



Leongatha & District HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Mechanics' Institute, McCartin St., Leongatha

Newsletter

Volume 10 Number 2 May 2013

Preserving Our Heritage

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Latest news

The Anzac Evening

We were very fortunate to have Richard Lester as our Anzac speaker this year. After a delicious dinner at the RSL we moved upstairs to the meeting room to hear Richard who is a Vietnam veteran. It has taken him many years to be able to talk about his experiences. Those present were greatly moved by his stories. Richard is interested in collecting stories of other Vietnam veterans and making a list of those from our area who served in Vietnam. He has written about his experiences and this will be available in our library.

The Railway Tour

On April 28th and May 12th a number of South Gippsland Railway visitors took the opportunity of taking an historic walk with members of the Historical Society. This proved to be most successful and the visitors really enjoyed their tour around the main part of the town. The Society was paid \$5 per person so it was worth the effort.

Thank you to Lyn, Ian and Wal for taking the tours. The railway group were very pleased with the outcome and look forward to there being more of the same in the future

Visit to Yarram

Our Society had a very successful and interesting visit to Yarram and district. We started at Tarraville School, enjoying the display and talk. Next was the Tarraville Church and then Greenmount cemetery. Yarram Historical Society have new wonderful extensive rooms in which to store their history and

present exhibitions. It was all very interesting and well worth a visit. Thanks Yarram Society for their hospitality. Following is the story of the Tarraville school

Tarraville School State School Number 615

The first recorded school was in 1848 and by 1851 there were three small schools in the area. Remembering that this was well before the State System was established in 1872. The Misses Duncan moved their school from Port Albert to ‘Kelvin Grove’ at Robertson’s Beach in about 1859. A National School was erected on the site in 1856 with J H Pettit as architect. By 1875 the school building was in such poor repair and so cold that parents were keeping their children at home. In 1876 the Head Teacher Mr Liddelow, complained that “during strong wind- commonplace in the area- some parts of the building moved up and down in a very unpleasant manner”. The Board of Advise wrote to the Education Department on the advisability of having an iron roof instead of shingles. The water from the shingle roof is discoloured and quite undrinkable. A new school was opened in 1877 and closed in 1988 due to lack of pupils. The building is maintained by the Friends of Tarraville and is now the Tarraville Living History Museum. The most famous past student is probably noted opera singer Ada Crossley. In 1993 the school was gazetted as a public hall

VicRoads Centenary Exhibition

2013 marks 100 years since the forming of the Country Roads Board (CRB). This was the Government authority responsible for the maintenance and construction of Victoria’s arterial road network. The first Chairman was William Calder who remained in that position until his death in 1928. The Calder Highway was named in his honour.

The Leongatha Historical Society has been selected as one of two venues in Gippsland to host the VicRoads centenary exhibition. The other venue is Bairnsdale. The title of the exhibition is *VicRoads-Connecting Victorians for 100 Years* and will feature photographs and documents related to the history of major roads in this State. One feature will be a portrait of William Calder. There will also be activities for children. Leongatha Historical Society will also have on display photographs of main roads over time from its own collection. In edition to this other local historical societies have contributed some photographs from their respective areas. Please see the invitation in this newsletter.



The Anzac Project

Lyn Skillern would like to be able to organise a publication which tells the stories of the 149 men from Woorayl Shire who died as a result of World War One. Di Newton has done some research already but more help is required. Please contact Lyn if you can research on a computer and help.

Feature Article

Keith Gwyther by Tory Cayzer, courtesy of Wal Cayzer

When I was a teenager my Dad took me for a bushwalk, near where he came from in Gippsland, Victoria. We went with one of his mates named Keith Gwyther. Keith was in his late 60s and I wondered how this old man would be able to walk all day ...how would he keep up with us young fellows? But when we started walking he left us for dead; I couldn't keep up. After a long day of hard bushwalking I was left wondering who is this old man?

Later my Dad told me about this man Keith. His story is one of amazing courage and resolve. His story made our bushwalk look like a walk in the park.

You see, Keith Gwyther was disappointed to miss WW11, he was too young. So five years after that war ended he was one of the first to enlist for the Korean War. This war was basically about stopping the spread of Communism. Australia joined to support our ally the United States of America and the United Nations.

After three weeks training in Australia and three weeks training in Japan, Keith landed in Korea by parachute and literally hit the ground running with a Bren gun and rifle in hand. Keith had funny stories to tell like the time he was firing at what he thought was a foxhole camouflaged with branches of trees only to see it open up and big guns swing down towards him. It was a tank and Keith thought they would blow his head off, the shells went over about three feet above his head and so he flattened to the ground.

On Anzac Day 1951, seven months after he arrived in Korea, Keith was taken prisoner of war. The Australian newspapers reported that the battle he had fought in as having the highest enemy casualty rate any Commonwealth unit had claimed in a single day. Their stand will be remembered as one of the finest in the war. They ripped an attacking enemy force to pieces, and when that day was over, 500 enemy lay dead on the hillside amongst the shell crater. Unknown to his mates, Keith lay there with them, buried almost to his neck in clods of dirt from a bomb blast. Keith was a forward gunner. No one got the retreat orders through to Keith and his mob. While they came under attack from the enemy they were also bombed with napalm from four American planes trying to halt the enemy. The napalm bombs burst so close that it shriveled the leaves he was using to camouflage his foxhole. His last memory was seeing his men waving desperately, signaling to the planes to stop bombing their own men.

Keith was later dug out by the Chinese who were searching for their own wounded amongst the dead. He spent more time as a captive across the 38th Parallel than fighting. Over the next few years he was held in various prison camps. He was among the first Australians in any war to have to have to stand up to brain washing. Days of endless torture and interrogated, starvation, squashed in a small box with other prisoners with dysentery, teeth knocked out, beaten to be unconscious, left to hang by the neck and wrists so that if they lowered their heels they would hang themselves. They were indoctrinated by Communist speeches and told to convert.

All through this they never gave any information away that might help the enemy. Keith said that not one Australian fell for the brainwashing stuff they tried to feed them. They would have rather died that helped the enemy. Keith attempted many escapes and spent days on the run and drifting at sea. Each time he was recaptured the torture and interrogation worsened. For all those years he was presumed dead, missing in action. Apparently it was only his mother who did not give up on him.

Eventually he was released and when he got home to Leongatha they gave him a civic reception with a half-day holiday. His story is one of courage and determination for his country. Not giving an inch to the enemy for what is right and worth fighting for.



Keith as a prisoner in Korea second from left

From the Argus December 21st 1951

I WAS SURE HE'D COME BACK TO ME'

TWO young girls were delirious with excitement in a Bell Street, Coburg, home last night. They were Jocelyn Piggott, 19 year old sweetheart of Pte. Keith Roy ("Mo") Gwyther, who has been reported a P.O.W. after having been believed killed in action. Leta, Pte. Gwyther's 17-year-old sister is staying with Jocelyn, Jocelyn said last night she believes a Chinese Communist report that her sweetheart is a prisoner of war. Smiling happily, she added: "I'm so wildly excited at the report that I'll never lose hope again. "I could never bring myself to believe that he was really dead."

Keith wrote to Jocelyn on April 18-six days before the Anzac Eve action of Australia's 3rd Battalion, where he was reported killed. Australian Army authorities said a soldier was buried in Korea under Gwyther's name after this action. In his letter to Jocelyn, Keith said: "I'm happy here. I've just come over to Korea from Japan after recovering from my wounds. "He enclosed a photograph of himself drinking a pot of beer. On the back was written: "My chief occupation while recuperating in Japan."

Jocelyn, now a school teacher, first met Keith in Leongatha when she was 13. Since then they had been close friends, and since he went to Korea he has written every week, Jocelyn says she will find some way of getting a letter through to Keith.

Great news

Leta, 'whose mother and brother live on their farm at Koonwarra, near Leongatha, in Gippsland, has been staying with Jocelyn since Gwyther was reported a POW. Her main comment last night was. "It's such wonderful news for mum. Mum has been worried ever since Keith was reported killed,

Award for John Murphy

John Murphy's years of work writing and talking about the history of the region were recognized by the Gippsland Association of Affiliated Historical Society. John was given the award to mark his major contribution to Gippsland History at the regional meeting at Foster on May 18th.



The Annual Meeting

This year our annual meeting will coincide with the celebration of 30 years in the Mechanics' Institute. What a 30 years it has been. We are planning to have a finger food meal followed by the annual meeting and then tell stories about the Mechanics' and our association with it. All our members and friends are welcome to come and talk. The stories will be an important record of our 30 years and the years that came before.

Roster. Come on a Thursday or Friday once a month.

We are trying to increase the number of members who come along and man the store so to speak. A roster is being prepared. Please help or we may have to close on some days.

An Invitation to the opening of the VicRoads display



VICROADS CENTENARY

CONNECTING VICTORIANS FOR 100 YEARS
1913 - 2013

Supported by Leighton Contractors



YOU ARE INVITED

Please join us at the opening of 'VicRoads - Connecting Victorians for 100 years' - an exhibition of never-before-seen images featuring Leongatha and its surrounds.

Time: 5:30pm

Date: June 6

Location: Leongatha Historical Society Mechanics' Institute, McCartin Street (next to Memorial Hall)

Refreshments: Provided

RSVP

Please RSVP to:
centenary@roads.vic.gov.au



Leighton Contractors - Platinum
John Holland - Silver
Sinclair Knight Merz - Silver
BusVic - Bronze
GHD - Bronze



Visit from the Mechanics' Institutes Victoria Organisation

On May 19th a group from MIV visited us to see our beautiful Mechanics' Institute. They enjoyed afternoon tea, asked many questions about the exhibition items and took many photographs. Pat Spinks gave a very interesting talk on the Mount Eccles Mechanics' Institute and showed some recent photographs to illustrate how well the hall is maintained. Thank you to Pat, Lyn, Ian, John Murphy and Lola for their help.

Pat Spinks addressing the audience in the billiard room



Our Guest speaker for June 12th “Knights of the Road – the White Road Liners of the CRB”.

The Guest speaker is Colin West. He worked in Traffic Engineering (Traffic Line- Marking) with the Country Roads Board from 1969 covering the whole State. One of his staff used to call them “Knights of the Road” So we thought maybe we could call the talk: “Knights of the Road – the White Road Liners of the CRB”. **Please come along and bring a friend**

Program for 2013.

June

- June 5th Committee Meeting
- June 6th Opening of VicRoads exhibition at 5.30 pm
- June 12th Speaker meeting guests regarding roads in the district over time

July

- VicRoads continues until July 27th
- July 10th general meeting

August

- August 7th committee meeting
- August 14th Annual meeting with finger food and story telling
- August exhibition on pioneers and local roads and bridges

September

- September 11th general meeting

October

- Bus tour
- October 9th speaker meeting

November

- November 13th general meeting

December

- December 11th committee meeting

