

CHRISTMAS IN THE LAND OF OZ

The Christmas season in the Land of Oz is a good time of year for Australian Fanciers, the race season finished in November and normally the breeding program for the next year finishes sometime in December. It is a time to sit back and reflect on the events of one season whilst eagerly awaiting the commencement of the next, which in most cases is towards the end of March. It's the one time of year where there are no excuses for not participating in the family activities. Whilst reflecting on this fact it brought to mind the many Christmas's past, the experiences I've had, and the changing face of this wonderful day. It's with this in mind that I've put pen to paper in an effort to relate a trilogy of stories covering my fifty-three years on terra firma.

Nan and Pop's/ The motorbike.

Christmas as a young fella growing up was fantastic. It seemed that by design the day was always boiling hot with clear blue skies and a wonderful air of anticipation. It wasn't as though our family were rolling in money but this was the one time of the year where everyone lashed out. It was a time of tradition. Firstly and foremost and I might add in my case reluctantly it was off to church. It wasn't that going to church was that bad it's just that it seemed such a waste of an hour when there were presents to deal with and games to play. After mass we would make our way to my grandparent's house (Nan and Pop's) where the various branches of the family would gather for what was regarded as a traditional Christmas Dinner, we call it lunch nowadays but back then we obviously weren't quite as refined.

As was the custom the women would contribute to the jigsaw until a meal of, roast turkey, chicken, pork, beef and potatoes together with the various other roast vegetables was ready to be assembled. The men had the more onerous task of not only placing the beer, lemonade and home-made ginger beer on ice in the old copper, but they were then required to continually test the product until it was universally agreed that the said beer was sufficiently cold enough to drink. What simple days they were, none of this rubbish about wine and mixers for the women, it was a shandy, lemonade or a cup of tea. Once all was in readiness the feast would begin with everyone finding a seat, the adults at the main table and us lot utilising a number of various temporary structures for our meal. It was a bit of a squeeze as Nan and Pop had a Commission (Council) house but that mattered not. The meal was always punctuated by lots of laughter and skylarking, not to mention the mandatory beer being knocked over to spill everywhere. Meal completed it was time for the most important part of the day; well, it was for us kids anyway. Presents, there were the family presents to be opened. In those days it seemed as though there was a never-ending supply of them, but upon reflection there wasn't, perhaps it was just that in a simpler world they mattered more.

After this it was time for fun. The women got to do the dishes whilst the men and us kids would adjourn outside. The men to drink beer in the hot sun and us kids proceed to break the newly acquired presents.

Nan and Pop's back yard was very large with all of one-side being taken up by the very large vegetable garden.

Along the fence on the other side were the garage and chook house, leaving a strip of land that ran the length of the yard down to a very dilapidated back fence that was only standing due to the presence of a very dense and prickly blackberry bush. Pop had been fighting with the Commission to replace the fence for ages but as is the way with these things and councils, nothing happens very fast. Anyway, the beer as usual obviously began to taste better and as sun became hotter, as was often the case, the challenges were issued among the men. I was about eight this particular Christmas and this year the challenge was to see who among them could get Pop's newly issued BMW motorbike, I might add supplied by his employer, up to the highest speed in the back yard. Once the rules of engagement were settled it was time to let the games begin. Dad was useless, didn't even raise a yelp, Uncle Kenneth, who was relatively new to the family played cunning, and respecting the pecking order, rode quietly, then it was time for Uncle Peter, he was originally Albert but didn't like the name. He was the original lair who liked to milk the moment. He was also expected to win. After much revving, he slipped the clutch and amidst a spray of grass and dirt was off at what seemed a blistering speed.

I don't know if it was the sun, the beer or a combination of both, but whatever the reason as he approached the end of his run he accelerated instead of slowing, all of a sudden there was an almighty crash, a spray of timber from the fence, and a scream of pain from Peter. Due to the fact that both men and children were rolling around laughing no one immediately ran to his aide. We were laughing that much that it brought tears to our eyes and I'm sure also put our underpants in great peril. Anyway, after everyone settled down it took about thirty minutes to extricate both Peter and the bike from the blackberries. Both received their fair share of scratches but with a little work were easily patched up and guess what? Pop finally got his new fence from the Commission.

Uncle Kev's/The Snake

When I was about twelve there was a change in tradition, Nan and Pop were in the process of shifting house, not to mention getting older, so it was decided that each year the festivities would rotate between the various families. Uncle Kev was first off the rank. Uncle Kev was a dairy farmer and lived in Gippsland so it was with great delight that I greeted the news 'No time for church this year, we have to travel one and a half hours to Kev's'. This in itself enhanced the day. There was also to be second change in tradition, and a sensible one considering the heat; a shift from roasts to cold meats and salads.

Another tradition, a country one, was that of the two toilets. One, a septic system that is inside and primarily used by the women and small children and the second, a 'long drop dunny' outside for the rest of us. It wasn't until I was older that I realised that it wasn't because of a difference of output that dictated who went where, just a matter of comfort for the more genteel. A long drop dunny by definition is just that, an outside structure of either timber or corrugated iron inside which is situated the throne. The entire structure is then situated over an extremely deep hole that serves an obvious purpose. Uncle Kev being

an enterprising bloke managed to situate his dunny over one of the many underground watercourses that ran through the property therefore avoiding the need of maintenance.

When we arrived at Uncle Kev's it was mid morning and the place was a hive of industry, the clothed trestle tables situated on the veranda were awaiting the arrival of the many culinary delights, cutlery and other bits and pieces were being put out. The women were everywhere.

It seemed as though this change in routine had thrown the whole day out of sync. As we got closer to lunch the cold dishes began to be brought out, the salads, coleslaw, ham, cold beef and chicken. What no turkey!!

Everyone was milling around and waiting for the word to commence when Uncle Kev, being a man of a good size and an equally good eater decided to make room for maximum intake and retired to the dunny. We waited patiently. It was only a minute or so when an almighty ruckus broke out in the dunny, Kev was swearing, there was lots of banging and all of a sudden the door was flung open to reveal Kev with pants and undergarments around the ankles and a tiger snake in hand, a flick of the wrist and a parting lobby of abuse saw the snake catapult skywards until it landed with a thud on the roof of the veranda. It was hysterical, but nowhere near as funny as it was when the snake realising that he was in parts unknown set about rectifying his situation. Before you could wink the snake tumbled off the roof onto the trestle with the salads and meat. This wouldn't have been a problem, except for Pop. He was like a greyhound that had seen a bunny and was off after the snake, shovel in hand. There were always a couple of shovels strategically placed on the veranda for this very purpose. It was mayhem, not only the trestle with the main food but also the one with the desserts met their Waterloo as he furiously attempted to despatch the offending gatecrasher. Amid the confusion and the laughter the interloper managed to make good his escape never to be seen again.

That year we had re-washed cold meats and salad washed down with as much laughter as you could ever want.

Our Christmas/Dad

Christmas has changed over the years, some have passed on and others, like us spend the main meal with their immediate family before trekking out on Boxing Day to visit the extended families.

We start our Christmas on the eve with midnight mass. Yes I know they've finally got me back in a church but it's only once a year and there is something intriguing about watching Tak Mak, a Chinese Buddhist, playing saxophone and trumpet with the choir in a Catholic church. It adds a whole different dimension to Christmas.

Dad is now in his mid seventies, travels over an hour by train to visit and he still manages to sneak a couple of cans of refreshment in transit. The kids arrive in due course and we now enjoy a lunch of seafood, both hot and cold, smoked salmon, oysters, mussels, prawns, baked fish and salads. Everything has changed but for the laughter. We still have fun and

somewhere during the day we have the opportunity to not only laugh at, but with each other.

Oh, and Dad, well Dad usually manages to let his ambitions far outweigh his capabilities, and hopefully this year we won't have to spend the wee hours of Boxing Day at the hospital getting him stitched up as we did when he fell in the bath thinking he was in the toilet. Needless to say we thought it funny and so did Dad, eventually.

MERRY CHRISTMAS, Duncan MacGregor and family