

WOOL BULL

Owen Griffiths 2015

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PROLOGUE

Preamble

Anyone born post 1950 who reads this book will benefit by studying the following introduction of the shearing team era in the Pilbara district of WA. By doing so the reader then has some hope of understanding the extremely complicated descriptions of life occurring in the pastoral districts of Western Australia during the 100 years or so of pioneer development

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The Pilbara's Monte Carlo.

By the time the year 1950 had come and gone it was an accepted worldwide fact that Monte Carlo had in fact taken its lead from Port Hedland. No, I'm not trying to be smart, the similarities are just too obvious. For a start both centres exist on planet Earth, both have street lights, even though the ones in Port Hedland were a half hour trek apart, and the night life for both was drawn like a magnet to the central attraction – big time gambling. The casino(s) in Monte Carlo grew from the success clearly demonstrated by those in Port Hedland, affectionately called the Pier and Esplanade Hotels, even more affectionately called Bloodhouse 1 and Bloodhouse 2.

Of course certain adjustments had to be made for the different environments. For example, in Monte Carlo patronage built up around 10pm and continued with decorum until 7am. Bloodhouses 1 and 2 saw a department store-like sales crush descend on both entertainment centres sharp at 9am opening time, nor did the pace slacken until next morning around 8.30am. Unfortunately for Bh 1 and 2 there were no limousines available to disperse the departing crowds, many of whom bedded down under the stars on the nearby beach one hundred yards away to the north. Those patrons unable to complete that marathon found suitable accommodation anywhere nearby, soft or hard ground didn't matter.

It could well be that more money passed over the tables at Monte Carlo, but I'll bet the percentage of GNP (Gamblers' Nevertobebanked Paycheque) was far in excess at Bh1 and 2. The percentage of bankrupts, too, far exceeded those at Monte Carlo. Incidentally 'bigtime' is

a word, believe it or not, which entered the vocabulary from the hustle and bustle of the Port Hedland gambling centre of the world, in pre-iron ore mining Australia.

Nor were gambling dens the only similarity. Both places had civic buildings, and even more important, both had major retailing outlets and tourist facilities. For Port Hedland though, it must be conceded, the latter's single and very basic cafe was there strictly in anticipation of the tourist trade developing 30 or 40 years down the track. With the benefit of hindsight it is now obvious that Monte Carlo would have derived similar customer satisfaction had they applied the same pricing principles to their gourmet meals. Note - Port Hedland, Example 1 – Jam sandwich 1/2d Example 2 – Steak (kangaroo or beef is uncertain) and 2 eggs 4/3d. This slow and generous start, before the rip-offs came into play, enabled the gambling coffers of Bh1 and 2 to be filled many times over. Monte Carlo, however, thought they knew best by screwing everyone from the start, so the casinos paid the price. They attracted only the very wealthy.

Major retailers in the 1950's were hell bent on establishing themselves worldwide, and this they did with the notable exception of Port Hedland. Horses for courses first proved itself in the red dust of that gambling mecca. Millions of dollars must have been spent by Marks and Spencers, Selfridges, Walmart and others to capture the Pilbara market – to no avail, Elder Smith and Dalgety held firm. Their stranglehold was never in doubt, anyway - why? - Because they were light years ahead of their formidable opposition, Elders in particular. They carried a range of goods, even then, which still exceeds that of today's counterparts – groceries, pharmaceutical, newsagency, fishing and camping, Manchester, clothing, cooking lines, stationary; - ok so far – but then add furniture, windmills, fencing equipment, motor vehicles, lubricants, drums of fuel, arsenic sheep dip, oxy acetylene equipment, tools, shearing combs, cutters and handpieces, to mention a few – and you can see there remains a long way to go for their modern equivalent before they catch up.

Monte Carlo – can it ever catch up?

What about entertainment? Dancing girls, Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra combined don't compare with the Port Hedland Deckchair Theatre. For a start all of Monte Carlo's theatres and nightclubs couldn't capture the resort's entire resident population not already at the casinos. Port Hedland's Deckchair Theatre did. The canvas deckchairs were designed by a lifestyle

expert. They could hold anyone with a bodyweight of fifteen stone for most of the first film. Each weather exposed recliner was raised off the ground sufficiently to store six king brown bottles of Swan Lager underneath (as long as they were securely tied to the owner/consumer's body). Drinking, smoking and hurling abuse could be undertaken in total comfort. And at interval between the two main films all the blokes could ogle at the two single women in the audience –in Port Hedland too, for that matter. Cop that Monte Carlo, in your tuxedos and with your stress related activities.

For some reason the aboriginal members of the audience sat on the ground, virtually under the screen. Viewing was possible, and enjoyed, with necks bent back at angles between 75 to 90 degrees.

Hospital facilities were top of the tree – guess where? Port Hedland of course, and with sweeping views over the uniquely blue Indian Ocean. Mind you, most of the near dead patients were bedded down on the verandas, so these bodies were exposed to the elements as well as the views. Those that did die departed this life bathed in sweat and with a magnificent panoramic vision firmly fixed in their expired brain. The cyclone season saw, as required, a whole movement of beds to inside passages, but never for more than two or three days. Fresh air has always played an important part in maintaining good health and in preceding impending death.

I wonder if all the residents in Monte Carlo knew their doctors personally. Port Hedland residents did, to the very last individual; so too, did everyone else within a 600 miles radius. Professor (also doctor) Saint was a 'flying' doctor in every sense of the word who was prepared to land his tiger moth on any station airstrip, no matter how rough, to deal with any medical crisis. Health Departments worldwide, including Monte Carlo, have been striving to achieve this high level of public involvement ever since.

And a flying catholic priest, prepared to land his tiger moth on any sheep station strip that required a vivid imagination to even be called a strip, was accepted as a friend by everyone be they a mick, calathumpion, a bush Baptist or an atheist. Father Bryan, fifty years hence, is still spoken of with affection, and has a permanent place in Port Hedland history. Monte Carlo has yet to nominate its equivalent.

Vehicular traffic on narrow, twisting streets, and parking even sixty years ago, was a problem of monumental proportions for Monte Carlo. One way thoroughfares, lack of on street parking or on-site parking drove tourists and inhabitants alike to absolute distraction. But after their engineers had spent months of research at Port Hedland, they returned home filled with wonder at how many problems, common to both centres, had been scientifically resolved by one such study programme. No one way traffic limitations, no right or left hand side of the road vehicular traffic requirements, no parallel or angled parking restrictions, both were acceptable as was parking in the middle of the road and on the footpath. Police traffic control and parking inspectors – excessive in the extreme and a drain on council revenue. The aim to emulate this unnecessary cost is a ‘should be’ priority aim for every town and city in the western world – surely.

If I’m honest and fair minded I have to tell you why Monte Carlo attracted film stars, celebrities and the rich and the famous (including the Mafia) in the 1950’s rather than Port Hedland. It all had to do with the ease or otherwise of communications. The process of making a phonecall in the latter town was just too complicated for anyone with an IQ exceeding 57.

First the phone – it, (the box holding the innards), hung on the wall with three visible components, the speaking piece in the middle front of the box, the hearing piece on the end of cord which had to be detached from a cradle attached to one side of the box before being held to your ear, and a handle on the other side of the box which had to be rotated several times before an outgoing call could be made. Rotating the handle eventually connected you to a person in the post office exchange to whom you gave the required number, say Port Hedland 45. With luck you were connected immediately. Without luck you tried again and again and again. Local calls could be mastered by most people within a month or so. It was trunk calls that posed the problems, interstate certainly – but others too, outside your own locality boundary sometimes less than 25 miles away. Calls had to be booked 8, 10, 12, 24 hours ahead depending on countless varying circumstances. Sometimes you eventually made contact, sometimes you didn’t. This situation did not attract the affluent to Port Hedland, just gamblers, shearers, fuel agents and some deadbeats.

Now this is a serious question, did Monte Carlo ever export Gold? Port Hedland did via a specially built railway connecting it to Marble Bar. I suspect Monte Carlo only ever imported gold through their casinos.

So for the Pilbara's Monte Carlo to be classified as the trendsetter for Europe's Monte Carlo is not such a wild assertion after all – is it? Mind you a vivid imagination is required in the first place to make such a comparison, but mark my words despite 'the affirmatives' clearly having been demonstrated, like many other historical documents, this one too, will be relegated to oblivion.

THE REAL BEGINNING.

I, and I alone, am responsible for Mike's career in the wool industry. Not once in sixty years since the 1950's has he acknowledged this fact; nevertheless it's true. Judge for yourselves.

I don't remember how we met, but around that time I was working for Frank Marks, a shearing contractor of some considerable note. Mike, an ex Hale School student, as you would expect, was aiming for the top. There was no more elevated position in a shearing team to which one could aspire, so come hell or high water he wanted that boardboy's job on offer.

I set up a meeting with Billy James, a woolclasser/overseer in one of Frank's teams who happened to be looking for a couple of roustabouts. It was to take place in the public bar of the Metropole Hotel. I was there, Billy James was there, so too were two or three shearers. Now they weren't dressed in blue singlets, yolk encrusted jeans and moccasins, but they were shearers, a bit rough and quite capable of enjoying themselves with a beer on hand and a rolled Log Cabin cigarette stuck in their face.

We'd had two or three beers and I was in the middle of telling them about something when they saw this look of horror pass over my face. Billy James later described it as undiluted terror. So, of course, they all turned around to see what was wrong.

There, standing in the doorway of the public bar of the Metropole Hotel was this ex Hale School student. Certainly his bearing was regal, his features were aristocratic with not one Brylcreemed hair on his head out of place, but around his royal neck he sported a pure silk, designer label, blue polka dot cravat, displayed for all to see under a gold buttoned, bright blue reefer jacket. He looked absolutely glorious, and to top it all off a Sherlock Holmes type pipe stuck out of his face. And he was here, in the midst of a bunch of shearers at my recommendation.

It took me two weeks of intense argument to ensure I retained my own job, and then another two weeks of pleading that it was Mike's class, his Hale School background, which was the one ingredient missing from Frank's five or six shearing teams.

Yes, he got his job, and as I said before, his introduction to the wool industry occurred solely as a result of my frantic efforts on his behalf. But for me, he could, even now be a kangaroo shooter, a scrap metal merchant or a bullshit artist.

The wool industry owes me plenty.

THE GREY GHOST.

A number of people have said that witnessing one of contractor, Frank Mark's shearing teams leaving the Ozone Hotel on its way up North was reminiscent of a royal entourage leaving Buckingham Palace for Westminster Abbey. There were certainly some right royal stuffups. No, Mike wasn't one of them. It wouldn't surprise anyone if the Red Cross one day confirmed that he had pristine, pure, blue blood coursing through his veins in necessary support for his ultra-active brain.

Surprisingly, even as a roustabout, he wasn't offered a seat in the cab of the Grey Ghost, our very superior form of transport. Instead he had to mix it with the rest of us on the architecturally designed rear truck tray. Quick thinker that he was, after the first day's travel on those outback, dusty roads he recognised that sports clothes and cravat were inappropriate apparel. Accordingly his attire for the second day was more in keeping with that of the accompanying rabble.



It goes without saying, before setting out on any journey every shearing contractor has his team's comfort uppermost in mind. So it was with the Grey Ghost, a three ton Ford Thames truck. No one has ever confessed, but presumably a brain played some part in designing the structure mounted on the truck's tray. There was a roof, not to keep the sun off the travellers,

but to ensure once the dust had been stirred up from the road it was contained under the roof in an ever increasing volume.

Oh yes, there were seats, two of them, backing on to each other and extending centrally down the length of the tray. As you would expect these were to sit on, though only if that didn't interfere with the stores crammed into every available space. And it always did, starting right behind the cab. Here were the only two points of entry to the rear, and blocking each one was a forty four gallon drum of fuel. You would not have been the only person to ask how you gained access to those sought after seats. Silly, when you climbed over the top of these drums you always found just enough room to squeeze through. Then, having made it thus far, you were confronted by all the cook's stores for the next shed. Because a dozen cases of beer would only fit under the seats miscellaneous boxes, cartons and bags of food had pride of place on the seats. Nor was any trip overland undertaken without a place being found for the very special gear belonging to the woolclasser, expert and cook, - absolutely essential they insisted for the successful carrying out of their work. (Most likely it consisted of boxes holding bottles filled to the brim with fiery spirits). Only after all this gear had been organized did shearers come next in order of priority; then, providing there was sufficient seating space, did the lowly shedhands have their opportunity to sort out their pecking order.

On his first day, for example, Mike's royal blue blood failed to gain recognition. To anyone with half a brain it would have been obvious, so all we can surmise is that apart from our 'Man' no one else had half a brain. He had to sort of sit on a forty four gallon drum until that got too hard, then he had to sort of stand holding on like grim death to anything that didn't tip over whilst going around a bend. After one day travelling in these conditions even accommodation on the train to Siberia would be seen as providing five star comfort.

Thanks be that thought had been given to finding suitable space for the team's cases and swags. Where better than hanging over the back of the truck's tray? That's where the dust was at its very thickest, and couldn't help but work its way through the protecting groundsheet. Grey blankets became red in no time. An extension built out over the end of the standard truck tray achieved this perfect pollution perfectly.



The urgent need for safety remained uppermost in our contractor's caring mind. To this end wooden railings enclosed everything on the truck up to dado height, the aim being to stop clobber from falling over the side, - other than team members that is. So with comfort assured the only other requisite was a coma. Some reached this state by means of grog, a few stumbled hopefully over clobber into unconsciousness, the remainder had to wait a few minutes until their lungs filled with (bull) dust. Only at that point, as their complexions developed a deep blue hue, and after they had assumed a foetal position, did they know beyond doubt that their survival chances had just exceeded 50:50. And I'm not kidding, travelling on the Grey Ghost was the pits.

One day out, and one day only, I don't know whether Mike introduced bribery, hypnosis or death threats, but I do know day two saw a change in the travel arrangements; no, certainly not a throne, instead he commandeered the best seat in the Grey Ghost - in the cab - to the exclusion of a more senior team member.

Brains beat brawn every time. When, in addition to brains you have been trained by Hale School there is nothing on earth that can stop you from joining the gods. Years later it is now acknowledged that Mike, Thor and Jupiter were all on an equal footing.

LUXURY FIVE STAR LIVING.

There's no question that Mike's past association with Hale School dormitories instilled in him a fierce desire for superior accommodation, - to never be satisfied with anything less than the best – five star 1950's style.

So intensely keen was he that arrival at every new shed involved risking life and limb. Well before the Grey Ghost had started to slow down as it approached the shearers' quarters, and well before any of the other shedhands could call on their courage, Mike would leap from the truck and race towards the luxury accommodation. First choice was an absolute must.

Others would be at least one hundred yards behind.

Unlike anyone else Mike had his Hale School standards:-

THE BED. No sprung bases here, just wire. To find a bed where the wire base hadn't broken away from the frame was always the first imperative. That never proved easy. If you weren't selective your sleeping time at the shed was spent with part of your body supported and the rest of it on the floor, having fallen through those gaps. A thorough search for redbacks never failed to be a worthwhile precaution too.

THE MATTRESS. It had to have enough stuffing so you couldn't feel the wire base when you lay down. At some sheds the mattresses had been purchased prior to the World War, - World War 1 that is. After forty years of use there was practically no stuffing inside the external fabric, probably only bed mites, and this could be worn so thin that your body was raised barely 1mm above the wire base. Even with first choice comfort could not be assured.

THE PILLOW. A different proposition altogether to the mattress; equally old and equally worn, but once folded fourfold your head rested at least 4mm above the mattress and 5mm off the wire base.

Only with these minimum standards satisfied could Mike slow down and appreciate his new surroundings. And what a joy to behold the opulence, it was everywhere. The bedside table, for example, was an upturned beer crate, very handy for stacking the top with tobacco, cigarette papers, Lux soap (used by 9 out of 10 film stars), Persil, travelling clock, magazines and anything else that you needed to reach in the dark. Hanging clothes? Never a problem. A strand of fencing wire strung between walls suitably held your towel, your clothes, your water bag and anything else you wanted to keep off the one inch thick, dust covered, concrete floor.

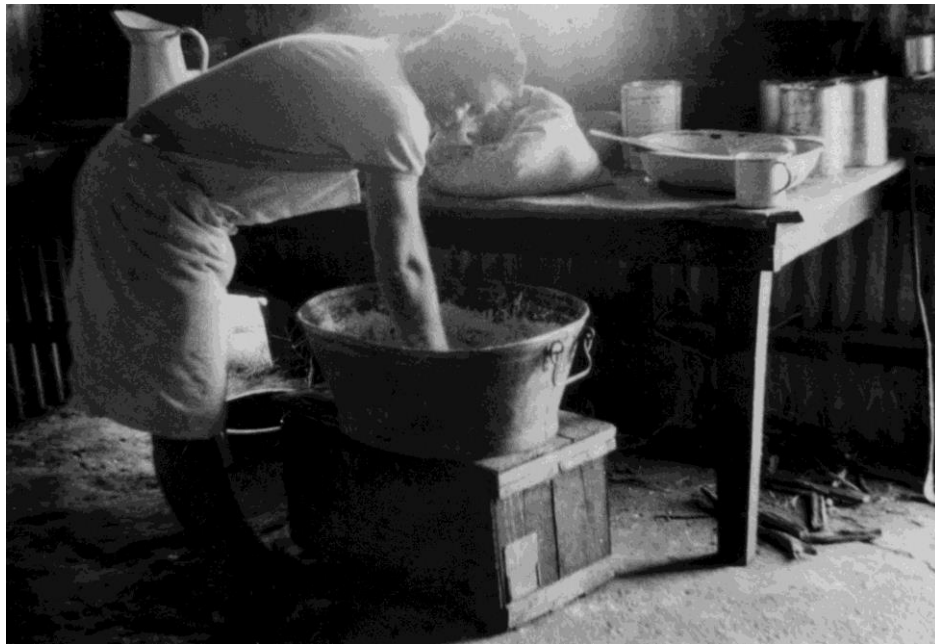


And no, that's not all. When you lay down on your bed, (from exhaustion not from choice), and looked around the room, what did you see? No wall linings, no ceiling, no window, a door which more often than not wouldn't shut, but plenty of holes in the corrugated iron caused by both rust and nails, which did very little to impede the entry of dust and rain. Can it get any better than this?

Yes, of course it can. Just take a stroll to the cookhouse and observe the ultra-sterile conditions in place there. Pots, pans plates, cutlery, opened packets and bags of food, all covered with nonexistent flywire to keep the hordes at bay.

The commercial, double wood stove in a corrugated iron clad building, without ventilation, had been specifically designed to produce copious quantities of sweat. Cooks who spend their waking hours hovering over the stove were the free-est flowing. They added their contribution

to all the cooking, be it for basting, roasting, frying or making a bucket of tea. Each cook's food had its own distinctive flavouring.



Sharing the trestle table and benches with up to twenty five blokes, most of whom had BO, all intent on consuming whatever culinary delight was on offer, provided three highlights each day for well over two hundred consecutive days. Come to think of it, no one sat in a chair for all that time, unless it happened to be on those rare occasions in a café, when passing through a town on our way to another classic shed.

And no, that's not all, either. What about the ablution block, combining showers and laundry? You could bet on a number of things. First, the door had been shut for the whole year between shearings. Second, all the taps and showers had been dripping for the same period. Third, there was green slime all over the floors making it impossible to stand without desperately holding on to something for the entire time spent under the shower. Fourth, frogs of all sizes and descriptions were everywhere inside the shower room, but since they didn't appreciate hot water you tended to ignore them for as long as you remained under the shower.

When I asked Mike, on one occasion, if he could visualise a better lifestyle, he was, as always, straight to the point, "Yes among the refuse under the Fremantle Traffic Bridge."

RAW AGGRESSION.

Mike delayed giving other team members an insight into his fearsome fighting qualities for as long as was humanly possible. He waited patiently for three whole days until the middle of the first week at Narndee, his very first shed in his very first year away as a shedhand.

The first shed on any run is always high on emotion, and absolutely chock-a-block full of dirty dispositions. After three or four months away from the bogeye, (shearers' handpiece), shearers' backs ache, heads ache, stomachs ache, and so do their shaky, achy hearts. Like the EJ Holden it takes three or four weeks to run themselves in. During that time lives are at risk, shedhands' lives, especially boardboys who are new to the job. These lowlifes must realise they have only one purpose for being in a shearing team, and that is to remove all shorn fleeces from the board before shearers bring their next unshorn sheep out from the catching pens.



In 1953 Bob had never seen a shearing shed before. He had trouble recognising the difference between a woolly sheep and a woolpresser. Both carried wool, neither could hold a conversation, although it must be said that sheep could express themselves with more clarity in other ways. And both boardboys and woolpressers thought shearers were the pits. So Bob's uncertainty was understandable.



But this uncertainty applied to everything. As a boardboy for four shearers he sort of knew he had to pick up each fleece from the board immediately after each sheep had been shorn. Sometimes he did just that too. Mostly, though, he didn't, and consequently the shearers just kicked the fleece out of the way as they made ready to start their next woolly sheep. Bob's board, therefore, very rapidly became a mess of tangled fleeces – from 7.30 am until thirty minutes after the final bell at 5.30 pm signaled knock-off.

Two days of this treatment and the tablehands, who were next step up the totem pole, developed a disposition that was more than dirty; they were positively explosive. Boardboys, you see, throw most fleeces on to the wool table for the tablehands to skirt, or at least they're supposed to. Two days with Bob and this had not happened once. All he did was chuck a heap of tangled wool anywhere into a space on the floor around the wool table. No space, no worries. He simply piled it up and up and up.

The tablehands, as a result, were in a worse predicament than Bob. You try separating skirtings from shit buried deep in a tangled heap of wool, and see how long you remain placid.

Mike, as one of the tablehands, he was too good to be a boardboy, recognised this very serious matter had to be dealt with. Diplomacy of the highest order was called for.

There's no doubt, from the moment the team left Perth, five days previously, Mike stood apart from his fellow workers. He had that indefinable quality which spoke clearly of his future greatness. In a succinct, authoritative voice, and with aplomb, he addressed the frantic, distressed boardboy, "You useless heap of crap. Don't you have a brain? You're such a stupid moron you couldn't throw up, let alone throw fleeces. I've a good mind to take you outside and beat something into your vacant brain cavity."

"When?"

Bob, you see, would have preferred being beaten to death rather than having to stay one moment longer on the board. Mike's threat wasn't a threat, it was a heaven sent way out.

Oops, had Mike taken things too far? Had he picked on someone without fear?

This called for a bluff. "Behind the huts at 5.30." That'll give him time to pull out. But Bob didn't. He persisted with his death wish.

Word spread fast. The entire team was ecstatic, something different, a break in their monotonous routine. Murderous Mike obviously combined the skills and sheer artistry of Joe Louis, Jack Dempsey, Gene Tunney and Joe Frasier. That this impending ferocious, violent assault would cause Bob's death seemed inevitable. Sometimes it was just good to be living

witnesses to feats of this type. They probably only occurred once or twice in each century, anyway.

So the time arrived. Mike's fighting stance was beyond reproach. He looked positively lethal, and one could but marvel at those flashing, dancing foot movements. He would have to be unhittable, surely? But you have to throw punches to hit somebody, and neither of them did. Wait for it, Mike's toying with his opponent.

When five minutes of scintillating footwork had elapsed, and still no blows, the writing was on the wall. Everyone, bar the two antagonists, retired to the ablution block to have their showers. The unanimous decision, debated with much passion, and unanimously agreed upon inside three seconds, was that the excitement of watching hot water dripping from the showers had far exceeded anything witnessed at the fight.

Mike's reputation continued to grow. In later years, would you believe, he was reputed to have held the heavyweight championship of the world.

DESTINY SURVIVES.

Another of Mike's innumerable claims to fame had to be the care he gave to selecting his friends. I suppose it was this Hale School thing again. You could actually feel his gigantic, throbbing brain analysing each new team member. One particular year he made his choice after long and hard deliberation. The two he chose could well have been on release/probation from the maximum security Fremantle gaol. They were aptly nicknamed 'Bandit' Bradley and 'Brigand' Bonner.

The weekends, after a few months up North, tend to be a tad boring. Tantrums amongst team members become an everyday occurrence. So, at Marillana Station, towards the end of the shearing season it was unusual, to say the least, to hear this incessant giggling coming from the threesome's room. Were they having fun? Yes. A plan had just been devised. Mike, with his Mr Atlas-like strength, could hold a bull out to piss. He was the unanimous choice to lift the galvanised bucket, filled to the brim with near frozen water, (heavy as hell), and balance it on the top of the half opened door to Reg's room.

All of five minutes passed before he appeared rushing back to the super comfort of his semi-derelict lodging place. Now Reg, aged one hundred and three, had been piecepicking for seventy years (that's a mild embellishment). The stage had been reached when it was as much as he could do to lift a three ounce piece of wool and throw it into an appropriate bin across his wool table. To call his complexion pallid wasn't being over the top. Through his skin you could clearly see his bones, all his blood vessels, even his nerve cords. In fact, after each meal you could even follow his masticated food from his mouth to his colon – and beyond if that happened to be your desire.

When Reg walked through the partially opened door everything went to plan - CRASH. He copped the lot, and even before collapsing on to the ground his pallid complexion had changed to a thunderous, rapidly darkening greeny grey.

He wasn't breathing. He had no pulse.

Once again it was left to me. I gave Reg the kiss of life, and even after six months in the bush that gave me no pleasure I can assure you.

Anyway he revived and lived for another three months.

The experts said he died of old age, but pardon me, I knew that to be wrong. Under normal circumstances Reg could have pranced through life for four months at most. So, did I set Mike up on a manslaughter charge, or did I allow destiny to run its course, knowing even at this early stage, that he was well on his way to becoming a world leader in the wool industry.

Instinct prevailed and destiny continued to survive.

POSTSCRIPT. Bandit and Brigand, I'm sorry to say, returned to maximum security Fremantle Prison, on other charges I hasten to say, despite the one page reference from Mike stating unequivocally that all members accepted into shearing teams were pillars of society.

OVERCOMING ILL HEALTH.

There are three hundred and sixty five days in a year. The saddest, most forlorn one of them all was when we left Perth for our seven or eight month shearing season in the North West. Depression affected Mike more than anyone else on that particular day.

The Ozone Hotel was our departure point every year during the 1950's and beyond. The reason? No grog! Sunday was a day of total abstinence in the city, so pouring shearers and shedhands on to the Grey Ghost after they had desperately tried to drown their departure sorrows, never developed into a problem. But woe betide any individual responsible for delaying the start by one minute after 10.43 am; once that occurred voices commenced screaming in Mike's head. He became one very dangerous individual. And the reason could not have been more obvious. Travelling time between Perth and Bullsbrook never varied – seventy seven minutes on the dot.

Country pubs, unlike their city counterparts, opened for business on Sunday, between 12 noon and 1.00 pm (bar sales only – no take away bottles). Before Mike had crossed over the Narrows Bridge, less than two hundred yards from the Ozone, he was homesick – no girls for seven or eight months. The only way any ex Hale School student could cope with this unimaginable trauma was to be breasting the Bullsbrook bar by no later than two seconds past 12 noon.

Mike never arrived late.

There happened to be a culture involving a Frank Mark's shearing team and Mike, into which any new team member had to be inducted. And in order to do this Mike invariably bet them he could drink twelve schooners in the one available hour. This as we all know is impossible. So all the uninitiated accepted the bet, and they always lost.

The older team members, who had been away with Mike in previous years, on the other hand, understood he had to undergo this impossible remedy to have any chance of surviving the utter hopelessness he felt at the impending seven to eight girl-less months that lay ahead.

Bullsbrook, however, provided no more than part of the remedy. The balance occurred four hours later at the Wubin Hotel, when, with meticulous accuracy, the other part of the healing

process occurred. Here, Mike arrived at precisely two seconds after 5.00 pm for the second hour of pretending to be having a good time. (The arrival time, incidentally, was achieved despite the call of ‘pisso’ coming from every bladder-filled team member, seemingly every few minutes, between those two vitally important country centres).

The same bet, the same result. New inductees had yet to learn that to Mike nothing was impossible.

After Wubin, those with some rigidity still retained in their bodies kept a sharp lookout for White Wells, an area cleared of trees, alongside the main road, where every one of Frank Mark’s teams spent their first night out under the stars. I had to unroll Mike’s swag. He wasn’t asleep, just unwake-able.

Within half an hour everyone blissfully slept, and without exception their firm intention was to remain so until 6.00 am next morning. Not even sleeping on stones or having death adders curling up inside their swags had even a miniscule hope of changing that firm intention. The old hands though, before any thought of sleep, had reached into their swags, their gladstone bags, or whatever was safe from prying eyes, and carefully removed an unviolated bottle of beer. Then, before dropping into their boudoir for the night, they knocked off the top and placed that precious, full receptacle within easy reach. These old hands felt so bad they thought if they woke up at all next morning the then flat elixir would be swallowed nonstop to give them their one and only chance of surviving their hangover hell.

Let’s get back to Mike. His stomach, some hours into the night, happened to become quite disturbed. There’s no denying aristocratic class and good breeding though. He deliberately stepped out eight paces from his swag before the twenty four schooners in a slightly digested form had their first encounter with the cool night air. Then back to his swag. Staring up at the stars, with sleep still ten minutes away, he was inspired to make a vow. “This is my year. I will make myself indispensable to my beloved mentor and boss, Lance. He will realise beyond all doubt I am ready. My shedhand days are behind me. Woolclassing and team overseeing for dear old Lance is my future. It is my destiny.”

Lance was Frank Mark’s partner, a very important person, known and respected throughout the length and breadth of Western Australia. He, the team overseer, with years spent teaching

up and coming woolclassers, woke next morning at dawn. From bleary, bloodshot eyes he peered out at the surrounding, dismal scene. Then, as he stumbled out of his swag, a persistent buzzing sound invaded his semi consciousness. Curiosity caused him to search for the cause. “Oh, there’s my brief case, and look its open. Would you believe all those flies?”

He walked a few steps to retrieve it and whilst bending over, only then did he realise that the brief case was filled, almost to overflowing, with vomit. The entire season’s supply of ledgers, cheque books, tally books, wool books, receipt books were floating in vomit.

The truth eventually came to light, and no, Mike didn’t have to walk from White Wells to Perth. But, believe me, it was becoming harder to convince the hierarchy within the wool industry that ex Hale School students brought a touch of class to shearing teams.

KAILIS – NO MIKE WAS KING.

Kailis was king – of fishing that is. And how did he learn his trade? Need you ask? Mike of course. Some of the latter's fellow workers, after knowing him for less than a day, called him White Death, because of the similarities he bore to the Great White Shark. But that had nothing to do with his innate ability.

Evidence of this uncanny know-how first revealed itself at Mundabullangana Station, located some forty miles or so south of Port Hedland. Munda, incidentally, is the best station for a shearing team to ply its trade in the whole of the North West. To go there with a team is like winning Charities (Lotto). Up to thirty people make it every year. Mike won the prize three times, the one person on this planet to achieve that rare honour. So on the third occasion he was a natural born leader.

Waiting for the shearing-free weekend to come around was like waiting for your horse to finish in the Melbourne Cup. It took an eternity. But on Saturday morning the wait became worthwhile, and the team's education began.

“Right, a clearly defined, explicit preparation is always a guarantee for success.” Mike spoke with pontiff-like authority. “Everyone bring your daily grog ration, two bottles, more if you've managed to save any during the week, like I told you. OK, now take your seats on the Grey Ghost. We're away.”

Those of us who were eager, willing students of superior fishing practice were mesmerised with this, our first insight into the mind of a master. Keep it simple took on a new meaning. No lines, no hooks, no bait, no sinker. Surely the fish didn't respond to Mike's command just like the rest of us?

“Where are we going Sir?” A perfectly reasonable question you must agree, and spoken with absolute respect.

“Wait and see, idiot,” a suitable response from someone who did not suffer fools, full stop.

So we waited. For half an hour we waited, and when the order came from above to halt, we did. There was no water in sight, only dry, arid land all around us in every direction. Our infamous truck, known and despised throughout the North West as the Grey Ghost, had stopped right on the bank of a dry creek bed. This was sheer stupidity. How were we going to catch fish here?

Well, from that moment on magic became the order of the day. This part of the coast is where tides can rise by up to fifteen to twenty feet, and as that happened we discovered the waterway in front of us was no ordinary creek. It was a tidal creek. Sea water flowed inland along the creek bed with each rising tide, and here we were, three or four miles from the coastline where the water level reached six feet before the ebb.

Before this occurred, Mike, from his position sitting on a log clasping a king brown bottle of Swan Lager in his hand, gave the surrounding lackeys their instructions. "See that roll of chicken wire lying there on the ground, that's been used a hundred times before. Unroll it and run it right across the creek bed. Make sure there are star posts threaded from top to bottom every two yards. Then leave the chicken wire lying flat on the ground."

We followed directions to the letter. "OK," came his next directive, "let the fishing commence. Have a beer."

No one was stupid enough to ask where the bloody fish were, but the mystery solved itself in a matter of minutes anyway. First a trickle appeared in the creek bed. Two gulps of beer later the water level had increased to a depth of six inches, - and rising fast. Before long a fish broke the surface, followed by another, and another. Soon dozens, all shapes and sizes, were darting here there and everywhere. By the time the level had risen to four feet the water was a boiling mass of fish in the throes of a feeding frenzy.

His Masters Voice rang out. "Six of you wade out and pick up the star posts. Push them as far as you can into the creek bed and continue to hold them upright. Then wait." No more fish passed our temporary fence across the creek, either up or down, but who needed them anyway? As the water receded it became obvious to everyone that tons of fish had already been trapped on the upstream side.



Again His Masters Voice blasted the airwaves. “Six more volunteers are now required to walk out amongst the trapped fish. Catch what you want by hand and throw them on to the creek banks, you, you, you and you three.”

This was done, but not without some misgivings. Although the water was stirred up and visually impenetrable, there were enough fish frantically jumping above the surface to know

that some mighty strange creatures swam around out there. Fear of Mike prevailed, nevertheless, and within ten minutes enough of our catch flapped about on the ground for shearers, shedhands and hangers on to fully test their digestive systems over the next three or four days.

Our catch included delectable Norwest salmon and mullet which, after months of nothing else but geriatric mutton, were truly beautiful cooked any way at all. Small swordfish, baby sharks and a multitude of other fish were there for all to see. Mike the man lived on.

No time to cogitate though. "Release what's left so they get back to the ocean." Mike's command rang out to be instantly obeyed. "Now mount up, - with the fish, morons, we're only half way through. And don't touch any more of the beer you've got left."

Gawd, his housemaster at Hale, and the other teachers, must have been mighty men to have gained any cooperation from this colossus. I bet he was toilet trained at birth, and inside one week of birth he would have weaned himself off mother's milk on to Chivas Regal.

So we headed for the coast. The sun was setting, leaving more than enough time to sit on the exposed rocks and fill our pint pannikins with oysters. Here we were in the outback, in the middle of the 1950s, miles from habitation, sitting around an open campfire eating oysters, fresh fish from the sea and swilling it down with grog cooled off in wet hession, (working like a coolgardie safe). The Shaftsbury Hotel was the first pub in Perth to introduce a la carte meals and here we were in the middle of nowhere pipping them to the post. Well sort of anyway.

So, now you've been armed with all the facts, who do you think is king, - Kailis or Mike?

FISHING FOR WIMPS.

Truth, according to the Oxford Dictionary: ‘of being true or accurate or honest or sincere or loyal or accurately shaped.’ Truth has always been completely foreign to a shearing team in the North West, and probably anywhere else for that matter.

I mean every shearer I’ve spoken to has shorn more than three hundred sheep in a day, at some time or another, and mostly monstrous rams cutting fifty pounds of wool at that, (their estimate). Every shedhand, presser, expert and cook is either a Rhodes Scholar or has seriously considered enrolling at Eton, Cambridge or Harvard. As for the woolclasser, the only truthful and sane member of the team he will, if pressed, admit that a prerequisite for his particular qualification is a minimum 160 IQ (genius level).

Friday night, after a few bottles of slops, with the weekend ahead for rest and recreation, is when the untruths peak. This story is not being told on Friday. I’m sober and I guarantee there is but a trace of untruth contained herein.

In 1953 shearing at Wallal immediately followed Munda, two coastal stations one after the other, but both as different as shearing blades are to the bogeye (shearer’s mechanical handpiece). The Eighty Mile beach fronting the Indian Ocean provided Wallal with its western boundary. Here, though, there were no tidal creeks in close proximity to the shearing shed. The tide still rose and fell by some twenty feet or so, however, because of the higher ground level there was no inland flow. As a consequence an alternative form of fishing became an urgent requirement.

Mike couldn’t believe his ears when some idiot mentioned during the Friday night free-for-all, that this dropout just happened to have a professional, heavy gauge fishing net in his ute, and he could think of no better place in Australia to set it than the Eighty Mile beach. Our Hero’s expression left nobody in any doubt that net fishing was the sole option available to wimps and amateurs. He, personally, would have nothing to do with the expedition planned for early next morning. To save their inevitable embarrassment though, he would accompany them and continue their education as mindless mistakes were made.

Would you believe Mike even had to tell them how to set the net? “Drive the two star posts into the exposed seabed, at right angle to the shoreline morons, near the high water mark, and leave sufficient length on the rope ties so that the cork floats are exposed at peak tide.”

Talk about being associated with the mentally deficient.

The net lay on the exposed seabed ready to harvest all the fish in the Indian Ocean, and although the first signs of an incoming tide had occurred, another two hours would elapse before the fishermen could hope to see any action. Meanwhile Mike very quietly walked over to where he had placed two, empty forty four gallon drums. Without a word of explanation he proceeded to tie them together with fencing wire so there was no movement between the two, barely touching circular surfaces.

He then sat in the sand speaking not one single word.

A full hour passed before the shearer supplying the net found enough courage to ask Mike what the drums were for.

“To make sure your net doesn’t get tangled with the surging tide, simpleton. You don’t expect to walk along its length with water up to your neck, do you?”

“No, but how will it work?”

“By pulling my craft out and back using the rope on top of the net that supports the cork floats; how else?”

The 160 plus IQ gained immediate recognition. Mike at once assumed complete and absolute control. “OK, I want two volunteers.” And because he knew his next comment would hurt the upstart shearer in the cruelest way possible, he continued, “Roustabouts, they’re not as stupid as shearers.”

And so Mike’s buoyant marine craft was launched. That unsinkable confidence was well founded too, - for nine minutes. Mind you, there had been some misgivings. This launching occurred in the 1950’s. The nearest motor boat happened to be more than two hundred miles

away at Port Hedland. In the event of some unforeseen mishap catching the reluctant sailors on an outgoing tide they would arrive in Madagascar before the rescue vessel had left its home berth.

Time and again, during that nine minutes, Mike reassured his co-seamen, “Don’t worry.” As fate decreed, however, the intrepid trio on those drums were at the outer end of the net, when, without warning the wire snapped. Their hitherto safe and secure form of water transport burst apart. The three mariners were in water over their heads. Mike, renowned for his courage, called out, “Save yourselves.” And at a speed which would have left Murray Rose wallowing in his wake on the day he won gold at the Olympics, made straight for shore.

Fortune favors the brave – and loppies (roustabouts) too, for some reason. The two remaining crew retained hold of the surface rope, so hand over hand they began to pull themselves towards shore. Progress was slow and hesitant for the first five yards, with ninety five still to go. At that very moment shrill, three hundred decibel, fear laden screams saturated the surrounding atmosphere.

We, on the beach, watched with dread.

What previously had been a real struggle against the fast ebbing tide changed dramatically, in an instant. Now those two would-be survivors were rocketing towards the shore leaving behind a raging white wake reminiscent of the Rottnest ferry. Only when they reached the sanctuary of the beach were we told that underwater creatures with sandpapery skin were continuously flashing past, gouging skin and chunks of flesh from their legs on the way. Our close examination of injured parts eliminated all doubt about that, although the claims of exposed bone were a bit over the top.

What collective courage existed previously had now quickly disappeared. No further move to tend the net was made by anyone, Mike included, not before the water level had fallen below ankle height anyway. There were reasons for this too. What, may you ask? Well for some time, as the tide receded, we could see a dozen or so bodies emerging through the murky water. Bodies? Unmistakable shark bodies, three feet in length. That, however, did not impress us nearly as much as the holes and tears in the net. If the three footers were caught, the ones that

had burst through must have been bigger, like ten footers maybe, and the two, shipwrecked boat riders had been sharing the water with them!!

About that time a song, 'Her Bathing Suit Never Got Wet' hit the airwaves. There's no doubt the amateur (?) fishing exploits of the Mike controlled shearing team inspired that rendition. Certainly most members of that fishing expedition never walked into the sea again, above their ankles. Some even found it hard to wet themselves under the shower.

FISHING FOR THE BRAVE, THE BOLD AND THE BRAIN DEAD.

The following Friday night, after the telling of untruths had climaxed at record levels, Mike introduced an amazing thought to the group. “Look, net fishing is for the fair sex. Tomorrow I’m going to show all of you how to be men.”

“How?”

“Wait and see.”

The next morning he led his band of merry men to the blacksmith’s shop. Here they watched in amazement as Mike, this man among men used the forge, hammer and anvil to fashion a fish hook out of 1/8th inch steel rod. The shape was right with a loop for connecting to a line at one end and a point and barb at the other.

“What now Master?” Do you notice how much more respectful these fellow workers were becoming?

“I want a water tight, empty, very sturdy four gallon kerosene tin, fifty yards of eight gauge fencing wire, one star post, a sledge hammer and a sheep’s liver.”

The wire was cut into two lengths, the longer section being secured to the star post after it had been hammered into the exposed seabed. The other end was attached to the very sturdy kerosene tin handle. Can you imagine a more perfect float? The second length of wire completed the rig after being attached to the float and hook. What shark could possibly resist such gear, especially after the sheep’s liver had been tied to the hook?

Now nothing remained to be done other than wait for the incoming tide to peak. Ideally this would be around five to six feet deep where the star post had been positioned.

Mike waited patiently, as professional fishermen do, sitting on the beach, totally involved in his own highly intellectual thoughts. The lesser beings, out of respect, sprawled some distance away. One of them said, “Do you realise in the last two weeks he’s been a boat builder, a

blacksmith, an Olympic swimmer, a master mariner and a master tactician. What can't this giant of a man do?"

Some smart Alec replied, "He can't pass through a town without having a beer, or two, or three."

That frivolous remark had scarcely been uttered when there was one almighty splash right next to the float. Water was being thrashed everywhere, in all directions and up to the heavens. A tail and part of a body, a very large body, could be seen doing this thrashing too. A shark – no question. For fifteen minutes this monster of the deep went berserk. Then gradually it quietened. At times no movement could be seen. Had it escaped? No, there it was again. More thrashing – more quiet. Could this be the one that got away?

Within seconds of that thought being bandied about some maniac said, "Why don't we go out and spear it? The water now is only waist deep, and if something is not done soon, especially as the tide ebbs even more, it may become frantic enough to break something and get away. Then who'll believe us? We don't have a camera."

Of course Mike had had this very same thought, he just didn't mouth it, because as far as he knew there was no one else in the group with courage equal to his. Rather than let the moment pass, though, he picked up two Mike-made spears lying on the sand and hurled one at the maniac. "Come on." The poor verbose smart arse didn't, for a split nanosecond, believe any team member would take him seriously, but now what choice did he have?

So together they advanced out through the murky water. Murky is an altogether inadequate description. The now outgoing tide had stirred up the sandy bottom to such an extent that seeing even one inch below the surface wasn't an option. The intrepid duo was advancing slowly towards the float. Like aboriginal hunters their spears were poised above head height, ready to savagely plunge into anything that impeded their progress. Just imagine, they could see nothing below the surface where they were most anxious to see something, anything, and if the truth be told both would rather have been anywhere else in the world than where they were now. But with the maniac's peers back on the beach, all of them thoroughly overwhelmed by their courage, what could they do? To go on remained the only option

Closer and closer they moved towards the dreaded float, the visually impenetrable water up to their waist. What lurked down there below the surface?

Mike found out first. A large sandpapery object scraped across his stomach and legs. With one blood curdling, five hundred decibel scream he took off, and though at least thirty yards from the beach he made it in one seemingly effortless movement. So did the maniac, a fraction of a second later. Did they fly? Did they leap? No one could tell, but all spectators were convinced such a feat had never previously been performed by man. Nor would any mere mortal ever repeat that impossible feat in the future.

And the shark; well it didn't get away. Once the tide receded the whole ten feet six inches lay exposed there on the sand. Of course we had no camera to prove what I've been at pains to describe actually occurred. Unless the jaws we cut out are still at Wallal you'll just have to take my word. Let it be known, though, those jaws, when opened wide went over my shoulders without touching.

And Mike, did he lose face after this episode? Of course not; half the world is now convinced he and the Wright Brothers have something in common.

STILL THE ONE.

Without doubt Wallal Station was heaven on earth for all those shearers fortunate enough to score a pen at the shed. Like the true heaven though very few qualified. Those that did were greeted by sheep the size of a chiwawau. Half the thirty thousand sheep shorn each year were bare bellies. None of the others had time consuming wool to shear from their legs and around their heads. No fleece weighed more than four pounds. Shearing was never meant to be that easy.

Of the ten shearers on the board not one shorn less than two hundred sheep each day. Alan, in fact, on one occasion turned out two hundred and ninety eight well shorn adult wethers and ewes. He was the 'gun' and the actual time for each animal, going through the eleven position changes approximated one minute, after excluding frantic seconds spent changing combs and cutters on the handpiece, and dragging the woolly delights from the catching pen.

From day one to cutout the race was on. Each of the ten shearers had his best chance of turning out the best ever tally. The competition was deadly keen, with three of the shearers vying for top spot – the Wallal 'gun'.

Anyway, between the lot of them more than two thousand five hundred passed over the board on a daily basis. Were these hair stylists having fun.

But believe me, the fun well and truly stopped there. The union decreed that for every shearer there must be one shedhand. Our team just happened to be two short. (No worries. We employed a couple of clayton rousies (make believe) whose income tax rorted wages were paid directly to poor old contractor millionaire Frank). Nevertheless, despite the latter's heartfelt sympathy we, the numerically depleted shedhands had to make do. So the usual two boardboys for these ten shearers fell way short of requirements. Another one was needed to keep the board under control, nor could one penner up keep sheep numbers at the necessary level for the five shared catching pens. Even two supposed to be 'part' time penner uppers had their dung funnels dragging.

And by the time those extra two rousies had been reassigned, guess how many were left after allowing for a piecepicker? Two, that's how many, Mike and I. Each and every day we handled

around two thousand five hundred bloody fleeces. My co-tablehand more recently approached the Guinness people to claim this as a world record. An absolute impossibility, they said. So that's another of Mike's countless achievements to go unrecognised.



At this point let it be known I don't like being beaten – ever. I get dirty if someone beats me at noughts and crosses. But that bloody Mike just left me in his wake. Let me demonstrate. We had to skirt (remove) the sweat and stains and remove the dusty back wool from each fleece. The remaining 'good' strips of wool had to be rolled and carried to the woolclasser's table. Most of the fleeces had to be picked up from the floor and thrown expertly on to the table for skirting. The space around our table had to be swept regularly so the wool pieces could be sorted and kept separate from the wool locks. Belly wool had to be found, (the pizzle stains removed) and placed in a bin. Clean skirtings were thrown into a basket, which, when full, had to be lugged over to the piecepicker. For us to do our job properly we had no more than twenty seconds to complete the process on each fleece, with no time for breaks from the start to the finish of every two hour 'run'.

Mike, the magnificent maestro, never tired, never faltered, never lowered his impeccable standards. As I wilted midway through the two hour run he would just increase his output. He

would throw each fleece, remove all the stained pieces from around the backside region, remove the dust affected back and class it into one of two or three bins, then roll the 'good' wool and carry it across to the woolclasser. I, of course, whilst all this was being done would have struggled just to skirt the wool from my side. (This paragraph comes from a direct quote by Mike – it is not how I remember things). How did he do it?

Obviously there could be no satisfactory answer to that question. Suffice to say Mike was no heavenly body, but he did descend upon the shearing industry - from Hale School.

Not infrequently, Lance our woolclasser at that time, would produce a huge dag (dollop of poo) from within the rolled up fleece being prepared for classing into an appropriate bin. For end buyers to find a dag in a bale of 'good' wool could reduce the value of the entire clip. And that would please the station owners not at all. Nor did the thought of a reduced value please Lance; quite the opposite in fact. His reputation would suffer. So with the offending, crappy article held high above his head for all to see, and to take on board, a warning was issued. If any more dags were to appear dire, life threatening consequences would follow as a matter of course.

Mike, it must be said, on seeing this would roll his eyes heavenwards as though seeking one on one communication with Providence. Reluctantly he then pointed at me; the guilt was exclusively mine. But Mike had skirted the daggy stained pieces, not me. Nil desperandum, to delegate responsibility was a sign of impending greatness.

At 5.30, with that day's shearing done, Captain Marvel would collect his butchering knives and sharpening steel before heading to the killing pens. His roll every day was to kill, skin and gut one, sometimes two 'killers' (wethers) for the team's cook. By the time the carcass(es) had been hung in the meatroom to set overnight, everyone else had completed their showers. Mike's late arrival, however, always ensured all the hot water had long since gone leaving only freezing cold water as an inevitable part of his day. The others had also drunk the first of their two per day issued bottles of beer. Ample time remained for them to meet the strictly controlled, 6.30 pm dinner call.

But, what about our jack of all trades? Faster than a speeding bullet and with song after song bursting forth from his Perry Como like lips he would complete his toiletries, his pre-dinner cocktails, his daily bookwork and still be first to breast the table.

Has there ever been another such as this? Has any thought ever been given to recruiting roustabouts directly from Hale School? How much longer can the wool industry hope to survive without input from another genius?

THE 1953 WOOLYMPIC GAMES.

There were two days of travel between Boodanoo and Hamersley Stations which meant desperately striving to pass nonstop through four towns and a number of standalone pubs in the middle of nowhere. A part of the journey included a half day stopover at Mt Florence for those physically able to play a game of cricket. Much water has flowed under the bridge since then so I'm not 100% sure, but I think Mike captained both teams. He certainly opened both the bowling and the batting for each of the slightly sloshed, fiercely competing groups.

Mt Florence, at that time, had worldwide recognition for its ultra-modern sporting facilities; the sum total – a concrete half pitch located on a claypan in the middle of beyond. It was criss-crossed with precipitous cracks into which a cricket ball could disappear, only to re-emerge streaking out at varying heights like a rocket fired projectile. No matting of course, and a bowler's run up affected by recent rains which had left a whole series of footprints six inches deep that had to be avoided at all costs. For some unknown reason once the cricket ball was in somebody's grip that somebody had one aim and one aim only – to bowl at twice the speed of Ray Lindwall. Mike had no trouble achieving that impossible goal, and at the same time had the brains to watch where he placed his feet, so he didn't break an ankle, arm or neck because of the potholes. With the others, though, that possibility remained ever present.

And the claypan itself had a radius of thirty yards. Beyond that boundary there were clumps of spinifex growing more densely than a twenty bag crop of wheat. It wasn't a case of hitting a six, if the ball was just blocked and not stopped by one of the reluctant fieldsmen it disappeared – no question. The game couldn't start again until that, or another ball was found. Anyway, Mike, as the legend goes, bowled out both teams and remained not out in the batting for both teams as well. The game was drawn. Not bad eh?

By way of explanation, rumour has it that, because the other players were so inept Mike had to bowl to himself and then bat against himself before being convinced that he had played in a first class cricket match.

From Mt Florence to Hamersley was a beautiful four hour drive, even to dispassionate shearing team members travelling on the Grey Ghost. The latter station extended over what seemed to be a huge hidden plateau, completely enclosed within the Hamersley Ranges. To reach the shearing shed and quarters involved cruising (?) on bush tracks, skirting in and out of numerous dry creeks and river beds, with sheer, rocky cliffs rising vertically on either side. This was iron ore country, although, at the time no one realised the magnitude of the deposits. Nor were we aware of how large tracts of this pristine, beautiful, semi-arid country would be violated by mining companies thirty years on.

Right now though, as we made our way to Hamersley Station, we were mesmerised by nature on display. Spectacular, tall growing trees with pure white trunks and brilliant green foliage grew along the banks of creeks and rivers. Away from the shade these provided, the day was blazing hot. Under the shade, by way of contrast, the cool relief was better than a cold beer in a bough shed.

Occasionally along the course of these dry rivers, two or three hundred miles from the Indian Ocean, there were pools with fish measuring up to one foot swimming their utopian day away. More years than not these pools dried up for months, sometimes for two or three years at a time. Where did they come from?

Half way up the sheer, multi-red coloured cliff face small to medium sized trees grew and flourished out of what looked like solid rock. Where did they get their sustenance? And where the hell did their water supply come from?

Every now and again clusters of vivid, unbroken, vast, red patches burst into view. Sturt peas provided a spectacular ground cover to break up the seemingly, never ending profusion of dusty, green spinifex, all with their seed heads rising skywards on long thin stalks, unmoving in the deathly still, suffocatingly hot air.

Artistic tendencies are not readily apparent in shearing team members anywhere, anytime. Nevertheless this collection of rough, tough men could only gaze out in awe at the surrounding inspiring spectacle. Their medicinal bottled beer, an absolute essential for surviving hour after hour of travel in this lonely land, remained unopened right up to the time Hamersley shearing shed came into view.

Not for one moment did anyone think that their sporting competition would continue beyond Mt Florence, but when Mike saw what was to be their quarters for the next two or three weeks, the germ of an idea began to grow in his doubled size, devious brain. Less than fifty yards from the collection of shearing buildings was a hill with the near side ascending upwards into the clouds (less several thousand feet). The gradient, if it wasn't ninety degrees, averaged seventy. There were a number of narrow, gently angled tracks however, which meant the summit could be reached by foot, without the need for grappling hooks, spikes, ropes and so on. Athleticism would suffice for what Mike had in mind.

Modest hero that he was meant that Mike had not previously mentioned his past prowess as an athlete. But for an unfortunate mistake in timing the names of Emil Zatopec, Herb Elliott and Ron Clarke would have been replaced by that of our illustrious warrior. World War 11, occurring when it did, meant he was too young to enlist before the commencement and still too young after the ceasefire, but his peak abilities unfortunately happened to occur during those years with no competition. Be assured however, seven years on our living legend's skill had barely diminished.

What better way to establish what could have been than to issue a challenge – first to the top of the cliff and return would win a case of grog, (twenty four king browns), at Mike's expense. Would you believe, some shearers even gave this proposal some consideration? In fact two of them entered with all the rousies. They had three days to train before the weekend. As an afterthought, Mike, seemingly with some reluctance, intimated that he might give it a dash himself. This totally unbelievable pronouncement didn't actually produce loud laughter, but a loudly expressed consensus was that a woolclasser didn't exist who could reach the top, let alone make it back down to the bottom.

Every shearing team, no matter how it operates has a bookie and with nothing better to do picking the winner of two flies attempting to land on the mouthful of food being rushed to someone's open lips would start a plunge by the least astute, fully unoccupied brains in the team. So for this Woolympic obstacle course there were certainly enough bodies in place to make a wager worthwhile. The betting had Nicko favourite at 2 to 1 on. Then came Billy H, Brucey W and the motley remainder. Mike at 50 to 1 against had no takers. Shearing team bookies, however, are invariably avaricious, and at 100 to 1 against, Mike, ever generous

stepped in with a hesitant ten shillings bet. What a loser! And when he didn't once train prior to the big event his participation was ignored.

On the day, one hour before the take-off, Mike had the temerity to say he felt so good he would give everyone else a fifteen minute start. Now, that by itself should have caused a re-think of the whole situation, but it didn't. Whilst the other contestants were milling around at the starting line, stretching, deep breathing and generally trying to look professional, Mike rolled half a dozen smokes, so he wouldn't have to stop on the way, he said.

Then they were off.

Nicko was one hundred yards in front one hundred yards from the start, Billy H, at the same time, was half way through his first step off the block and Brucey W was sweating profusely before straightening up from his crouched starting position. Mike concentrated on blowing smoke rings. One minute into the race the other competitors were, only now, beginning to realise the enormity of the task about to be undertaken.

Fifteen minutes came and went; still no move by the master. We all had to wait another five minutes before he took off like a rocket. Nicko by this time was half way up, with the other competitors straggling behind like brown's cows; whereas everyone else looked for angled ledges upwards, not so Mike. He made an Edmond Hillary approach, perpendicular, there being no obstacle large enough to halt his progress into the clouds. And was he fast.

Kangaroos and feral goats thought of impeding his progress, but not for long. Within moments they all realised that matching speed was impossible, so rather than being injured under his flying feet they were temporally forced to grow wings, then to fly out in all directions, regardless of what dangers that entailed. Like the famous cartoon character, Roadrunner, Mike had only one speed, somewhere between the speed of sound and light. I know you're all wondering – the first one there and back? Mike of course. And by the time Nicko returned to base he had commenced slowly sipping his second King Brown.

As for the other poor quality competitors, well, they were done like dinners, totally exhausted. They were incredulous, unable to believe what they had just seen was a human feat. Well may

you ask yourselves – was Mike a human being or an alien? Or could all of this be traced back to his Hale School background? Will we ever know?

PS Stewey, the bookie, did pay Mike the 50 pounds owing.

PPS Every attempt has been made to limit the exaggeration.

IS HE A MOUSE OR A MAN?

Mail day. – Misery. Madness. Marvels. Miraculous Moments – all of those things. Every team member, without exception, waited with eager anticipation for the once weekly mail to arrive. No other thought entered anyone's mind that day, as it offered the hope of a letter from a wife, girlfriend or children. And it has to be said hope didn't take up too much time in any team member's day for the best part of that horrendous seven to eight month run.

At Warrawagine the truck with the mail, stores, plus other bits and pieces for the station should have arrived by 11 am. It never did. Half an hour late could be tolerated by Mike, and for an hour afterwards he would be pretty much under control. However, beyond that time he became positively flammable, ready and willing to scorch the surrounding countryside within a hundred mile radius. Even then, if, when the tardy truck did arrive, the mail produced a letter from his love, all would be forgiven and forgotten.

On the other hand – no mail – a terrified hush would descend on every person around the equally terrified mailman. The threat of a Mikeyplosion was very real.

Mind you, everyone else behaved in a similar, somewhat more mellow way. Mail day minimized the monstrous distinction between Mike and the rest of the team. But imagine what life was like for the 'successful', moronic recipients who were out of their cotton pickin' minds with sheer delight. Then think of the rest, who were so bloody depressed, they did what they did without knowing what they were doing.

A good day for Mike saw him prancing around the woolroom like a show dog, with a stupid grin spread all over that aristocratic moosh. Every so often he would give off one of those idiotic, half suppressed chuckles, and strangest of all he could be seen regarding the boardboys with soft, gentle affection. I mean boardboys are like sediment in a sewerage pond, they are beneath shit. As for regarding them with soft, gentle affection, that was proof positive Mike's brain had slipped into holiday mode and no longer functioned in the shearing shed at the required level.

The lovelorn in a sheep station environment are beyond understanding; they would even be incapable of recognizing aliens from a distant planet. Without argument our hero can lay claim

to being a true North West legend. He was, is and will remain a blue blooded, arrogant aristocrat. Yet when he received a letter from his love he would slink off a dozen times a day to read that two page missal, just like any other moron in the team. At the end of that day's shearing he could be seen lying on his unmade bed alternatively rereading the thing, staring unseeingly at the roof, sighing, giggling, and puckering up his lips for an imagined kiss; same after the evening meal.

Before lights out he would tenderly place this letter with those missals previously received. Then he would sleep the sleep of a happy man, completely undisturbed by the loud snores and even louder tinned, green pea induced flatulence of those sub humans in nearby rooms.

That's what happened on good days.

Bad days were something else.

During the mail distribution, which happened to be one of Mike's responsibilities, his eyes slowly changed from bright, glowing and expectant to dull, glazed and lifeless as the prospect of receiving a love letter became less and less likely. When nothing turned up he immediately became one bitter individual, one with neither hope nor purpose; irreversibly gutted. Our fervent hope always – that the next week would right what was wrong. I don't know whether Dale Carnegie (*The Power of Positive Thinking*) ever worked in a shearing team. If he did, that wasn't where he learnt *The Power of Positive Thinking*.

Should the next week produce no love letter then the consequences were dire indeed. Once Mike missed three weeks in a row, and towards the end of that third week he wavered between bottomless despair and towering rage. We all became fearful for our very lives, particularly when, as was our right, we approached him for the necessities of life, cigarette papers, tins of tobacco, Persil, soap and so on; beer of course. You can't go to a shop for these things if those shops are one hundred miles away. Mike was it. His maniacal behaviour though discouraged any approach. Sales dropped to almost nothing. We were deprived of our comforts so it follows, no love letter for our woolclasser/overseer meant indescribable suffering for the entire team.

It's quite understandable that even an icon like Mike could become a little erratic in this loveless situation. Remedies were unavailable, so too were distractions. You could order the

daily newspapers (broadsheet in the 1950's) with the certain knowledge that these would stimulate you no more than a sound sleep. And remember, because of the once weekly mail truck, some news was already up to seven days out of date. Apart from that there were Man and Man Junior magazines, Pix, all monthly publications and a very limited range of paperbacks, including Carter Brown, Phantom books and very little else; certainly no hard covers in the outback. Each and every day, only after nightfall, you could listen to someone's wireless and comprehend the noise issuing forth. Only on the very occasional night was the Test cricket or music was more audible than the static.

Get on the phone? Speak to your loved one? The only phones in existence were in towns – and not all towns at that. Most calls had to be booked half a day ahead through the local exchange, as often as not, unsuccessfully. In any case North West towns were hundreds of miles away. Visits occurred maybe three or four times during the seven to eight month run.

Send a telegram? Sure over the pedal radio so that the entire pastoral station population of the North West knew of your desperate, uncensored plight.

So you can see there was no way Mike could reduce time spent wondering about his wavering love. When not pining he devoted hour after hour writing voluminous love letters to his irresolute love. Not for one moment am I suggesting he resorted to pleading, but it would be interesting to know whether the ex Hale School man of steel, at some stage, gave way to a crumbling heart, wouldn't it? I wonder if any of those screeds have survived the passage of time.

MEDICAL BREAKTHROUGH.

Dengue fever is a terrible, very debilitating disease. It ravaged a ten stand team at Munda in a year when Mike was still a lowly roustabout. Most of the shearers were afflicted. They maintained their resistance had been totally eroded through sheer hard work, something that couldn't happen to others in the team who were a bunch of girls, (A horrible expression used in those days, seemingly without affecting one's human rights). And whilst that may have been true for most, it did not apply to Mike. His time at Hale School had given him a resistance to all diseases known to mankind, other than rabies.

The sick just lay on their beds, aching all over, unable to open their eyes because the pain, even in the semi dark, unfiltered light was beyond unbearable. No soothing sheets and pillowcases, just a dirty, thin, old mattress and pillow. The untreated sick had only their own blankets, unwashed after accumulating dust and grime for six months or so, to provide comfort. Sweat gushed from their bodies. All they could do, every now and again, was to throw thoroughly sodden clothes on the concrete floor next to where they lay, before reaching out in hope for an unwashed, but dry change. Food for all of them held no interest although copious quantities of salt laden, bore water were consumed night and day.

This was the scene, their existence day after day after day for endless weeks on end.

No it wasn't. Would you believe every moronic, useless, unaffected rousie suddenly discovered the presence of a Florence Nightingale gene? Nicko knew beyond doubt if someone rolled a cigarette for them their inertia, nausea, encephalitis, hydrophobia, whatever, would be cured. So a dozen times a day he tried to convince them to start on his sure fire treatment. I mean these blokes were so sick they were barely inhaling or exhaling. The only actively working part of their bodies from which smoke could escape was their dung funnel.

Jock, the penner upper, had an obsession – food. These pitiful; dengue sufferers hadn't eaten for days. Reverse that, he claimed, and all would be well again. So what was on offer? Leather-like mutton, derived from a stag, (a mature ram to have only recently been castrated), a rank, inedible, almost toxic stag was it. Potatoes so old that not one in any of the hessian wheat bags carried green shoots less than two feet long, freshly baked bread with the constituency of

dumplings, and all of these delights were the most appetizing on offer. Not even crap on toast could have tempted this lot.

Enter Mike. He was their saviour. (Of a lesser kind mind you, but a saviour nevertheless). Now most medical practitioners take seven years to qualify, and then more time gaining hands on experience. Not Mike. After one minute of thorough research he knew exactly the medication he needed to prescribe. What's more he was well aware of the healing qualities of natural products. Note – this unfolding drama occurred in the 1950's, forty years before Western medicine even began to realise the significance of nature.

Mike's particular remedy had a sugar cane base – rum. And a medicine glass? Sheer stupidity. No, a pint panniken x two was the measure, and sipping was forbidden.

It goes without saying success was almost instantaneous. The sick slept (query coma), in utter peace for twenty four hours. Another twenty four hours passed before Mike's patients were coherent again and despite urging from him that another dose would cure them altogether, they all refused, claiming perfect health had already been achieved in spite of their cracked and bleeding lips, jet black, ringed, sunken eyes, uncontrollable shaking limbs and blood pressure 220 over 390.

Was there no limit to this brilliant human being? An approach, I understand, has been made to the University of WA recommending 'The Man' for an honorary doctorate of medicine. (I must check to see if this has been bestowed).

ENTREPRENEURIAL STUFF-UP.

Breeding. Class. Superior intellect. All of these distinguishing traits were readily recognised. What we didn't realise, however, was Mike's entrepreneurial potential. Surprisingly a couple of years passed in the wool industry before this became apparent, but in the end nothing could hold it back. Remember we are referring to the mid 1950's. Succulent, fresh vegetables in the Outback were unheard of. There were tinned carrots, tinned beetroot, tinned tomatoes and tinned, flatulence producing, green peas.

Enter dehydrated vegetables, an unbelievable array of market fresh (?) cabbage, cauliflower, parsnips, pumpkin, sweet potato, beans and swedes. In those days that list left not much more that could be added.

Our good health was assured and Mike sold that very suspect promise to Frank Marks, contractor extraordinaire; no more scurvy, boils or barcoo rot. A delicious diet based on this wide ranging choice would ensure absolute happiness and uninterrupted contentment for every shearer lucky enough to have those tantalising titbits on his menu. Nor would each team member be prepared to lose the taste from his mouth following every meal. That meant no beer, not at any shed, not for the entire run, not even when passing through a town. Frank's joy knew no limits. All his management problems were over.

With much gaiety and anticipation the first order was placed, - and the delivery made.

Now, they say you learn from your mistakes, and as far as I'm concerned it's the only one Mike has ever made. In those days, of course, materials available for packaging included cardboard, calico, hessian and paper, definitely no plastic. That would seem OK, but Frank was no slouch, he insisted on a trial run. As a result the order came in part packs from the warehouse, and these arrived wrapped in paper with no description of what was what.

Hale School Mike, the source of all knowledge, happened to be no slouch either. He re-wrapped everything in sheets of newspaper, held together by lucky bands, after carefully noting what was what, (he hoped). He very deliberately placed each bundle into the tucker box for the journey to the first shed. In other words these bundles of anticipated joy were chucked in with

the Holbrooks sauce, Keens curry powder, Nurses corn flour, fresh bakers bread, butter, eggs, polony, cooking salt and many other life sustaining ingredients.

As that first shed, Mooloogool, drew closer the excitement on the Grey Ghost reached fever pitch. But, oh dear, four hundred miles of mainly ungraded, six inch deep corrugated, bone shattering tracks, in a far from dust proof tucker box which was subjected to glass shattering, vibrations and jerks several times a second, had produced an inseparable blend of all but a few ingredients.

Our very ordinary cook did try to follow a recipe, but his first attempt at producing cauliflower cheese was not encouraging. There was general agreement that this tasted like an unknown recipe for apple charlotte which included a combination of brawn, egg custard, olive oil, Holbrooks sauce, baking powder and whatever. Still for the very same meal and the carrot and parsnip mix fared no better, its taste being likened to a butter, egg, vanilla essence, polony and blancmange.

Don't gloss over the difficulties this situation created. There were two. The esophagus stoutly resisted entry of this stuff into the alimentary canal of every team member. In those cases where entry did occur, the other end desperately tried to rid itself of a very horrible, undigested mass.

No second meal ever graced our cook's table. Dehydrated vegetables were unanimously rejected, they became a thing of the past. Even worse, the mess account, shared equally between each team member, rose to a level never previously encountered in Australia. There was no threat to Mike's life, but I firmly believe he gave consideration for the first time to turning his back on his woolclassing destiny.

MADMEN EXPOSED.

The 'Cutout Horrors' commenced not more than five minutes after departing the dry Ozone Hotel in Perth, at the beginning of the shearing year, and this most horrible of all afflictions increased progressively, day by day, for the entire time away. The last shed meant that every team member had endured eight months of unmitigated misery. Every last one of them had developed homicidal tendencies. The most homicidal of all, without any doubt, was Mighty Mike. No one would share a room with him. He had become one mean maniac. Other screaming, gibbering halfwits sought to avoid contact with him at all costs.

Night and day lost its meaning; so too did time. In his saner moments Mike, without equivocation, declared night descended for one reason, to grant him the time needed to wander, he knew not where, and to lust for life's pleasures, all of which were available only in Perth. Sleep became unnecessary, and in any case impossible; so did eating. Whether this dramatic change in lifestyle caused him to appear unexpectedly in odd places at odd times is open to conjecture, but he did and this proved very inconvenient to other completely troppo members of the team. In their more terrified moments, immediately following an unexpected encounter with Mad Mike they likened him to a werewolf with blazing red, laser like eyes, with saliva dripping from bared fangs and with a continuous, demented snarl escaping from his lips. – Hands up if you think I'm exaggerating. – Only slightly.

Call it fate that set this Hale School great on his wool industry path, if you like. Had fate not intervened as it did, then who knows, cuddly Mike and his gentle disposition could well have ended in the kindergarten industry.

The wristwatch was packed away, not to be sighted again until the Grey Ghost hit the outskirts of Perth. It caused too much confusion when our Man could not be convinced that there were only twenty-four hours in a day. Normal time had long since ceased to exist. After thirty odd weeks living a feral like existence, those last two weeks saw everyone poised, ready to take off for Perth like a rocket. Cases had not been unpacked. Swags were only partially unrolled. Dirty washing could now accumulate for the good folk at home, and making a mess – anywhere – was strictly forbidden. There was no time in anyone's programme for cleaning up unnecessarily. Our transport had many volunteers, skilled and unskilled, to check tyre pressures, petrol, sump oil and water levels. A single thought occupied twenty four minds, yes

even Mike's very superior organ. 'Nothing, but nothing would delay the getaway by one second except some of those 'go slow' lily-livered shearers - so what if each of them had already shorn around thirty thousand uncooperative sheep during the last seven months. That didn't entitle them to be exhausted. That totally inappropriate attitude was costing Mike precious hours in Perth, a fact which, like an elephant, he would never forget or forgive. I mean these shearers were dead on their feet, shearing from memory alone, too exhausted to breathe, let alone think. So what? Demented Mike required more effort, so did every other demented non-shearer.

As time passed anger towards any suspected loiterer snowballed. Eventually anger became active dislike. Then in a matter of hours active dislike became pathological hatred and this persisted to the very end of that last shed.

Cleaning the shearing shed, quarters, even the cookhouse had long been completed, more than an hour ago, in fact, and still that bloody useless woolclasser hadn't finished his bookwork. Now they had to wait to be paid; what's more important, getting paid or getting to Perth? Being paid can wait. And worse still, the grog's run out. The Grey Ghost should now be on the road heading south, not hanging around this hell hole. Woolclassers are absolute morons with whom workers have nothing whatsoever in common.

Now this dissertation has become a trifle confusing, hasn't it? Mad Mike in his second year as a rousie, had to temporarily forget his erratic tendencies because he was responsible, under the woolclasser's guidance, for completing all bookwork at the cutout for each shed, and that required total focus. Now he was the one holding things up. Nevertheless, be assured, that maniacal behaviour rested ready to return given the slightest opportunity. Remember, a moment ago pathological hatred was rife throughout the team.

And then:-

"Load up everybody, we're on our way," Billy our boss gave the much anticipated command – the eight month run was over.

What a transformation.

“Mike, I’ll meet you at the Basement bar of the Palace Hotel at 9:00 am sharp on Saturday.

“I’ll bring Edgar, Jack and Rick.”

‘Yeah pal, I’ll be there before the doors open with Bob and Harold. You’ll see Bob’s Vanguard outside the door in William Street.’

I mean they’re still more than twenty four hours from Perth and two minutes ago these bosom buddies hated each other.

The ‘Cutout Horrors’ from the very moment of “We’re on our way” call was a thing of the past.

OFF SEASON HIGHLIGHTS 1

I have always considered Mike a good friend, loyal and true blue. That friendship developed during the off season when we both worked in the wool stores. Our affinity towards each other grew for many reasons, not least of which was that Mike owned a car, and I didn't. This attention grabbing heap of scrap metal went by the adrenalin pulsating name of DKW.

And there were features galore; the most obvious one, I suppose, had to be the gear stick. The gear stick you ask? Not possible. Well keep reading and learn. This famous/notorious gear stick entered the world from the dashboard – near the passenger's window. Double declutching, as a result, was a continual problem. BUT, since the driver had to assume an almost horizontal position just to reach it, passion on certain occasions was possible for Mike, even while driving.

The lesson according to our Hale School hero: - When buying a car don't just look for the obvious. A little lateral thinking can produce benefits like you wouldn't believe.

Every working day during the "off season" I travelled with Mike from Nedlands to Fremantle, and from Fremantle back to Nedlands. Now I knew what constituted a smooth ride. I could peer out the window and observe other vehicles, also using Stirling Highway, which were propelled without any discernible shaking whatsoever. Not us. We appeared to travel the entire eight miles in ten to twenty feet leaps, depending on the speed, (no that's the wrong word). It happened every time we reached twenty mph. Travelling faster was not an option. At the end of each journey I was all shook up. Question; how is it possible for joeys to survive in their mother's pouch when their mode of travel is identical?

There were no traffic lights in those days, but there were hills. On some of them we made the grade, reaching the crest in that DKW at a speed approximating five mph. This caused other road users to bank up in peak hour traffic for some five to six miles. On occasions, though, it must be said, that same perpetual motion machine kangaroo hopped to a sudden, dead stop, leaving Mike no alternative but to freewheel backwards against peak hour, non-forward moving traffic while searching for a side street. No mean feat let me tell you. I have no hesitation in stating, that under these circumstances, I proved to be an absolute coward. I would

cringe down below window level willing myself to become a Trappist monk. No such luck. Nevertheless, for Mike I had nothing but admiration, because from this position, when I turned my head to look in his direction, he always, without exception, reminded me of Errol Flynn, swash buckling, debonair, head out the window, authoritative, almost arrogant, daring any driver behind to impede his backward, downhill progress. None did.

Once safely ensconced in the side street he would then tinker with his beloved DKW. The permanent toolkit, consisting of a screwdriver and a crescent spanner, occasionally enabled us to proceed before twenty four hours had elapsed, or without having to call for a mechanic.

Nor were our excitement filled days in the heap restricted to the working week. The weekends, too, were made for adventure. I remember one weekend heading to North Cottesloe for a swim. Why North Cottesloe? Well according to my detailed and accurate calculations there were always, without exception, between three and four thousand girls on the beach just waiting for a glimpse even, of Mike's gladiator-like body. (Sometimes I found it beneficial to be on the fringe).

This particular Saturday, travelling along Stirling Highway, we'd sped past Bay View Terrace to the foot of the hill rising up to the old Fire Station. The DKW incidentally was purring along like a Formula One racing car. And then, lo and behold, waiting there by the bus stop were two beautiful, statuesque, Marilyn Munroe like girls, complete with beach bag and towel, obviously heading for our destination.

At fifteen mph it usually required not less than one hundred yards to come to a dead halt. For the first time in living memory this DKW burned rubber. It stopped within one yard. I think Mike changed from a forward gear directly into reverse, which he sometimes did when he was in a particularly determined mood.

So there we were, two blokes, two girls and a DKW, a situation just made for romance.

Mike majestically rose from the driver's seat and walked, oh so confidently, around the front of the car. He spent the next fifteen minutes, arrogantly at first, but then plaintively pleading with the girls, telling them they had nothing to worry about. He was an ex Hale School student who had total control over the ex-Albany High School retard sitting in his limousine.

Would you believe they got in?

There's a first time for everything. The unalterable seating arrangements meant for the first time ever I was one up on my loyal, true blue friend, Mike. The DKW you see, sat two people, so those girls had to sit on my knees, one each. Oh those hazy, lazy, crazy days of summer.

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Mike, meanwhile, pranced confidently around the front of the car and majestically re-seated himself. He revved up the powerfully purring racing machine in exactly the same way Stirling Moss and Jack Brabham would sitting in pole position. The start of a lasting relationship had begun. We passed the half way mark up the hill, too. Oh, what a wonderful world.

The first stutter of that Formula One machine, though, introduced an element of doubt to our expectations. The second stutter removed all doubt. The third stutter didn't eventuate. We had stopped dead. Nor was there any encouragement from the starter motor. The engine refused to purr.

Talk wasn't necessary. Without a split second's hesitation Mike was freewheeling backwards. As he did he somehow slammed the gear into reverse, hoping that when he released the clutch the engine would restart; first time no go, second time no go. Third time no go, fourth time, success. Nor were any stripped gears left lying on the road

Mike looked at me, his loyal, true blue friend and without revealing any guilt whatsoever said, "Out. I'll come and pick you up if and when I can."

Well, there's no way I had any intention of leaving the safety of the DKW, not with the embarrassment between my legs. So an almost perfect day turned into a disaster. After a memorable four hundred yard ride in Mike's heap of crap the two Marilyn Munro like girls were the ones who had to disembark.

There's no point in denying our loyal, true blue friendship was strained, and remained so until the appropriate amount of Swan Lager had been consumed.

And believe this if you can; that bloody DKW performed adequately for the rest of the “off season”: no similar stoppages. I have no choice but to conclude that that (censored) vehicle was a catholic car, concerned only for our moral wellbeing.

EXPERIENCE MAKETH THE MAN.

Experience, some philosopher explained, is worth a lifetime at university. He made these observations three thousand years before the birth of Mike, but there's no doubt in my mind his prophesy was centred, fairly and squarely, on our intellectual giant. How could it be otherwise? What other non-divine human being in those thirty centuries has even come close to Mike's accomplishments? James Bond? Certainly not. Clark Gable? No. Mr Magoo? Possibly, but he's the only one.

So how did Mike go about gaining experience for his first love – wool? By a sheer unanticipated fluke, that's how.

Hale School teaching staff, fellow students, gardeners and domestics realised early in the piece that Mike's ability to learn was at least three times faster than the average genius. They, therefore, reluctantly agreed to release him from his stultifying, scholarly duties, confident that nothing on earth could prevent his rise to the very summit of success. So with tributes ringing in his ears he unknowingly headed for his destiny as a jackaroo on an outback sheep station, where he rocketed to the top earning two pounds ten shillings a week and keep.

His quarters consisted of a room next to the kitchen, thus ensuring his wake-up call at 4.30 am was never overlooked. The cook started banging everything that made a noise then, to ensure the 5.30 am breakfast remained strictly on time. Mike, therefore, had the best part of an hour, as he lay in his room, to appreciate his surroundings. The appointments were luxury plus. Take the bed for example, it was a wire based, iron, folda bed. That covers the furniture. Another item of interest – a galvanised, corrugated iron shutter, still on its hinges, but only just. Thought had been given to ventilation in this excessively hot climate. Thousands of rust holes in the tin walls and roof maximised internal air circulation, and provided unrestricted access for centipedes, scorpions, redbacks and millions of midgies, if ever Mike absent mindedly turned on the kerosene fueled lamp after dark. Asleep at 8.00 pm, awake at 4.30 am, no wonder he was never tired before nine o'clock each morning.

And whilst the quarters were not suitable for tourists the lifestyle for Mike was the ultimate. Windmill runs, fencing, mustering, camping out under the stars, blacksmithing, erecting windmills, bagging salt, all of these offered the perfect life for teenage Mike, and provided him

with the perfect opportunity to learn about station management in a way that could only help his future as a living, woolclassing legend.

Driving a Jeep over station tracks was like Rally Australia. Following twisting, turning, two-wheel tracks over deep sand, corrugations, dry creek and river beds, rocky outcrops, through pools of water, at speed was pure adventure itself. Climbing windmill towers to fix a head or rod, scaling down a well to check on a pump, cleaning troughs and tanks, all these jobs were just plain satisfying. During the hotter months, particularly early in the morning or late afternoon, when physical effort was almost bearable, this type of work occurred on a daily basis. If not undertaken consistently, stock losses could be high. So ensuring a reliable water supply became the main purpose in life.

Fencing could kill you on a cold morning. Handling wire and wire strainers with hands that were almost frostbitten caused excruciating pain. Giving in to the extreme discomfort never entered your head. Fencing could kill you on a hot day, too, when everything metal had a temperature around one thousand degrees (estimated). Erupting burn blisters and wire don't mix. Again, a type of perseverance, peculiar to anyone on the land, would be seen day after day after day. Over time this type of work could produce hardened hands, but on a sheep station some days involved handling wool for some reason or another, and wool carried liberal quantities of lanolin. It is axiomatic therefore, that sheep station employees and beauty parlour clients have something in common, and I hope it's restricted to soft hands. One thing is certain, fencing never ceases to be a perennial occupation with more than a hundred miles in need of constant attention on even smallish stations. Flash flooding to fences spanning creeks and river beds, most years, just adds to the constant maintenance being undertaken.

Mustering though, remained the ultimate highlight. 'Speed learning' to ride a horse up to twenty miles a day, for Mike meant one thing; in the initial stages all the skin and hair on the inside of both legs, from backside to ankles, had to go. The chafing that occurs between bum and saddle before rhythm is achieved makes sitting anywhere and on anything unbelievably hard for days on end.

Mike had his own string of horses, their names he insists should be recorded for posterity; Sugardoe, Shadrack, Charlie Boy and Pedong. There, it's been done. Anything less would be less than they deserve.

Mike, totally lacking any experience, started his mustering life on a practice run with four wise, old station hands. Those stupid bastards all got lost, of course it wasn't him, but unbelievably they tried to blame him. He never sighted a single soul in that ten thousand acre paddock beyond the first ten minutes, arriving back at the camp minus any sheep and two hours after the four incompetents. Forget the mob of sheep those smart arses brought in. That was unadulterated luck. Where had they been? Would they continue to make life difficult during the main muster? (You can see how our reticent hero's confidence was growing, even after a week. Never mind, he believed with one hundred percent certainty things would improve. They (the others) couldn't get any worse after all, could they?).

Now, let's deal with Mike's horses. Sugardoe. Slow, old Sugardoe, who without any doubt was much, much smarter than Mike. You could heal him in the ribs all day long in an effort to make him trot and not once would that animal move above a reluctant walk. The only concession that bloody horse made on the job was that he didn't stop to graze quite so often. However, as our cowboy found out later, whenever his mighty steed sighted a mob of sheep it took off like a rocket, leaving Mike half out of the saddle, holding on like grim death. And regardless of what he did with the reins Sugardoe remained in total command. That beast knew what the sheep were going to do and would anticipate any breakaway move before it occurred. Remaining in the saddle became Mike's sole objective, being upright in the saddle was of no consequence. Any unintentional departure from the saddle would have seriously jeopardised his legend status.

Shadrack, on the other hand, stood accused of being better than good. Whilst any un-used energy remained in the tank, obedience was the only focus. Walk, trot, canter, walk, trot, canter around the paddock, for four or five hours at a time, caused no trouble, in fact was accomplished with ease, and what a pleasure to ride. That horse had a gait best likened to riding a motorbike on a bitumen road, smooth as smooth. Shadrack, too, could anticipate every move a mob of sheep was going to make. For that matter most experienced mustering horses could. It's just that they weren't as shitty shrewd as Sugardoe. After a day's work Mike would talk non-stop to Shadrack as he washed away all the horse's sweat and brushed the coat. In return our man was nuzzled continuously, so hard that it became a game they played out for ten to fifteen minutes until both agreeably declared a draw.



Charlie Boy happened to be something else. A pure brumby, he stood no more than twelve hands, with a huge out of proportion head highlighted by a flowing Rip Van Winkle white beard and a small, well-muscled body. He could canter all day and refused to be restricted to a trot, let alone a walk. Charlie Boy and Mike, though, were an odd looking duo. The latter's six feet frame didn't sit so well in the saddle. His boots dangled at ground level and appeared to give his mount an extra couple of legs. Because of Charlie Boy's limitless energy he, of all other horses in the mustering team, was hobbled before being released to graze overnight. In addition a bell hung from his neck. The hobbles limited the distance horses could travel and the sound of the bell pin pointed where they were. Whoever had the horse tailing job before dawn would, without fail, head towards those irregular chimes, knowing that the ever moving Charlie Boy was unwittingly dobbing in his nearby equine peers. Sugardoe, by way of contrast, never ceased being a bastard. He, quite deliberately, refused to move a muscle, leaving the tailer floundering around in the dark, and half-light at sparrowfart, without a clue where to head. The inevitable late start to the muster pleased no one. Walk, trot, canter didn't apply to Charlie Boy. For eight hours he cantered and pig rooted his way around the paddocks.

Pedong though, was the ultimate, beautiful, sixteen hand, gelded, bay racehorse, all rippling muscle and so very beautiful. Mike had the distinct impression that between horse and rider, Pedong, like Sugardoe, thought the four legged mammal had a far higher intelligence.

The daily test began every morning whilst saddling up. That exceedingly clever horse, gazing directly into your trusting eyes, could blow out its belly, even without seeming to. Tightening the girth strap to stop the saddle from slipping with Mike on board was a contest of gladiator-like proportions. As for mounting, Pedong would always allow the left foot to be placed in the stirrup, but from that point on the contest began. Immediately this magnificent animal would back off, then side step, then trot forward a few steps with Mike holding on to the saddle for dear life, hopping around on one leg, all the time waiting for a chance to swing the other bloody leg over the horse's back. After five minutes of increasing frustration, Pedong made a choice, 'let the idiot mount.' That just happened to be the prelude to the next chapter. The thoroughbred began to prance around as though lining up at the starting barrier, then a pig root or two coupled with a four legged prop. That sort of jerking around before dawn had properly broken, and whilst the porridge and powdered milk breakfast still had some distance to travel on its way down to the stomach, produced a seriously, deleterious effect on Mike's humour; from then on though, nothing but bliss. Pedong wouldn't trot. He cantered or galloped only, giving an armchair ride to the Hale School dynamo.

Mustering wasn't just a case of scouring the distance for a sighting of sheep. Mike did his best to make out like an aboriginal tracker. He soon learnt to recognise the difference between old and new hoof marks. As time went by he became increasingly familiar with other tracks, too, kangaroo, emu, fox, snake, lizard, bungarra and so on, even to the point of distinguishing between individuals within the species. Droppings were another clue in the search for sheep. Any moist excrement (shit) that had been passed inside the last hour required more attention to searching the near vicinity.



Mike, the botanist, learned about *Spinifex* just through observation. He identified twenty one species on the station in a matter of weeks, and associated each one with a certain soil type, so he became a sort of geologist, too.

No joking, Mike, so he said, had at this point become an expert on everything. During mustering and while on windmill runs there was time to take in all the subtle differences in flora and fauna, and how the changes occurred from season to season. Living close to nature opened up an entirely new world for him. The more you saw the more you learned, and the more fascinating the surrounding eco-system became. Station life really was a learning experience like no other.

Straggler mustering for sheep not found in time for the main shearing made life even better, because they were fewer in number than in the previous, main muster, life atop the saddle allowed greater scope for Mike to cogitate and enjoy the surrounding tranquility. Tranquility, did I say? How's this for a scenario? 'Oops, over there – two ewes, two weaners and one lamb. I'll head them over towards the centreman.' (Whose job, incidentally, was to turn the sheep into the wind after collecting them from all the other musters, and head them towards the last fence. Here they would be concentrated into a mob so that the mustering team would drive

them through the gate which placed them in a paddock closer to the shearing shed). Easy, eh? Well don't let anyone tell you sheep are dumb. They're not. They're bloody smart. So let's get back to the two ewes, two weaners and one lamb. Mike and Sugar, his mount, knew exactly what to expect. Sure enough, after being driven no more than one hundred yards, one ewe went that way, the other ewe went in the opposite direction whilst the two totally mad weaners went in a hundred different directions. The lamb stopped dead and stayed there, unmoving. Try driving them where you want them to go under these circumstances.

Nevertheless situations like this created a legend out of Miraculous Mike, which is still spoken of with awe in these parts. There has only ever been one person, accepted without qualification, as the undisputed best fenceman in the universe. Yep – Mike. His constant five hundred decibel conversations with co-musterers and small mobs of uncooperative sheep meant that his whereabouts was always known, not only by his fellow musterers, but also by other mustering teams on adjoining stations fifty to one hundred miles away.

On one particular occasion Mike and others were straggler mustering a paddock furthest removed from the shearing shed. It was known as 'open country', or land belonging to no one. With the benefit of hindsight he realised this was bull. A much more likely scenario would surely have been that they had mustered a remotely located paddock belonging to an adjoining station. So sheep rustling can now appear on Mike's CV. Anyway by the end of that day one hundred and ten woollies had been gathered together. Driving a mob this size through all the in-between paddocks to the shearing shed would be slow and tedious. Bring the shearing shed to the sheep. That was the obvious solution.

As it turned out this introduced Mike to his first, really up close, hands on contact with the wool industry. It was 'luv' from the very beginning.

The stragglers were herded into a temporary yard as the station manager and one other jackaroo left in the ute to bring back the shearing shed.

Mike and the remaining musterers sat on the red ground in the shade provided by their horses. Trees and scrub were nonexistent in the immediate vicinity, consequently there were no other shade options. This left two or three hours to fill in near the Southern Cross windmill, in the blazing sun, before the return of the removalists with said shed. Mike looked around through

the clearly visible heat haze that rose up from the ground like thick, grey smoke. Closer to the horizon this haze turn into what appeared to be simmering lakes of boiling hot water. There the sheep rustlers sat, having a ball for the full three hours.

The ute re-emerged through the haze without the shearing shed (of course), nor was there any portable shearing plant. Instead a thirty by thirty feet ground sheet and five hessian wool packs were off-loaded, nothing else apart from a broom and two blade shears, one of which Mike gladly accepted. Although he had never used blades before he had briefly seen a conventional handpiece being handled and because of his lightning fast brain had noted the various holding positions applied during the shearing process. What could be more logical then for him than to shear alongside the seasoned manager?

The only suitable level spot for the ground sheet was twenty feet from the temporary holding yard. As a result each sheep had to be lifted holus bolus and then carried that distance so the powder fine red dust didn't pollute the wool and so lessen its value. With wool selling at prices not far short of a pound a pound the effort expended was well worthwhile. Ask Mike. He estimated each six to seven pound fleece would drop half its value, if treated otherwise. Needless to say the blazing one hundred and twenty degree sun, the struggling sheep, the thick red dust all caused our hero's stress and blood pressure levels to rise alarmingly.

Even in a shaded, sheltered shed shearers sweat like crazy. In the open, under the unrelenting, scorching sun only the very occasional cockeye-bob (willy-willy) causes momentary air movement and some miniscule relief for the labourers. Mike however, as he toiled away in these merciless conditions, enjoyed the experience. He revelled in it, he claimed. Getting used to the blades required resoluteness beyond the norm, but despite all the difficulties he continued to improve for as long as the blades remained sharp. Three sheep to one was his advantage, so he said. Mind you, the water he consumed from his water bag disappeared three times as fast too. Sweat poured from his brow like a running tap. His clothes were as wet as if they had just been lifted from a tub of water and his boots overflowed with each step taken.

Nevertheless Mike loved the experience. In this Clayton's shearing shed he was the 'gun'. Destiny in the wool industry had just been determined.

TARZAN WITHOUT THE JUNGLE.

Mike's camping experiences continued unabated during his frequent mustering, fencing and well sinking excursions. But early in the piece, as a first timer, the general consensus was that he had come from another planet armed with a complete knowledge of all there was to know about everything.

For example, finding the softest piece of ground for his swag never ceased to be the first priority. No problem when camping in a dry river bed, but elsewhere could be another matter altogether. Can you imagine Mike co-existing with a rock hard claypan, or a surface covered with a multitude of small and not so small stones? No way. Where could he gouge out a hollow for his hip in these circumstances? This is when those suspicions about an earlier life arose. It seemed as though instinct alone caused him to search for the largest clump of spinifex he could find. After tying a rope around the base and the other end to the Grey Ghost he pulled it from the ground holus bolus. Upending it, then with the spiny leaves pointing down, he could throw his swag across the now exposed base. No inner spring mattress could ever provide such comfort.

And how did Mike know to make up the swag with feet pointing in to the prevailing wind? No one told him. Yet he knew that no cool breeze could enter and disturb a good night's sleep through the opening around his shoulders. That's when a swag was a real swag, a canvas groundsheet and two or three blankets, which had to be made and rolled up each day for a number of reasons let me tell you, not least of which was to ensure the entry of death adders, scorpions and a host of other creepy crawlies were precluded from sharing Mike's boudoir. A pillow? Nuh. A rolled up jumper raised his head off the ground sufficiently to eliminate all risk of a broken neck.

Mustering days, as it happened, were spent not too far from Marble Bar. Despite this town's hot reputation, some mornings in winter can produce temperatures almost down to freezing. Mike wasn't really a morning person, but when it was that bloody cold he chose to be up first, to light the campfire. This caused amazement amongst others in the team who, for some reason, thought Mike invariably expected breakfast in bed, even in a mustering camp.

The tucker box assumed the utmost importance at the very beginning of a muster, or when Peter (the boss) returned from the homestead after a quick food replenishment trip. For a brief period only, in this circumstance, did the repository for food hold a few packets of biscuits and some tins of almost edible main meals, such as braise and vegetables, Irish stew and pork sausages and crap. The very foolhardy may have been tempted to look at the contents before Mike, but his right to first choice remained inviolate. Peter must have been of the firm opinion that musterers were more alert and produced better results if they were kept permanently starving. Those biscuits never lasted beyond one day. Bread, baked at the homestead was expected to fill stomachs for three days, never - one day – maximum. From then on some would-be chef supplied damper ad infinitum, which, only when smothered with jam or honey became consumable. Those tins and jars too, were emptied well before the time came to shift camp and resupply the tucker box.

An empty tucker box became a challenge, never the end of the world. When scarce food meant actually starving to death a four gallon (clean) kerosene tin was half filled with water, placed over a fire, and the two hindquarters of a kid were added. (I hope it's not necessary to explain that this kid was of the goat variety). And that provided a very pleasant variation to the endless tinned meals, which were standard fare. Campie, Mike's least favourite gourmet delight, usually blessed his midday meal and had to be eaten on horseback whilst riding around the paddock. Extreme hunger at this time ensured the delicacy, consumed with a hunk of damper, was more welcome than a night out at the local bloodhouse.

Washing yourself and your dishes required a degree in science. Mike passed with honours. The others, though, had problems. Our Hale School hero stood naked next to a water tank and with an empty Sunshine powdered milk tin proceeded to tip the icy contents over himself. No problem even up to midafternoon. Anyone up to that time could kid themselves that some winter warmth remained in the freezing fluid. Any later, the conditions cooled off markedly, both water and the enveloping atmosphere, stirred up by a biting east wind. Only legends stood up to the test. Others went unwashed.

Every individual in the camp had his own set of eating utensils. Good health was of the utmost concern, apparently only to Mike. Why else would the riffraff not wash their plates, knives, forks and pannikins from the first day to the last, when it was time to move on to the next camp. Hardened remnants of porridge mixed with Irish stew didn't even raise an eyebrow. While

these peasants, after the meal, were grouped around the campfire smoking their quirleys Mike was up to his elbows in hygiene. To begin – sand, nothing better than river sand, which for the last ten thousand years had been harbouring kangaroo dung. Then, with the hard stuff scrapped off he would reach for the dregs left in the tea billy and use that to rinse away the residual matter from his all-purpose plate. There the washup was done – almost. All that remained entailed hiding the sparkling gear from the jealous, avaricious mob. Where else but wrapped in his jumper hidden in his swag. Here it would be under his complete control, collecting dandruff and superior bred mites (as distinct from lice).

The funny thing about all of this is that Mike could not remember another phase in his life when he had ever been healthier.

And how did these experiences, just described, help Mike with his chosen career?

I don't know for sure. Maybe it happened when he was seventy feet underground cleaning out the bottom of Wylies well. Down there it's bloody dark and every few seconds you keep gazing up to make sure the daylight above is still there. There's a circle of blue sky way in the distance alright, but in between that circle of light above and Mike below, a ten gallon bucket filled with dirt and rocks swings perilously from side to side as it's hauled by windlass to the top. The well had a diameter of three feet so dodging anything, particularly the bucket, if it happened to fall would create a problem. Perhaps that's when our 'would be wool man' saw where his future lay a little more clearly.

Or could it have been in the blacksmith's shop? All mechanical and windmill repairs took place there, and sometimes someone with an intellect was needed to hammer out an item not carried in stock, possibly a bolt or a gate hinge. Mike, naturally, became an artist at the forge. On the odd occasion, however, he forgot to use tongs to handle the red hot metal as he made to shape it on the anvil. Then, when that unhappily occurred, there was a mighty scream and vivid descriptions not normally associated with blacksmith shops, anvils, hammers, tongs or red hot metal. Perhaps at times like these, he saw destiny's path heading away from hot objects to something soft and cool, wool for example.

Of course there are other possibilities. Why the hell sheep were partial to salt fell way beyond Mike's comprehension. But they loved it, and every so often half drums of the stuff had to be

placed near water troughs for sheep to lick. So what? That's no problem. No, but getting the salt certainly was. Unfortunately some very, very salty salt lakes were located less than one and a half hours drive away. Our man, after several hours of intense persuasion, reluctantly became convinced that a spade, several bags and the empty tray on a jeep would enable him to supply every watering point on the station. So, with misgivings aplenty, he set off to complete a very simple task.

Finding the ideal loading spot presented no problem. Pure white salt stretched away into the distance as far as the eye could see. The first minor complication arose when it became obvious to Mike that for fifty yards from the shoreline the salt was less than one quarter of an inch thick. You'd be shovelling for years to fill one bag. Off came the boots so he could wade out to the thick stuff. Cunningly concealed under that layer of the salt was the most concentrated brine in the world, and before ten minutes had elapsed he had cause to examine his legs to see why they were stinging. Blood, gushing blood, flowed from cracks in his skin, opened up by the most concentrated brine in the world. And he still hadn't filled one bag.

"I could be here until next week," Mike thought, so he shovelled like mad and in less than three minutes had filled the bag. Complications, though, continued to arise. Dry salt is heavy enough, when its wet the weight doubles. Try as he might Mike couldn't lift that vividly described bag on to his shoulders. With his Hale School background to the fore it was axiomatic for him to practice all undertakings with science, so he tipped half out. Problem solved. Almost. Not long after lifting the bag on to his shoulders he became aware of blood streaming down his back. After carrying four bags to the jeep, shoulders, back and chest were bleeding in proportion to his now bloodless legs. As the thought occurred to him that death through hemorrhaging was inevitable, another thought flashed through his awesome brain. This was not what a sane man does for a living. Bugger the salt, the pastoral sheep industry's loss became the wool industry's gain; no question, no second thoughts, but thanks for the memory.



OFF SEASON HIGHLIGHTS II

Christmas Eve each year in the wool stores was the one day of good cheer. After spending eight months up North and then having to endure the ‘off season’ standing at a wool table for up to twelve hours, five days a week, the need for good cheer became a top priority.

Jowetts Woolbuyers Store had been renowned since time immemorial for the feast they provided their staff on Christmas Eve. Crayfish, prawns, party pies, sausage rolls, savoury eggs, you name it, your favourite over the top, calorie rich, cholesterol saturated food was there, displayed on the trestle table to tempt you beyond endurance.

For some reason a relatively junior (in years) Mike had assumed total control over the catering. The more senior men present, including the boss, had instinctively recognised his ‘all round’ talent.

As midafternoon approached and the gluttonising time drew near, two trucks pulled into a couple of loading bays. One, joy of joys, off loaded our grog, two five gallon kegs, two boxes of glasses and some jugs. The other truck had a load of sheep skins, which, damn and blast, at this time of the afternoon, on this particular day, had to be hung out to dry upstairs, over rows of timber beams. The least senior slaves, excluding Mike, had no choice; don’t reappear until that task is done.

Nothing funny or strange had happened to this point have you noticed? With Mike present at all times that in itself was almost reason enough to hold a judicial enquiry.

Five hundred skins have never been hung faster.

Mike, meanwhile, had completed his splendid food arrangement and had removed all cloth covers. The several thousand flies wouldn’t stand a chance once the workers were told to eat. But, sure enough, there was a delay. The master of ceremonies wanted to say a few words. I mean this Christmas feast had nothing to do with him. It was a Jowett affair. Maybe Mike wanted practice for when he became President of the Universe.

Now, with our hunger barely under control, mutinous thoughts were starting to occur, however not one person had the courage to ignore ‘the man’s’ authoritative presence. Oh no, our gluttony was put on hold, and from his position standing on the trestle table Mike commenced his address to us peons.

The sad part was, when only mid-way through his first sentence, without having even begun to make a point, he saw looks of horror appear on all the faces of those there assembled, What? How? Why? He turned and ---! Only his Hale School background prevented him, when seeing what he saw, from erupting into an outburst of splendid expletives. Instead he turned the colour of aged parchment, and began to tremble uncontrollably. He did, however, stop short of losing control of bodily functions.

What?

There, dropping through cracks in the floor above, were thousands upon thousands of yellow/white cylindrical bodies; maggots, bloody maggots, from the sheep skins that had just been hung out. And where were the bloody maggots falling? Right on our yet to be sampled feast. They covered our crayfish, prawns, party pies, sausage rolls, savoury eggs and worst of all, they half-filled those glasses from which we were to consume our grog.

Everyone at that function had spent time in shearing teams up North. We all had stomachs that were hardened to questionable cuisine. Not one of us, however, even attempted to make a start on the food so temptingly displayed. (Don’t worry about the grog being wasted. That didn’t happen).

No, Mike never completed his speech, nor would he, the caterer in charge accept the blame for positioning the trestle tables under the one spot where maggots could fall through. As I’ve said before Mike does not make mistakes, but his catering days never extended beyond December 1953.

A PROPHET IN THE MAKING.

You won't know this, but Mike has, over many years, enjoyed legend status in the North West of Western Australia. Dawn Fraser, Don Bradman, Trudie Queen of the Desert – all minnows – midgets by comparison. It began in 1955. Mike, mid-way through the run, had been called upon to take up shearing, to help out during an emergency. And let me tell you, he was no ordinary shearer. He happened to be a shearer with flair. There are dozens of examples of this but I intend to concentrate on three.

When Mike removed the belly wool he would, without exception, remove the pizzles from rams. He couldn't help himself. You see, since he was a little fella he had this thing about the need to abstain from s-e-x. He even confided in me he had given serious consideration to becoming a celibate monk at one time in his life. And what was good for man was good for beast. No male of any species should be encouraged.

Second example occurred with ewes. When he shored around the inside of their hind legs he would, ever so gently touch the teats with handpiece. No, it wasn't a threat, but a means of discouraging the female of the species from being filthy. 'Purity of mind was paramount', he said.

We all know lambing in Spinifex country in later years rarely exceeded 30%. In the years and on stations following Shearer Mike, lambing barely made 5%, despite the fact there had never been a succession of better seasons – ever. For example, 1955, 56, 57 to the present time remains the only years when rain fell, leaving behind in sheep tablet form pure protein, vitamins and minerals. Theoretically and practically, lambing should have been not less than 130%.

History records that an economic downturn caused the demise of the wool industry in these parts. Definitely not true. That man amongst men, with a mind so pure, single handedly changed the course of history. He, and his handpiece alone has that honour.

And whilst changing the course of history is significant in its own right, would you believe that is not Mike's main claim to fame in this neck of the woods.

I told you previously he was a shearer with flair. Every other shearer on this planet, when doing the blow with his handpiece up the neck tried to make that blow in one movement. Not Mike.

He would always finish with a few little flourishes, the end result of which was that on every sheep he shorn he removed (applying surgical accuracy) the bottom lip, so exposing all the top teeth. As they left the shed you could tell each animal was delighted with its lot by the wide open, happy smile spread over its features. They were as happy as pigs in poop.

So what, you ask?

Well some bigwig stopping at Roy Hill Station didn't initially realise the significance either, but even now, at the age of one hundred and twenty and having had Alzheimers for sixty years he still has the absolute ingenuity of this Shearer Mike act indelibly imprinted on his brain.

This extremely reliable source happened to mention the smiling phenomenon to a couple of Department of Agriculture blokes. They arranged to accompany the Roy Hill overseer around the property. The further they went the more excited they became. "Jesse, these smiling sheep, are they a new breed? Do they produce more wool? Why are they so happy?"

BINGO. Jesse saw the hidden potential at once. A few well placed advertisements and within two weeks Roy Hill Station was deluged with visitors from around the world, all of them there for one purpose and one purpose only, to actually see these smiling sheep. Mike's smiling sheep remember.

And so as night follows day it proves beyond a shadow of doubt, Mike is the forefather of the tourist industry in this remarkable State of ours. After destroying the fecundity of our sheep, and years before anyone else knew there was a problem, our Hale School icon saw the need to replace one failing industry with one that could only grow.

John Forrest, Paddy Hannan and C.Y. O'Connor have a place in Western Australia's history. Whatever you do don't forget our man, Mike.

POST BALLROOM ANTICS.

Of course it hadn't happened during that brief period in my life as a loppie and when I shored sheep for a living. As such, I, in keeping with every other team member below a woolclasser, would have thrown three blue singlets, two pairs of jeans, a pair of moccasins and one single, white, nylon, drip-dry, non-iron shirt into a battered case. As a first time woolclasser entitled to respectful respect from all team members, though, I had automatically packed a tuxedo, a selection of cravats, several pairs of Italian leather shoes, dress shirts for every day of the month and my valet.

And this shed? Yes – Mulga Downs. Yes, the team's quarters were twelve miles from the town of Wittenoom. Yes, the Wittenoom Ball was being held on the second Saturday after shearing commenced, and yes, in my first year as a woolclasser I no more wanted to class in a North West shed located twelve miles from a pub than I wanted to share my quarters with a boardboy.

But, and I'm telling you the absolute truth, neither Mike nor his perpetually bone dry, thirsty, fellow shearers ever once threw down their handpieces at the end of the day to jump into a car for an evening's cultured boozing at the hotel bar – cultured as you would expect from an ex Hale School student and his friends.

Oh, what a boon to a first year woolclasser. Mike my friend was determined to ease me through the stress of overseeing a group of lonely, angry, miserable, desperately bored men.

Like bloody hell, the bastard was setting me up.

Even someone with half a brain would have known something decidedly strange was in progress when the shearing part of the team didn't once come and coerce or threaten me in an attempt to score more grog than the daily ration of two bottles. I didn't know or even suspect, though. My trust in my friend Mike, at that stage, had no limit

Only on the Saturday of the ball did I even begin to have a modicum of suspicion that something didn't ring true. And for very good reason, Mike could be seen standing at the woodpile with an axe in his hands. He was chopping wood. He was lighting a fire under the forty four gallon drum needed to obtain hot water. That job belonged exclusively to a loppie

(shedhand). Even when he was a loppie Mike never stood by a woodpile. Nor did he ever hold an axe in his hands, or chop wood. Ex Hale School students just don't involve themselves in that kind of thing.

My suspicion remained no longer a modicum.

So I decided to watch him more closely to see if this strange behaviour persisted. And it did. He filled the tub with hot water. Could it be? Yes it could. Mike had commenced washing his clothes. Not his entire wardrobe surely? Lesser beings were paid to do that sort of thing. But this giant among men had actually thrown three blue singlets, two pairs of jeans and a single, white, nylon, drip dry, non-iron shirt into that tub.

Whilst these were being scientifically soaked using half a packet of Persil, he picked up his moccasins and carefully removed all the dags. (Dags are small clusters of wool mixed with sheep shit, sweat and dirt that have to be separated from the clean fleece. They can stick to anything at all more efficiently than Tarzans Grip). Moccasins, even when new and completely shine-less, soon become encrusted with the above, plus yolk grease from the wool. A shine? Impossible. Not for Mike though, his rubbing produced a blinding glow.

Now I'm only half stupid. By this time I knew Mike wasn't planning to play poker in the cookhouse after dinner, but what?

Midway through the afternoon it dawned on me that his actions were more in line with someone preparing for a very important function, someone who intended to be impeccably attired. His preparation could not have been more meticulous. He carefully selected the least dirty of the three, now dry, blue singlets. Both jeans hadn't made it past the soaking stage. In Mike's world it was a well-known fact that rubbing clothes during the washing process only wore materials out. Undiluted wool yolk, therefore, remained in place in the jeans. These, it can be said, over the months of shearing, had adopted a uniform red colour with no blue threads in sight. Their all-over, thick, cardboard-like rigidity, too, had been retained. Dancing at any ball, if contemplated, would have to be done without bending anything from the waist down.

Final selection - the single, white, nylon, drip dry, non-iron shirt – absolutely immaculate, apart from food and grease stains down the front.

So the first stage of preparation had been completed; now for the planning.

Because of past experience Mike knew the end result of a cultured night's boozing was that he would fall asleep in his room the instant his head hit the pillow. Equally certain, he also knew he would wake up midway through the night with a raging thirst. No problem, he filled his pannikin with crystal clear water and placed it on an upturned, empty beer crate at the head of his bed. Forward planning had been completed. Now to finalise the presentation. Proper preparation maketh the man.

Careful consideration produced the thought that a shower was probably necessary, then a shave. Mulga Downs could only be described as having typical shearer's quarters. The shower room cum ablution block had no mirrors, no hand basin, just taps and now, because of Mike's half hour shower, no hot water. How could he complete his toiletries? Firstly, would he bother? For the Wittenoom Ball, yep, he probably should. He grabbed his roommate's pannikin and filled that shining receptacle from the cook's kettle. Since his own blunt razor ceased cutting whiskers months ago he had had the foresight to grab Billy's razor as well. Racing back from the cookhouse to his room enabled Mike to whip up a lather and start shaving.

The borrowed razor wasn't all that sharp either, but the impression gained from his fellow ballroom dancers suggested very forcibly that the time to take off had well and truly passed. As he ran at full speed back to his room he made sure most of the week's supply of bristles, soap, skin and blood went into Billy's pannikin. Then a quick look in the hand mirror – nothing could spoil those aristocratic features – and they were off in a cloud of red dust.

Seventeen hours later, at 10 am, the entire stupefied team, except me, was awakened from its deep, entertainment induced sleep by an ungodly, blood curdling, ex Hale School student type scream. The five hundred decibel soul piercing cry produced unadulterated fear in each team member, but instinctive loyalty to our mate saw us rushing towards the sound – Mike's room.

He, of course, in appearance was still puce (flea colour, purple/brown – by courtesy of the Oxford Dictionary), a horribly horrible sight, drooling profusely, manic eyes wide open, staring a nothing apparent to others of this world, and gibbering uncontrollably. For a desperately needed explanation we turned to his roommate, the kind and compassionate Billy Baxter.

“The stupid bastard went to bed, woke up as he knew he would, had a satisfying drink to quench his alcohol induced thirst and then passed out until ten minutes ago. He reached out for another drink only to discover his midnight satisfaction had been achieved by consuming the contents of my mug - whiskers, skin, blood, shaving scum and soap. I possibly aggravated the situation when I woke up first and saw all the dags he’d removed from his moccasins yesterday, still on the floor. I thought a lesson in tidiness was called for. Some of them I carefully placed into my almost empty pannikin to produce a stew-like mixture. For all Mike knew that was the drink he enjoyed so much last night. Could it have been this which caused him to take a turn, do you think?”

So, when Mike’s destiny is fulfilled and he tells you about dining on caviar with the Queen, you would be quite in order to remind him of the time when his diet had more to do with dags.

MATERNAL INSTINCTS.

In the 1950's a spade was a spade. Vermin were vermin. Kangaroos were vermin, their numbers so great, and naturally growing feed so scarce, that the sheep carrying capacity on each station was probably halved. Wool production and hence income was correspondingly reduced. Rifles had become commonplace throughout pastoral areas to be used on vermin, not only kangaroos. Watering troughs located every four or five miles apart on station country had caused an explosion in 'roo numbers way beyond those applying in a naturally occurring environment.

Shearing teams too, more often than not, carried two or three rifles. Death to anyone spending time up North was encountered almost every day. Dingos killed sheep, sheep died of thirst, or when too weak to resist had their eyes pecked out by crows, before dying. Roos and emus trapped their own legs in fence wires as they tried to burst through from one side to the other. A slow horrible death ensued. Droughts, cyclones and flash floods wiped out thousands upon thousands of animals and birds, instantly, if they were in luck. Death was accepted. You just moved on.

Hard hearted Mike was no different in this regard, or so we thought. No stranger to kangaroo shoots, he took pleasure in a good, well aimed shot as much as anyone.

One weekend, whilst at Doolgunna Station, three or four roos had been shot, including a mother with a joey in her pouch. Just to show how contrary shearers can be, having killed the 'roo with no qualms at all, they became absolutely passionate about saving the joey. This, however, required more nursing skill than was collectively available in the team.

Mike wasn't in the team. He was a woolclasser – the enemy. But he had brains, so hope existed after all.

A sugar bag scientifically slit half way from the top to the bottom, with some wool and an old shirt stuffed inside hung from the door knob. What could possibly be a better alternative to the mother's pouch? Anyway the joey accepted this as its very own. That was the easy part. Mike alone knew that to survive the joey needed sustenance. Probably the one thing our Hale School hero couldn't produce himself was mothering milk, so where the hell did that leave him? Sunshine powdered milk, of course, and he even read the directions. One heaped tablespoon to

a pint of water, and stir. What the blazes was a tablespoon? Could a soup ladle be close enough? Yep, with another half measure for fortification.

The resultant mix did not have the constituency of wet concrete, nor did it have the constituency of milk, sort of in between. Regardless instructions had been followed to the letter, and the manufacturers obviously knew what they were about.

Only at that point did Mike's maternal instinct slip into gear. He nursed the little joey as if it were a baby, lifted the whisky bottle now filled with blood temperature milk (?) to its lips and the little darling sucked away on the valve rubber teat as if nothing else had ever existed. Boy oh boy was it thirsty. Twice during the night Mike arose from a deep sleep to repeat the process. For him to leave his bed during hours set aside for sleep was unheard of. It must have been those maternal instincts in overdrive.

At breakfast, however, our little orphan displayed considerably less interest in milk (?) and everything else for that matter. Never mind Mike would top his now beloved joey up at morning smoko. For him to leave the shed at morning smoko created history too. Any team member absent at smoko could kiss goodbye to a possible edible component of the morning horrors sent down to the shed by the butchers hook (cook). Even so, whatever food (?) had passed team member's lips required the remaining fifteen minutes before the next two hour run started to focus on chewing the bloody stuff. Perhaps that sacrifice by Mike wasn't so huge after all.

He returned to the wool room five minutes late, concern spread over his face. The joey's condition had deteriorated markedly. It was now listless and refusing to drink. Nor did the position improve at lunch or afternoon smoko. In fact the prognosis by this time could not have been more serious.

The outcome? – Inevitable death.

To Mike though, not without one hell of a fight. He had no drugs, no veterinary instruments and no clues, but it's a well-known fact that brandy has medicinal properties, so I suppose the joey died happy.

The effect on Mike was devastating. Those of us who had known him for some time were convinced he had no heart. The theory rampant among his peers was that his constantly moving vocal chords provided the energy needed to pump blood through his body. We were wrong. He definitely has a heart, as we discovered from his genuine grieving when he insisted that the joey's body lie in state for three days.

PAIN, PERSEVERENCE AND POPPYCOCK.

Courage? No question. Contest? With Mike there was no contest. Who the hell could compete with him anyway? Pain? Unbelievable pain? I'm convinced you could undertake heart replacement surgery on Mike without anaesthetic and he wouldn't flinch, wouldn't utter a sound, in fact, during the operation he would be quite capable of providing the surgeon with any necessary assistance. He could even assume the role of head surgeon should the need arise. His pain tolerance was amazing.

1954 is a year Mike, the shedhand, would prefer to forget. Sick shearers were dropping out of Lance's ten stand team like nine pins. Dengue fever. The 'Man' had been called upon to perform a duty, which was abhorrent to him, under any circumstance. Could he please take over one of the sick shearer's pen? His esteemed bosses, Lance and Frank, would be forever grateful.

Another shedhand 'Bill' also shedhanding at Munda at the time also succumbed to this request. He travelled to Corunna Downs Station to develop his shearing technique, whilst one of that team's seasoned shearers transferred over to Munda, where Mike had begun raising a daily sweat. Many will find what I have to say next beyond belief. But why would I lie? Within a month Bill's daily tally had exceeded one hundred shorn sheep. Mike's tally during that time, as hard as he tried, could not pass eighty over the shearing board. For some strange reason this variation caused Bill to develop an ego, and he had the temerity to challenge his peer (?) to a contest when they linked up at the next shed, Roy Hill.

No one had ever thought to question Mike's extremely elevated position in the world before, but this difference between the two was a once in a lifetime opportunity for the whole team to bring him back to their level. Mike, though, had qualities these morons had never heard of. He exuded self-confidence, had unlimited nous, infinite ingenuity, an IQ beyond the maximum and an inherent shrewdness way beyond shitty.

Roy Hill, like Munda, produced woolly sheep as big as bullocks. Fleece weight averaged somewhere between twelve to one hundred pounds (shearer's estimate). Corunna Downs, on the other hand, was renowned throughout the length and breadth of this land for running sheep with no wool on their legs, none around their head, countless bare bellies and an average fleece

weight of less than six pounds. Work it out for yourself, any mug could shear one hundred sheep at Corunna. As it so happened, the thought occurred to Mike, there might be some money to be made out of all this.

With a very cunning plan uppermost in his mind, he continued to struggle to shear around the seventy to eighty at Munda; Bill during the same period shore as high as one hundred and twenty.

When the time came for both teams to join up at Roy Hill the odds were one hundred to one against Mike shearing the higher tally. The only ones to lay a bet supporting Mike, were Mike himself and Lance, despite and because of the odds.

Monday morning, 7-30 am. The atmosphere sizzled, akin to being at the MCG for the AFL grand final. Forget the ‘guns’ shearing two hundred plus. You could watch them any old day. On this long awaited, momentous occasion, however, Mike was about to vacate his celestial position and rejoin the human race. No longer would all the other team members feel the compulsory need to genuflect in his presence. Eventually, at some time in the distant future, they could even develop the courage to stop calling him ‘Your Grace’.

When the pen you share with another shearer is full, each of you is bound to select the best combing, best cutting, least wrinkly sheep on offer. There are thirty to forty in the pen to choose from, and it’s not always easy to differentiate between good and bad, particularly when a learner shearer shares that pen with a hungry ‘gun’, who has never been noted for benevolence. This situation faced the duelling duo, so it was even stevens. Now a learner remains a learner for two or three years, but not Mike, he with the immortal presence. Seemingly, without a semblance of extra effort he moved up to the next level – no, he moved up two levels, possibly three, on that sweat filled first day. One hundred and twenty three ridge free, ‘pinked’ sheep counted out in his favour to seventy nine for Bill. Everyone knew inside the first hour the contest had been decided. Their bets had been lost and Mike remained firmly mounted on his pedestal.

By the end of the next fortnight this incredible life form; he had to be superior to human, had shorn one hundred and fifty seven –37, 40, 43, 37 – not bad eh? This he achieved in a shearing life not exceeding three months. And did it stop there? No way, Jose. Neighbouring Marillana

was the next shed where the sheep were just as big and just as tough. Bill continued to make pitiable efforts to do the impossible and top 'The Man'. However by the time Roy Hill had reached the 'cut out' Mike had nurtured a multi-headed carbuncle on his left leg and three boils under his left armpit. These all continued to grow and three days into Marillana were full blown. Add to this a poisoned thumb on his right hand that had swelled to twice its normal size and you could envisage that perhaps, in these circumstances, Mike was vulnerable.

Of course he tried to cure himself. He found the brightly coloured tin box with First Aid prominently printed across the lid, but like all first aid tins in shearing teams in those days, it was empty. So his carbuncle remained uncovered and kept rubbing continuously against his yolk encrusted jeans, all the time absorbing rapidly multiplying, virile germs for up to ten hours daily. Occasionally, sheep with thrashing legs, would unerringly hit the exact spot. The resultant anguished wail would measure the pain.

Yes, that was excruciating, but nowhere near the pain bursting forth from the boils in the armpit. To remove the belly wool off every single sheep, the two front legs had to be placed and held firmly under the left armpit; now that really caused pain, unavoidable searing pain. More often than not these hooves had just walked through scouring sheep shit, in which bacteria were twice as virile and multiplied twice as fast. They were passed liberally and without dilution to the three boils.

The daddy of them all though, believe it or not, was the poisoned thumb. That appendage, with the fingers, gripped the handpiece. Bad enough when the bogeye (handpiece) had been fine tuned to perfection, but when incorrectly set and running hot, the resultant pain is unbearable (to all but Mike). The setting for Our Hale School icon happened to be incorrect, so his machine had reached the same temperature as a meteor entering the earth's atmosphere (Mike's description, not mine). The two burn blisters on his thumb were each the size of a two shilling coin; at this point they would burst, and this process occurred each and every day. Every time he gripped the bogeye his red raw, throbbing thumb would be BBQ'd. A happy shearer he was not.

Bill, despite this apparent advantage failed to master the master; he now fully accepted his position on the totem pole and lived to shear another day; his impossible dream never to be fulfilled.

Mike shored until cutout at Marillana, three months shearing from start to finish – then no more. Years later, as his legendary reputation reached Captain Marvel like proportions, it is said he could have been the greatest shearer of all time. (A few misfits have also stated that he is, and has been from birth, the greatest bullshit artist of all time). This story, incidentally, has come without alteration straight from the horse's aristocratic mouth.

OFF SEASON HIGHLIGHTS (iii)

“Humility? What the hell is that”? And he wasn’t joking. Mike up to this stage in his life had not heard of the word.

Woody with his 58 IQ (compared to Mike’s 198) tried to explain. “You accept, as royalty do that never the twain shall meet. You can see, after careful consideration, that Rockefeller, Packer, Murdock and others still have some way to go. You Mike, on the other hand, can look down from the top. Humility is knowing where you stand in the pecking order.”

That definition provided not one iota of help whatsoever. However Mike happened to be mere days away from a lesson in humility, which would stay with him through thick and thin, for several hours.

During this particular ‘off season’ work in the woolstores was impossible to come by. Western Australia had barely survived a drought and so the quantity of wool handled by the stockfirms was way down on normal. Even Mike had been made redundant. A good man though, can’t be kept down. So it goes without saying the smaller woolbuying firms were fighting each other to gain his services.

Prevosts won.

It wasn’t sorting wool, dumping wool bales for overseas transport, or picking pieces. No sir, that was too ordinary, too mundane or just plain not suited to a person of Mike’s intellect. He demanded responsibility more in keeping with his renowned ability.

Every day thousands of sheep were slaughtered for meat consumption. No small proportion of their skins was delivered to Prevosts each day. Mike’s job was to hang these pelts out to dry, prior to them being tanned. Now you can probably guess, in normal circumstances, this type of work would not appeal to our ‘off season gentleman’. However these were not normal circumstances. During the shearing season up North when good wages were being earned, Mike, very diligently we all thought, invested every spare shilling in his possession on cigarettes, grog and writing paper – but no wild, wild women. Mike’s motto, ‘Look after the shillings and the pounds will support your lifestyle for four months in Perth’ - doesn’t work

because he arrived back in Perth a pauper, one who had to hang sheep skins or remain a pauper. Choices? One and one only.

So there he toiled, struggling each day to lift and hang every single, foul smelling, cold, clammy, mongrelised pelt over the timber beam above his head. As he did so maggots fell from above. Some he avoided, some fell in his shirt. He was having fun.

Could this be where Mike discovered humility? No, this was a necessary, preliminary experience.

Would you believe right at that very time all the slaughtermen chose to go on strike? No more pelts. Prevosts, though, believed in loyalty to their employees. Rather than sack Mike, which in those days presented no problem, they racked their collective brains and came up with a solution.

Rabbit skins. Pegging rabbit skins.

You're right, this is not the work associated with an aristocrat, an intellectual, a hero, but as previously explained, Mike would suffer this indignity in silence for as long as he could retain his anonymity. He had never heard of pegging rabbit skins before but he knew there was no work on this planet he could not master.

At this point a little background would be helpful. Rabbits were in plague proportions on the Nullabor Plains and several trappers, with full time employment, tried desperately to reduce the ever increasing numbers. Every day, they would tend their traps and then kill, skin and gut that night's catch. At the end of two weeks all rabbit skins were loaded on to a truck for transporting to Fremantle, and to Prevosts.

Mind you, by this time, some pelts were over two weeks old. The stench could overpower a corpse, and if sheep skins were cold and clammy, the rabbit variety was doubly so. Just thinking about them, let alone handling the putrid monstrosities, was worse than swimming in raw sewerage. When Mike started his new job he was oblivious to all these facts. He had been sitting in the warm sun for half an hour, thoroughly enjoying himself, when the first truck of skins arrived. Before he could stand the tip truck dumped its contents all around and half over

him. At that very moment the first inkling of what pegging rabbit skins entailed tiptoed through into double sized brain.

Even so, Mike still had plenty to learn.

Both hands were needed to stretch each rabbit skin over a wire frame in preparation for tanning. (In those days anyone wearing gloves was a girl). There were ten thousand pelts in one truck load and the aristocrat, the intellectual and the hero sat in the midst of this stinking, fly attracting heap of filth all day for day after day, handling each and every one of the little delectable delights. The question, ‘What am I doing here?’ did enter his mind from time to time.

During this happy period aromatic Mike had no vehicle. Others like him, who used public transport, were described as peasants. The 5.15 pm peak period bus from Fremantle, after two days with him on board, only ever carried one passenger. What previously overflowed with peak hour customers now carried this one unsavoury individual, and quite frankly there were times when it seemed even the driver operated from outside the bus.

Sure, Mike had a shower each day before he went to the Captain Stirling pub. That made no difference. The moment he appeared at the entrance there was a total exodus from the bar, including the barmaid. Our thirsty rabbit skin pegger sensed something was amiss. “Hey, one schooner,” – no response. If at first you don’t succeed, call out louder. “Hey slut, give me a beer,” still no response.

Now a rabbit skin pegger without a beer automatically becomes desperate – even humble. “Please darling, when you have a moment could you pour me a schooner. I’d be ever so grateful.”

Just at that very instant the licensee stormed in. “Get the hell out of my pub you putrid piece of crap, so I can get some customers back inside again. Leave ten shillings on the step outside and I’ll bring out two bottles of Swan Lager. Then go to some park and drink it. Don’t come back here.”

Only then, as he slunk out the door, eyes downcast, muttering, “Thankyou kind sir,” did our smelly ex Hale School student fully understand the meaning of humility.

IMPROVISATION IS A GIFT.

Frank Marks was our number one leader, and accepted practice for any new woolclasser, involved spending some time during ‘the season’ travelling with the great man. Mike was obviously heading for greatness, so when his turn came the entire worldwide wool industry held its collective breath for the meeting of two exceptional minds. Would it be love at first sight or a volcanic eruption?

During his lifetime Frank had motored for more than a million miles. What he didn’t know about outback travel could be written on the back of a matchbox. Mike with his Jack Brabham like skills, learnt while guiding his DKW at speeds not exceeding twenty mph, was born for rally driving. The pair, in combination, was surely destined to become world champions, (for what I don’t know).

Cutout had occurred at Munda. Mandora, our next shed, meant a five to six hour drive behind the wheel. That travelling time in this remote country required some preparation. After leaving Perth, Frank had only ever removed his swag from the ute whenever he had a stopover at one of his teams’ sheds. Reloading, therefore, for the trip to Mandora required no great effort. Anyway, Frank knew that by delegating the responsibility to Mike nothing untoward could possibly occur. Any and every crisis on the road would be overcome. No worries.

So the twosome set off at least two hours ahead of other team members travelling in the Grey Ghost and a couple of private cars.

Port Hedland in the 1950’s wasn’t good for much more than refuelling vehicles and occupants. As this oasis, their first and only stop, provided ample fuel, both petrol and grog, the chances of either of the energy releasing liquids running out never happened despite consumption way above normal. Not a worry in the world for the happy duo. De Grey station came and went. With all round, good quality fuel what could possibly stop you?

The Pardoo sands – that’s what.

Frank was driving. One minute they were hitting every bump in Western Australia, the next they were up to their axles in deep, loose, bottomless sand, and Frank had forgotten to take his

foot off the accelerator. In fact he was revving the motor up even more. Another thirty seconds and the ute would be totally buried.

Mike (Brabham) reached across and in one fumbling motion switched off the key, thankfully just in time to stop their rapid descent from proceeding past the floorboards.

“What the hell did you do that for, young Mike? We were nearly through. Bugger it, now you dig us out.”

Only then did Mike begin to understand his true roll as Frank’s travelling offsider. Frank you see was big, thirty stone big. If he lay alongside the ute in its present half buried position his gut would have been clearly visible above the cab roof. No way could he have dug anything out of the sand, even if he’d wanted to – which he didn’t. So Frank sat there comfortably in the shade under a nearby stunted tree. His consumption rate of the energy giving fuel was in no way diminished from the full throttle of moments before, whilst sitting on the car seat.

Mike, clearly had only one way to go; unload the ute, of course, to reach the essential rescue gear; swags, cases, forty four gallon drum of petrol, tucker box, tool box, miscellaneous boxes of stores, cases of beer, four gallon drums of oil, axe, crowbar, spade – “wait on, no spade. But we’re up to the floorboards in bottomless sand with only me to dig us out.”

In a tense, quivering, pleading, but hopeful voice Mike asked a perfectly reasonable question, “Where’s the spade, Frank?”

“Haven’t got one. Use the frying pan.”

To cut a long story short, Mike did just that. For two hours he gouged away at the earth using that frying pan, seemingly without making much impression. “Please let me be out of this bloody sand before the rest of the team arrives here.” You see, Mike happened to be a sensitive young bloke (that’s a good one). If anyone saw him in his present predicament he would be laughed out of the wool industry.

Hindsight is all very well; what I wouldn’t pay for a photo of His Grace - at least a four figure sum. And I’d double the amount if that same photo included Frank, guts up under a tree,

conscientiously generating power, using an environmentally clean liquid fuel to facilitate the effort needed to change his position from almost horizontal to perpendicular.

CLEANLINESS IS NEXT TO GODLINESS.

Everyone, without exception, Mike included, had Frank up there on a pedestal – the shearing contractor extraordinaire. After some forty or so seasons in the North West he knew the lot. Willing pupils, prepared to marvel at his profound intelligence remained the one worthwhile requirement in his life. Leave the wool industry in a better state than when you started, that was his motto, and his contributions were many. (Preceding comments are all bullshit, but I needed a preamble for my next sworn statement).

Frank had two travelling companions from whom he never parted – Princey Boy and Ikey Pots. Without a shadow of doubt they were the two most obnoxious, matted, flatulent cocker spaniels that have ever graced this planet. Both were the love of his life. Both received much more affection than Mrs Marks. First choice of the available seating in Frank's ute belonged exclusively to those two hounds. Mike, if he was lucky, sometimes scored space in the ute's cab, and Frank's sought after tutorials had slightly more meaning that way than when he sat outside on the open rear tray.

No one had ever seen The North West's premier contractor have a shower. He probably did, but there were no witnesses. And for an entire eight month run no one had ever seen him wash his clothes. Red is red, and his fashion statement never varied from a dusty, brick red. His physical appearance, though, after a full day's travel on those dusty, brick red outback roads remained a mystery to all his fellow jet setters; excluding Mike that is. Clothes aside, the rest of us after time on the road would have our skin coated with a quarter inch layer of this horrendous dust. Not Frank, he was invariably immaculate.

Now as any up and coming woolclasser like Mike can attest, it is vitally important when you pass through towns like Marble Bar and Nullagine to be immaculate. The white and aboriginal inhabitants are always on the lookout for immaculate visitors.

So let the lesson commence.

As Mike observed, most times Princey Boy and Ikey Pots deliberately positioned themselves on the ledge behind the driver's seat. From here their access to their master was always readily available. That's the initial important part of this lesson; a dog's place is always on the ledge

behind the driver. Why? In Frank's case no more than ten seconds passed before the reason became obvious. The ute had not reached the first gate on the way to the next shed when their duties began. For as long as the ute remained in motion they licked and they licked. They licked Frank's eyes, his ears, his nose, his mouth, his neck, his chin, his arms, - not one particle of dust was allowed to settle. "Good boy Princey Boy, good boy Ikey Pots, here." And he would make some other part of his upper anatomy available.

Don't be confused. What I have just outlined, and taken directly from Mike's lips, is the important lesson for all North West travelers. And yet it is practised by few.

Mike I'm pleased to say has cherished his time with Frank, and his tutorials in particular. One day when he writes his autobiography this lesson on cleanliness will be highlighted in the hope its importance will spread beyond the North West to other more populated parts of Australia – maybe even the world.

Nobody has yet discovered how he kept his teeth so pearly white, but be assured, Frank is under surveillance 24/7. You'll be informed once that mystery has been solved.

A LOOK INTO THE FUTURE.

Tabba Tabba, a nondescript station in the middle of nowhere, consisted mainly of hard, un-nutritious spinifex as it struggled to survive on large areas of surface rock. Over the years it had proved difficult to manage and even in the years when wool was a pound a pound never provided much more than a meagre living. The basic shearing shed and quarters, both of bush frame construction, were fully in keeping with this relatively poor quality pastoral property.

Not exactly the sort of place to send the world's greatest woolclasser/overseer is it?

And it doesn't get any better. The dual purpose enamel crockery had been in continuous use for two thousand years. For one month each year it served shearers in the cookhouse. The rest of the time the Royal Daulton look alike was used to advantage in the shearing shed and engine room, performing all sorts of cleverly devised functions, such as holding sump oil, spare parts, emery paper, partly used packets of arsenic sheep dip, lubricating grease and everything else you were ever likely to find on the premises. In the mind of management the fact that these eating items were always returned unwashed to the cookhouse prior to shearing contributed directly towards building up the team's resistance to all known infectious diseases.

Don't ask me why Mike, the aristocrat, classed at Tabba Tabba one year, he just did.

His joy at being there increased threefold because he had to share totally inadequate quarters with his boss, Frank – and Princey Boy and Ikey Pots. After placing two beds in the room there remained only twelve inches of space in between and that, let me tell you, was the cause of some problems.

Mike spent each day in the shed conscientiously doing his job. Frank, too, spent his day conscientiously – guts up on the bed, and because he liked to be near his two beloved hounds the most obvious place for them was on Mike's bed. Dog's hair and flatulence permeated his three blankets in no time.

Of equal concern was Frank's thirty stone. When he lay guts up on the bed his giant corporation rolled three feet to one side, always towards the middle, and in doing so overlapped on to Mike's place of rest. Not a happy experience for our ex Hale School hero, believe me. Apart

from the uncomfortably close proximity of this global sized gut, its thunderous rumblings throughout the night kept the room's other occupant somewhat disturbed. By five o'clock each morning Mike's two options were, either to arise and greet the new day or commit a very un-Hale School like assault.

One Saturday morning after getting up and getting out, fate decreed that Mike, on his way back from the cookhouse, should meet up with Frank on his way to the cookhouse. "Young Mike, come to the shearing shed with me, there's something I want to discuss."

"Uh uh, has he sensed this pathological hatred I feel towards him? Is this the end of my woolclassing career?"

Long before reaching the shearing shed, fifty yards away, Frank was obviously tiring. "Rest a while young fella." It so happened a forty four gallon fuel drum stood in an upright position where they had stopped. Just what Frank needed. As he turned towards it he stretched his hands down to knee level. From there he placed both under his gut and only with a supreme effort did he succeed in lifting that huge hulk up and up and up, before planting it squarely on top of that very welcome support.

Frank stood there transfixed for a full sixty seconds before his panting slowed sufficiently, enabling him to remark, "Young Mike, I want you to know this, the only reason I've allowed you to share my quarters is that I regard you as I would a son. The likeness is uncanny. The same aristocratic features, the same finely tuned athletic body; looking at you is like looking at an exact replica of myself when I was your age. I'm almost overcome with emotion."

Now if you think Mike accepted these fatherly comments in a son-like manner you're wrong. Not exactly in a state of shock, but he was teetering on the edge. One of Frank's ten minute ear splitting farts was all it would take, after hearing those well-intentioned but horrifying words, to send our icon plunging into a bottomless abyss of despair.

Fortunately silence prevailed.

What do you do when someone introduces even the remotest prospect that you could finish up looking like thirty stone, global guts Frank. Do you give up breathing? No. Do you give the

wool game away and take up ballet? Tempting, but no. You do the only responsible thing you can, you give up grog. And like the iron willed man that he is that's exactly what Mike did, until 11 am that very morning.

RECLAIMING OUR ENVIRONMENT.

I'll bet my house *and* my car you've all heard the expression, 'Shearers are full of shit'. Well Mike proved this very complex assertion beyond any reasonable doubt. His findings are now accepted as a binding environmental precedent.

Everyone knew Mike had limitless talents, limitless skills and limitless intelligence. Without question though the wool industry had always been his first love. Regardless, he could have turned all his brain power to anything. For example, as we will discover, this leaning he had for straight science came as no surprise, nor did his other leanings towards domestic science, forensic science, environmental science, female science and so on. As a woolclasser his ultimate short term goal had now been achieved. Another goal was needed. This is how it evolved.

Initially we were unaware of any behavioral change. In fact three months passed in one particular year before we noticed that Mike would sometimes disappear in the weekends for hours on end. Countless hours of discussion occurred amongst team members before we realised that this new found interest centred around thunder boxes. There were two types of waste disposal, septic and those built over mine shafts, which descended straight down into the bowels of the earth. (Pardon the pun). The latter now provided our would-be scientist with an all-consuming passion, particularly at those sheds he'd been to in previous years.

What an incredible intellect. Something which had totally escaped the inferior minds of us lesser beings he immediately recognised as having the potential to revolutionise world thinking. And his analysing methodology was faultless.

When he first came to Mooloogool Station as a roustabout and sat on the mine shaft thunderbox he could count to nineteen before he heard a plop. The next time, two years later, the count was eleven. Can you even credit his powers of observation? This time, right here and now, it was seven. Need more be said? With this sort of information, who wouldn't have their curiosity raised?

So this scientific-charged brain streaked into action. Scientific experiments commenced using the very latest in high tec equipment – a wrist watch, note book, pencil and rubber. These were his scientifically deduced findings.

Shedhands didn't shit. They were too stupid.

The woolpresser and expert (also known as the grinder) only produced hot air.

The cook knew what went into his cooking so he only ate when passing through a town. As a consequence he didn't eat anywhere near enough to produce even one good shit per shed.

Woolclassers (other than Mike with the scientific mind) were too refined to use a thunderbox. They would dig their own hole.

So, who did that leave? Shearers, that's who. And as clearly demonstrated by the Mooloogool scientific experiment, they are so full of shit that the world wide problem of reclaiming all mine shafts and open cuts has been immediately resolved.

Once again Mike confounded everyone by proving shearers have a worthwhile use after all.

MASTER CHEF.

Of course Mike can cook. He can breathe too, can't he?

When you have unlimited talents and when you've cheated death despite the efforts of more than a dozen shearers' cooks, you automatically become a Mount Everest among that misbegotten breed. Mike was a colossus, a master chef, who would have been equally at home in Government House cooking for royalty as he was woolclassing in a shearing shed.

Most of his expertise had come from observation, learning what not to do. For example, not once in an eight month stint at the stove did Ron succeed in making an edible batch of bread. Invariably it left the oven with a constituency identical to porridge. Fresh, stale or toasted made no difference to how it tasted. And his ability with bread exactly matched everything else he produced. Ron did not win Cook of the Year award, nor was he encouraged to reapply in the following year. He typified the sorts of cooks who gave unstintingly of their time, and just as Huggies Disposable Nappies absorbed urine and excreta, so did Mike's brain soak up knowledge. By the end of the year he could spell yeast.

Gilbert, another classic who commenced one season as Mike's source of health and energy, intended to use his earnings to finance his trip to London, and two year's tuition at the London School of Ballet. He was sacked after the second meal and I have no hesitation in categorically stating that Mike learnt more from Gilbert than any other individual cook with whom he came in contact. (Can you believe though, that a ballet dancer had been sent away with a shearing team?)

Rex was a sad experience. At some point we had been told he was chief chef for Qantas and the Royal Sydney Hospital in years gone by. Lammingtons, butterfly cakes, cream sponges (with jam and no cream), orange, chocolate and rainbow cakes, plus a multitude of biscuits sent to the shed for morning and afternoon teas everyday were unheard of in any North West shearing team. Mike wasn't the only one changing to a Frank Mark's like shape for the few weeks Rex stayed around. Then, one morning after spending the night drinking methylated spirits he was around no more.

So what? Mike declared his readiness to assume control of the kitchen on a temporary basis. None of us, starting with breakfast, anticipated any lessening in the quality, gourmet cuisine to which we had become accustomed. At his emphatic insistence we were forced to watch him from a distance outside that place of mouthwatering aromas. We knew sadly, that his endeavours would only brighten our day until a replacement cook arrived. However, the bond we felt towards our glorious woolclasser/overseer/cook strengthened second by second. No crystal ball was needed to guess our breakfast menu either, lambs fry and bacon, chops and eggs, scrambled eggs. Oh the sheer joy of breathing in and out. Really and truly, who would want to be anywhere else in this world but good old Yallalong?

At last the breakfast bell rang out its welcoming call. Twenty four of us trooped in, eyes shining, eager and bright.

Who called the cook a bastard? Who called the bastard a cook?

Mike, that black hearted mongrel, had piled sixty hard boiled eggs into one bowl and had sixty slices of toast spread everywhere but on the floor. And let me tell you something about that scrumptious fare he had prepared. The hard boiled eggs were hard, so bloody hard you needed a sledge hammer to crack the shells. All that did was provide a crack for the crowbar needed to peel the shell away from the rock hard inside. Without a commercial mincer the egg white and yolk couldn't be eaten. No one's teeth were a strong enough alternative. Some team members persisted. They even swallowed the non-masticated mass, the end result of which was that their alimentary canal remained blocked for a month. Try not crapping for a month and see how that improves your disposition.

What could he do to toast cooked on an open fire? Turn it into charcoal that was one stage short of turning into coal, that's what he could do. And if perchance those who swallowed the egg also swallowed the pure charcoal then a permanent bypass of the backside became a surgical necessity.

I suppose because of his very sensitive nature Mike the overseer seemed to sense something was amiss. A trebled beer ration issued before breakfast was completed went part of the way towards maintaining peace. The arrival of a kangaroo shooter who agreed to step in as cook for a couple of days helped calm a dangerous situation too. The only dish this bloke knew how to

prepare was boiled kangaroo, but no one in the team even thought to complain, except Mike of course.

INSPIRED MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES.

Downsizing, a management practice of the 1950's? Unheard of? Bullshit. Downsizing was alive and well in the 1950's and practiced by a man amongst men – Mike, a genius, forty years ahead of his time.

What is it about Hale School that turns out these powerful, lateral thinking minds?

Life for Mike as a woolclasser/overseer in a four stand team held no problems whatsoever. There was unlimited time to terrorise the useless bloody shedhands (roustabouts, loppies) and that included every last one of them. There was even time to relish the three meals a day enjoyed (?) over the preceding five months. In all four hundred and fifty meals, every one of which consisted of stag. And what is stag you ask? Stag is a male sheep, probably decades old, which reached the adult stage before being castrated. Every conceivable part of it is rank. It is tougher than Joe Louis, and no station owner exists who would sacrifice even one juicy, hogget wether for the enjoyment of a shearing team. In fact, the stag, deliberately chosen for each meal, is subject to a test that clearly identifies the complete absence of all moisture in its flesh.

Mike, for some reason, looked forward with eager anticipation to the remaining two hundred and seventy meals before the season cutout. He concluded stag, like fish, was a brain enhancer. Let there be no doubt though, that to work on somebody, there had to be a brain. Of course, in a shearing team who else but he could benefit?

So how could any problem develop, complicated enough to tax his razor sharp, ultra-fast, computer like brain? As this next authentic tale reveals, none could.

Right from the time shearing began at Pollele Station, south of Meekatharra, it was apparent something radically wrong had crept into acceptable shed practice. Beautifully 'pinked' sheep, standard in all previous sheds, no longer appeared off the board from any of the four shearers. Each animal came down the shute into the counting out pens looking like a cross between a sulphur crested cockatoo and a French poodle. Ridges of wool half an inch deep extended for the full length of the sheep's body, on both the short and long blows. Second cuts by the handpiece were rampant, greatly reducing the value of each fleece.



Just because Bill, the station owner, complained very early in the piece didn't mean that Mike's attention needed to be directed to this matter. Oh no, he had previously heard mutterings from the fabulous four about shearing starting in the cocky districts, so trouble was anticipated. He knew shearers preferred to work in those parts of the country where they could spend each night home with their families, or for the weekends at least. The fact that they had signed an agreement with contractor Frank to complete the North West run wasn't worth two penneth of poop. Their time had come. They wanted out. Being sacked gave them their passage home.

So when this foursome began roughing up the sheep Mike's wrath descended on them with all guns blazing. "Ladies you have the next two hour run to resume shearing properly. If you choose not to, I'll see that none of you will ever shear in these parts again – with any contractor. What's more you'll have two hours to leave the station."

Since no logical, reasoning person could ever withstand Mike's displeasure, he thought, "Well that's that. Now let's begin shearing properly again."

By some mischance he had momentarily forgotten that shearers have no brain. A normal person, even with a low IQ, will think with the highest part of his body – the head. Because they're bending over sheep all day the highest part of a shearer's body is his bum. And this is

where he does his thinking. What is really unfortunate is that with a diet consisting largely of flatulence producing, tinned, green peas shearers' thinking was forever being interrupted. When, or rather if a thought occurred, it was like being in a wind tunnel – to be immediately despatched into space and lost forever.



Without this ability to think Mike's ultimatum was ignored, leaving him no choice but to introduce this downsizing caper. The shearing size of the team was downsized from four to zero. To further complicate the situation the woolpresser developed a thirst, and to quench it he decided to take off with the fabulous four until he reached the first pub in Cue.

Who, as a result of this downsizing, experienced enhanced joy and happiness? The four rousies and the expert did. Doing nothing and receiving pay appealed to their sense of humour.

Who, as a result of this downsizing, experienced diminished joy and happiness? The pastoralist with each passing hour became more monumentally pissed off. Contractor Frank was quite cranky with Mike for allowing it to happen. And Mike, well he didn't have time for this crap. He had a solution. And now the advantage of having a brain can be measured. On this earth, he alone knew, without a shadow of doubt, four – no five men were not his equal

So began one of the greatest miracles ever witnessed in the wool industry. Mike became a one man shearing team. He never shored less than one hundred and twenty sheep a day, as well as classing around two hundred fleeces and pressing four or five bales. (One of the loppies, Barry by name, shored eighty or so sheep too, but let's not highlight that).

A true story this, one that is still spoken of in awe. Tycoons could see for themselves the clearly demonstrated advantages of downsizing, but for another forty years they lacked the courage and vision of this incredible man to fully introduce such a historical change to the world's work practices. Had they done so we could now be enjoying 98% unemployment all over the planet.

RETRIBUTION CANNOT BE DENIED.

Anyone in the 1950's who drove a Morris Oxford car on North West roads was stark, staring mad. A husband and wife cook team, with a combined weight in excess of half a ton, driving such a car only confirmed they were from some far away twinkling star. I mean this vehicle in the showroom had a clearance of four inches, with Ron and Shirley, plus their luggage, it was reduced to less than one inch. Suffering bloody hell, the graded road corrugations in this country were never under twelve inches deep. With bitumen stopping at Northampton and Wubin on the coast and inland highways (?) respectively, how they expected to complete the four thousand mile North West shearing run, still in a mobile car, is beyond comprehension.

Of course Mike, their boss, told them of the problems; he told Frank too, and not only about their mode of travel. The gargantuan appetites of these two would double the mess account at every shed, causing mutiny in the team who were responsible for meeting all costs, including what the cooks consumed. Nor would the station owners be overcome with happiness either. A trail of broken furniture would inevitably follow in the team's wake.

Good sense though, did not prevail. Ron and Shirley blessed Mike's team for the entire eight month run. The meals started off at a standard comparable to a Siberian slave labour camp – and worsened on a daily basis. No love and affection developed towards the gruesome twosome. Even worse, no one could fight back for fear of retribution. I mean, how bad could the food get if these cooks actually tried to create a failure? So, one day when the opportunity for revenge presented itself every member of the team willingly volunteered a contribution, Mike included. His gourmet appetite, after all, was the one most severely affected.

Shearing cutout had occurred at Narndee and Boodanoo Stations. Hamersley, the next shed, was five hundred miles away in the heart of the Tablelands.

Ron and Shirley led the way in their Morris Oxford. They were the ones most likely to experience trouble, so it made good sense to have the other three vehicles following. Good sense, perhaps, but with the difficulties they had negotiating the roads, travelling time increased from less than two days to more than three. What's more there was four hundred miles between pubs. Thirsty shearers become homicidal.

The inevitable happened. Midway between Roy Hill and Wittenoom Gorge, and that sought after pub, Ron drove into a deep, deep wheel rut. In doing so he lost his sump, gear box and propeller shaft. Best of all half his floor went missing. The democratically concluded consensus, with one exception, was to leave the bastards where they were. The two or three vehicles a week travelling this route would give the offending duo ample time to reflect on the misery they had caused.

But no. With the wisdom of a Supreme Court judge Mike spoke of the need for the punishment to fit the crime. The victim's rights must be paramount at all times. And I tell you without any exaggeration whatsoever the team, to the last man, could only marvel at his superior intelligence. What he proposed was diabolical, fiendishly wicked, but undeniably just. Before being implemented though, the proposal almost foundered. No rope. Could you believe, with all the seasoned bush travel experience present, no one had thought to include a rope amongst their emergency gear. Unbelievable. All was lost.

Never. In a split nanosecond the solution burst forth from Mike's lips. "Half a mile back a fence crossed the road. Get fifty yards of wire – a single strand – divide it into three, twist these around, then tie one end to the Grey Ghost to do the pulling and the other end to the Morris Oxford."

Once these instructions had been obeyed the convoy set off with eighty miles of pure North West bulldust ahead of them, choking, red, powder fine bulldust. In accordance with Mike's further instructions their firm intention included not one stop along the way.

Before half a mile had sauntered by, Ron and Shirley, barely visible now through a solid red cloud, were waving frantically. They could not open any car window as that would only increase, if possible, the entry of deliberately stirred up bulldust. Their situation had to be close to life threatening. But visibility for those thoroughly enjoying themselves on the Grey Ghost was restricted to - . Who the hell cares about that? After all there are none so blind as those who don't want to see. All these fine fellows, intent on revenge, waved back knowing that life for Ron and Shirley, in their dust enveloped car had to be pretty bleak. I mean, with visibility virtually nonexistent all Ron could do was steer towards the thickest bulldust, not the peripheral stuff on the edge. As he did so he knew he and his wife were slowly suffocating. What's more,

the bulldust was not entering the interior through minute cracks in the car body, it was rising like an atomic blast, straight from the road through the missing floor panels.

Well the eighty mile trip resulted in no loss of life. The combined half ton of Ron and Shirley fell out of the car almost before it had stopped. A three inch layer of the purest, finest bulldust covered every inside surface of the car, so it followed that each of their lungs was caked solid. Breathing, if it occurred, had to be from memory. In fact their esophagus, stomach and bowels had to be caked solid too. Both miscreants seemed more intent on ensuring half a dozen bottles of beer were flowing straight through, rather than breathing.

It's fair to say Ron and Shirley were repentant. The 'lesson according to Mike' resulted in much more harmony existing between the opposing forces. The 'goodies' knew now that cooks didn't automatically hold the whip hand. Others could fight back.

The team, of course, understood beyond any shadow of doubt Mike's true calling was on the judiciary, but as this wise man himself declared, an understanding of psychiatry could resolve all disputes, and since this had always been a compulsory subject at Hale school (up to a doctorate standard) how could his superior intellect not prevail?

MIKE'S TAXI SERVICE.

It seems to me, as Mike approached the end of his illustrious career in shearing teams, and as I reviewed those spectacular years, there were forever carefully thought out, ultra-wise, maxi sayings pouring forth from his lips. One in particular keeps coming back to me, over and over again.

“Shearing teams would be so much better off if there were no shearers in them.”

Now you think about that. It's true. There would be no grog problems, much less discord, no union reps, mess accounts would be halved, the list is endless.

Mike confessed to me one day when he was depressed, or pensive as he described it, and hadn't spoken a single word for a whole minute, that this controversial but logical thought first came to him after he had to deliver one of his shearers to another team. Of course only other teams under Frank's control lost shearers through sickness and, as always, Mike's already depleted team supplied the replacements. How he was expected to keep his shearing programme for the entire season on course, and finally reach Perth at the designated hour, before going berserk, remained an insoluble mystery.

This particular year, for a change, saw shearing progressing beautifully until that fateful telegram came from Frank stating that Barry was to be delivered, post haste, to Mulga Downs as a replacement. He, Barry, had achieved 'gun' status at Munda by consistently shearing over one thousand grown sheep a day, (just joking). His departure would cause maximum disruption. Mike was not pleased. The thought of travelling to Mulga Downs, three hundred miles away, over a two day return trip on horrendous, graded (?) roads, including the infamous Madman's Track, made him positively deranged.

That year, for the first time ever, Mike drove his brand new, beloved Holden ute up North. Exposing it to dust was worse than suffering gout, driving it over bone shattering corrugations, even worse, like having to camp with a boardboy for a whole week. However, what had to be, had to be. There was no way out. So, at 5pm Friday Mike loaded up, and understand this, in remote pastoral country no risks were allowed. All potential problems had to be anticipated. Carefully he checked everything, spade, crowbar, toolbox, hand pump, spare wheel, tyres and

tubes, tucker box, oil, water bags and last of all fuel. Nothing goes without fuel. Yep, the ute's tank was full, plus eighteen gallons in drums for refuelling.



Nor do downright, deranged woolclassers go anywhere without their fuel. Each of the dozen bottles of Swan Lager was individually lifted, like a new born babe, and ever so carefully placed on a ledge behind the driver's seat, where he could keep an eye on the contents. Mike knew if he so much as looked like going to sleep at the wheel that bloody Barry would drink three bottles in as many minutes.

They were ready to go with only half an hour of daylight left.

The road was horrible. No grader had been near it since the last rains. Truck tracks, some two feet deep and slewing all over the place, went for mile after mile. Parts of the road remained inundated with red, churned up water just waiting to bog an unsuspecting driver. But it goes without saying, Gelignite Jack Murray, star of countless Redex Round Australia Car Trials would be proud of Mike's skill and total focus. Kangaroos on the road, ready to play chicken? No problem to Mike.

“Barry if I thought you were watching me drive and learning from the extraordinary expertise being displayed, I might be persuaded to give you a turn at the wheel later on. Doesn't matter if you have already driven a million miles, you have a long way to go before you lift yourself to my standard. I just wish I could have an accident, then I would be able to test my reaction time and -----.”

A loud, “Shit a brick,” from Barry brought the lecture to an abrupt, unplanned for halt. They and the ute were airborne.

It was not uncommon for creeks and rivers, dry or running a banker, to traverse roads in these parts. Sometimes their banks descended gradually down to the creek bed. Other times, as in this case, both banks dropped to the creek bed at an angle approximating ninety degrees. That is why an unsighted Mike was airborne, travelling at fifty miles an hour, giving a lecture and probably thinking of opening a beer. Reaction time? Instantaneous, – no time to waste trying to think things through. As the ute landed on the creek bed, half way across, he realised the other bank, now ten yards in front also rose up at ninety degrees, like a towering cliff. Mike's reflexes moved faster than the speed of light as he stopped the bucking ute barely a foot away from a serious crash.

Nevertheless the consequences were dire.

The stop was so sudden that the twelve bottles of beer didn't have time to take all this in. They just kept on going at fifty miles an hour. What did end their onward dash, though, was the windscreen, the dashboard and Mike. First off the sound of breaking glass filled the cab. Then came the sound of fast flowing fluid. Finally a piercing, pitiful, anguished cry from Mike filled the air. His own precious fuel, every last drop, was no more.

Now it's hard to imagine anything worse happening to anyone, anywhere. It can and it did. You remember the shattered glass? Well it shattered all around Mike, mainly on the car seat. He said to roof height, though that's probably an exaggeration. Any person who felt as frustrated as he did should have been racing around the ute shouting expletives at the top of his voice. Mike, however, couldn't move. Had he tried, the piled high, broken glass would have cut an important part of his anatomy to shreds. So he sat there, grief stricken beyond belief, well and truly past boiling point, waiting for Barry to remove the many razor sharp obstacles, piece by bloody piece. The source of help was obviously overcome with mirth when there was absolutely no humour in the situation at all.

Eventually, Mike, with relative safety, could move freely enough to avoid all those cuts that required more than twenty stitches. He was, however, one angry hombre, and remained so until he arrived at Mulga Downs about noon the next day. Bugger the ute, the need to refuel Mike became Mike's number one priority. All his gauges had been registering empty for fifteen hours, so he filled up, slept till 3am and took off on the return trip. This time, travelling alone, he ensured each and every article was securely battened down. There would be no repeat of the previous night's performance.

Whatever negative thoughts had been pervading Mike's increasingly black outlook were suddenly dispersed. Half an hour after dawn he had begun his descent from the hills down the twisting, turning Madman's Track. The eastern skyline was ablaze. Splashes of red and orange, with glowing streaks of gold, against a background of clear blue sky was a truly awe inspiring sight. Somehow, here in the backblocks, miles from habitation or another human being this vision splendid assumed an almost spiritual meaning. Even the most cynical, emotionless person could not help but be overcome by the beauty that exploded upwards above the horizon.

Then as the sun rose higher in the early morning sky, the hills through which Madman's Track zigzagged became transformed. What had started as a featureless blob had now become a multi coloured panorama. A profusion of reds, browns, yellows, even blues, of all shapes, sizes and shades captured Mike's rapt attention. Creeks, formed half way down the steeply sloping, jagged hillsides, were lined with trees, all of which displayed the whitest of white trunks and the deepest of deep green foliage. What a contrast this provided to the technicoloured hills.

The terrain itself was awesome. Sheer cliff faces reached majestically up towards the sky. There was something timeless about this scene which had Mike absolutely mesmerised. Sitting in his ute, trying to absorb all the splendour, he could readily believe that he alone existed on this earth, that no other human being had ever witnessed such beauty before, and that it was his own special, magical memory.

Five minutes, not one second more, and the scene disintegrated. The sun shone with increasing intensity, and as it rose higher and higher in the sky, no longer were these wondrous colours on display.

Mike resumed his journey. He remained stoked all the way back to Munda.

THE MAD BOMBER.

You've heard of the Monte Bello Islands, haven't you? That's where they conducted atomic bomb trials during the 1950's. But have you heard of the Mulgul Bang?

Can you guess who was involved then?

You're no genius for guessing correctly – Mike of course, and a bloke called Robert.

Now Mike describes what happened as a lapse, which would never have occurred if he hadn't just been through a really, very traumatic experience. He had deliberately left washing his woolclassing gear until Sunday morning. By that time all the riff raff in the team were done, so he didn't have to fight for one of the three tubs, or for hot water. Mike sat on the floor in the shower room (also the laundry), rubbing, rubbing, rubbing, and dreaming visions of the Captain Stirling Hotel in Perth, Marilyn Munroe, North Cottesloe Beach and all those wondrous things now beyond his reach. He was oblivious to his surroundings, deliberately oblivious. Who would need reminding that the shearing season was only half way through and for the next four months most of his conversation would be with halfwits?



To this day he doesn't know what refocused his attention on the washtub. All Mike can say is that there, on the other side, less than three feet away, was this dirty, great big, bloody bungarra. Ten feet in length, he now admits, is a slight exaggeration. Nevertheless it was huge and it had the most evil set of eyes he'd ever encountered in twenty one years of life, and they were fixed unwaveringly on him.

Mike vows and declares both he and the bungarra remained unmoving for hours, he frozen rigid with terror and the bungarra poised to pounce.

Then, and he is absolutely certain what happened next occurred through instinct, not as the result of any conscious thought, he leapt in a single bound on to a shelf ten feet above the floor. With the passage of time our woolclassing legend believes those instincts of his reverted way back to prehistoric man. What burst forth from his lips was not a shriek of fear, but a fearsome warrior's wacry.

Anyway nothing happened. No one came to his assistance despite the on-going, uninterrupted, prolonged wail. Only then, with silence restored, did this twelve feet, two ton bungarra, contempt shining forth from its eyes, turn and disdainfully swagger out of the shower room.

Robert found Mike still on the shelf one hour later and told him the bungarra was a pet, just a baby. It lived in the woodpile and appeared every day for a hunk of meat, which when offered, was very gently taken from his hand.

Yeah. Well Mike recognised unadulterated crap when he heard it, but he did accept an invitation to accompany Robert on a windmill run. Anything to escape from the shearers' quarters, even for five minutes.

Several windmills had been checked and as they moved onto the next one Mike saw an outcrop of rocks in the distance. While still half a mile away Robert stopped the jeep, dismounted, stepped around to the rear, picked up a hessian bag and slung it over his shoulder. "C'mon, let's us go for a walk."

"Are there any bungarras?"

When, and only when it was established beyond any doubt that bungarras avoided this section of Mulgum Station for spiritual reasons did Robert and Mike take off towards the rock outcrop. “Do you know anything about geli Mike?”

Geli, to Mike’s surprise turned out to be gelignite. Apparently Robert had found half a dozen sticks, some detonators and fuse wire at an abandoned prospector’s camp. I hesitate to say this but Mike knew nothing about it, or any other explosive for that matter. Nor did Robert, other than you placed one of these there, wedged something else round about here and attached the fuse somewhere near the middle. With that done, hopefully, the all-hell spectacular would hit the atmosphere. Choosing the adequate length of fuse presented some difficulty, but an eenie, meenie, minie, moe solved that problem.

Robert mistakenly concluded that his knowledge of munitions exceeded that of Mike. It was incumbent on him, therefore, to issue instructions. “When I light the fuse we’ll walk calmly over to those rocks and crouch down.”

Like bloody hell. Mike shot off like a rocket. After five paces Robert passed him. They were barely behind the rocks before the whole world went mad. A flash of brilliant light lit up the sunlit midday sky, followed by an unbelievably thunderously loud bang. Mike’s brain, for the first time in living memory, ceased to function. He was blind, deaf, and yet fully aware of those boulders, ten feet in diameter being hurled into the stratosphere, only then to rain down all around them. Death was but a miracle away.

Five never ending minutes passed before all body functions returned to normal. Eyes could see. Ears could hear. Bowel and bladder could be restrained. Mike and Robert made a ‘B’ line for the jeep. This was still rocking so violently that mounting, and then sitting in the seat, required the ultimate in mountaineering skills. However, with courage born out of unmitigated fear, they mastered their difficulties, to then send the vehicle hooning down the bush track towards the safety of the bungarra infested shearing shed. With that haven in sight Robert and Mike’s racing hearts commenced a slow down. Soon breathing returned to an irregular two hundred breaths per minute. They were safe.

“Oh shit, no they weren’t. Another station jeep appeared, hooning straight at them. “Please – not Robert’s dad.”

Don't scoff. Robert's dad, at seven feet tall hit the top of the door frame, and at seven feet across he hit the double width side frames, too. And he was one mean man. Robert, six feet up and six feet across had no intention of arguing with his Old Man. Nor did that thought enter Mike's head either. Mike, who feared no man (except Robert's dad) asked in the most pleasant voice he could muster, "Why Mr D, what brings you to the shed on Sunday?"

"Shut up you stupid, moronic imbecile." With that, and with no other word spoken, he motioned for Robert to turn the jeep around, by pointing in the direction of the homestead. Mike, with three quarters of a mile to the quarters was left to make it on foot.

The sequel to this tale occurred some weeks later. Frank informed Mike that Robert, even now was returning to good health. More significant however, Mr D had placed a total and permanent embargo on that raving idiot of a woolclasser. Never, but never would he be permitted to return to Mulgul. He, Robert Snr, would come even in death, if that mentally deficient imbecile so much as set foot on the place ever again.

What a bitter disappointment to blameless Mike, who at all times, was understandably proud of his brilliantly unblemished reputation. In retrospect however, he realised even Robt Snr, after death, couldn't fail but to acknowledge his genius. Look what happened to Tiny Tim, Twiggy, Boy George, to mention a few, whose superior intellect only became apparent either with the passage of time or after their demise.

Nor did our Hale School hero set out to increase his knowledge of explosives.

A CALCULATING COLOSSUS.

Everyone knew the greatest 'brain drain' in Australia's history had been going on now for some time. The 1950's worldwide shortage of mathematicians had already set our country back by decades. That may well be true, but I knew one brain that, by itself, could overcome all the problems this 'brain drain' had created.

It is not generally known that Mike had already withstood tempting offers from the Philharmonic Orchestra, Shenton Park Dogs Home and Casey's Fish and Chips. In each instance he was assured of millionaire status within two weeks. While others would have succumbed to temptation, not Mike. No way would this loyal and dedicated wool man forsake his destiny.

There's no doubt his brain never functioned below full speed; example, that revolutionary theory that a shearing team would operate better by eliminating all shearers had been developed and refined to include roustabouts as well. Is there no way this man's lateral thinking can be held back?

In the 1950's slide rules, calculators and computers did not exist. A woolclasser with foresight would utilise a ready reckoner as his one and only aid. This was a book with more than a thousand pages displaying the answers to hundreds of thousands of multiplications and divisions worked out to the nearest farthing. Mike, need it be said, carried all this information in his head. Having outlined this situation it is now easier to accept that millions of calculations per shed is no exaggeration. Ten shearers and four two hour runs involved forty count outs per day. This was undertaken by our Man at the end of each run, with the station manager on hand to provide a check count. Physical fights were regular occurrences because the station manager invariably believed Mike's fifty count should have been forty seven (The bastard couldn't even keep score of whose buy it was).



And while their woolclasser and champion stood in the blazing sun fighting for their rights those ungrateful, bloody shearers were inside the shed eating whatever happened to be edible in the morning and afternoon teas sent by the cook. When he did get to the bucket of tea it was invariably cold, nor had anything been left for him to eat. And the shearers were hovering, waiting to see the tally book. Without exception Mike's fifty should have been fifty three. More skirmishes. Dealing with Mike though compared very unfavourably to dealing with Hitler. Accept his decision or face the firing squad.

No real relief for the mathematical maestro after the 5-30pm knock off either. The ten sets of figures, accumulated during the day had to be checked before transferring them to a tally sheet, which by union decree had to be displayed in the shed. Not so easy when it included a breakdown for each shearer into flock sheep, double fleeces, rams and stags. A further breakdown into ewes, wethers and lambs followed. As Mike sat on his bed, precariously balancing all this paperwork and applying five star concentration, you could bet pounds to peanuts some mongrel from the team would choose that very moment to front up for a packet of Persil, a book of Tally Ho cigarette papers or a bar of Velvet bloody soap. The real optimist spent time arguing his right to an extra bottle of beer, one more than his daily ration of two. Whilst the latter interruption wasted time, the other incursions meant dropping the tallying to enter these piddling transactions in a docket book. Do you wonder why some claimed to have

never seen Mike smile? I mean he had one hour from knock off to dinner. One such interruption provided him with a lucky day. What's more he had to shower in that hour too. As the last one entering the ablution block to wash off that day's grime he invariably had to use cold water. The fire fed hot water had long gone. Then, with the need to maintain good health uppermost in his mind Mike had to follow his doctor's specific and insistent advice. "Michael, my boy, the lifesaving ingredients of beer are now an irrefutably proven medical fact. Two bottles are essential, but they must be consumed before dinner." An extremely difficult proposition, you'll agree sometimes requiring less than five minutes of total dedication.

After the evening meal the daily entries into the wool book occupied some pre-sleep time. The wool presser recorded the necessary information relating to each bale he turned out, the class (wool type) and the weight, usually in absolutely illegible handwriting. Deciphering and mentally adding up weights for thirty or so class lines and as many as forty hand pressed bales per day, none of which were to weigh less than three hundred pounds, readied Mike for his night of restless relaxation. These were the easy days, nevertheless; wait for the cutout.

As cutout approached the whole damn team became more frenetic. Another shed completed, one less to go before returning home to mother. For Mike, however, it created three days (nights actually) of living hell. Apart from the normal, daily, woolclassing and mathematical chores he had to stock take all the stores in order to work out what food had been consumed at each shed by the most gluttonous bunch ever encountered by man. What was the overall cost at the start, what was the cost at the end, all confirmed by countless receipts. Divide the result by twenty four, add individual's personal outlay from docket books, record this information in each person's ledger account – and still Mike hadn't passed the half way mark. Of course there'd be bitching. Some gluttons were more gluttonous than others. Where was the justice in sharing things equally? There were rumours, invariably started by the union rep, about how Honest Frank Marks had deviously included the full cost of four tyres for his ute into the mess account. As if he would. With a query like that though, bookkeeper Mike had to sit down, go through all his workings, and convince one or two of the clowns, representing the team, everything was legit.

There were occasions when Mike thought that walking out the door in an easterly direction towards the desert was the way to go. But North West legends, particularly when they hail from Hale School have another beer, and like shit to a blanket keep on keeping on. Shearers and

rousties are so bloody useless. Why can't they provide for themselves? When passing through a town, what's stopping them from stocking up on soap, razor blades, tobacco and anything else for that matter? If this was a form of retribution against the woolclasser then team member beware; anything you can do Mike can do better.

The night before cutout everyone is given the opportunity to check their own debit entries. Another useless exercise according to the team accountant. To do this the minimum qualification needed is to have mastered the skill of counting accurately on the fingers of two hands. Don't scoff. You'd be surprised. After Mike had resolved every disagreement with his workings, those on fixed wages would have all ledger entries completed and their nett cheque filled out ready for payment the next day. To conclude by midnight could be considered an early finish. By that time, Cosgrove or someone like him, would have been asleep for three hours, snoring their bloody vocal chords, soft palette and nasal passages to shreds. Anticipating this scenario for Mike, as he sat working on an unmade bed, balancing papers across his knees, unable to lean back and relax, almost guaranteed a sleepless six hours ahead.

In five star shearing quarters light was generated by a two forty volt plant. More often than not though, Mike struggled in light coming from a twelve volt plant or a hurricane lamp. Of the three sources the latter two were barely sufficient to light up the middle of the day. Who cares? Another cutout was another shed closer to Perth and our icon would have worked in the dark to bring that on.

That last day, the grande finale, was a day of really, really intense pressure. Nevertheless, only rarely did Mike exhibit signs of stress, and yet, to this day, no satisfactory reason has been given that goes even close to explaining his incredible serenity and permanent rage during that eighteen hour final day splurge.

Normal duties lasted for him right up to the last sheep shorn. Then he would race to the cookhouse, throw his books and papers on the mess room table, switch his ex Hale School brain in to overdrive and calculate each of the ten shearers' tally for the entire shed. Because they worked on contract rates each of the ten would vigorously argue that their tally had been short changed in some way. It was an inevitable process they followed, but Mike always won. "Who do you think you are, Mike? Denying me my rights – are you a stooge for the station owner, or is it Frank Marks?"

This fight would be over one stag or a double fleece (both at a marginally higher rate than a flock sheep), roughly one shilling out of a total two hundred and fifty pounds (one shilling to five thousand shillings). Inevitably though the all-out battle would be decided in Mike's favour. With the last shearer paid there remained only one person who had not showered, had not packed and loaded his gear and had not had a beer. Guess who? How could he when settlement with the station owner remained outstanding?

More calculations, more ginning around with born losers. But let it be known there could only be one winner where Mike was concerned. This time he received a cheque on behalf of Frank, begrudgingly given, it must be said, but gratefully accepted, again after another futile fight.

By this stage banker Mike's underlings were carrying on, "What the hell is he doing? We're always waiting for the slow witted moron." A slow witted moron, I ask you? Like the mighty Bernborough thoroughbred racehorse, Mike was always first to finish - except at shed pay outs.

No one can suggest the lifestyle was suitable for a man of Mike's intellect, so why be a woolclasser? Because, with an IQ of 278, in ten a stand team, the door automatically opens wide. Exclusive job offers for our mathematician came pouring in – examples, one from the University of WA as their professor of mathematics, another as barman in the Basement Bar at the Palace Hotel, but only during non-peak periods. The latter offer, though tempting, was refused.

At the end of this chapter I'm not sure whether it's Mike or me who has lost the way. Should you remain in doubt about what's been said I suggest you check with UWA and the Palace Hotel, both of whom have carried out a detailed investigation into Mike's background. Do not be discouraged when difficulties arise. UWA destroy records after fifty years and the Palace hotel has not existed now for twenty years or so. Keep going.

ACCURATE WEATHER FORECASTS.

“It will not rain.” Mike had spoken, both with Stalin like authority and with positive uncertainty.

“That’s not what the Weather Bureau just said on the wireless. They said thunderstorms and heavy rain for the Pilbara, Gascoyne and Goldfields.” Some argumentative rousie, who at this point knew no better, and was desperate to stay put, continued, “It’s not worth the risk, Mike. When it rains all the roads will be unpassable. We’re better off here enjoying the delights of Meekatharra.”

“Enjoying the delights of Meekatharra. You bloody idiot. There are no delights. There’s the Commercial, Railway, Royal Mail and Meekatharra pubs. Which one of them is a delight? They’re blood houses, you fool. And that leaves Elder’s and Lloyd’s general stores, Lloyds chemist shop and a café with no refrigerator. Then what? There’s nothing.”

“There’s Rosie.”

“Yeah, and I love purple peanuts. Get on the Grey Ghost, NOW.”

So the shearing team and their infallible leader departed the pretty, picturesque, health centre town of Meeka (yeah sure) which had been completely obscured by thick red dust. The upcoming journey saw them heading towards the peace and serenity of salubrious Marillana Station, their next shed. Only murderous thoughts were on everyone’s mind.

The one truck cavalcade, with one hundred and twenty, trouble free, dust filled, suffocating miles behind them, felt the first few gentle drops of rain. Before five more miles had been left in their wake a tropical downpour hit this band of reluctant travelers, with unprecedented fury. In no time the North West Inland (graded) Highway was flooded. The Grey Ghost was slip sliding as far sideways as there was forward progress. Ten minutes later – “Everyone out and push,” which is how Mike’s team enjoyed most of the next twenty miles; not once did the tropical downpour ease. Red, dust covered clothes and bodies changed to red, mud covered clothes and bodies. That red viscous substance had impregnated everything exposed to the

surrounding atmosphere. And not one non murderous thought interrupted the thought processes of every member of Mike's team, bar Mike, who would have appreciated being somewhere else.

What everyone thought would never appear, eventually did – the Gascoyne River. Nor was the Grey Ghost the only vehicle in sight. Three cars were parked on the banks with a dozen or so people grouped nearby. Beyond them, the mighty Gascoyne, running a banker and topped by unbroken white, frothing, swirling water formed an impassable barrier. Trees and debris were being swept along at an unstoppable rate. Any attempt to reach the opposite bank, three hundred yards away, was never contemplated.

By this time the deepest part of the river was ten to twelve feet, and this, all in a matter of two or three hours. Incredible. At least four or five inches of rain must have fallen on nearby parts in that time. Rainfall runoff from more distant country had yet to arrive. What was painfully obvious to Mike's deliriously unhappy crew could be seen in their black expressions. Even if the rain stopped reasonably soon their holiday on the banks of the Gascoyne River would not be for less than three days. Then, as the 'Man' unwisely explained, "With no way forward and no hope of a return to the delights of Meekatharra this gives each one of us a wonderful opportunity for reflection – and to save our hard earned brass."

Reflections? Right here goes. The problems they all faced hit them one after the other. First food. Stores for Marillana had been delivered directly to the shed. The few loaves of bread, butter and eggs, carried with them on the Grey Ghost, would be consumed by the end of day one, no question. Now, let's dig a little deeper. A whole twenty pound bag of rice, part bags of onions and green shooting potatoes and a few tins of stuff carried over from the last shed – that's it. That reflection on food pleased no one.

Cooking utensils? Each station provided this gear, which left them with a spade and, after the petrol had been poured into their transport, an empty four gallon tin. Reflect on that, oh Great one.

The chances of shooting a 'roo were zilch. Every appetising, last one of them would now be dispersed. The need to concentrate around a few existing watering holes had been eliminated

with the widespread rain. Good one Mike, the delights of Meekatharra were looking more delightful by the minute.



Where the hell were they going to roll out their swags? The ground everywhere consisted of mud, oozy sloppy red mud. Each step meant sinking down to the ankles, so finding a partially dry spot to spread the groundsheet was well-nigh impossible. Stepping into the blankets brought to them mud on feet, legs, hands, hair and clothes. You could wash at the edge of the raging river, but then you had to walk back to your swag through the bloody mud. This was to be life for the next few days.

However, everything else paled into insignificance when this band of very unmerry men were confronted with their biggest problem. The Grey Ghost carried five cases of the beautifully amber Swan Lager – one hundred and twenty bottles – not even two a day per person would last for 3 days. What if the river remained impassable for more than four days?

It was at this point that Mike considered it prudent to camp away from his loyal team. There he remained, unseen and unheard, for three days. Despite intense interrogation he never revealed his diet for that period. (I hope it wasn't bardie grubs).

Then –hope. The river had receded to about two feet, so he returned to take charge.



The Grey Ghost had the clearance to safely negotiate the now slowly flowing water. Cars and utes though, were a different proposition. Water would bank up against the sides, exposing them to the risk of being washed off the eroded crossover. So further patience was called for. Patience, however, was in short supply. No doubt the prevailing grogless situation contributed to this deficiency. Wise counsel was urgently needed.

Re-enter the indomitable Mike. Like Nelson, with the telescope held to his blind eye, Mike stood resolutely on the banks of the Gascoyne River, right hand held to his heart - that meteorological mistake now in the past. The future held nothing but hope.

A fifty feet length of rope tied to the Grey Ghost and twenty desperately staining men assisted by a racing engine, managed to pull the obstinate truck through the river to the opposite bank. Success, and with every sober, shearing team member safely on board the horror trip resumed as they slipped, slithered and slathered their way to Marillana.

Let it be known, however, Mike lost all control of weather forecasting. Nor would shearers ever again give him any say in whether or not sheep were too wet to shear.

SWEAT AND STATISTICS.

Statistics have always played an important part in Mike's life. How would you mark the worth of a man for example? Years of diligent research on his part produced an answer that was acceptable to both the medical and pest control professions. A man is someone who can drink twelve schooners of beer in one hour and still retain the dignity and poise associated only with ex Hale School students.

How do you mark the worth of a good shearer, assuming of course there is such a thing? Is it by the number of sheep he can shear? You see, statistics again. Is it simply a case of comparing a three hundred a day man to someone struggling to shear one hundred and fifty? "No! Emphatically not," says Mike. "A good shearer is one, regardless of his tally, who always addresses me, or any woolclasser for that matter, as 'Your Grace'. This same good shearer has never claimed rates for a stag or a double fleece, and who, whilst suffering a broken leg and dengue fever at the same time, continues to front the shearing board as he 'pink' shears sheep in undiminished numbers, knowing that to delay my return to Perth by one second will create an exceedingly ugly situation (for the world)."

Based on these comments therefore it's fair to conclude that there is no such thing as a good shearer.

He continues, "Most important of all, a (----) shearer will accept the word of a woolclasser without question, as the undisputed expert on all matters relating to the wool industry. No, that's not explicit enough. A (----) shearer is one who will accept my word without question as the undisputed expert on all matters relating to the wool industry, the finance industry, the racing industry, the pearling industry, phantom comics and unblemished good taste as published in Volumes 1,2 and 3 of Royal Etiquette."

OK, so where do statistics come into the equation?

It all started when a shearer (and he certainly wasn't a good one) actually called Mike a bludger. "You stupid goose," Our legend replied. Even when faced with a crisis Mike refused to swear, "Me a bludger? I'm a woolclasser. And whilst the most active part of your body is your bum,

the most active part of mine is my awesome brain. Every day I deal with a hundred matters, each one of which would never occur to you in a hundred years.

At this point you sort of got the impression that Mike was about to deliver a classic.

“Would you know worm, that a woolclasser physically lifts seven tons of wool each day, walks a total of three miles carrying that seven tons each day to a bin, then walks those three miles back to his wool table.” Let me sum up in plain English what this means. During one season away up North I carry over 1,200 tons more than 520 miles.” The world of statistics certainly gives one an advantage when talking to a moron that’s for sure.

“You are dealing with a legend, not a bludger.” The knockout blow had been delivered. Nothing more remained to be said. Anyway the dumb shearer just stood there with a vacant look on his face for the whole time Mike was delivering a one round, knockout blow.

“I’m not impressed shit for a head,” was the worm’s eloquent reply. Mike stopped midstride as he started to turn away. No one spoke to an ex Hale School student like that. “No, I’m far from impressed, pus for a brain. Sweat is the only true measure of effort. A shearer loses five pints of sweat per day. That’s one hundred and six gallons per season, and that’s two and a half forty four gallon drums. You, you globule of grease, don’t even sweat.

Mike had been struck wordless. He was wordless for quite some time, able only to marvel at the ignorance of shearers. Did he learn a lesson? Not for one moment did he concede that some shearers have a brain, but it was certainly evident that sweat and statistics needed more research.

JOB INTERVIEWS.

The more people you meet the better informed you become.

That is utter crap as far as Mike is concerned. Should you remain unconvinced, let it be known, that, because of his vast experience, he can state without fear of contradiction – “There is more knowledge to be gained from one orangutan than there is from the collective capacity of fifty shearing teams, woolclassers excepted of course.”

He should know, too, having interviewed hundreds of would-be shearers, shedhands, wool pressers, experts and cooks. The brain cavity of a flea is bigger by far than any of these. All sorts of people apply for jobs. Shearers, without exception, insist they are non-drinkers, and this is said with such sincerity that you would have to be an unconscionable bastard to ask the next obvious question. “What’s that on your breath? It’s like I’m now sitting in a brewery.”

The reply – as quick as a flash, “I knew there was something different about that glass of milk. The mongrel must have laced it with brandy. I’ll kill the rotten sod.”

Yeah!

The mentality of shedhands/ roustabouts/ rousies/ loppies has been covered in precise detail throughout this historical document. Mike, however, when asked to summarise his findings, chose to do so using one word, ‘extrabloodydumb.’ When asked for further elaboration, “They’re in the shearing industry and they don’t even know that wool comes from sheep.”

Job interviews for loppies were, and remain unnecessary. As far as our woolclasser is concerned it’s a case of, “First in scores. None are any bloody good anyway.”

Wool pressers are specially chosen from failed shedhands, whilst experts are ex shearers who, after twenty five years, have never shorn a tally over fifty. A prerequisite is that they must have sufficient strength in their grinding arm to wear out combs and cutters before one week has elapsed, and who, at the same time produce a cutting edge equivalent to the sharp side of a sledge hammer.

The daddy of them all, though, is the cook.

If ever Mike has the chance, like for example when he meets up with a roadworks gang in a pub, he would welcome this opportunity to hold an enlightened, semi intellectual type conversation, on such occasions he always recites this one experience to make his point. What follows may not be word for word, but it sure is close.

“This stupid woman had applied to cook for my ten stand team. In my politest voice – I went to Hale School, you know, where good manners and proven good breeding were an entry requirement. I asked, ‘what experience have you had, bitch?’

‘I’ve cooked for three farmhands,’ she replied.

Still carefully using my impeccable manners, I posed the next question. ‘Shit, you silly old cow, there are twenty four ravenous men in my team. They’ll kill you if meals aren’t ready on time, and what the hell are you going to cook for them anyway?’

‘Don’t you worry about that, Dearie, beef is my specialty.’

I retained my incomparable dignity, but only after applying super human self-control. ‘Beef! Beef! You stupid ignorant old hag! Beef! There’s no such thing for any meal at any sheep station. They only run sheep. We don’t shop at Woolworths, you doddering old fool.’

I was so pleased I had kept my cool.

‘You mustn’t worry unnecessarily, Dearie, and don’t fret, I can whip up a host of lamb dishes, too.’

No, that wasn’t the straw that broke the camel’s back. I hadn’t reached my present elevated position in the shearing industry by chance. Since the very outset, even as a rousie, I have had this uncanny ability to impart knowledge.

‘Lamb! Lamb! You have to be brain dead. You’re an imbecile. This is stag country you silly old bag. You don’t even know what a stag is, do you? It’s a castrated ram, twenty four hours

from death from natural causes. It will never serve another ewe, never sire another lamb. It's bloody useless, just like you. It's brain dead, too, just like you. The station manager specially chooses the feeble monstrosities. He pretends they're young wethers and makes sure that's all we ever have for every meal.'

'As long as it's tender, Dearie. I can make a scrumptious, mouthwatering meal. They'll come back for seconds, you mark my words'

'Tender! Tender! What's tender you bloody old cockroach?' Despite a Herculean effort and my impressively well-mannered background, my exasperation was starting to show through. 'I can't believe I'm here listening to this raving, mad woman.' I breathed in deep, counted to thirteen, rolled my eyes and lifted my hands heavenwards. Then in a soft, controlled scream I began my lesson.

'Listen retard, the meat you get is double dead. Blood stopped flowing through the body weeks before we see it. There's no moisture the flesh. Constituency is like leather that's been out in the sun for years. And that's before the bloody rousie gets it to the killing pen. The killing process doesn't improve the texture of the meat either. He can't make the flesh any tougher even though he bruises every skerrick of goodness out of every carcass. That said, he does make one change; adding flavour to the taste is his specialty. This is stag, remember. Its flesh starts out rank and is absolutely repulsive, and because all roustabouts are dumb, none more so than the one doing the butchering, it can get worse. Don't ask me how, but as he removes the guts from the carcass, more often than not he cuts the stomach lining. Half digested contents spill over the meat. Most times, too, he cuts the bile duct, the bladder and anything else that spills. So the rank flesh delivered to the meat house for the cook has been marinated with multiple other obnoxious flavours as well. That you silly old sow is what you cook.'

'Well now, that does present a challenge, doesn't it?'

Mike digressed from his tale for a moment to address the spellbound road gang. 'You can see she was an uneducated, mindless bloody maniac, can't you? So I thought I'd resort to good old fashioned logic. In my most kindly manner I said, 'Some people never learn, others are born dumb. That's you. In fact both are you. I've deliberately set out to impart knowledge. My sole aim is to help, because I've been told you get back what you give. Despite all my professionally

delivered advice, though, there's a void, nothing is coming back to me. - Do you still want the job?'

'Desperately.'

'Why?'

'So I can poison you.'

That's almost the end of Mike's delivery. He concluded this discourse after one of the road gang asked, 'What the hell's the point, Dickhead?'

'The point, my learned friend, is this.' He paused to collect his thoughts and to hide his hurt. 'You can set out to help someone as constructively as you know how. You can give them priceless pearls of your own hard won wisdom, but when you're dealing with a shearers' cook, it's like filling a vacuum flask. Until you unscrew the lid and add some contents, it's full of nothing.'

THE TRILOGY.

MICK

Saint Mike is not to be confused with Saint Michael. There are similarities, without doubt. Both breathe, eat, pass wind and have the softest of soft hearts. Yes, it's true, gruff, impatient, intolerant, aggressive – Mike is all these, but only to hide the fact that he is a gentle man. How do I know? Well in 1955 it was almost Saint Mike Martyr, the man who but for non-divine intervention would have given his all for the wool industry he loved.

You understand, don't you, that Mike the woolclasser/overseer, possessed characteristics which were associated with Stalin, Hitler and Idi Amin. There were rumours abounding that he ran labour camps, not shearing teams; all untrue, as you will see for yourselves as this story unfolds.

Mick and Alf were two of Mike's shearers. Bruce was the team's expert. All three had a common problem – grog.

Mick was a thoroughly decent bloke, quiet, unassuming, reasonable, fortyish, married, devoted to his children; he detested the seven to eight months away from home. For him, this existence he endured for one reason, the good income competent shearers received. So you stuck it out, regardless of any circumstance.

Within a week of starting the 1955 run Mick was a mess. Over the preceding twenty years or so of his shearing life he had built up an ever increasing allergic reaction to wool yolk. This is stuff shearers cannot avoid. The very nature of their work involved handling sheep and wool, and that's where yolk is found. For four or five months down south – not a problem in the world, but Mick knew without a shadow of doubt, that from the day he commenced shearing his life would be hell on earth. The skin on most parts of his body became a cluster of angry welts. These clusters didn't just itch, they produced searing pain, particularly whilst shearing. At night the pain eased but not sufficiently for Mick to sleep. Arms, legs, torso, even his face had to be scratched. Calamine lotion offered the only relief and that was little enough to be as good as nothing. Showers were agony, hot or cold. These increased the pain to indescribable levels.

Why did he stick it? Well Mick's family had been built around a certain income. There was no alternative work for him in Perth, which even came close to the earnings he received as a shearer. For Mick to maintain his family's lifestyle there was no way out.

After four months of unremitting pain, virtually no sleep and constant mental anguish like you couldn't begin to understand, he took to the whisky in a big way. Needless to say in his disturbed state he and the whisky didn't combine too well. So, of course, the mature adults comprising the rest of the team immediately turned to Saint Mike to solve the problem caused by a screaming, deranged and violent drunk.

The first thought that comes to mind when Mike is on a salvage mission of this sort is 'Emulate Galahad – Sir Galahad – the most chivalrous of all knights' (this time, though, without his gallant white steed, - but ever tactful).

“What in the name of bloody hell are you doing Mick, you mad brained bastard?”

In normal times Mike and Mick would interpret such a comment as proof of mutual respect and good intent. This couldn't have been normal times. Something clicked in Mick's mind. His eyes glazed over, hair stood straight out from his scalp and it is said horns appeared from his temples. He lunged for an axe leaning against a nearby wall, grabbed it and was no more than three yards from Mike, with that lethal weapon raised above his head, poised, ready to strike with atomic like power, and so create two vertical, aristocratic halves of our man Mike.

Saint Mike's immediate thought, surprisingly, was not, “Forgive him for he knoweth not what he doeth.” - It was ‘Shit!!!!’

There's no doubt, though, on that emotion charged day, Mike nearly gave up his life for his chosen vocation. Had it not been for three brave souls standing behind Mick, who grappled him to the ground as he was about to make that fatal move, Mike would indeed have become a martyr to the wool industry.

After being restrained for several hours Mick reverted to his normal self, truly devastated by what he had done. After that same several hours, though, Mike had not uttered one sound. The team suggested he remained too traumatised, or had decided to offer forgiveness (to the world)

through permanent silence. Yeah!! Mick, however, did accept this silence as forgiveness and from that time on became a disciple, whose main purpose in life was to spread the word, particularly to those not exactly enamoured with ‘The Man.’

ALF.

Alf, a simple, quiet, apparently single man in his late fifty’s was a different kettle of fish. He never mentioned family, nor did he receive any mail. Limbs and a body that were showing distinct signs of aging restricted him to a tally around one hundred and twenty sheep daily. Off season saw him working as a deckhand on a crayfish boat. So for him, hard work happened day after day after day, year in year out with no worthwhile respite. Every waking moment he spent with a smile on his face. Nothing was too much trouble, even for rousies. He was a good bloke.

One bottle of beer, however, and he lost his capacity to reason. It didn’t take long for the sharks to work out a way to exploit that weakness. Whilst the working week was sacrosanct, Alf didn’t booze, but with a little encouragement from the stalking sharks on Friday night and a few bottles of Swan Lager, he was fair game. Alf wouldn’t win one hand he wasn’t allowed to. When he’d lost all ability to reason, betting five pounds on jack high seemed like an astute wager. The dirty deeds taking place around him went unnoticed – almost.

None of the other team members could convince him that the card sharks weren’t his good friends, not stone cold sober or when he saw the growing pile of IOU’s The gambling began after dinner Friday night and continued all night until lunch Saturday, then, after a sleep, resumed again that night until mid-morning Sunday. Four weekends in a row this sting continued.

Saint Mike first became aware of Alf’s plight when he overheard a couple of shearers discussing the ramifications. Apparently, his earnings accumulated over the preceding four months, had gone in IOU’s held by the sharks – plus some. Alf’s four months hard work passed by for no return. Without a stop being placed on this blatant rip off it could well mean he would fork out everything he earned over a whole year - maybe even beyond.

Now you have to realise sainthood is not freely awarded. It has to be earned and since there's no denying there are traces of the devil in Saint Mike, he had to try really hard.

After dinner one mid-week night the three sharks were seated at the same table where they played their poker. Conversation stopped as they observed pious Mike approaching.

“Hey you blokes, do you want to be in a quiz? Question 1. Who are the three biggest arseholes in the team?”

No response. “None out of one. Question 2. Name three shearers who have just been sacked?”

“What the hell for Mike? We shear around five hundred sheep a day between us, and do a bloody good job, too.”

“Wrong. None out of two. Question 3. Who can keep their pen after they burn all Alf's IOU's?”

Pete, the chief shark, and their spokesman, managed to spit out, “Get stuffed you stupid crap artist.”

Either Pete didn't know Mike and his fearsome reputation all that well, or he sought a slow, painful death. No one called Mike a crap artist without retribution being delivered in a truly horrible fashion. Initially, though, this wasn't apparent. Mike called out several names and they came arunning. “Marty take Alf to the shearing shed. He shouldn't see what's going to happen. Greg, Bob and Jake, you supervise these bastards while they get their swag, gear and a full water bag together. Then load them on to the Grey Ghost. I'll drop them by the side of the road. If they can persuade someone to give them a lift – good luck to them.

So off they went. The only thing was they didn't stop, as expected, by the side of the North West Coastal Highway, where three or four vehicles a day passed through. Mike, the lousy bastard, had more on his mind than that. Inside Wallal's boundary, you see, there was another turnoff belonging to a remote, rarely used track crossing an uninhabited stretch of desert before rejoining civilisation at Warrawagine Station. On this track three or four vehicles a month would have been busy.

Of course the three sharks all thought pure bullshit emanated from Mike, that is until he dropped them off and said he'd be back in a couple of days with water. That was the extent of his help. Their threats that they would report him to the union fell on deaf ears. As he turned the Grey Ghost around the three potential castaways held a quick conference, and as a result magnanimously offered to negate half the IOU's, and work twice as hard on their pens.

Still they didn't realise that to cross Saint Mike was to be damned forever in hell's fire.

No negotiation, all the IOU's, and since they had been irreversibly sacked the best offer for the terrible trio made it necessary that they hitch a ride on North West Coastal Highway back to Port Hedland.

The end result left Alf with a life again, but only because Saint Mike had made the supreme sacrifice. He sacked the sharks knowing that at least two weeks would elapse before replacement shearers became available. Two weeks lost shearing at five hundred sheep a day amounted to five thousand in total. That set the final cutout for the very last shed, and the arrival back in Perth, by two whole weeks. Now, for 'Our Man' that had to be the ultimate, supreme sacrifice; only death was a worse alternative than being away from Perth for one minute longer than necessary.

Alf recognised this fact and in his capacity as a crewman on a crayboat arranged for the delivery of a case of Swan Larger and a carton of cray tails to coincide with Saint Mike's canonisation ceremony.

BRUCE.

No pretense about Bruce. He was a binge drinker. Once he had persevered past the hangover stage he became transformed, a thoroughly decent bloke, a man amongst men. On the slops, though, he was one massively irritating menace.

Bruce's binge would inevitably start whilst moving from one shed to another, which meant passing through a town. There he stocked up on the hard stuff, whisky usually, fire juice known as Corio (C-o-r 10). And talk about cunning. Somehow the stash would be hidden away so

effectively that nine times out of ten it remained undiscovered, not from want of trying either. Every team member would have given their right arm to confiscate the lot, knowing that for as long as it was available to Bruce their lives would be a continuous hell.

Bruce never set out to deliberately annoy us, it just happened as a natural progression. After half a bottle all he wanted to do was talk. If it had been something better than inane drivel, OK, but no way. You could spend hours trying to break contact, you could adopt a fighting pose, use a ferocious voice fired up with fury and threatening to life and limb, you could try desperately to offload him on to someone else. Nothing worked. Once in his grip his befuddled brain claimed you as an appendage.

Occasionally, whilst still with the fairies, he gave the impression of being asleep. Some hope. At the most five minute would pass by before we became disabused of that very optimistic impression. Then, seemingly well rested, Bruce would set out to make contact with someone, anyone. Until he did the song, 'Peg of my heart I love you' shattered the airwaves. He shared the same melodic tunelessness with Tiny Tim, and though we came to hate that song, all of us knew it off by heart.

Bathing, also a no, no for as long as Bruce retained his access to his stash, made him nobody's favourite, certainly not Mike's.

Sober though, and the situation reversed. He was so damned clever with his hands, and so willing to help everyone. Maybe that came about because of guilt feelings. No engine existed that he couldn't fix. Any shearer whose car under-performed would see Bruce stick with the problem for as long as it took. All of us in the team owed him for countless hours of his time, every single second of it, though, was freely given. Most sober weekends saw him in the expert's workshop making something for someone. Tin trunks were a specialty and were works of art, which, when finished could be displayed with pride at the flashiest pub in town. Every year new team members, shearers and shedhands alike, placed their orders; the only cost was for materials.

The contrast in behaviour never ceased to amaze people. Sober Bruce was a legend, albeit a lesser one than Mike, but without doubt the most popular man in the team. Drunk he was ostracised, an absolute pariah. He always remained Mike's expert of choice, however. The

shearer's combs and cutters were sharper than sharp during his sober times, and that meant one thing less for sheep drovers to complain about. Other so called experts, drunk or sober, couldn't produce a sharp remark, let alone a bogey (handpiece) to slide through wool with minimum effort.

Mike's status gravitated between saintliness and villainy, depending on Bruce's level of sobriety. Saintliness was at its height during those recovery phases when his head pounded like a battering ram, when his entire body seemed to be one agonising ache, when his eyes left their sockets to hang down around his navel. For the three days or so needed to pass this brutal stage Saint Mike would exhibit patience towards Bruce like no one else thought possible. He would nurture the tortured man, carefully ration out a measure of beer to lessen the pain and sit with him as he lay in bed fighting his way through the DT's. There was a friendship which, on two separate occasions, helped Bruce to abstain from grog altogether for an entire shearing season.

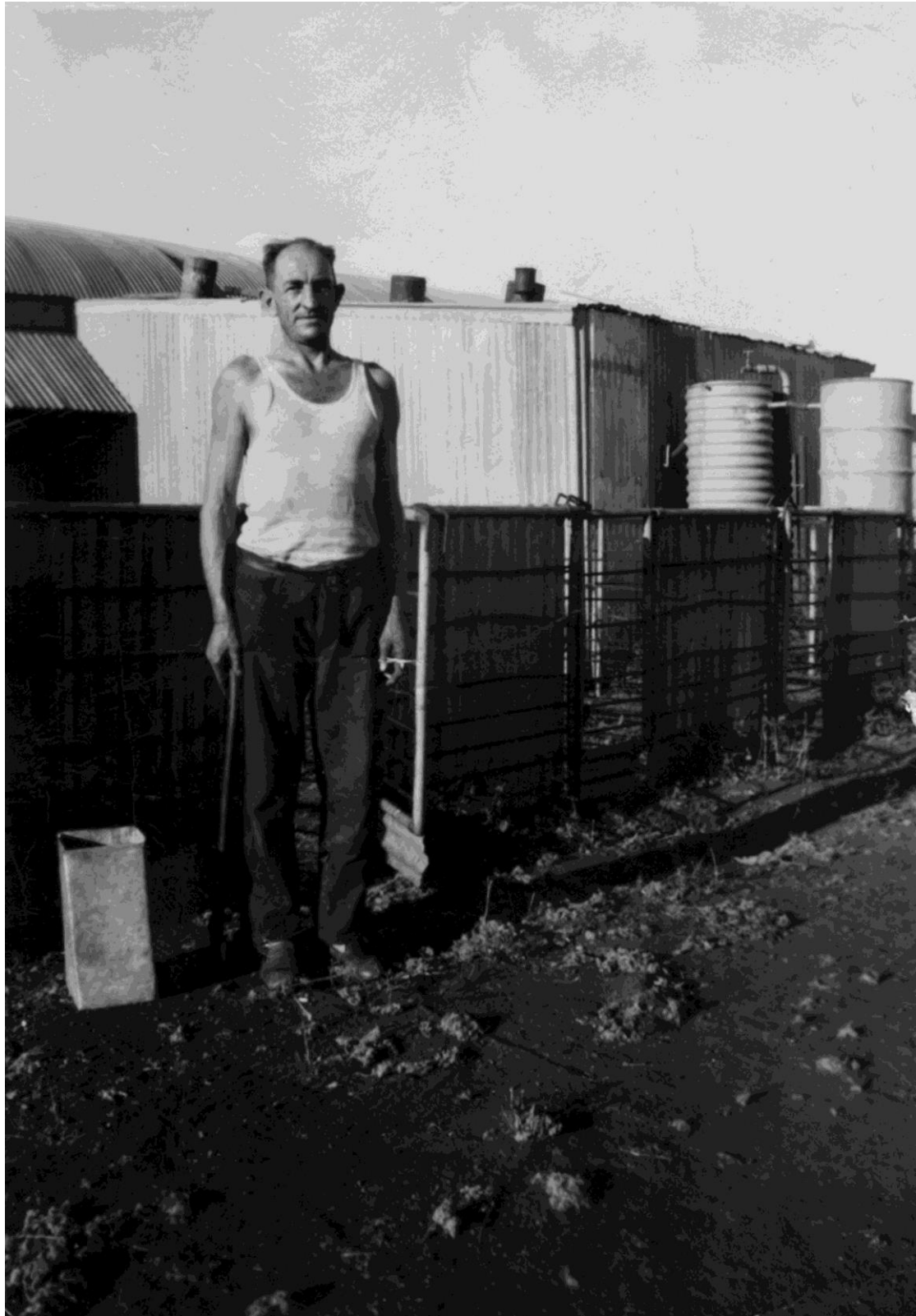
CHARACTERS YOU MEET.

ROBERTY BOB (DESERT HEAD, BUNGARRA BOB).

Bob was a gentle man shearer, as rough as guts, but a man of principle who had taken a liking to Mike. The liking developed while Mike still worked as a first year rousie, which for a shearer was somewhat unusual. Rousies, as a rule, have a two or three year induction period before acceptance is grudgingly given. Even more peculiar, the friendship was mutual. How about a Hale School legend bonding with a Boyup Brook nonentity, whose passionate interest revolved around Corio whisky. The whole world had gone mad.

Bob drove a Vanguard ute. Mike and Billy, the woolclasser in those early days, were constant fellow travelers and co-drivers. Come to think of it, they probably did 99.9% of the driving with Bob preferring to cover the miles in a placid manner and a half full state. He was, nevertheless, invariably happy and never devious. He would always help and never hinder.

Bob, in his fifty's and slowing down, had worked hard all his life. Playing harder had developed in more recent times. For a quarter of a century, though, he would have averaged around two hundred sheep a day, but over the last five years his daily average would have been closer to one hundred and fifty, and getting progressively harder to maintain. His working life, if grog didn't take over, would probably finish in a shed as a standby shearer making up the numbers; from there – probably as a penner upper or a piece picker in a small team. Long time shearers with no stability in their lives quite often completed a full circle – shedhand to shearer to shedhand. Whatever happened, such a lifestyle would feed him during the shearing season and would enable him to buy his booze. How he coped in the off season would determine his destiny. As his body degenerated, however, and his craving for grog grew, the future as a lonely, single, old man didn't look too bright.



LANCEY BOY

Lance happened to be one of Western Australia's top woolclassers. He and Frank Marks had formed a partnership that specialised in providing up to five shearing teams for North West pastoral properties. No other human being has ever existed who hated his working life with the venom that Lance hated his. There's no doubt many other woolclassers received their training under Lance, in both classing and overseeing (having responsibility for the successful management of their team) and they all learned from a master. He also taught many of them, through his own very obvious misery, to make their woolclassing careers up North short term.

In the 1950's these teams left Perth for seven or eight months at a time, and there were no overnight or weekend trips home to relieve the loneliness and boredom. Lance had lead such a life for thirty years, broken only by a five year stretch during the World War 2, when he didn't see his family for that entire period.

Over time he learned to control his feelings with grog, whisky mainly, and somehow this therapy rarely interfered with his actual classing. Bookwork he allocated to his learner, at the very first opportunity, so this vital part of management remained under control at every shed.

Lance was a good bloke, drunk or sober, just unhappy. In his presence you usually wanted to do nothing more than help relieve his non-stop misery.

MURPH

Murph could well have been the first person to suffer from anorexia. Nevertheless he was whipcord strong and fearless, so fearless that team members twice his size were reluctant to take him on. To subdue him physically meant his antagonist could only stop when Murph had reached the near death stage.

Most people have good and bad qualities. Murph had only good. In company he was unfailingly cheerful, but I suspect, by himself he experienced deep despair/ depression. You see by the time he turned thirty he was an alcoholic. I suppose his body chemistry was such that he became affected much earlier in his life than some of his peers, who were obviously heading in that direction. The difficulties this problem caused were, in many ways, overcome by his

outstanding intellect. He left school at thirteen years of age, under parental influence no doubt, to spend his teenage years as a jackaroo on a remote sheep station. Before long he was managing the place.

Murph had a photographic memory, was well read and abounding in common sense. When he spoke his resonant voice reminded you of Sir Laurence Olivier, when he sang you had only one thought, - to escape.

Once an alcoholic always an alcoholic, Murph, though, has not had a drink for three decades. He left the wool industry far behind and completed a university course. His subsequent working life has seen him rise to an important and exceedingly responsible position in the field of psychiatry.

PAUL AND IVAN

The two brothers came from South Australia in 1955 to try their luck shearing in the North West. They arrived at the Ozone Hotel, Frank Mark's marshalling point for our departure each year, not knowing another soul. The fact that they rolled up in a brand new, bright red, dust free, one ton Ford ute soon changed everyone's reserved attitude. Because it was the first of this model seen in WA, the team, to a man, positively drooled over their magnificent mode of transport.

Their start to the season established them as competent shearers, capable of maintaining a healthy year round average of one hundred and eighty sheep per day. Grog was not the most important thing in their lives. Perhaps, because they were relatively young, mid to late twenties, the hopelessness of the lifestyle for most engaged in the shearing industry hadn't struck them. They obviously had started this phase of their life with a purpose, evidenced by the fact that in later years they both finished up owning farms.

One of their most impressive characteristics was the outlook they had on life. Unlike fellow team members, who spent the weekends flat out on beds, playing cards, occasional kangaroo shoots, and generally becoming more and more bored, Paul and Ivan regularly cleaned and serviced their Ford, and sort out the history of the North West, area by area, all the time displaying a genuine interest in station management. It was a tragedy, therefore, when, half

way through the eight month run they contracted dengue fever. Both were as sick as a dog. For three or four weeks they lay on their beds, sweat pouring out of them, barely eating and dramatically losing weight. Returning to their pens became impossible. And being so far from home meant the next best alternative saw them heading off to a family in Albany, with someone else less sick, who was able to bear the brunt of the driving. Another two months passed before they could resume full time work.

Both died separately in extremely tragic circumstances many years later.

RECKY

Ted wasn't a wowser. He'd have the occasional drink, but I suspect under sufferance, just to get the mob off his back. Whilst lack of affection for the amber fluid set him apart, he was, despite this, regarded with absolute respect by everyone who knew him personally or by reputation. He lay no claims to being a 'gun' shearer, but he 'pinked' every sheep he shore, whether the wool combed beautifully or was as cotted as a coir mat; nor did double fleeces or sheep that kicked from start to finish affect his uncanny shearing technique. There were never any wool ridges left on the sheep's body, never any second cuts, never any skin cuts. Each and every sheep left his stand perfectly shorn, and this was recognised by his peers.

Ted shore around one hundred and fifty sheep daily, well below the gun's tally of two hundred and fifty. Nevertheless, he was always the first to be signed up for any team and apart from all else he was a gentleman.

ALAN AND JIMMY

Two more brothers hailing from Queensland who landed in WA mounted on a soft top Austin A30 ute. It lacked clearance, was too small and should never have travelled up North on those 1950's horror roads. It did though, and completed the three thousand mile round trip without a hitch. Good driving, good car, good luck, all of those contributed and were needed.

One day at Wallal Alan shore two hundred and ninety eight sheep. Talk about poetry in motion. He would have had to average just over a minute for each one; that means eleven different holding positions completed in that time. That is truly remarkable with the then narrow combs permitted by union decree. They say one day's shearing requires more energy than running a

marathon. I don't find that hard to believe. What's more remarkable is that a number of shearers have shorn more than 300.

Alan described himself as a bit flighty. Jimmy a consistent two hundred a day man, without doubt was the steadying influence. The impression gained was that Alan liked to 'play' at every opportunity, his way of letting off steam, and because Frank's teams were based around the towns of Meekatharra, Wittenoom, Nullagine, Marble Bar and Port Hedland that required considerable ingenuity. Anyway Jimmy never let things get out of hand, and that required considerable ingenuity too.

BRUCEY

Five feet four and full of fight; that was Bruce. He directed his talents towards penning up, which involved keeping the shed, both holding and catching pens, full so that shearers never ran out of sheep. After only two weeks on the job he learned he could say without fear 'get stuffed' to any shearer in the shed. They were dependent upon his continuing goodwill to avoid having more than their share of 'hard to shear' sheep in their particular catching pen. Other shedhands, of course, only speak to shearers with eyes downcast.



Bruce thrived on team life. He actually enjoyed his penner upping despite the many frustrations, when, for no known reason, sheep being herded into the shearing shed would refuse to go where he wanted. Although small in stature these frustrations helped him to develop a powerful voice and a vast, truly awesome vocabulary of profanity.

When travelling between sheds on the back of the Grey Ghost he seemed to be laughing non-stop. Nothing bothered him. Every other fellow traveller grew heartily sick of constantly swallowing thick red dust, being jerked around as that bloody truck hit every bump in the road for hour after hour – not Bruce. In this situation he was at his entertaining best, stopping life for his fellow travelers short of becoming unbearable.

Then, after travelling on the back of a truck in his first year away with a shearing team, he was holidaying in the South West when he fell out of a ute, killing himself.

JOE HOSIE

Joe, at sixty years, still shored sheep in reasonable numbers. Around one hundred and twenty was his limit. All were pretty well pinked. He had shorn through the depression and despite the hard existence our generation believed we endured, Joe would recall experiences of those earlier times in a way which would leave us absolutely convinced that ours was ‘the good life’. (His tales could have included some mild exaggeration). On a couple of occasions he and two shearing mates rode bikes from Perth to their first shed around Port Hedland, a distance approximating thirteen hundred miles. These weren’t racing bikes either. They were old fashioned and as heavy as hell. Nor were these roads bitumen, just tracks, ungraded tracks at that, with long stretches of deep sand where there was no alternative to dismounting and pushing. After heavy rainfall mile after mile of these same roads became inundated, slippery and muddy. Again walking and pushing was the only way to make progress. A month could elapse from woe to go, during which time, to survive they had to carry their own food, water, swag and clothes.

Were they not iron men in those days?

One year, two adjoining sheds, De Grey and Pardoo were shearing at the same time. Joe had a pen at Pardoo. Heavy rain fell over a couple of days making the sheep too wet, and the ground too difficult to muster, for shearing to recommence inside of a week. De Grey missed out altogether on the rain. Joe walked the forty miles in between for a day and most of the night so he could shear for three days. Then he walked back.

Now that’s what I call a work ethic.

BUSINESS CLASS TRAVEL ARRANGEMENTS

Despite constant urging, even ranting from Mike a 6 pm cutout at Cowra did not happen. 6 pm came and went, then, around 7.30 pm, with the Tilly lamps barely lighting up the gloom, the final sheep went down the shute. Still the shed, quarters and cookhouse had to be cleaned and the all parties payout completed. Listen and learn. This represented a tragedy of monumental proportions. Cowra, you see, happened to be the second last shed for the year. Five or six hours of tortuous driving would be the minimum time needed to reach Bonnie Downs – the grande finale, the end of our eight month run. Even leaving at 6 am meant the next day would be a total right-off for shearing. That, in turn, left Mike's arrival with destiny in Perth stalled by one whole day, and that was just not going to happen.

No, the team had two alternatives to consider – travel tonight in time for a 7.30 am start next morning or delay the team's departure from Cowra until the next day, and in doing so forego all grog for the duration of shearing at Bonnie Downs. Night time travel won hands down.

Let it be known the shearing industry is built on tradition. Rousies have been, are and always will be sub human. Comparing them with shearers is like searching for similarities between a Brazilian sloth and an African wart hog. There are none. However that irreversible principle – 'Never do today what you can do tomorrow', counted for naught towards the end of an eight month run up North, so even the bloody shearers offered their assistance, in a strictly limited way, mind you. Rousies had to carry on, as always, with the dirty work, but for this special situation some of the shearers helped load the truck. When Mike saw this level of cooperation he thought he had stumbled into an enclave of the Salvos. But no, everyone was still bitching at everyone. It was a shearing team. Mike settled with the station owner and left the team Cowra payout for completion at Bonnie Downs.

Mind you, leaving Cowra at night was no easy matter. Shearers' quarters without electricity presented a few problems, especially as hurricane lamps and torches barely interrupted the pitch black outside. Nor was the Grey Ghost the object of this feverish activity. Oh no, in his wisdom Frank had sent this team away in a five ton International truck, no seating, no cover, just sides approximately fifteen inches high around the rear tray to keep everything and everyone on – in that order of priority. You sat on swags if possible, otherwise it was a rock hard surface which bruised hell out of your backside with every bump in the road. The

upcoming departure was not for the faint hearted. Never before has Mike been described as a humanitarian. On this one occasion though, he revealed himself in his true colours. The trip to Bonnie Downs promised to be no pushover. Andy and Reg travelling on the back had no hope of completing the journey other than as corpses. Andy, the cook, mostly had a seat in the cab along with Mike and the expert, who drove. He (Andy) was old and needed constant reminders to breathe anyway, so for him to make way for someone more needy wasn't a proposition. Reg had graced this world forever. The last time he had mounted anything was around the time of the Great Fire of London, 1673 or thereabouts. For him to climb up on to the rear tray of the truck unassisted could only be impossible, and throwing weightless Reg up was pointless. Once speed had reached twenty mph the slipstream would lift him skywards, and like smoke, who would know where he'd be by morning.

Mike, the woolclasser/overseer, the king, the ex Hale School dynamo had no choice but to vacate his comfortable cab seat and mingle with the riffraff on the back.

Ten minutes into the journey, and ten minutes only, was the time taken for each happy, almost Perth bound team member seated on the truck tray at the back to realise the next five to six hours would be a mind numbing experience, well beyond the endurance of mere mortals. Mike, of course, was no mere mortal. Nevertheless, even after wrapping himself in two blankets and then disappearing under a groundsheet, he still felt like a frozen carcass. The cold air, accentuated by the truck's 40 mph speed, could not be held at bay. It passed unremittingly through every garment and cloth on the way to Mike's skin. Once there it deliberately set out to convert all body fluid to ice.

And the stupid bloody expert who drove the truck, without trying, managed to hit every bump on and off the road. When that happened, Mike and everyone sharing the back with him, would be sent soaring up towards the stars. As this occurred and for the entire free-floating period, before landing somewhere else other than from where he started, our humanitarian was fully exposed to a massive blast of freezing air. For the entire six hours of travel, limbs ceased to function and breathing was painful. The bitterly cold air remained bitterly cold even as it descended down into the lungs, which were forced to work in a semi frozen state.

The team, apart from the expert, cook and Reg in the cab, all arrived at Bonnie Downs in a semi-conscious, non-compos condition. It was 4.00 am, dark, with no operational lighting

plant and barely warmer than an extreme Antarctic night. Still, most had the luxury of a two hour sleep ahead of them. Andy, the cook, had to straight away set himself up in the kitchen with just a dying torch providing a glimmer of light. A full breakfast for the mob by 7.00 am was required under threat of death. The expert, also with similar lighting aids and also under threat of death was ordered to have all six stands ready in time for a 7.30 am start.

Not skill, not natural ability, not true Aussie knowhow – but fear, immeasurable, undiluted fear caused all deadlines to be met. Not one person was prepared to face Mike’s displeasure by failing to meet his commands. Even shearers and shedhands fronted the board on time in spite of their wretched condition.

Postscript. The team arrived back in Perth on time. The urgency, so Mike claimed, was to enable him to honour his commitment as keynote speaker at an exclusive Hale School reunion for super legends. His topic, I’ve subsequently learned, is headed ‘Tolerance and Humility.’

A SECRET LIFE

If word ever leaks out about this, then I'm dead.

Boardboys and tablehands in many ways are directly comparable to street sweepers. You know, those people who collect refuse. There is also a distinct likeness to those gallant individuals manning the night cart (collectors of poo before the installation of septic and sewerage disposal). Mike spent three very productive years as a tablehand. Records supporting this fact have long since been destroyed, so you have to take my word that what I write is the truth.

Yes, Mike, among many more splendid things, was a collector of refuse, and a collector of poo, and he excelled at that job; so good that his promotion to woolclasser/overseer was delayed way beyond the time it should have taken. The truly baffling part about this was that, of the years spent in the wool industry his refuse collecting and nightcarting days appeared to have been the happiest of his working life. He would sing from daylight to dark, songs of love, whisky and wild, wild women, delivered at the top of his very considerable voice. The atmosphere in the shed would have been much more contented with half the decibels and a smidgen of tune. Alas, Mike had none.

But I digress.

The duties of a tablehand have been described previously. Much of it involves handling fleeces. However, there is another duty – mastery of the broom. A diligent woolclasser will insist that his roustabouts keep locks separate from stained pieces, separate from pieces, separate from belly wool. The only way this can be achieved is by constantly sweeping around the wool table and around the wool room generally. Mike, as chief tablehand and aspiring woolclasser had to set an example. For this reason he became recognised far and wide as the Grand Master of the broom. Every second or third fleece he would sweep around the table and at least three times he would sweep the wool room, each two hour run. Nor am I giving you this information for any idle reason. So keep it in mind.

Having swept everything on the floor into heaps and sorted it, Mike then commenced collecting refuse, that's locks. These are separated staples of wool, second cuts or wool pieces lacking bulk. Larger wool pieces, both stained (with urine) and unstained and belly wool were thrown

into appropriate baskets. At this point Mike was ready to carry out his night carting duties. Pure sheep shit had to be kept separate from sheep shit stuck to wool, and so good did he become at this task he became recognised as the Number 1 sheep shit classer in WA – in no time at all. Pretty good eh?

Those of you who are still unimpressed should now refer to the Guinness Book of Records. Do you remember sweeping details provided previously? Well, what does it mean? It means this – Mike in one year as a refuse collector and night carter swept the equivalent of two hundred and ten acres with his trusty broom; his three year total – six hundred and thirty acres. Is there any doubt about his legend status now? And it doesn't stop there. I know you'll be overwhelmed when I tell you Mike can claim responsibility for personally and lovingly (remember he loved his chosen vocation) collecting over eleven tons of unadulterated hard, soft and in between, sheep poo.

ONE OF THE MOB

Doolgunna Station in the 1950's was not typical.

For a shearing team, typical quarters consist of a building comprising several rooms for shearers and shedhands to enjoy their luxurious lifestyle. Other facilities include a cookhouse, store room, meat house and sleeping quarters, all of which come under the sole control of the cook, and an ablution block for all to visit.

The woolclasser/overseer occupies a room removed from the rabble. He can share it with the expert if he so wishes, providing he (the expert) imbibes adequately.

At Doolgunna in 1953 the two most important buildings were quarters – with no partitioning, a dormitory in other words – hence no privacy, - and a non-existent woolclasser's room. From the team's point of view they could survive the inconvenience for the two to three weeks needed to complete the shearing. Further, the union rep supported the station owner (unbelievable) who was obviously experiencing trouble. This, and other nearby properties, had been embroiled in a three year drought. All sheep were emaciated in the extreme, so thin and weak, that many of them could not be driven. They had to be left to die where they dropped. Watching them out in the paddocks you would often see these poor starving creatures using their snouts to turn rocks over, hoping to find a few seeds underneath. If any, they would lick them up with their tongues along with copious quantities of dirt. Not much else appeared edible above the caked hard, red earth. Sheep numbers had halved in those three years from twelve thousand odd to just over six thousand. Virtually no lambs had survived over the last two years.

Mike, without his own separate quarters, at first, was most unhappy, for good reason too. How could he protect his ability to issue two bottles a day grog supply if he had to share accommodation with a bunch of enthusiastic consumers? The solution? - A tent located at least one hundred yards away from the rabble. It solved many problems, one of which was that that huge distance would discourage all and sundry from attempting a disrupting trek to sound Mike out for some frivolous item, like extra grog. Essential items only, and for that reason alone he changed from being unhappy to someone experiencing blissful, monastic-like contentment.

Outside of working hours his solitude proved to be almost complete. Interruptions were very few and his ability now, to concentrate for periods beyond ten seconds more than halved the time taken for his bookwork. Life in a shearing team wasn't a living hell after all.



Saturday and Sunday, in particular, were more than good, in a hermit like way. Blissful solitude away from other voices, could be joyfully compared to living in a humpy a hundred miles or so from Perth. Lying on a bed in a tent under the all-enveloping shade of a river gum, with gentle zephyrs of breeze providing comfortable coolness, only accentuated the serenity. The others in their sweaty, unlined, unceiled tin shed could only dream.

‘Gotcha,’ Mike gloated.

But that unkind thinking obviously upset Huey, the raingod. Within two days a drought breaking, tropical deluge arrived and it came with a wind that could blow out a raging bushfire. The contrast could not have been greater. At times gusts up to one thousand mph (estimated) hit the scene, shaping Mike's tent like a spinnaker on the Bounty. While his abode remained anchored to the ground the flapping noise totally obliterated all other sound, even the rain. I mean those thoroughly useless morons comprising the balance of the team in their primitive shed were secure, sheltered from the wind and 100% dry. Mike on the other hand faced imminent death from exposure. The raindrops had to be three inches in diameter. How long

could his tent withstand the battering? The canvass shelter was already saturated and drips were drips no longer. They were falling at a rate just short of a solid mass. Remaining dry was not an option. Would he have to slink up to the sturdy quarters and seek admittance? No, never.

And did the rain start to ease; just the opposite, it became heavier and heavier. Mike sat there in the dark, sheltering under his groundsheet from the internal flooding. Also under the groundsheet, sharing his now altogether inadequate shelter, was his tin trunk, his blankets, his very disorganised bookwork and his very dirty disposition.

Could that be laughter he heard in the background, coming from the rabble in the, oh, so solid quarters? No one, positively no one laughs at a recognised legend. Mike thrust his bare feet on to the earth floor, ready to bring all hilarity and disrespect to an instant halt – only to discover flowing water, two or three inches deep, raging through his tent. Could this be the prelude to a wall of water, several feet deep, taking all before it, five hundred miles further west to the Indian Ocean?

Any hesitation previously experienced by our Mike ceased forthwith. He dropped everything and burst out into the night, ready, and indeed eager, for the first time ever, to become one of those bloody misfits comprising a shearing team.

AIRWAVES

The Basement Bar of the Palace Hotel was often compared to the Supreme Court; when the truth surfaced, in the course of verbal intercourse, it was invariably discarded as being completely irrelevant. Not that this created a problem, because the truth remained a total stranger to everyone associated with the shearing industry. So it made perfect sense for shearers, shedhands, experts, woolpressers, cooks, woolclassers and contractors to meet there as often as possible during the off season, thus enabling them, as was their want, to deal only with falsified facts.

In the Basement Bar Mike became re-acquainted with Dave.

Dave can only be described as a super-star. He always travelled in his own ute, never in the Grey Ghost, for one very obvious reason. Travelling on the Grey Ghost meant that your beer ration remained forever constant – two bottles per day. You had no other means of procuring an increased supply. Dave had a medical problem which required him, under threat of death, to consume six bottles in the one hour between work (5.30 pm) and dinner (6.30 pm). And he had a stomach to prove it. Hence, the ample rear tray of his ute provided him with the only solution he had for ensuring the life preserving medicine remained available at the prescribed dosage.

Nevertheless, Dave was no slouch with the bogeye. Shearing two hundred daily, at this stage in his life, presented no real difficulty other than he had to somehow manoeuvre that bogeye around a belly that looked to be supporting quads.

He was a good bloke and Mike, even as a rousie, relished the truth-absent time spent in his inspiring presence. You could learn a lot.

On one occasion Dave had a portable radio he wanted to sell, and there's no denying its beauty. A rectangular box covered in resplendent, artificial crocodile skin housed all (Dave's) guaranteed working parts and a tomato red dial. You could imagine it positioned prominently somewhere in a brothel. But it could blast out a sound with the best of them and Mike wanted volume more than anything else, if only to deaden the drivel he was forced to listen to for months on end from others in the team.

According to Dave twenty five pounds, not a penny more, not a penny less represented fair value. And the deal was done. (Who says shearers are dumb, that's more than he paid two years previously).

The 1956 run, as usual, started from the Ozone Hotel on Sunday. First shed – Mandora Station. A fourteen hundred mile trip of bone breaking roads, however, introduced a problem. How the hell could that beautiful radio survive? The only way was to nurse it nonstop. I suppose, in turn, that introduced Mike to fatherhood, because cradle it he did, for four whole days. He ate nursing that bloody radio, he drank nursing that bloody radio and he even slept in his swag with that bloody thing in the crook of his arm. But would he turn the bloody thing on? No siree, no point in wasting the battery, he said. So we had to contain our excitement until that thing of beauty lay safely on an upturned empty beer crate at the head of his bed.

Radio Australia, audible at night only, rang forth from within the resplendent, artificial crocodile skin case, housing the equally resplendent tomato red dial. For the first month, with only music being broadcast, it didn't matter so much that the thirty second fade outs every minute, interrupted each melody. There were enough Mario Lanza's in the team to fill in the blanks. Bonaparte's Retreat, Red Sails in the Sunset, Oh Patricia My Darling Patricia, On Top of Old Smokey, Rose Marie and many other tunes were mutilated in the name of harmony, with only an 'after dinner' pannikin of tea to create the euphoria needed for everyone to think they were having a good time.

But, with the advent of the Ashes series, those fade outs were another matter altogether. When Morris, Barnes, Bradman, Hassett and Harvey batted, you dwell on every word uttered by Johnny Moyes and Vic Richardson. For example, if they started to describe an unbelievably, magnificent cover drive, reaching the part about a perfectly straight backlift before earsplitting static hit the airwaves, then you became a little peeved. Thirty or forty seconds later, when normal sound resumed, with Laker running in, bowling a beautifully flighted ball that -----, your peevishness heated up a notch or two. After two hours of totally focused listening to Mike's 'thing', no longer one of beauty, the all-important score may have been stated twice without interruption.

Next night Lindwall and Miller bowled like magicians, both were absolutely unplayable. The funny (?), though, for some inexplicable reason, the fall of wickets only occurred during the fade outs. Peevishness turned to being really shitty. Of course, Mike's Hale School background helped a lot. Whilst the others shouted obscenities he just hurled whatever came to hand – and shouted obscenities.

In no time at all that thing of beauty lost its attractiveness and its (Dave) guaranteed sound. Even now, sixty years on it probably remains on the Mandora rubbish tip, a testament to Mike's astute artistic taste and his uncanny financial awareness.

THIS IS WHAT HAPPENED

The 1960 season started from the Ozone Hotel on the second Sunday in April, as always, but let me tell you, it heralded in a shearing year from which the wool industry has never recovered. Shearing teams, pastoralists, hoteliers, all of them above the twenty sixth parallel were about to enter a thirty year period of mourning, brought on by something that could never happen. It's too shocking even to commit to print. But I have to, don't I?

Well get on with it.

Bob and Harold were leaning against the former's Vanguard ute watching the haphazard arrival of that year's team members. Jock, a regular woolpresser for Frank Marks, even had the temerity to offer them a friendly greeting. What next? Woolpressers don't communicate with shearers without an invitation. It was much more acceptable when Len and Wally came over to talk. They were a couple of shearers with a combined total of forty three years shearing up North, and who together in that period had shorn around three and a half million sheep.

Rousies turned up in dribs and drabs, some of whom were obvious 'first uppers'. Christian Dior clothing, a brand new leather case and a swag that didn't look like a real swag gave their inexperience away. Others wearing the exact same, still unwashed gear they finished up with last year were busy identifying their position on the team's totem pole. Whoever did what they told them were destined to grovel for the next eight months.

Shit! Andy was their cook again. What's the matter with that bloody Frank Marks? We told him last year the bastard couldn't cook well enough to produce a good fart, even from the boardboys. And he's back. Eight months of grease, burnt offerings, incredibly stupid chatter and inedible bread that took forty years, minimum, to pass through every team member's large colon. Wacko.

What's keeping Frank? He should be here by now. Another car pulled into the parking lot. The driver and his girlfriend disembarked, the latter in tears. Who was this idiot? Why the hell did he run around the car to open the door for her? There should be a law that prevents women from coming to this most miserable of all days in the year. Neither Bob nor Harold could place

this bloke's job in the team, but after some deliberation about his obvious lack of intelligence they marked him down as a boardboy or a penner upper.

C'mon Frank, if we're going to go, let's bloody well go. How much more miserable do you want us to be?

Well our revered contractor did arrive. He walked straight over to the new bloke, pointed to the Grey Ghost, undoubtedly giving the halfwit something to do and joined Bob and Harold.

"Where's Mike, Frank? This is the biggest ragtime show on earth. Everyone of importance is here but him. He's a bloody overseer; he's supposed to be running this fiasco isn't he?"

"Mike's not coming."

"What's he caught a dose of rabies or something?"

"No, he got himself married."

"So have most of us. So what?"

"Well we're not going to see Mike in a shearing team again. When he told me I was in a state of shock for a week. Mary wanted to call an ambulance for me. But, believe me, it's final, dead set final. He's bought himself a lawn mowing business, been at it for a month now and reckons it's the best thing he's ever done."

Every person in hearing was struck dumb. Death would have been more acceptable than this news. No Mike. Who was going to be around to dish out the beer ration?

Frank resumed, "Look it's not all bad. Come and meet his replacement." He pointed to the new bloke. "His name's Mike too. Isn't that a coincidence? And he comes from Hale School."

