

...so close that we live in each other's pockets," Ron Thompson announced.

"Raywood's the sort of place where if a bloke was down and needed help, they'd be there to get you through.

"That's important for a little town like this.

"What a lot of small towns can't understand is that they come unstuck when people don't look after each other."

Ron runs Raywood's butcher's shop, a bold little masonry brick building smack on the cross-roads which is the centre of town.

From his front window you can see Dennis and Jill O'Gorman's pub, Stewie McGregor's shop, the general store across the corner, and if you peeped out his side window you can see down to the Post Office and the grain silos.

Which is to say that you can see most of Raywood from Ron's shop.

According to Ron, Raywood is a self-help town.

When he started his butchery 10 years ago, it quickly became obvious that he could not make ends meet. So he went back to the future and began home deliveries in neighboring communities.

He now employs a bloke to do the deliveries. He used to employ an apprentice but says government costs and charges robbed the young bloke of his job.

There are some interesting examples of why Raywood is a self-help town. In summer when local folk want to use the swimming pool, they take care of the gate key and unlock the pool themselves.

A number of Raywood people are now trying to entice a financial institution, preferably the Bendigo Building Society, to open an agency.

The Commonwealth Bank closed its post office agency, a move which angered many.

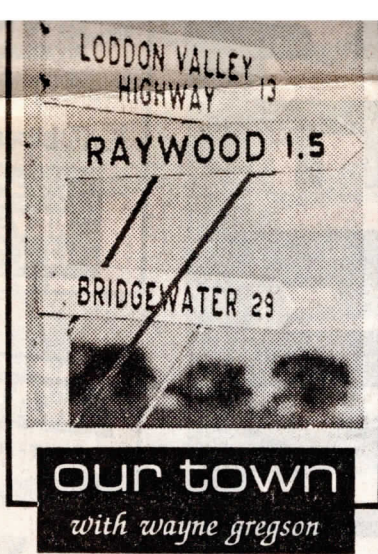
They believe that the best way to get even with the Commonwealth is to show that they did not really need it anyway.

Raywood may look a sleepy little town, and visitors might have a chuckle at the comment that the biggest thing to happen in recent times was when a circus set up on the oval, but it is far from quiet — at least for the publican O'Gormans.

Dennis had been a senior manager for a massive retail electrical chain in Melbourne when the company suddenly went under and with no warning he was jobless.

He says he applied for about 100 jobs and ended up on the dole, wondering what the hell life was all about.

He and Jill decided to sell up and get away from the



our town with wayne gregson

ego-sapping chaos of Melbourne and to test out his dream to run a little country pub. Neither knew where Raywood was until they saw the picturesque little pub which lords it over the cross-road.

Believing that their own personal Utopia was about to happen, the couple headed back to Melbourne — and had a head-on collision from which they were lucky to walk away.

A week after the couple took possession last December, they made front-page news in the Melbourne Herald-Sun when their pub was swamped by flash floods.

Not long after that, Dennis was out until 4 am helping volunteer fire fighters put out a massive hay fire.

What quiet life?

Dennis says he's happy to take part in these things, even if only to convince the locals that he's there to stay.

A few claim that the average lifespan of a Raywood publican is 18 months.

"I wonder if I have to buy a cemetery plot to prove we're here to stay?"

In sharp, sharp contrast, just up the road is Stewie McGregor's little shop and newsagency.

Stewie was also regarded as a blow-in — 38 years ago.

He had run the old Showgrounds Hotel which used to be in Bridge Street, Bendigo, near Rosalind Park. A friend thought the Raywood shop might be a nice change of pace.

Thirty-eight years later, Stewie still thinks it was a pretty good idea.

"You know, not a lot has changed in town in those years," Stewie chuckles, braced behind the worn counter of his century-old shop.

"They knocked off the Post Office bank agency, and a few other things have gone, but it's still much the same as it was.

"I'll stop here till I die. I have to keep the shop alive, and the town alive — not to mention keeping me alive."

Stewie also looked after Raywood's grain silos for 25 years, back in the years

to run frequently up and down the line to Bendigo and Swan Hill.

Raywood had a station master, a station master's house, all the old railway trap-pings. Stewie says they've all gone now.

"The young people don't spend their money in town any more. They go to Bendigo and spend it there.

"That doesn't worry me one bit. I don't need to worry about anything.

"But there's a lot who do."

While Stewie can point out a few things that have passed, on the other side of the cross-roads, Beverley Neate easily lists the things that have grown.

She was looking after the historic old Post Office on the day we were in town.

"Raywood's got a lot going for it.

"It's lovely and quiet, a great place to bring up the kids."

Not that that was Beverley and Peter Neate's plan when they came to Raywood from Bendigo 16 years earlier.

They came so Peter could play footy with Northern United.

Beverley and her builder husband have raised five children in Raywood. They went to Raywood Primary School, and to East Loddon Secondary nearby.

"Everyone seems to get involved in things in Raywood. They take part in things like the school council, Brownies and that sort of thing."

The town's school has about 80 pupils, and everyone has their fingers crossed it is not on some bureaucrat's list for change in the State Government's plans.

Football is a consuming passion in Raywood — but it is not necessarily a healthy consuming passion.

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