

**This is a tribute to an Albany and Great Southern Community Statesman
compiled by his eldest Son Eddie Lange in May 2015.**

BENNO EDWIN LANGE

Benno Edwin Lange was a Member of the Order of Australia (AM), a Justice of the Peace (JP), a Freeman of the Municipality and a Farmer.

He was born at Narrogin in 1910 and died at Albany in 2001 aged 91 years.

For almost 50 years, Benno Lange willingly and voluntarily contributed in many different areas to the development of the Great Southern community of Western Australia until his retirement in 1975. To those who never knew him, he was a quiet reserved person, who never spoke of his achievements, but displayed quite a sense of humour.

His early schooling was at Wardering, near Narrogin, and as a young boy Benno was experienced in hard work on the farm, rising at 4.30 am.

A young Benno was responsible for feeding and harnessing up the horses before going to school and would then work on the farm after school, sometimes until 9.30 at night.

Father often reminded me that conditions on the farm were very tough in the 1920's. Just walking the 3 miles to and from school was an effort in itself. His parents could not afford good shoes or boots for him and his brothers, and in winter their feet would get so cold walking to school, the boys would walk in cow dung pads to prevent their feet from frost bite.

Benno never relied on his school academic achievements to formulate his success.

"I never had too many brains at school and didn't learn much at all," he said "I completed primary school and left altogether."

"My philosophies were to use common sense, be realistic and when you have made up your mind stick to it," he said.

When he was 19 years old, his father purchased a mostly undeveloped property on the Millbrook Road, King River, 9 miles from the small town of Albany.

World war **two** had just began when he married Albany girl, Sylvia Mary Hall in 1939. They had 2 sons, Edwin and Robert.

After working on the farm for a few years, he then took over the family farm named "Greendale" from his father and brothers including the now heritage listed "Lange Homestead."

During the depression the meagre farm income had to be supplemented by transporting sawn firewood logs from the Millbrook timber mill to Albany.

I remember him telling me the story about the "hissing" sound. My brother and I were about 5 or 6 years old. He describes the family sitting down to lunch when my brother and I ran inside to the kitchen yelling "Mum, Dad, come quickly, there is a "sssssssss" noise coming from the back of the truck." Dad raced outside. The truck was fully loaded with firewood. He noticed the truck was sitting very low to the ground on the driveway. Both rear tyres were flat. The boys had been pushing sticks into the tyre valves and consequently the hissing sound was the tyres deflating.

Benno Lange, with enormous help from his wife Sylvia, gradually developed the "Greendale" farm into the "hub" of King River. He bred a sizeable dairy cattle herd, planted fruit orchards and later diversified into producing sheep for wool, fat lambs, and cultivated a large fruit orchard that exported thousands of cases of apples to the United Kingdom. The farm was entirely self sufficient with his father tending a magnificent vegetable garden in his retirement.

By this time the farm boasted a three level export apple packing facility, a workers cottage, a super phosphate shed, a blacksmith shop complete with a furnace, several machinery sheds, a milking dairy and a shearing shed.

The "Lange Homestead," built in approximately 1910 and now Heritage listed, was a sizable home of seven bedrooms, polished timber floors, high ceilings, fireplaces in the bedrooms, and a carbide gas lighting system.

During the war years Benno Lange and other farmers from the district were "man powered" as part of the war effort. Several nights a week, farmers had to maintain military surveillance from the defence bunkers at the Princess Royal Fortress, located on Mount Adelaide overlooking Princess Royal Harbour. Farms in the district were allocated a quota of vegetables, fruit, milk, and livestock to be produced for local and overseas consumption.

Benno Lange purchased an adjoining property that needed cleaning up.

I distinctly remember one winters day when my father was "sweeping" fallen trees into windrows with his bulldozer. The ground was soggy from heavy rain and he was busily pushing up logs, when all of a sudden the topsoil gave way to a muddy slush. The bulldozer sank in a sink hole up to the operators seat. I watched as he jumped off the machine. I honestly thought the dozer was going to disappear.

Of coarse, the entire district then knew that Benno Lange had bogged his bulldozer and much to his embarassment the neighbours all came to see his pride and joy being pulled from the mud.

Benno Lange always wore a hat, not just a cap, but a brimmed felt hat with a hat band. He purchased a tractor from Cranbrook and had to get it home to the farm. This was an upmarket tractor. It had rubber tyres instead of steel wheels. When driving the tractor home to the farm, guess what, his hat blew off and before he could retrieve it a truck ran over it and destroyed his trusty head warmer. He was more worried about his hat than the distance he had to drive the tractor to the farm.

In 1958 he suffered horrific burns to his arm and the left side of his body. This "new super duper" tractor started on petrol fuel and once the engine had warmed up, the fuel bowl tap had to be changed over to power kerosine fuel. There was a leak in the tap and petrol sprayed the tractor and his body. The tractor and his clothes caught on fire. He must have been in agony walking from the paddock to the homestead, before my mother set out for the Albany hospital. After a week or so in hospital he returned home. It was evident later, that after he was burnt he scooped up handfuls of sand and threw it over the burning tractor. The tractor was saved and no pasture fire resulted by his brave actions.

My father was a hard but very fair man. I can also remember him saying that he would never ask anyone to complete a task on the farm that he could not perform himself and that he preferred things to be right or wrong rather than half right or half wrong. He was a man very strong on principles.

When I was 13 years old my brother and I would catch rabbits on the farm and sell them for pocket money in Albany. One day we were riding our push bikes along a bush track on crown reserve land and spotted a few rabbit traps which we picked up and took home, thinking they did not belong to anybody. Our father asked us where we found the traps, to which I replied "in the bush where nobody lives."

"Somebody owns them," he replied and eventually traced the owner. He then insisted that we return the traps to the rightful owner and apologise, which we did. That was on a Sunday. Monday was the next school day. I had just progressed into long trousers and was regarded as grown up by my school friends, but not for long. Being the eldest son that should have known better, I was made to go to school for a day in short pants as punishment. It certainly taught my brother and I a lesson. Don't take anything that is not yours without permission of the owner.

Benno Lange entered local government at 38 years of age and represented the King ward on the Albany Road Board in 1948. The Albany Highway and the road to the upper King River bridge were the only roads controlled by the Road Board that were bituminised.

So it was with some consternation that the works committee would depart their office to carry out on site inspections for future roads.

The Road Board clerk, as was traditional, jumped into the drivers seat of the council car and the councillors crowded into the remaining seats. With a sense of duty firmly fixed, they would take to the tracks more fit for goats than cars and discuss the possibility of future roadways. With infallible regularity, the vehicle would become bogged in baths of mud where tracks were supposed to be. Again, in keeping with tradition, the councillors would line up behind the vehicle for some hefty pushing while the clerk kept his seat to steer the vehicle clear. Consequently, the spinning rear wheels would spray the councillors with mud.

Such are the memories of Benno Lange in an interview with the Albany Advertiser in 1976.

The Albany Road Board controlled and was responsible for roads, parks, reserves, playing fields, fire control and housing etc and all future development in the rural area surrounding Albany. The Albany Town Council was responsible for the urban town area and development within a radius of approximately 2 miles from the town centre.

In 1961 the Albany Road Board became the Albany Shire Council.

The Road Board office of one room and a lean to, cost 600 pounds to build in 1925. It served as the Board office for 33 years, and was located on Stirling Terrace in Albany opposite the original gaol and still exists today.

Meetings were held every Friday, the town day for farming members, and frequently went until 10.00pm at night. In 1958, new Road Board offices were constructed near the corner of Chester Pass Road, or the King turn off as it was known then and now the Chester Pass roundabout.

Benno Edwin Lange gave 27 consecutive years voluntary service to local government in the Albany district from 1948 until 1975. He represented the King Ward on the Albany Road Board for 13 consecutive years from 1948 until 1961 and was chairman of the board for 7 of those years.

On July 1, 1961, the local government Road Boards became Shire Councils. He was elected the very first President of the Albany Shire Council, a position he held for 14 consecutive years until 1975.

In total he was Chairman of the Albany Road Board and President of the Albany Shire Council for 21 consecutive years.

Following Benno Lange's philosophies, the Albany Shire Council made steady progress under his leadership. The Road Board and Shire Council emerged from its predominately rural and unsettled area, to an area of housing development potential, but still with a rural base.

A number of important developments were undertaken by the Albany Shire Council under the guidance of President Lange.

The Lower Denmark road to Youngs Siding and the narrow gravel road past Mount Many Peaks which is now Route 1 or South Coast Highway to Gardiner River were upgraded to major highways in conjunction with Main Roads. Many townsites and suburban communities were established including Eleker, Grassmere, Redmond, Many Peaks, Cheyne Beach, Goode Beach, Lower Kalgan, Kalgan Heights and Bayonet Head, just to name a few.

He was a confident promoter, against strong opposition, of the Lower King River bridge construction that was completed in 1961. It was the last bridge ever to be constructed in West Australia utilising the raked or 30 degree angled piles driven into a river bed rock and the last traffic bridge to have a separate foot bridge.

He was instrumental in the development of an alternate cemetery to the original Albany cemetery in Middleton Beach road and pioneered the establishment of the present Albany cemetery at Alambie Park in Bayonet Head.

Milk from dairy farms was picked up at the farm gate in 7 gallon steel "cream cans," but March 1965 was an innovative month for household milk delivery in the Shire of Albany. It was the first Shire in the State to abolish "billy can" milk delivery and introduce milk bottles to the suburbs.

The first Albany regional cattle saleyards were constructed under the guidance of President Lange. When he joined the Albany Road Board revenue was about 8,000 pounds. In 1975 at his retirement the Shire Council had revenue of approximately \$500,000

Full Shire Council general meetings continued to be held every Friday and as the urban population increased so did the demands of the Shire President. More and more of the Presidents time was required at mid week finance meetings, Shire and urban planning meetings, Shire and district progress association meetings, fire prevention seminars, Shire network road inspections etc.

As President of the Shire and representing the people and ratepayers of the Shire of Albany, he was also required to attend all civic functions including the opening assembly at the Albany Senior High School, presenting school swimming carnival trophies, attending school sports days and representing the Shire at local government week in Perth, as well as attending surrounding Shire Council regional zone meetings and many other civic duties.

The position of the Albany Shire President was becoming more and more demanding. He was often told, with tongue in cheek, to shift the farm into the Shire offices and maybe more farm work could be achieved.

He represented and spoke on behalf of the people of the Shire of Albany at the official unveiling of the Desert Mounted Corps Memorial at Mount Clarence on 16 October 1964. This ANZAC Light Horse Memorial is dedicated to the Gallipoli Warriors and is recognised world wide.

On a very wet and windy day, Benno Lange and his wife were privileged to officially welcome Queen Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburgh to Albany at the Albany airport in March 1954. They were then both invited company at an enormous welcome for the Queen and Duke at Centennial Oval by the people of Albany and surrounding areas.

It was the responsibility of the Shire President to represent the people of the Shire of Albany when royalty or dignitaries visited the area. President Lange, in the company of his wife, officiated at the civic reception when Princess Margaret and husband Lord Snowdon visited Albany in October 1972.

In officially welcoming Prince Phillip, the Duke of Edinburgh to Albany in November 1973, the Duke, on shaking hands, looked up at the towering figure of Benno Lange, one of the biggest men in local government and asked, "what do you do"?

"I'm a farmer," replied President Lange.

"I thought you might be" said the Duke, flexing his well shaken fingers.

In 1975, Benno Lange and his wife Sylvia were guests of honour of the Albany Shire Council at a formal farewell dinner function held at Hillside Lodge to commemorate their valuable contributions to the Albany and Great Southern areas of Western Australia. The awards presentation night was attended by Government Ministers, Parliamentarians, Town Council Mayors, Shire Presidents and dignitaries from all over Western Australia.

Benno Lange was appointed a Justice of the Peace in 1976, a position he held for many years. He was a member of the Albany Agricultural Society for 47 years, an elected member of the management committee for 7 of those years and was appointed a life member of the society.

He was Chief Fire Control officer for the Southern areas and the Albany Shire hinterland for 21 consecutive years, a position that allowed very little sleep during the summer months. If he was not approving official "permits to burn" from landholders he was on the two way radio communication channel at all hours receiving up to date weather conditions from throughout the region.

According to many divisional fire control officers, in January, February and March of 1966, the Albany Shire area experienced the worst bush fires in living memory. Raging fires had to be controlled at Bakers Junction, King River, Kalgan River, Redmond and the Albany airport.

With the assistance of local fire captains, Shire President Lange's management in controlling these fires and many others will always be remembered.

In the 1950's and 60's the Land Board of Western Australia opened up virgin bush for farm land to the North and East of Albany. Applicants from all over Australia applied for conditional purchase blocks of uncleared land. Strict qualifications governed the successful applicant. Was their present farm too small and uneconomic for a growing family, or did their present financial position permit extensive development, or did they have previous farming experience etc. The applicants that qualified for each block were then selected by a ballot procedure. Benno Lange was a respected member of the Board and his advice and acumen in land allocation under this Government conditional purchase scheme was invaluable. The new areas of South Stirlings, Green Range, Kojoneerup, Wellstead, Cape Riche, were some of the new farming areas established.

In 1975, aged 65, he retired from public life and farming. His two sons, much to their Fathers disappointment, were not interested in farming, thinking the bright town lights were more inviting. He and his wife Sylvia then sold the Millbrook farm and built a new home high on the hill overlooking the town of Albany. They then spent time in England including the place where Sylvia was born and she reunited with many long lost relations. Before travelling overseas, Benno Lange was presented with a "to whom it may concern" introductory letters from the Premier of Western Australia and the Australian Agent General in London.

On returning to Albany he joined the Emu Point Bowling Club where he enjoyed many years of competitive bowls and bowling competitions. He won many bowls trophies and as a young man was a fine athlete and talented cricketer. He played competitive tennis at the highest country level, played league football for the now disbanded West Albany team and represented Albany on many occasions in the Great Southern football carnivals.

For good or for bad, Benno Lange was a perfectionist. I remember playing league football for the Royals football club in Albany and at half time I had kicked a sizeable tally of 6 goals. As we were running on to the football ground after the half time interval I heard this voice I had heard so many times before say "keep your eye on the ball son." Father was pleased with my performance but thought I could still improve.

One winters morning when he was away from the farm on Shire business, my brother Bob and I took our vehicles down to the green wet and slippery grass surrounding the farm apple packing shed. Going round and round in circles and doing "figure eights" with the wheels spinning was our specialty. We didn't think about the huge ruts and gutters we were making in the grass and there was no chance of us covering them over. I wondered how much trouble we would be in from the damage we had done to the pasture. Father came home, inspected our "handywork" and in a typical Benno Lange quiet and reserved way said, "well boys, at least you are learning to control a motor vehicle."

My father was also a very resourceful person. He manufactured farm implements with his self taught welding skills, repaired broken machinery and constructed the apple orchard irrigation systems. He was also a capable shearer. He manufactured his own home made hay bale loader. This portable loader was made entirely from scraps found on his farm. The elevator and platform were made from timber, the driving chains were from scrap steel and the steel wheels were salvaged from an old super spreader. He named the loader "The Gig" and everybody in the district knew of Benno Lange's hay bale loader.

My Mother told me his resourcefulness was evident one winters night when I was about 10 years old.

My Mother, my Brother and I were sitting in the old farm truck outside the Albany Road Board office on a Friday night waiting for Father to emerge from the Road Board Councillors meeting. It was a cold dark, windy and rainy winters night and the truck only had open windows. About 10.00pm he emerged from the meeting and to his dismay, discovered the truck rear tail light was damaged and not working. Not to be discouraged, he walked to his brothers home and borrowed a torch and found a piece of red rag. He tied the red rag over the torch light. Mother rugged me up in my raincoat, and I sat on the back of the truck holding the improvised tail light all the way to the farm. He was not going to get stopped by the traffic police under any circumstances.

In 1976 he was awarded the status of Freeman of the Albany Shire.

The City of Albany named the suburb of Lange, Lange Street and Lange Park after Benno Lange in further recognition of his untiring voluntary services to the Great Southern community.

Perhaps one of the highlights of his life was on January 26th, 1979, when he was awarded the prestigious Member of the Order of Australia (AM) by Queen Elizabeth in her birthday wish celebrations for his voluntary contributions to Albany and the Great Southern districts of Western Australia. He was one of only 6 West Australians to be given that honour in 1979.

A very proud and humble Benno Edwin Lange was presented to Prince Charles, the Prince of Wales to receive his Order of Australia Medal at Government House in Perth later that year.

Benno Lange said he "owed his honour to his wife, his children and to fellow councillors."
"Any recognition I have received would be through them," he said.

Benno Edwin Lange died in Albany on the 17th of October 2001, and being the humble man that he was, requested a private funeral. His wife of 62 years, Sylvia, died in Albany on the 10th of December 2001. They are survived by two sons, Edwin and Robert, two grand children Narelle and Nicholas and two great grand children Jackson and Harry.