FEATURE

Bendigo Weekly

The day a severed finger was in a pub

IN THIS edited extract from his new book *Around the Bend I Go*, former magistrate Max CS Beck describes his father's Bendigo bar, The Crown Hotel, during the 1950s and '60s, last drinks and the bloodied contents of a tobacco tin.

GEORGE English sang *Old Man River* and *The Bluebird of Happiness* beautifully, although in normal conversation he had such a severe stutter that he could sometimes barely put two words together.

One day George turned up at the hotel after work and explained to my father that he was in serious trouble. It was winter time and he said that he had been travelling home from the hotel in the semi-darkness after 6 o'clock the previous evening, when a man ran out and he had hit him with his motorbike.

George said that because he had a few drinks he kept driving, but that he was really worried about the consequences of his actions and the extent of any injuries he might have caused the man. My father Reg, the proprietor and licensee, said that it was unlikely that George had done any serious injury with his small bike and it would be best if he just shut up and said nothing to anyone about it.

At this point George became quite distressed and, after a terrible bout of prolonged stuttering, eventually blurted out to my father that he had found "this" in the spokes of the back wheel of his bike as he pulled out a tobacco tin from his pocket.

"What the hell is it, George?" said my father.

George lifted the lid and there, in the tobacco tin, was a human finger lying in bloodstained cottonwool.

"Christ!" said Reg. "Give me a look."

Then, as he peered more closely at the item in the tin, suddenly the finger stood up vertically.

The finger was George's that had come up through a hole in the bottom of the tin! History doesn't record exactly what my father's subsequent remarks were, but the joke was on him and so was the shout with free drinks around the gathering throng.

Shortly after purchasing The Crown, Reg decided that to accommodate the additional drinkers he planned to attract, he needed more empty space where men could stand shoulder to shoulder.

In Victoria, until the 1960s, pubs closed at 6 pm. Men who knocked off work could buy as many drinks as they liked before 6pm so long as they drank them by 6.15pm.

Beck's Crown Hotel in the 1980s. Picture is supplied.

Five minutes before 6pm, Reg rang a loud bell and would yell out "Time gentlemen please!" This was the signal for any last purchases to be made within the next five minutes. In busy bars like The Crown, drinkers would be lined up four or five deep at the counter. As pots full of beer were planted on the bar and then handed back to drinking mates a quantity tended to be splashed around resulting in this daily ritual being labelled "the 6 o'clock swill".

To outflank the turning off of the beer taps, many patrons bought two or three pots at once to line up on the bar knowing that they had 20 minutes at most to down them.

All drinking was done standing up, with 99 per cent of men smoking, throwing their cigarette butts on the floor and talking furiously. As the smoke caused visibility to reduce the volume of sound increased until at 6pm Reg rang the loud electric bell again signalling the end of serving and the cry would go out once more, "Time gentlemen please!"

In the next 15 minutes, barmen cleared the bar of all empty glasses telling drinkers, as they did so, to finish up. Then when 6.15pm arrived my father would yell, in an ominous voice, "Time gentlemen please!" several times and leave the bell switch on continuously until the last man left.

Sawdust hides riches

It's hard to imagine an entire year full of more inhumanity, horror, tragedy, death, evil and bitterness than the year I was born. Obviously I knew nothing about this at the time. My understanding of the history of World War II brought with it a component of guilt connected with the fact that I had, in part, a German ancestry.

As American forces had built up in the Pacific, the number of US soldiers in Australia on furlough grew until, by mid 1944 it was estimated that at any given time there were up to 250,000 GIs in the country and, by the end of the war, 860,000.

At the time, my father Reg Beck was licensee and proprietor of the Canadian Hotel in Seymour, near the Puckapunyal army camp.

With a name like "The Canadian" my father's hotel was popular with the American troops who, when granted leave, would march into town and 'dismiss' in front of the hotel and invade the bar.

Often the thirsty soldiers were up to 10 men deep at the counter. Men in the front of the bar would refuse to leave their position of advantage causing the back markers to hand their money forward to the front men to make purchases for them.

Many had no understanding of the Aussie currency or exchange rates and would simply hand up a wad of notes and say "Take what you need pal", or throw a handful of coins on the counter, some of which would end up on the floor. Front positions were so well held that many men, instead of going to the toilet, would piss in situ on the bar wall.

To deal with this my father laid saw dust on the floor of the public side of the bar.

When he lost a diamond out of a gold signet ring that had been given to him by my mother, he set up a water sluicing tough, one Sunday, in the backyard of the hotel and shovelled all the sawdust through it.

He recovered the missing diamond and such a very substantial amount of coinage that he repeated the procedure every Sunday thereafter.

Max CS Beck's *Around The Bend I Go* is printed by Ingram Spark and is available to order from all book stores.

Retired lawyer goes 'around the bend'

BOOKS

BY TOM O'CALLAGHAN

IT IS A wonder that Max CS Beck ever did become a highly respected magistrate and coroner, given the boundaries he nudged, or drove through, as a child.

The founder of Beck Legal has come clean in his new book *Around the Bend I Go*.

"To be honest I was bloody lucky the cops didn't catch me or I would never have been able to become a lawyer," he says.

"I used to borrow my old man's car in the middle of the night. I didn't have a licence, I was underage, all those things. I'd go and pick up some of my scungy mates and we'd go for a burn somewhere."

The book charts Beck's unconventional 1950s and '60s childhood at Hargreaves Street's Crown Hotel, and the colourful scrapes he could get himself into.

Beck's father Reg bought Hargreaves Street's The Crown Hotel after World War II. He and his wife Madge transformed it into one of the most popular venues in town.

So Beck's childhood was one of patrons parading through his home, ranging from the forlorn to illustrious, like the judges that waitresses would wait for at breakfast, ready to open the dining room doors as they glided down the stairs.

"One morning, when waitresses were fully occupied, my mother told me to sit at the bottom of the stairs in one of the club leather chairs and 'watch out for the bloody old judge and let me know when he is coming'," Beck writes in the book.

He blames what happened next on the sort of rote learning the then-grade one student was being schooled in at the now defunct Gravel Hill Primary.

"'Mum! The bloody old judge is coming down the stairs!'" the young Beck bellowed.

"She explained [to the judge] that it was difficult to protect me from all the influences of some of the less desirable patrons and apologised to him profusely."

Beck describes the wider city centre he roamed from a young age as his own version of Luna Park. "It's like another planet here now," he says today of Williamson Street, where he is standing during an interview with the *Bendigo Advertiser*.

The desire to write his second book, after 2016's *A Different Earth*, was born of a need to capture a Bendigo now lost.

The book is not an entirely rollicking journey. In the background is the loneliness that comes with parents who worked such long hours and the yearning for a "normal" life, in a time when children were already more likely to be left to their own devices.

And there is a brewing sense, as the book progresses, not all is at peace in his parents' lives, especially when it came to alcohol.

There is still a sadness when Beck talks about that part of his parents' lives, but not as much when talk turns to what Bendigo has lost since the 1950s.

"People ask that question about changes in history all the time. You have things that were of value in the past but would be thoroughly useless at the moment," he says.

"I think all those things that were there back then are to be treasured in thoughts but not grieved."