

THE SHOWIES

Revelations of Australia's Outdoor Side-Showmen



BOB MORGAN

This generously illustrated book covers a history of the Australian outdoor side-showmen almost from the turn of the twentieth century.

It is a colourful profile of seven legendary show people, and records a very special and unique chapter in the history of our community – the entertainers.

'The Showies' is synonymous with this special life, they are: Tommy Castles, his wife Shirley (now both deceased), Jimmy Sharman, Tom Wittingslow, Bill Dwyer, Jack Allan and Frankie Foster.

Tommy Castles – this ventriloquist, magician, illusionist and famous spruiker, must be classed as the complete showman as will be shown in his contribution 'The Magic has Gone'.

His wife Shirley's story, 'The Front of the Show Gets the Dough', was selected to place on record an appreciation of all those female showies who worked alongside their partners through tough times and good times, and filled in for the men folk either in the drag, up on the line-up board, or in a more domestic role.

Jimmy Sharman's story, 'Who'll Take a Glove?' fully covers the life and story of his famous father, and his own fascinating story as a top footballer and a 'follow-up' to his father in one of the toughest of all side-shows – the boxing troupe.

From Tommy Wittingslow we have a wonderful life story in his contribution, 'Ladies by Observation, Gents by a little Investigation'. In this he tells of his early struggles, his time as a POW of the Japanese, and ultimate rise above all odds to be sitting on the top of the pile as Australia's best known rides operator.

Bill Dwyer's story, 'They Bridged the Gap', is a classic overall account of how the young people in Sydney survived the Great Depression, and some historical information on the formation of the Showmen's Guild.

Jack Allan's contribution, 'The Colour has Gone', tells the story of a 'show-struck' kid who only ever wanted to be a showie, and how he was able to rise above all the odds to become one of our top rate spruikers in this competitive industry. He frankly tells of his association with Chief Little Wolf, and their sometimes stormy relationship over almost 20 years.

From Frankie Foster's story we are able to live again the trials and experiences of the old showie family, with his graphic description of his whole family.

All these stories are repeated in the way they have been told by a special band of people.

It is a valuable record of those who 'bridged the gap' for so many Australians for almost a century.



Upon discharge from the Army in 1946 – after seven years service – Bob Morgan took up farming in Gippsland.

Due to war disabilities he was forced to change his vocation, and in 1950 became an officer in the Victorian Department of Agriculture, an appointment he held until 1956 when he was recruited to the Royal Agricultural Society of Victoria by the then Director, Mr Colin Woodfull, to take charge of the Young Farmers Clubs in the Gippsland Region.

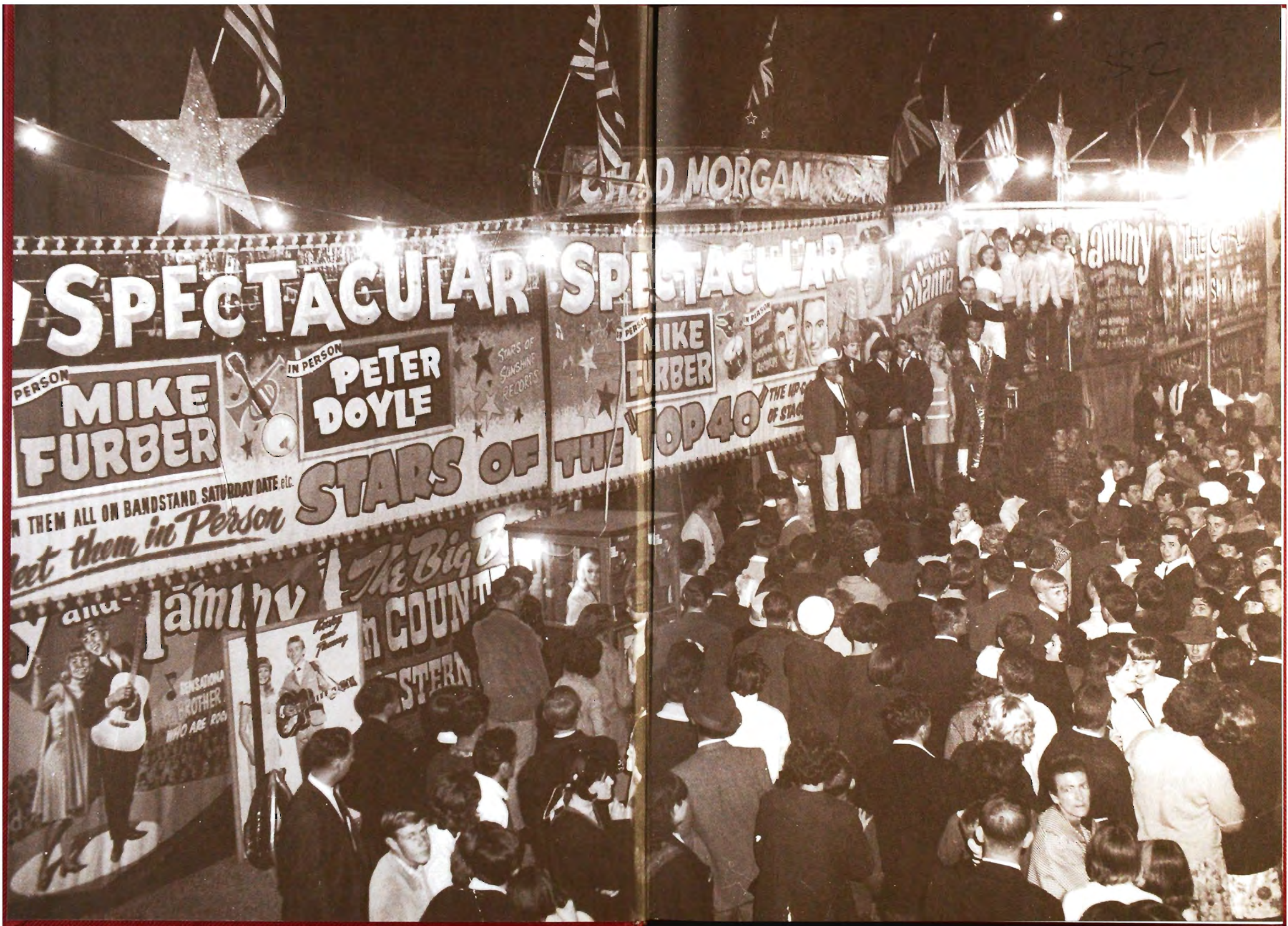
In 1963 he was called to Melbourne to edit a number of RASV in-house publications including, the 'Victorian Young Farmer', the 'KCC Gazette', 'V.A.S.A.', and 'Feline Focus', and to understudy the then Public Relations Officer, Mr Allan Daws.

He was appointed Public Relations Officer in 1964 and it was in this capacity that he met and worked with a number of well known members of the Showmen's Guild including the then President, Mr Tom Wittingslow, and his Guild Secretary, Mr Dick Holden, and Mr Jimmy Sharman.

He retired from the Royal Agricultural Society of Victoria in October 1977, having spent the last fourteen years in the position of Public Relations Manager.

Always interested in the historical background of the RASV, he was co-author with the late Mr Fred Noble of the history of the Society – 'Speed the Plough'.

That same interest in historical activities prompted him to take on the task of producing 'The Showies'.





Frank Foster, Jack Allan, Bob Morgan, Jim Sharman, Tom Wittingslow

THE SHOWIES

*Revelations of
Australian Outdoor Side-Showmen*

BOB MORGAN

1995

Bob Morgan
225 Mitcham Road
Mitcham 3132

ISBN 0 646 27021 4

© Copyright

Designed by
Peter Buckmaster

Printed by
Brown Prior Anderson (BPA) Pty Ltd

Dedication

*Dedicated to the memory of
Georgie Magdziarz
1970–1995*

Acknowledgements

Putting together 'The Showies' has been a most satisfying and absorbing experience, and has given me a much greater appreciation of the trials and tribulations faced, and conquered, by this intrepid group of people.

At the outset I express my deep gratitude to all those people who have helped me, and who have shown an interest in this work.

Starting from scratch, the need for such a work should have been obvious long before now, because before our very eyes the entertainment industry — especially that of the outdoor showman — changed dramatically with the advent of television, and remember, that happened four decades ago!

My interest in the work was fired by three people. First, my son Tim, from the comfort of his desk at the Royal Agricultural Society of Victoria, was obviously more discerning than I was — or maybe he just wanted me to have an interest in my retirement? However, he kept suggesting that 'something should be done about the old travelling showies before they all disappear'.

His view was reinforced by two prominent outdoor showmen in Jimmy Sharman and Jack Allan. (I am still not satisfied that this was not some kind of conspiracy!)

In all cases the emphasis was placed on the 'disappearing' showman. And in fact this was not too far from the truth, because most of the subjects had reached octogenarian status, this however did not in any way retard them from telling their stories.

It was Jimmy Sharman who supplied names of a variety of show people, covering the tent shows, rides and games. Tommy Castles was on top of the list, and although he and his wife Shirley were not enjoying the best of health, they welcomed me to their home in Cowra and spent time with me outlining the roles of the travelling showies, and sharing their experiences 'on the road'. Further, Tommy Castles unstintingly produced many of the pictures illustrating 'The Showies'.

It is a great sadness to me that neither of them shall see their story in print. Tommy passed away on 14 June, 1992 and Shirley joined him almost three years later, on 28 May, 1995.

Tom Wittingslow also gave freely of his time, and his story is one not many people would have been aware of. He also has been generous with supporting pictorial material. The Sharman family has been synonymous with tent shows for more than 80 years, and this father and son combination comes freely to the fore whenever mention is made of our old time entertainers. Jimmy Sharman Junior kindly supplied the vintage pictures used to illustrate 'Who'll Take a Glove?'.

From Bill Dwyer we got a different slant on this game in that his is a story of a city kid

who had the audacity to try and break into the world of the outdoor showmen without an invitation! Over the years show business has been good to Bill and he in turn has been good for show business.

Another city boy to adopt show business is Jack Allan, who has no hesitation in admitting that all he ever wanted to be was a showie. He too has been most generous in supplying an outstanding part of this publication in his submission 'The Colour has Gone', supported by illustrations scattered throughout the book.

Frank Foster brings to 'The Showies' a continuity of family involvement from before the turn of the century — stretching back to the home of the outdoor showman, the United Kingdom — right up to the present day. He gave freely of his time and was also generous in supplying pictorial support.

To my family, especially my wife Kath, who spent hours with me unravelling my drafts, I express my thanks and I trust that they will enjoy the finished work.

Melbourne
1995

Bob Morgan

Contents

Acknowledgements	vii
Foreword	xiii
Introduction	xv
1 The Magic Has Gone <i>(From the Tom Castles tapes)</i>	1
2 It's the Front of the Show that gets the Dough <i>(From the Shirley Castles tapes)</i>	20
3 Who'll Take a Glove? <i>(From the Jimmy Sharman tapes)</i>	40
4 Ladies by Observation, Gents by a little Investigation <i>(From the Tom Wittingslow tapes)</i>	57
5 They Bridged the Gap <i>(From the Bill Dwyer tapes)</i>	78
6 The Colour has Gone <i>(From the Jack Allan tapes)</i>	96
7 The Camp Fires have Gone out <i>(From the Frank Foster tapes)</i>	113

List of Illustrations

<i>The Magic Has Gone: Tom Castles</i>		
1.	The Greenhalgh Family	2
2.	Margaret Castles, Frank Durkin in the Globe	5
3.	Tommy Castles grabbing a pitch	7
4.	'Anopia' the Living Head on the Sword	11
5.	Tommy Castles and the Floating Lady	11
6.	Tommy Castles with his ventriloquial doll 'Jerry'	16
7.	Australia's three greatest showmen — Jimmy Sharman, Arthur Greenhalgh and Dave Meekin	17
<i>It's The Front of the Show that gets the Dough: Shirley Castles</i>		
8.	Before amplifiers, Tom Castles on the Line-up board	21
9.	The Line-up show — Still Towning	24
10.	Shirley Castles makes the grade as a Spruiker	26
11.	The Fat Lady	28
12.	Shirley Castles grabbing a pitch	34
13.	The Tattood Lady	37
14.	The 'Great Kahara' with some of his Line-up Girls	38
<i>Who'll Take a Glove? Jimmy Sharman</i>		
15.	The Fighting Machine — Jimmy Sharman	41
16.	Early boxing troupe	43
17.	Pastor (later Sir) Doug Nicholls with Rud Kee	45
18.	The Sharman Troupe about 1917	46
19.	Sydney Show Line-up 1938 — Jimmy Sharman 6th from right	46
20.	The firm of Sharman and Sharman with Rud Kee	49
21.	Jimmy Sharman Jr Outfit, Sydney Show 1950	53
<i>Ladies by Observation, Gents by a little Investigation: Tom Wittingslow</i>		
22.	Modern Merry-go-round	65
23.	The Cha Cha	69
24.	The Ranger Ride	69
25.	Super Loop, Mad Mouse from Giant Slide, Melbourne	71
26.	The Pirate Ride	71

27. The Break Dance Ride	73
28. The Rainbow Ride	73
29. The Wittingslow Family	77

They Bridged the Gap: Bill Dwyer

30. Jimmy Sharman's Boxing Troupe, Sydney Show 1934	83
31. Cats used for Cat Joint	86
32. Bill Dwyer's early Hoopla Game	86
33. Some Special People	87
34. Arthur Greenhalgh, Jimmy Sharman Jr., Bert Anderson in saloon bar at Beach Hotel Newcastle	89
35. Violet and Lance Skuthorpe	91
36. Herb Durkin in the Globe of Death	92
37. Bill Dwyer with Pedro Labb's Carnival, 1938	92
38. Chairlift at Royal Melbourne Show	94

The Colour has Gone: Jack Allan

39. Chinese Troupe at Wellington (NZ) Exhibition 1939 Arthur Greenhalgh extreme left, Jack Allan extreme right	98
40. Chief Little Wolf	99
41. Chief Little Wolf — Hospital visiting	100
42. King Chong and Chang the Pinhead boy	102
43. Jack Allan with Special People	104
44. Jack Allan on the Show Train	106
45. Jack Allan, King Chong, Pinhead, Ah Foo	107
46. Dennis O'Duff and his wife Dorothy	110

The Camp Fires Have Gone Out! Frank Foster

47. Eileen Foster 1926 (Frank Foster's mother)	114
48. Johnny Foster with Olympian Nick Winter at the Kings Head Hotel (Poverty Point) Sydney	115
49. Johnny Foster, Eileen Foster, Maori Bill and wife, 1920 (Death on Guillotine Show)	121
50. Johnny Foster's Black Magic Show L-R Jean, Frances Foster, Dot Woods, Bridie Foster (sister-in-law)	121
51. The Le Garde Twins in Hollywood.	125
52. Frank Foster spruiking on the Slim Dusty Show	125
53. Frank Foster and Johnny O'Keefe	126
54. Frank Foster and Reg Lindsay	127
55. Slim Dusty, Johnny Devlin, Frank Foster and band member	127
56. Chad Morgan	128
57. The Le Garde Twins 1994	129
58. Frank Foster and Normie Rowe	131
59. Violet Skuthorpe	133
60. Johnny Foster with G from pitch (snake in bag)	135
61. Frank Foster (extreme left) with Slim Dusty Show	137
62. The Camp Fire — Johnny Foster and Friends — L to R Alan Hill (accordian), Johnny Foster (banjo), Girls (back and kneeling, members of show), Eileen Foster, Frances Foster, Pikey (Alf) Foster, Gordon Parsons (who wrote The Pub With No Beer), Two men (members of show), Alf Browning (old time showie), Mrs Hill	137

Foreword

It is with pleasure that I introduce this work on the history of some of our Australian pioneer outdoor side-showmen. It is a colourful profile of seven legendary show people, and records a very special and unique chapter of our industry. It focuses a colourful spotlight on our craft which has its roots in the dust of hundreds of country and capital city showgrounds across Australia; in the smell of the ageing canvas, and the sweat of the would-be boxing champions; in the 'thump, thump, thump' of a battered drum, and the raucous patter of the tent show spruiker.

Over five generations of Australians have paid their money at the turnstiles just to be harangued, coaxed, thrilled and delighted, by a special band of nomads who, in many cases, lived solely for the next show, in the next town on the 'circuit'. 'The Showies' is a profile of seven such people who are synonymous with their craft, they are: Tommy Castles, his wife Shirley (now both deceased), Jimmy Sharman, Tommy Wittingslow, Bill Dwyer, Jack Allan and Frank Foster.

Their story is repeated in the way they have told it — with glimpses of life on the road, recollections of mates who have helped and been helped, snatches and insights which will serve to some extent to preserve a way of life. A distinct chapter reserved for these special people and their craft, which all too soon unfortunately, may be lost to us. The author, Bob Morgan, is no stranger to our scene, he was with the RASV for more than twenty years, and is co-author of 'Speed the Plough' the official history of the Royal Agricultural Society of Victoria.

I commend 'The Showies — Revelations of Australian Outdoor Side-Showmen' to readers as a valuable record of those who 'bridged the gap' for so many Australians for almost a century.



Emile Verfurth, President
Victorian Showmen's Guild

Melbourne
1995

Introduction

One of my earliest recollections as a young child living in a country town in western New South Wales, was the annual country agricultural show.

For weeks in advance of the great event the local showgrounds was the hub of district activity with hordes of men from within the town and surrounding areas busily working at their allotted tasks preparing the grounds for the special one big day of the year.

I can still smell the newly mown grass — cut with horse-drawn mowers, and raked with the long-tyned dump rakes. Other familiar things spring to mind such as noises made by the thump of sledge hammer and axe on poles and posts being erected to hold the competing horses and cattle; the local plumber and a couple of his farmer mates at work on the annual inspection of the water throughs, and the inevitable adjusting and repairs to ball-cocks on the troughs, washers on taps, and the water pipes.

The busy country women are there setting up their pavilion to display the competitive arts and crafts, cooking, jams and preserves.

Behind the poultry shed another group is setting up the high poles and cross-bar for the sheaf toss, and spacing out distances for the woodchop competitors. In the middle of the newly mown arena, another team is busily erecting the numerous stock and riding judging rings, while others are putting up the yards and shutes for the buckjumping events.

Strangers start appearing on the grounds, and the space-steward with his team have their work cut out trying to satisfy the demands for space — naturally they all want the 'good ground'.

Soon our attention is diverted from the showgrounds to the railway goods-yard. The show train has pulled in — no such thing as large semi-trailers and forty-foot trailer homes in this time — rather, what seemed to be miles of flat-top trucks loaded with tents, props, animal cages and living trailers. The local carriers, some with single-horse lorries and others with the two horses on the pole, and sides on their flat-tops formed orderly lines to await the allocation of their load. When loaded the continuous convoy trudged its way from the goods-yard, via the main street, to the showgrounds on the river bank.

This procession provided an ideal medium for dozens of small school children to run and skip alongside the vehicles with their assorted loads. These loads — especially those carrying the small animals — all seemed to have a fascination for these entertainment-starved youngsters chattering in joyous anticipation of this wonderful annual event — The Show.

Arriving at the showgrounds the convoy split and drifted towards an area set aside for

the side-shows and other amusements. Also at this time, there appeared another convoy of tip-drays loaded with sawdust from the local sawmill, and as the piles of poles and canvass were dropped at numbered sites, the tip-drays off loaded neat piles of sawdust in the same area, to be used as flooring for the side-show tents.

In next to no time a new noise rent the air — the noise of sledge-hammer on tent peg, and before our very eyes tents rose up like mushrooms. The artistic banners depicting everything from the Indian Rope Trick, to boxing champions — past and present — were now being displayed, and by night fall a new part of town had been created. These then were the memories which came flowing back when it was suggested that ‘someone should do something in an endeavour to record the history of Australia’s Outdoor Side-Showmen, before they all die out’.

Having spent more than 20 years associated with this industry it was considered that I might be interested in ‘doing something’ about this project.

In 1990, Jimmy Sharman spoke to me about the lack of recorded history existing on old tent shows — and especially some of the ageing show people, and suggested that it might be an opportune time for someone to do something about it.

Fortunately, I had known Jimmy for many years and he was able to supply me with a list of show people who might be prepared to put their experiences as outdoor ‘showies’ on record. So my object in commencing this project was to try and record some of the history of this unique Australian ‘industry’ by profiling the lives of a select number of show persons.

Before proceeding further, I would like to add that I am aware that there could be some criticism about my selection of showies, but I do believe the selected individuals are fairly representative and reflect the history of their industry. The selected seven are: Tommy Castles; Shirley Castles; Bill Dwyer; Jimmy Sharman; Tom Wittingslow; Jack Allan and Frank Foster.

Tom Castles became involved in entertaining people whilst still at school. He introduced his ventriloquial doll ‘Jerry’ to his school mates, and this gimmick was to stand him in good stead for the next 70 years.

I was lucky to have spent time with him in his home at Cowra before his death. This ventriloquist, magician, illusionist, hypnotist and famous spruiker, must be classed as the complete outdoor showman as will be shown in his contribution ‘The Magic Has Gone’.

On a subsequent visit to Cowra I interviewed and recorded Mrs Shirley Castles’ story, ‘The Front of the Show Gets the Dough’. This selection was made to place on record an appreciation to those female showies who worked alongside their partners through tough times and good, and filled in for the men folk either in the drag, up on the line-up board, or in a more domestic role.

Bill Dwyer kindly agreed to participate and his story, ‘They Bridged the Gap’ is a classic overall account of how the young people in Sydney survived the Great Depression, and some information on the formation of The Showmen’s Guild.

Jimmy Sharman’s story, ‘Who’ll Take a Glove?’ fully covers the life and story of his famous father, and his own facinating story of his life as a top footballer and a ‘follow-up’ to his father in one of the toughest of all side-shows — the boxing troupe.

From Tom Wittingslow we have a wonderful life story in his contribution, ‘Ladies by Observation, Gents by Investigation’. In this he tells of his early struggles, his time as a POW of the Japanese, and ultimate rise above all odds to be sitting on the top of the pile as Australia’s best known rides operator.

Jack Allan’s story, ‘The Colour Has Gone’ fully tells the story of a ‘show-struck’ kid who only ever wanted to be a showman, and how he was able to rise above all odds to become one of our top rate spruikers in this competitive industry. He frankly tells of his association with Chief Little Wolf, and their sometimes stormy relationship over almost 20 years. Finally, from Frank Foster we are able to live again the trials and

experiences of the old showie family, with his graphic description of his whole family, from the matriarch of the family Aunty Lulu, through his own entrepreneurial experience with celebrities such as the Le Garde Twins, Johnny O'Keefe, Normie Rowe, Chad Morgan, Slim Dusty and numerous others in his story, 'The Camp Fires Have Gone Out'.

Throughout the whole of this work the stories compliment each other to reveal a very special lifestyle laced with hard work and in some cases heartbreak. And those associated with the business will not be surprised of the common references to the pioneers such as Arthur Greenhalgh, Dave Meekin, Jimmy Sharman, Tommy Castles and the Foster family. Other show families include — The Davis family, The Shorts, the Labbs, the Durkins, the Bells, the Pinks and the Markovich family.

Further, as the story is told of these remarkable men and women, a common thread appears — their great capacity for hard work, their grim determination to succeed under very harsh conditions, their morality and integrity in dealing with those who worked with them, and despite fierce competition, their compassion towards those going through hard times who needed a hand up.

And although I have continually referred to this group as an 'industry' their lives together were so linked as to be called a 'family', a 'brotherhood', yes, a 'fraternity'.

Living in a world where a camp fire was always an invitation. I sincerely hope that you will enjoy their story, told in the way they have told it, and to live again the wonderful days of the Australian Outdoor Side-Showmen.

And finally, if in any way I have breached any rights it has not been intentional, and I have endeavoured to acknowledge all sources to the best of my ability.

Bob Morgan 1995

I

The Magic has Gone

(From the Tommy Castles Tapes)

EARLY BEGINNINGS

One of Australia's best known magicians, illusionists, ventriloquists, and sideshow entertainers, Tommy Castles, (KAHARA) was born in the central western town of Cowra, in New South Wales, on 12 July, 1904.

His early life was spent in the neighbouring town of Canowindra, and was anything but easy. Before reaching his teen years he was working on a dairy farm, not only milking cows, but also delivering milk on the local milk round, twice daily.

Saturday was his big day, after finishing his afternoon milk round he fronted at the local picture show, took charge of a hand bell, and paraded up and down the main street ringing the bell and announcing the name of the feature film. He admits that there were times when he would forget the title of the film and on these occasions he would have to retreat to the picture show to see the name of the film. He still recalls the patter he used over 75 years ago — 'Tonight, tonight in Fogarty's Hall see the outstanding picture etc etc . . .'

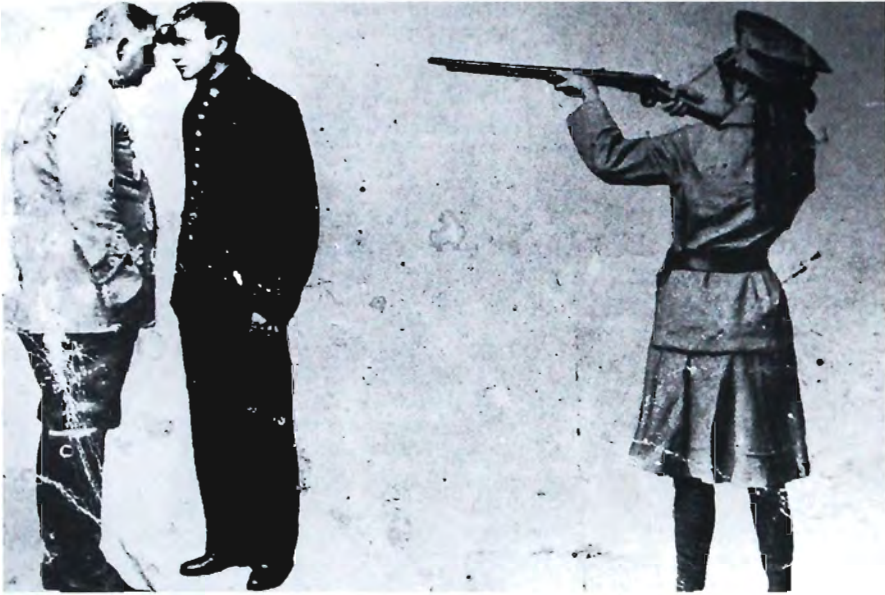
Once the movie started he was busy in the projection room rewinding and helping change the huge silent film spools for the projectionist. But he still vividly remembers the atmosphere created by the silent flicks:

The only sound was provided by the piano-player, belting away on an old upright piano, going for her life in time with the film, chewing gum and getting into the real swing of things.

The films of those days were mainly old cowboy action films with stars such as William S. Hart, Tom Mix, Hoot Gibson and scores more.

After the pictures were finished and the movie reels rewound, Tom would hurry down the street to the 'Garden of Roses' café where he would help out until closing time.

The show business bug bit early. His spruiking began with the bell-ringing announcements in the main street of Canowindra; and at the age of 12 years he entertained his school mates with his ventriloquial doll — a ventriloquist in those days was something sensational, and he became known as 'Tommy Castles, the boy with the talking doll'. Then followed his first illusion. He put a girl in a deck chair and placed a cone over her head and a little frill around her neck, and with a big blade appeared to cut her head off, he lifted the cone and the head was gone; then he went over to the table and put the cone down. Next, he lifted the cone and there was the head. After this he informed



1. *The Greenhalgh Family*

his audience that he was going to replace the girl's head on her body, he again lifted the cone, took it over to the girl, put it on top of her body and the girl stood up, took a bow, and the audience went wild. (This act was to subsequently become one of the top side-show acts on the entertainment and show circuits in Australia.)

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

In 1912 Tom Castles can remember going to the local show and being greatly impressed by that super-showman, Arthur Greenhalgh. He and his father Captain Greenhalgh, and sister 'Little Edie', had a sharp-shooter act. Arthur used to place an apple on his head and Edie would shoot it off with a .22 rifle (in true William Tell style).

This was followed by a more daring act where the two male Greenhalghs stood facing each other holding the apple between their foreheads and Edie would clean it up from about twelve feet away.

Other great old showmen such as Snowy Flynn and his boxing troupe, and Tom O'Malley created a lasting impression on the very young Tommy Castles. (But greatest of all, the Greenhalgh Name, was to have a most significant influence in later years.)

FAIRY FLOSS

His next venture, when still in his mid teens, was to buy a fairy floss machine. This machine was purchased from America for a promotion in one of Sydney's big stores, it was the first floss machine in Australia but turned out to be a flop in the store promotion — no one would buy the floss, it looked too much like cotton wool! It was advertised for sale and Tommy bought it for £25 (\$50).

By now he was completely entranced with the show atmosphere and decided to become part of it. He took his floss machine to the Bathurst Show, erected a small structure and was in business. In those days the machine had to be manually operated, the sugar was poured in the top with one hand and the machine churned with the other. He sold the floss at three-pence (three cents) a serve and although he did not make much money it was enough for him to persevere and so continue on the show run. He introduced his floss to shows at Orange and Dubbo, and towns further west such as Coonamble, where this new sweet was treated with suspicion, and many of the early serves were free samples, but once the children got a taste of the sweet floss the product sold well. (Tom recalls that on this first big run his takings averaged about £5 or £6 a show (\$10 or \$12).)

TO SYDNEY WITH THE DOLL

His experience at shows with his fairy floss machine, and his association with show people and their lifestyle, was enough for him to make the decision that his future was in the field of entertainment. Still in his teen years he ventured to Sydney with his ventriloquist doll, and entered amateur trials as 'Tom and Jerry', (here once more Tom displayed a shrewdness beyond his years, for at that time there was a very popular drink named Tom and Jerry and he took full advantage of the public perception and worked it to his own use).

He won a couple of trials, the first one was at Newtown conducted by Charlie Lawrence. At this trial another future entertainer, Joe Lawman, made his debut.

As a result of this success Tom and his doll Jerry, secured a spot on the bill of Clay's Gaiety Theatre in Oxford Street Sydney for a two-week trial as a boy ventriloquist (he was still only 15 years old and in short pants). His act was well received and resulted in engagements at North Sydney and Newtown, about eight weeks in all. This experience brought him in contact with many well known entertainers of the day, names such as Muggsy Desmond, Jim Gerald, and other stars of vaudeville and review.

From Clay's he went on a circuit of halls around the country with his doll, which was still a big success and he was also developing his magic act. He tells of the occasion of showing to a mixed audience of whites and Aborigines at Lightning Ridge. The whites occupied one side of the hall and the Aborigines the other. As soon as he appeared with the doll the dark people began to laugh, and when the doll spoke they rolled about uncontrollably for the whole act. (Tom says that this incident could have led to the creation of the well known saying 'Laying them in the aisles!'). He admits to having a good routine of patter with the doll which included cracking jokes and singing a song.

After working a number of halls over the next year or so he met up with a showman called 'Professor' Wright who was working a sketch called the 'Yellow Fang', and together they travelled around the halls and did a stint on the Tivoli circuit with this show. Later the combination decided to transfer to a tent show and work the country show rounds, with Tom as a character called Abdullah. (He hastens to say that he was not the original Abdullah, who was imported from India by Dave Meekin.)

After severing his relationship with Professor Wright he did a further season with his doll at Clay's.

It was at this time that he introduced his walking doll, advertising feature films in the lobbies in front of picture shows. The doll had springs in the legs and used to move with a distinctive 'springy' step. He made his debut with this doll at the old Lyric Theatre in Sydney to advertise a picture called 'Raffles', and he had the doll dressed in a Raffles costume. Following this he later worked with Union Theatres in this type of lobby advertising.

THE PITCH-GETTER AND ARTHUR GREENHALGH

By now Tommy had built up a reputation as a top class 'Pitch-getter' (spruiker and crowd drawer). He would get up on the line-up board with his doll in front of the sideshow and 'hold the pitch' thus drawing the crowds to the sideshow. In this capacity he was in demand, and in this role he became associated with Arthur Greenhalgh, who for many years had been Tom's ideal showman.

The following years saw Arthur Greenhalgh import many acts from America, and Chinese troupes from Hong Kong, and Tom Castles did the spruiking for most of these acts.

HALF MAN-HALF WOMAN, ZIMMY, THE GIANT, PIN-HEAD

He introduced such shows as the first man-woman, who according to Tom was a big Negro with three different pitches in his voice; one side of this body was clean shaven, including his leg, whilst the other half was hairy and very much male. On the clean shaven side he had a breast, and his voice changes from female to male were most unusual. This attraction proved a great success and accordingly was a good money spinner.

The next import was 'Zimmy' who had no legs and was referred to as the 'Legless Wonder'. He used to work in a water act. He had a big tank of water and used to submerge into this tank where he would eat a banana, drink a bottle of soda, and smoke a cigar. There was a plank from the tank to the outside line-up board and Zimmy used to walk on his hands along the plank and do a handstand on the forefinger and thumb on each hand on the line-up board and then 'tell the tale' (describe his act).

Before coming to Australia Zimmy supposedly dived off the Brooklyn Bridge in America. Having heard this Tommy suggested that he might care to repeat the performance by diving off the newly completed Sydney Harbour Bridge. Zimmy enthusiastically agreed to do this stunt, and in true showman fashion this daring and dangerous act was duly leaked to the Sydney papers by Arthur Greenhalgh and Tommy with the result that thousands of people took up vantage points around the harbour to be witness to the act. However, before he was able to get close to the Bridge the police intercepted and intervened, and Zimmy and his handlers were firmly escorted from the precincts of the Bridge. This incident created great interest in Zimmy and earned publicity beyond the mentor's wildest dreams.

Arthur Greenhalgh's next importation was an American giant named John Aeson. He was 8ft 6ins (256cm) tall, and to stretch this even further, he was outfitted in high-heeled boots, and a high-crowned Texas hat, and according to Tom Castles, he appeared to be almost 10ft tall when fully dressed.

Tommy recalls the time in the central western New South Wales town of Wellington, when John Aeson and Zimmy had a drinking bout which resulted in each of them becoming paralytic drunk and they decided to settle their differences with a brawl in the main street. A disgusted Arthur Greenhalgh 'tore strips off them' bawling out that they were to be on show the next day at the showgrounds and here they were giving the locals a free show! As it happened the 'blue' acted very much in favour of the great showman and produced very good results for the sideshow next day.

Next came the midget Chinese troupe and the 'Pin-head' Chinaman who was only ten years old when he first came to Australia. With a head the size of an orange, he was so small and light that Tommy used to place him on the palm of his hand and walk around the audience with him. And according to Tom he was a great favourite and is one freak act which has remained foremost in his memory.

The other two midget Chinese were a woman and a man, she was 33 years old and he was 50 years old, and they were only three feet tall. The man used to perform hand-



2. *Margaret Castles, Frank Durkin in the Globe*

stands and cartwheels, and the little lady used to march up and down the tent. (She wasn't 'all there' in Tommy's words.)

In his pondering on Arthur Greenhalgh, Tommy's association goes back earlier than the imported sideshow acts to when Greenhalgh was showing snakes. His wife was named 'Nevada' the Snake Queen and Tom did the spruiking for this act. The setting was a big pit and the audience had to walk up steps and look down on Nevada and the snakes. He admits that he was never 'too wrapped up in snakes' even though he worked them himself and had his last snake show at the Royal Melbourne Show. However, his daughter Margaret Castles, worked snakes with great success in later years.

He described her as a top show woman, she could handle snakes, she rode the motor cycle solo in the Globe with Frank Durkin, and later also drove the car in the Globe. She could dance, she could spruik, she could do magic and was a person with exceptional talents. Her early death was untimely and a great loss to show business, according to her father and step-mother Shirley.

MODE OF TRANSPORT — HORSE AND WAGON — SHOW TRAINS

In the early days all the show people travelled by horse and wagon or by train. The horse and wagon outfits were similar to the old covered wagon trains of wild west days and still shown in some of the old western films. The showies travelled in a convoy of up to 15 and sometimes 20 wagons. At night the wagons were drawn up in a circle and the show women did the cooking around fires in the centre of the circle. The horses were hobbled and restrained and grazed close handy to the wagon train. (Mrs Shirley Castles recalls the story of the time Tom's horse dropped dead in harness not far from where the night stop was to be. The story goes that a bobbing light was noticed approaching the camp and on further investigation it was found that it was Tommy Castles pulling his

wagonette. He had unharnessed the horse, left it on the side of the road, and pulled his gear to the night stop.)

This lifestyle was one conducive to creating strong and lasting bonds between the showies' families.

Tom's show run in those days, after the Sydney Show, would be to travel to Bathurst, Orange, Wellington, Dubbo, Coonamble and Walgett. At the completion of this run the action would concentrate on the big run north through Queensland.

This run was done by show train from Brisbane to Cairns. Stops would be made at most towns but mainly at Ipswich, Gympie, Maryborough, Bundaburg, Townsville, Innisfail and Cairns. All the show equipment was carried on these trains, the tents, the rides and all the sets and stock. At each stop local carriers would cart the equipment and gear to the showgrounds and after the show return it to the various trucks on the show train.

After Cairns for those wanting to go up to the Atherton Tablelands the route was by road, a long winding tortuous trip. But the rewards were good at the Atherton and Mareeba Shows, and the buckjumping show held in conjunction — the biggest in Australia — which attracted great crowds of Aborigines from the Gulf country.

On returning to Cairns from 'up top' all the show gear was again loaded on the show train for the wild ride south. The trucks were all flat tops, and had up to 50 hooked on the train. The racket was never to be first to load for all the caravans and gear-carrying vehicles had to be driven up onto these flat toops, and the first vehicles on had to be driven the length of the train and when in place sleepers were placed behind the wheels and tied off with ropes.

For those living in caravans on top of the flat tops it was a wild nightmarish ride with the vans swaying dangerously. However, there were other occasions when carriages were provided and these became home for the trip north and south.

The show trains north in Queensland were for many years considered the biggest lift of show stock and gear in the world.

In those early days there were up to seven different show trains. One was used for the outdoor showies; one for buckjumping shows; one for circuses; others for night shows such as George Sorlie; Philip Linton; Coles; Newton Carroll and others; and one for show horses.

As the road conditions improved the showies became independent of the trains and made their own way north at their own speed.

The exception to this were the big rides which continued to use the railway system. Especially Teddy Markovich who had half a train to himself, he was the first of the big ride operators on the north run.

The night shows were usually complimentary to the daytime shows. The idea was to have the local public go to the day show and then front up to a circus or other entertainment at night. In many cases this was not unusual for there were country communities whose only real fun would come from the annual show and accompanying night entertainment.

The night shows generally took the form of drama, drama, drama. They were presented in three segments: The first would be a tear-jerking drama such as East Lynn or Uncle Tom's Cabin; then interval, followed by another drama with a big finale with all the company involved.

Tommy Castles remembers the early days of George Sorlie's career when as an international singer, he used to appear in the night shows singing between the change in acts. Subsequently, he obtained his own show and became a house-hold name around country Australia, especially New South Wales and Queensland. (Many country people still remember Sorlie's black and white striped car.) His shows, for a time, followed the pattern of those other shows with drama, but later he introduced vaudeville and variety shows and imported many overseas artists to work in his shows. One of these was Bobby



3. *Tommy Castles grabbing a pitch*

Le Brun, a comedian of exceptional talent who subsequently took over the Sorlie enterprises.

THE OPPOSITION

Some of the sideshows in those early days were freak shows, others magic and illusion shows, there were 'girlie' shows, (the strippers went as far as removing seven veils tucked into a belt around their waists — as Tommy says, 'no hot stuff' but plenty of 'hot' talk from the line-up board!). But irrespective of the type of sideshow, when in competition, it was the 'opposition', and it was a case of every-man for himself. In other words, every showman if he wanted to eat, had to get up on the line-up board and 'grab a pitch'. His mind goes back to people like Dolly Godfrey and her 'boneless wonders' acrobats and contortionists. She was an outstanding show person with a very big line-up show, and did very well. She was an excellent spruiker and was very popular. (Tom was not sorry to see her subsequently finish up with a very successful buckjump show.) Then there was Joe Godfrey who had 'Billy the Pig, with the Gold Tooth', and Dave Meekin. Dave Meekin had the Little Pigmies and the Little Woman (Chillaweeny), who was three feet tall; the three horses with 15 legs between them; Ajax the giant horse; Little Jimmy, a miniature race horse shod with gold shoes; a giant pig; and Abdullah the Indian magic maker who was a wonderful attraction. (Tommy says he watched Abdullah very closely and profited from his observations.) The great showman also had Chan the little Indian boy with a five inch tail, who Dave Meekin later took to America and had him on display at the Chicago World Fair.

But prior to showing the freaks and horses and Abdullah, Dave Meekin had made his name showing lions, although he did not initially work directly with the lions leaving that to his tamer-handler. This all changed one night in Lismore (New South Wales),

when returning from town Dave Meekin found that his handler had let the lions out of their steel security cage, and one of the animals was attacking the man, he had him on the ground and had badly mauled and savaged him around the neck and arms. Without thinking Dave Meekin tackled the beast and dragged him off the man thus saving his life, and although he had no experience in handling lions he was able to return the animals to their cages. After this incident Dave Meekin became a lion handler and worked his own lions on showgrounds and also with Fullers Theatres.

Other good acts and good showmen who were classified as 'opposition' were Les Short Senior, and Vince ('Pedro') Labb. Les Short had a performing sea-lion named 'Tommy' and used to show him in a pit. Tommy performed tricks such as leaping over a plank in the pool and others similar to those performed by the dolphins on the Gold Coast these days.

Les Short's wife was also a much respected member of the showie families in those days, and was responsible for the business side of the operation.

Vince (Pedro) Labb was famous for his mirror maze show, but earlier he had made money with many good acts. One remembered by Tommy Castles was a magician who used to jump on broken glass bottles, eat fire, and as his main trick used to put a penny down the neck of a bottle.

Snowy Flynn who with Tom O'Malley were early showmen and made a success of their enterprise. Snowy Flynn had a big outfit, a big tent with a lot of good fighters, wrestlers, and also a champion wood-chopper named Jack Lay, and a specialist on the punching bag. His show extended to variety with a very tall tumbler.

Jimmy Sharman's boxing troupe was on the road in the 1920s, his outfit took over where Snowy Flynn left off. Jimmy Sharman Senior would be remembered by more old timers than most other showmen. His pitch of 'Who'll take a Glove' was part of the show scene for decades. He was not only a good showman but also a shrewd and successful business man. In the show sense he could 'tell the tale' and was a natural in matching fighters. He worked top class fighters at all capital city shows, Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne, but Sydney was his home base.

Some of his good fighters were blokes like Tommy Uren, an Australian champion (and father of Tom Uren, the ex-politician). Billy Grime, also holder of several Australian titles and so many good fighters too numerous to record.

Tommy Castles recalls names like Rudd Kee, who was Jimmy Sharman's right hand man for years, and his numerous contests with that other oriental pugilist, Taggy Young.

Tom says his one objection to Jimmy Sharman's troupe was that the fighters were always chasing his line-up girls, who really believed the pugs were as good as Jimmy made them out to be! This cat and mouse game with the fighters and girls was a constant problem for Tom who had to make sure all his girls were in a fit condition to go on show the next day. He thinks he won most of the battles but in the process, lost a hell of a lot of sleep.

Next in line was the Foster Family. The Fosters came from England with the reputation of being Romanys. The clan was led by Auntie Lulu who was very much the matriarch, and who worked the Dancing Duck act.

Tom remembers that at one time in Maryborough in Victoria the tent was full waiting for the show to begin when it was discovered the duck had escaped and was placidly cruising on a nearby pond, after a short period of panic the star of the show was retrieved and the show went on.

Auntie Lulu had three sons, two of whom embraced the show scene. Johnny (father of Frankie Foster) started his show career with games then got into sideshows with monkeys. Another son Frank, beame 'Abdul' a super showman, and after the breakup of an international act imported for Wirth's Circus, the Fosters bought a big orang-outang, called the 'Dog-faced Ape' which was a marvellous performer and a great crowd puller.

Frank, who also had performing dogs, took the ape to America, and whilst there he worked in a number of the Shirley Temple films as a dog handler.

Later, Johnny Foster also acquired a dog-faced ape and with that and his monkeys he went into business with another showie named Les (Captain) Davis. When this combination dissolved, Johnny's daughter joined her father and together with another brother called Pikey formed a pretty formidable combination. Johnny's daughter became a good spruiker, and Pikey, who was a juggler, and a good performer who could work snakes, and do a fire-eating act, along with their line-up girls became big opposition to Tommy Castles, and this lasted for many years.

In more recent times Frankie Foster was also to become a big name in show business with personalities such as the Le Garde Twins who later became a big name in the United States; he then got Slim Dusty and together this combination became a very lucrative association. It was from this start that Slim Dusty branched out and today is recognised as one of the best known Australian performers. The same can also be said of Normie Rowe, who was under Frankie Foster's guidance in his formative years. He served his apprenticeship with girlie shows too, but nowadays he is better known for games, but in the eyes of Tommy Castles he is still a big showman.

THE EELY-WHACKERS

When the subject of doubtful characters was brought up, Tommy Castles was not prepared to give too much time to the parasitic 'con-men' who followed the shows. In the early days these 'camp-followers' were called 'Eely-Whackers' and the genuine showman did not want to be associated with them. They used to work the three-card trick, the thimble and the pea, crown and anchor, and a number of other doubtful stunts. However once the general public got wise to the fact that they could never beat these parasites the element gradually disappeared from the show proper and concentrated around the bars on the showgrounds.

There was one old man, Tom remembers, whose people were associated with the circus, who used to work many shows with what was known as the garter trick. It was a betting game, whereby a stick was wound around an elastic garter and pulled away without disturbing the stick.

Another old fellow used to work the 'dumps', he would sit down with two stumps, put a three-pence on the top of each stump, with a ring around the base, and if the player could knock the three-pence off the stump and outside the ring, he got two shillings. His name was 'Silent Dick', a tall man of about 6ft 4 inches who used to walk from show to show refusing a ride from everyone. His habit was to drink all his earnings and almost without exception before he could set up for his next show he had to find two three-pences to start his act. He would advance upon the showies with a request to change two trays for a zack (two three-pences for a six-pence), but as soon as he got his two trays he promised to return the zack as soon as he was in business.

On one of his binges Silent Dick was jailed for creating a nuisance, he made so much noise in the cell that the policeman let him out so that he could get some sleep. So much for the 'silent' as in Dick!

Unfortunately he met his death by drowning. This happened between Bendigo and Echuca in Victoria, when he attempted to get a drink from a lagoon and fell in.

From all accounts there were a number of persons like Silent Dick who were tolerated by the showies and travelled the show circuits.

SOME TOP-NOTCH SIDESHOWS SPANNING SEVENTY YEARS

When asked to detail some of the best sideshows and showies in his association over his seventy odd years in the business Tommy Castles made this reply:

As far as a showman goes, a man who could perform, put up his own tents, and do his own show, one bloke stands out. He was Billy Woods alias 'Listo', who in the early days worked with and learnt show business with me. Throughout our life in show business we worked similar acts such as 'Death on the Guillotine' and the 'Living Head on the Sword', sometimes together and other times separately.

When asked to elaborate on these acts Tom said the staging of the guillotine act consisted of a frame about the size of a normal door frame, and a big steel blade which was pulled to the top of the frame, the girl victim, kneeling at the back of the frame put her head in the frame, and the blade was then dropped on to her neck. In the front of the frame was a box into which the head apparently fell after the crash, this box was lifted up and carried over to a chair on which a sword was lying across the arms. Next, the box would be opened, a cloth placed over the head and lifted onto the sword, then with the cloth removed the head would be displayed on the steel sword. Tommy would then put his hand under the head resting on the sword, move the head about from side to side to prove that it was separated from the body, and announce, 'This is "Anopia" the living head on the sword, she can speak to you, and if you would like to speak to her, she will reply and answer any questions you like to ask, if you doubt that she is alive, pinch her cheek.' To which the head would say, 'Don't do that you will spoil my complexion!' He would then ask his audience who would like a head to take home, and when a taker came forward and the cloth was removed the head turned out to be a head of cabbage. When the taker said he wanted the real head, the cabbage would be returned to the sword, the cloth taken off and the girl's head would again be on the sword.

The Castles patter would conclude with something like this: 'Now you can see the head is alive, and in case any of you have a mother-in-law you would like to get rid of, I'm going to show you how to do it. All you have to do is take the cloth, place it in front of her head like this, and the head disappears'. (With this the girl jumps up and stands behind the guillotine.)

Tommy Castles asserts that this was the best show and the best crowd pleaser, and he worked it for many, many, years. He recalls that in 1955 when he was performing this act a man in the audience died as Tom let the guillotine drop on his assistant's head, he would not entertain the thought that the poor bloke may have had a weak heart, oh, no, it was definitely the effect of the act which caused his death!

Later with 'Listo' Tommy created another show they called the 'Floating Lady'.

He used to place the attendant on a couch, stand behind her and wave his hand over the couch and the girl would float up in the air, the couch would then be taken away and with a big steel hoop would pass it around the girl to show that there was nothing holding her up. The couch would then be returned and the girl lowered back onto the couch, having pretended to have hypnotised the girl, we would then 'wake her up'.

A similar act was the Indian Rope Trick, which both magicians worked. He would place the girl on the couch, get a big coil of rope laying on the floor behind the couch, put it underneath the girl's back then take the couch away and the girl would give the impression of floating up on top of the rope. His spiel would go something like this:

Now showing you ladies and gentlemen that she is still suspended in the air, I will make the rope fall to the ground and she still remains in the air.

He would pass the hoop over her again, put the couch back and the girl would be in her original position.

These illusion acts also proved very successful over the years and served the Listo and Kahara combination indeed well.

Tom claims to have worked the first strip-teast show in Australia when he introduced to the show circuit 'the dance of the seven veils', which on reflection, he now claims to



4. *'Anopia' the Living Head on the Sword*



5. *Tommy Castles and the Floating Lady*

have been very tame compared to the present day strippers, or even, some of our beach belles.

Whilst on this theme he mentions a number of 'girlie' shows he handled such as posing belles and contortionists. Also to mind comes the name of Bill Nash, alias 'Raymond Bey', whom Tom took under his wing and although he admits that initially his bag of tricks was limited, he had one act where he swallowed a dozen needles and lengths of rolled up cotton, he would eat a banana, flash a torch down his throat, and withdraw from his mouth all the needles threaded. He later became a very good showman and with the Castles help eventually went out on his own and became successful.

Raymond Bey worked the 'invisible man' which was a black art show, and he followed this up with the 'ghost house', which he had until he died.

The next venture for Tom Castles was his 'Girl In the Goldfish Bowl'. The props were a gold fish bowl sitting up on a stand and the illusion showed the girl sitting in the bowl, she waved to the customers and they waved back. This act was classified by Tom as a 'walk through' act, in other words the customers were queued up and walked past the object on display, no loitering, and out the other side of the tent as quickly as possible! The 'Girl in the Goldfish Bowl' proved a good act and was particularly well received in Melbourne.

Another great personality was Ma Jones, a prominent show woman in the 1920s. Tom worked under her auspices and on her ground at the Sydney Show. One of her shows consisted of an act called The Algerian Wonders. These were two big black things like whales captured out of the sea — supposedly. This act was an import from America by Grace Brothers from the mighty Barnum and Bailey Circus, and from all accounts the creatures were a sensation, but at the same time a 'touch show' according to Tom who was of the pinion that the 'wonders' were made of leather.

Another show worked in conjunction with Ma Jones was the Bullet Proof Lady, this was back in about 1926. The props for this show were a big bullet-proof case about 6ft high by 4ft wide, it was all steel and would ring like a bell. The girl was placed inside this case and handcuffed, paper was placed down the back and front of the case and at the back was a big sheet of steel. The rifle would be offered to a member of the audience who would load it, and after asking the girl if she was ready, and hearing that she was, the rifle would be fired. The bullet would strike the steel sheet at the back of the case, the hot lead fragment would be retrieved and displayed for all to see, and after three shots (with their own rifle and bullets if they wanted) the paper would then be broken down and there was the girl still handcuffed and unharmed. This act was worked all over Australia and in New Zealand with great success.

Switching back to later times Tommy also retrieved the circular saw act. In this spectacular he had a girl laying on a couch and above her was a huge circular saw, which was controlled with a long handle which enabled him to control the up and down movement of the equipment. The illusion was to saw the girl in two — he said ‘there were bits of red stuff flying about’ but as he lifted the saw the girl would stand up no worse for her ‘ordeal’. He only worked this act a couple of times, once in Melbourne and in Brisbane. (It would appear that it may have been slightly gory!)

Then there was Abe Plenty who had Venessa The Undresser, a show Tom worked for a while as spruiker. Abe Plenty later went into freak shows and after doing quite well in the show business transferred his activities to business ventures in Sydney.

RIDES

A diversion from the tent shows came when Tom suggested we might talk about the showies who conducted the rides on the showgrounds over the years.

Earlier he had mentioned that Teddy Markovich was the first of the big ride operators, but prior to him the main riders were the merry-go-round, the razzle-dazzle, and chair-o-plane. Tom mentioned that the first chair-o-plane ride was introduced to Australia by a bloke named Jones, in fact the son of the famous Ma Jones. The first ferris wheel was owned by a fellow called Mackie, and this was considered a big ride. (A humorous aside was created when Mrs Shirley Castles recalled hearing of Tom’s exploits at one time when he was responsible for working a merry-go-round and razzle dazzle at the same time. Both these rides had to be ‘push started’ in those days, and Tommy ran himself ragged dodging from one ride to the other to keep them firing.)

Tommy, like most of us, shudders at the sights of some of the present-day rides and the huge costs involved in conducting these rides. The present day ferris wheels run by the Durkin family and Bill Dwyer, are considered the biggest in the world and are established at all our capital city showgrounds. This combination also have the Melbourne Show chairlift. (Bill Dwyer came into the show scene originally with games, this was well before he became involved with the Durkin ferris wheels.)

Tommy Wittingslow has been a pioneer in the big ride field and is continually updating his vast range of rides and equipment. (Tom Wittingslow started in show business guessing people’s weight. He had a big set of scales atop a tripod which had a seat extended from the top of the structure. He used to sit the person on the seat and guess their weight, he had a margin of error of four pounds (in fact it was eight pounds, taking the margin light or heavy), the prize for not being able to accurately guess the weight was a box of chocolates — specially made up for showies!).

SHOWMEN’S GUILD, BUCKJUMP SHOWS AND CIRCUSES

Tommy Castles was not prepared to go into too much detail about the Showmen’s Guild. Suffice to say that over the years the Guild was active and inactive, and has how

spread to all states. There is also the Australasian Guild of which he was recently made a Life Member.

He agrees that over the years the Guild has done much to clean up the show business in a self regulating way. He remembers that in the old days when the showies came to town, the townspeople used to lock up their daughters and chooks — in that order — because these terrible interlopers were all considered gypsies, and occasionally there was a 'wild Card' in the pack. The mention of the word 'gypsies' brought to mind some of his experiences with buckjump shows and circuses.

The buckjump shows became big attractions for a period of time, and the Castles influence was also present here. He speaks of such people as the Gill Brothers and the Skuthorpes, Lance and Violet and her husband Johnnie. On occasions when he was contracted to work for the buckjump shows he would put his doll on a little pony and work from the ring.

His influence also went to the various circuses around the country, Ashtons, Bullens, Perrys and Wirths.

Jimmy and Freddie Ashton were personal friends. In fact Freddie Ashton and his daughter Maudie who was married to Alfie Warren, travelled with Tom. It was during this period that this husband and wife team built up their springboard-trampoline act which proved so good that they took it to England and later the United States where it obtained world class status.

He talks of Phil and George Wirth, who arrived in this country when he was still a boy, with what was then considered the biggest circus ever to come to Australia. They imported all the best acts and this kept them on top for years.

Wirth's always travelled by train, and used their elephants to pull all their gear from the goods rail siding to the circus lot, and the elephants also provided the power to pull up the big top. The circus personnel all lived in the rail carriages, this was their home for as long as the circus season lasted.

Bullens Circus was the next to come to mind. This circus began with a little sideshow worked with Tommy Castles. Perc and Mrs Bullen worked tirelessly on their act and skills, and at the same time their sons became good entertainers and were excellent trapeze and flying-act artists and moved out into their own circus. Later they were to import world class artists and became big time.

Next came Perrys. The Perry Brothers came from Mentone, a bayside Melbourne suburb, and built up a big circus which in its time was the only real opposition to Wirths.

Leonards Circus had its beginnings in the far out blocks of western New South Wales and became a highly reputable and recognised circus.

Most of these shows are still on the road or working with capital city shows.

The old showie's eyes began to sparkle when he described the old days of the circus coming to town. The parade would be led by the band wagon, every circus had its own band, then would come the bareback riders, the trapeze artists and acrobats, the cages containing the lions and tigers, the numerous horses and ponies, the elephants with their handlers sitting precariously on their heads, and weaving in and out of the parade, those wonderful clowns. He contends that all this atmosphere is lost with the huge enterprises such as the Moscow Circus.

WHITEY CLAIR AND THE AMERICAN INFLUENCE — THE DOME

Tommy vividly remembers the introduction to Australia of one of the greatest of all sideshows — The Dome.

It was brought to this country by a bloke named Whitey Clair, along with a number of other attractions from America including the Pig Circus and a monkey act. All this gear was held on the wharf for a period of time until certain obstacles were overcome, but it

was eventually cleared and the carnival opened up at the old Sydney Sportsground. The carnival was called the 'Cooee City Carnival' and it was staged by Arthur Greenhalgh and Whitey Clair.

The carnival consisted of the Dome with motor cycle riders 'Cyclone' Curtis and Jack Jackson; the pig circus; the monkey circus; a high dive performed by a bloke diving into a tank of water, and many other attractions. Along with the Dome Whitey Clair brought his own spruiker, a man named George Donovan, who had a fondness for alcohol. On the opening night Donovan was missing and when eventually found he was so drunk the only thing he could say was, 'God Damn' 'God Damn'. Arthur Greenhalgh then called on Tommy to work the Dome, he had no 'tale', and told Greenhalgh so, but the reply was 'you'd better make a tale'. In response to this Tommy got one of the motor bikes outside and had it revved up and got the pitch really without doing anything, and while the noise from the bike was doing a good job he was busily thinking the tale out. Incidentally, the tale he made out that night in ten minutes stayed with the show from then on, to the best of his memory it went something like this: 'Where they race and ride at 60 miles an hour, crossing and recrossing, passing and repassing at terrific speed, dare-devils on bikes etc.'

From the Sydney Sportsground carnival Arthur Greenhalgh and Whitey Clair decided to take the show on the road and did the run Bathurst, Orange, Wellington, Dubbo, and then went into Queensland and were on the road for 12 months. This proved too much for Whitey Clair who by now was very homesick and wanted to get back to the United States, so Arthur Greenhalgh bought him out, and Clair and the pig circus with Margie Van Camp, who worked the pigs, returned to the United States.

Soon after Greenhalgh took overall charge of the Dome, 'Cyclone' Curtis turned it up, and fearing that the other rider, Jackson, may also leave, he made him a partner and the act became known as Greenhalgh and Jackson. Then Greenhalgh's wife Nevada joined the act and used to ride pillion behind Jackson and they called her the 'Lady Rider' but in fact she was only a pillion rider.

Tommy Castles stayed as spruiker to this act for a long time and he knew by its popularity that it was also a very viable business so approached Arthur Greenhalgh for more money — he was being paid about £11 (\$22) a week at the time and his wife was working the ticket box for no extra money — Arthur Greenhalgh said he could not afford to pay any more so Tom left him and went to an opposition Dome where he was paid £20 (\$40) a week as a couple. At times when the two Domes were on the same ground the Castles influence 'killed' the Greenhalgh enterprise and it was not long before the rift was repaired and the old Castles-Greenhalgh combination carried on for many more years.

Later on Arthur Greenhalgh took over the Durkin Dome. (This was built in Bondi by Mr Durkin senior, who was an engineer.) Frank Durkin was one of the riders and Tom's daughter Margaret joined the act as the other member of the team, and the first solo lady rider to do this daring and very dangerous act. In this act Margaret Castles was known as Margaret Jackson, and Stan Durkin was the spruiker, who introduced the act as Durkin and Jackson. Later, Margaret became the first and only lady performer to drive the car in the Dome.

The act continued for many years and was known variously as the Dome; the Globe; the Globe of Death, and the Wall of Death, and retained its popularity throughout the years.

THE RENT COLLECTOR AND THE GAMES

Most showgrounds, before the advent of the Showmen's Guild, were pretty hard to put up with, and on more than enough occasions it became Tommy's lot to measure out ground in company with members of local showgrounds committees, and collect the

rent. In many cases this became a cat and mouse game for the rent collector who on visiting some of the showies' camping tents would be told that the bloke he was looking for was 'up the town' or any other frivolous excuse to dodge the payout until they got that first show under their belt and had the rent money.

Fortunately most of this changed with the formation of the Guild but Tommy was still involved as the guild delegate with the allocation of ground, the settling of disputes and payment of rents.

Speaking of the carnival side of shows in days gone by, Tommy revived memories of the showies who concentrated on the game.

He speaks of the big round hooplas with the table in the centre holding the stock, and the worth of these 'joints' depended on how good the operator was. Next came the hoopla with the ducks. In place of the stock there was a pool in the middle and the ducks, similar to the decoy ducks used for duck shooting, were swimming on the pool. The player had to ring the ducks neck with the hoopla ring, and this was much harder than it appeared. With the operator yelling 'ring the duck' 'ring the duck'.

Shooting galleries were the next game covered, starting with the old time shooting funnel where a target was sighted at the end of the funnel and the marksman at the other end. These were eventually barred from carnival and showgrounds because of the danger of shot escaping from the target end. The gallery which has run successfully throughout the years is the one with the tin ducks on the conveyor belt principle.

Almost without exception the stock has been good in these joints and the custom brisk.

The laughing clowns have been a great favourite with the small fry over the years because every trier wins a prize.

Other games like 'knockems', which originally consisted of three rows of wooden pins, similar to the old dumb-bell or the pins used in the ten-pin bowling alley, and these had to be knocked over before winning a prize. Later came the rows of dolls which maintain their popularity even today.

One of the oldest of the games was the darts with numbers on the board corresponding with numbers in the glass case. This has always been a favourite and over the years a good money spinner. Who of we older generation will every forget the 'sympathic' stallholder whose gold watch was up for grabs, breathing a sigh of relief, and at the same time, quoting that quotable quote 'just missed a gold watch and chain give the man a cigar!'

RETROSPECT

Reflecting on his life as one of Australia's top showmen, illusionists, ventriloquists, and spruikers, Tommy Castles considers his first act and love was his doll. He says his ventriloquial doll was always something to fall back on, it was his biggest asset throughout the bad times of the 1930s depression and the Second World War, with the doll he was always able to earn a 'crust'.

He speaks of the old days when all the sideshows had their line-up boards outside their tents, and the competition that went on in these situations was almost entertainment enough. Up on the board he used to do a bit of sleight of hand, also 'an egg bag' — making a kid lay eggs in a bag. He would coax a boy up on to the board, crack a few jokes with him and in no time he would have a big pitch. Once he got his pitch he would begin to tell the tale until he came to the 'hot point' when he was going to hypnotise someone and make them eat a candle. He would say, 'I'll tell you what I'll do, I'll make you eat that candle, not only eat the candle but swallow the wick too.' The victim would say 'What if you can't do it', to which Tom would reply, "Then I'll make you a present of a ten bob note". Thus the crowd grew and the ticket box worked overtime.



6. *Tommy Castles with his ventriloquist doll 'Jerry'*

Speaking of the line-up board activities triggered memories of his ju-jitsu and wrestling girls shows. He used to do ju-jitsu with a girl inside the tent demonstrating falls and different holds with a bloke called Jack Wright, who was a professional demonstrator. It was an unusual show in that the slightly built girl was able to throw men much heavier and stronger than her, so it made her the target for a number of 'smarties'. This reminded Tom of an act which grew out of the ju-jitsu displays. It was called 'Kiss the Girl', in which men were invited to go up and try to kiss the girl. If the trier was successful, he would get ten bob, if he wasn't he would have taken a good fall from the girl and a lot of stick from his mates.

In some cases the blokes tried wrestling the girl so Tom introduced this into the act. His patter went something like this: 'All you have to do is come in and kiss the girl, kiss her on the rosebud ruby lips, and if you can place a kiss on those rosebud ruby lips inside of sixty seconds, you will become the owner of a ten-bob note. Now remember, if you kiss her on the arm, kiss her on the leg, or anywhere else you don't get paid — and if you kiss her below the belt you're barred'. He went on to say that there was one bloke who used to try his luck show after show, he was always flat out but Kitty used to beat him, and when the show was all over Tom was getting to the bloke and trying to tell him to go easy and be more gentle when a couple of blokes came and grabbed the fellow. Tom wanted to know what it was all about and they said that their charge had escaped from their mental institution! He also remembers the jockey at the old Ascot Vale Racecourse in Melbourne who used to come over to his show between rides in races and try his luck at kissing the girl. Tom said the jockey might have had a few winners on the track but he never 'cracked it' trying to kiss the girl.

As a spin off from his ju-jitsu demonstrations Tom was invited to one of the big ladies' colleges and there gave demonstrations and taught the art of this age old craft.



7. *Australia's three greatest showmen — Jimmy Sharman, Arthur Greenhalgh and Dave Meekin*

When asked what his feelings are these days on attending shows, his answer, after such a full and exciting life, is somewhat predictable:

It's not sideshow alley any more,
there are just rides and games . . .
All the magic has gone.

He said he still likes going to shows to meet his old mates, but sadly most of these are now gone, but in so many cases the sons and daughters of those old colleagues, and in cases grandchildren are still active in the show scene. Some of the present day showies remind him that they remember him as the great 'KAHARA', magician and illusionist, and confess that they used to get into his tent, sit around in the front — you couldn't keep them out says Tom — and when he was doing a trick that had a finish to it they would yell out in chorus, 'We know how it finishes!!'.

His joy is to be found in the fact that so many descendants of the old show families continue in the profession. He cites Jimmy Sharman who took over from his illustrious father, and when legal mumbo-jumbo closed down the boxing troupe, he still remained under the umbrella of show business with his dodgem cars.

He laments on the fact that there are no descendants of Arthur Greenhalgh, who Tom considers the greatest of all Australian outdoor side-showmen.

Tom Wittingslow's name came to the fore in these trips to the past, and how Tom started with his weight guessing enterprise, and his boxes of chocolates, and his influence in the field of world class rides, but especially the fact that his son Des, and grandchildren, are involved in the show business profession. (As had been the case throughout recording the whole of these tapes, Tommy Castles' mind had a 'hair-

pressure trigger' and key occasions, people, or situations, would bring forward other happenings from other times.)

At the mention of Tommy Wittingslow's specially packed prize chocolates, Tom switched to the St. Kilda Esplanade where a bloke called Tom Warren and his wife worked for many years and gave boxes of chocolates for prizes. And just as chocolates brought forward Tom Warren's name, so St. Kilda Esplanade struck a further chord and introduced the fact that during the Second World War Tommy Castles and his wife Shirley, worked the Esplanade with his skaters sideshow, and also showed a little race-horse which belonged to Bobby Lewis the jockey, he also had a lot of the famous jockey's gear, saddles, whips, spurs, etc.

Also at this time they worked 'The Pit' and the Indian Rope Trick. The pit was a structure made with building scaffold and rose to about 12ft high and the customers used to mount steps and stand on a platform looking down into the pit where Tommy was working.

Besides helping Tommy, Shirley Castles had a second string to her bow, she used to sell floral bouquets to the American servicemen. She used to have a basket which she carried in front of her, similar to the lolly boys baskets, and from this sold her bouquets. When she had sold out she would replenish from her stock from the large pile she had prepared the night before. There was never any shortage of custom.

Another act Tom had at this time was a sword-swallower, who used to swallow an old Ford motor car axle — the type the showies used to use as pegs for their tents! He would put this axle 'right down his gullet', take it out, throw it down, then swallow a sword, and eat fire. A pretty good performance for an 88 years-old performer.

Also during this period Tommy worked with Wirth's Circus at their site across Princess Bridge. He compered the show inside and showed freaks on the outside. These were animal freaks, such as a cow with two heads, sheep with six legs, a calf with six legs and a number of others. (This type of show was never to Tom's liking, he always felt uneasy showing freaks.)

At the same time Arthur Greenhalgh was showing many of his big attractions at the Tivoli Theatre.

Moving to a completely different subject, Tom was asked what effect he considered television to have on the show business, he had this to say:

With the advent of television the world's greatest acts were brought, free of charge, to everyones lounge room. The best of Las Vegas, the best of Barnum and Bailey, and all the best acts throughtout the world. The excellence of these shows served to make a very uneven comparison with the Australian tent shows, the circuses, buckjump shows and sideshows. Although the sideshows were the last to buckle being eventually worn down by things beyond our control. For these were other factors besides television.

As an example, in the capital shows in Sydney and Melbourne, we were forced to work on someone else's ground; you could not get space, and the only way you could get space was to work on a 50/50 basis with those few who had tied the grounds up.

This practice was more prominent in Sydney, although the same thing happened to a degree in Melbourne. But in that city a re-building program was also responsible for lack of space. Then came the big joints and big rides — these took the place of sideshows.

Another aspect was the price of labour, especially for performers. In early days you could employ girls for £2 (\$4) a week and their keep. Today girls such as these, good dancing girls and with talent, would demand at least \$500 a day.

Tommy foresees problems for the big operators, especially the big rides, with increased labour costs and increased space charges. He considers the biggest trouble with

capital city shows will no doubt be the price of space, and diminishing available space as ground improvements continue to spread across all grounds.

The inevitable question was asked as a finale. What happens to the Castles name in show business? He sadly said that there was no other Castles name in the business, he had grand-daughters (Margaret's children), but they did not carry the Castles surname.

But his name is legend, and he has had the experience of being asked if he knew the super showman Tommy Castles? So after 70 years he takes pride in telling all and sundry that he carried on a clean and tidy business and from this earned respect not only from the public but from his peers. And although the magic has faded and gone from those wonderful days now passed, the name of Tommy Castles will always remain a talking point wherever showies old and new meet and discuss their trade.

(Sadly, Tommy Castles passed away on 14 June 1992)

2

‘It’s the Front of the Show that gets the Dough’

(From the Shirley Castles Tapes)

EARLY DAYS

Shirley Castles was born in Bendigo, Victoria, in 1926, and at the age of three years her father died and her mother moved their home to Melbourne. Her early schooling was at the Toorak Central School and from there she won a scholarship to attend the famous MacRobertson Girls High School.

During this time her mother remarried and soon after, her step-father enlisted in the services. Her ambition was to study law and become a solicitor; but these plans were dashed when her step-father joined up and her mother was left to care for her, which meant that at the earliest opportunity she was obliged to leave school and endeavour to supplement the family income.

It would be hard to imagine her disappointment at this time, for she was an outstanding student. From her earliest school days she showed great promise, and towards the end of her primary school days she had to stand down a year in the Central School because she was too young to enter the Girls’ High School, and she felt keenly the fact that she had to forego the scholarship which included free books and free tuition fees.

Her first job was in a butcher’s shop where she was cashier and chief meat wrapper-upper. Later she was taken on as an apprentice florist. The change in vocation was because the florist business was situated on the corner of her street thus eliminating the need to travel.

As a young girl she used to go by train with a group of her friends to the Mordialloc Carnival each Christmas, and on one particular occasion Tommy Castles happened to be in his ticket box and asked her and her girl friend if they would like some complimentary tickets to some of the tent shows. They accepted, and after looking at one show she returned to the ticket box to ‘go crook’ at Tom for she considered the act was a fraud and told him so. She did not realise that the show was Tom’s because he was in the ticket box next door.

This encounter was enough introduction for Tom to ask Shirley to go out. The arrangement was that they meet under the clocks on Flinders Street Station, but when she went home and told her mother (for at this time Shirley was not quite sixteen years old) who naturally was concerned, especially knowing that her escort was a much older person and a ‘showie’ to boot! So the compromise was made that she would permit Shirley to keep the appointment but the meeting place had to be other than at the Flinders Street clocks which was a notorious spot. It was war time and the city was saturated with American servicemen, and her mother suggested that she contact Tom



8. *Before amplifiers, Tom Castles on the Line-up board*

and change the meeting place. Shirley rang up a café which took messages for showmen and left a message for Tom changing the meeting place to the Batman Avenue tram terminus — this would allow her to get straight off the tram and not be waiting about. However, the person who took the message for Tom did not pass it on so on the night Shirley was waiting at Batman Avenue and Tom was pacing up and down Flinders Street Station. The following day Tom rang the florists where she worked and the matter was thrashed out.

START OF A LIFELONG PARTNERSHIP

Their courtship began in December 1941. At this time all shows had been cancelled because of the war and wherever showies were at this time they stayed. There was petrol rationing and many other problems at this time with which the showies had to contend, all of them restricting movement. Tom Castles moved in with Shirley and her mother, who in time came to accept the big difference in ages and the fact that Tom was an outdoor showman.

As Shirley says, in those days the reputation of the showie was anything but comforting for mothers with young girls, they did believe the old adage — that when the showies came to town you locked up your daughters and your chooks, in that order. From all

accounts this mistrust did not last for long, for Tommy with his winning ways soon became accepted into the family.

During the day Tom worked on the wharves as a painter and docker, and Shirley continued her profession as a florist. At night they worked as a team outside Luna Park at St. Kilda for Green and Thomas who were well known showmen, but not travelling showmen. Tom built a structure and showed several top class acts, including a skating act which had been a Royal Command performance; a small horse owned by the well known jockey, Bobby Lewis, and described as the smallest horse in the world. And during this time they were invited to Bobby Lewis' home in Glenroy where they were shown all his trophies and gear such as saddles, bridles, whips, etc.

THE WEDDING

In November 1943 Tom and Shirley were married, and Shirley vividly recalls this very important day so many years ago:

On our wedding day we did not have much choice of ministers, photographers, or caterers, or any of those very important people, for their priorities was the war effort. (In fact one of my great regrets is that we did not have any wedding photos as all the photographers had been taken into the services). My mother did the catering for our wedding.

Tom's religion was Catholic, mine was Methodist, and we had to marry in an Anglican church for he was the only available minister.

We were married at 11 am on 13 November 1943. Ken Foster was our best man, taxi-driver, and everything else that was necessary.

In his Ford coupé he took us one at a time to the church, my sister was matron of honour. During the signing of the register Ken Foster leaned over and said to the minister, 'Hurry up mate or we'll miss the first race'.

After leaving the church we went back to my mother's and had a little bit of lunch and as all the guests were racing people we went to the Melbourne Cup race meeting. From the racecourse we went back to Luna Park and worked our two shows there until about midnight when we returned to Ken Foster's flat and had our wedding breakfast.

Shirley recalls that she knew very little about racing in those early days — Tom on the other hand, was a seasoned race-goer. She tells of an experience she had early in their married life when she attended a race meeting with Tom:

I stood waiting for him at Moonee Valley Racecourse, very well dressed in a nice frock and little flowery hat and veil. It was a very hot day and I fainted, and there was a crowd of people around me when Tom and Ken Foster came back to pick me up, and from all accounts Ken said, 'I wonder where Shirley is?', to which I heard Tom answer, 'She'll be in here stickynosing to whatever is going on'. And here was I down on my knees with people putting wet handkerchiefs on my forehead and cold keys down my back.

When I recovered a bit I said to Tom, 'I want to go home, I just want to go home', and he took me home. But if this incident had happened in latter years, my guess would be that Tom would more than likely have left me there and watched the whole racing programme!

ON THE ROAD

In 1944 Tom and Shirley travelled to Tasmania on board the old 'Taroona' taking enough gear to show wherever possible. They travelled the Island by train, and put up in

boarding houses, and this was Shirley's introduction to becoming a 'line-up girl'.

In this capacity she had to make costumes and with her step-daughter Betty made up the compliment of girls for the shows.

Tom was doing his magic act and Shirley became his assistant, and Betty did a contortionist act, and with this show — the war was still going at this time — they were just about able to do the full run of available venues. They showed in Launceston, Longford, Hobart, Ulverstone, Burnie, Stanley and Devonport.

Their stint in Tasmania proved to be well worthwhile and quite profitable, and so they returned to Victoria. The Tasmanian experience was something new to Shirley for it produced cash in hand for the first time.

Throughout his life Tom was a gambler, and after the death of his first wife he almost became a compulsive gambler, with the result that as quickly as he earned money he lost it, and when Shirley and he married their total sum of money was five shillings and one penny (51 cents). But from that day on Shirley handled the money and she proudly shows a bankbook which records deposits of ten shillings a week which was gradually increased to one pound a week until they got back on the road again in 1945.

Tom's old Chevrolet truck — which had been up on blocks throughout the war in McKenzie Street — was fitted with a gas producer, and Shirley tells of many funny stories concerning the early trips.

The gas producer had to be stoked up about every fifty kilometres with charcoal which was carried in the back of the truck along with the girls, and any one else associated with the tent shows. (These were people who helped with whatever was needed for the showies, but did not have any gear of their own. One such person was Rex Coles who lived on what he picked up around the bars on showgrounds. About four or five o'clock in the mornings he would do the rounds of the bar or bars and picked up enough to keep him going. Another was Corky Punch who sold balloons.) These were constant passengers on the Castles' vehicle.

Shirley tells of the time they were travelling through Dubbo in the old Chev and pulled up for their ration of petrol — both of her step-daughters, Margaret and Betty, were in the back of the truck. (When Shirley married Tom, Betty was 14 and Margaret 10 years old, and they were in the care of their grandmother who lived at Canowindra. They joined Shirley and Tom after they married and Shirley raised them from then on.)

Anyway, the story goes that about sixty kilometres after leaving Dubbo Tom pulled up to stoke up with charcoal and as usual, called the girls to throw down the bags but got no reply. He thought they must have fallen asleep so he got up on the back of the truck but the girls were not there — unbeknown to the parents the girls had climbed down to get some sweets when they stopped at the garage, and Tom had driven off without them. So after topping up with charcoal Tom returned to Dubbo and on the outskirts they met an old car with two young girls waving frantically for them to stop.

INTO THE REAL SHOW BUSINESS

The Castles family found themselves in West Wyalong when the war ended in August 1945.

In 1946 they got into the full run of the shows but did not go north, instead they decided to do the western run, taking in Bathurst, Orange, Dubbo and other well established show towns in western New South Wales.

The country was still feeling the effects of the war and all kinds of food, petrol, clothing and materials were subject to rationing. In this climate Tom and Shirley decided to 'still-town'. That is they entertained at carnivals and other functions around Bourke, Brewarrina, Collarenebri, Gunnedah, and other places where there were able to put on their line-up show.



9. *The Line-up show — Still Towning*

Shirley explained that one of the drawbacks of still-towning was the need for versatility, for when they stayed for up to a week and more in the one place, it was necessary to bring in as much programme change as possible. They met this challenge this way, after a house of variety they would switch to boxing. They organised boxing tournaments, and although they had no fighters, the locals supplied all the necessary talent. Tom used to match them up and let them fight one another, with the result that with semi-finals and finals the boxing tournament would go on for the rest of the week.

As was their custom, they had a couple of showmen with them one of whom later on made his mark in the game — Arthur Shane, who worked his little game, and also made a game for Margaret. For prizes they used to go around chemist shops and similar places buying up any little odds and ends. So while Tom was busy with the boxing, the girls, from their own joint, played Margaret's game.

By 1947 they had bought a brand new Reo truck and worked Shirley's first Royal Easter Show in Sydney. Betty had married by this time but Margaret was still a member of the team. (And according to Shirley, Margaret from a very early age could do just about anything in the show.)

By the time they arrived and set up for the Sydney Royal, Shirley had stood alongside Tom on the line-up board for just on three years and knew every word of 'the tale' like poetry. Unfortunately on the first Saturday night of the Show Tom became ill and Shirley had to take him to hospital. After examination, he was allowed to return to the Showgrounds but was not allowed to work. In those days there was no Sunday show but by Monday Tom was still not well enough to do the show, so Margaret — who at this time was just fifteen years old — took over the spruiking. She knew 'the tale' word for word but by Tuesday night her voice had gone so Tom said to Shirley that she would have to do the spruiking.

As already stated, Shirley knew 'the tale' from A to Z but she was so nervous that tears rolled down her cheeks. However, she got a pitch and told the tale and in so doing turned a lot of people to the ticket box.

Recalling this memorable day she now thinks that maybe it was not her outstanding spruiking that filled the house, and quoted the well known showie adage — 'It's the front of the Show that gets the Dough' — but rather, that it was the first big show after the war and the crowds were enormous, with the result that it turned out to be a bonanza financially and started Shirley on a lifetime of spruiking for which she became famous.

The programme at that time was Tom doing his magic; the coloured boy they had with them did a fire-eating act; Shirley had her mental-telepathy act; and besides they had a couple of monkeys which they bought in 1946 and worked; Tom also worked his big illusion act; then would come a belly-dancer, and finally out of the pitch they would get someone to come up and be hypnotised.

At one of the sessions Shirley was doing the spruiking and a female in the pitch — who was much the worse for drink — insisted on being hypnotised. She kept pulling at Shirley's ankles so she had to give her a bit of a tap with the sword to keep her from climbing up the ladder. Finally she tried to pull Shirley from the line-up board, and knowing full well that sooner or later she would succeed, Shirley jumped down from the board 'and got stuck into her'. They were having quite a wrestle on the ground — and at that time Shirley had jet black hair with a few little false bits in it — the drunk grabbed Shirley by the hair, and her main fear was that she would lose her hair. As this disturbance was going on another girl from the board went inside and told Margaret what was happening in the dirt outside the tent. The drunk happened to have a lady friend who was in a similar condition and who was loudly barracking for her friend, so when Margaret arrived she said to this person 'Do you want to be in this too?' and with that 'hauled off and clobbered her on the chin'. By this time the police had arrived and took the two offenders away. It turned out that they were a couple of 'ladies' down from Kings Cross.

To this day Shirley laments the fact that they lost the pitch and had to start anew for the next house!

Asked whether this type of interference was a common thing, Shirley admitted that where it was necessary to get someone from the pitch to be hypnotised, or to wrestle or kiss the girl, there was always a certain element who craved attention and in fact, made a nuisance of themselves.

With the first big show under her belt Shirley Castles considered that she had at last qualified as a spruiker. And in this new role — having had a good grounding in her education — she was soon using her good voice to get the pitch and hold it. To help her in this she used to 'do a little trick' with the egg bag, when she would get a local boy to come up on the board and threaten to cut his tongue off, or his head off — anything to draw a crowd. When Tom was on the board he used his ventriloquial doll to get the pitch. She was unabashed when she said that Tommy was one of, if not the best, pitch-getter in the game.

A CHANGE OF ROLE

With her newly found talent as a spruiker, life became much easier for the whole team. She used to do her act first on the inside — which meant that she was available to go back outside and get another pitch — not so much on quiet days, but on busy days especially at capital city shows or country shows on main days, she could have a pitch, tell her tale, have them at the ticket box waiting to go in, as Tom finished up the show inside and let his 'house' out the other side of the tent. The combination of them both



10. Shirley Castles makes the grade as a Spruiker

being able to spruik and work meant that the team became very flexible and a successful combination.

Later that year they went north working in with Owen and Lorraine Jimbers, who were New Zealanders. This meant that they did not have to take any of their own outfit with them. Shirley recalls that she learned in her first twelve months in show business that working partners with anyone was not good. For some reason they always seemed to be doing the bulk of the work but the money had to be split. So after they returned south she insisted that there be no more such deals. And to prove her point she actually went on strike for a day to make Tom break up a deal he had with the wily Major Wilson.

Nevertheless this first trip north was a treat for Shirley. They boarded the Show Train at Rockhampton and virtually lived in the train for the whole trip — making home in the carriages as comfortable as possible.

In later years when caravans became more available these were towed on to the flat-tops, anchored down, and that became the new mode of travel for the north run.

Shirley remembers the hard job she had to get her first caravan. It was about 1948 and they bought this twelve-foot van at Ballarat for £130 (\$260), much against Tom's wishes for he kept on arguing that the prices would have to drop — but as she says had they waited for this to happen they would still be waiting.

Although travelling in the caravan made life a bit more organised, Shirley loved the camping tent life. The exception was when they were travelling overnight from show to show, or when they were covering long distances and had to stop somewhere along the road. Then it was hard, for they had to get the camping gear out, and the beds, cook the meals in the bush, then clean up and pack up again and move on.

She speaks of the companionship that was to the fore in those days, when the show fraternity looked after their own, and where a camp fire was always an invitation.

At this time she became a little philosophical, and told of a conversation she had with Dorrie Foster (Ken Foster's wife), during the war and when she was still single, when Shirley confided in her about her mother's anxiety concerning the outdoor showies. This conversation took place in the shed in Elgin Street Carlton — the Foster's home for the duration of the war — and the advice she got from Dorrie Foster (this early lesson, as Shirley likes to refer to it), was:

If you'll be friendly with everyone,
and not too friendly with anyone,
You'll get along alright in this show business.

Don't be all the time in someone else's camp because they will tell you something, a little bit of scandal, and if you repeat it to someone else, the next thing you'll know will be they will be saying you started it.

This advice was to become Shirley Castles' creed throughout the whole of her life in show business. In this vein she tells of the social club which was created on the northern run, she was made beer-ticket seller. The club was formed the year before Tom and Shirley went north and the ticket seller proved a bit timid, with the result that some of the showmen were able to stand over this person which meant that the tickets were not evenly distributed. The whole idea of having such a person was to make sure that with an even distribution, no one member would become too much the worse for wear thus causing disagreements and leading into fights — these occasions did happen from time to time.

When Shirley was made ticket-seller, Ken Foster was the president of the club and made this announcement:

We have got just what we want now,
we have a girl who's not frightened of anybody.

There will be no standing-over her, she doesn't drink herself, so she wont be using any of the tickets, and she wont be giving tickets away.

The social club did much to keep the showies together, for at every opportunity they would arrange functions ranging from small get-to-gethers to their renowned cabaret balls.

OTHER OUTSTANDING WOMEN IN SHOW BUSINESS

Being recognised as one of the best spruikers in the business, and being a woman in this cut-throat game it naturally followed that we should seek Shirley's opinion of other women working in the tent shows, so we threw up a few names of successful ladies past and present who graced the line-up boards:

MA JONES

Shirley admitted that she did not know Ma Jones, she was well before her time in show business, and her only knowledge of this legend in show business was what Tom had told her, and he had said that she was a marvellous show person of those early days. She was certainly one of the early women pioneer showies, and Tom, in his early days had done spruiking for her.

AUNTIE LULU FOSTER

Again Shirley had never met this matriarch of the Foster family, whose actions were legend and who was thought to have been of Romany descent. She did know Johnny



11. *The Fat Lady*

Foster (Frank's father) and other members of the clan, and knew that Dolly Godfrey was related to them.

DAISY DAVIS

Her introduction to Daisy Davis and her husband Jackie Davis, commonly known as 'Dingy', came back in those early days of the old Mordialloc Carnival — where she also met Tom. At that time Daisy only had one son Colin, who has since passed away. She worked the ticket box when the Davis family had their monkey show. Daisy comes from a very old family of show people, she was Daisy Pink. Bill Howard, who was President of the Guild for many years, married Daisy's sister Donna.

Daisy could use a microphone for what was called 'dragging'. Dingy Davis would have his monkeys and ponies outside, he would get his pitch and tell his take, and Daisy would do all the dragging in and ticket selling. And here again Shirley emphasised just how important the person in the ticket box really is, especially on line-up shows, where you get a big crowd all wanting to get in at the same time — that is where a good ticket-seller is a real asset, to get the crowd in and out, otherwise it can cost the show a lot of money.

DOLLY GODFREY

Shirley said that she knew Dolly Godfrey well, and put her in the category of the strongest opposition you could strike on any grounds. She had her brother and son who were both top class performers, and there were also their wives, which gave the show a ready made line-up.

Dolly was a very good spruiker, and Shirley pays her the compliment of being the best female spruiker she had ever encountered in her time in show business. She remembers

that at the Brisbane Show Dolly Godfrey and the Fosters always combined, and on these occasions when she and Tom were right alongside of them, this combination proved a very tough one, and the Castles had to work really hard to get their houses against this strong opposition.

FRANCES FOSTER

Frances Foster was the daughter of Johnny Foster and a sister of Frankie — now the best known of the Foster family. Frances was also a very good spruiker and worker outside, and backed up by her brothers, they formed a formidable team, spruiking and dragging between them.

Frances married Doyle Gill of the famous buck-jumping clan, and is no longer in line-up shows but they travel with little farm yard animals (like the animal nursery at capital city shows), and games, and are doing quite well. Most of the remaining members of the Foster family are still engaged in show business. Pikey, Johnny, Billy and Frankie, but not all of them travel the circuits.

MARGARET CASTLES

I thought if I asked Shirley about her step-daughter Margaret, she would be a bit diffident because of her close association over the years. However, in this I was quite mistaken and like the true showie she is was not in the slightest abashed, so here is her reply:

Tom was a pretty strict father and watched his girls very closely, he would not let the girls go out much but you know what girls are like, they sneak out. In 1947 at Adelaide Show we woke up one morning to find that Margaret and a couple of other girls who worked for us were gone.

Margaret had met and fallen in love with another showman named Stanley Green, and had just disappeared. Tom went to the police and all the other welfare organisations such as the Salvation Army to try and stop her from getting out of Adelaide because she was quite young. But she got away and married Stanley Green without her father's permission — some other person had forged Tom's signature on the papers.

Tom wanted to have the marriage annulled but I talked to him, and by this time she was pregnant, so it was decided to let the matter stand. She had a daughter, Mavis, but unfortunately the marriage did not last and after the breakup Margaret went to work with Arthur Greenhalgh, and worked about every show he had.

She turned out to be an outstanding performer, she could do anything. She could dance, spruik, she worked snakes in the snake pit, worked line-up shows, the Chinese troupe, she rode the Wall of Death with Frank Durkin, and the Globe of Death also with Frank Durkin. She was still with Arthur Greenhalgh and Tom was getting older, and by this time we were all back friends and family again, so she came back and worked with us again. We gave her an outfit to work for us, a truck, a tent and a caravan, and put her on the road working for herself.

Sadly, she became pretty sick she contracted T.B. and knocked herself about a bit with excessive drinking and smoking. She entered a sanatorium and finished up with emphysema.

She stopped working line-up shows and became very good with stocks — stock novelties. She made wonderful dolls and things like that, and was doing this work when she passed away.

There is no doubt she was a really wonderful show girl, having inherited her father's skills and talents.

The conversation then moved from individuals to show families and the first cab off the rank was the Sharman family.

THE SHARMAN FAMILY

Shirley said she knew old Jimmy Sharman who was working the same boxing troupe when she started on the road with Tom. She remembers that he did his own spruiking but always relied on someone else to get his pitch. He never used a megaphone or a microphone. His trademark — if you could call it that — was to place one hand over his ear and in the other hand he had a boxing glove. He would then go inside, work at matching the fighters and do the refereeing.

A very clever, smart man, he never stopped on the show-grounds, always preferring to stay in hotels or guest-houses. He had a very charming secretary who proved a big help to him in his business dealings, for besides being a good out-door showman, he was also a very shrewd business man. She remembers when 'young' Jimmy came onto the show scene — 'I still call him young Jimmy' — he was exactly ten years younger than Tom, and it was at the Bathurst Show. He worked with his father for a while and then he eventually took over and worked the troupe.

Like his father, he relied on someone to get his pitch, but unlike his father he mastered the microphone and used it very effectively. He mostly had someone doing the match-making, and he also had the assistance and experience of Rud Kee with him — 'and when he was on the door, I'll tell you what, no one could get past Rud Kee without a ticket, he was a wonderful backstop and friend to both father and son'.

All she remembers of the third Jimmy Sharman was as a child. His mother was not keen on staying on the showgrounds and as a result stayed in hotels. She always got on well with young Jimmy's wife who would call around and chat whenever she visited the show.

THE LABB FAMILY

Shirley knew the Labb family very well. 'Pedro' Labb and his wife and daughters and his son Vince junior. When she first came to know Vince Labb he had Smokey Dawson with him and the Labbs and Castles worked side by side at the Royal Melbourne Show one year.

In later years he had mirror-mazes. His son Vince junior, had carnivals in New Zealand where he spent most of his time. His other brother was a bookmaker in Melbourne.

Pedro was a very smart businessman, and she tells of a visit to the Labb's home at Woollahra in Sydney — a beautiful home, the building comprised a two-storey structure, with the Labb home on the top storey, and two self-contained flats on the ground floor which were rented out.

According to Shirley, Pedro's pride and joy in this beautiful structure was the back fence, which he made himself out of four-gallon kerosene drums, cut open, flattened out, and nailed to timber supports. He proudly gave Shirley and Tom a special inspection of this outstanding piece of work, and Shirley admits it made a very good fence!

One of the daughters carried on with the father, for unfortunately Mrs Labb suffered with diabetes, from which she finally died. And when Pedro passed away, this daughter, with the aid of a good manager, Brian McDonald, carried on the business.

THE SHORT FAMILY

The next family referred to was also a very old and respected one, the Shorts. As has become the custom with show families especially, there always appears to be at least two

generations — the 'old' and the 'young' — and in this respect this also applied to the Short family. Shirley makes the distinction as follows:

There was old Les Short and young Les Short,
The one we called young Les is the father of the boys on the showgrounds now, John and Peter. I did not know Les' first wife, but knew his second who worked variety shows and 'giggleville'. Young Les was a very good showman with lots of rides, dodgems, merry-go-rounds, and also some big rides and games which are now controlled by John and Peter. Les still handles the carnivals around Sydney and has lots of property up in Queensland — again, a very smart business man.

THE DURKIN FAMILY

Shirley Castles talks of the Durkin family with some authority, because of her step-daughter's association with them. Herbie Durkin had the Globe of Death and later the Mexican Hat Ride. She did not know Herbie's first wife but knew his second wife, Kath. They now live in Melbourne but have not been active in the business for some time.

Frank Durkin also had a dome, the Wall of Death — and Margaret Castles rode this show with Frank. But both Frank and his wife are now deceased.

Stan Durkin was more the engineer in the family set up — he made the ferris wheels and the globes but was not all that much involved in running of the show work. Stan, finished up in Brisbane and had also passed away. (These personalities are again the first generation of the family, the huge Durkin empire is still being run by 'younger' members of the family.)

THE WITTINGSLOW FAMILY

Shirley became acquainted with Tommy Wittingslow just after the Second World War, and also at the same time with 'young' Des (who incidently is now 'old' Des). She admits she is not too familiar with the third generation of the family, Des' boys, Des junior and Michael, who have come into the business in later years. Tommy Castles knew Tom Wittingslow when he first came into the business before the war, and often told Shirley of the young Wittingslow's exploits in guessing the weight of patrons, but Shirley's recollections go back to when he first started in the rides — with the horsey-plane, merry-go-round and games.

She speaks very highly of both Tom and Des Wittingslow. She has high praise for Tom and for the wonderful work he did as President of the Showmens' Guild, and of the many years before and after that time. The fact that he was prepared to help all showies — no matter what their circumstances — and right to this day, he still communicates with Shirley and offers an open invitation to her to visit his home whenever she is in Melbourne.

These actions she appreciates, especially from someone like Tommy who had become king in the rides business. And although Des and his sons are now so much involved in the business of Wittingslow Amusements, Tom was the person with the vision to establish the business in the first place, and she surmises, is still very much a part of the decision making process. She expresses the wish that this family continues to prosper, especially with their involvement with the Luna Park projects.

THE ROY BELL FAMILY

Of course Jimmy Sharman's name is the one that comes to the fore among local people when boxing tent shows are discussed but Shirley says that we should not forget to

mention Roy Bell, who in the eyes of many was equally as prominent as was Jimmy Sharman. Here are her impressions of Roy Bell and his family:

Roy Bell's family are still in show business, all except one girl, Joyce, who lives down at Forbes and is married to a farmer, and doing very well. His daughter Nita is on the grounds with Ken Deans, they have everything — rides and games, and he also has a very good head for business. Arnold, that's Nita's twin brother, is also still in the business.

I remember when they used to come up this way, specially the Parkes Show — must have been during school holidays and those kids (not Joyce, who must have been older) used to annoy hell out of us in the tent show. But they have been born and bred in the business and are now very good workers and show people in their own right. They have attempted to carry on the boxing troupe, the son and grandson, but without success. The expenses and restrictions are too great, they have to have all the equipment, and besides they are compelled to carry a doctor, and no business today can afford that.

THE OLD TIMERS

Having covered most of the ladies involved in show business, and some of the most prominent families, it was natural for Shirley to then turn to some of the real old showies who shared the stage with Tom Castles and who, like him, are legends in the field of outdoor showmen. Her starting point was Arthur Greenhalgh:

Arthur Greenhalgh was Tom Castles' idol and a very smart business man — smart, because other than the very early days, I never saw him actually do any work or spruiking. I've worked with him quite a bit on his shows at capital cities because he had the space and we had the show, and for all of that time all I can ever remember him doing was to occasionally have a little hit on the ticket-box, and his spruiking would consist of him saying 'get your tickets'. Nevertheless he was a very clever and astute business man and he would have imported more shows to this country than any other showman that I know of.

Dave Meekin: From what I heard from Tom, Dave Meekin started in show business as a boxer in a boxing troupe, and from all accounts was a very good boxer too. But when I first met him he had a pygmy show, little Ubangi the tiny pygmy lady with whom he made a fortune. He was a very good spruiker and worker — he did all his own work, even drove his own pegs in! He was a most generous man, and would pay some 'hangers-on' just to give them a bit of a hand out. He would be paying them to help him and they would be standing aside watching him do most of the manual work. He was a very strong man physically and an all-round wonderful showman who could do well anywhere. Unfortunately he contracted Parkinson's disease which reduced him from a giant of a man to a wreck, and finally was responsible for his death. He had a daughter, Beryl, who was an outstanding stage artist on the theatre circuit. Appearing frequently in shows at the Tivoli and other variety houses, but she has also passed away. Little Ubangi was with Beryl in her last years after Dave died, and she pre-deceased Beryl.

Bill Dwyer: I knew Bill Dwyer from when I first came to the show scene. He was there long before I was, but over the years Tom has told me much of his early days. But when I first knew him he was married to Tina and they had games. Bill is also a very smart man and a perfect gentleman. He is a good businessman and a good worker.

After he lost Tina he went in with the Durkins and now has interests in all the chairlifts and big ferris wheels in all the capital city shows. The big wheels seem to be getting bigger every year! Bill has lived in Newcastle for many, many years and is still active with business interests.

IS A GOOD SHOWIE ALSO A GOOD BUSINESS PERSON?

I posed the question to Shirley — after hearing her constantly referring to certain showies as ‘smart businessmen’:

I think that in recent times in show business education plays a big part in the business of showing, because now it has to be run as a business, and you have to be a bit smarter than your opposition.

Whereas the early showies did all sorts of things and got away with them, things that today would land you in jail.

I have heard Tom speak of some of the practices that some of the old boys used to employ that could almost be classed as fraud and deception. But today you do have to have a business head as well as being a good showman. And this is the situation that has been responsible for the introduction of managers into our field of show business. We were never able to sit in our caravans on show day like a lot of show people of today do, whilst their business goes on just the same. You could never do that with tent shows, you had to be there to work them yourself. You could employ someone and try and get a break from spruiking, you could write down what they had to say, but it was never said the way it should have been. I know this for a fact from our local shows, when we would get a casual spruiker and without that person knowing, we’d get out in the pitch and listen, and I tell you it never sounded the way it should have.

A SPLIT IN THE BUSINESS AND A BAN ON AMPLIFIERS

Parkes used to be the first show after Brisbane for many years and their run was to Parkes, Grenfell, Young and Cowra. Unfortunately this run clashed with the Adelaide Show so Tom and Shirley decided after a few years that they would split up with Shirley going to Adelaide and Tom staying behind and working the New South Wales shows — the run was his favourite part of the state, having been born and reared in the Cowra district. So Shirley would go to Adelaide and work for some other people as the Castles did not have space on the Adelaide Showgrounds.

They lost their space for using amplifiers, when they were banned. But according to Shirley everyone else were breaking the ban but with their sort of show it was not possible to get through — especially at a capital city show — without amplification, although in the early days Tom used to use a megaphone but then there was not the loud music which now accompanies the rides.

In an endeavour to prove the authorities wrong in Adelaide she and Tom went around all the South Australian showmen and asked them if the amplifiers were worrying them — they had turned the speakers inwards instead of out and everyone they approached said that they were not concerned with the noise.

However, it wasn’t long afterwards that a South Australian showman named Stoney Robinson — who travelled in all states, told Tom that the South Australian showmen were taking up a petition concerning the noise and were taking the petition to the show society to have the amplifiers banned. This petition resulted in the loss of their space at Adelaide, but in later years they were back and worked Adelaide — with amplifiers, on someone else’s ground, but this cut their take to fifty-fifty shares — Tom and Shirley doing the work and the owner of the space putting his hand out and saying ‘thank you



12. Shirley Castles grabbing a pitch

very much!' That was Shirley's explanation for the reason for splitting up for that time of year.

While Tom was working 'at home' she would take a couple of girls to Adelaide. The people she worked for would supply her with a tent, but as an indication as to how cut-throat this game can be Shirley related this episode:

The people I worked with had the previous year come along to our show, he was a performer in the live theatre, a comic actually. But I remember the Adelaide Show of 1949 — the year we lost our ground — this man coming along with a tape measure, measuring up our line-up boards, taking photos of the front of the show and from that information made it all up and made an outfit for himself and was able to submit this to the society in an application for ground space and was able to get it. What made me made was they also copied our 'tale' and story word for word.

On one occasion I was taking one of the girls to the toilet and we got held up. She was a married girl and as we moved through the crowd some larrikin touched her on the breast and I turned around and gave him a whack in the mouth, and to my surprise he hit me back, and I think I might have fought about three rounds with him in a circle made of people watching and nobody doing anything to help me. But I kept fighting him until I got a headlock on him and threw him to the ground, bottles of beer and all. We then went on our way back to the tent.

As I passed the Durkins Glove of Death, which was next to us he called me over and said 'Shirley, there's something I can't believe, they have been up on that line-up board and told your tale word for word like a piece of poetry and never turned hardly anyone to the ticket box', and I said to him that they had learned the tale word for word but there are few little 'eelies' (our word for it), that I have never taught them and never will, and that is the difference.

And that of course is exactly how it works, they are only a couple of little things and that is all it takes, because people are like sheep and unless you can get the first ones going to the box you could lose the whole pitch, and that is why quite often if you should see a showie or someone we knew walking through the pitch, and there was a little bit of hesitation in the crowd in moving to the ticket-box, you would tell him to 'e-jar' which meant to lead the way to the ticket-box, pretend to buy a ticket, walk to the door, pretend to give the ticket to the girl and go out under the flap. And that one movement would start the whole crowd moving towards the ticket-box.

THE NIGHT SHOWS

The next point of discussion centered around the relationship between the sideshow fraternity and those supporting entertainers responsible for the entertainment and amusement of the public after the day show finished on the showgrounds.

Shirley well remembers these night shows and the show people who used to run them. This is her description of those events:

The night shows were just about in every town which conducted a show during the day. Normally they would have a block of land, as the circuses still have today, and they would have their pitch — also similar to today's circus. As an example, present day circuses could show in a country town tonight and then move on to the next town. But in the early days companies such as Sorlie's and Lavines' always tried to secure land on the river banks as close as possible to the showgrounds.

They travelled just about everywhere the ordinary showies did — up north on the same show circuit, and they would have sold out houses every night, because in country towns in those days they never got much entertainment. And that is why today the local show is not so important because they are so many counter attractions.

In my time the night shows had companies such as Sorlie, Macs, the Great Lavines — Les Lavine was a good magician, he did very big illusions, very spectacular. but he could not do a lot of small magic for which Tom was so expert. Nevertheless he had a full show which included a ballet and pulled full houses at every country town. We showies used to patronise these night shows and with our arrangement co-operation or 'amster' (free admission) we formed a very strong association over the years. I did not meet George Sorlie in my time but I knew his daughter Maisie, who was an excellent performer and spruiker, but is off the scene now and living in Brisbane. I knew George Sorlie's second wife Grace who continued running the company after her husband died with Bobbie La Brun, a very good comedian. After Grace died he and his wife took over the running of the show — and the La Bruns made a very good go of it.

NOT DESPERATE ENOUGH

As with all the showies involved in these revelations, Shirley Castles was asked whether we will ever see tent shows again, and although she hesitated in her response. she said:

Well I don't think they will come back, I can't see how they will. There have been a few of the younger show people who have tried in recent years but they do not seem to get a go on.

Tom has sold banners to a couple of them and tried to teach them a lot of tricks of the trade, but they don't seem to cotton on. I don't know what it is, unless they are not desperate enough!

This generation has had too many good times. I've seen them grow up, and these are the ones mostly on the showgrounds now. Up until now — and of course I can't speak about the last couple of years, they have not experienced hard times, in fact they have had it pretty easy, they have never had to do it real hard, and whether they have had that necessary desperation I don't quite know.

In all fairness the scene has changed dramatically, for the rides seem to have taken over — such big thrilling rides. It's a long way from the thrill rides of the tent show days — the merry-go-round, the horsey-plane, the razzle-dazzle, and the most exciting of them all — the chair-a-plane!

On reflection, I can't see tent shows coming back, for one thing capital shows have banned all live freaks, human and animal.

Over the years we showed little horses, big dogs, and all sorts of animals even crocodiles, but probably today minority groups such as animal liberation people would never give you a chance to show people some of the animals they might never otherwise see. Another side is that I don't think you could run a successful tent show unless you can do some of the things yourself, because staff are much more difficult to hold today, I know from people in the business — particularly the big ride people who tell me that staff now are just a complete headache because they can get just about as much on the dole as what showmen can afford to pay them in wages and they will not work the long hours required — which include putting up and pulling down, and travelling, maybe all night to the next place — if the option is show work or sitting at home and getting the dole, the latter is nearly always the winner. So staff is one part of the problem, and the other thing to make a success in tent show business is you have to have performers in the family and be able to do something yourself.

With us, when we worked tent shows, we could have half the staff leave and with Tom, myself, and young Tom and my other grand-daughter Anna, we could carry on. Anna was the little Indian girl, young Tom was the little Indian boy and we could stage the Indian Rope Trick. I could do my second-sight act, Tom his fire-eating act, the girls could dance and could also do fire-eating. So even if all of our staff walked out we could still put on a show, maybe not quite as good a show, but nevertheless carry on.

So, I cannot see tent shows coming back, not in my time which is a very great pity for I think from speaking to local people — in latter years I have done quite a bit of this — they say they don't go to shows now because there is no real fun anymore, there are no tent shows, no Jimmy Sharmans!

TOO DIFFERENT AND TOO DIFFICULT

Shirley volunteered the information that she would not like to be running a girlie show today. In her day they didn't have, or hear of drugs, the biggest problem was if she had any drinkers. In which case they would be on their way very smartly. Her practice was to go round about three times a night checking the girls' caravans to see who was home and who wasn't. She confesses that she may have been considered a strict master but in that way she had good girls and good staff.

She doubts that this type of control would work today but in her day in tent show business, particularly in the variety and girl shows as they called them, you had to control them because if on the night before show, and that was the rule in their outfit, no one was allowed out. The reasoning was that if the girls were seen out up the town, maybe in the pubs, or other places, and the next day on the line-up board they were being introduced as 'Fifi, the famous fan-dancer' the show immediately lost credibility and became a big laugh. So the strict control was obvious, and these rules were always strictly enforced.



13. *The Tattooed Lady*

TELEVISION MUSICALS AND TENT SHOWS

In a reflective mood Shirley picked out the advent of television and big live musicals as the main reasons for the decline of the tent shows. She considers, and with good reason, the big impact television made on the show business, especially the tent shows.

She emphasises the point that so much can now be seen on the television medium that was never available in past experience, and this experience is available to everyone without having to leave their own homes to be entertained.

Another point not generally conceded is the change in attitude of many people towards the big international musicals. Shows such as 'Hair', 'Cats', the 'Phantom of the Opera' and 'Jesus Christ Superstar' caused a revolution in present day entertainment.

Now it is possible to make up a bus load of people from almost any country town to travel to the city to see these big productions, have an overnight stop over, and return home. All of these counter attractions make the local show almost a lost cause — it is certainly not appreciated nearly as much as in days gone by.

THE YATALA PROJECT

She concedes she did not know much about the Yatala scheme in its early days, but she had on many occasions pointed to the need for some place where older showies could live together in retirement, for in their working days they were a big family. Not a caravan park or any such place, for at her time of life that would not be the way to go.

Shirley points out that most of the older showies own their own homes but unfortunately they are scattered all over Australia, and her idea was that in their latter years it would be nice if they could all be together in a special retirement village.



14. *The 'Great Kahara' with some of his Line-up Girls*

Her first recollections of the Yatala undertaking was at a Guild meeting — she and Tom always attended the important ones, where they heard of the proposal for Yatala and she had since seen this proposal become a reality.

She has visited the project on a special invitation she received after Tom's death, to the official opening, and she declares that the function was something unbelievable. On her calculations there would have been four to five hundred people there, show people all dressed up in their very best — not like you see them on show days, and most of the high ranking dignitaries from the area were in the official party. She was very impressed with the wonderful function room and thinks the idea will develop into bigger and better things. Now with the suggestion of a Hall of Fame type of museum she has promised to donate Tom's banners, in fact they are in the garage waiting to be picked up.

This brings untold joy and satisfaction to Shirley Castles just to know that evidence of her beloved husband and soul-mate for half a century, will live on in an atmosphere cherished by all who were associated with men and women who did so much to bring entertainment and amusement to those less able to go too far from home.

THE GUILD

In winding up these tapes, Shirley paid tribute to the Showmen's Guild, saying that over the years it has gone a long way. Recalling some of the earlier days she is reminded that Tom was a Vice-President for many years, and a ground delegate for as many years as she can remember. In the old days Tom and some other delegate had to go around and collect the rents, but in those days they had to go to the showies' camps, and there were times when they did not have the money to pay, in which case they had to wait until the

first house of the show and then collect. In other cases they would be in town and again Tom had to play a waiting game.

There were times when they would be awakened in the middle of the night by late arrivals hammering on the caravan door wanting to know where their space was, and Tom would have to get up and show them.

One instance particularly stands out in Shirley's memory, it was at the Rockhampton Show. Normally, they would get in about four sessions on the first day at Rocky, but in this case, they missed the lot because Tom was out collecting rent — the showies had to earn the rent in their early houses before they could pay. Being a delegate in those early days was a very demanding job, but Tom was a good communicator and was always able to work out the problems with the show societies to everyone's satisfaction.

IT'S LONLEY NOW

Throughout the whole period of making these tapes with Shirley Castles it became patently clear that her life of fifty years with Tom was something very, very special. Every reference she made to him was something almost reverent, her admiration for him was something special to witness, and although she does not enjoy the best of health, her life is made easier by the love and devotion shown to her by her son Tomo.

As a final tribute to her loving husband and partner for more than half a century, Shirley Castles had this to say:

I have never been the star of the show, or liked the limelight, but I hope and think that for these last 51 years I have always been in the background, pushing and organising, and working alongside Tom, and I have tried to help in everything that he has done.

Sadly Shirley Castles' life came to a close on Sudnay, 28 May, 1995 at the Cowra Hospital.

For a number of years she suffered indifferent health which it was understood was caused, initially, by the horrific road accident she and Tom were involved in on the Newell Highway a number of years ago.

3

Who'll Take a Glove?

(From the Jimmy Sharman Tapes)

The Sharman family would be recognised as the best known of the old time outdoor showies. Wherever the subject of tent shows comes up the Sharman name comes to the fore, even among many of our younger people who have at some time heard their parents or grandparents speak of the old time showmen and the now lost tent shows.

This is the story of the Sharman family through three generations as told by Jimmy Sharman Junior.

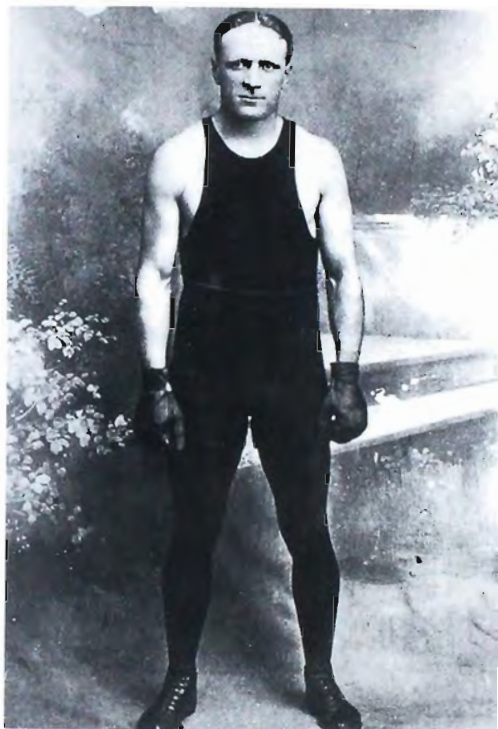
Jimmy Sharman Junior was born in the Riverina town of Narrandera on 28 October, 1912. (He still visits his old birthplace whenever he gets a chance, because he says that he has more cousins in Narrandera than there are rabbits!) But before digging too deeply into his life as an outdoor showman, we considered it was necessary to background his father who would be recognised as one of the outstanding showmen ever to grace the show scene.

The original Jimmy Sharman was born at Narellan, outside Camden in New South Wales towards the close of the century (and incidently passed away in the Camden Hospital in 1965), he was one of ten children he had two brothers, Charlie and Jack, and seven sisters. Even as a kid he was mad on boxing — from all accounts the only member of the family so inclined. The family came from pretty poor circumstances, his father was a great man but had no education whatsoever thus he was unable to read or write.

The story goes that as a youngster Jimmy used to walk barefoot from Narellan to either Camden or Campbelltown, a distance of two miles each way, to be at the regular fights and would take on any of the kids who wanted to fight and always won.

On one of these occasions the 13 year old southpaw offered to fight a boxer whose opponent did not show up. This bloke was about 20 years old and outreached and outweighed young Jimmy by many inches and pounds, but Jimmy scored the decision by quite a big margin. In those days the preliminary boys relied on a 'tarpaulin shower' for their prize money (patrons used to shower the ring with coins — mostly pennies and half-pennies and the occasional silver coin).

Later that night when he had successfully got into his room, through the window, he placed his share of the purse neatly on the dressing-table for his mother to see first thing in the morning. He felt proud of the fact that at last the family 'had a quid'. However, it was his mother who first discovered the money — she looked at her bruised and battered son and without further ado fetched the whip and gave him a hiding, thinking he had obtained the money from doing something not quite legal.



15. *The Fighting Machine — Jimmy Sharman*

He ran away from home when he was 14 years old and picked up an occasional job around a shearing shed or wherever he could find work. He finished up in Cowra, in mid-western New South Wales under the assumed name of Billy Shadow and one day while sitting outside the 'Garden of Roses' café he was approached by a local policeman with the greeting, 'Hullo Jimmy Sharman' and in reply Jimmy answered 'Good-day', thus falling for the trap used so often with runaway kids, and was on the first train back to Narellan.

THE FIGHTING MACHINE

As time passed he fought anybody and everybody, and in a career of 84 fights he won 83 on knockouts and the one he lost on disqualification, he broke three ribs of his opponent. Well known boxing authority and referee of the day, Joe Wallis, made it clear to all and sundry that with the exception of the great Les Darcy, Jimmy Sharman was the best fighter he had ever seen.

Dick Lean and John Wren, who were at that time matching fights in the Stadium in Melbourne, enticed him to go to Melbourne for fights and made arrangements for him to be boarded out with an elderly lady in Footscray. One day after training he returned to the house to find the old lady with a cold, she had a bottle of smelling salts boiling on the stove to be used for an inhalation, but she was unable to open the bottle so Jimmy went to help her and the contents of the bottle exploded in his face, especially in his eyes, and he was blind for six months. And from all accounts, it was only the medical skill of a

Doctor Pockley from Sydney that saved his sight. However, this put paid to his Melbourne experience.

THE £100 A SIDE BET — AND THE JACK CARTER AFFAIR

In 1911 Jimmy Sharman was in Temora training fighters, one of whom was Tommy Murphy, when a fellow by the name of Smith, a New Zealand shearer, kept sending him white feathers in an endeavour to shame him into fighting him. Jimmy Sharman was aware that Smith was skiting to all his shearing mates that the Riverina boy was not game to step into the ring, so he had no alternative but to tell Smith to put his money where his mouth was. It was agreed that the fight take place at the Star Theatre in Temora for a purse of £100 a side, with all proceeds to go to the Temora District Hospital. Smith was knocked out in the first round.

What made Jimmy Sharman famous as a fighter was his bout with Jack Carter at the Wool-Shed at Wagga Wagga for a purse of £500 (\$1,000) — this remains the biggest side-wager in the history of Australian boxing.

They fought under the Lightweight limit, which in those days was 10 stone. Carter was a brilliant boxer and southpaw Sharman was a dogged type who was extremely fit, and a deadly puncher.

For the first ten rounds of the contest Carter 'painted a picture' on Jimmy who was always confident that his fitness would help him win, and he kept boring in and taking a fair amount of punishment, but by the 15th round he knew he could win. Carter was now taking a lot of heavy punches and despite repeated calls to stop the fight Carter's father would not do so — he considered that his son was so far ahead on points he refused to throw in the towel. And he also knew that if his son was beaten the whole of the proceeds would go to the Temora District Hospital and they just fought for the £500 a side. Jimmy Sharman kept appealing to the referee to stop the bout in the 18th round because Carter was in such a mess but Carter senior still refused, so in the 19th round he knocked Carter out.

This famous fight remained a hurt all through the rest of Jimmy Sharman's life because Carter finished up blind and was never the same again. Jimmy Sharman never ever forgave Carter's father for not agreeing to stop that fight. (This was the end of competitive boxing for Jimmy Sharman he never again fought professionally in the ring.)

In persevering with the subject of his father and his fighting prowess, it was possible to bring out more of the history of the first Jimmy Sharman —

I understand that when Dad was courting my mother in Narrandera the irrigation works were going into the district and a fellow called John Symonds was the head of Peters Brothers the contractors doing the work. Dad started off there doing the work as a 'water joey', filling the billies, making tea and all that sort of thing. But he used to sneak away at the weekend and fight. Wherever there was a fight Dad would be in it, he would have a fight and for a win he might get £10 or £15 whatever the purse was and he was never beaten so he collected all the time. Now you can imagine what a young bloke was like in those days, with little education, and life put up many temptations for the unwary.

So John Symonds took an interest in him because all his mates used to follow his fights, and mostly have a bet on the side, so his boss used to go to the fights with him and as soon as Dad got paid he would take the winnings from him and if the purse was £20 he would give Dad £5 and bank the balance of £15, and thus built up a bankroll for Dad and at the same time educated him in handling money.

Further to this help there was Alex Gibson, Manager of the Commercial Bank of Australia in Temora, who was later promoted to the position of General Manager of



16. *Early boxing troupe*

the Commercial Bank in London. These two men were responsible in helping Dad with his finances and investments.

Our conversation moved to opposition troupes and Jimmy first drew attention to how his father started in the tent boxing game.

THE FIRST BOXING TROUPE

Dad's first venture into show business was at Ariah Park in 1911, and being conscious of the value of a good spruiker to draw a crowd, he practiced his spiel on a stump, this training unfortunately turned out to be a waste of time for the first time he climbed up on the board — at Ardlethan in 1911 — and opened his mouth to get the pitch, not a word came out! But being well known in the district this caused a fair amount of good humoured banter and catcalls and questions wanting to know who was to fight who? So Dad got his first house by sign language — that is by pointing from one fighter to another on the board.

THE LINEUP

Throughout his career Jimmy Sharman senior had some very famous fighters for example names like Frank Burns, who was middleweight champion and was a blacksmith's striker at Temora when Jimmy Sharman first discovered him, and incidently Frank Burns was Georgie Barnes' father; there was George Cook from Gilgandra, heavyweight champion of Australia; Tommy Uren, who was working on the Caterach Dam when Jimmy brought him to prominence, he later became a triple champion of Australia; Billy Grime came from Young in N.S.W., and came under the notice of Jim

Sharman when as a very young bloke the old fighter noticed that this young kid had sawdust and shavings on the front of his jumper, a dead giveaway that he had entered the tent via the back flap.

Billy Grime would fight any kid his own weight and his spectacular boxing career started in the Sharman tent. There was Micky Miller who came from Wellington in N.S.W. and who entered the fight game the same way as Billy Grime and later in this career was a dual Australian champion. (Billy Grime held three Australian Championships.) In fact these two almost became an embarrassment to the great man for they were continually wanting to fight and were always first in line for a stouch.

There was Jackie Green, a triple champion of Australia, who had Jimmy Sharman to thank for starting his career. He held his championships at the age of 18 years and was burnt-out a year later. Next there was Jack Hassen, he came from Charters Towers in Queensland, he was working as a drover when he came to the notice of Jim Sharman, and in the opinion of Jimmy junior, was one of the nicest people you could meet. Of course there were many other fighters besides those few mentioned who called the Sharman tent home over the years, a lot of whom became good citizens and business people, and a few who fell by the wayside.

RUD KEE

One of the most likeable and memorable members of the Sharman troupe was Rud Kee — who came out to Australia with his parents from China, as a baby. He came under the notice of Jimmy Sharman when word got about that there was a Chinese man who could use his dooks, but Jimmy, with all his contacts, could not find him. In August 1916 whilst doing the Forbes Show he once again got on the track of this Chinese fighter. He was on a hawker's wagon plying his trade locally.

At this time Jimmy Sharman still had the occasional fight in the tent — he would take on anyone — and as it happened he had a bout with a big burly fighter and was a bit the worse for wear when he met up with Rud Kee and tried to entice him to join the troupe. He opened up as usual by saying it was not a hard job, with plenty of opportunities to get about, and the story goes that Rud Kee looked him straight in the eye and said, 'You are no great advertisement for the job with your black eyes and being all burred up'. This meeting in August 1916 was to continue as a partnership for over 50 years and was generally recognised as one of the real successes of the tent show days.

It is a matter of record that Rud Kee was one of the toughest people to get past at the ticket box — young Jimmy Sharman concedes that when Rud Kee was on the door 'he wouldn't let the breeze through the door without a ticket'. And during his period with the troupe is reputed to have knocked back two Governors from entering the tent. When Jimmy, in his embarrassment, took him to task for this oversight Rud merely said 'You didn't say they could go in without a ticket'. Jimmy Sharman asserts that Rud Kee was half his father's success, he filled many Sharman tent when he was an active boxer, and subsequent to that took a great interest in the whole enterprise. He was a dominant part of the boxing game covering two generations of the Sharman family and died peacefully in his sleep at the Home for the Aged in Arncliffe, New South Wales, at the good age of 85 years.

THE OPPOSITION

Next we talked about other boxing troupes operating earlier than his father's or at the same time and he came out with names like Snowy Flynn, who was the 'Mr Big' in tent show troupes, and he recalled the tale his father used to relate of the early days at the Maitland Show when the great showman Dave Meekin was boxing and was on the board with Snowy Flynn — from all accounts Dave Meekin was a very good boxer.



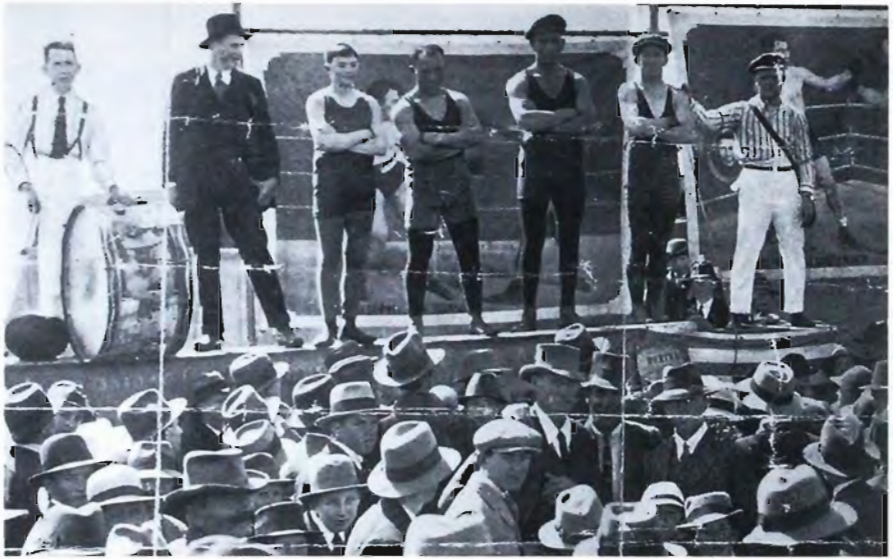
17. *Pastor (later Sir) Doug Nicholls and Rud Kee*

Anyway Jimmy Sharman was the first serious opposition for Snowy Flynn and he wanted to make sure that the new bloke didn't get an easy start in the game.

Being well established in the tent show business Snowy Flynn produced his big guns to the crowd, his lineup consisted of two Australian Champions, Dave Meekin, and a number of very handy fighters. And being what he was, Snowy Flynn had the biggest pitch you could imagine. The two tents were almost facing each other and just as Snowy was about to use the key words 'all down and in you go' Jimmy Sharman got up on his board with only one other person, just one, and the whole crowd turned away from Snowy Flynn's tent and advanced on Jimmy Sharman, who then proceeded to call his fighters on to the board, he had fighters such as Tommy Murphy, George Thompson (his first fighter) and several others. But the lone boxer first up on the board was none other than the great Les Darcy, who entertained the crowd with boxing demonstrations throughout the period of the Maitland Show.

The story goes that later in that show Snowy Flynn went around to Jimmy Sharman and said, 'Little fella, I have always treated you as a "mug", now I know that I'm the mug'. And from that day they worked out an agreement and became great mates.

Other troupes were operated by, Harry Johns, in Victoria; Tom O'Malley; Johnnie Shields; Tich Lennon and Bosey Cusko, who had a very good bird and monkey show also. Bosey later secured a long contract in Melbourne with his bird 'Peter the Parrot'; then there was Sandy Moore, and when he died his brother Selby took over and later still his son Alan Moore, and another one was Les McNab — all very good showmen. But the main opposition was Roy Bell, who was a great friend of the Sharman family, and operated for years. He was a great showman and a good bloke whose family have all done well in show business, and are still prominent throughout N.S.W. and Victoria and up north mainly around Darwin and the top end.



18. *The Sharman Troupe about 1917*



19. *Sydney Show Line-up 1938 — Jimmy Sharman 6th from right*

ENTER THE SECOND JIMMY SHARMAN

Moving forward Jimmy Sharman Junior described his early days as a showie's kid. We started off by asking whether he travelled the show circuit with his parents to which he answered:

During those early years things were very hard and my mother and father were battling to get a quid and I was brought up by my grandmother in Narrandera. But there were times when my parents were working at local shows that I was able to soak up the atmosphere and generally make a nuisance of myself.

He considers his childhood was good nevertheless, and puts forward the fact that he could have been the first showie kid to have a college education. His father enrolled him at St. Patrick's College Goulburn, in 1926 and he stayed there until 1930, when he became a student at the prestigious St. Joseph's College at Hunters Hill in Sydney for a further two years.

Speaking of his college days he admits that academically he was not the top of the class, but in sports he was a shining light. He was in the cricket team and football team and starred in both these sports. At St. Joseph's, like all New South Wales Public Schools, the football code was Rugby Union, and after leaving school most of the 'Joey's' boys migrated to the Drummoyne Rugby Union Club, and in 1933 Jim was one of those players.

He played seven games with Drummoyne, one game in which he scored two tries from the full-back position (at that time a joint Australian record). However, the club was not able to find him a suitable job. He was selected in the New South Wales team to play Victoria on the King's Birthday weekend in June 1933 and being keen to hang on to his prized representative jersey and socks (in those days these items remained the property of the N.S.W. Rugby Union) he put on a long leather overcoat over his football togs and changed into his street clothes in the toilet of the Manly ferry, and with these prized possessions safely stowed in his portmanteau he caught the train at Central Station for Narrandera.

He had played Australian Rules football whilst living in Narrandera and on his return after the successful representative game against Victoria at Rugby Union, he played out the rest of the season with the Narrandera Aussie Rules team and they won the South-West premiership that year.

Soon after he returned to Narrandera he received a letter from Len Plasto inviting him to go down to Sydney and play with the Western Suburbs Rugby League Club. In the same mail he received a letter from the South Melbourne Aussie Rules Club inviting him to go to Melbourne and try out with that club. However Western Suburbs won the day and Jim went on to play eight years with Wests, to captain the top team, and become a Life Member of the Western Suburbs Rugby League Club and also the Leagues Club — he also played first grade cricket with Wests.

Speaking of payments to players, Jimmy tells of the year he captained Wests (1939), he played every game and his match payments amounted to the princely sum of £17.7.7, (\$35.70). Len Plastow supplemented this amount with a bonus of £50 (\$100) out of his own pocket.

In this season Laurie Ward, who was the Australian full-back was not able to get leave from the Education Department to go New Zealand with the New South Wales Rugby League team captained by Ray Stehr and having to find a substitute in a hurry, Jimmy was picked to fill the vacancy, and played all nine games and for the tour collected £68 (\$136). He really is not sour with what is happening in today's sport but quietly draws a comparison with the champions of today and those of yesteryear and laughingly says that his gross payment in 1939 would hardly buy a pair of footy boots today!

Over this period and for many years Jimmy was working at the big Sydney store of Anthony Hordens and had scored a duodenal ulcer. When war broke out and being medically unfit for the services, one of the Stapleton brothers who was a head man in Armstrong Holland a big earth-moving business at Mascot took Jimmy into the organisation and put him in charge of the sub-contractors, where he was to remain until the war hostilities ceased.

All this time he was in close contact with his parents and there were occasions, even when he was still at school, and especially during the Royal Easter Show in Sydney, when he would help out in the ticket box.

Even with these occasional family reunions he sadly admits that there would not have been a father and son relationship which was further apart than that of his and his father. And he feels quite sure that this situation was caused mainly through the absence of his father from home. This was to prove a lesson to Jimmy for the future as regards his own son.

In later years he was the NSW representative for the Melbourne based Sporting Globe paper, and with his sporting contacts was able to fill this requirement quite well, however, at this time his ulcer started to cause him a lot of pain and discomfort and his doctor suggested that there would be no improvement unless he was prepared to change his lifestyle for at least a month, otherwise his health problem would worsen.

THE BIG CHANGE

About this time, December 1945, his father came to town and Jimmy's wife Christina, told Jim Sharman Senior what his doctor had said about his son, and with this the elder Sharman suggested that they join forces for a months holiday and father and son hit the road together on a paid holiday for young Jimmy. (He dryly recalls that that holiday started in 1945 and is still going!) Speaking in retrospect Jimmy Sharman had this to say —

Dad was a tough old bloke, his education was the university of hard knocks, and for all the years I worked for him he never once offered praise or compliment but I have heard that when he was with his old mates like Merv Williams and Ron Casey he used to admit that I was doing a good job, but he would never tell me.

He tells of the early days with the troupe and recalls that the initiation was tough and the life was a cruel life. His trade was operating bodies, many of whom were pretty crude — they are all good when they start but after two or three months they start to show their true colours.

SOME OF THE 'DRUM BEATERS'

Jimmy Sharman spoke freely of some of his 'good boys'.

George Bracken (his correct name was Brackenridge but Jim shortened it to Bracken — came from Ingham in Queensland, he was a coloured boy of mostly Island blood who never had a drink of alcohol in his life nor smoked a cigarette — he was Lightweight Champion of Australia for a number of years and a real little gentleman.

Bindy Jack, was one of Jimmy's creations and came from Sarina (near Mackay) in Queensland, he was only a little flyweight fighter, and like Elly Bennett he had this great white-toothed smile although he was black as tar and could fight like a tiger. In later years he joined Pastor Sir Doug Nicholls in his work in Fitzroy, Melbourne, and took a great interest in education for coloured people.

George Fleming, came from Brisbane, and was Featherweight Champion of Australia, his proper name was George Ellis, and to quote Jim 'was an ornament to the game'.



20. *The firm of Sharman and Sharman with Rud Kee*

When we spoke to Jim on how difficult it was for him to handle some of the more aggressive types he answered —

It is a matter of psychology, as I said Dad was a tough old guy he started from scratch and would never stand any nonsense, and as the old saying goes, 'booze and boxing don't mix', and that was a religion with Dad, and also became my creed. And when some of the fellows did get drunk you had to handle them yourself, and from time to time this meant telling the culprit to pack his bag and get out.

THE NEW BOYS

The method of selecting his fighters was one reason why Jimmy Sharman did not have all that much strife with his troupe. In many cases he found that at country towns there were young kids wanting to become fighters and also wanting to travel, they would be isolated in the town and wanted to see more of the state.

He made it a practice of never saying anything to the boys unless their parents were present, and if their parents were there he would outline the situation —

That the young fellow can join the troupe and do a tour for the whole year or part. He will have to behave himself, and his weekly pay will be so much and keep, and if he is a smoker he will be given an allowance, but I will not pay the boy until we come home when I will hand over his money in front of you people.

This method of deal with the young people created an outstanding trust with parents especially coloured people. He went on to say that most of the coloured boys were good.

there was the occasional bad one, but then again there were plenty of bad white blokes too.

DRUMMING UP CUSTOM

Like all good showies Jimmy Sharman was loathe to disclose all the secrets of his trade, but did go so far as to generally tell of his method of matching fighters at country shows — more of that later, but first let's go back a step to the first Jimmy Sharman and one of his means of attracting fighters. This is an extract from a recent book 'Cowra on the Lachlan' —

Scores were settled in Jimmy Sharman's colourful tent, the most popular sideshow attraction for many years. An advertisement in the Cowra Guardian in September 1922 promised — 'Any two locals having a grievance to settle will be given the opportunity to settle their differences, and at the same time earn a good purse by putting up a good battle'. (Sharman's troupe which came to Cowra from 1920 until 1971, lured one local lad, Tom Coe, who travelled with the troupe for many years.)

Now Jimmy Sharman Junior assured me that he was divulging a trade secret when he said —

If you go to a town and there are no fighters, you don't just go there and put your tent up and pull it down again and go away, you must have a programme. So you talk somebody in — although they may not be able to fight at all, to come in and box an exhibition. But the main action where people get the value for their money would be at times with two of my own fighters. You'd break them in and they would deceive a lot of people too, they had to be good otherwise people would not come back.

But some of the best fights in the tent, in Dad's time and mine, were between two of our own blokes. You would pull up at a town and they would both fall in love with the same girl, and you'd go out to the camp and there would be a bare-knuckle fight so you'd break it up and when you got back to the next town you'd put one bloke on the ground and the other up on the board. Your pitch would be that one came from Bullabakanka or anywhere, and when I got them in the ring I would say 'now go for your life', and boy you would see a good fight.

Jimmy tells the story of the American negro Tiger Payne, who arrived in Australia at the age 16 years, he was a Catholic by religion, and as his mentor Jimmy Sharman Senior, took him to Temora. The people of Temora had never seen a negro before and at the time of his visit the Catholic bazaar was on and the George Sorlie show was also in town. Jim's mother and father decided to go to the George Sorlie attraction, and left young Jim and Tiger Payne to attend the bazaar. To begin with Tiger 'bit' Jimmy the First for £5 (a fortune in those days) and at the bazaar bought raffles, bats, and tried every game there was and the only thing he won was a mouth-organ.

The Sharman family stayed at the Shamrock Hotel in Temora this night and to everyone's annoyance Tiger would not go to bed until he learned to play 'Annie Laurie' on his mouth-organ.

The next morning they went down to breakfast and on the table was a big bottle of Leon Perrin worchestershire sauce and Tiger took a desert-spoon and filled it with the sauce, drank it down and then repeated the dose. The young goggle-eyed Sharman asked him why he had taken the dose to which Tiger replied 'Son, it keeps me black!'

THE TAKE-OVER

Speaking of life on the road, Jimmy Sharman revealed that his father never learned to drive a vehicle — but he was a very good back-seat driver according to his son, and the older Sharman always stayed in hotels, whereas his son used his caravan.

The annual circuit followed by the troupe started in the New England district, took in most of the country shows and this would be a pipe-opener for the Royal Easter Show in Sydney. After Sydney they would head west doing Bathurst, Orange, Coonamble and Walgett. They would then do the northern run to Gympie or Maryborough in Queensland, and continue north as far as the Atherton Tablelands, in far north Queensland. They would then return to the Brisbane Exhibition. And from the Exhibition they showed at Wagga, then across to Cowra and Young before turning south to Narrandera and shows in that area. Next would be Albury en route to the Royal Melbourne Show.

From Melbourne they would make tracks to Swan Hill, Shepparton, and across west to Warracknabeal, Rainbow, and a few others in the Wimmera and Mallee on their way to south-east South Australia. They would return to Warracknabeal and then do Noorat which Jimmy describes as a freak of a show. A small town which can compare more than favourable with any major provincial show with their cattle classes and grand parade. He mentions at this show all children under 14 years are admitted free, and goes on to say that some of the 'kids' taking advantage of this concession would be almost as old as he or I!

Another thing that makes Noorat different is that it is most necessary to have got all your houses in by 3.30 pm because there would be no one left on the showgrounds, they all go home to milk!

The circuit would finish at Camperdown in the Western District of Victoria in December. (At this stage Jimmy sighed and said, 'They were great days filled with wonderful memories'.)

WHO'LL TAKE A GLOVE?

Reminded of his father's 'trade-cry' of 'Who'll take a Glove?' to get his pitch, and the Sharman action of placing the right hand over the right ear, Jimmy said he copies these idiosyncrasies from his father to carry on the Sharman tradition — despite the occasional reminder from his father that he should develop a style of his own!

He continues to assure us that he was a very fortunate son who fell into a ready made business and that had he not been up to the job he would have got a kick right in the backside and told to find his own way in life.

Fortunately he made the grade and stuck it out until 1971, but the game became progressively more difficult as time passed. There were counter attractions such as ringside boxing on television, and besides, finding staff became an increasing problem — and those you could employ were not all that good. Besides, he was getting sick of the game, and he had a wife and son who were becoming strangers because he was never home with them. (Maybe the pattern of his own lonely life as a youngster could have also been an influence?)

The last straw for the boxing troupe was when legislation was passed restricting boxers to one fight a week, and if he got knocked out, he could not fight again for a month. And, every boxer had to undergo medical examinations and be pronounced fit to fight. So he finished at the Shepparton Show in Victoria in 1971, thus ending what must be considered as one of the most notable of show business enterprises — The Jimmy Sharman Boxing Troupe. From 1911 to 1971.

In a tribute to his father Jimmy said —

He was a great showman, one of the best ever, he was a straight shooter, and had the respect of everybody, and like many others in the game, there is no son as good as his father — nevertheless you can just do the best you can.

At this point it was suggested that the Sharman name could be considered the best known in tent show business, which happened to be a lead in for Jim to tell of the exhibition in the Mitchell Library in Sydney which gives a wonderful display of the Jimmy Sharman Troupe. Incorporated in the display are the old banners on loan from the Hall of Fame in Longreach, Queensland, the old drum (which was older than young Jim) and which had been belted by every champion who trod the boards outside the Sharman tent — including Les Darcy and Rocky Marciano, in fact all the champions hit that drum, he went on to say —

I made a movie called the 'The Settlement' and they had that on video. It amazed me where they got all the material from, especially all the fight scenes. In fact I got quite emotional about the whole thing, and finished up doing a tape for them to use in conjunction with many of the old pictures, it's a great exhibition.

(Jimmy Sharman also appeared in the movie 'The Slim Dusty Story'.)

THE GUILD

Our next topic of conversation was the Showmen's Guild and its relevance to the Outdoor Showman to which he replied —

The Guild is everything these days, it is a very strong and powerful union, the officials are sensitive to everything, they know values, and although some of them might look like fools — fellows might arrive at a show having had a break-down of vehicles or machinery and look untidy, and some of the young show society councillors might class them as bits of dills they should never sell them short. For these blokes have been born into the business, its their life and they know it backwards, they are very just and very fair and the formation of the Guild was the best thing that every happened, it pulled all the showies together.

At this time the name of Bill Howard was mentioned and Jim admits that they have been very good friends for many years. Bill Howard was also a good friend of Jim's father, in fact it is said that the older Sharman did much to help Bill Howard in the earlier days. He was inclined to be a bit hot-headed and old Jimmy took him in hand, and although he was not in competition with the tent showmen he was still part of the scene, being the originator of the Dagwood Dog food line, a canteenman, but friend or foe were all the same to Bill Howard, if you did anything wrong he would tear you to pieces. He was an outstanding chairman, and according to Jim Sharman the present strength of the Guild can in no small way be traced back to Bill Howard.

Jimmy Sharman's involvement with the Guild was an important one, for any time there was a disagreement between the Guild and a show society he was the spokesman for the Guild to media, putting the view of the Guild forward, invariably these statements were prepared by Bill Howard.

Both Sharmans were prominent players in the life of the Showmen's Guild. And the Guild also had its troubles through the years, following is a summary of the life of this unique organisation supplied by Jim Sharman:

1909 Showies strike at Orange over ground rent.
 " Showman's Association formed. First President was a man named Marconi.



21. *Jimmy Sharman Jr Outfit, Sydney Show 1950*

- 1914/18 The organisation went into recess for World War I.
- 1927 Move to form a Showmen's Guild. This was unsuccessful with rumours of alleged ballot rigging.
- 1937 Meeting held to try again to form a Guild.
Morrie Darling elected first President.
- 1938 Showmen's Guild of Australasia formed.
- 1939/49 Recess for World War II.

Jim made it quite clear that all Capital Shows are not Guild shows but they do give preference to Guild members. However, he sees big problems for outsiders to try and break in to the rides scene especially. At the mention of rides Jim brought in the Wittingslow family who he declared as the biggest in the business, they have the best rides, the best of everything, but he went on to make a point about the 'little bloke':

I've always been a great believer in the underdog in this respect. Certain big boys have got rides and the battler who battles all shows in four states of Australia just can't get in, and I reckon there should be some provision for the good one to be given space at a capital show — but the big boys eat 'em all up.

THE BOXING TENT AND BAR

Following on with the allocation of show space I posed a question which has been asked many times, Why was the boxing always the closest sideshow to the bar at country

shows? His reply was to say the least interesting —

Going back over the years, locals had to tender for the bar on the showgrounds and those who tendered, mostly publicans or local sporting bodies, would always want to know if Jimmy Sharman's tent was near the bar before they would put in a tender. If the troupe was stationed away from the bar this would influence the tender. For over the years it was a pattern with certain showgoers to have a beer, see a fight, and come out and have another beer!

It was mentioned that newspaper reports indicated that in some NSW country towns boxing troupes had made a comeback. Jim confessed that he had heard that a boxing troupe had opened up at Tamworth a year or so ago and the police closed them down and told them to disappear.

He said there was a boxing troupe which operates around Birdsville and the back country of Queensland, who gets a fair amount of television exposure. He doesn't know how he would get a permit to operate, and said he was not knocking the bloke that runs it because out in that country the people are so starved for entertainment any type of diversion would tend to ease the frustration.

SET BACK FOR A SINGER

For some reason the focus came on to Frank Foster and his family, and Frank being one of the pioneer entrepreneurs in exposing current 'pop-star' personalities to outdoor showman scene, brought to Jim's thoughts something that happened up north:

Johnny O'Keefe was sitting in my caravan up at the Mareeba Rodeo on the Atherton Tablelands, when he said, 'This is great country up here', to which I replied, 'Yeah, but no I'm going to hurt your feelings, for up in this country they have never heard of you, but everybody knows Chad Morgan', he said he didn't believe that, and I told him that the audience came from all over, from Cooktown out of the scrub, but they all knew Chad Morgan, and went on to give him some advice. I suggested that he go on early, single a couple of songs, go off and let Chad be the star of the show. Anyway he took this advice, he belted out a couple of rock 'n' roll songs and hardly got a clap, they weren't used to that kind of music.

But when Chad Morgan came on they went wild, they clapped, whistled and tossed their hats in the air and wouldn't let him leave the stage. Johnny came into my van and said, 'Blimey Jim if I hadn't seen it I would never have believed it.' So after that he used to go on sing a couple of songs, and then come and watch the fights!

POVERY POINT

At this point the conversation reverted to some of the old timers Jim knew well. He started by filling us in on that old meeting place in Sydney so well know to showies through the years — Poverty Point.

It was mostly to do with shows like Sorlie's Barton's Follies and Les Levante and Coles variety shows in the early days. It was situated on the corner of Park and Pitt Streets and it served to bring together those looking for work in the entertainment game, and those offering work.

Later the site changed, the activity moved across the road to Tooheys pub, which is still called by the same name — Poverty Point.

He spoke of some of the old showies such as Arthur Greenhalgh and Dave Meekin with a sort of reverence which to this point he had reserved only for his father, and sadly expressed the opinion that their like will never be seen again.

FROM THE TENT SHOWS TO DODGEMS

As the show scene changed from tent shows to rides and games so too did the old showies have to change their lifestyle. Jim Sharman said that in this case it was 'Paddy's choice'. Restrictions placed on boxers put the boxing troupe out of business as a tent show, so he was forced to look elsewhere for a living. He had to find a ride which was suitable, a family ride, so he selected dodgem cars.

Although he no longer does the show circuit he still follows the shows from time to time to 'stickybeak' and see his old mates, although he admits he does not have too many of them now, it's a new generation of showies. He rather sadly said —

There is no such thing as a sideshow area any more, that's finished. In a nutshell the showgrounds today is just a carnival, it shifts from one place to another because its only rides and games.

Jim had a dodgem track up at Grundy's at Surfers Paradise and proudly says he does not price people out of their enjoyment. He says the greatest horror with showmen today is that costs are escalating all the time, and believe it or not, they hate to have to increase their prices because by so doing, they are only pricing themselves out of business.

When questioned on the future of capital city shows he offered this advice — that providing the show societies do not price themselves out of business, and that the organisers and councillors recognise the fact that shows are for the people, and for that reason prices must be kept to a reasonable level.

He cites Brisbane Exhibition as an example where reluctantly the admission price had to be raised \$2 which still left their charge well below that of Sydney and Melbourne, and as a result patrons attended up to four times during the show.

From all accounts, more people go to the Brisbane Exhibition than the whole population of the City of Brisbane. Whereas Sydney and Melbourne are differently situated. Brisbane is still similar to one of the big provincial shows where everybody attends at least once, and in lots of cases families take their annual holidays to coincide with the show.

He stressed that the respective societies need to study their costs, and in the cases of Sydney and Melbourne it will be vitally necessary to contain their costs to remain viable.

He made reference to the change of site for the Royal Easter Show in Sydney after 1995, by saying that in his opinion the move to Homebush would have been the greatest thing to have happened to the Sydney event because the new site at Homebush is now in the centre of the Sydney metropolis. And with the area of land estimated at 880 acres, all sporting and recreational activities can be based there.

Another big advantage in favour of the new site is that it will be served by a direct rail link. At present the Moore Park site Showgrounds is starved for good public transport facilities.

THE THIRD JIMMY SHARMAN

When asked about his brilliant son he had this to say:

Like Dad and myself we did not see much of each other, he had a bad start in life health-wise, he was asthmatic and me being away all the time my wife became mother and father to him — in fact she should get a Victoria Cross for what she did for the young fellow.

He came away on school holidays with me a couple of times, he and his mate, and I just loved having them. Out in the bush we used to shoot ducks and rabbits and really had a wonderful time.

However, the last time he came away with me we had a couple of roughies in the team and one night they came home drunk and I had to get up and deal with them, and went back to bed making nothing of the disturbance. This was at Coonamble, and the next day the show was over and I put them on a plane to go home to Sydney, because I had to go to Walgett and then do the Queensland run.

When I returned home we sat down and had a bit of a talk just the two of us, it was strange and a pleasure, and he said to me — ‘Dad, I know that you would be hopeful that I would be following in your footsteps because Grandad started this tradition and it is part of Australia’s history, I will never say this again, but don’t ever ask me to take over the boxing troupe, because I never will’. He looked me right in the eye, and well what can you do? You just can’t do anything.

Being an asthmatic my son never went to the Marcellan College at Randwick, he stayed with his little mates at Randwick High School because if he got crook his mates would bring him home, he only lived over the road from the school. Mr Johnson headmaster at the Randwick High School was enthusiastic about organising little shows and plays for the kids and each year the school had a fathers’ dinner and I was the only father who was absent, and the Head used to represent me and allow Jim to sit beside him, a kind act for which I was very grateful.

So the young fellow got the bug, done the lighting for these little shows and plays, and whenever we were away on the road with people like Bobby Le Brun or Les Levante — rated one of the world’s greatest magicians — he would always be up behind the stage trying to find out Les’ magic tricks and things like that, he became more and more enthused with this side of show business. And finally he asked me if I would have any objections to him going to NIDA (National Institute of Dramatic Art), I asked him if he wanted to be an actor, to which he replied that he didn’t want to be an actor but he wanted to learn to be a director. He obviously had his mind made up at an early age, and after finding out that the term was three years, arrangements were made to have him enrolled at NIDA. He tackled the new learning with great keenness and graduated as the most brilliant director to come out of that Insitute.

James Sharman the Third now has an international reputation as one of the finest directors of stage shows in the world. He will be remembered in Australia for his direction of such outstanding productions as ‘Hair’; ‘Jesus Christ Superstar’; and the ‘Rocky Horror Show’, to name but a few of his worldwide successes.

WHAT NOW?

Jimmy Sharman having passed the age of 80 is a remarkably fit looking man — although he has in recent times had a knee reconstruction, and still occasionally get the old ulcer twinge, he will tell you that life has been good to him. He and his wife Christina still live in Randwick, he remains a keen lawn bowler and still derives great pleasure in ‘doing over’ many unsuspecting younger bowlers on the Randwick greens.

No longer does he need to travel backwards and forwards to Queensland on business connected with his dodgems, he has successfully disposed of this enterprise and is now without any outside commitments.

The Sharman name will not die with our generation, over the years fathers will tell their sons of this remarkable family, and their sons will pass the story on of two of the greatest of Australia’s Outdoor Side-Showmen, who, for over sixty years entertained a nation and created a showtime legend with the cry ‘Who’ll Take a Glove’.

4

‘Ladies by Observation, Gents by Investigation’

(From the Tom Wittingslow Tapes)

Thomas George Wittingslow, was born in November 1913 at Broadford in Victoria. This agricultural and industrial township is situated on the Sunday Creek about 80 kilometres north of Melbourne on the old Hume Highway, in recent times bypassed by the Hume Freeway.

When Tom was seven years old the Wittingslow family moved to Northcote, a suburb north-east of Melbourne city where he attended school at the Northcote State. Having obtained his merit certificate at the age of 14 years, he considered he should face the world and get himself a job. His first job was at Bedgoods boot factory at Jolimont where he was employed in the socking-room for about six months when he was offered a clerical position at the head office in Flinders Street.

A GOOD DEED A DAY!

By this time Tom had joined the Boy Scouts movement and had had a few experiences at scout gatherings, especially jamborees, and with this experience he was selected in the advance party to set up for a forthcoming jamboree which was to contest the Stradbroke Cup (which his troop won!)

He approached his boss and asked for an extra day off to go with the advance party to set up the camp for the main body of the jamboree. Unfortunately there was another young lad working in the office who had already been granted time off and Tom's request had therefore been refused — and although he had been told he could not have time off, he was so keen to go that he took the day off nevertheless. On his return to work after the jamboree he was given a new pair of shoes, an extra one week's wages (about thirteen shillings), and he and Bedgoods parted company.

Next, he went to work with a Thornbury grocer, Mr S.D. Manton, but this was not for long, for as Tom wryly says:

I don't know whether I sent him broke, but he went broke in the depression but not before he arranged a job for me with Crofts Stores.

For the next two years he worked at Crofts but then he decided to marry. He married at a very young age and was a father at 17 years old. He recalls that Des was born in October and he turned 18 in November. He tells the story of his first trip to the hospital to see his wife and new son, and when a rather overbearing and officious nursing sister told him in no uncertain manner that members of the family were not allowed to visit.

only the fathers! And in his words Tom says: 'I had to put her on the right track'.

With a wife and family he soon found out that his wages from Crofts was not enough to live on. After paying his rent he virtually had nothing left, so he decided to try his luck being self employed.

JACK OF ALL TRADES

In this respect he used a number of avenues to raise money. First, he sold sweets at nights in theatres, starting off at the Capitol Theatre, he had to pick up his supply at an office or a base next door in Flinders Street. After servicing the Capitol he would make his way to the Regent and then other theatres in Bourke Street, this little enterprise brought him in a few bob.

Next, he used to sell 'Heralds' from a stand outside the old Federal Hotel in Collins Street, this added further to his income, but these two activities only occupied his time in the afternoons and at night. During the day he would hire a horse and cart for five bob (50 cents), and head for Whelan The Wreckers where he could pick up as much old timber as he wanted. He used to chop up this timber into about six-inch lengths and stuff it in potato bags which he then sold for a bob (10 cents) a bag, to fuel the little chip-heaters which were so important in all households at that time, long before the advent of gas or electric bath and hot water heaters.

He recalls that the basic wage at this time was about £2.8.0 (approx. \$5), and he was making at least £4 to £5 so his shift to 'private enterprise' was proving to be the right way to go.

Next, he decided to try another field, he made naphthalene novelties. With a couple of little moulds (an elephant and a hare) he would boil the naphthalene, colour it with a little paint, and his wife would decorate the finished product with a small piece of crepe paper around each neck as a collar. Tom sold these novelties from door to door, he estimated that each of these novelties cost him about one penny farthing to make (approx. one cent), and he sold them for sixpence each (5 cents).

He also remembers that in those days there could be six to eight door-knockers working the same street so it was always necessary to get an early start in the door to door selling field.

His next venture along with the novelties was to work up a window cleaning business. He soon built up a nice little clientele in this enterprise charging a bob a time to clean all outside windows.

He always loved football so why not use it to make a bob? So he decided to provide the footy followers with something to eat, and hit on the idea of selling oranges at the footy on Saturday afternoons. Starting off with one case he soon built up this trade to again having a hire a horse and cart to carry his 10 to 15 cases to the matches. By this time he had a few blokes working for him because he had to get his stock over the fence at the footy matches. After he had sold all his oranges he would then sell the orange cases for the footy followers to stand on!

These 'bits and pieces' as he called his activities so far recorded, he more or less dismissed as 'things he did in his younger days'.

THE VICTORIA MARKET AND THE FUN PARLOUR

As his vision broadened so did his activities. The next phase was his introduction to retailing fruit from the Victoria Market. The wholesale market used to open about 4 o'clock in the morning when the fruit and vegetables were sold, and it was not long before he got to know some of the growers. At times some of them wanted to get away early so Tom would buy their load, sell from their space, and come out making a few bob. When selling in the wholesale market was almost completed he used to go and buy

for retail sale pretty cheap and this in turn meant that he could sell the same stock cheaply.

It was about this time that he discovered the fun parlour in the city and it interested him to such a degree that he decided to seek a job there, and sure enough he found one. This new project further strained his lifestyle, for he would get up early in the morning and buy at the market and his brother Roy used to look after the market stand while he took up his job in the fun parlour. By now he was about 19 years old.

The fun parlour was situated in Bourke Street between Russell and Swanston Streets, and ran from Bourke Street to Little Collins Street. One of the main games played was called box ball, which was similar to what we know as bingo or housey-housey. The player would have five balls which were thrown in numbered boxes, the box numbers were recorded on a card similar to bingo, and the first to get a line on their card won. To qualify as a game of skill and so satisfy the necessary convention, the winner had to throw a ball into a basket, that was the 'skill' component.

Called Pennylands, the parlour was run by showies including Wally Webb, Percy Pullen, and a bookmaker named Frank Schultz. Other attractions at the fun parlour were dodgem cars run by the Bowler brothers from Perth, and a big skittle alley, other rides took up the whole area right through to Little Collins Street.

He worked at the parlour for a month, receiving £2.8.0 a week, and decided to stay in this field but do it alone. Whilst at the parlour he was running a game called the butterfly game, and this was to be his first ever venture into the life of the outdoor showman.

THE OUTDOOR SHOWMAN

The occasion for his move into the life of entertainment was the Melbourne to Geelong yachting race and he and his butterfly game was let loose on the unsuspecting public!

To play the game a penny was rolled onto cards on a table and wherever the penny stopped that became the prize. If it stopped on a ten of spades the player won ten pence, and if it rolled on to a two of anything tuppence was the prize, but if it landed in between the lines — which it often did, then bad luck for the customer.

It was on this occasion that he first witnessed the game of guessing the weight. The operator was an American, and his opposition in the same game was a showman named Albert Simmons. This game intrigued him so he watched them operate for a while and decided to build a set of scales. He made a tripod with a seat dangling on it and a set of scales mounted on top of the tripod marked off in stones (14 pounds), and half-stones (seven pounds). The rules of the contest were that he must guess the weight of the customer to within four pounds of the actual weight, and if he failed, he had to pay up with a box of chocolates. His pitch was — 'Ladies by observation and gents by a little investigation'. When asked whether the women customers were not a little self-conscious about their weight, and whether many came forward, he said:

Oh yes, but with the women you didn't have much hope. In those days they used to wear stays, and you'd get a slim little thing and estimate her weight at about 8 stone 7 lbs, and as soon as she sat on the scales she started to spread and you knew you were done by about 10 pounds. They'd spread and weigh in at about 10 stone, and naturally you were done.

BUNYIP, THE FIRST SHOW

The first real show he operated at was Bunyip (in Gippsland) and once again he hired a horse and cart for five bob a day and kept it for three days.

He and his brother drove to Bunyip on the first day and returned on the third. At the show he had the scales and a game of ringulet (hoopla), and whilst he worked the scales his brother worked the ringulet. With this game money was stuck on a black cloth on a flat surface, and if the player threw a ring over the money (clearing it) they won that money as the prize. For example, a £1 note, a two-bob coin, a bob coin and a sixpenny piece, would be stuck on the cloth and if the player happened to clear any of these prizes with the ring they got the money.

It was at this time that Tom received his first 'proposition' it came from a fortune teller — who according to Tom was 'no youngster' — offering him a job driving her car from show to show at £1 a week, and in his words 'seeing it was modern times, he could sleep with the boss'. He made a deal with her, that he would drive the car if she would allow him to carry his joints. This arrangement was accepted.

Tom tells of the time when he had just bought his first car for twenty-one quid (£21), and with a mate named Jimmy Spears decided to work the Echuca show. After out-laying such a large amount of money on the car they arrived at Echuca with eight or nine pounds (£8-9), all of which was in coins and they stuck the lot on the ringulet board.

They were so broke they couldn't buy breakfast because they had committed all their cash to the ringulet board. Just as they were set up along came Wally Webb and said — 'You're supposed to have notes on there too Tom', to which Tom replied, 'Yeah, I know you're supposed to have notes but we don't have any notes', and with that Wally loaned him a few notes and he put them on the board and they were open for business.

WHACKO THE KIPPO

He had a little tin which he called his cash register, and when he had five-bob in the tin he suggested to Jimmy that they eat. However, Jim had only gone yards away from the site when someone threw a ring and got ten-bob. Tom then yelled out to Jimmy, 'Whacko the Kippo', which meant bring back the money, so they had to wait a little longer for their tucker!

Before leaving for the next town Tom took his car to the local garage to put some air in the tyres. Somehow the air pump got stuck to the valve in the tube and caused a blow-out, thus writing off the tube. As he could not afford a new tube he packed the tyre with grass and drove to the next town.

At this time he was working the scales and ringulet, and soon added 'knockem' to the list. Remembering those early days he speaks of the showies who used to work up in the back country and around the Wimmera when there used to be about three or four operating games at the shows and they would take it in turns to share the best space, and reflects:

It's hard to believe in those days we used to have three or four — at the very most, ten games and a couple of rides at these shows.

Briggs used to have the merry-go-round and horsey planes at many of the shows, other shows had rides belonging to travelling showies, and of course the tent shows.

There was no Guild in those days, we used to just take it in turns for the best sites.

Now when you go to these places some have as many rides as you would see at the Royal Show.

Over this period there were four working the scales. 'Simmo', 'The Yank', Tommy Wallace, his wife, and Tom. Asked about his success rate in correctly guessing the weight he had plenty to say:

In guessing the weight, if you came out with two out of three you were going pretty good. I think the best run I had was that I guessed eight straight. It's a marvellous thing, it finished up once when there were four or five sets of scales on the one ground, and the bloke who was the best guesser had the best custom. People wanted a challenge, they all wanted to 'knock off' the best guesser.

Chocolates were always the prize for the scales, and the chocolates used to cost five pence halfpenny at wholesale rate, and this included the nicely decorated box containing ten chocolates. The competition to sell us chocolates was also pretty keen in those days too. But if you were a good guesser at sixpence a go you were able to cover yourself.

I remember working the scales — once again this was at the Bunyip Show — and there was a big bloke by the name of Duffy, he was the tallest man in the world and was my opposition at the show. He wore a big red coat and he looked enormous, and believe me he was pretty hard and keen competition. Anyway, the public would go from one to the other to see if they could beat you.

At the same show I remember a little Italian coming up to me and saying, 'You got the choc in the box', and he went on to say, 'I go to the big man, I pay my sixpence. I sat on the scales, I beat him, I got my box of chocs, I opened box, no chocs' — there were four jubes in the box. So I guessed his weight and beat him — he still never knew whether there were any chocs in my box! There was another character he came from the west and was a pretty tough sort of guy, he was a fighter — and looked it. He never gave any prizes away, he used to get the bar of the seat and move the weight to where he wanted it, if it was down he would just push it up etc. And if you wanted to argue with him that was your bad luck. (These days the Guild would never allow this kind of scam to happen.)

THE TOUGH TIMES AND SHOWIES FRATERNITY

The shows during the depression years of the 1930s were mostly if not all, agricultural shows, and the going became very rugged and tough, and it was hard to get money. Most of the showies used to live on the showgrounds and Tom remembers all too vividly having to move the sheep out of the sheds, and sleeping on the straw used for the sheep bedding.

He tells of the problems they used to have with transport, of breaking down on the road and being towed to the next town, or, towing someone else, but never every passing a showie who had broken down.

Asked to expand what life was like in those days and also to tell us more of the strong bond that obviously existed among the showmen he said:

There was a very strong bond between all show people we were more like a family than individuals, a real fraternity, more so then than now I'm afraid. Those days were very good, we used to have tent shows of course and after the show was over we'd get in a tent, light a fire, and have a sing song, have a few beers — it was all very friendly. Most of the showmen are in family groups — that's the fair dinkum showie, they are born to the game.

This statement prompted the question of his initiation into the life of an outdoor showman and how he was received by some of the old showies when he first took to the road?

Well, there were not so many about in those days, and I was 'having a go' so I was received okay by the oldtimers. However it is different today, the Guild has changed many things.

The Guild was formed while I was overseas in the Army and it was not easy for me to gain membership, but with the assistance of some of the showies I met on the road before the war, and with a little pressure, I eventually made it and gained membership. There were names and faces that I have never seen, now members of the Guild.

To qualify for membership the candidate must prove that he has made his living on showgrounds for the past three years. He had to be nominated and seconded by two Guild members, and gain a two-thirds majority of votes at a general meeting of the Guild. These rules are understandable for there are only a limited number of shows and space both for the show society, the public, and the showman. The showman must have some security and confidence to update his equipment.

What is not understandable is today's ruling that showie children, when they reach the age of 18 years automatically become members of the Guild with the proviso that they can prove to be good citizens. This rule has resulted in several new members swelling the ranks of the Guild each year — with no extra shows or space.

At the same time there are few showies retiring, and only a few 'going to the big showgrounds above'. To me this is like telling the show kids that when they turn 18 there's a trip around the world for 12 months for them, but when they get to the airport they are asked to put the money up! Sooner or later this will cause problems.

INTRODUCTION TO THE BIG ONE

Tom Wittingslow made his debut at the Royal Melbourne Show in the 1930s, plumb bag in the middle of the big depression. He was not able to get space for himself so he approached Arthur Greenhalgh about working a percentage with him and got a spot in front of the famous Greenhalgh and Jackson's Wall of Death, in the then sideshow area along the perimeter of Epsom and Langs Roads.

His ringulet game was duly set up in front of the Wall of Death and Tom recalls as though it was yesterday, the task he had in trying to spruik over the noise of those roaring, noisy motor bikes, in the confined space of the 'globe'. He has good cause to remember his first Royal Melbourne Show. (It might seem ironic or just retribution for now after all these years Tom Wittingslow has, on a permanent site, a slide which covers the very area where he had his ringulet so many years ago.)

As the depression deepened the show game became really tough and Tom got a permanent job with the Australian Glass works. He used to work all week at his permanent job and on Saturdays would continue to work the shows.

After war was declared in 1939, Tom decided that he should join up, and in 1940 gave notice to Australian Glass of his intentions, and enlisted in the AIF.

BREACH OF SECURITY?!

Tom and his brother Bert joined the AIF at the same time and were posted to the 2/4 Anti Tank Regiment. After completing the necessary basic training the unit embarked on the troopship Zealander from Port Melbourne for Singapore with other contingents of the ill-fated 8th Australian Division.

In transit he wrote a letter home which disclosed the fact that he was on board the Zealander. This brought a strong rebuke from the duty officer censoring the letter who in turn gave Tom a long lecture on security saying that troops were not supposed to be telling anyone about where they were going, what they were doing, or anything else which may be useful to the enemy.

Tom was a little crestfallen about this because he said that the Zealander previously to becoming a troop ship, was used for carting cattle from Australia to New Zealand 'but it

got too unhealthy for the cattle!’ Later the small ship paid the full price of war, it was blown up in the Darwin Harbour.

Shortly after arriving in Singapore Tom had the misfortune to injure the cartilage in his leg and was evacuated to hospital at Malacca. As though in sympathy, the cartilage in his other leg gave way and this was repaired at the General Hospital in Buckatima Road, this was about three days before Singapore fell.

WAR IS FAIR DINKUM

The Japs having no respect for the Geneva Convention, bombed the hospital, and Tom along with other patients was moved to another hospital which was also bombed. The third move was to an area in front of the wharves where they were eventually captured and made prisoners of war. He was the only Australian in this group, the rest were English soldiers.

They were incarcerated in Changi Prison, and for six weeks Tom was listed as ‘missing, believed dead’. This news caused all sorts of problems at home, for the Army authorities immediately ceased to pay his wife the agreed allotment from his pay, and instead transferred her to a widow’s pension.

After six weeks in Changi he was included in the first draft, ‘A Force’ for the Burma Railway. They were transported on the Toyuozu Maru and landed at Mandalay in Burma and were marched to an airport in the jungle which had been recently captured by the Japs.

WHO CALLED THE COOK A...?

At this jungle airstrip a call went out for volunteers to do the cooking, and Tom said to his brother Bert, ‘I know you never volunteer for anything in the Army, but let’s volunteer for this’. Bert refused, but Tom went ahead and became an Army cook.

His new classification meant a promotion from gunner to sergeant cook, and he finished up cooking for 250 to 1,500 men for the next three years and eight months of his life. He admits he was only on the railway for about a week and the rest of the time he was in charge of cookhouses.

Rice was the main food going into the cookhouses and he describes some of the problems with supply:

What happened was they used to send a bag of rice up from no-mans-land on the railway, and the ‘rats’ would get into it, you know the human rats, and if you got an empty bag it was still counted as a full bag. That’s how they worked it, you see if you were at the end of the line, or at the end of the drop off, then your rations were very light.

From time to time we used to get a few vegies and egg fruit: from which I made egg fruit stew, ‘Can you imagine that?’ However, there was never any meat or anything else.

I always worked in the hospital camps, and it became well known that you could always get a feed off Wittingslow because I used to throw another bucket of water in with the rice. We used to cook the rice like a porridge, you could pour it out in the morning!

During this time my weight dropped to eight stone and a few pounds, and I was still one of the heaviest in camp, and as a result when the railway line was finished, 100 of us were picked to stay behind, and I was in that 100 because I was considered fit, even though I was just a bit over eight stone.

Tom Wittingslow was one of the last troops to leave Bangkok for Singapore at the cessation of hostilities in the Pacific War.

On return to Australia he faced hospitalisation. However, he proudly refers to a newspaper clipping from the 'Melbourne Sun' which shows he and his brother Bert on the wharf at Port Melbourne peering through a big steel security gate with the caption — 'Behind bars but not for long'.

At this point he allowed himself a moment or two of reflection, and said, 'You know I have heard so many people say since we returned home, that they were quite sure, and in fact knew, that so and so would get back from the war because he was rugged and tough, but that thinking was so much hooley, it was just plain luck.'

WORKING OUT A FUTURE

As all service personnel at sometime while they were away did think about the future I posed this question to Tom and this was his response:

At times I thought that if ever I got out of this mess I'm going into food because I realised just how important food was to everybody. When I returned I was put into Heidelberg Repat. Hospital where I spent the next nine months. While I was there I was in a ward with three others and one of them was a little bloke called Tiger Delane. Tiger came from Geelong and was secretary of the Sub-Branch of the local RSL. We got talking and he knew that I was in the show business before the war, so he suggested that I go down to Geelong and run a spinning wheel for the sub-branch. I told him that it was illegal to run spinning wheels, and anyway I'm getting to the cookhouse and start food.

He was a persistent little cove and kept at me to go down to Geelong and give it a go. So I thought nothing ventured, nothing gained, so why not? I used to get a bit of leave so on one of these occasions I shot into a place that had toy koala bears for fourteen and six (\$1.46 cents), they were beautiful toys in all colours. This supplier was in Flinders Street, he was reputed to be a major in the provosts (military police), and was one bloke who did very well out of the war I should think. He was a strange character, one who never appeared to be happy, and kept on going from one thing to another. Anyway he sold me these bears and I took them down to Geelong and ran the spinning wheel for the RSL. About six o'clock I ran out of stock and still had the night to go. I remember thinking to myself, how long has this been going on? I couldn't believe it. As soon as I arrived back from leave I rang a bloke by the name of Ern Todd at Ballarat who organised the street carnival and told him of the scheme. It took me a couple of days to convince him that I could make him money. Anyway, I arranged weekend leave from the hospital, and in uniform, I went to Ballarat and ran the spinning wheel there, again having bears as prizes, but this time I didn't run out of stock. I was ready for it.

Next I went up to Sale where they were celebrating the declaration of Sale as a city. Working for Apex this time with the spinning wheel in the street, I did quite well. Returning from leave I couldn't get out of the army quick enough to get back into show business.

(The contacts made with RSL and service clubs during this time was to stand Tom in good stead for fund-raising efforts in later years.)

BACK TO THE BIG TIME

Tom Wittingslow took his discharge from the army and immediately set his sights on some space on the Royal Melbourne Showgrounds for the forthcoming Royal Melbourne Show.

Shortly after the 1939 Royal Show the whole of the Showgrounds were taken over by the Defence Department, and as events turned out, the 1939 Show was to be the last for



22. *Modern Merry-go-round*

an interval of seven years. So it was into this climate of show-hungry Victorians that Tom endeavoured to make his comeback to show business in the big time. Luckily he was allotted space along the Langs Road side of the Showgrounds and there set up his scales to guess the weight. Helped this time by another brother, Roy, whose job it was to queue up the customers. He remembers that he was 'just bashing them on the scales and really went through them, and by gee we really took a few bob on those scales'. He increased his price from sixpence to one shilling, mainly because the price of the chocolates had risen so much, and chocolates were always the prize for the scales.

And although the 1946 Melbourne Royal was a good show money-wise he found it much more difficult to get back into show business than he had imagined because the showies had formed the Showmen's Guild.

INTRODUCTION TO RIDES

The 1946 Royal Melbourne Show taught Tom two very important lessons. The first was the great influence the newly formed Showmen's Guild had for the showies, and the second that it became necessary to have rides.

On the matter of rides it was particularly hard for Tom because there were those showmen who during the war, carried on in show business and had stored up big kitties and besides, had pretty big equipment.

In Tom's case he had no rides, and what's more, no one was really keen to take him in with his games.

Eventually he teamed up with Norm Haines who had a nice little merry-go-round and a miniature train. They started off working carnivals and a few shows, but after a while they decided to split up and Tom had an engineer in Northcote build him a merry-go-round, and this is how he described the machine:

I went and had a look at it and immediately felt sure he built it with gear from the bloody tip. The horses looked more like sheep than horses. Anyway, I bought it and that's the first ride I had — the three-horse galloper.

He used the ride for carnivals, never on the shows because his commonsense told him that he would be no competition, and wouldn't made a bob with his ride against the good stuff the well established shows were using at the shows. But carnivals were different, people didn't seem so fussy.

By this time he had built up a few good games which he worked mainly at the Melbourne Royal and a number of the other big shows around Victoria.

Next he bought a chair-o-plane and a horsey-plane to be used mainly for carnivals, because in those days the agricultural shows used to close at 6 o'clock.

He speaks of shows like Horsham, where after the show closed for the day, he would run a carnival with the Apex Club. The carnival site was in the main street and he would have the spinning wheel and lucky envelopes. (For the various service clubs and committees, the arrangements was that the host body would receive 51 percent of the takings, and the remaining 49 percent would go towards defraying Tom's expenses — and supplying the prizes.)

This was the norm in a number of cases. When the show finished for the day they would pull down one or two rides, load them on a truck and move them to the carnival site, bring out the spinning wheels and lucky envelopes and work well into the night. The next day they would start all over again with the horsey-plane or chair-o-plane back in position at the showgrounds. There were cases when permission was given to conduct these games on the showgrounds but Tom says he always made sure that the activities were separated, the service clubs and charities were on one side of the showgrounds, and the side-shows on the other side.

HOUSEY HOUSEY

However, the charities were well to the fore in other ways for he used to conduct the game of housey-housey on behalf of a number of well known charities, all over the state.

A big tent would be erected in the street — close to the main street — fitted out with trestle tables and stools, and Tom would do the calling of the numbers. Through this he was to become very widely known throughout country Victoria.

He grins now as he recalls some of the pillars of country society who did not gamble, but merely attended the housey-housey game 'to make a donation to a particular charity', but they always stayed and played the game through! With the housey he used to work two weekends, starting on the Friday night and finishing on the following Saturday night. He introduced a 'come on' scheme in the form of a bonus which worked like this: If the player did not get a single line in the first six numbers, the kitty would increase by five shillings, and in a number of cases the jackpot would build up to £300–400, and that was a lot of money in those days. On the last night the jackpot would be paid out as follows — Starting off with six numbers they would go to seven, and then eight numbers until they had a winner. Speaking of the bingo games today he says:

I don't know how they ever win bingo in six numbers because all the time I've been associated with the game, and that's a long time — we used to play 100 or more — up to 150 games a night, and I have never seen it won under 15 numbers.

Tom Wittingslow recalls with pride some of the achievements created through the humble country carnival. The assistance to organisations such as kindergartens through to country hospitals, RSL sub-branches, fire brigades and halls. He took us through the

fund-raising system as it applied in those days. For every pound (£) raised by the charity, the government would double the amount, so if the organisation raised £1,000 the government would put an additional £2,000 making the total £3,000.

When the Rye Sub-branch of the RSL was destroyed by fire Wittingslow Amusements helped rebuild it with proceeds from local carnivals. They also financed most of the cost of the Lakes Entrance Memorial Hall; the kindergarten at Stawell still relies on them to feed in the 'bickies'.

When the Donald Hospital was in financial trouble, and was going to lose a nursing sister because they could not meet her salary, they contacted Tom and through his housey-housey he was able to keep them afloat until the next government cheque arrived.

Working with the Moomba Lions the Wittingslow Amusements has raised more than \$1.5 million for charity along with entertaining over 150,000 spastic children with free rides during the Moomba period.

THE GUILD AND MOOMBA

Referring again to the Victorian Showmen's Guild Tom said:

In the 1950s I was starting to kick a few goals and I was approached to stand for President of the Guild. This amazed me but it appeared that the powers that be wanted a change and decided I was their boy. I held the office for almost 25 years. Emile Verfurth came looking for me one day and told me he was going to stand against me for President, I smiled at him and said 'Thank you very much I have been waiting for someone to take over for a few years'. I was well over 70 at the time and not feeling well and had been looking for a way out.

As President of the Guild my main given priorities were to win all country shows over to the Guild. At this time some of the shows were 100% Guild shows, others were Guild assisted and others were those where show societies allotted space.

Briggs' shows operated under this last scheme. They would put up their rides and games and any space left they would give to other showmen, including Victorian Showmen Guild members, but there was no space for rides. After contacting the first of the Briggs held shows I soon realised it was not an easy task to get them back to Guild control.

For a start, the Briggs family were held in high esteem, and their equipment was well presented. After many trips visiting show committees — some as many as four times — we had gradually gained all the Briggs shows except two, one in Gippsland and the other was Ballarat. As it happened we had an appointment with the Gippsland committee at one o'clock in the afternoon and the outcome of the meeting was that it became a Guild show. That same evening we met the Ballarat Committee in the President's Room at the Ballarat Showgrounds at 7.30. Again we were successful and left that meeting feeling very pleased, and although it snowed most of the way to and from Ballarat, the trip was well worth it. The Guild on getting the Briggs' shows would load them with top rides, games, side-shows and eat joints. The Guild offered Aub and Stan Briggs membership of the Victorian Showmen's Guild, with the understanding that they would hold their space at the shows already held by them. They declined this offer for reasons of their own — although they did offer me the opportunity of going in with them.

Strange as it may seem Aub and Stan and I became good friends over this period of time, and I was with their families when we said our last goodbyes.

Sale Show was one to receive the full treatment as a Guild Show. Stan Durkin Senior put his big ferris wheel up at their showgrounds, he dressed it up with plenty of lights and gave it a trial run on the Friday night — there were no night shows in those

days — The Big Wheel was so spectacular that it was one of the most talked of events seen in the Gippsland city for many years. Along with top class supporting rides, games, tent shows and other attractions this resulted in a record show for Sale.

VASA was formed in 1964 and I represented the Guild with our secretary at the first meeting, and never missed a meeting while I was President. VASA helped bring the Guild and show societies together at these meetings and we could straighten out any differences that popped up. At the same time it was brought to the attention of the show societies that the doors of the Guild were always open to them. Besides, we made it clear that distance was no bar to us attending show committee meetings to talk any matters over with them. This co-operation resulted in the fact that at this time of the 100% shows 95% were Guild Shows and 5% Guild assisted shows in Victoria. During this time Guild delegates played their part well. Tich McClure, Ron Potton, Don Davenport, along with secretaries Bill Perry and Dick Holden, ably assisted me at the various meetings. After my first visit to a show committee where I took six Guild Committee members, I realised this was a mistake and afterwards the number was cut down to the secretary and one of the above committeemen.

At this stage I should clarify the rules of the Guild in reference to space allocation. All space in country shows held by the Guild is allotted by a very satisfactory method agreed to by all members of the Guild. Space at Royal Shows is allotted by personal negotiation with the person in charge of space allocation. Space at carnivals etc. is also by personal negotiation. The showman that wins the carnival rights — should they need extra or more variety — invites other showmen to join him, or her, at an agreed arrangement. At Royal shows and country shows I have operated my equipment on agreed arrangements with other showmen on their allotted space and they have used mine. This has been the unwritten rules for the past 63 years that I have been a showie in Australia. The same method is practiced by showmen all over the world, thus ensuring that your equipment is working most of the season. This system helps and encourages you to improve and update your equipment, besides acting as an assurance to societies and committees that they have a good variety of amusements in rides and games.

In the mid 1950s the Melbourne Moomba Festival came into being, it covered ten days including the long weekend in March — the Labour Day weekend. And knowing that Tom was associated with this function in some way, he was asked how he became involved and what contacts he had in this field:

Well I had no contacts, I went in there and found out there was a new director so I approached him on behalf of the Showmen's Guild but he wasn't keen on the Guild he wanted to do business with one person. I assured him that everything would be alright and on that assurance was granted the rights to Moomba and offered space to members of the Guild, any member that wanted to come in with me was welcome. For this privilege the charge for space was ten shillings (\$1) a foot in those early days.

Only a few wanted to take a chance because the period covered two weekends — they would miss four or more country mid-week and Saturday shows. George Phillips joined me with his merry-go-round and worked Moomba for a few years. I again made it clear to Guild members that they were welcome to come in, but still there were very few takers. I still could not understand why the members would pay ten bob a foot at some country shows and not be interested in Moomba at the same price — I couldn't believe it. Anyway, that's how it was, and I gradually grew along with Moomba.

At Moomba I bought my first big ride. I had the chair-a-plane and horsey plane, and someone else brought in a set of dodgems, and then came the Cha Cha.



23. *The Cha Cha*



24. *The Ranger Ride*

There was this showman, Scotty Clayton, who went to America and brought back the blue prints of the Cha Cha and handed them over to Nuttall Engineering in Sydney to build him a Cha Cha ride.

I contacted Scotty Clayton to build a Cha Cha for me, he had one down at St Kilda at the time, he said he would build me another one and I made him guarantee me that if he didn't have the ride finished, I'd take the one from St Kilda for Moomba — and that is how I got the Cha cha, my first big ride.

RIDES GALORE

At this time his son Des was called on to take over the running of the business following an illness to Tom which happened on the opening day of the Royal Melbourne Show — and thus began a partnership and close friendship which is still valid today.

This was the period before the advent of television and the public was still hungry for entertainment. And it was in this climate that the Wittingslows, along with other showies, fed the public and filled that need for entertainment, and also in the process, served local country charity and service organisations such as hospitals and community facilities throughout Victoria and the Riverina of New South Wales. It wasn't long before other rides were added to the Wittingslow stable, such as the Ferrari cars, bought from Kevin Ferrari; these were followed by the Space ride, which came from Austria and was operated for Tom by the owner, who, after a short while wanted to return to Austria, so Tom bought the ride — which has proved a good investment.

At this time the Wittingslows made a policy of introducing a new ride every two years. The next addition was the Turbo from America; dodgems from Italy; the Matterhorn from Belgium; the Ski-Jump; the Zipper, another Kevin Kerrari ride; the Music Machine from Belgium; and the Orbitor, which came from England — here is Tom's account of this particular deal:

Richard Wolf was a ride builder in England, he was the son of show business parents. Richard never joined the Guild, although his father, sister, and brother-in-law were members. Over there the travelling showmen try to outdo each other with their caravans — for them not the best ride, but the best caravan, hard to believe. These mobile homes used to fold up like concertinas — there are some of them in Australia now. You pull up on your caravan space and using rollers you just pull the sides out, giving you living space, and the result is, instead of the site being eight feet wide the area becomes 14 feet!

Anyway, I said to this brother-in-law who wanted to buy this particular caravan — by the way he had a beautiful conventional caravan — 'Look if you buy the Orbitor, you'll buy ten of those bloody things'. But no you could not convince him. By the way, I was amazed at the poor standard of rides I saw while travelling in England but believe they have improved immensely of late. Richard Wolf was a great bloke and he had a lovely wife and kids, Joyce and I had our first feed of English fish and chips with them.

The Super Loop was the next addition and it came from Texas, followed by the Pirate ride, from Huss in Germany — who has the reputation of being the greatest rides builder in the world. Also from Germany came the Disco Train, and another Huss ride — The Rainbow. From Italy came the Ranger, to add more variety to the Wittingslow collection.

The closing of the Brisbane Expo proved a bonanza to Wittingslow Amusements, they bought the Breakdancer, the Troika, the UFO, and the Huss Ranger — and with this purchase they became one of the largest owners of Huss rides operating in the world. And, according to Tom, the deal was an exceptional one financially in that they



25. *Super Loop, Mad Mouse
from Giant Slide, Melbourne*

26. *The Pirate Ride*



were able to buy all these world class rides for what one would have cost had they imported it.

Speaking of costs, we asked Tom if he had any idea of the total value of the rides — for we had read somewhere that these assets went into millions of dollars; that his group owned about 40 sideshow games; and about 35 rides, nine of which cost over a million dollars each, with a conservative value collectively, of about twenty million dollars. Also, if the main bulk of the rides were on any particular site, such as a capital city showground?

To the first part of the question he answered —

No, not twenty million, in the millions probably, we bought those four rides for the price of one at Expo, and we paid over a million dollars for the four. In answer to the next part of the question, we do not have a concentration of rides at any one site, we move them about. We have three at Darling Harbour; one at Sydney Showgrounds; three at Melbourne Showgrounds; three at Luna Park, Melbourne; 14 at Luna Park, Sydney. We went into Darling Harbour for eight weeks and have been there for over four years. The only reason why we are still there is the money has not been available for their building programme. Once they get the money for the buildings we'll be no longer there. We are negotiating deals with Luna Park in Sydney and Melbourne, where we will have partners with us but we will be the operators. But operating costs are high, for example, the little festoon holder and a globe costs \$2.50 today, and we use thousands on our rides.

SHOWIES OF YESTERYEAR

Reminiscing on his early days, Tom presented this word picture of some of the greatest of the outdoor showmen in his long experience in the business:

Ted Markovich was a very big showman in my early days. When I was just starting in the business he was the big man in Queensland — with the best of rides. Occasionally he came down to the Melbourne Royal when we used to be along Langs Road. His son and son-in-law are still in the business.

Greenhalgh and Jackson, they never really did the heavy work on the showgrounds, they owned pubs and other property — they were businessmen. They had managers to do the work for them, putting up, pulling down, and running the show. They were quite nice blokes, you could talk to them.

I was only a battler in those days, only just breaking into the business, and they gave me my first break at the Melbourne Royal when they made space available to me in front of their Wall of Death.

Dave Meekin was a totally different man. He also had plenty of money but still did his thing on the grounds. He used to sleep in the tent right up to the finish, he couldn't get away from the business — I can easily relate to blokes like Dave Meekin.

I knew old Jimmy Sharman well, and also young Jimmy — they were the boxing troupe kings of Australia. I used to have an old Dodge car — I bought it after I sold the Ford — but in between I had a Dort — there were only about four Dorts in Australia. I had a bit of bad luck with the Dort. I broke down and arranged with a semi to tow me, but the brakes were not the best and I became too close to him and when he pulled away, the wire I had as a tow rope tangled underneath the diff. and pulled the bloody thing out — that was the end of the Dort. The International Company made the Dorts. With the Dodge I used to carry some of Jimmy Sharman's boxers around with me. We used to call them 'Gs' and they would travel from town to town with me.

An American Negro named Tiger Parkes, he was one of the main attractions with the troupe — he fought with white gloves which made him stand out from the others.



27. *The Break Dance Ride*



28. *The Rainbow Ride*

I was his best man at this wedding with Blond May. At that time I knew old Jimmy reasonably well, and young Jimmy and I have always been good cobbbers — I think there is only a few weeks difference in our birth dates.

The Foster family are generation showmen who were operating side-shows when I first arrived in the game. Their tent shows became famous for bringing top entertaining live shows to the ground — top named artists of the rock-n-roll era especially. Of course other tent men followed suit with the result that there was great entertainment to be had over this period.

Another showie that ran a different type of tent show was Sonny Godfrey, he always had a few good sorts on the board. One of his gimmicks was for the last show of the day to be restricted to men only when the star of the show would show her 'pussy' — as a result the last show was always packed, and the price was doubled. The big moment would arrive for the star to 'shock' everybody, she would roll her skirt up and there would be a tattoo of 'pussy' on her leg! Sonny and I often had a few drinks, he was great company.

Maisie Sorlie worked the Victorian run and the Adelaide and Melbourne Royals with me. One of the shows being the half man half woman. Her shows were always well presented and she was a top spruiker and great to work with.

One of the whitest blokes I ever met was Tommy Castles, he was a terrific showman and one of the best workers I have ever seen. As a matter of fact Tommy Castles worked every day putting over the same speil, but you would always stop and listen to him, he was magnetic. One of his illusions was levitating a woman and on one occasion she would not rise up, so he turned to his wife Shirley and said, 'He's let me down up top', and you know the crowd loved it, and I guess had it been anyone else other than Tommy Castles, they would have booed him off the grounds. His wife Shirley was a wonderful showie in her own right, and one of the mightiest of spruikers — they were a very close and lovely couple. There are many other tent folk that I had the pleasure of working with and representing at the Victorian shows.

ANY CHANCE OF TENT SHOWS COMING BACK?

With his knowledge and experience of the old days of tent shows, and the way they conducted their enterprises, led to asking Tom whether we would ever see the old time tent shows again:

I don't know, it would be very, very hard, in fact it would have to be an extraordinary act to get into a tent — television has already done it all! I remember on carnivals I hired Bill McCormack the well known Irish singer — the people for miles around came to hear him. I'd hire him for an hour, just let him sing three songs, then I'd put him on the spinning wheel, let him autograph prizes — he was able to hold the crowd.

These days people wouldn't walk out their door to see that — television now gives them all the entertainment they want, free of charge, and in their own homes. It costs so much money to set up an act that it would not be worth the effort or the money. With the side-show these days you would put a band on stage and they would want to play once and finish. But in those days they were on a percentage — so the harder they worked, the more they made. You could put them up on the board, and they were keen to do it, and if they could do 20 shows in the day they would do them for it was all the more money for them. Besides, they would sleep in the tents — they would put them up and pull them down — even though they were all top artists. Just imagine trying to get one of today's so called stars to do that? There is no way that would happen.

SPACE ON THE MELBOURNE SHOWGROUNDS

Tom Wittingslow was one of the pioneers in creating a permanent area for games and rides at the Royal Melbourne Showgrounds and in his own words this is how he was able to accomplish this feat:

I broke into the Adelaide Show after battling for a number of years, after three years I approached the Director to put up a concrete landing, he agreed on the condition I financed and built it, and although I didn't have much money I went ahead. I came back to Melbourne with about 200 quid left in the bank.

I received a call from Mr Woodfull asking me to attend a meeting with Green and Thomas and Hall Kenny. At this meeting he approached us about building an area similar to the Adelaide one, and we agreed to go ahead.

I went around everyone I knew that I could borrow from — nobody was barred — because I was always confident in my equipment, and the only other thing I wanted was good weather, and I knew I could do it if the weather was good.

At this particular stage I'm running Moomba, when Bob Thomas came down and told me that Mr Woodfull wanted to see me. I went and saw him and he hit me with the news that Hall Kenny had pulled out of the Showgrounds deal and asked if I would be prepared to take over his share of the development. Now Hall Kenny had been very extravagant, he made the area a lot dearer than what it should have been — anyway I agreed to take it over. I had nothing in my pocket, and I'll never forget it, I got sick on the last day of the show, I still owed money all over the place, and it was impossible to meet all my debts in one bloody year. I went to my accountant who said to me — 'Tom what do you want to borrow money for, you already have the money, now they have to get it from you. And there is no one else who can run the show other than you so you have no worries'.

I had another opinion which supported my accountant's so I went to see Mr Woodfull and told him I couldn't pay the rent. He asked me when I thought I could, and I said after my Christmas carnivals, he agreed, and I was able to settle my debts.

After establishing the fun fair area on the Melbourne Showgrounds, Wittingslow Amusements approached the RASV to put another concrete slab down at the back of the Mad Mouse ride — make it two storeys high with the object of placing three big rides on the top. The Society at first was in favour of this but later changed its mind — on the top level.

THE DYNASTY

Tom Wittingslow came into show business during the Great Depression as a complete outsider — in other words he did not have any family ties as far as being helped into this type of livelihood.

Now in the late part of his life he is recognised as the greatest rides man in the Southern Hemisphere, so what did it feel like to be at the top of the tree?

Well, I was just ambitious I suppose, I just kept on going, it's a remarkable thing while you are battling you are a good bloke but as soon as you get on top they seem to think you are unapproachable. You know there are times at Moomba, when we get everything together, I've walked along and just can't believe it — I just look and think. Of course Des has done a helluva lot. He works very hard and we are lucky with my two grandsons too, they are both working well — they are getting into their prime now and

starting to be a force. Des didn't come good until he was over 30 and overnight he became a real asset.

I don't think he intended to come into the show business but shortly after he finished college I had an attack of malaria during the Melbourne Show and was bundled off to the Heidelberg Repat. Hospital and he had to just come in and take over, and fortunately he has never left. Up to that time I used to run just Victoria and Des broke into New South Wales and Queensland. I still worked south — I did the Adelaide Show and the Melbourne Show and then Victorian country. Later taking in part of the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area. I used to break in up around the Koondrook/Barham district, cut through and go over the border to Moulamein and Hay then Griffith. I worked with the Australian Rules Football clubs in the winter. We used to work through the area including Narrandera and make our way back south via Moama. You made more money out of Moama than Echuca, which was a remarkable thing — so naturally we never worked Echuca.

I used to start the winter run for football clubs here in Victoria — at Inglewood and around that way, then cut through to Maryborough, which was a big town and although I used to have a king position, right beside the town hall, I never took as much as I would at the little town nearby, Dunolly!

But you never know, show business is a funny business you could never rely on any place for that matter. You'd be having a bit of a bad trot and think that when you got to such and such a place she'd be good and you would get out of it — but when you arrived there you'd come undone. But with all that you would also know that at the next place which wasn't worth a pincha, you could quite likely get the lift you want. And although it is a funny business it is also a good business, there are lots of good people and good friends in this game, not only among the showies but the people you meet in the country towns that you get to know, and in turn, they get to know you.

WHERE NOW?

Tom Wittingslow, Chairman of the Board, is now an octogenarian and is still vitally interested in the business, and although he handed over the running of Wittingslow Amusements to Des more than a decade ago he is still very much a force, and is recognised as one of the straightest shooters in the game and commands tremendous respect.

Along with each dynasty there must be a founder, who in turn becomes a legend — such a title would sit comfortably with Tom Wittingslow. He speaks with pride of Des and his grandsons, Des Junior, and Michael, and granddaughter, Lisa, and how the young members have filled that vital gap in the organisation — designing and building rides, a choice they made in the 1970s rather than continuing to buy secondhand rides from abroad.

In fact at this time a hi-tech roller-coaster is being built in their Melbourne workshops for Sydney's Luna Park on the harbour edge at Milsons Point. Worth about \$6.5 million, and standing 41 metres high, this modern Big Dipper is a replacement for the original timber thriller which served the Harbour City from 1935 up until the park closed about 1987.

These fear-inducing rides are not new to the Wittingslows — they built the Corkscrew Rollercoaster operating at Sea World on Queensland's Gold Coast — this was constructed in their Collingwood factory.

And as time goes by we can be assured that bigger and better pieces of very expensive machinery will be dreamed up for all those graduating from the Cha Chia and Mad Mouse to the breath-taking, stomach-churning, nerve-tingling rides in the minds of the Wittingslows — especially Des Junior and Michael. It is little wonder that Tom



29. *The Wittingslow Family L-R Des Jr., Lisa, Tom, Des & Michael*

Wittingslow does stop and think of those early days — and try to relate the past to the present. Surely he sees again the queues of people waiting to have him guess their weight, especially along the Langs Road side of the Melbourne Showgrounds; the little home-made three-horse galloper merry-go-round, his very first ride; coming into the big time with his Cha Cha; his financial worries brought about mainly by his journey into improvements on two of the capital city's showgrounds.

He must also get a warm feeling when he recalls the number of small communities he has helped by fund-raising — and the fact that he will forever be welcome back among the people who hold him in such high esteem — the country folk.

Tommy Wittingslow, the eager young man who found it so hard to break into show business in the first place — because he was not from a show business family, has witnessed the passing of so many from that era of long ago. He has seen the tent shows disappear along with their magicians, freaks — human and animal; the Wall of Death, the snake-pit, and tattooed lady; and every other conceivable attraction that could be put on public show. And although he still holds an interest in the games, he obviously picked the winner in concentrating on the rides.

It is such a long way from the young man who cut up kindling to feed Melbourne's hot-water heaters — and sold it from door to door in the early 1930s, to the Chairman of a multi-million dollar corporation in the 1990s.

But to those of us who have had the privilege to know him, this honest, generous, and gentle ex-digger has never changed. He has been, and still is, more than willing to help out any genuine showie with advice.

We wish him and his family well for the future. Show business in Australia has been made all the richer because of this Broadford boy's determination to 'give it a go' and to go after what he wanted.

5

‘They Bridged the Gap’

(From the Bill Dwyer Tapes)

Bill Dwyer first saw the light of day in Kalgoolie, Western Australia, in 1914. His mother, whose family lived in Newcastle, New South Wales, was one of eight children — she had four brothers and three sisters. Her parents came to Australia from England and Ireland — her mother was English and her father Irish.

When the great gold strike was made in Kalgoolie in 1897 she accompanied one of her brothers to the west. Although the Transcontinental Railway was under construction, the most used transport was by sea. Brother and sister landed at Fremantle and proceeded to Kalgoolie via Perth which was a long way by slow transport in those days.

It was in Kalgoolie that his mother met and married his father, a marriage alas which was not to last for Bill’s father died when he was only three years old in 1917, leaving a widow and three children. Bill’s older brother was sixteen months his senior and his baby sister was only three months of age when their father died. So the young widow was left with three small children in a miner’s shack in Kalgoolie, which according to Bill is still there today — No 1 Picadilly Street, Kalgoolie.

THE IRISH CONNECTION

In answer to a question about his father’s background, Bill has this to say:

‘Round the turn of the century there were lots of bad economic times in Ireland, this history had not changed for hundreds of years, it embraced a history of internal strife, and also the strife from the English takeover, accompanied by other invaders that came in from the bottom end. So you get Irish people that have got a bit of colour in them from down the bottom — but that’s another story.

Anyhow my father must have got on the first available ship — the Irish people, from what I can gather from the story, would get on any ship that was going anywhere, as long as they could get out of Ireland. My father had a sister who finished up in America, and whether he had any other family I don’t know. I have no recollection of any because I have no history of him, I was only three years old when he died.

BACK EAST TO A NEW LIFE

The young widow and her young family had no ties to keep them in the west so in 1918 she decided to returned to New South Wales. By this time the Transcontinental Railway

had been finished so she decided to take her family overland by train.

It would be hard to imagine the bitter struggle imposed on this young family by such a journey. For almost four days they were confined to the train up to Port Augusta where they had to change trains for Adelaide, with a further change to the Melbourne train, and still another change at Albury.

The brother she had accompanied to Western Australia initially had returned to New South Wales earlier and he was on hand to meet her at Central Station in Sydney, an event Bill remembers quite clearly, and has described it as though it was yesterday:

I would have been only four years old but I can remember it clearly. I have found through the years that there are some things that are photographed on your memory and become indelibly fixed there, and this was one.

I can remember the big clock that was hanging at the Central Railway Station, and the steam and all that sort of business, and I have a mental picture of my mother wearing a big hat and a feather sticking out, and she had a bag which some bloke with a razor came by and cut the straps.

I can remember us walking off Central Station to a long line of hansom cabs, my mother, my brother and the baby, and old Uncle Fred, and off we went out to Newtown where he had arranged a room for mum and we kids. It was one of these big terrace houses in Linterton Road immediately opposite the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital.

Bill likens those terrace houses to some still in existence in North Melbourne. His remarkable memory recalls that the room was a very large one. His mother went to work at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, the baby sister was handed over and fostered by his mother's eldest sister in Newcastle who brought the child up.

Bill and his brother were looked after by his Uncle Fred and taken to a boarding-house in Bligh Street — now known as Carillon Avenue. From there they moved to a little house in Brown Street around the corner from Bligh Street, but has now been demolished. In fact the whole street has been realigned and turned into a continuation of Carillon Avenue.

Another recollection of this time was seeing the arrival of Sir Keith and Ross Smith on their inaugural flight from England after the First World War. The two boys were now growing fast and a decision had to be made regarding their education, so the mother went and spoke to the local priest in Newtown who enrolled them in a convent boarding-school at Richmond, which was then considered to be in the bush. It was 40 miles from Sydney connected by steam train and a very rough road.

Bill and his brother spent their primary school years — to the age of about eleven — at Richmond, after which they returned to Sydney. By this time their uncle had bought a cottage in Newtown and had reunited the family, with the exception of the baby sister, who still remained in Newcastle.

The boys continued school in Sydney until they attained the Q.C. (Qualifying Certificate) level of education when they were legally permitted to leave school.

Bill by this time was a bit over 13 years old and remembers that these were pretty desperate years with the Great Depression looming. His Uncle Fred never ever married and was always 'floating around the scene', and it was he who discovered the possible opening for a messenger boy in a factory around the corner. First, he went with Bill to see the school principal and told him that there was a job waiting if Bill could be permitted to leave school (he was not yet 14 years old, which was the legal leaving age), and could be given a reference. The principal agreed and Bill started his first job in a mixed factory at 13 years and six months old.

STARTING WORK AND THE GREAT DEPRESSION

The factory covered two floors. It had a printing works on the ground floor, and upstairs were paper-bag making machines. In 1929 when Bill was 15 years old the Great Depression broke, a time he can remember very clearly:

Initially they didn't know what to do because it was like a cataclysm — the disaster happened so fast and everything snowballed. One factory would close, a couple of days later headlines in the paper signalled another big factory had closed and so it went on, it mushroomed and snowballed. There was no social security, or welfare system in place. So what the authorities did was to virtually set up a system of ration tickets to give the people food supplies.

They worked out a system based on a single man receiving four shillings and two-pence (4/2) a week. This amount was supposed to give him a quarter pound of tea; a quarter pound of butter; half a pound of flour, and a small tin of jam — a total of four and tuppence. Mind you in those days farthings and half-pennies were very much in calculation!

In this scale, a married man got double that for a single, and then there was a scale for each child.

He went on to describe the relief work system which was put in place, and proved counter-productive because the married men most involved in the scheme were dispirited with such non-productive work such as cleaning grass out of ditches.

However, there was a definite productive side from the community point of view, and that was that much of the Sydney sewerage scheme was put in place by this system of relief work. Most of the relief work was given to married men, so what happened for the single men?

The single men started to congregate in gangs because they had nothing to do, they had no money and would gather on street corners. I refer to the gangs which were similar to the present bikie element. These were the teenagers who grew up and had nothing to do, only assemble, talk, and generally make a complete nuisance of themselves. If any of them got hold of two or three bob they would spend it on a quart bottle of wine, and if you spread that around a few young blokes it would not be long before they'd be fighting each other. There was the Enmore Gang; the St Peters Gang; the Newtown Gang; the Paddington Gang; the Redfern Gang; and the Surry Hills Gang, and they started little wars against each other. One gang would send out a challenge to a rival group to meet them in Camperdown Park and they'd go to it with sticks, bottles, and any other items which they could use for weapons.

The situation became quite serious when the authorities introduced the Consorting Act. This legislation read that any three persons standing together talking could be questioned by the police. So what used to happen if two or three blokes met on a street corner and a police car saw them and questioned them as to what they were doing, and if one of the three had any type of record, the three of them would be pinched under the act, so instead of only one having a record there would now be three. I tell you the Consorting Act broke up the gangs in Sydney.

Unfortunately, the problem today is that there is no fear of the police, and the lawmakers are not giving their police the backups, with the result that the police are now in a position where they are fearful to talk to, let alone touch, some of these 'street-wise' people in case they are cited for assault. I dare say if similar legislation to that of the old Consorting Act was introduced today, and the legislators were prepared to enforce it, the lawlessness would be curtailed.

There's got to be a form of discipline infiltrated into the minds of these people. Another thing, when young men turned 14 in those days they had to automatically

report to the local drill hall and enrol for National Service training. It wasn't really a strenuous service but every parade the recruits were lined up on the parade ground or hall and they were taught to march correctly and to obey orders. A little bit of self discipline and a little bit of running around — but none of this happens today.

THE OPEN ROAD

Like thousands of others Bill Dwyer at the age of 15 and a half, was out of a job, this was in 1929. In a further effort to disperse the young and single people the Government of the day introduced a scheme encouraging the unemployed to look for work in country areas. As an inducement the unemployed were offered 'track rations'.

The formula was for every 30 miles travelled in a week the recipient would be paid four shillings (40 cents). The distance in the formula (30 miles), was calculated on the assumption that a young man should be able to walk the same distance in a week as would a bullock or a sheep. And this applied to subsequent weeks for each 30 miles, irrespective of direction, four shillings was paid.

Naturally the influx of young men into certain country towns had its problems, but the local police became adept in moving on the strangers.

Bill continues the story at this point:

So I joined that particular brigade and when I was 15½ I was off and out onto the open road. I didn't have a swag, I just had nothing, only a little overcoat and a couple of pairs of socks in my pocket, my worldly wealth was two bob, and away I went. I got as far as Penrith that first night and camped underneath the railway bridge.

I picked up another traveller along the route, a bloke about 30 years old. He came from Redfern but he never went on the next day saying it wasn't the life for him — it was the first time he had been out of Redfern in his life. But for me it was all of a 'boys own adventure' in a sense so I kept going and eventually got over the Blue Mountains and through to Bathurst, on to Dubbo through Wellington, and out through Narromine. I cracked it for a couple of jobs on farms, mixed farming, which gave me a few weeks work. We were able to cover these big distances into western New South Wales by 'jumping the rattlers' and that got us more quickly to places, and besides, we got a few more of the four bob rations too! I spent about six months in the bush and at about 16 I returned to Sydney.

I was only in town a couple of days when I ran into a woman I had known for years who told me of a job back in her suburb. I didn't have the fare so I scaled a tram from Parramatta Road to Annandale and went in and fronted the man in charge. He was the manager of a little store which was a branch of a big chain of grocery stores. I got the job after satisfying the manager that I could add up. I was on a weeks trial and at the end of the week he confirmed that I had the job. To cut a long story short, I stayed with this firm until I was about 19 years old and finished up as manager of the branch.

My first weeks wages was 14 or 16 skillings (\$1.40–60) I'm not quite sure, and when I was being paid I was informed that under the Shop Assistants Award, and because I'd entered the trade two years late (I should have been apprenticed at 14) for the first 12 months of my employment I would have to repay ten per-cent of my wages to the employer for teaching me the trade. So I had that experience, and after all it was a trade, and there were a lot of things to learn. A shop assistant started in the trade at 14 and was never declared a fully qualified tradesman until he turned 23 years old.

We were still in the Depression and things were not improving, and the firm closed down up to 83 branches, including the one I was managing.

There was another big firm in competition and every time one opened a branch — be it in a small town, a village or suburb — the other would also open up an outlet with

the result that they kept cutting each other's throats.

This action today is referred to as rationalisation or restructuring, when a firm needs to shed staff — so I guess I was restructured!

BREAKING INTO SHOW BUSINESS

After leaving the grocery business Bill knocked around Sydney 'getting a quid' selling radios and vacuum cleaners when he met up with an Englishman who was running a radio shop. He had just returned from a trip back to England and whilst there he visited Piccadilly Lane where he came across a spruiker who sold him a little gadget called a 'magic converter' for turning paper into money.

The Englishman asked Bill if he would like to go out to the Sydney Show and try and sell these wonder gadgets. Bill was pretty desperate and so jumped at the suggestion. He described the magic converter as a miniature old-fashioned laundry mangle — it had two little paper rollers and a small spindle. Parchment or greaseproof paper was cut into the size of a ten-shilling note, a pound note and a five pound note, and these were put through the gadget and reproduced as money. Bill recalls that the finished product would never have been able to be passed as the real thing — the reproduction was so bad!

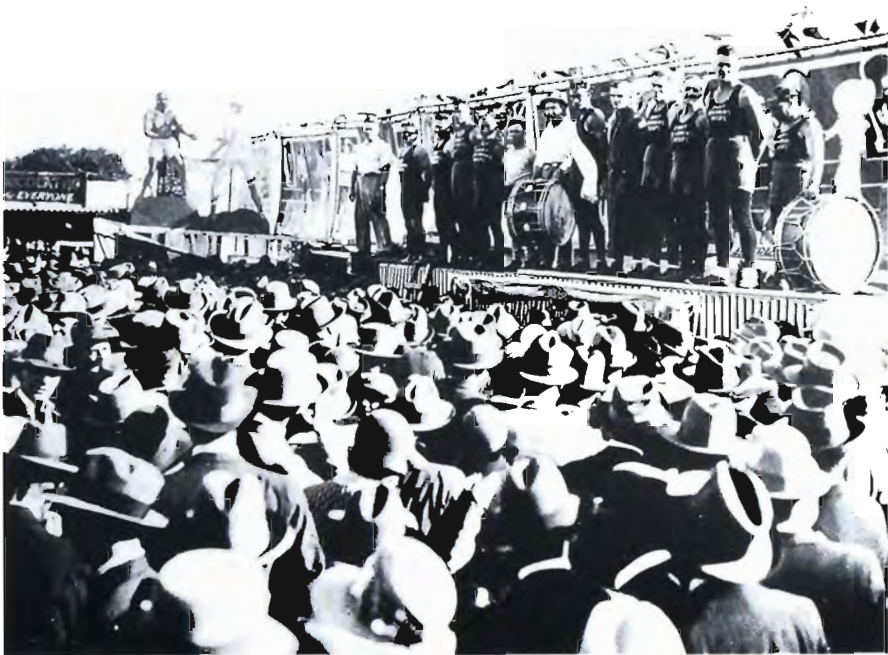
Anyway they went ahead and built a rostrum and Bill started his debut into show business. He tells of the amusement area at the 1934 Sydney Show as being very tiny, and instead of him being in what was called the 'main drag' he was around the corner. (He confesses he did not know what the 'main drag' was when he first heard the term, but he became a very quick learner.) He put the rostrum in his allocated space, and then came the movement of truth, as he said. 'All I knew was that I would have to get up and say something, or do something'. He goes on:

Of course there was no noise where I was. I had nothing around me much. A couple of bits of machinery — I was in what we later called Siberia. Anyhow I walked out into side-show alley — which was existent then — there were a few side-shows and a string of games, or joints as we call them, down near the horse stalls.

Old Leslie Short — his son Leslie is now in his 80s — and his wife Ruby had a string of joints backing on to the horse stalls. Opposite them was a row of tent shows, Arthur Greenhalgh: the Dare Devil Durkins were operating the Wall of Death; Tommy Castles also had a show there. And there was Dave Meekin of course, he had two or three shows. At that time he didn't have the pygmies he had a lion show and called himself Africander Meekin.

There was old Jimmy Sharman just around the corner near an old bar, a square bar — for it was always recognised in show business that the boxing tent had the position alongside the bar. If you went and opened up a new showgrounds, showmen would subsequently fight over every other position but the one next to the bar, that belonged to Jimmy Sharman or whatever boxing troupe was on the grounds, and over the years there have been quite a number. Harry Johns, Roy Bell, Smally Higgins — a whole team of them. Snowy Flynn was ahead of my time he was in Tommy Castles' earlier years.

There was another old showman called Vince Labb, he was a great old showie, he started about the same time as Arthur Greenhalgh. Old Vince started playing a violin in the streets up north, he had nothing, not even boots or socks. Anyway he graduated from that poor state and finished up with a hundred tons of gear which he put up in a big carnival in South Brisbane which proved a flop. He moved to Tweed Heads and from there to Hobart, and from Hobart he took it to New Zealand, where he retired but later returned to Australia. His son took over in New Zealand. Vince was a great old showman, he introduced Smokey Dawson to the show scene.



30. *Jimmy Sharman's Boxing Troupe, Sydney Show 1934*

I'm getting ahead of my story, the story of the magic converter. I've already told of how difficult it was to start, anyway, eventually I made up the 'tale' and once I got a pitch the tale went something like this — 'Ladies and gentlemen, you are all interested in these hard times in how to get a little extra money, well that's now no problem. I've got the solution, see this little thing, it's what we call a 'Magic Converter' — he then produced a pre-cut piece of parchment, and went on — 'So you don't want much money only ten shillings to nick down and buy a pack of cigarettes or something small like that, so you take this piece of paper here, just run it through this wonder machine and out comes the ten shillings'. Then I'd say, 'On the other hand, your wife needs to go down to the grocery shop and she wants a bit of money, say a pound, so you run that through too, and the old man wants to go to the races on Saturday and he wants five pounds — yes, five pounds!'

Of course with this tale I had to have a payoff for the police, otherwise I'd be in Long Bay if it had been fair dinkum. So I said — 'Of course ladies and gentlemen you are all intelligent enough to know this is only a trick, but it is the best trick you have ever seen. It's a great party trick, it's something new and something to entertain your friends — who wants one?'

Unfortunately to cover production costs of the gadget we had to ask two bob for them, well two bob in 1934 was a fortune, like asking \$10 now. Anyway I battled and struggled on and at the end of the day — no night show then — I went down to the bar and there met a nice little fellow who worked for old man Short, we had a couple of small drinks and he asked me what show was I going to next. This came out of the blue, I only ever knew of the Sydney Show. He told me that there was a show at

Bathurst and one at Grafton, in fact there was a show every week in some part of the State.

I decided to try Grafton because I recalled my visit to Bathurst when I was 15 years old, and at that time I nearly froze to death! So I got one of the old boats that used to ply between Sydney and Newcastle — there were two of them, the Hunter and the Gwyder — they carried passengers and freight between the two ports. They would leave Sydney at 11 o'clock at night and berth in Newcastle at 6 o'clock the next morning. The steerage fare was five bob and you went down into the great big steerage area which was confined to males. You kept your boots on all night otherwise you could wake up in the morning without them. I arrived at Newcastle, that was a step along the way, I had an old aunt there, a real old toff who would always give me a feed, so I hoofed it down to Aunt Kate's. She said, 'You're back again', and I told her that I would be leaving for Grafton, she wanted to know where Grafton was so I told her it was way up on the coast. As always, she made up a meal and away I went and a couple of days later I reached Grafton. I had asked the little bloke back in Sydney who I should see in Grafton for a job and he told me to see Dave Meekin, who he said was a tough old bird but he might have a job.

I arrived at the showgrounds and saw all the tents up, it was still a couple of days before the start of the show and there wasn't much activity going on. Anyway, I stood alongside this tent and sang out — 'Are you in there Mr Meekin?', he answered and I said 'I've been told you might give me a job.' He said, 'Can you spruik?' to which I answered that I could spruik, he then wanted to know who I had spruiked for and I said 'Well I haven't spruiked in a side-show much but I've done a bit of demonstrating'. His answer was short and sweet, 'No, you're no good to me'. I then asked him if he knew of anyone I might get a job with, and he suggested that I go and see Mrs Cummings. Well fluke of all flukes, I walked away from his tent and saw a lady and asked her if she knew Mrs Cummings, she wanted to know who was asking, and I told her that Mr Meekin had suggested that I ask her for a job. She said that she was Mrs Cummings and asked me if I could build a 'joint'. I had never heard of a joint but I told her I couldn't build one but I was willing to learn. Her reply was the same as Dave Meekin — I was no good to her if I couldn't build a joint. Just then a little half-Chinaman fellow came along, his name was Teddy Foy and he said he would give me a job picking up the balls in his joint. He told me to follow him and asked if I had anything to eat, I told him I hadn't and he gave me one shilling and sixpence and told me to go over to the caterer's place and get a meal and by the time I got back the joint should be there and we would put it up. So I went over to this tin shed and he was a good caterer too, his name was Preston and he had catering rights at the Sydney Show and he and his brother had a hotel in Sydney.

I had a lovely meal of steak and vegetables for one and threepence. So I got back with a 'tray-bit' to give to Mr Foy and when he told me I could keep it I thought I had fallen right on my feet. I then thanked him again and asked him when we would start work, and he said as soon as the joint arrived and looking up he told me it was coming right then. I followed his gaze and coming along I saw an old horse in a spring cart, and an old fellow smoking a pipe, and what looked to me to be a heap of bloody rubbish on the cart — a heap of unpainted timber. He showed the driver where to put the junk, and all this unpainted timber fell on to the ground. Next, he told the driver to throw the basket down — it was one of those commercial travellers baskets, and it had everything in it. There were kockem balls; fluffy cats that you knock down; the canvas top; the tucker box — everything went into this basket. Once all this was thrown out, including the hammer and nails, we started to put the joint up. I thought I would be watching a miracle happen if anything could be constructed out of this pile of junk. Fortunately I had learned a little bit about timber in my travels, so when he asked for a bit of 2x2 I knew just what he meant.

In no time he had the first frame built and then the second one, then we put the frames up and within an hour we had it ready for the canvas to be put down the back. Ropes were tied on it and we pulled it over. Next the canvas beds were in, then the tucker box and a couple of primus stoves and lights and we were set up.

We lived in that place, we put up the knockem inside and lived, slept and ate in that joint. And I'll tell you what, I learned more from Teddy Foy on how to work a joint — or a game as we call it today — he was a very smart little fellow. By now I was getting to like this show business, there was something inside me responding to this kind of life. As soon as the people started to arrive he hold me to go in behind the canvas, pick up the balls and bring them back to the front, and watch what he did, that was my job for the time. It was a four day show and he would not let me out for two days which was very smart of him because I would not have known what to do anyway. So I watched him and I picked the balls up and took them back, then he gradually let me out and by the time the show was over I had some idea of what it was all about.

So that was my first start in the real show business. I stayed with Teddy Foy for the Grafton, Maclean, Coraki and Kyogle shows, then we came back to Ipswich in Queensland and Teddy told me that was where he baled out. After that I picked up with another showman and went up all through north Queensland — that was my first run through the north, following all the shows.

BITTEN BY THE BUG. AND A WHOLE NEW LIFE

Although his experience in show business to this time had been limited. Bill Dwyer was hooked on the life style and admits 'something inside me responded to this kind of life'.

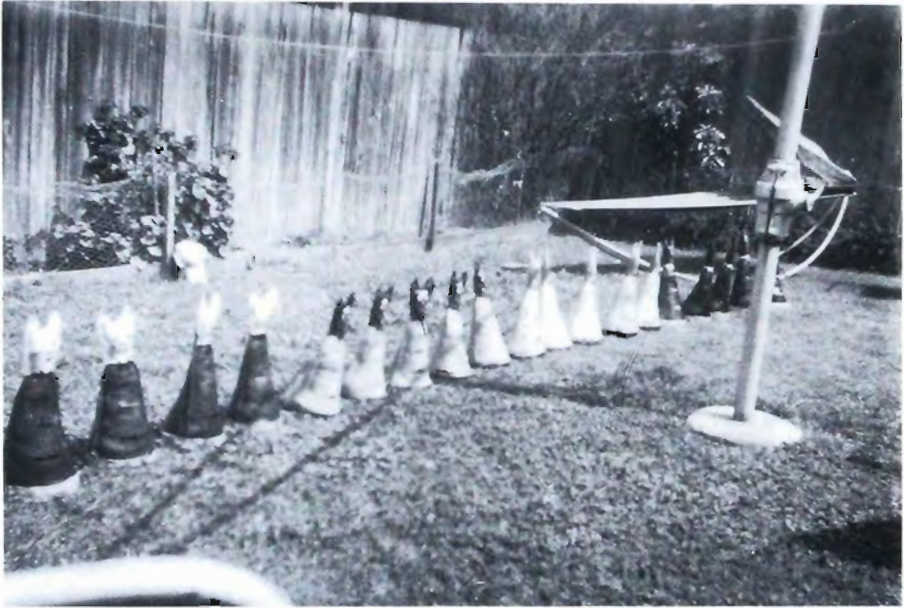
After Teddy Foy left the scene in Ipswich, Bill joined up with another showman with games. He recalls that there was not a big variety of games, most were either throwing games or throwing with variations. There was the cat-joint game which was built in the form of a fluffy doll's cat — patrons could knock them over and win a prize — or, the hard ball knockem, where hard balls were thrown at hard pins — a type of present day skittles.

There were one or two men who specialised at games such as hoopla. And at this time he made an interesting point, by saying that not every one could make a success out of all games. Certain people could make a success of a game like hoopla and others wouldn't do any good at all. This also applied to dart games. But once you got away from knockem, hoopla and darts there were only one or two other games. One of these was what was called a roll-down game. It was played initially with three balls, two of one colour and the third a different colour. The idea was that there were numbered holes at the end of the table and it was like a pool game with a number of players participating — up to 14 or 15 — and whoever scored the highest number won the prize.

He also remembers McCorkindale with his racehorse game. This showman travelled widely with his game in the early days, and for the first two or three years he 'froze with it'. People refused to play it, then quite suddenly it took off and he had a number of very profitable years before he gave it up and somebody else took it over. This game was the forerunner to games such as the climbing monkeys.

In 1936 Bill joined up with Herb Brown, a New Zealander, who had a truck and they got hold of a couple of games and travelled the show circuit for the next three years.

There were in southern New South Wales when they heard the then Prime Minister, Bob Menzies, tell the nation that war was declared on Germany — this was 3 September, 1939 — and they had already booked passage to Tasmania on a Bass Strait vessel. They discussed the situation regarding the war and at that time there was no great activity or urgency to change their plans so they went through with the Tasmanian trip.



31. *Cats used for Cat Joint*

32. *Bill Dwyer's early Hoopla Game*





33. Jack Allan (second from left), Bert Anderson (third from left) with some Special People including Willie Camper (Boy Giant) and Tommy Ison (Pygmy)

The pair stayed in Tasmania for six months before returning to New South Wales in 1940.

After they returned Herb Brown went back to New Zealand for a while, he later returned to Australia and died in Sydney — he never returned to the road after the Tasmanian tour.

Bill Dwyer goes on with his story:

We went up north in 1940, up to north Queensland, and then came back. By this time Arthur Greenhalgh and his partner Jackson, had all those exhibits they brought from America. There was Willie Camper, the Giant; Betty, the Tattooed Lady; Little Tommy Ison, the Pygmy; and Bill Barlow, the Skeleton Man.

They got a big house to live in initially but needed more room so Arthur went fossicking around — he was always interested in racing and at a meeting he picked up the manager of Tooths Brewery in Newcastle and asked him if he knew of a cheap pub for sale. The manager told him of a little pub up in Watt Street Newcastle, which was being run by an ex-coal miner who had no idea of how to run a pub and would sell for a cheap price. So Arthur made enquiries and went back and discussed it with Jackson.

Now Jackson was a Mexican/American who came out here with Whitey Clare in 1928 and with a partner worked the Wall of Death. Tommy Castles would have told you how he got them off the boat, but he may have missed a few details. Whitey Clare had no money to get off for customs or anything else. Tommy went and saw Arthur who was a run-around-man at that time and was getting a quid any way he could — his first wife was a snake charmer! Anyway Tommy told Arthur that Whitey had no money to get off the boat and suggested to Arthur that he rouse up the money because 'This will be a good show'. Of course Arthur raised the money and cleared customs and the rest is history. Whitey also brought a spruiker out with him named George

Donovan but he and Whitey went back to America and Arthur formed a long lasting partnership with Jackson. And this is how and why Tommy Castles developed the 'tale' for the Wall of Death. And subsequently when any showman put up a Wall or similar show he would copy Tommy Castles' tale because it was he who developed it. Greenhalgh was a smart operator, the best showman ever in the business. He was a great promoter and a good publicist, that really was his business — publicity.

I can remember when Arthur ran one of those roll-down games at the bottom of Pitt Street Sydney. They were little shop frontages and the operators would put up all their chocolates and prizes and they would have the tables right out on to the footpath — set up as though they were on a showground. The other side of Arthur Greenhalgh was that he would not even drive a nail, he was hopeless at any kind of manual work.

His partnership with Jackson was a handshake partnership, there was never anything written and over the years they had countless blues. I remember him saying to me, 'Bill never ever let the fact that you've had a blue with a man stop you from doing business with him'. He was an entrepreneur and wanted to do things. He would take on something new and give it a go. Getting back to the pub, he went back to Jackson and suggested they should buy it. He said that there were six rooms upstairs and a residential alongside where they could put all the people, and besides, if the war got worse they would always be able to get a drink! Jackson did not want to be in it, he said hotels were not their line of business, but nevertheless he always relied on Arthur's judgement and in this case it again proved right, the pub turned out to be a bonanza. I tell you what, that was a pub and what a pub? It had a little saloon bar, I always remember it had a clock high up on the wall, the room was quite narrow. The Giant used always be on the clock-side and we would all be drinking — in those days it was six o'clock closing — the barman always had his eye on the clock to make sure he complied with the law. At about a quarter to six the Giant would stretch up and pull the clock back ten minutes, giving us an extra ten minutes drinking time. Arthur decorated the walls of the pub with photos of all the exhibits and little stage people.

THE OVERSEAS STARS AND THE SIX MONTHS RESIDENCE ACT

Whilst we were discussing the overseas 'exhibits', we asked Bill about the procedure in those days of importing these people, especially as it concerned Arthur Greenhalgh and Dave Meekin. His reply further reinforced our concept of these two old showies as top businessmen in their field.

He told us —

Arthur Greenhalgh had a Chinese contact by the name of Chong who used to go to Hong Kong and select acts for the show circuit. He used to bring out Chinese jugglers and magicians and the occasional 'exhibit', and that is how the Pin-head Chinaman happened to come out. This Mr Chong was responsible for all the Chinese acts.

In those days foreigners were only permitted to stay in Australia for six months at a time, then had to leave. Dave Meekin used to overcome the problem with his Pygmies and Indians by finishing up at the Perth Show, then he would put them on a boat to Singapore or Malaysia where they would stay a month or so. He would then bring them back to Australia for a further six months. It was fairly common knowledge that Arthur Greenhalgh and Mr Chong worked the same game.

Before the Second World War, I think about 1938, Arthur Greenhalgh went over to the United States and brought back a number of acts including Zandu, the Quarter boy; the Tattooed Lady; and the Skeleton Man. At the same time he brought back a fighter for old Jimmy Sharman from Stillman's Gym in Chicago. In those days the Australian promoters could offer an overseas act a two years run — they could do the



34. *Arthur Greenhalgh, Jimmy Sharman Jr., Bert Anderson in saloon bar at Beach Hotel Newcastle*

whole of Australia, including Tasmania, and New Zealand in that time. Now a two year contract to an American exhibit was a long contract and a godsend, because in America they are only able to work for about four or five months of the year because of adverse weather conditions, they get frozen in. So a two year contract in the Australian sunshine was a very tempting bait, and helped to seal a lot of contract.

Dave Meekin brought out 'Jang' the Tail-boy from Borneo and he also brought out those Indian fakirs — they were good entertainers. At that time Dave had up to three shows running at the same time here in Australia and New Zealand — operated by different showmen. Then there was Anna John Budd, the first man/woman to come out here, he came from Hawaii and was a showman in his own right. In fact I think he may have been the sponsor of Zandu the Quarter boy. Around the same time an old American bloke called Colonel Bill Scott came on the scene, he was a typical Yank with the trademark big American cigar, and he headed an entertainment unit.

It was inevitable that he should find the way to Beach Hotel and there mix with all the other show people. He had a daughter who married Phillip Wirth. They returned to America to marry, and Bert Anderson their manager was the best man.

The mention of Phillip Wirth's name jolted Bill's memory about the night shows and he went on to tell that Phillip Wirth joined the Tex Morton Rodeo and did the north Queensland run with that show.

The cast of stars in the Tex Morton Rodeo included Lance Skuthorpe the world champion buckjump rider, his sister Violet — who later travelled with him to America

and Canada where he won his world title at Calgary — and who in subsequent years was a riding teacher and was also associated with the performing Spanish horses.

He recalls in detail those days of the Tex Morton Rodeo, with the special train load of equipment and gear, and Jackie Watson, who was the Queensland representative of the Showmen's Guild, as their train manager, and Phillip Wirth was the Ringmaster.

THE DURKIN ASSOCIATION

Bill Dwyer's main interest these days is in association with Stan Durkin and rides. Especially the Big Wheel and the Chairlift at the Melbourne Show — this partnership has been in existence for almost forty years. He was good enough to give us a very detailed account of this well known and respected show-attractions family:

Young Stan's father, Stan Senior, was 85 years old when he died in 1991. He was not one of the original bike riders, the Daredevil Durkins — there were three brothers, Herb, Frank and Tommy. Stan Senior was a big man when I first met him, he would have weighed 20 stone and was tall with it. He was a practical boilermaker and an ideas man, and during the Second World War he set up a little engineering shop in St Peters in Sydney. Just after the war he started to build little rides — small riding devices, out of tubular steel. If you remember back before the war tube was only used for three things — water, gas and steam — it was never used for fabricating.

He first built a little merry-go-round and some horsey-planes, then he built a small ferris wheel. Then he built another bigger one which he called a 'star-wheel', because it was a five-point star. Next he built a bigger one still and took it to Tahiti. Herb, one of the original bike riders, was a dirt track rider, and a famous one at that. He led the Australian Dirt Track Team to New Zealand in the 1920s and they scooped the pool over there — that's where he got the tag of 'Daredevil Durkin'. He was headline news in New Zealand for his fearless riding methods, so they adapted their skills to show business and produced the Wall of Death. Herb and his brother Frank were the original Australian performers.

The younger brother Tommy, was a civil engineer. He finished up with Coca-Cola as their Southern Asia Engineer, and of course he is now retired. But when Coca-Cola shifted their Asian Headquarters from Australia he declined their invitation to move for two reasons — first, he was getting close to retirement and he had some property here, and second, his wife's father had won one of the big lotteries, so money was suddenly not that important! This brother was never in show business.

Along with all the other showies interviewed we asked Bill Dwyer his version on what ended the tent shows — and like other things in his revelations, he dealt with it a little differently:

The tent shows were put out of business by the television camera and video. When television came to Australia in the 1950s one of the very first documentaries shown was made by the BBC when they sent a camera crew to the Kalahari Desert in Africa where the crew lived with the bushmen and the pygmies.

This single viewing practically killed Dave Meekin's show. For up until then his set consisted of lion and tiger skins, drums, spears and all that type of thing. His tent was beautifully set up. He had little Chillaweeny as she used to be known — but Ubangi as he finished up calling her — 'Ubangi from Savage Central Africa'. This little pygmy used to sit up on one of the little drums, wearing a little frilly skirt and carrying a small spear. Just as the show was coming near the end she would run towards the children brandishing this little spear with the result that the kids would smartly leave the tent followed by their parents. The tent would be cleared in no time!



35. *Violet and Lance Skuthorpe*

THEY BRIDGED THE GAP

Show people arrived on the scene when they were needed. They bridged the gap from out of the horse and buggy age until the start of the high technology television period. Prior to the Second World War there were a lot of people that never moved out of their own towns, their own villages, their own cities — they didn't travel. So to a great degree they were naive and were therefore subject to be told, and to listen to what these travelling show people — who came in their fancy rigout and fancy dress — when they said, 'We have come from all four corners of the world, and we are going to take you to the highways and byways. We will take you to Cairo and to Casablanca, into Morocco, the deepest dark places you can imagine. Wherever you have imagined places we have been there, and that is where we are going to take you today'.

With the advent of television, the camera went to all these places and brought them into their homes. It immediately cut the ground from underneath their feet, so this curiosity no longer existed in the minds of the people, and of course the show societies were not without blame in hastening the demise of the tent shows.

Sydney Royal, I think was the first show society to say, 'We don't want any more human or animal freaks'. We show people don't refer to them as freaks, rather we refer to them as special people. They are wonderful people as a rule, they earned their own living — not living on handouts or any other charity. Wherever they travelled in the world they were able to exhibit and show themselves, and thereby earn their own



36. *Herb Durkin in the Globe of Death*

37. *Bill Dwyer with Pedro Labb's Carnival, 1938*



living. This of course was the difference in perception by them and the show society. The argument put forward by the Sydney Royal was — ‘We don’t want any more of those bandy-legged horses because we are showing the best of Australia’s stock, what we claim to be the best in the world, so therefore we do not want anything that is going to distract from that — and the same applies to humans’.

THE MORAL

Bill Dwyer pointed out that so many people do not realise that wild animals are already bred in captivity and if they were to be returned to the wild they could not exist. Likewise, if a lot of them were not bred in captivity the species would have long ago disappeared.

He reminds us that there is a reason in everything. Children, people, everybody needs to know, needs to learn, to see and observe. So many people will never go to places like Africa and see so many wild animals in their natural state, let alone their wild state. He admits that he has no desire to do so — to see a wild elephant, or a wild lion or tiger — but defends the rights of the circus to continue to show and exhibit these animals. In his view there are minority groups who have gone too far, and the sad thing is that so many of their members are misled younger people.

WHAT NOW?

As with other showies, we asked Bill Dwyer what he considered was the future of the outdoor showman:

The future of the outdoor showman to a great extent depends probably on the future of show societies. While there are show societies in existence they provide the medium for show people to exist.

Adjustments must be made, tent shows have gone, the riding device has come in, and the games are still struggling on.

The trouble with the games side of it is that most people don’t want to try their skill out at anything, they adopt the attitude that they are not well skilled and they can’t do it, they would sooner play a game of chance, hence the popularity of the poker machines — that’s why they play them, they don’t have to have any skill!

So we in our turn have to provide the games that they will play. We need to take a chance but you can’t try something different at a capital show. It’s got to be proven and if it doesn’t fire you don’t put it up — you only put up the tried and tested game at a capital show.

A lot of our business is hand to mouth business you might say — like a lot of the small country shows. Our people, particularly those that are born into the business are never going to live outside the business, they travel and the showgrounds are their homes — that’s where they want to be and so they go from place to place.

If they break square or break even at a small show in two or three places they go on, and now and again comes a big show and they get the cream. When they get to a capital show — that’s if they can get space — and it’s good space they get a nice big lick and they might be able to invest in something, maybe a new truck or some other capital investment. But in this game millionaires are scarce! Nevertheless it is good business to reinvest in your own enterprise. But also don’t forget, that a lot of these people depend upon financial institutions like any other business, they deal with leasing companies etc. and I suppose if you could get inside their minds or their accountant’s office, you would find that a lot of them are struggling to meet commitments and payments from time to time.



38. *Chairlift at Royal Melbourne Show*

As Arthur Greenhalgh used to say, 'There is always the haves and the have-nots'. There will always be that, some will get up somehow or other and others won't. It's a matter of just keeping going and looking for opportunity and trying to take advantage of it when it knocks — if it knocks!

THE GUILD IN THE EARLY DAYS

Bill Dwyer must be one of the few remaining original foundation members of the Showmen's Guild. He has been a member since it was formed in 1938.

He recalls the first ever meeting of the Guild and disputes some theories that that meeting was held on the Brisbane Showgrounds. He says it was held in Bowen Park just outside the showgrounds on a Sunday, but this meeting didn't really get off the ground because someone had notified the police of the intended meeting. The police would not permit the meeting to proceed because a special permit had to be obtained to hold such a meeting in a public park. So the venue was then transferred to the Brisbane Showgrounds in an area backing on to the railway wall. This meeting was witnessed by a young *Courier Mail* reporter named Jan Stirling. Bill remembers that she was quite a young girl smoking a cigarette in a long cigarette holder. He continues:

We all sat around on little stools and I'm sure that the tent that we used belonged to old Dutchy Brooks — another old showman forgotten, nobody can ever remember him and whenever I bring up his name I am asked who he was.

Well Dutchy Brooks used to exhibit a pig, a big pig — ‘Dinny the Pig’ he called him. Not to be confused with ‘Billy the Pig’ which belonged to big Jack Baker. He put a gold tooth in Billy’s mouth and he used to advertise now and again that the gold tooth was lost and a reward would be paid to anyone finding the gold tooth and returning it to Billy. No, this pig was ‘Dinny’, he was never brought down to the showgrounds until the first day of the show, and was only ever shown inside a roped enclosure on some sawdust.

So at that time there was nothing in that tent and I’m sure that is the tent we held the meeting in. I remember we all sat around this roped enclosure and the person who was subsequently appointed President, Maurie Darling, was supported by Bob Skullthorpe who came up from Sydney, and Jacky Watson. I well recall we all sat around with this girl with the long cigarette holder, Jan Stirling, who reported the meeting.

Yes, that was back in 1938 — I know that is correct because I’ve been to the library in Brisbane and checked back on the papers.

JUST FLOATING AROUND AND DOING ODD JOBS

In the limited time we had to cover a lifetime of show business, my impression of Bill Dwyer was that of a quiet, sincere and thoroughly good man. It is not hard to see why his peers hold him in such high esteem and gives him the tag ‘The Gentleman Showie’. This quietly spoken man, now an octogenarian, has earned the right to take things easy, and at the Royal Melbourne Show he was doing just that, although I imagine that Stan Durkin would miss him should he not turn up. For this association has been a long and fruitful one, and as a parting shot Bill had this to say:

I can just float around and do odd jobs, such as performing the presentation of the Durkin Woodchop sponsorship. And I’m there if Stanley needs to go away — I can hold the fort in case something happens. You see he knows that if anything was to happen in his absence that I would know how to handle it — you just never know what could crop up in this game. I haven’t got any pressure, stress or strain on me and I come in whenever I like and go home early.

We express our thanks to you Bill Dwyer for what you have done to enhance the reputation of the Australian Outdoor Side-Showmen, and for your contribution to the history of those entertainers who were responsible for ‘Bridging the Gap’.

6

‘The Colour has Gone’

(From the Jack Allan Tapes)

Jack Allan was born in North Melbourne in 1914, his early education was at St Michael’s in North Melbourne, and from there to St Mary’s Christian Brothers College in West Melbourne. Like so many of his peers at that age, he had his selling point and sold papers to earn a little pocket money. Also, like so many others he joined in all sorts of kids capers, and was active and keen on sport.

THE BUG BITES EARLY

One thing he did not have in common with his school mates was his infatuation with the Royal Melbourne Show. At nine years of age he made his debut on the showgrounds by devious means — he sneaked past an unwary gate-keeper and made his way first, to the Cattle Superintendent’s office to get himself an animal to lead in the Grand Parade (for which he was paid the princely sum of two shillings (20 cents)).

As soon as the Grand Parade was over he would set sail for sideshow alley, where he was willing to do anything — to pick up papers, or any other menial tasks that would keep him in this wonderland and give him the impression that he was part of the sideshow atmosphere.

He would listen to the spruikers — people like old Jimmy Sharman and all the other show legends, and as long as he was involved in some way around the tent shows he was happy. He made up his mind, at this early age that he too wanted to be a showman.

The spruikers completely fascinated him, as already mentioned Jimmy Sharman senior was one of his favourites along with Dave Meekin. A further matter was placed in his memory bank from these early days, the great effect the spruikers had on the show going public.

With all kinds of entertainment at a premium, the showgoers in those days could satisfy their wants for fun by moving from one line-up board to the next. In fact it was not unusual for many visitors never to leave the sideshow area. They would go from spruiker to spruiker and in lots of cases may never even enter the tents — they found their entertainment mainly in the antics of the spruikers.

It could, and in lots of cases was, a very cheap form of fun. For after paying admission on the gate, and stallholders handing out free samples of all types of foodstuffs, the show was a real boon for so many of those people who may have been living in poor circumstances — either on their own, or in crowded accommodation — to have a wonderful day at the show, from nine in the morning to five at night virtually for the price of admission.

Jack Allan left school at the age of 14 years and immediately went to the Melbourne Show hoping to snag some sort of a job. He was lucky enough to strike Les Short senior, who with his wife were conducting games and rides and Jack started his career in show business taking tickets at the tent flap for the Short family.

He was in his element, and at every opportunity got out and about listening to the spruikers, and the more he heard of the spruikers the greater was his urge to become a spruiker. By this time other notable 'front men' appeared, such as Snowy Hodge and Major Wilson, and Jack's technique was gradually, and unconsciously, being formed!

Jack recalls one of the unusual showies in his early days was Smally Higgins who ran a boxing show of sorts around the country shows. He used to get himself a piece of sidewalk and with two pairs of boxing gloves, a small truck, but no fighters, made a living in the show business. He used to pull into a country town, go down under the river bridge, or rail bridge, and pick up four or five blokes who were out of work — for this was during the Great Depression — bring them back to the grounds, put them up on this small board, gave them all titles of champion, and he had a show. Smally's spruiking was so good that he could pack each house, and according to Jack Allan he was a brilliant showman — who ran a boxing troupe without any fighters!

This was just one example of a good spruiker being able to pack a house. He adds to this list other great spruikers such as Tommy Castles; Ray Manville; the whole Foster family, Frankie, Pikey, Johnny, their uncles and aunts, and led by the family patriarch Johnny Foster senior. This family had animal shows and girlie shows and Frankie's sister Frances was an exceptionally good lady spruiker. Frank Foster of course is still on the grounds and is recognised as a very great showman.

THE CHIEF LITTLE WOLF INVOLVEMENT

It was put to Jack that he would have come to prominence in show business with the introduction of Chief Little Wolf to the show circuit. This fact he did not completely deny, and these are his recollections of those days:

In 1936 or 1937 I was in New Zealand and Chief Little Wolf was also there wrestling. I was spruiking at a show and he and his wife came out and stood in front of the show. Obviously I was a novelty to them with my accent and Australian mannerisms, so when we had finished for the day he came over and made himself known to me. This resulted in he and his wife having dinner with us that night and from then on we became friends.

In 1939 at the Wellington Exhibition in New Zealand, we met up again — war had just broken out, and he was there as one of the chief attractions for the stadium. He found out that I was working at the Exhibition and we again renewed our friendship and spent a lot of time together.

When the war finished he came out to Australia with his third wife and two step-children. But I must mention that during the war he was a sergeant in the US Forces stationed at Camp Pell Military Establishment (Royal Park). Naturally he made contact with me when he got out here and as a result of our association I struck on the idea that I could get a beautifully presented front-show and put him in a tent as a show attraction.

When I discussed this idea with certain people they all said I was mad, they pointed out that most of the public had seen him wrestle and therefore would not pay good money to see him in a tent show. How wrong they were is of course now history. We packed them in to full houses all over Victoria and Australia. And at the Melbourne Show — we were down near the pig pavilion on the lawn — it was not a matter of getting them in but rather of getting them out! And I will say to this day nowhere near as many people went into other tent shows at Melbourne that year, as the number that



39. *Chinese Troupe at Wellington (NZ) Exhibition 1939 Arthur Greenhalgh extreme left, Jack Allan extreme right*

went into the Chief Little Wolf show. He was a brilliant showman, besides being a very good wrestler and a natural athlete. The man was so colourful with his head-dress and costume. I admit I pulled some tricks with him that you would go to jail for now, but that's showmanship. I would never put him up on the line-up board, to do that was giving half the show away!

We did a benefit show out at Woodstock and it was pouring with rain and the people helped us to put up the tent then paid to come in and see the Chief, and he had been working with them! That gives you some idea of the drawing power he had. We would go to little country shows where we took more money in the tent show than they took at the gate. In fact he was such a draw that show societies would ask us to go to their shows, pay no rent, and they would meet our expenses.

Even at regional shows like Bendigo and Ballarat, they took no rent off me — the attraction of having the chief there was payment enough. A spin off from all these visits was that he would visit all the old peoples' homes and the local hospitals. He would appear with his headgear on, much to the delight of the sick children. He had a wonderful reputation as a charity worker.

It is not generally known that he was a religious man. He and his family used to have bible sessions and church nights, he was a strict Catholic. He was brought up by Catholic missionaries in a place called Honie, in Trinidad, near the Colorado Mountains. He was the son of a Taos Indian mother and a Navaho father. The Taos tribe is Mexican, and the Navahos are known as blanket weavers. During our association he never queried anything I did. As I have said, I pulled tricks that would put us in jail, but if I asked him to do this or that he would never ask what we were doing it for, he would just do it. It was also not generally known that he was a periodical drunk. You must understand that he had to let off steam somehow. Although I remember he went seven years without having a drink. But I knew him so well that I could tell a month before that he was 'going to bolt'. He used to say, 'You are the meanest son of a so and



40. Chief Little Wolf

so in all the world'. Then I'd set all my traps and let him run 'til he had a good week of it. He would drink until he fell over, and then I'd catch up with him, and he would look at me and say, 'You are the meanest son of a bitch that I have ever known', and I would reply, 'Yes, and you are a savage and should be in a reservation'.

These spats went on and on from time to time throughout the twenty-six years of our association. Over this time we travelled mostly all over the world, and Chief Little Wolf was the biggest draw card ever at the Melbourne Stadium.

CHIEF LITTLE WOLF — THE WRESTLER

Over the years Chief Little Wolf had a love/hate relationship with the public. An interesting thing about this drawing power at the Melbourne Stadium was that those who hated him most were always the first into the Stadium, for the simple reason that they did not want to miss seeing him being 'done over'. His acts of charity counted for nothing in the eyes of a certain section of the crowd, all they wanted was to be there and witness him getting a hiding. He was a top class wrestler, in fact he won the World Heavyweight title in New York City.



41. *Chief Little Wolf — Hospital visiting*

Little Wolf was only five foot nine inches (about 175 cm) tall but he had a chest measurement of 64 inches (162 cm) normal, this made it very difficult for any of his opponents to get a leverage on him, and besides, he was as quick as a cat. He would get up onto his feet quicker than most men and had more endurance and resistance than most.

It is not common knowledge but Chief Little Wolf was a very handy fighter before he took up wrestling so had the ring-craft experience to be able to read the thoughts of his opponents, and to gauge the mood of the paying public. So if he knew that he could beat an opponent in two or three rounds he would just carry him along, and at the right time 'bury him'.

He took a delight in roughing-up good looking, handsome opponents, and Jack revealed that on the occasions that he met Bobby Lacone, 'Mister World' and that type of wrestler, he would say to Jack, 'These glamour boys, I'm gonna bury this so and so'.

At one stage a wrestler asked Jack Allan how could he beat the Chief, to which Jack answered, 'Don't do the wrong thing, because the minute he touches you he'll know your intentions, and he will shoot you down'.

THE AMERICAN INDIAN INVOLVEMENT

Over the years embracing his association with Chief Little Wolf, Jack Allan learned much about the American Indians and became accepted by them. This association led to an invitation to him in 1992 to attend the biggest Indian gathering in the world. This is how he tells it:

In February 1992 I was taken over to Arizona to comperé the biggest Indian gathering in the world. It was a gathering of more than 100,000 Indians and the function went on for a week.

I was honoured to be made Chief Marshall and Comperé. They have a big procession similar to Moomba, and in this display all their nation's traditions. Representatives came from all over the world, with a big contingent from Canada. It was the most colourful sight that I have ever seen. It is an annual event, and serves as a big 'pow-wow' and embraces all types of sporting events including buckjumping and many other traditional sports.

He went on to say that his acceptance by the American Indians was made possible by his long association with the late Chief Little Wolf, with whom he went through the ceremony of blood-letting and became a blood brother. Jack also revealed that he is one of the few white men allowed on certain Indian reservations. He says there is a similarity between the American Indians and the Australian Aborigines with certain of their tribal ceremonies. But the big difference is that the Indians own their own land and so dictate the terms on the use of those lands.

Before leaving the subject of the American Indians generally, and Chief Little Wolf in particular, we were anxious to know whether Jack was still involved with any of the late Chief's family, and he closed this important chapter by saying:

Little Wolf died in the Veterans' Hospital in the San Fernando Valley in 1990. Of course he was a sergeant in the US Army and was stationed at Mount Royal (Royal Park) for years. He had a brother back in the States who wanted him to return after his parents died so he went back. I visited him two or three times in the Veterans' Hospital. He had suffered a very bad stroke which had reduced him physically from a man of 20 stone to a very fragile person, and although he retained almost his full mental capacity, his speech was slurred. As it turned out these visits affected both of us, and finally got much too painful.

In all our years together we never had one cross word about money. He used to tell me to do my job and he would do the entertaining. I still have all the books signed by he and his wife. Every item ever used in our association was always fully recorded. His only real child was Makita, born to his third wife Donna, and she is the living image of her father. She had plenty of talent but there was a problem with her mother, and although she was keen for me to manage her I declined.

THE JOHN WREN ASSOCIATION

As manager of Chief Little Wolf, Jack Allan, of necessity was mixed up with great number of people in the show business, the fight business, and especially the wrestling circle. In this capacity he came in contact with the late John Wren a very influential figure associated with the Stadium in Melbourne and interstate. He was eager to tell of his association, and here is his version:

Being in charge of Little Wolf it was natural that as a promoter I would sooner or later come in contact with Mr Wren in his role with Stadiums Limited. He had a tough reputation — which was stressed through the 'Power Without Glory' rubbish. But any business or dealings I had with him regarding Little Wolf was on a handshake, and at no time did he ever waiver away from our agreement. So much so that in the old days when admission charges were ten shillings for men to get into a bout, and women paid half price, we agreed to have a trial one price run and this is how it happened. I always made it a practice to spend my time before the Little Wolf matches wandering around the stadium and I found out that there was more than



42. *King Chong and Chung the Pinhead boy*

sixty per cent of the attendance made up by women, and as our share of the take was a percentage of the gross all these women were costing me money. So I went to Mr Wren in his little office in Flinders Lane — for a man of his standing he had an office that was unbelievable, I've seen bigger and better toilets, but that was the way he wanted to operate. Anyway, I told him of my study over the year, the fact that nearly seventy per cent of the seats were taken by women and that this was costing us both money. He then asked me if I was trying to run Stadiums Limited and why didn't I take it up with the manager of Stadiums? To which I replied that my business was with him, and would he like to give the Little Chief matches a trial for a couple of weeks with a one price house? He asked if I thought it would work and I assured him it would so he agreed that at the next match he would introduce a one price house at both Sydney and Melbourne.

It was agreed to experiment with this for two trial matches and we never lost a customer, and if anything, had more women than usual — the Stadium was packed! But there was a fall-out to all this in the form of Dick Leane, the Melbourne Stadium manager, who got a bit fussed about not being in on the arrangement, but I told him he

could do what he liked about it, my contract was with Mr Wren — a verbal agreement, with a handshake.

I always found Mr Wren an honourable businessman to deal with and the same applied to his son John.

TRICKS OF THE TRADE

Jack Allan has been in the show business game for more than sixty years and like most of his era had met and worked with the best in the field so we thought it was about time that we quizzed him on some of the proven tricks used by those bygone showies to woo the showgoer into their tents, he came up with some already covered in these revelations and others who have only received a passing mention. He commenced by saying they all had little tricks, most were outstanding spruikers — here is his list:

Billy Woods (Listo) — Was the almost complete showman, did wonders on the line-up board and specialised with the Head of the Sword trick.

Tommy Castles (The Great Kahara) — A wonderful illusionist, and an exceptionally good spruiker, had many little tricks including the 'egg bag' and doll.

Ray Manville — Used to wear a fez and made up like an Indian, an outstanding man on the line-up board.

Snowy Hodge — According to Jack, Snowy Hodge was probably the best showman he has ever seen with a bad show! He had the 'Mermaid and her Baby', a papier-mâché model. And he and his Maori princess wife were the gentlest people one could meet. However at one Melbourne Show a certain detective of police approached Jack and told him that they were going to lock Snowy up for a con with his side-show, he said it was a fraud and a take, and when he opened up the next morning they were going to grab him.

This happened on the day before the show started so Jack told Snowy about the threat, and with this they decided to change the banner which read — 'The South seas Mermaid and her Baby', in bright red letters about a foot deep. They had the signwriter add the word 'effigy' above 'Mermaid' in small (once inch) letters, which blended in quite well on the banner. The next morning true to his word, the detective turned up and Jack and Snowy were there to greet him. Jack suggested that his action to arrest Snowy might be premature and suggested that he take another look at the banner, and be quite sure that he knew the meaning of the word 'effigy'. As a result there was no further action by the law on this matter.

Snowy had another show, a big rooster called 'Oohjar', he said, 'he is the father of the barnyard, and mother of a batch of chickens', and when asked why he called the rooster Oohjar, the reply came back, 'every time he lays an egg he goes ooh-jar'. Jack said 'That's Snowy Hodge, the loveliest person you could ever meet, if he had ten bob in his pocket and you were short he would give it to you. They had one little truck, no caravan, and they lived up in the back of the truck and in that way they travelled all over Australia'.

Major J. Wilson — Jack Allan describes Major Wilson as an educated man who was most conversant with all the laws. He was a major in the New Zealand Army before going into show business, he was a tubby short man not more than 5ft 6in height, he was a kind, gentle type who ran mainly girlie shows but up on the line-up board he was something quite different. His trick was a forced impediment and variation of speech, he would say outlandish and sometimes obscene things on the line-up board, and when the police tried to 'fit him up' he would always go into a stammer and a stutter and come out with the answer that they must have made a mistake because of his speech impediment.

Jack Allan recalls the time when 'Truth' newspaper really went out to get Major Wilson at the Royal Show in Melbourne. Their mission was to make it known to the



43. *Jack Allan with Special People L-R: Jack Allan, Ah Foo, Dennis O'Duff, Tam Tam, Front: King Chong, Pinhead, Dorothy O'Duff, Betty Broadbent*

public that this man was getting away with tricks and scams. Their articles were venomous, warning the show public against this shonky showman and advising all and sundry to give his show a wide berth. This kind of publicity played right into Major Wilson's hands, he got a 'G', dressed him up in a nice suit, and somehow procured a press pass for him which he placed prominently in his hat. He had this person in the pitch and according to Jack turned on an outstanding act. He screamed at the 'G' 'You have blackguarded me, taken my good name, so now I'm going to pay you back', and with that proceeded to stuff the 'Truth' down this bloke's throat.

Asked about his own means of getting a pitch Jack said his 'come on' was the 'Unfinished Trick'. He would get up on the board and tell about the most ridiculous, impossible trick in the world, and when he had got his pitch would say, 'I'll do it next time!' and this got widely known and referred to as 'Jack and his Unfinished Trick'.

He was a spruiker first and foremost and as such did not actually perform any acts, but at times assisted.

For many years he worked in front of some of the best ever side-show acts for Greenhalgh and Jackson such as the Chinese Troupe; Princess Pompous, the giant Negro woman; Billy, the boy giant, who was eight foot six inches in height and only 16 years old; Mexican Rose, the fat lady — 58 stone weight; Franklin Tearney, the three-legged Frenchman, who used to tap dance; Paul Del Rio, who was 19 inches high, he could hide behind the pages of the tabloid-sized 'Sun-Pictorial' newspaper; Frank Lutini; Chang, the pin-headed boy; Betty Broadbent, the tattooed lady.

THE FRATERNITY, SHOW TRAINS, AND LIFE ON THE CIRCUIT

It was time to discuss the real life of the outdoor showie on the road, and Jack Allan's version is much the same as others selected for these reflections. The showies were not a group, they were more a family, or to be more precise still, a fraternity. Caring and compassionate for their own, hiding minor irritations for the good of the whole, but up on the line-up board the scene changed, it was a case of bread and butter versus competition.

Jack relates experiences on the northern run with the show trains and the organisation behind the annual exodus to far north Cairns. He speaks of his experience as one of the show train marshalls along with Jackie Davis and another showie named Riley. They had to work out the loading procedure for a train consisting of 30 flat-top trucks and the routine used for loading.

He tells of how they all helped each other driving from one flat-top to the next, tying down, and the procedure used to unload. The point was made that even if a person was last on and first off the train the rule was that he was expected to stand by and help all the others to unload.

Jack talks of the influence the side-shows and night shows used to have on towns along the route of the north run. He recalls seeing seven night shows along the river, outside the showgrounds at Mackay. Shows such as George Sorlie, Mac's, Ashtons and Wirths. And these were not skeleton casts either, but rather the same show as would be staged at venues like the Tivoli in Melbourne. The big marquees contained a full sized portable stage, dressing rooms and all other facilities. Further more, they had all the top acts such as the Norman Thomas Quintet (which played on Broadway for many years). La Sonya, and other world class acts. He especially speaks of George Sorlie and his wife Grace who were considered top entertainers.

All these night shows were popular and were packed out night after night, and the management and performers did the right thing by the public by changing the format every second night.

We are reminded of course that the day shows on the showgrounds used to close down before dark, and this was the cue for showgoers and showies alike to go down the town and patronise the cafés and dining rooms. The fast food or take away food trade in those days was restricted to pies, pasties, fish and chips and sandwiches, however, most went for a sit down meal.

But show time was the big time, people travelled long distances to go to a show during the day and then on to a night show, and everybody in the entertainment and hospitality line benefited by this annual event. Towns in all areas in those days did very well out of the local annual show.

Like the business people in the towns, so too did the showies cash in on the country show. People in those days used to save for the annual show which in most small country places was the big event of the year. And the showies, especially the tent shows, did well because there were no big rides, and certainly not the number of games on the showgrounds. At most there would be six or seven rides — the octopus, a merry-go-round, a chair-o-plane, and a few others such as the horsey-plane, but nothing like the position today.



44. *Jack Allan on the Show Train*

A good example of the importance of the annual country show was the one Jack gave us of some of the North Queensland towns, and particularly a community such as cane cutters whose main entertainment for the year was the big show week. In their hundreds they would patronise the day shows and would see every one of the night shows.

He reminded us of the very successful plays and film, the 'Summer of the Seventeenth Doll' which emphasised the importance of shows in the lives of the people of northern Queensland.

Especially did this apply once the show train passed Maryborough, its progress from then north became a really big event, and when they pulled in to a railways goods-yard half the town would be there to welcome them.

SOME OF THE BEST

Although Jack had told us of some of the big acts he worked with, most of those were for Arthur Greenhalgh, so we went a bit further and asked him to nominate some of the best acts overall that he had seen during his long life in the show business.

He unhesitatingly named the Chinese Troupe as being outstanding, the combined north China and south China performers were top entertainers. This group was not the Chinese freaks such as the Pin-head and old King Chong, but rather stars such as Ah Foo, probably the best sleight-of-hand magician in the world; young Ku Dec, who was an Olympic gold medallist in gymnastics; Big Chong, who was such an outstanding attraction out on the line-up board; then there was the yo-yo specialist who could throw a whistling yo-yo up so high you could not see it and yet he would never miss it when it



45. Jack Allan, King Chong, Pinhead, Ah Foo

came down. He was a real pitch-getter, he would make the yo-yo whistle up to a screaming pitch and draw people from all over the showground.

Acts like Princess Pompous and Mexican Rose were both great entertainment and gave good value for money. The Pygmy Show: Ray Manville; Tommy Castles, with his illusion show; Billy Woods (Listo), was also a famous illusionist, all of these were top line entertainers.

Jack declares that all these people were the real showmen whereas today our so called showmen in many cases are promoters. The skills of yesterday have been mislaid but not lost, and although ninety-nine per cent of today's showmen would not have a clue on how to put up a tent, this is not the main skill of the craft which has been lost, that rests with the lost art of being able to get the showgoer to stop and listen to what they have to say. The art of the spruiker is the missing component, for in the real show business there is no truer saying than 'The Front of the Show gets the Dough'.

EARLY GAMES

As he sorted through the memories of days gone by Jack Allan painted a picture of some of the very old games seen on the showgrounds. Games such as blocker-knockems, knockems, fluffy dolls, shooting galleries, games of darts, marble games and hoopla.

It was of great interest to hear him say that he introduced the 'laughing clowns' into Australia from New Zealand back in 1940. They first came from England to the Wellington Exhibition in New Zealand, and the original owners thought that they were going to make a fortune with them, but made the mistake of displaying them in one long unbroken line, and instead of them making a fortune they in fact went broke. It was alright to have long lines of the clowns in England or America where the populations were so much greater, but to have to buy space for 40 odd clowns at the Exhibition in New Zealand — with only four or five of the line producing revenue, was a very expensive operation. And the operators were only too happy to have an outlet in Australia and an opportunity to try and recoup some of these losses.

THE COLOUR HAS GONE

With Jack Allan as with all the other celebrities in these revelations, we posed the question as to why the tent shows disappeared and from him received a different insight to many of the others.

He considered one of the primary reasons of the demise was the legislation brought in concerning safety precautions against fire, which were harsh and completely unnecessary, as the material used in the tents was completely fireproofed and would not have caught fire 'even if a blow-torch was used on it'.

Next reason for the loss of tent shows — in Jack's opinion, was they lost 'the man in the front', the spruiker. And he repeated the old adage so often referred to by Tommy and Shirley Castles, 'It's the front of the Show that gets the Dough'. And with this makes a comparison with the spruikers of yesteryear and the attendants of today — a group he classes as mutes. He gives as an example those in charge of the present day games booths who just stand behind the games and make no effort to attract or to entertain the showgoers because they are not trained to do so. Spruiking is an art, it's a craft, it's a trade — and is in fact a lifelong study, according to Jack Allan.

He was prepared to share some of his trade secrets when telling of his experiences on the line-up board over a life-time in the show business game:

You can have three or four hundred people in your pitch and if you are experienced you will look them all over, and that experience will tell you that in your pitch 30 to 40 per cent are going to go into the show no matter what I say, another 30 per cent is not going to go in even if it is free, it's the remaining 30 per cent you have to sell.

So this is the group you need to concentrate on and your message is personal to each one of this group. It would go something like this — 'If you don't go inside and see this show you are an idiot. you might as well have stayed away from the showgrounds altogether'. In other words the message is to each individually. So in the end I don't have to convince the certainties, nor the no-hopers, but just those who have not made up their minds.

Throughout his long career as an international spruiker he says he did not use a megaphone, and only on special occasions did he use a microphone, for he thought with such an aid he was not able to make his tale personal enough, and anyway he had a loud voice — talking from down in his stomach — not as a normal person speaks.

The first few days of a show were always a problem for Jack, his stomach muscles used to ache through using them for spruiking, consequently for those first nights he was not able to sleep very well — however over the years he learned to control the speech muscles. He too refers to the art of spruiking, not a matter of just speaking but the choice of words:

You can talk for ten minutes and still say nothing, for there are three or four words that sell your tale, and you have to concentrate on those words and put them in the right place.

He repeats his introduction of the Chinese Troupe as an example:

And how presenting a galaxy of oriental extravaganza long to be remembered. It's the best show I have ever seen in my life so I know it will be the best show you would ever have seen, because I've seen more than you, and if I'd seen a better one than this I would have it here for your edification.

Returning to the decline in the tent shows, Jack reminded us that another very

important factor in terminating the tent shows was the action of the show authorities in barring freak shows, both human and animal.

When pushed on how well these human exhibits were treated in the old days he assured us that they were treated like royalty, they were the showies' bread and butter. He cited the case of the Chinese Troupe which used to stay on the showgrounds in special accommodation and were given the best of food cooked under supervision by their own special Chinese chefs.

Jack Allan has connections in the circus fraternity, so next came a 'serve' at the animal liberationists:

You can't bring an elephant into this country even if you had a million dollars — there are no more coming in. So if you own two elephants you are a millionaire, but if one should get hurt there is no way that it can be replaced.

Take the Palomino horses that my family have as an example, they had to bring a special trainer from Germany to break them in and it cost more than \$50,000. These horse are cared for like Dresden china, they are padded up and not even allowed out in the weather — yet some of these demonstrators keep up the pressure to stop them performing, they say it is a cruel and unnatural act for horses to perform! These bans are all so ridiculous, but even with the restrictions placed on them circuses are still doing good business, it's the atmosphere, the big top. There is evidence in the United States of a rebirth of tent shows but they have no spruikers, and you can't make a man a spruiker just by talking into a microphone.

And with the loss of the spruiker the colour has gone out, for he was the most colourful person on the grounds.

Referring back to the 'special people' used as exhibits Jack Allan said they were all treated very well and because of their unique appearance were always the centre of attention, and loved it. He cites the case of Peter the Chinaman who was in show business here for fourteen years, he was an illegal immigrant and was deported. Within six weeks of his return to China he was dead — he could not fend for himself back in his native country.

Another example was big Dennis O'Duff, a big Irishman over seven feet tall, he could not work, he was 'gone in the legs' and all he could do was to sit and entertain people. And there was Mexican Rose, the 56 stone entertainer, who could only waddle along, what employment was there for her outside show business? On the show circuit she lived like a queen.

Setting aside objectionable and malformed animals used as freaks, Jack draws our attention to some of the big attraction animal curiosities such as Billy the Big Pig, and King Kong the big bullock, both were monsters and there was no way that city people could have seen these oddities of nature other than as an exhibit at shows. These animals, like the humans, were all well treated and thrived on merely being on display.

In the 1970s an oddity was brought to the Royal Melbourne Show. Said to be the progeny of a goat and sheep, this animal caused all sorts of discussions between students of genealogy, but for reasons of expediency, the RASV called it a 'Geep' (a cross between a goat and a sheep!). This odd animal was given a place in the Royal Melbourne Show Grand Parade and proved a big attraction.

This reminder happened to be spur for one of Jack Allan's hobby horses — the Melbourne Show's Grand Parade. He classed this event as the biggest attraction on any Royal Showground, and is saddened by its present presentation of three or four showings over the whole show period.

He tells of the showies' dislike of the Grand Parade in days gone by, when it was about the only attraction on the Showgrounds to clear sideshow alley, and in those days it was presented daily. And he takes great pleasure in telling all and sundry that



46. *Dennis O'Duff and his wife Dorothy*

when he is overseas he expounds the value of the Grand Parade at the Royal Melbourne Show by saying that to sit in one of the grandstands and watch this display, is to see Australia's very best cattle, horses, goats and harness turnouts.

THE ILLS OF CAPITAL CITY SHOWS

In the 1950s the first signs of disharmony appeared between the Royal Agricultural Society of New South Wales and farm machinery and farm equipment exhibitors, when the Society sought to impose excessive charges for space on its Sydney Showgrounds.

The outcome of this was a walkout by exhibitors and the birth of the Orange Field Days which for the exhibitors concerned, became an immediate success.

In the eyes of many old showies this was the beginning of a new policy by Capital City Shows in a process of selection of exhibitors more favoured by the Royal Agricultural Society Councillors than in the wider interests of the showgoing public.

The birth of the Orange Field Days meant the death of the exhibitors of farm machinery and farm equipment at the big Capital City Shows.

The formation of the Wimmera Field Days held at Horsham in Victoria, devastated the world famous displays at the Royal Melbourne Show, and whereas in the past farmers would head to Melbourne to view the latest on offer in machinery and attend the study stock sales, this was no longer necessary. They could now go to the big Field Days and compare the machines and equipment under field trial competition.

Along with the loss of farm machinery and equipment, the showies sensed a hardening by some of the Royal Agricultural Society Councillors towards all types of freak shows, tent shows and showies generally. And the occasion was ripe for the 'do-gooders' to come out of the woodwork to pressure the societies to clear out all the 'undesirable' acts, human and animal, and make the showies 'clean up their acts'.

Little did those in authority realise the mistake they were making. Not only did the

colour disappear from the grounds but worse still, the space was plundered by operators of joints, rides and games.

In an endeavour to find out how the showies of today are surviving at the big Capital City Shows, we asked Jack to tell us what currently is wrong with the Royal Melbourne Show. He pulled no punches in his reply:

I can tell you what is wrong with the Show. For a start you get no publicity in advance of the Show, the event has started before most people realise it. And the charges, especially admission charges, are too high. For five years I have suggested to the Society that it makes a range of admission charges, with big concessions for the night show period — in fact cut the price in half for the night show. In America you can go to the Penola State Fair out of Los Angeles, the biggest in America, it's \$4 to get in, pay another \$2 and you can see the top acts of the world. Personalities such as Kenny Rogers and Willie Nelson. But here they want to charge \$12 to come in, but at night time all you can see is a carnival — there is nothing exciting in the ring. (But I must acknowledge in fairness to Melbourne they have not increased their admission charges for four years, and have cut the night admission charge to half.) Nevertheless as a family entertainment it is too dear and actions such as these can lead towards pricing yourselves out of business. I understand that some Royals are seeing the light. Brisbane for example charges only half price for two or three days, and Adelaide. I believe by adjusting its prices has increased its attendance.

Up to this point Jack Allan gave us some straight talking on the ills of the Capital City Shows, so we asked him to put himself in the place of a Royal Show Chief Administrative Officer and come up with a cure. As already covered, his first priority was more pre-show publicity; then some decent free attractions in the Main Arena; then regardless of what the Councillors or anyone else says about admission charges, they must come down.

He reminds us that in 1972 the Royal Melbourne Show dragged in over 916,000 people, and the population was a lot smaller than what it is today.

If the admission charge is cut he considers the RASV could look forward to a big increase in attendance. For the Royal in Melbourne has always been a good show and so we should never lose sight of the fact that each year there is a new generation waiting to be introduced to a real show, but the onus is still on the Society to entertain the show-goers — the showies entertain them, even without the tent shows!

All the components that make up the show have got to get back to basics. The Melbourne Royal has world class stock — and most marketing research surveys have declared that the animal component is the Show's greatest attraction, so we must use this component to the full.

Jack Allan's association with the circus world (the Perry Brothers Circus is a family association) gives him an authority to speak on the matter of entertaining big crowds, and he says if the circus is not drawing full houses it is necessary to find out why, and if the answer is that the price is too high then you must drop the price.

The name of the game is people through the turnstiles, and in this business it is not hard to price yourself out of the market. And in respect to prices he practices what he preaches, he asserts that he has not raised his prices at the Melbourne Show for five years — on his giant slide; the jungle of fun; the ferris wheel; space ship and his collection of games.

Jack Allan has been in the show business for nearly 70 years and his motto has always been — 'I serve to serve again', and he reckons he must be doing something right to have lasted so long.

His daughter Gail and family have now taken most of the work off his shoulders and his aim, and hope, is that they will also be in the business as long as he has been.

THE 'OUT OF SHOW' ACTIVITIES

For more than 30 years he has built up a very nice little side-line in supplying rides and games for some of the top companies in Victoria such as the Ford works and General Motors, for break-up parties for staff members at the end of the year. The fact that he has been able to maintain this custom against very strong opposition strengthens his claim that he must be doing the right thing. Further, he has now extended these activities to encompass racecourses, where he supplies rides for children whilst the parents enjoy a day at the races, as Jack says 'We look after the kids while the parents look after themselves, and there is no way that the kids will leave the rides area while ever the rides are free!'

As we approached the finish of the interview I was keen to know how much this typical old-time showie missed the excitement of those days up on the line-up board in competition with the likes of Tommy Castles, the Foster clan, the Sharman family, and others of that era, so posed this question to him — 'The ghosts of many past showies must occasionally flit across your vision, what are your thoughts when this happens?' He replied:

Lots of times I lay in bed and think of some of the loveliest people who are no longer with us, and deep down it worries me, the ranks are getting thin. Over the years I have met some wonderful people. For example, during the Second World War I compered the American Thanksgiving Balls, and had the good fortune of sitting next to Mrs Roosevelt, at her request. I was in the Preston and Northcote Community Hospital (PANCH) when I had my first heart attack, when the then Governor of Victoria, Sir Rohan Delacombe, saw fit to visit me at 10.30 at night and then apologise for not being able to see me earlier! These are the occasions and things that nobody can ever take away from me.

I've never been anywhere I can't go back to, I'll admit at times I have done the wrong thing, but never knowingly done the wrong thing to anybody in my whole life. My one desire was always to be a showie, that's the only thing I ever wanted to do in my life — to be in show business.

Jack lives in semi-retirement with his wife Dawn but still keeps his finger on the pulse of the show business game, and although both he and Dawn do not now enjoy the best of health they have the satisfaction of knowing that they were a part of those magnificent people who brought so much joy and entertainment to the multitude of Australians who were so dependent on them and their kind for decades — from the Depression days of the 1930s through the dark days of the Second World War, and into the post-war years leading up to the advent of television.

But more importantly still for this family would be the high esteem in which they are held by their peers. Here is a man, now in his 80s, who has rubbed shoulders with the wife of an American President, and solicited the concern of a Victorian Governor, been a straight shooter, and has no regrets for the decision he made as a very young man to make show business his love, his trade, and his life.

Well done Jack Allan I would doubt whether we shall ever see you kind again.

(No one could have predicted the tragedy that was to befall this fine old showie family when Georgie Magdziarz, 25, was accidentally killed at the 1995 Royal Melbourne Show. Son of Gail (Allan) and George, brother of Perri, and grandson of Jack and Dawn, this fine young man was Jack Allan's focus on the future of the industry. We grieve with the family in this loss.)



The Camp Fires have Gone Out

(From the Frank Foster Tapes)

A member of one of Australia's oldest and best known show business families, Frank Foster, was born at Arncliffe in Sydney on 12 October, 1927. His family originally came out from England where they had been in show business for as long as anyone can remember. (According to the late Tommy Castles the word was that they were of Romany descent!)

Frank says that in England, he understands the family members were mixed up in all sorts of things — in games, in acts, the musical side of show business, and they were also stilt-walkers. He has old photos of a number of family members on stilts back in England. His grandmother, and matriarch of the family, Aunty Lulu, came out to Australia about the turn of the century, and brought with her four sons and a daughter. They were, Lally; Alfie; Frank; John and Frances, all of whom were great show persons in their own distinctive way, and contributed to a great extent to Australia's entertainment and show scene.

His Uncle Alfie was the first man to bring the Performing Flea Circus to Australia, his Uncle Alfie was one of the first showmen along with his brother John (Frank's father) to bring out pygmies, and John was involved in monkey shows, variety shows, magic shows — and, as Frank says 'You name it and at that time he had been there and done it!'

THERE'S NO BUSINESS LIKE . . .

Frank tells how his father and mother first met:

It was in Albury, she was of Irish descent — a member of the Keegan family. Anyway her father was a ganger on the roads and he had a large family, so when my father — who was working at the Albury Show — met my mother, he decided for the first time in his life, I believe, to do a bit of work by accepting a job from his prospective father-in-law, working on the roads.

My father — as he was then and up until the day he died — was a made keen fisherman (like me). So instead of digging up the roads — in those days it was all pick and shovel work and horses, no modern machinery such as tractors, graders, and front-end loaders — the old man decided he'd go finishing, he was not all that keen on repairing roads!

Well that was all right probably for once, but when he did it consistently, Mum's dad — a real Irishman — went and picked my father up and said, 'If you want to fish



47. *Eileen Foster 1926 (Frank Foster's mother)*

you may as well live with them' — and with that threw him into the river with his gear and the tin of worms. This changed my father's ideas about work so he went back on the road — he didn't like that Irish type of treatment!

THE GOOD OLD DAYS?

There are four members of Frank's immediate family, they are — Bill, John, Alf (or Pikey), and his sister Frances. He speaks of the early days when they were all young and were trained to do all sorts of things. These were times during the Depression and things were very, very tough. He recalls his father up on stilts walking the streets of Sydney and in particular 'down in the park' near the waterfront with his sister Frances doing a trapeze act between the stilted legs. And he remembers his mother at night bathing the father's legs where the stilts used to rub, and for all these hardships they were lucky if they collected ten shillings.

Frank takes up the story —

Believe it or not that ten bob used to keep us for a week, but in this we were not



48. *Johnny Foster with Olympian Nick Winter at the Kings Head Hotel (Poverty Point) Sydney*

Robinson Crusoe, because things were really tough in those days. I remember I used to go down to Paddy's Market, where there was a guy who used my talents in identifying fish — I knew just about all the species of fish — and for naming the fish he would always give me one, of course I used to give him a bit of a hand too, but we always had some fish — and in those days fish was only three pence a pound.

My father did all kinds of dangerous things for a few bob and publicity. He used to hang out of windows, along scaffolding, and free himself from a strait-jacket while it was afire, just for publicity. There's one story worth relating and it concerned a fellow named Captain Stoddart — he supposedly piloted the second plane in the Australia-New Zealand Air Race which was won by Kingsford Smith.

He had heard about my father's crazy stunts of hanging out of windows in a strait-jacket, and must have thought that it would be a spectacular thing for his flying show, so he called down to the old house where we were living and wanted to know where John Foster the stuntman was. Well my father was at the King's Head Hotel, which was nicknamed Poverty Point — where every sort of actor and showman met each Monday along with the booking agents. It was a place where everyone was a winner! You would hear such yarns as 'God I had a good week last week, you know I really made a packet, but the money has not yet arrived, have you got ten bob? I'll give it to you back next week.' This used to go on with everyone, but not much money changed hands!

Anyway this Captain Stoddart met and got talking to my father and told him he would like to take him in the air show. Naturally my father asked what he was sup-

posed to do, and the answer was — ‘I want you to put your straitjacket on and we’ll lower you out of the plane, and you free yourself out of the straitjacket while we are flying past the crowds’.

My father asked how he would get back into the plane, to which the good captain replied — ‘I don’t know just at the moment but we’ll get a winch or something, we’ll get you up again don’t worry about that’. Dad told him he wasn’t too sure about the idea and that he would have to discuss it with this wife. But Captain Stoddart wasn’t going to let my father go and asked to accompany him to see my mother. Dad was fenced-in and agreed to take him along.

After the introductions he told my mother what this Captain Stoddart wanted him to do, and if he agreed to do it he would be paid five pounds (£5) a week. Mum said, ‘Gee Johnny that’s a lot of money, and we could really do with it’, to which my father replied. ‘And I’ve gotta hang out of the plane and he’s gonna wind me back up you know it’s pretty dangerous, would you like me to do that?’, she said, ‘Oh yes but it’s a lot of money Johnny’. By this time dad was getting a bit hot under the collar and said — ‘But Honey the plane’s going and I’ll be swaying back and forwards’, to which mum said ‘Oh Johnny’, and dad replied ‘Listen to me your bastards, you wanna get me killed!’.

DEPRESSION BLUES

The family did not stay long in the one spot, specially around the cities. At this time the Depression was causing anxiety to all sections of the community, but especially to the show business people. Frank said he remembers that the family used to go out and entertain the shearers in the shearing season. They would call at two or three stations a week and put on a show for the shearers after they had finished the day run — for which they used to collect a few bob, enough to get them to the next shed.

In the winter time when it was too wet to shear, and there were no shows, all the showies met in an area between Bourke and Brewarrina in western New South Wales, and there they used to set up a tent city on the Darling River. The women did all the cooking, even baking the bread, while the men used to hunt pigs and rabbits, and fish.

It was during one of these breaks that Johnny Foster wanted to cross the river because it was believed there were more pigs on the other side. So they jacked up the old truck, took the wheels off and stripped the tubes from the tyres to make a raft.

His sister was sent across the river to tie a rope on a tree on the opposite bank so they could use the raft as a ferry and go back and forth. They did get more pigs but at a price. When it came time to leave the riverbank site and make it to Peak Hill — the first show after the winter break — Frank’s father found that the tubes had perished, and as the wagons departed one by one they wished the Foster family well in their search for replacement tubes! Speaking of these experiences jolted Frank’s memory regards being on the roads during the time of the Depression.

He recalls that on the whole the roads were very bad, hardly any of them were sealed, and if it rained it could take them as long as a week to get from one town to the next. The northern run to Cairns was out of the question unless you were fairly well banked up.

There were times when they did the northern run by train, and he remembers the time when there were seven show trains going north. It was the practice to board the train at Rockhampton, go to Cairns and maybe the Atherton Tablelands, and return again to Rockhampton. But he stresses the point that if you were having a lean time you would not be able to afford the trip up north.

He goes on to tell of the family’s ups and downs during the 1930s:

I was about eight years old at this time, my father had been over to New Zealand and

he'd done a big turnout over there — the Dunedin Exhibition. He did quite well and made a bit of money, so bought this big show in partnership with a couple of other people.

A cousin of mine had married the daughter of the bloke with a big vaudeville show. The father was dead against the marriage so he followed his daughter back to Australia and put up his big show in opposition to us, and sent us broke. The result of this was, we finished up with about 15 members, family and relations, with no money and stuck out in the never never. What we had to do was to earn whatever we could by our own skills.

In most towns there were vacant lots, and in these areas we would conduct an open air circus and take the hat round.

I remember I had to sing in the streets and at the same time I was learning acrobating and the tricks of the show business trade — everybody had to learn different things. My sister Frances was a contortionist, but my father was the complete showman — he could handle everything from being a magician, or escapologist, to taming lions. In those days in order to survive you not only had to be a showman, you had to be a great showman.

Competition was keen because there were other great showmen too. To name a few — Dave Meekin, Arthur Greenhalgh, Jimmy Sharman, Snowy Hodge, Tommy Castles and Major Wilson. And every one of these individuals specialised in specific fields. Some were good 'in and out' show workers — that means one could have a little horse exhibit, and another could stage big animal shows like Captain Davis and the Davis family, and the Ashton family.

LIVING OFF THE LAND

The Fosters continued their nomad existence travelling the countryside 'living off the land'. As already mentioned they worked the shearing sheds and if the worst came to the worst, they could go to a homestead and get a handout. (The unwritten law of the bush was that at the homestead they were obliged to supply you with enough food to get you to the next town.)

Frank speaks of one time when they pulled into Brewarrina, the whole 15 of them, with no money and little prospects, they had a big outfit and started open air showing, and there was this girl whose name was Wahoo, who had a crooked nose. She used to play the ukulele and sing a song that went like this — 'Give me a horse, a great big horse, and give me a man or two and I will wahoo, wahoo, wahoo'. From all accounts the wahoo was quite appropriate because Franks says at that time they were living like a tribe of Indians!

The wagons were placed in Indian file, and they were being supplied stale bread 'to feed the monkeys'. This girl was sleeping in the back of a truck at the end of the line and in the morning she was awakened by the local baker who said to her — 'I've got the bread for the monkeys, but come to think of it I've been looking around and can't see any monkeys' to which Wahoo replied, 'We are the bloody monkeys'. And after that the baker started putting in a few fresh loaves.

He remembers the time he sang in the street in Brewarrina, and says the local publican must have felt sorry for him because he gave him two and sixpence (2/6), a leg of mutton, some bread, and some tinned peas and butter. He took it all back to the camp and here's what happened:

I said, 'Look what I've got', and was instantly put in the best camp — that is until the meat ran out and was then kicked back to where I came from. It was a really hard go but there were lots of friendships.

We used to have camp fires of course, and we would collect coal from the railway line in bucketfulls and this kept us warm in winter. I can still smell the soup cooking in the camp oven, and the dumplings and damper and all that sort of stuff. Looking back I guess we never really went without good wholesome food — and we certainly seemed to appreciate it a lot more than some of the food available today. My father was very particular about making tea, he used to take a handful of tea and as soon as the billy come on the boil he would toss the tea in and not let it boil, if the billy was allowed to boil after the tea went in, he would go mad and reckon it stewed the tea. He would just pull the billy off the fire with a stick and let it settle.

FROM VAUDEVILLE TO ANIMAL SHOWS

Eventually, as times improved, John Foster decided to ease out of the vaudeville scene which had been a stone around his neck since the New Zealand days, and made a decision that animal shows was the way to go.

Frank reminds us that the family had one of the first performing monkey shows in Australia. They bought a big monkey they called Joe Joe — the Dogfaced Ape, which they later sold to the Davis family, and subsequently sold all their performing monkeys to Bullens Circus, and these were the animals used by Mrs Bullen in her performances for many years. But first Frank tells of the early days and the fun and games his father and Uncle Frank put in training some of these animals:

My Uncle Frank was sixteen years in Hollywood as one of their main animal trainers. He was also known in the trade as 'Abdul'. He used to work with Sir Benjamin Fuller on the Fuller circuit and the Tivoli circuit. He had a big baboon called Mutz, who was almost human and I believe Mutz played a part in the first Tarzan of the Apes movie.

Uncle Frank's dogs performed in all those early Shirley Temple pictures. You might recall seeing those little dogs she used to have, well they were all his. It didn't matter what they wanted in those days — he had a big pet shop for the stars in Los Angeles and lived there for many years.

I remember my father telling me about the time in New Zealand when they first imported the baboons and some of the problems they had. The animals were in crates and my father and Uncle Frank rented this house which had beautiful white walls. They had to take the baboons out of the crates and put collars and chains around their necks so that they could control them. Anyway, they opened up the crates and the four baboons went around the walls like they were in the Wall of Death! In trying to catch them — the animals were making a dreadful mess all over the place, and the lovely white walls started to change colour to a nasty black — both my father and uncle were badly bitten on the arms. They caught the monkeys, put bags over their heads, and were able to attach the collars and chains. Then came the job of cleaning the place up. The result of all this was that Uncle Frank got 'Mutz' and we got 'Joe Joe', both became quite famous baboons in Australia.

Mutz also was a great performer — and as already mentioned, was taken to America by Uncle Frank. I remember hearing of Uncle Frank's exploits and one in particular that concerned his baboon Mutz and two Russian buskers. Uncle Frank used to get up on the line-up board outside the tent with some of his monkeys and dogs and 'tell the tale' of the Leap for Life, and all the acts in the show. In the Leap for Life, a little monkey used to go to the top of the tent (some 30 to 40 feet high), and when Uncle Frank clicked his fingers, the monkey would slide down a little ramp and jump into his arms.

It was a pretty hairy act — especially for the monkey, for it he missed being caught he could be badly hurt. Mutz used to always be out on the board and when things were

ready to go, my uncle would say — ‘Mutz, go in and start the show’, and the big monkey would go into the tent and pick up his bicycle and ride it around, or do something like pushing a kid on a ball — just something as a pipe-opener.

This was the setting into which these two Russians came. They wanted a job but Uncle Frank was flat out supporting himself and keeping the animals, and told the two strangers — who were musicians — that the best he could do for them was to pay them two quid a day, they agreed to this saying — ‘We do this, we play beautiful music, but we no eat’.

Uncle Frank told them the procedure, he would say to Mutz to go and start the show, and this would be the introduction for the Russians to start playing as the people started buying tickets, he told them as soon as the big monkey came into the tent to start playing. They asked if the monkey would bite and were told that they wouldn’t as long as they were not touched. So out on the board Uncle Frank told Mutz to go and start the show and at the same time gave the musicians the nod and away they went.

The smallest of the two played the violin, and his mate played the button accordion. As Mutz walked past them he stopped and looked at them because they were strangers, and he hadn’t seen them or their musical instruments before and so was naturally curious. Mutz was dressed in a red outfit and when he saw the little violinist he became more curious still for there was a silver button on his trouser fly — there were no zips in those days — this shiny silver button got the better of Mutz’ curiosity, and as the people were walking in and buying their tickets the monkey started pulling at the shiny button.

The little violin player, to say the least, was distracted, he forgot what he was playing and looked in terror at the big monkey, but heeded Uncle Frank’s warning — ‘Whatever you do don’t touch the monkey or he’ll eat you’. In the meantime Mutz kept tugging at the button, so bag goes that button and about three more and to his great embarrassment out pops his willy, by this time he could hardly control himself and his mate wanted to know what was going on, just then Mutz put his finger underneath the private part and started bobbing it up and down. However, he soon became bored at this and opened his mouth to yawn, well as soon as the Russian saw the size of the baboon’s teeth he snapped, and smashed the violin down on Mutz’ head, and after playing roly poly for a while the musicians grabbed their gear and took off. And that was the last Uncle Frank saw of them — but at least he had them for a few minutes!

As the Russians disappeared through the front of the tent, the monkey in his red suit panicked and shot out through the back of the tent and disappeared into the cemetery next door.

As it happened there was a Maori woman putting flowers on her husband’s grave and as Mutz appeared in his red outfit, jangling his chain, he jumped up on the tombstone and when she looked up and saw him she gave a loud groan and fainted. When they brought her around she said — ‘I saw him, I saw the devil, he was there looking at me’.

A KINGDOM FOR A HORSE

Frank went on to relate more of the family doings, this time concerning his father’s association with the Wild West Shows. The arrangement was that Tom Handley — one of the greats of the old time Wild West shows — would run the buck-jumping side of the entertainment and Frank’s father would fill in with magic and animal shows whenever needed, especially while the riders and horses were getting ready for the next event.

The two men became very friendly. It so happened that the Foster’s cart horse died and the replacement horse for their wagon — which was also their home on wheels —

was a jib, he just would not go, each time they put him in the wagon he would prop and refuse to move. So John Foster, after many threats, collected a pile of wood and placed it under the horse, threw some kerosene on the pile and lit it. With this the horse walked forward about four paces and stopped with the wagon directly over the fire, resulting in the wagon being completely burnt down!

Frank takes up the story:

My father got Tom Handley to go with him to the local mission station, because he was the only dealer in horses at this place at this time. They were told to see old Paddy who was in one of the four or five shacks along the river. Tom Handley was dressed as usual in jodhpurs and white outfit with the traditional big hat, and when they got to the place — the locals were very wary about strangers, but when they said they were from the buckjump show in town and wanted to see Paddy about a horse — a big aborigine came forward and identified himself as Paddy.

The conversation then went something like this: 'I'm looking for a good cart horse', answer, 'Mate, you come to the right place, I got just the bugger you want, he's a beauty'. 'Is he quiet?' answer, 'Quiet, the kids get between his legs and pull his tail, he's just the horse you want'. 'Will he pull a wagon?', answer, 'This one will pull a wagon day and night and wont even breathe, he's a beauty'. 'How much do you want for him?', answer, 'I want 25 quid'. 'I don't think I can afford that', answer, 'Well you struck me when I'm a bit short, you can have him for 20 quid', 'I'll have to have a look at him'. So three or four young blokes get ropes and over the paddock they go and they are chasing this big half-pie draft horse and he's galloping and knocking down fences and trees, and the few that started out to catch him soon became a pretty big team. Paddy kept praising this outlaw and the old man could not believe what he was hearing.

While all this was going another little darkie from one of the other shacks spotted Tom Handley all dressed up in his cowboy gear and twigged who he was and said, 'Hey mate, you buying old Paddy's horse?' and Tom said, 'Yes, we're going to have a look at him and see what he's like', to which the darkie replied, 'Well I'm tellin you you're getting a corker there, there's no bugger can catch him, no bugger can ride him, you're getting a beauty'.

By now they have caught the rogue and half a dozen or so are hanging on to this 'quiet cart horse'. The old man looked him over and noticed he had a big lump on his leg, a big growth, so he said to old Paddy, 'We don't want him', 'You can have him for 15 quid' said Paddy, 'No we don't want him' said the old man, and as they left the 'salesman' cried, 'You can have him for a tenner'.

THE PICTURE SHOW MAN

Frank Foster tells of his father's experience with one of the very early picture shows. These old time theatres, of which there were very few, also followed the show circuit and were an attraction because they were flexible enough to put on a show during the day and also in the evenings. The Picture Show Man was equipped with a small marquee and his movie picture equipment, or in some cases, the old lantern slides. In particular show Frank remembers that there were two movies — 'I was a prisoner in the Chain Gang' and 'When the Kellys Rode'.

His father used to open the show with his magic tricks, notably 'Death on the French Guillotine' in which he appeared to chop someone's head off — Frank's mother usually — and put it on a sword. He would address his audience and ask if anyone would like the head, and at this point his mother's voice would say 'Stop, aren't you going to wrap me up?' and the magician would reply, 'Of course I'll wrap you up', and with that would grab a cloth and supposedly wrap up the human head and present it to a member of the audience.



49. Johnny Foster, Eileen Foster, Maori Bill and wife, 1920 (*Death on Guillotine Show*)

50. Johnny Foster's *Black Magic Show* L to R Jean, Frances Foster, Dot Woods, Bridie Foster (sister-in-law)



But when the cloth was removed it merely revealed a cabbage or a pumpkin. The magician would then apologise to the 'sucker' and say, 'I'm very sorry sir, a pumpkin is no good to you so I'll put it back on the sword', this was the cue for his wife to appear to the plaudits of the crowd. Many years later Frank Foster was to see the late John Meillon in a film titled 'The Picture Show Man' and in that film the settings were identical almost to his father's description of the same act carried out so many years before and this made him wonder whether there was any connection with the two shows?

THE GILLY GILLY MAN

In the days of the tent shows good showies had to be able to turn their hands to any type of act that would fill the tent and earn a quid. John Foster obviously was a super showman and, as Frank says, 'He'd been there and done that'. In his recollections Frankie Foster recalls one of these periods when his father was the 'gilly gilly man' going Indian tricks and especially the Indian Rope Trick, and growing the mango tree.

This all came about through Dave Meekin bringing out an Indian magician by the name of Abdullah. Up to this point John Foster's magic act was advertised as 'Foster's Black Magic' but with the arrival of Abdullah and with 'Afrikaner' Meekin's publicity of the new act, all the old showies had to rethink their entire magic routines. John Foster's reply to all this was to ask the question, 'Can he do the Indian Rope Trick?' And answered it himself on a big banner which read — 'See him do the Indian Rope Trick'.

As the story becomes a bit complicated at this point, Frank tells it in his own words:

My father put up a big banner in opposition which read 'See him do the Indian Rope Trick'. He dug a big hole about 10 to 12 feet deep and into this hole he fed a pipe, through this pipe he put a rope with a steel rod in the middle. He had further a piece coming off this main pipe like a winch, so that when he put it in place the winch was out through the back of the tent, with sawdust covering any suspicious trench marks.

It was my brother Johnny's job to sit outside the tent and do the winding. Inside the tent my father had a big basket, like an Indian basket, which had a false bottom in it that popped up. Dad would get the rope and show it to the audience and then put it in the basket making sure to curl it around so that he left the middle of the basket free for the rope to come up through the bottom of the basket.

For precise measurement he had a marker on the ground to indicate where the basket should go — after he had shown it to the audience. He then put a cloth over the basket to show that there were no strings or wires to pull up the rope. Dressed in Indian gear and with Indian make-up on, he would sit down blowing his little flute to the accompaniment of weird Indian music.

When the rope appeared through the basket and was up about 10 to 12 feet high, I used to run out dressed as a little Indian boy — turban and all — and climb up the rope, and when I got to the top he would clap his hands and the rope would drop and I would do a tummy rollover. He would then lift up the basket and of course the bottom would fall down and he would kick sawdust over the hole to cover it.

On one particular day my sister Frances while doing her contortion act accidentally kicked the marker forward so when my father sat down in front of the basket with his flute he was not in the best position, for as it would happen my brother Johnny was having a quiet snooze out the back and when he realised that my dad had given him the cue to start winding he got a bit excited and gave the handle a real hard wind, with the result that the reinforced rope struck my father in the backside and shot him head first into the basket which he quickly grabbed and shoved it over the rope and as

quick as a wink said — ‘He funny one, he come up in all funny places’. This however didn’t save Johnny’s hide for my old man really tanned his backside.

SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS

In view of Frank’s nomad life style we were anxious to know how he fared for schooling in those days, his answer caused no surprises:

Well, believe it or not basically I had very little schooling at all. I was self taught, we went from school to school. This was no fault of my parents it was just the way things were in those days. I went to each public school that we could make it to, but as I have already said the roads were so bad in those days it could take three to four days to get to a show and town.

By the time you got into a town it might be Thursday and then you’d go and see the local school and they just couldn’t be bothered with you. The teacher would tell you to sit in the class and if you couldn’t pick up the work it was too bad. With the result that by the time you had to move on it almost proved a waste of everyone’s time.

Then we got correspondence courses and for a while that was all right, but going from town to town the mail was never able to catch up. Some of those outback places we would have left before the mail arrived. I remember one time the teacher from the correspondence school wrote to my mum and said, ‘Frank’s work is all right but I wish he’d stop using too much bread’. Everyone used to help me, and to rub out words we used bread — there were so many different handwriting styles in my work they must have thought I was Chinese! Now at my stage of life I look back on those early days and wonder how much better off I might have been had the education system for we travelling people been a better one.

Again on reflection, in those days your education was on how to survive and what you did for a living, there was no need to be an academic, your education, believe it or not, was your craft and how you handled things — such things as what to do when the rent is too dear for a show! By that I mean, if you get on a showgrounds you know a good position from a bad one. You don’t need a college education for that, nor do you need a college education to know how to get the pitch for an act up there on the platform. All you know you have to work for it. The average person walks around a fairground or showground and may think we get it easy but it’s never that way. Mostly we live out of doors, and we have to forgo a lot of other things that other people have.

A SHOWMAN IN HIS OWN RIGHT

Up to this point our main emphasis has been on the doings of the Foster Family, it is now time to have Frank tell of his own career:

I started mainly when I was 15 or 16 years old to help run my father’s show. My sister Frances and I used to do all the spruiking out front, but my ambition was to get something that was attractive, something different, so I devoted my time to changing things — I wanted to get a different look, a different image. Not that there was anything wrong with what everyone else was doing — because in our industry we have the greatest people and the greatest rapport with them, you wouldn’t meet better people anywhere in the world than the people in show business. So, I first kicked off running shows when I was about 16 years old.

A year or so later I was doing the publicity for our circus — Hayden’s Circus. I was what used to be called ‘the front man’, the man in front of the house. I got the pitch and told the tale and then I used to jump down from the platform, run inside and do

my acrobatic act and get back on the platform as quickly as I could.

Then I suppose it would be when I was about 25 years old that I met up with the Le Garde Twins. They were working with my father and we got talking and made the decision that we'd take out a show together. This was the big break, I started with the Le Garde Twins on my own show and we did very well. They had offers from America and wanted me to go with them but that wasn't my cuppa tea, so they tried to talk me into moving into the theatrical field but I was established here and stayed here. As soon as they went I took over Slim Dusty, a partnership which lasted over six years.

Then I branched out into rock 'n' roll and country-western, more into the field of such artists as Johnny O'Keefe, and Normie Rowe — and you name them they were with me! There was Chad Morgan, Tex Morton and Buddy Williams to mention a few more. Chad was with me for about five years and later worked for me on and off — name the artist and they would be there on the showgrounds. You must remember in those days the showgrounds was the venue for all these people to become known, there was no television — and they couldn't be seen on radio! So to appear at a Royal Show as a big deal, even if the people didn't come and see their show they would see the banners out the front, and like in America, where an artist wanted to push a song or an album, he'd go anywhere to sing and be seen. In fact the record companies would almost insist that the artist make a name for himself before putting down a disc, and the best place to be seen was on the showgrounds. In lots of ways it was good for these artists — Johnny O'Keefe was a good example, he was always worried that to appear on a fairground would spoil his image and people would look down on him. But of course that was not the case for when the 15 and 16 years old went to the show the kids had a chance to meet their stars and get autographs and photos and they thought it was great.

Actually, Johnny O'Keefe said to me, 'Do you know I can't believe this, when I did the big shows with Lee Gordon as soon as you did the show they would whisk you away in a car, you never actually got to meet the people, they would scream and yell. But this way you just walk out and they ask you for your autography, it's really great'. As a matter of fact I've got a recording at home called 'Johnny O'Keefe's Last Performance' and he mentions me in the text.

I reckon the showgrounds offered the basis for a good psychology for a lot of artists, it gave them a chance to hear what people think, and besides they also had the opportunity to mix with different audiences which were not restricted to any one age group.

IT'S NOT ALL STEAK AND GRAVY

We mentioned to Frank that although his show business life required moving about, nevertheless it must be idyllic by comparison to many of the mundane existences which are part of the suburban dwellers' lifestyle.

He was quick to put us right on this score:

Remember in our business it's not all steak and gravy. You get plenty of ups and downs you know, you have to put up with wet weather, droughts, and bushfires. I remember in Hobart one year we took a big show over there — Reg Lindsay's Country and Western Hour, it was a television show running in Adelaide and we took the whole show over to Tasmania. It was at the time when the big bushfires broke out in Hobart and the place was abandoned.

I had made arrangements for Ray Brown and The Whispers to come over and I could not get word to them not to come because all the telephone communications were out, so I couldn't contact them.

Yes, you certainly get your ups and downs, I'll tell you there are no pots of gold at the end of our rainbow!



51. *The Le Garde Twins in Hollywood*



52. *Frank Foster spruiking on the Slim Dusty Show*



53. *Frank Foster and Johnny O'Keefe*

At this point Frank was asked to nominate the greatest artist or attraction he managed over this time — his answer was not unexpected:

Well you know you have to put people in their right categories. It's very hard to answer such a question, because all these people were and still are very personal friends of mine and they are all different personalities. It's just like when you go to buy a record, you might like one singer presenting a particular song or another singing a different song. But my leanings were to fellas like Slim Dusty — a proven performer who has his score of gold records on the board.

Then there are others like Chad Morgan, he was an artist that to me was always underrated, because no matter where you go everybody knows the Sheik of Scrubby Creek — the only bloke that could eat an apple through a tennis racquet! Chad was a very funny bloke, he is a great favourite. He was a very good bloke to work with and audiences really loved him. I remember one time going to Gippsland, and we had Chad and Normie Rowe. One would be hard put to imagine such a combination — Chad, the Sheik of Scrubby Creek teaming up with the then number one teenager? Well as it turned out they complemented each other so well that after the first show they became the best of friends.

I think if I had to really make a choice I would favour the Le Garde Twins because they are not just entertainers they get about, they love promotion and attack everything with heart and believe in what they are doing. They have done a lot better in America than a lot of people realise. They have become known and have worked with



54. *Frank Foster and Reg Lindsay*



55. *Slim Dusty, Johnny Devlin, Frank Foster and band member*



56. *Chad Morgan*

many, many big stars — Star Trek; Daniel Boone; the Ed Sullivan Show, and with Groucho Marx. In fact they have worked in hundreds of shows besides their own television shows. Their current shows, 'Out West Downunder' is a 50/50 Australian-American Show with stars such as Johnny Cash, Tammy Wynette, in fact all the top country and western artists have appeared with the Twins who do all the interviews, and do a very good job.

They are people like myself in a way, because they started out as kids and have really made it. Actually you find you don't learn much in life until you get past twelve years, and you find that if you are devoted to what you are doing and really put your heart and mind into it you will succeed.

You've got to remember that we show people get a lot of bad publicity. In days gone by when the show came into town people used to say, 'Pull your washing in and lock your daughters up'.

I remember on one occasion in this particular town where the showgrounds was close to a lot of houses, this young boy was over at the tap washing out his shirt when he saw a young girl in the garden next door and after they exchanged greetings he asked her if she would like to go to the pictures that night, and she told him she would have to ask her mother and the conversation went something like this, 'Mum there's



57. *The Le Garde Twins 1994*

one of these show blokes out here and he wants to take me to the pictures', the reply was quick and final, 'You come inside and bring the cow with you!'

SHOW FAMILIES AND SHOW CHARACTERS

As with others, we asked Frank to give us an insight into other show families and their stock in trade, and of some of the old showgrounds characters who coloured the show scene in those early days — acknowledging that this own family, the Foster family, was classified as one of the most prominent in the outdoor show business in Australia:

Yes, we had the Sharmans, the Davis', the Allans and Perrys, the Pinks, Greens and Davenports, the Shorts, the Rileys, the Markovichs, the Bells, the Wittingslows, the Durkins and fellas like Tommy Castles, these are the pioneers, they are the legends you might say.

Tommy Castles, Arthur Greenhalgh and Dave Meekin were different — they were individuals, they didn't have follow-on families. But they all brought something different and special to our outdoor attractions. Like Arthur Greenhalgh, he had a show called the 'Waxworks' and in this show he had an old bloke up top, and old darkie character, playing a role like an Uncle Tom, and he was one of the first figures with moving lips. But besides the darkie he had all these blood-thirsty characters, depicting nasty crimes — little kids with their throats cut, and other horrific figures. Anyway between Rocky and Mackay in Queensland where the roads were pretty bad, Arthur's truck driver piloting this old truck — they didn't have pantecs in those days.

you used to load your truck and throw a canvas cover over the top and tie them down — he was tired before he started, and you only had a couple of days to get through, and at that time of year there's a lot of fog and the roads are dusty. At about 2 o'clock in the morning he came to a nasty bend in the road and tipped the truck over, and all the wax bodies scatter all over the road. The driver dragged himself out of the truck, he had a cut on his head and he was half stunned, and had just picked up an axe which had spilled from the truck, and just at this time around the bend came several car loads of local graziers who had been to a wedding. The headlights of their cars picked out this bloke standing in the middle of the road with an axe in his hand and all the bodies spread out on the road. The sight was so unnerving that they didn't stop but headed straight for the local police where they excitedly told of the massacre, and of the bloke who had run amok with bodies lying everywhere on the road. So with the local copper from Maryborough about a dozen of them formed a posse and returned to the scene of the tragedy, when they arrived at the spot the policeman called out for the criminal to come out with his hands up to which the poor half-stupid driver replied — 'Thank God you found me I've been here all bloody night'.

There was a bloke called Corky and another called Old Rex Cole, actually they were just drifters around the ground, you might call them showground swaggies, they would sell a few balloons to earn a living. I never knew how they got to the shows, they used to sit under a tree and boil the billy and were great people. They were not perverts or anything like that with kids — they were interesting characters and told of some very interesting experiences.

Of course in those days the shows finished at dark and you'd get around the camp fires and always have plenty of tall tales and entertainment. There is a misunderstanding about what the public claim as con men in our business. In days gone by there used to be those who were referred to as speilers or con men. These people used to play the games of chance and all those suspect games, but they came and they went.

Another funny thing about this business, I've been in it all my life, I was born in it, but I have yet to meet a pickpocket. You hear all these tales yet I've never seen one and I don't know of any. Really, the showgrounds is like a small town we have good citizens and those who are not so good — the same as you would find in any small community.

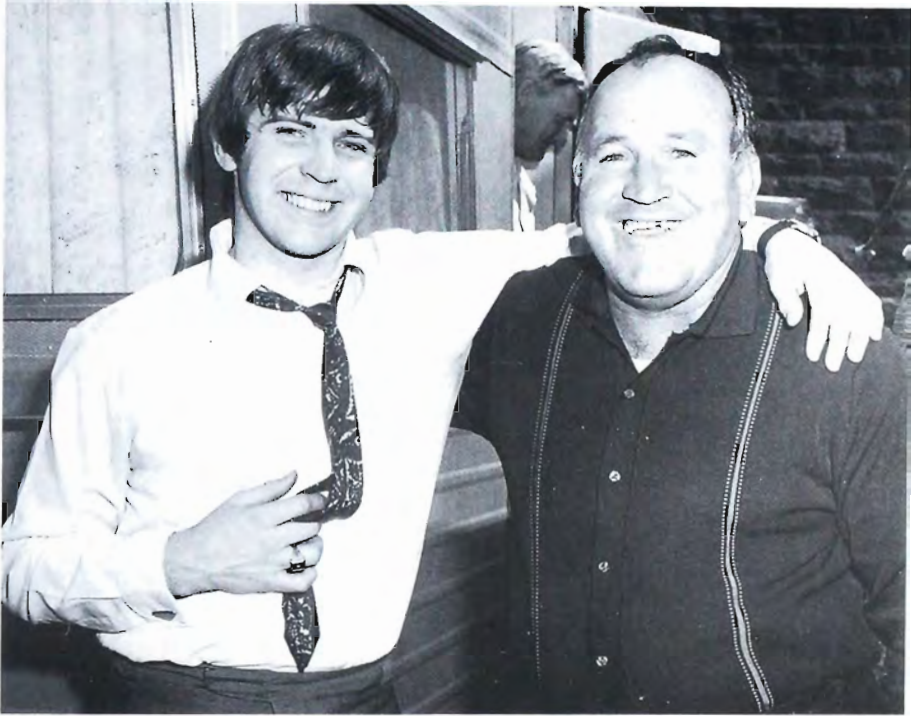
Unfortunately people get the impression that showies are an undesirable mob, that they have to be watched when they arrive in town. This attitude in turn builds up a sort of resistance with the showies. Things have changed, most of the kids of show people are now given the best of education and in turn become very astute business people.

A further thing that annoys us about some country towns is the attitude of some sections of the local community that we fleece townspeople. That of course is a load of rubbish, what about the money we bring into towns? We all have to eat, there's the grocer, the butcher, the baker, the drycleaner, the engineer, the petrol stations and lots more.

There are many shows that showmen go to knowing full well that they will be lucky to clear expenses, so why go to these towns? Well we go because it is a tradition, because maybe your father before you went there!

T.V. OR NOT T.V.?

As with all our other interviews, we asked Frank Foster what in his opinion caused the decline of the tent shows. But unlike some of the others he was not prepared to say that the advent of television in the mid 1950s was the main cause. In fact in his case he thought that television was good for the tent shows, because he used to put a number of



58. *Frank Foster and Normie Rowe*

his class artists, such as Johnny O'Keefe and Normie Rowe on some of the television shows, shows like the 'Go Show' and the stars would make sure that it was known that they were appearing at the Royal Show.

According to Frank it was not television alone that shut down the tent shows it was the changing of the regulations regarding human 'special people' and the animal shows. Space contracts contained a clause prohibiting the showing and display of human freaks and animals — and so shows such as the monkey shows disappeared.

However, he has visions of the tent shows returning, but he insists that you have to be born to the tent shows and you have to be an old showman to run them.

Frank Foster emphasises that running a tent show is something altogether different to rides and games. With games it is not difficult to get any ordinary person to work things like knockems or darts or clowns, but when you come to the tent shows you need to know what it is all about. For example you have to anticipate how the opposition will operate and counter his moves — it is a very specialised operation. Of course as the tent shows disappeared their space was taken up with rides and games, but Frank has a gut feeling that we will see tent shows again!

SOME TRICKS OF THE TRADE

He continues his opinion and sets out some food for thought:

Tent shows would do well now because it is time for a change. I'd like to bring the old tent shows back. Everything goes in cycles to my way of thinking. It's like movies,

nowadays you don't see any old time westerns such as Hopalong Cassidy, Roy Rogers or Gene Autry. But if you were to ask any of the 15 or 16 year olds about those old timers they would not know what you were talking about. But talk to them about the space people and it is a different story.

I suppose a contradiction to my statement is the movie released a year or so ago, 'Dances with Wolves' which turned out to be a great box office hit. This was a cow-boys and Indians picture presented quite differently to the old timers, but is proof that this type of western still has wide appeal. Yes, I'm thinking very seriously of bringing back a tent show. Having said that, I realise that every show has to have a point to it. If you haven't got a tent show without a gimmick it's pointless — 'It's no good putting something in the shop if it's not going to sell'!

THE 'BELL EWE' SYNDROME

Surprisingly enough when I first met Slim Dusty he was out in the crowd and I got him to be hypnotised. He was what we call a 'G', you get them and tell them you'll give them a few bob if they'll shut their eyes, that's all they have to do!

Then in days gone by you would have three or four people and you'd give them free tickets, and as soon as the show started they would run to the ticket box — they were what we called the 'lead in'. People are like sheep, it reminds me of the story of the old farmer who lived near a bridge which was on a stock route, as is well known sheep are very difficult to get to cross a bridge, but this wily old man trained a couple of his sheep to cross the bridge so that when the drovers arrived with their flocks he used to let them hire his trained sheep to start the flock across the bridge, and this became a pretty profitable pastime for him.

You see, people will follow the leader just the same as the old 'bell ewe' led the flock across the bridge! One of the biggest things when you are up on the line-up board is your timing, your reading of the people, and when you are telling your story and get to the final pitch of that story, you can tell whether you have got them or not.

That's experience, you can't buy that — but you can tell by watching them move whether they are going to move away, if they are getting bored with you. If that is so you quickly change your story, get to the point, and even if you say, 'Now look!' and hold your finger up, that will stop them.

I've got a relation working one of my little stalls, he has glued 50 cent and 20 cent pieces on the ground in front of his stall, and naturally people walking along that road stop and attempt to pick up those coins — that's my point, anything to stop a prospective customer. You grab your pitch and describe your acts, leaving the big finish as a come-on to get them to the ticket box and inside your tent.

SOME GREAT PERFORMERS

The Skuthorpes: Violet Skuthorpe used to work with me, she was a great performer. She used to teach me school subjects in the early days, we had a great rapport, I loved her and she was very fond of me. All through her time in America she kept in touch and used to send me all sorts of things from the States. As a matter of fact I received a very sad letter from her just before she died, enclosing photos of her and her brother Lance — these things I'll treasure for ever. She toured many years ago with top stars like Tim McQueen and Tom Mix. Violet was married to Johnny Brady who is also a great performer, rope-spinner, and whip-cracker. Johnny was the double for Lee Marvin in the film 'Paint Your Wagon', and since Violet's death he does a solo act.

Her brother Lance was the first man to introduce bull-dogging to Australia. He was a great showman, probably one of the greatest, he was like a film star of the day. He



59. *Violet Skuthorpe*

won the world buckjump championship carrying a sprained ankle — he had to be lifted on to the horse — There will not be any more of his like as far as I'm concerned.

Margaret Castles: We were showing at a place called Benalba up in the Kyogle-Lismore area, and Margaret Castles had a snake show which she carried around in suitcases. She was sleeping in this little tent and put her snake-filled suitcases close handy in the same tent intending to put them in the pit the next morning, but when she woke up in the morning the suitcases were gone.

Margaret was a trooper to swear, she came over to me and said, 'The bloody so and so snakes are gone', and really carried on no end. Anyway, everybody was out looking for the snakes, and right behind the showground there's a sandy creek and there we found the open suitcase. The place is full of darkies, there's a mission near by and it would seem that during the night they had been poking around the camp and the wind must have blown the canvas back in Margaret's tent and they've seen the suitcases, grabbed them and run down the bank of the creek, opened them up — and in the sand there was plenty of evidence of their fright, as they took off!

At the same place, Greenhalgh, Wolfy and Jack Howe had a big death adder, he was really a big one. It's show morning and they are starting to put up and all of a sudden one of them picked up the death adder box but it had been crushed and the death adder was nowhere to be seen — they guessed it must have been loose on the truck. Now these blokes were heavy drinkers, and when it struck them that the death adder was loose they looked at each other and sprung off that truck running. The question was how to unload the truck, they had to get the show up but the death adder had taken command. Eventually they got a long pole and put a hook on it, dropped the sides of the truck, and just pulled everything out. Happy Woods and I gave them a hand but we could not find the death adder — he must have dropped off the truck somewhere along the track.

FUN OF THE SHOW TRAINS

Frank Foster was no different to any of the other showies we spoke to, they all seem to have a memory mechanism which activates to similar situations. We had just finished speaking of Margaret Castles and her snakes and the missing death adder, when Frank remembered an incident aboard the Show Train travelling north for the northern circuit:

Getting back to the tent shows, in those days the show trains were very colourful. I can remember we would pull into a siding and would find that the town would really open up. The refreshment rooms would open, because they would have been advised that our train was coming and would have had plenty of time to warn their staff. Of course in those days on the trains would be stars like the Pinheaded Chinaman, the Irish Giant, the Fat Lady and other well known acts, and it was a treat to watch the expression on the faces of the locals as they came face to face with these special people — they would be wiping their eyes wondering what they were seeing.

I remember one time on the show train my father had bought this big snake, he was a big python 25 feet long. In those days, the trains weren't like today, we never used to get the best trains — we used to get the old tea and sugars, ones that blew plenty of smoke and were shunted off the main line. And believe it or not half the time when you went up a mountain or a steep grade, we would have to get out, honestly, they just crawled. We used to get out and run alongside and jump off and on again.

Anyway, my father bought this big snake and he was a monster. We had him in a piano case up on top of the truck, well with all the shunting going on in the night he had expanded and broke out of the box. These big pythons are like trout — they always swim against the wind — so this big snake moved from wagon to wagon always towards the warmth of the engine. Well there are these two blokes on the footplate of the engine, the driver and the fireman, the fireman who was shovelling coal was the first to see the snake coming towards him — he couldn't believe his eyes — so in self defence he hit the snake with his coal shovel which caused the snake to 'dolly up', and in the process got its tail caught. He yelled to his mate to warn him and as they got to the next siding they pulled up the train and in a panic jumped off yelling, 'snake, snake'. Of course we got off with the rest of the people — it took seven of us to capture the snake. My father grabbed the head, the body part was pretty swollen — he had swallowed a pig!

The driver of the train asked where the snake came from, and he would have to report the incident. My father spoke up and said the snake must have joined the train at the last siding! In those days the show trains between Rocky and Mackay mainly consisted of flat-top trucks, and we would have to drive our trucks and trailers on to these flatties and that then became our home until it was time to leave the train.

Along the track there used to be a few lonely tin dunnies and the sport of the day for the young blokes was to grab a shotgun and blast off at these 'targets'. On one occasion a hand appeared out the door waving a newspaper — we must have scared the poor guy almost to death, fortunately we didn't hurt the bloke, but we must have made things easier for him!

THE TRUTH ABOUT THE DANCING DUCK

Frank tells the story of his father's first tent. At this time John Foster had developed a good act as a fire-eater, he used this as a finale to his magic acts. The procedure was that he would get a mouthful of kerosene, ignite it was a lighted torch, and blow a stream of fire into the air.

Now Frank's grandmother (known as Aunty Lulu), was the banker for the family — she used to loan all her sons money, but not without security, all members of the family



60. Johnny Foster with G from pitch (snake in bag)

had to tip in something. On this occasion Frank's father bought this new tent for about 50 pounds (£50) — something that you would pay close to \$10,000 for at today's prices — and as Grandma Foster had not seen this new investment (the tent), or in fact Johnny Foster's new act she decided to witness the performance. As it would happen the tent was packed, and after a good reception for the magic acts, up came the finale. Johnny Foster took a good mouthful of kerosene, lit the torch and blew out the flames which in this case almost hit the roof of the tent. This was all a bit too much for Auntie Lulu, she leapt up from her seat and in front of the packed house, yelled, 'you bastard, my tent!'

There have been many different versions of what happened to 'Lulu, the Dancing Duck' so in order to put the record straight we asked Frank Foster to let us know what really did happen to this distinguished bird:

Well Granma Foster had Lulu the Dancing Duck and this day after closing the ticket box she went to the other end of the tent and discovered there was no duck — it would appear that Lulu had gone for a waddle to the creek at the back of the showgrounds. So Grandma got her sons — my father, Uncle Lally and Uncle Alfie — to search for the missing duck. Someone had remembered the creek out the back so they concentrated their search in this area, when they got down to the creek and walked along the bank for a while they came to a bridge, and crossing the bridge they saw a swagman and he's got Lulu, but he had her in a pot, alongside his billy of tea on the fire. Granma Foster gave a leap at him and screeched, 'You bastard, you've killed Lulu', and with that walloped him over the head. That's where Lulu finished — in a pot — that was the end of the famous Dancing Duck!

THE WINDS OF CHANGE

The next point of discussion was on the children of the present day showies and how they are handling and coping with the life-style of the show circuit:

As far as the kids go I think the present system of education is wonderful, because they have opportunities that we never had. Of course a lot of them go to boarding-school and colleges — not that I think that's great, but it seems to suit some families — and the kids can be with their folk on holidays and long weekends.

In Queensland the Government has made special provision for those kids that travel with their parents. They have remedial teachers who follow the circuit and just look after show kids, they do a wonderful job. This year we had a reception for these teachers, along with the heads of the Education Department, and it proved a big success. Actually, I'm hoping that this system will be adopted right throughout Australia, because when I look back on my experiences at school, and compare them with the kids of today and the opportunities that they have, I realise only too well how my own education was so sadly neglected. As a result of the present system I think we are going to see great showmen in the future. I can see it now in a few of the young ones. But there again our business is the same as any other business, not everyone's great and famous, some will make it, and some are just that way that they don't want to make it.

Look at some of our present show families, like the Wittingslows, the Davis boys, and the Markovich's, they are the types I'm taking about — they are well educated and they are experienced. On the other hand there are those who don't want to have ten rides, they just want to be individuals and plug along and be steady goers. It's like people in a country town, there are lots who don't want to own the biggest store — because the biggest store also has the biggest headaches, so you get the smaller independent sort of guy that just wants to run his own small store.

So with our business, we've got some that do a wonderful job, they just want to make a living that is all, and are happy and contented in what they are doing. Show business today is still a big business, our movable equipment is as good, if not better, than anywhere else in the world. Our games are a lot better than anywhere else.

But nevertheless show business throughout the world, whether it's Australia, America, or England, still has its roots back with the old English showman, when you look at our business, there is no difference, no matter where you go.

If I was in America now sitting down with a group of showies I'd be talking just the same — you know they understand our slang and speak it. They dress the same, talk the same, and eat the same — nothing's different. But in the history of American showman their business is basically, and mainly, run by tent men, even today they still have their tent shows.

Here in Australia there are so many rules prohibiting exhibits — our laws do not allow such things here. Besides things have changed so much these days that if you dared approach a very tall girl and say, 'Hey, would you like to go in a side-show?' She is either likely to punch you in the nose, or have you charged under laws of harassment or discrimination.

THE CAMPFIRES HAVE GONE OUT

In summary we asked Frank how he felt the show business had changed over his sixty-five years in the game:

Well I believe the campfires have gone out. I believe the old togetherness and what we used to do in the olden days have gone forever. In some ways you probably would not want to go back, but then there are lots of memories and lots of times that you had that you will cherish.



61. Frank Foster (extreme left) with Slim Dusty Show



62. The Camp Fire — Johnny Foster and Friends — L to R Alan Hill (accordion), Johnny Foster (banjo), Girls (back and kneeling, members of show), Eileen Foster, Frances Foster, Pikey (Alf) Foster, Gordon Parsons (who wrote *The Pub With No Beer*), Two men (members of show), Alf Browning (old time showie), Mrs Hill

When television came it took away the campfires, it took away the yarn spinning, it took away the lies — we were always good at telling stories. It took away all that sort of thing, you know you'd sit down at a fire and toast a bit of bread and boil the billy, and once you lit a fire you would never be alone because a fire is like a magnet, it draws people. Now they retire to their big caravans with all modern conveniences — such as air conditioning and television. One time you would see the fire and hear a banjo playing — my father used to love playing the banjo at night time. Maybe someone would bring along a squeeze-box, or some musical show would be rehearsing, or maybe, somebody would be having a blue and you could see the shadows on the wall — and you would be wondering who was going to win? But now of a night time it's no more, it's finished.

YATALA AND THE HALL OF FAME

Before getting Frank's reaction to the Yatala Retirement scheme we asked him once more as to whether we will ever see the likes of the old time showie again and without hesitation he said:

There will always be tent shows and they will always come back. I've got no doubts about that, as I have said it just takes one to start then others will follow. In fact in recent years in Las Vegas I saw the Globe of Death in a huge production called Splash. They had the Globe and it was no bigger than a large room and they had three riders performing. Your head felt as though it was on a swivel, and when the act was over the whole audience stood and gave the performers a standing ovation.

While in America at a place called Tampa, I visited Gibbtown — that's the home of the American showmen and they have built their own city similar in concept to what we have got in Queensland. The Hall of Fame sort of thing, and all the showmen are buying land around Yatala, and when finished it will be just like the American model.

Our's is a beautiful place, it is really great, we will have a sort of retirement village — the home of the Australian showman, which in the future hopefully, will incorporate retirement villas. We expect event to have our own football field!

Of course showmen are funny, no one will settle, but if you drive from here to Cairns and park on the side of the road, you would wake up in the morning and there would be ten other showmen there — like birds of a feather, we flock together.

But all in all our life is a good one, there is a lot of happiness, it is lovely when you see a daughter getting married or a son taking over — but it is also sad when you lose your Mum and Dad. See, I've lost my father, my mother, and my daughter in show business. And I can tell you know that I have no desire to die in some place where I'm going to be alone — I feel if I am to pass on I want it to be with people that I know. I think that is one of the greatest things in show business that we have — even though we argue over space, or we will slog it out on the line-up boards, like I used to do with Tommy Castles, at the end of the day there is always that warmth of feeling towards each other, knowing that if you have had it tough so has your showie brother.

Since making this tape with Frank Foster he has unfortunately lost other close members of his family. One sadly being his oldest daughter Robyn, along with brothers Pikey and Johnny — this happened all within a few weeks period. Frank and June now have their two grand-daughters, Bianca and Jade. But in the true tradition of show business Frank has carried on.

My heart would like me to believe what he says about the return of the tent shows, but my head tells me that they will have to be pretty smart about it otherwise there will be no Frank Fosters, Bill Dwyers, Tom Wittingslows, Jimmy Sharmans or Jack Allans, to show them how it is done!

Maybe Frank is leading the way. Recently I came across a two-year-old copy of the Australasian Post and flat bang in the middle pages is a picture of Frank Foster large as life standing in front of his Brisbane Show 'House of Horror' show, depicting aliens, ghosts, ghouls and every other nasty you can think of.

The Foster Family has given much to the history of the Australian Outdoor Side-show industry, and it is good to know that Frank is still holding up the tradition created by people like his father, Johnny Foster, and his grandmother, the matriarch of the family, Aunty Lulu.