sounds decent but at this time of evening, he's not too keen to cook it. When I mention the tribulations of Margaret Canny in 1928–29 he tells me he has no clue about the history of the place.

There's a clump of locals – my estimate is they make up 10 per cent of the area's populace – discussing the day's events. Off on his own at a middle table there's a bloke who's fair tuckered – been pushing cattle along the road all day and not much in the mood for a chat.

Over in the group one fella talks of being an extra in *Red Hill*. He tells of how they just came into town, asked who was interested, didn't pay anyone but provided pretty decent grub. He was an extra in the town hall scene,

shot inside Benambra's hall, where they returned six months later for a community screening of the finished movie. Walking-Chris and I are the first visitors here for weeks.

'Quietest summer I've ever had,' says Johnno.

Of the three groups who come here, the fishermen have no reason because 'the fires and the rain have turned the rivers to mud and the fish have vanished', the hunters have nothing because 'all the deer have migrated to New South Wales' and the dirt bike riders haven't been able to get here because 'the main road in from Bruthen has been closed for half the summer'.

And the road north through the Nariel Valley isn't opening any time soon.

Back in 1929 the scrupulous Inspector Ashton stressed the importance of a quality hotel in Benambra: 'A road is being constructed to Wagga, which will reduce the road distance between Melbourne and Canberra by 150 miles. A new road to Lakes Entrance is also being made.'

And then, to give weight to his case to force the pub to rebuild he invented his own myth for the town: 'Benambra is going to be one of the most important tourist resorts in the Commonwealth.'

Well, that didn't quite turn out did it? The *Gippsland Times* of 14 February 1929 quoted Licensing Inspector Ashton as saying:

The people of Benambra are opposed to the present site, which in winter is a quagmire, making motor transport difficult. The present premises had formerly been a cheese factory, and refuse from the factory has worked into the soil, rendering it very unsatisfactory.

Yep, rancid cow juice and stinking mud, combined with the fleas, bugs and nits in the beds, aren't about to entice too many tourists, so I'm with him on that.

But despite Ava Gardner being falsely accused of claiming Melbourne was a fitting place for a film about the end of the world, the putrid lactose under the Benambra hotel would've given it a fair claim to being, well, at the end of the entire Milky Way.

And that'd be no myth at all.



CHAPTER 2 – CORRYONG

MORE MYTHS OF MEN, HOTELS, DOGS AND HORSES

Forget nailing the daily double, how's this for a trifecta?

On 28 December 1882 in Corryong's Court of Petty Sessions, Sarah King successfully got off a charge of throwing a glass of dirty water at a bloke named William Riley by claiming he'd made use of 'language unfit for ears polite', in fact more disgusting than the water.

Later that same day the Licensing Court granted Mrs King a licence for the Courthouse Hotel.

She wasn't done yet! Back at the Court of Petty Sessions, as her public notice in the Albury paper announced, she, 'did ... apply for and obtain(ed) ... an ORDER to PROTECT MY PROPERTY and EFFECTS from my husband ...'

So ... gets off a charge of assault, secures the licence for a pub and dumps her husband. Probably celebrated that day with a coldie or two.

She must've flourished from the outset. A traveller the following July wrote of 'Mrs King's Hotel, newly painted' but just over a year later the pub was on the market, being touted as 'the only licensed house in the rapidly rising township of Corryong'. Which is a little weird. Back in 1883, on the same day Sarah King was granted a renewal of her licence for the Courthouse, the same court granted a transfer, 'from Janet McVean to Thomas McVean for the Corryong Hotel' which had been trading since at least 1877. Maybe Thomas went bust or maybe we'll just stick another one in the 'myth' column.

Anyway, the advertisement for the Courthouse Hotel claimed the place had eleven rooms, but by the time it was resold in 1891, 'a portion of the building (was) quite new (with) six brick rooms ... being just finished'. This

had increased the place to a total of twenty-four rooms, including a large billiard room. Sounds like it was flourishing but, er, maybe not.

Two weeks after placing this ad, the publican, John Hughes, was found head down at the bottom of the hotel's well. In the weeks prior he'd been showing 'evidence of mental aberration'.

It's not long after opening when I front up to this airy bar-room lit by the morning sun through its front windows. The early odds are on the unobtrusive screens at the back wall – a pool table, well-worn and with good space on each side awaits attention off to one side.

So far Murray (yep, same as the river) has only pulled beers for a couple of blokes this morning and Ernie's just finishing his first pot for the day whilst Grumblebum's lips are still to touch liquor.

Ernie was born just down the river a bit at Towong – reckons he can remember the old pub there but he'd be pushing it; maybe the building was still standing when he was young. The place was closed by the Licences Reduction Board in 1913 but talk of Towong stirs George up and it turns out that like Benambra, back up the road, this place has its touch of Tinseltown.

'We got a racecourse out there, beautiful old grandstand, actually I think we had two grandstands and for some reason one of them was owned by New South Wales and the other by Victoria, anyway we have this annual Cup Day meeting – it's called the Flemington of the bush, second biggest racecourse in Victoria, it's where they filmed the movie *Phar Lap*.

So anyway, sometime in the 1920s they had Towong Cup Day and Squizzy



Taylor turned up. He had a whole lot of thugs with him and they stirred up a makeshift fight in the bookies' ring and while they were fighting, Squizzly and some others went in and stole all the takings.'

Later I track down a newspaper from 1928 and its report reads:

Towong Race Club, Wagga [sic], had an exciting day on January 16. Two jockeys flogged each other during the race, and continued the fight in the saddling paddock. The racehorse Euda was so over-doped that blindness and paralysis set in. And the whole of the day's takings were stolen.

Apart from that it was just another day at the races. (A number of subsequent articles heap scepticism and scorn on the claim that the heist can be put down to Squizzly. Another one in the myth column!)

Meanwhile, Grumblebum's settled onto his usual 'strategic' perch at the end of the bar with a coffee he didn't need to order. His real name's George and he's been coming here pretty much every day for twenty years. Starts every morning with the same coffee from Murray and once this is out of the way, just like every morning, he'll have a middy of the good stuff and then maybe go for a tour to the shops.

He's both a punter and a drinker and his is the one stool in the entire bar which is near the beer taps 'so my drink's always fresh' and from where every single race screen on the back wall is visible.

I ask him what he prefers to invest in, horses or dogs.

'Whatever's running next,' is the quiet, smiled reply, 'whatever's running next'.

'My right eye doesn't work, it's only there for cosmetic reasons to make me look good, I lost that in a car accident, they tried to fix it for years but the retina had too much damage. But my other one's bionic, truly, and I can read all those screens over there without glasses or anything. I had a cataract taken out and an artificial lens put in. Now I can easily see all the money I lose!'

Out front of the hotel, right beside the door, I'd passed a blue electric buggy, and on its footrest is a small dog, peering out from an enveloping bed. I ask George if the buggy's his.

'Hell no,' he replies. 'I'm just the dog's designated driver.'

George adopted Ajax a year or so ago, 'and that donut he's sitting in is his security blanket and at home he'll move it around into the sunny spots. When I'm getting ready to leave home he'll go and grab that and carry it

out to the scooter. He decides if he's going to come. Sometimes I'll just take off and he'll let me go but when he wants to come out he'll just stand there with his cushion in his mouth waiting for me. I put a little hand warmer in there to keep him warm.'

Much less demanding than George's previous dog: 'Patch was a miniature foxy and if I didn't bring him out with me he'd get out somehow and he'd just go all over town looking for me. The first place he'd look would be the pub and then the next place would be the 'stupormarket' as we call it, across the road, and then he'd go around to every mate's place until he found me. Great dog was Patch.'

A couple of blokes have arrived and are sitting around the bend in the bar and one of 'em, with long hair cascading from under a peaked cap, and a massive mo that must make supping soup a real challenge chimes in.

'One day I was going out fishing with George and we were almost at the river and I got out to open a gate and Patch jumped out wanting to chase a hare and George just hit the gas and ran over his dog – put skid marks on him and all but it was real muddy so Patch pretty much got squashed into the mud, but he was pretty messed up, bleeding and all. And I said we'd better take him up to the vet but George said we should put the rods in first so we did and the dog pulled through. When we got back our baits had been taken but the fish'd gone. Wasn't a real successful day.'

Everyone's heard the story but again they all laugh and then this bloke who's unsurprisingly known as 'Sheepdog' adds to the Patch myth.

'We were fishing down at Cudgewa and the thing is, Patch knew when there was a fish on the line, he could sense it before we could feel it, and he'd run up to the rod and watch us pull in the fish and then when it was close he'd jump in and grab the fish and bring it in. But this one day I had a massive trout on the line and he jumped in and knocked the thing off the hook. George reckons he's watched footy all his life but never seen a better drop kick!

'But he was a bloody good dog, old Patch. Had his uses too! He really suffered from worms and so if we were ever short of bait we'd stand him in the water and the worms would, well they'd start coming out of his you know what, and we'd grab them and hook 'em up!'

Uproar in the room – Murray spills a beer he's serving to Hume down at the end of the bar, but then Sheepdog fesses up: 'Okay that bit's bullshit!'

Murray tops up Hume's beer and hands it over. Can't be short-changing a bloke who's been drinking here for over sixty years.



Born in the local hospital, Hume – known to everyone as ‘Hummer’ after a Humber car he owned for ages – was ten years old when the Black Friday fires devastated the town in January 1939. He’s in his Corryong Men’s Shed sweater with matching faded cap.

‘I remember it hitting the town. It went from one side of the hills to the other and then just swirled back onto the town. All the family got in a truck thing and we went down to the creek and stayed under the bridge there for a day and a night and then two days later after we left, the bridge burnt down too. Will never forget it – the noise and the heat. No-one who was there then ever could. Our farm was pretty much all burnt out, so we all just had to start all over again.’

As he has his first for the day, Hume tells that he was a late starter to drinking.

‘Our farm was a fair way out of town and we didn’t have grog in the house and we didn’t have a car either – we used to have to ride the horse to come in here and I wasn’t sure about riding home after a few so I never really had the opportunity until I was twenty-five and went to a party at Cudgewa.’

Once he’d established he could manage a horse after a beer, Hume starting drinking here at the Courthouse Hotel, but it was very different back then.

‘Right here where I’m sitting was where the hitching rail for the horses was, and beside that was their water troughs – they were only knocked down maybe thirty years ago. And where the dining room is now, that used to be shops and a haberdashery.’

I show him an aerial shot that I’ve just taken from across the road.

‘Yeah, so the original pub that I started drinking at was that double-storeyed building at the back.’

The photo sparks interest and others are keen to check it out. It’s that sort of pub – everyone’s interested in its story. Sheepdog’s first, ‘Apparently the pub was downstairs and at the end they did all the court work upstairs, and the lock-ups were out the back.’

Chris who owns the fishing shop right across the road reckons his mother used to work in the old pub, ‘I’m guessing in the thirties’. He

remembers this new section and coming in with his parents, and points out where the old Ladies’ Lounge used to be, ‘with half a dozen chairs and the ladies would all get served through a little servery window, and the old entrance to the toilets was there in the middle of the back wall there.’

Between pours, Murray joins the talk and explains the slow gentrification of the pub.

‘When the door was open you could see straight to the guys standing at the urinals and old George Turner, he closed it up, and so now we just have to walk a bit further but at least you can take a leak in peace without everyone at the bar seeing you every time the door opens.’

Not that it was by any means uncivilised – see, ‘this was before women

were allowed in the bar. There were barmaids serving and they’d seen it all but there were no delicate ladies drinking.’

Murray, who’s been working here ‘off and on’ since the turn of the century tells me that he’ll take me on a tour of the old pub whenever I’m ready and show me the old smokehouse and fridge out the back of it. All the fireplaces are heritage listed and all the floors are from local Murray pine.

SIX MORE PERISH IN FIRES GRAVE FEARS FOR OTHERS TERRIBLE TOLL OVER WIDE AREA TOWNSHIPS WIPED OUT WARRANTYTE DEVASTATED

By THE SPECIAL REPORTER

Breaking out ahead over an area extending throughout the mountains and from one end of the State to the other, smoking bush fires have taken further terrible toll of life and property. At least six more people have been burned to death, many are missing, and hundreds of houses have been lost.

With a maximum wind that reached a velocity of 20 miles an hour at 1000 ft., and a record temperature of 114 deg. in the city, and on high



That’d be great, but first people, I have to address the jockey-sized elephant in the room: Jack Riley (no relation, as far as I can tell of William, the bloke who copped the glass of filthy water from Sarah King in 1882).

Loud guffaws fill the room. Comments of ‘Was waiting for that’ and ‘Here we go’ are followed by a crowd-pleasing, ‘So this book of yours is fiction, eh?’

No town that I know of in Australia has forged (what an appropriate term!) its identity on unproven myth, legend, hearsay and downright invention more than Corryong has done with a bloke called Jack Riley. You can’t enter the town from any direction without being welcomed by a silhouette of a bloke on a horse with a whip. There’s a statue you can’t avoid in the middle of the main street. There’s hardly a store without some representation of ‘The Man’.

Banjo Paterson explicitly denied that any one person was the model for his Man from Snowy River but that hasn’t stopped ‘experts’ and vested

interests from pushing aside the claims of up to half a dozen old stockmen as being the inspiration for ‘The Man’ in favour of their bloke.

Jack Riley, whom Norman Abjorensen in 1995 labelled, ‘a dubious character, a tailor by trade, and a man who did time for horse stealing ... a skilled bushman ... but a braggart as well,’ is nothing more than just one of the claimants.

In 1948 the Melbourne *Age* carried a feature titled, ‘The Man from Snowy River, Reality or Myth?’ The writer tells of a meeting at a pub in Jindabyne in which the credentials of Lachie Cochran, ‘Hellfire’ Jack Clarke, McEacharn of Bredbo, Jack Riley, Lowder of Yass, George Hedger and Jim Spencer amongst others were discussed. (I’m not sure how much research they did, or whether they had subeditors back then but Bredbo’s claimant was Charlie McKeahnie, not ‘McEacharn’ and he remains, for mine, the strongest contender – if there indeed is one.)

One of those present was Thomas Macnamara who claimed his brother-in-law was:

the Man from Snowy River. His graphic detailed story of the tide leaves little doubt in our minds, and in a mood of conviction we return the article and leave for home by way of Kosciusko with the feeling that the riddle has been solved.

On the way they drop into Corryong and head up to the cemetery where the headstone of Jack Riley causes them ‘bewilderment’. He continues:

Corryong Heresy Tombstones have an authority and finality which seem to discourage contradiction. Indeed it is something like heresy to question Riley’s title in Corryong, where pictures of Riley inscribed ‘The Man from Snowy River’ are a common possession ...

What the stunned author didn’t mention is that unlike all the surrounding headstones, in fact unlike pretty much every headstone in every cemetery in the country, Jack’s year of birth is not chiselled into the marble. Neither is his place of birth. This just might be because Jack Riley wasn’t even born in this town that’s claimed him as a son, but in Castlebar, County Mayo, Ireland in 1841 and he didn’t arrive in Australia until he was thirteen.

Not only is Riley’s connection to the poem tenuous other than his undoubtedly meeting Paterson, his connection to the town is also flimsy

and the blokes around the bar know it damn well.

Hume puts his empty 7 oz glass back on the bar. ‘It’s a bit of fiction. It brings people to the town which is a good thing and no-one gets hurt so it’s a harmless bit of fun.’

Sheepdog looks up and reckons it’s true – ‘As true as the dog’s worms!’

We’re not going to top that so I head out the back. Murray’s just hoeing into a delicious looking lunch and says to make myself at home and beware of snakes.

As I make my way out, George says he’s had some tips in one of the later races. I don’t know how he went but I hope he boxed three and, like Sarah King, won a decent trifecta.

After the fires I catch up with Hummer and ask how he is and how he got through the latest fires – eighty years after his first home was burnt.

‘This was a panic job this time and everyone was told to get out and no-one considered staying and, yes, “panic” is the word I’d use.’

The family opened all the paddock gates and herded the cattle down to the Corryong Creek at the foot of the property. ‘We learnt to do that in ’39 and just like then we didn’t lose a single animal, apart from a few chooks the first time.’

His family all moved into town on that afternoon of 31 December and the plan was for Hume to follow them, ‘but I lost my licence to drive a while back and when I went to fire up the old Ford had a flat battery and it wouldn’t start so I just stayed here with my dog.’

The flames, ‘sort of went around past the house and dropped into the paddock below us and burnt about 80 hectares and the bulldozer came and cut strips through the paddocks and around the house.’

He never felt he was going to lose his home.

‘I could see the fires going around it and I could tell this wasn’t our time, and besides, I had a lot more help than we did in ’39 when all we had was a bathtub of water and a couple of wet bags.’

His family returned the next day. With the feed paddocks burnt out the cattle were fed on willow branches from beside the creek. His neighbours had also driven their cattle to the safe point and when the danger had passed, the boxed herds were drafted apart in the yards beside Hume’s place.

‘It was a bit of an ordeal,’ he tells me, ‘not as bad as ’39 but if we don’t get another one for another eighty years, I’ll be happy.’



From the ancient times when the Yorta Yorta people first came to the middle of its course and the Ngarrindjeri settled around its lower lakes, the river, known to them as Millewa or Tongala, and to most people now as the Murray River has been central to much of the life and development of Australia.

In this follow-up to his bestselling *Pub Yarns*, author and photographer Colin Whelan this time takes his motorbike the entire length of 'Old Man Murray', visiting each of its more than fifty hotels, gathering the history and stories of the pubs and the tales of the characters who frequent and sometimes haunt them.

Pull up a stool and join him as he recounts the myths, legends, true stories and tall tales of the pubs and people, both past and present of Australia's greatest river. And just remember: the most unbelievable yarns are the true ones.



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