

If they are aware of it as a town, it's a vague impression of a pretty old pub, a shop or two and the palm trees.

But slip down some of the side streets and the views which Tess and her fellows love so well become quickly obvious.

The Bullock Creek in particular creates some exotic vistas as it snakes its way in from the north, cranks around to the east of the town and then wanders off south through the notable complex of sporting grounds and facilities.

In places it looks almost rainforest-like, an effect heightened by the surprising number of palm trees growing along it.

The Bullock is not a permanent stream, reducing to deep pools in dry summers. But it is as close as this part of the world will get to a river.

Where it passes the footy ground and the golf course, the palm fronds act as an understorey to towering river red gums.

Perhaps the palms were self-sewn from the monumental stand of stiltish palms outside the pub.

Publican Michael O'Keefe says he has often been asked to sell the hotel's palms, sometimes for up to \$4000-\$5000 each.

He says that some years back there had been a plan to get rid of them but the townspeople put a quick stop to it.

Once your eye becomes attuned, you begin noticing palms everywhere, peeping over back fences, lining municipal properties, surround the sports ground, lining the creek.

They make a particularly magnificent scene next to the heritage hotel.

Michael O'Keefe said the hotel was built around 1917 and was one of three hotels in the town. The other two have since gone the way of all flesh.

The Marong Hotel used to stage theatre restaurant nights but Michael says the meals side of his business became too busy to keep the theatre going.

His regular trade tends to be travellers at lunchtime and the members of any one of a bewildering number of sports clubs in the evenings and on weekends.

There are clubs for footy, tennis, swimming, shooting, riding, trotting and cricket, to name just a few.

There also are a fair number of gold fossickers to be found on some days as Marong is on the edge of the Golden Triangle and once had some gold mining of its own.

Outside the pub on most nights there's a gathering of people you will never see inside the pub — dozens of truckies.

They stop there in the evening to buy food from a late-night hamburger van which fires up its stoves at 8.30 pm, when Michael switches off the cookers in his pub.

But there's a special reason the trucks stop at Marong.

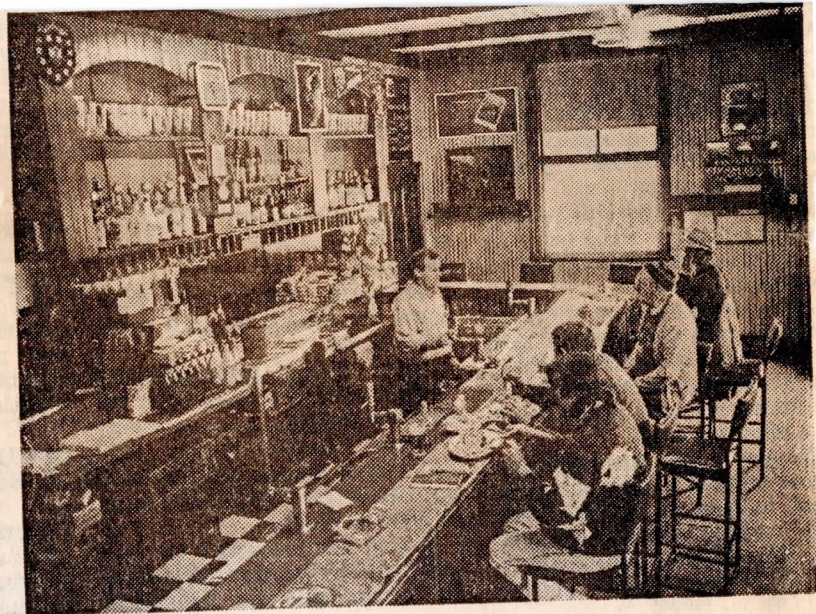
Between Mildura and Melbourne it is about the only place where the interstate haulers have to crank down through the gears to first gear.

There's a 15 kmh bend onto the Alternative Calder and trucks which try to sneak through in a taller gear often come unstuck.

"They feel that seeing they have to get down to first gear, they might just as well stop altogether," Michael remarked.

On some nights, you'll find as many as 20 trucks parked outside the pub. It's a trade which doesn't affect the pub either way, as all the truckies these days rigidly abide by the Double-Zero blood alcohol ruling.

While Marong might not have a theatre restaurant working these days, it's not without culture: post-



● ABOVE: The scene inside the Marong Hotel.

one-night play of Pygmalion last week.

It starred Sue Anstee, the town hairdresser, and some other notable folk from the golf club, the bowls club and so on.

The play was to raise money for a new hall.

Dorothy says Marong people don't mind getting involved in these things.

Her wonderful cottage-post office serves a community of about 580 people and it is growing each year as more houses are built and more people move out of urbanised Bendigo.

Dorothy is also president of the ladies bowls club.

While she pushes for the money to build a new hall, over on the highway, the Rural City of Marong is doing a superb job of restoring the old shire hall.

Municipality chief executive officer Graeme Elvey said \$120,000 was being spent ripping an added mezzanine floor out of the old council building and restoring the hall and chambers as close as possible to their 1908 original.

Before the stylish Edwardian hall was built, the shire's centre was up the Alternative Highway at Lockwood.

Graeme Elvey also is a great fan

He particularly likes the way people run their community.

"The degree of volunteerism in Marong is incredible.

"Have you see our sporting grounds? They *really* are good, and the only reason for that is the amount of volunteer work done in this town.

"In our community, the value of these people's work can never appear in our books or accounts.

"In effect, the work the community does saves this municipality a helluva lot of money."

Graeme has worked with the municipality since 1965 and has been chief executive since 1973 — perhaps making him the most senior local government officer in this region.

Asked to nominate the most notable thing to happen to the town in those years, he nominated not an event but a feeling: community attitude.

Like Tess' vision splendid Graeme's favored aspect is full of color and hope.

