

STORYWORTH

Glyn's CRB Memories - 7th Dec 1938 to 7th February 2023

I worked for close on 35 years with the Country Roads Board / Road Construction Authority / VicRoads from 1959 to 1994. They were good years. I returned to work as a contractor mainly for the Metro North West Region and as a consultant to most other regions from 2003 to 2017.

Particularly as a CRB engineer, I had some interesting situations; some were amusing whilst others tugged at the heart strings. I have jotted down some of the memories that that are still vivid in my mind and may be of interest to readers.

My First Adviser – Bill Pascoe

I well remember the first talk I had with Mr. Pascoe when I joined the CRB in 1959. He was good engineer, great communicator and a pleasure to work with. I recall his first bit advice or was it an order. I was not to say that a person worked for me – I had to say they worked with me. In other words, teamwork was the order. I wish the new recruits of today had such a wise head guiding them.

Later on while receiving my first assignment to supervise a contractor, Mr. Pascoe gave me another valuable lesson. He stated that my responsibility was to ensure that the contractor carried out the work effectively. It was not my job to harass the contractor just to prove I was in charge. Remember if you make it impossible for the contractor and he is bankrupted, then there is one less tenderer able to take on the work for the organization. I have seen a couple of contractors over the years suffer at the hands of vindictive engineers just to prove their importance rather than make a valued judgement.

Peter Spigt

It was during one of those cold layoff winter periods in the 1970s that Frank Murray's bitumen gang was sent down to Nelson. This often happened as it was too cold to spray the black stuff during the rainy season. Being a bitumen crew, they had no grader driver of their own so another driver from a road construction crew was loaned for the winter months. Nelson was good construction area as the local limestone responded well in the wet conditions.

This particular year it was Peter Spigt who drew the short straw as grader operator. He was a blonde headed tall European migrant chap who could pull all of the right levers at the right time. All went well for a couple of weeks but something upset Peter's sense of righteousness on that day.

The camp was perched on the bank of the Glenelg River in the Nelson Township. It was only a little stroll to local rubbity – which was probably just as well for the return journey for some. Though I must confess, I never did hear of anyone staggering into the river.

On the particular evening of the upset, the bitumen boys trekked down to Lockie's Nelson Hotel bar for their usual medicinal session. It was not until they began to leave the pub did they understand that something was amiss. Several discharges from a rifle were heard accompanied by bullets thumping into the lintel over the pub doorway. It was reported that lads were seen scampering off in different directions with great haste whilst those still inside elected to stay there.

The police were called and soon apprehended Peter. He was lying on top of the bank with his rifle ready to let loose with more shots if anyone came into view.

He was charged with intending to do malicious harm to the crew members. His defence was classic. He had been a crack shot with a sniper unit in the army during World War 2. His comment was, "I was only trying to frighten them – if I wanted to shoot them, they would all be dead by now!" I believed him too.

Grease Gun Benson

A new bridge was to be built over the Gellibrand River at Lower Gellibrand. This was a fairly remote area along the Great Ocean Road where the trees were tall, the under-storey dank and leaches were plentiful.

Roy Harris (known to many as Shagger – but that is another story) was the overseer. It was in 1959 and hollow steel shell piles had to be driven as foundations. In the deep silt flats, one simply kept welding on extra lengths until the required bearing capacity was finally achieved. The piles were eighteen inches (450 mm) in diameter so were sizable pipes to handle.

It was also at this stage that shifter wrenches were given to each crew as a quicker way to do up bolts. This was guarded by the overseer as some sort of status symbol – quite often suspended from his belt. Anyone wanting to use it, had to borrow it from the boss-man.

The bridge works were proceeding well and old Scrooge Thomas was driving the piles under a contract. One pile was down about 75 ft when Basil Benson borrowed the shifter wrench to do some adjustment on the piling rig. Basil was nicknamed Grease Gun – one look at his overalls and the reason became quickly apparent. To everyone's horror, Basil managed to drop the wrench down the hollow pile.

Roy Harris was not amused. Basil was told he would have to recover it. A long piece of stout rope was taken from the shed. Basil was tied securely around the ankles and

lowered head first down the pile. Arms had to be stretched out above the head before lowering as there would be no room to manoeuvre in the dank confines of the tube. It is unclear if Basil had a torch for the perilous task.

After reaching the bottom, Basil located the wrench and they proceeded to haul him up. Near the top the poor man started to black out and dropped the wrench once again. Roy was concerned for Basil so allowed him a brief respite whilst he regained his senses. Then down he went again only this time he was told to tie the bloody shifter to his wrist so that it could not fall down again – that would be wasting time. Happily, the second attempt was successful and I think Basil returned to normality. Roy was happy and so were the rest of the crew.

I never ever heard of anyone ever dropping a shifter down a pile again. These were men of “grit”. This was prior to “Work Cover”.

The Major and the Gun

The bean counter (accountant) at the Warrnambool Divisional Office was Major Frank Helsham. He had been with the army in NT during WW2 hence the title. He held the office of accountant with the CRB for many years. He was an officious little man who had little time for anyone who could not balance his books at the end of the day.

Before electronic transfers for pays were heard of, pays had to be given to the workers in cash. The pays were carefully counted out on the Thursday and put into individual envelopes and delivered on the Friday. Much was often spent at the hotels on the way home before an employee opened his front door. All engineering staff including the draughtsmen, and mud-doctors (laboratory assistants) and even the yard maintenance man was seconded as either driver or escort. The amount of money carried was large as sometimes up to 120 men (no women) had to be paid. When the Major handed over the pays for delivery, he had a little spiel he recited until all became fully conversant with it. “Here is the money, here is the gun, it is loaded, there is a bullet in the chamber and the safety catch is on. To release the safety catch, slide it back like this (accompanied by a demonstration)”. The gun was a 0.25 calibre short barrelled pistol that was more likely to do us damage rather than any would be highwayman.

It was during the 1960s when rabbits were still plentiful. What better way to sharpen up our pistol use than to knock off a few bunnies. Alas I was never successful. I fully realized that I would have to account for the shots used so took the precaution of buying a packet of .25s before going out. On return of the guns and after a couple of pay runs, the Major stormed down the stairs demanding to know who had been firing his pistols. Innocently, I had not observed that my bullets were copper nosed whilst his were silver nosed shells. Surprisingly, two of us ‘fessed up. Yes someone else was doing it too but he was wiser than I. He emptied all the CRB shells out and reloaded with his own.

We were lectured on his responsibilities and told that we were not to use the CRB ammo'. Of course this was taken as tacit approval to use our own shells. We continued to have our own target practice but the rabbits were safe. Again the Major exploded! "If you must continue to use my guns – at least clean them after use!" So we happily complied allowing him to demonstrate the cleaning process.

Pay day brings back many happy memories.

Roy King and the Priest

A story that can best describe country attitudes and how to handle an unexpected event again relates to the fortnightly pay car. This time it involved the Roadmaster Roy King. It was unusual to a person to go out on the pay car alone. There would almost always be an escort with a useless 0.25 pistol. However one day Roy ventured alone down the Great Ocean Road to pay the workers there.

Roy was motoring carefully along a very winding section of the road. Suddenly another vehicle from the opposite direction came around a tight curve on the incorrect side. Roy pulled over quickly to the left side but had to run his wheels up the side of the cutting.

The result was the car fell down into the table drain and pay packets were strewn across the ute floor and fell out on the muddy ground when the door opened.

An apologetic priest stepped out of the errant vehicle and assisted Roy to recover the scattered pay envelopes. Both men were shaken up. After getting Roy's ute back on its wheels they pulled into the Port Campbell pub and drowned their shock well. The pay packet delivery had to wait until the following Monday.

Secondment in Indonesia

The best 3½ years of my working life was a secondment overseas. I was fortunate enough to be sent to Indonesia as part of the bridge management system group. It was an experience I will never regret as horizons broadened and we were exposed to many different experiences.

The opportunity also spring boarded career opportunities in Bridge Inspection and Maintenance systems. However this is getting a bit too heavy.

The story that I delight in retelling concerns David Jellie of the Overseas Projects Corporation of Victoria. My wife and I went to Indonesia as a two-some and returned as a foursome. We were the first of the secondees to actually have children borne overseas – the norm was for the wives to return to Australia for the big event. When Adrian (our first) arrived, OPCV arranged flowers and sent a big teddy bear and card to us. We were thrilled! It also meant an extra allowance for another mouth to feed. When the second arrived we wondered what would come forth from OPCV. David Jellie advised that they were going offer to fund a vasectomy!

There was always a good natured twist from David.

Who's for Dinner?

The camp was at Glenthompson and a great cook (name with-held) was there. A good cook certainly makes the world a better place to work.

The cook was not beyond having an ale or two and sometimes got the wobbles on his return to camp. Apparently he felt a thirst a workin' up early that warm day and visited the local rubbity in the afternoon. Alas, he was in doubtful condition to prepare the steaks for dinner that night.

Overseer Brian Kerr (I think it was the overseer) came around the corner of the kitchen building only to see the ashen faced cook washing down all the steaks under the tap. He was sprung. A quick check of the kitchen revealed that he had “chundered” all over the cooked steaks and was still prepared to serve them up.

The mess committee soon decided to dispense with his services and so a frantic search for a fill-in ensued.

Such were the days of the big camps and cookhouse personnel.

Mary Bray – First Female Field Worker

Back in the 60s and well before, each crew had their camp. Normally a crew consisted of about 15 to 24 men including a cook, a cook's offsider and cost clerk. Overseer Len Yeoman had such a crew and they were camped outside of the Maretimo access near Portland. The cook there was an old timer and knew how to milk the system. Meals early in the week were pretty good but by the end of the week were pretty basic and not very appetising. A check on his clothes bag revealed where the best cuts were going on Friday night – back home.

After this show down, he failed to return on the Monday. Consternation prevailed as hungry men are not always the most pleasant breed. Pies were hurriedly purchased as a make shift arrangement. When Tuesday saw the same situation, saveloys were served by a temporary stand in.

The grader driver on this crew was Kingsford William Bray – known to all Bill. He lived apart from the camp by the regulation distance (which was about 250 metres) in a converted bus with his delightful wife Mary and their three children. Bill volunteered his wife's services as cook to fill the breach. This offer was quickly taken up and the Wednesday meals were back on. What a change! The meals were better, a lovely desert was served, and the overall meal costs were reduced by about 25%. Men who seldom washed before meals (if ever), were suddenly spruced up with hair in place. The language was "clean" and words like please, thank you and excuse me could be heard. No one wanted to offend Mary.

All went well for about three weeks until the worker registration form hit the Crystal Palace (head office). "This new person you have put on, what does the M stand for?" (I had purposely not written in Mary). "M for Mary" was my reply. "Yes, M – what does it stand for?" I repeated my answer but it took several attempts to convince them that M was for Mary. "Well you cannot have a woman in the camp" I was advised – the regulations do not allow it. I answered "I have read the regulation and there is nothing there that forbids it".

"There is nothing there that allows it either – pay her off".

"How can we pay her off when is not officially on?"

"Well don't put her on – pay her a catering fee and finish her up".

So ended the career of our first field lady. It was shame as Mary was a great cook, wonderful personality and the arrangement was working well.

Honest George Chenoweth

Rennick was the scene of this anecdote. It is located on the Vic/SA border on the Princes Highway. We were resheeting a seven mile length of the highway. The lead for carting in the limestone was about 22 mile so we had approximately twenty tippers shuttling to and fro to supply the limestone pavement materials. There were basically two groups of truckies on the run – one group from Heywood and another group from Warrnambool.

The contract cartage rates were laid out in a printed table but were based on gravel. Limestone being in larger lumps tended to knock the trays about more so a slight rise in the rates was permissible. This was duly and quickly agreed to when the truckies approached me. I must have seemed like a push over as the next week the Warrnambool drivers complained that they were losing money on the rates I gave. I promised to think about it.

Later that day, I was quietly approached by George Chenoweth from Heywood in confidence. George had a stutter when excited and was pretty calculative so I was a little wary when he came to me. He stuttered “Glyn, I was part of the group that asked for the rise last week and we needed it. This is now a “try on” and a few are seeing just how far you will go.”

Yes George was calculative but knew his figures as he ran his truck as a business. I was able to offer those after the higher rates a transfer elsewhere if they were dissatisfied with the rates – but no one wanted to move on. I always respected George for his honesty and gave greater heed to requests in the future if George was amongst those asking.

Ken Natrass – and the Snake

I was travelling down through Drik Drik between Dartmoor and Nelson. On rounding a bend, there was the Dartmoor patrol crew cleaning out a culvert. As usual, I stopped to have a natter. It is pretty isolated in some of these areas and the home-spun philosophies of these men were always interesting and informative.

As it was warm and humid, I commented that they better watch out for “joe-blakes” around there. They quickly replied to say that already had killed a beauty earlier and thrown it over into the grass. Ken Natrass bounded over to pick it up to show me. “Isn’t this big one or something like that?” he said. To my horror it started to writhe up and he coolly commented, “It must be another one”. He threw it out onto the road and another of the crew quickly dispatched that one too.

Ken was allergic to bee stings but he certainly showed me it was a medical state – certainly not a lack of nerve.

Jack Stonehouse & the Dartmoor Rail Overpass Fill

There was an old overseer named Jack Stonehouse. He was small in stature and reminded me of Mr. Magoo – but was nice guy at heart. He normally was given the smaller jobs like shoulder maintenance or minor resheets to look after. However, due to a rush of funding (rare now) the division was short strapped for supervisors in the early 1960s. The rail overpass at Dartmoor was well advanced and the road approaches had to be built up. Old Jack was given the job.

Handling a dumpy level was too much for his limited experience so he used to sneak up to the local post office to obtain assistance from an ex-overseer, Jim Collyer (known through the CRB as “Starlight”). Things were going well and the fill coming up nicely. I thought I should do a double check to verify the levels as I had my doubts on Jack’s ability. Vin Gillfedder (another CRB immortal) and I found the finished levels to be within ½” of design – this was great. We proceeded down to congratulate Jack with a backhand compliment and said “You are 0.5 of an inch too high Jack”.

As he did not fully understand levels, he proceeded to advise that the dozer driver and grader operator should be sacked as he told them the fill was far too high.

He did make a good job of the shoulder maintenance or minor resheets. This was really our fault as we should have backed our better judgement from the outset.

Bridge Survey & Stream Profiling.

Years ago, the survey was not so sophisticated as today. Sometimes we did not even have a boat. I recall doing the initiating report for the Wannan River Bridge just west of Hamilton. We had a fair idea of the maximum flood level but needed a stream profile for the submission for Bridge Division.

Graeme Brown (or was it Vic Malikoff) and I set off armed with the level, tape and a ball of string. The leveling out on the banks was pretty straight forward stuff. Next was the river. We measured off the rope in 20 ft lengths and tied bits of cloth on it at these points. This was duly strung across the river so that a regular interval of levels could be obtained.

I ventured into the water (in jocks) but found it impossible to hold the staff upright against the flow. My colleague graduated my body and arm when extended above my head and read off the depths when my feet hit the bottom at the specified points. This was not always achieved on the first try but we persevered. We mapped out as much as we could from both banks but there were still a few levels needed mid stream. It was either grow longer arms or find another solution. A long thin stick was used after graduating it. Thus was held in the outstretched hand as I gurgled to the bottom. I am a

poor swimmer and normally found it difficult to stay afloat – but try sinking to the bottom when the body’s floatation keeps popping one back up. It was slow process but we obtained the necessary data before heading back to Warrnambool. A singlet was used as a towel and the dip on an early summer’s day was quite enjoyable.

When stream profiles were drawn up it was impossible for anyone to appreciate the effort and improvisation needed to collect the data.

The 6 x 6 Wheel Fuel Truck and Water Tank.

The Heytesbury Soldier Settlement (HSS) area was opening up. Engineer John Glenn was leading the pack down there. It was through virgin bush land on the edge of the Otways – consequently rain fall was heavy in the winter (this was prior to the global warming of today). There were approximately 20 bulldozers or large D7 and D8 size clearing the proposed road locations. This was fine during the summer but a quagmire in the winter. The dozers could work but sending in the truck to refuel the dozers was a problem. I was a very young engineer at the time and when someone mentioned that a “four-b-four” (4WD) truck was needed, I responded by going to Mount Gambier where many ex armed services were (for the logging industry) to see what I could find. By chance there was a “six-b-six” Studebaker truck ex the RAAF with only 17,000 miles on the clock. It ran well and I even had the Workshop Foreman (Alex Canaine) verify its good condition.

Payment was made on an L2 form along with other supplies like pens, pencils, erasers, etc. All went well and the dozers were moving again. The cost of the truck was debited against the HSS project.

Approximately eighteen months later there was a query from Central workshops (I cannot recall whether it was Syndal or South Melbourne at the time) asking about the fuel truck in the Heytesbury. The chaps on the job got wind of a visit to suss out the truck so it was parked deep in the bush. However, the next time, the visit was kept under wraps by the Melbourne bods and we were caught out. Strangely, the method or manner of purchasing the truck seemed of little consequence – they wanted us to pay plant hire for it! A number must be painted on its side and monthly returns must be made for it. Any argument that we had already paid for it once fell on deaf ears.

I suppose we came on the credit side as the heavy plant continued to work in the winter.

The original fuel tank off the RAAF track was still sitting in the Mt Gambier yard. We could not hire one of the CRB tankers for love nor money so I trundled over to SA and purchased the 1800 gallon tank. Without much trouble, a spray bar was fitted and it was watering the roads under construction around Portland with Overseer Len Yeoman. The expensive metering gear the RAAF used for the tanker was taken out and placed in a shed.

Again we were caught out by the Melbourne plant inspectors. “It has to have a number on it” was the order. We complied and it was the only tanker in that era to show H₂O. No mention was made of plant hire (although that was their intent), so no forms were filled in. It was several months later that the inspectors picked up the anomaly and the same “already paid for” arguments met with the same lack of success!

We later sold the metering equipment at the same price we paid for the whole unit. This was credited to the job and this was considered poetic justice!

Peter Birbeck and the Train

This story came to me by courtesy of Bairnsdale CRB Divisional personal.

Peter Birbeck was a cost clerk for many years at Warnambool. He was English and we were constantly communicating with his mother back in the UK to advise that he was well and still with us. He had no concern for his own personal safety and was often battered and bruised after a local rodeo, bar room fracas or similar function. Into the bargain he was extremely short sighted but refused to wear glasses. Consequently, he ran through cars very quickly – mainly his!

As a cost clerk he was brilliant and helped introduce new methods and analysis into the organization. Bairnsdale were short staffed and needed a progressive clerk so he was loaned out to them.

Down near Orbost the train track ran parallel to the road then crossed the road at a very shallow angle. On the night in question, Peter was driving along and saw this big headlight coming towards him. He flashed his lights constantly to get the other driver to dim. The train driver realizing the situation brought his train to stop just clear of the crossing and Peter cruised across the crossing without mishap. The driver often stayed overnight in Orbost and knew the car so had a go at Peter the next time in the bar.

I wonder how many other people can claim that the train stopped for them whilst they sailed safely across the level crossing.

Bert Beasley – “Die you B...B..”

The Heytesbury Soldier Settlement Scheme was in full swing and all the roads and bridges were being constructed by the CRB. There was a sizeable camp at Simpson with a double row of Stanley huts along the new road reserve. The facilities were excellent for that time and no one minded being on the job. There were several road crews there and Bert Beasley was the head overseer.

Bert was a big man with huge under slung jaw and smoked heavily. His lungs must have been bad as he always had a consumptive cough and spat out great globs of sputum. In the winter he wore a heavy overcoat, had his hat pulled well down over his brow, and was the undisputed boss. Even the engineers were careful not to upset him although to be truthful I never had any problems with him – on the contrary, I found him quite helpful.

My hut was next to Bert's and he would cough away for an hour or so before going off to sleep. One night when he was in one of his paroxysms, two younger navies were passing his hut and one said "Die you black bastard" and walked on.

Next morning before all boarded the trucks to head for the job, there was line up. Bert was walking along the line and eventually asked, "Who was the person that wished ill of him the night before." (They are my words – not his). Silence reined and all continued to stand there. It was obvious that he knew the culprit but that all would suffer if the offender did not own up. Eventually a hand was raised hesitantly and the rest of us were dismissed and sent to the field.

I never did hear what transpired between Bert and the young chap – I am just glad it was not me. These were the days when an overseer had practically full control over the crew and had their respect if not awe – not like today when the management is almost taunted by the troublemakers.

Survey Induction

Today inductions are an essential part of the work place but back in 1959 they were a rarity. However, my first day with the survey crew was a real induction. I was only 20 years old at the time.

Gerard McDonald, Jack Bourke and Albert Jewell were saddled with me for a stint out in the sticks. Our first job was at Mumbanna – a small place near the South Australian border on the Princes Highway west. All four of us crammed into the front seat of a Holden ute with canopy and away we went. We were to stay at Mt Gambier for the week as it was geographically closer to any other accommodation.

After the survey work was completed on the first day, we motored along to our digs. Gerry said number off so he automatically said "One". Albert followed with "Two". And Jack quickly said "Three". I dumbly said "Four" wondering what it was all about.

Gerry explained that No.4 had to line girls up for the night. I being naïve thought "When in Rome do as the Romans do". Shortly after pulling into the guest house, a big interstate coach pulled in a weary travellers stepped out. Ah-ha – there were two late teenage girls disembarking. I waited around and they strolled out onto the large veranda over the street. I followed and politely chatted and asked if they wanted to go to the pictures. As they had been on the road for two days they said no but would come out the next night.

They had seen a local flyer and wanted to go to the drive-in. This would get me in well with Gerry but Albert and Jack would have to miss out.

At dinner I advised Gerry that there were no women on Monday but I had lined up two girls for Tuesday night. "Oh Yeah" was the comment and he proceeded to study the racing form (he was great on the horses).

At breakfast next morning we sat down and were eating heartily when in came the two girls and gave me a big smile. The colour drained out of Gerry's face – "You didn't, did you?" was all he said. "Oh Yeah" was the reply. Then they came over and said "It's still Ok for tonight isn't it?" Of course was the reply.

At that work that day Gerry explained he was a happily engaged chap and could not go through with it. However, rather than lose face, he did come along but introduced himself as "Jerry Gee". I forgot to mention that one girl was quite shapely whilst the other should have been six feet six if she was to be called well proportioned.

The days work was over and we were scrubbed up and decked out. The ute was outside ready to go. The girls appeared and I slipped in front of the taller one and ushered the height deprived one in next to Jerry. Pauline had to sit on my lap.

The drizzle became heavier once at the drive in. Back in 1959 there were no demisters so watching the show was a failure – but we endured. The tubby lass was moving in on Gerry in a big way and he was repelling her as well as he was able. He excused himself and went down to the canteen for a huge bag of Minties. After that every time his lass turned around for a smooch, he stuck another Mintie into her mouth. She was prime candidate for sugar diabetes after that night.

We arrived back at the guest house and went to our rooms. About 15 minutes later, Gerry was knocking on our common wall (he was in the next room) calling for me to come in. When I entered, Gerry was cowering behind the door and the lass was all over him like a rash. He took five pounds out of his pocket (which was lot in those days) and said "Take the girls out for a coffee Glyn – they might be hungry too!"

The survey boys never did pull any more swifties on me or dare me to do any risky thing after that. I wonder what happened to Pauline Hughes from Moonta?

Lyons Tunnel – Where’s the Train & What about Lunch

Lyons is a small country area on the Princes Highway between Portland and the SA border. It was well known within the region as having many crashes where the road crossed the rail track at a particularly bad “S” bend. We had applied for funding for many years to rectify the problem. In desperation, the local Patrolman was asked to submit an accident report every time there was evidence of an accident even if the driver/vehicle was unknown. As white posts were missing every weekend, the file soon bulged and funds were made available for a rail overpass.

The type of structure was to be a 22 ft Armco pipe 330 ft long along the invert. As the railways still operated in those days, it was important to minimise any delays to the railways. Planning with both the railways and valued assistance from the Armco expert (John East) determined that a 36 hour window would be sufficient provided preassembly of the invert was undertaken. This would then be towed into position and ballasted and rails reconnected.

Two bridge crews were shifted into the Dartmoor hotel for the job. I prearranged with the publican’s wife to send lunches out for the men. Len Pollock looked after one crew while I kept the half going – it became a competition to see which crew could achieve the best progress.

To the side were the Railways employees preassembling the rail sections and sleepers. They were envious when large meat roasts and roast veggies and big trays of apple pie and whipped cream/ice cream were seen in the CRB tents. John East added fuel to the fire by advising the Rail chaps that this was normal for the CRB. The quoted cost for the meal was the same as if we had dry old sandwiches. Len Pollock who had bad ulcers could not take the rich diet so had them revert to corn beef and mashed potatoes – so much for my wheeling and dealing with the publican’s wife!

We achieved our target and had the invert all preassembled on time. The big day arrived and the last train passed by. The men moved in removing rails. A road crew under Bill Bray excavated the old soft fill, replacing it with a good gravel bed and then towed the invert in. Gravel was tamped under the invert to stabilize the curved surface and the ballast spread quickly. The Railway workers did their bit and the rails were installed and joined up. All in a 24 hour space of time! We were elated. This was reported to the Railways District Manager quite proudly and told that his train could come earlier if he wanted. The train never arrived. We were all disappointed when he advised that he had cancelled the train as he did not believe we could achieve our 36 hour task.

It took a little time to challenge the crew to push on with the side and top plates in the same vein but we continued the work after that.

At least I thought I now have a great 16 mm film of this work to remind me how a crew can really produce! How wrong can one be – the new CRB administration closed down the old photography section and the almost finished film was being sent to the scrap heap. I rescued it and still have it at home here.

That New Estimating System - 1961

In the early 1960's the push was on for "Systems". Estimating rated high on the list. So with several different forms we were given the low down on "How to get it right".

I was young and eager so spent many hours on my first estimate. The job was the Princes Highway West reconstruction north of Bolwarra junction. Even the job number is burnt into my memory – 504^{H10}278. I spent a good day with the road overseer (a true gentleman) Len Yeoman calculating how many machine hours and what manpower was required, where the materials were likely to come from and the resulting rates. It was a great learning experience using first principles. All the forms were appropriately filled in and the final sheet – the estimate - was produced with much confidence and sent off to Head Office for vetting.

The job progressed well and the mandatory monthly reports indicated that we were spot on. We received a well done memo from The Highways Engineer (Howard Hobbs). The Divisional Engineer even sent a note home to my Dad saying that I was going well in this area. I felt so good – I still have the note he sent to Dad!

The job finished up so close to the estimate and the sub-jobbing was quite accurate. This was good stuff. I thanked the overseer for leading me through the exercise and making it seem so easy. I said is there anything that I had missed as we were so close. He completely took the wind out of my sails by advising that he simply charged against a sub-job until we had used up the funds in that bucket – then proceeded with the next bucket. He said he added 10 to 20% to all the times normally expected (when developing the estimate with me) to give himself a bit of lee way (equivalent to our 15% contingencies now).

I have since thought about the many systems devised for all sorts of things and how we kid ourselves that they can replace good judgement!

-oOo-

Alec Leitch

No set of memories from me would be complete without mentioning Alec Leitch. Yet there is no individual tale regarding Alec that titillates the mind. Alec was a dour Scott who stood about five foot tall. His claim to early fame was laying the keel for the ill-fated British battleship the “Hood”.

I was indeed fortunate as he was my mentor and tutor for two years before retiring at 67 years old – even so he departed probably forgetting more than I ever knew about bridges.

Alec was quite stern and I can still picture him at the yard at start time, with his fob pocket watch out timing the men as they checked in. The wages sheets duly recorded any failure to be there on the dot.

Alec came to Warrnambool as a relieving carpenter/foreman in 1933 for a 3 month period. He never did return and eventually retired from the Warrnambool office in 1967. As I have said, there are few stories about Alec – just a universal acknowledgement that he was the best – that is probably why he was the only “Bridge Master” in the CRB in Victoria in my time!

Frank Haezelwood

When I arrived at the Warrnambool office in January 1959, Frank Haezelwood was already well on in his 70’s. Frank walked with a bad limp – this was the legacy of a fall off the running board of a patrol truck and the wheel passing over the leg. The wheel weight won and leg came in second. Frank’s job was to fuel the cars (for CRB and other departments), act as escort on the pays and I think he posted the mail. The thing I remember Frank for though is the wealth of stories from the past.

In his youth he acted as shotgun escort on the early coaches along the Great Ocean Road. He knew every corner, and could relate the history of every individual area. He could point out where the old pubs and stables were situated along the track and what happened where. He knew where the aboriginal camps were and related how the young girls made themselves unattractive by rubbing manure on their own thighs when the young lads came along. A day with Frank along the Great Ocean Road was like an interesting history lesson and travelogue rolled into one.

I can also picture the time when a Dept of Agriculture official came in for petrol. He was an A.I man (Artificial Insemination) with all the syringes for artificial insemination of cows. He decided to clean out his car and surreptitiously dumped his rubbish behind a bush in Frank’s garden. Frank moved quicker than I imagined he could and intercepted the car leaving the yard. He abused the chap and stood over him whilst he put all the bits and pieces back in his vehicle. Old and lame as he was, he had the better of that chap – and I bet the vet never did it again!

Kanga Thorburn and the Grader with the Wonky Wheels

I cannot recall his first name – we simply called him Kanga! Kanga Thorburn came from down Cobden way and was a big raw boned lackadaisical country lad. He also drove the Cat 12 grader but his was old and due for replacement. It was a fair drive from the Heytesbury bush to Melbourne and return, so he hitched up the caravan and headed for the big smoke.

He decided to divert and do the unthinkable – he drove down Swanson Street. He even pulled up by the kerb and did a bit of shopping. It was claimed he went to Dunklings to look for an engagement ring but that may be conjecture. By the time he returned, a couple of Council officers were buzzing around like angry hornets. He was told that he had breached regulations and could not stop there. Kanga said that the rig had broken down and he went to ring for help – couldn't they see that the front wheels were all canted over.

He said if they liked to help and get the wheels upright he would get going. He had them pushing and heaving while fiddling with the levers. He said he would have to be in the cabin to lock the wheels when vertical. They pushed too much and the wheels flopped right over the other way. Next time they were more careful and were able to stop when the wheels were just vertical. Kanga made out he was securing the wheels in the vertical position, thanked them very much, and departed. They all felt good.

I can imagine the council time clerk dissecting their time sheets and looking for a costing code for “Pushing grader wheels upright”.

These are the little things that legends are built on!

Vehicle Change Over at Syndal

V6963 Land Rover – Spring St median jump with Lou Lehmann.

I was a bush boy and Lou Lehman hailed from Hopetoun. Melbourne traffic was a mystery to both of us. We had to go out to Syndal Depot to return one vehicle so we were in separate vehicles.

We were driving west towards the Flinders St / Spring St intersection. I had been there before and knew I had to turn right into Spring St. Alas, the intersection had been altered and new kerbs had been cast to prohibit this very movement. Fortunately I was driving a Land Rover (I still remember the registration number – V*6996) I quickly slipped into 4WD mode and jumped over the kerbs with no problem. Lou was driving a Holden Ute and with considerable grinding he to scraped over the kerbs. Thankfully, there were no police around. We were the boys from the bush.

Moleside Bridge Design & the Dartmoor Cop

I was greatly interested in bridges and never missed the opportunity to become engaged in the reporting, investigating and decision making when it came to a new bridge.

The old timber bridge at the Moleside Creek had to be replaced so I busily put a lengthy report together recommending a multiple large culvert. I remember stating that debris would not be problem.

Then *Bruce Addis*, the top bridge designer visited the site with me and Frank Lodge (the Divisional Engineer – another legend in his own time). Bruce had my report in one hand and scanned the National Park immediately upstream. “What’s this about no debris problem”, was his opening remark.

I confidently replied, “The bush it too dense for any debris to get through”. I remember Bruce’s almost unbelieving utterance of “Preposterous”.

Culvert proposals were soon altered to a three span bridge. I certainly learnt well and quickly from that exchange.

The same evening we stayed at the Dartmoor Hotel. It was in the days of six o’clock closing. We were perched on stools in the bar room sipping away with a couple of locals at about 9 pm when Bruce asked one of the chaps “What happens if the police come in”. The local replied and calmed any fears that Bruce may have had “Don’t worry mate – I am the police man”. Yes Bruce Grant (the policeman) was well known at that inn.

As for Bruce Addis, I still regard him as one of the icons of Bridge Division back in the time when engineers were engineers.

Ray Roberts and the Collection

Ray was very quite chap but a man of high principle. The men in the field had absolute trust and respect for him (and I use the “absolute” as that is what it was). I think it is fair to say that the guys loved him - although in today’s gay society they would be loathe to express the thought. Ray was a returned serviceman who had seen the worst periods of Singapore – consequently he was a very active Legacy man in his own humble way.

Ray’s wife died and all the field chaps wanted to show how concerned they were. They took up a collection to cover the funeral expenses and this was duly given to him.

At the same time, Overseer Tommy O’Keefe was killed in a car accident down the Ocean Road. Tommy had a houseful of young children and their prospects were not good. Ray gave all the collected money to the widow of Tommy to allow her to bury her husband and any left over to help with her kids. He felt her need was greater than his.

Yes, there are some wonderful people in the world and Ray was up there with the best of them.

In later years Ray developed diabetes. At times one could be excused for thinking he was drunk as he would wobble when walking and slur his words. I always kept a bag of Minties for such occasions. I would slip him a Mintie and he would slur "You know my problem Glyn". In less than a minute Ray would be back to his usual efficient self. Pity help anybody I caught sneaking a Mintie out of my drawer as they were for Ray.

The Dartmoor Grave Diggers

It must have been in about 1975 but I could be wrong about the year. A young chap from Dartmoor was tragically killed in a car accident. To make it worse, his Mum and Dad were overseas working on the mission field in New Guinea. It was stinking hot and David was to be buried next day. Unfortunately the usual grave digger was away for some reason.

The Dartmoor cemetery was positioned about 3 km west of the town on a hard limestone ridge. The CRB had a camp immediately adjacent to the cemetery. The overseer, Brian Kerr, noticed the local parson toiling away but making no great progress digging the grave. He was not young and blisters were already appearing. For anyone who knows Brian, they will also know that he has a heart of gold.

Before long a couple of chaps were released from the job and detailed to take over the laborious task. Soon all was done and the funeral could proceed the next morning.

All this was done without fuss and no thanks were sought. I was simply advised that this was what had happened and that I should know in case any questions were asked.

It is little wonder that the old CRB gangs were treated with respect when they moved into an area. It makes one proud to have been part of that era.

A Hick from the Bush

People from Head Office do not appreciate how us yokels from the bush react to the different environment there. The following is a case in point.

Bridge section had moved from Denmark St into the new Princess Street offices overlooking the junction. I found the offices without too much trouble. After the long drive from Warrnambool, the bladder was uncomfortable and needed relief.

Finding the toilets was not difficult but I was perplexed – where was the stainless steel dash board. The first reaction was to step outside to ensure I was in fact in the male’s area. Yes – that was right. Another search and I could only find the normal toilets and several low hand basins as well as the regular hand basins. Was I missing something? In desperation I used the full sized toilet.

It was only on second visit that I realised that the low hand basins were in fact urinals. Thank heavens I had not used them to wash my hands in.

This sort of mild panic would not occur now. Some lass would graciously take you around, demonstrate and explain in detail how these items work during the induction!

Welder – Snowy Densley & the CEO

Snowy Densley worked in the workshop and was a welder. He was very good at his job, conscientious but a bit of a wag.

He had worked in the Warrnambool workshops for over 25 years so was due to receive his long service award. There was a new C.E.O. was travelling around the state and doing a hand shake to get to know some of the people. It was thought he would make the presentation. I think it was an engraved pewter mug. There was a brief afternoon tea in the workshop to mark the occasion.

It came Snowy’s turn (he was the last) and he stepped up to receive his award.

The CEO asked him what he did in the shop.

Snowy’s typical reply “As little as Possible”.

Next the CEO asked him what he was doing now

Reply was “Waiting for the 5 o’clock whistle to knock off”.

The CEO nodded and walked off slowly. Jack hopped up on the bench and proceeded to auction off the mug. His Workshop boss was quick to get the C.E.O’s ear and clarify that Snowy was actually a great and dependable worker – not a fool as he had just appeared.

Country Group

There was an important conference and training session to be held in the Kew Head Office theatre. As usual most of the attendees were head office and Melbourne based employees. There were only five of us from the rural divisions.

Part of the proceedings involved breaking up into syndicate groups to address problems voiced during the discussion times. Naturally we rural chaps were put into the one group. I always felt we were looked down on by the folks from the “big smoke” so I thought we may as well act like “Hicks from the Sticks”.

Each group chose a title for their group. One was the “All Stars”, another was “The Aces” so in keeping with general feeling we called ourselves the “Country Group”. Ian Gardiner from Ballarat was to be our spokesman. I was to be the scribe and had to prepare the notes and prompts for Ian.

Ian rose to speak when it was our turn. He started to titter then broke into uncontrollable laughter. At first others were concerned but his laughter was contagious and it took time for Ian to explain what occurred. He said that his scribe had difficulty with spelling and omitted the O in Country and confused the Group by spelling Groop. It was a mixed gender conference but all soon joined him in his mirth. Eventually he finished his presentation and ended with “that is it from *The Cuntry Groop*”.

As the scribes notes were collected for further reference, a humourless official asked did I want to correct the mistakes. Of course I said that was unnecessary and the notes could stand.

Final Comment

The old CRB was a club of mates. Any differences of opinion were settled out on site – not some long drawn out process with industrial intervention. Practically all knew what the bounds were and what the penalties were. Those who did not or would not understand generally had a short stay with the club.

It was the era when the Divisional Engineers had power to make decisions and administer justice if called upon. The records of the CRB are studded with many legends. Warrnambool was no exception and I counted it as a privilege to serve under two such masters as Bill Pascoe and Frank Lodge. Both had the ability to direct without seeming to control. Perhaps it was because they had served their time and come up the hard way so knew their craft.

I believe we who worked there in the 1950s to 1980 saw the greatest period within the state’s roading and bridging history.