

# Marysville search was an "all-in" effort

*How a town reacts when a little boy, Peter Whitaker is lost.*

**The story of little Peter Whitaker, the 2 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>-year-old Coburg boy who was lost for 18 hours at Marysville last weekend, is well enough known now, even though the daily press, radio and television reports contained some features unfamiliar to those who took part in the search**

**Not so well known (except to those who participated, and they won't talk) is the fine community effort by the people of Marysville and district, who rallied to a man - and woman - when the call for assistance went out.**

Peter and his mother were spending the weekend with Mr Barry Dale and his wife Ruth, who manage Mr Lloyd Gould's farm on the Buxton Road, about 2 miles out of Marysville.

At about 5.30 on Saturday afternoon Mr Dale, who had Peter with him in the milking shed, sent the little lad back to Mrs Dale in the farm house. Within five minutes a check showed that he had not arrived., and Mr and Mrs Dale and Mrs Whitaker commenced searching.

They concentrated on the paddocks surrounding the house, the nearby Buxton River and the road, but at that stage ignored the track at the back of the farm, leading uphill away from the buildings.

Within 15 minutes they had notified the Marysville **exchange** and before dark several dozen men were at the farm, and, wading three or four abreast, had checked the river and deep drains on the property.

## **200 MEN SEARCHING**

A further call went back to the Marysville Hotel at about 6 o'clock. Almost within

minutes 100 men were searching and quickly built up to nearer 200 as the news spread. "It was simply marvellous the way they came out," said Mrs Dale.

Lanterns were brought from homes and guesthouses, new torches and batteries were sent in by Barton's stores, and the farm and the hillside resembled a gigantic fairyland as the searchers' lights dotted the darkness.

At 8.30 the finding of a bucket high on the hill, about 600 yards from the house gave the first positive indication of the direction taken by Peter, and eased fears that he had been caught in the river or one of the drains. An earlier check on a hay shed about 100 yards short of the spot where the bucket was found had revealed no trace of the wanderer.

## **CAMPED OUT**

The search continued unavailing until about 11.30 pm, when it was decided to call a halt for the night and that small parties of four or five men would camp out along the river, across the flats and up the hill, maintaining silence in the hope that they would hear Peter if he moved or called out. About 80 men camped out; the rest going home to snatch a few hours sleep and return at daybreak.

One of the men, Mr Ron Hadfield, said "We didn't sleep very much. We were

wide awake at every noise, thinking it might be his little voice."

One party did hear a voice calling "Mummy" but could find no sign of the caller.

### **WOMEN ORGANISED**

By this time the women of Marysville had organised food - supplies given by guest houses and shops - and took hot soup, sandwiches and other food out to the camping parties.

At 4.30 on Sunday morning five members of the police search and rescue squad arrived, and in frogman suits searched along the river, which, apart from a few holes, is not very deep.

At dawn the general search commenced again, with many of the men who had camped out coming in for a bite of breakfast - then rejoining the search with others who had snatched sleep at home. Newcomers joining in for the first time apologised and "felt guilty" that they had only just heard of Peter's disappearance.

A steaming copper of soup, and another of boiling water for tea, barbecued chops, sausages, sandwiches, scones and cakes provided breakfast and snacks for tired men as they came in to the "kitchen" on the flats for a break.

### **EXTENDED AREA**

Until Sunday morning the search had been confined to within a wire netting fence bounding the farm on the hillside, the men believing that Peter could not have passed this.

Several parties then went through the only gate and commenced to scour the tall grass and scrub bordering the track, which lead on to the thick timbered country.

At about 11.45 as one of these parties set out from the track near an old log landing Ian Sullivan, of Marysville, noticed a movement in the grass and then heard a faint "Hullo, Hullo".

His call brought the other searchers racing to the spot, and, it was later said - in humour, but with a great deal of truth, it seems - that the sight of men bounding towards him from all directions probably frightened Peter more than the whole of his night's experience.

### **WRAPPED IN SHIRT**

The rescuers removed some of the tiny tot's clothing, washed him in a small water race nearby, and, wrapped him in a shirt, brought him down to the house, where most of the searchers - numbering more than a hundred - were assembled, having been notified of the finding by siren.

A few minutes later Peter was bundled into the Alexandra ambulance, which had been standing by, and taken to Eildon Hospital, where he was examined by Dr Toohey, and pronounced fit and well, apart from a few mosquito bites.

He returned to his home in Coburg on Sunday with his parents. Mr Whitaker, who works night shift had come to Marysville late on Saturday night when he received the news.

# Mother's 'Thank You'

**Many searchers were not aware that, shortly after Peter had been returned to his parents, Mrs Whitaker came out of the house and expressed her thanks and appreciation for all that had been done.**

She spoke to several groups but was understandably shy in the presence of so many men, and upset by the night's experience.

- Mrs Ruth Dale has asked us to convey to Marysville the gratitude of Peter's parents. "This has been an "eye-opener to the sort of community we are living in." she said. "Everybody has been just wonderful." She added that throughout the night they had been comforted by the knowledge that so many were helping.

The Dales have been in Marysville less than twelve months.

"It's not right to pick out individuals," Mrs Dale said, "but Mr and Mrs Gould were really wonderful. They worked unsparingly and couldn't have done more."

- It is doubtful if there is anyone in Marysville who did not contribute something to the search, and it would be correct to say that each gave according to ability.

Most gave unstintingly of compassion, time and energy. Guest houses and shops gave food in abundance, and the women of Marysville prepared and served it with a cheerful smile.

At the telephone exchange there was a list of volunteers waiting to be called for catering duty; women who had prepared food and were standing by with it until called. They did not want to go down until

they were wanted for fear of being in the way. Barton's rushed through special batches of sausages on Sunday morning and cut chops for breakfast. There were a lot of chops and sausages.

- Among the goods sent in by the hotel were three dozen cans of beer. They were not touched during the search, and afterwards the volunteers only wanted to go home.

- Tradition and necessary places the country telephone exchange and the policeman's wife in positions of extreme responsibility when emergencies arise<sup>1</sup>.

Marysville exchange and "Sergeant" Jean Chamberlain added glory to the tradition.

- People who ordinarily don't hit it off well worked shoulder by shoulder. They will be fighting again next week, but all the better for their experience.

- One who enjoyed the search was the pony in the farm paddock. He had a fine rummage through heaps of clothes - probably belonging to the S and R Squad boys - and gave "Slim" Smith a devil of a fright when they met in the dark.

"Slim returned to camp white as a ghost," said his mates.

- Mrs Gwen Greatorex had a rude introduction to the S and R Squad when she turned to a voice "May I have a cup of tea?" and thought the Martians had

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<sup>1</sup> This is as printed, although it does not make sense.

landed when she saw a frogman in complete rigout standing just beside her.

There were many tributes paid to the Search and Rescue men for their efficiency, willingness and cheerfulness.

- Blokes ran everywhere when one of their number discovered they were in the bull paddock by meeting the bull face to face - and the bull still with blood on his face from a dehorning operation earlier in the day.

- Jack Haycraft's bottled gas for lamps and heating was a wonderful asset.

- What happened to the piles of food still remaining? We can only answer for the soup. It went to the Marysville

Scouts camped down at Buxton, about 7 gallons of it!

- Peter was found at about 11.45. By 1 pm paddocks were completely empty. Searchers, "kitchen" helpers and all the gear had vanished as efficiently and with as little fuss as they had come.

**And, as a final word on the great community that makes Marysville what it is, one lady said, "Every kiddie in Marysville belongs to the whole town, and everybody feels that it is their own child out there."**

*This article is from the Bill Metcalf collection. It is not sourced, but appears to be from the local paper in the 1960s.*