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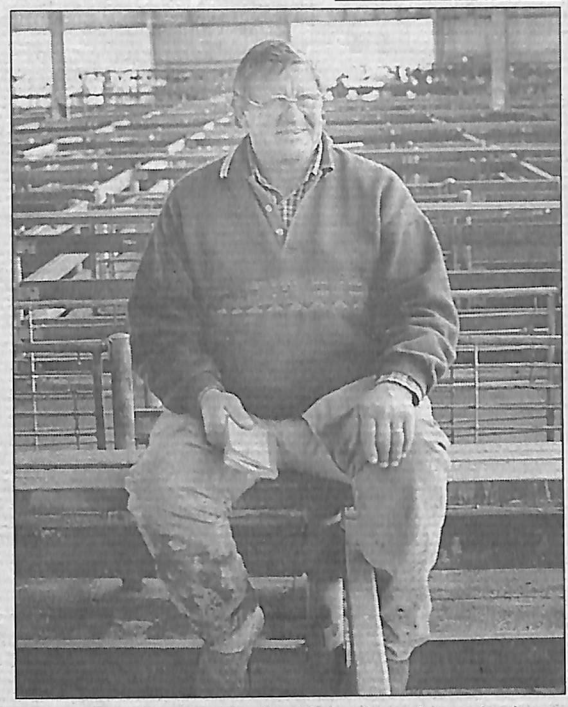
Record lost in the past

PICTURE: ROBERT CAREW



ANY EXCUSE: Gordon Baker has always had an affinity with Dandenong's market.

MARKET TOWN

by ALICE ARCHER

Celebrating the history of the Dandenong stock market.

AS a boy of eight, Gordon Baker would find any excuse to get to the stockyards.

He would plead with his stock agent father Thomas to take him.

They would drive from the family property in Longwarry North to Dandenong every week. It was a big event.

"In those days the stockyards were thriving. There were big trucks each carrying 200 head of cattle and the stock agents would make four or five sales a day with perhaps 150 to 200 cattle per sale.

"There were probably twice as many agents back then, Dandenong was a lot busier.

"The clientele has changed. The farmers have more choices now and a lot of them will take their stock to the nearest scales where they get quick cash.

"The biggest change is the ethnic aspect of the saleyards. There are a lot of migrants in the area now and they like to buy livestock to feed their families.

"They will buy a couple of cows and a pig or two, get someone to cut them up and then split the food between the extended family.

"I worked here as a teenager up to 19 and back then it was mainly Australians that came here."

Mr Baker now works as a buyer for wholesale butchers.

He has seen the price of beef fluctuate wildly over the years.

"The highlight of my time here is making a record sale for two lambs. My brother Kevin and I got £50 ($100) a head which was exceptional. Sadly, it also demonstrates how low the prices are today with lambs fetching between $35 and $55.

"A lot of farmers must be struggling, particularly those who have borrowed money. I will be very sad to see the stockyards close. These yards attract people from all over the country. It's a big part of Dandenong."

When cattle roamed

MR George Collins is a well known identity at the stockyards.

He remembers the days when farmers walked their cattle down the main street to the saleyards. He has seen three different sites in his 58 years as a client.

"It used to be in the main street. Then they moved it to where the produce market is now and then to Cheltenham Road," he said.

Mr Collins did not agree with the council's decision to build the stockyards in Cheltenham Road.

"This site isn't big enough. They should have built it on Hammond Road where there was 140 acres. The Dandenong Plaza should have been built here because it is close to the railway station.

"When Newmarket closed 11 years ago, Dandenong was supposed to take over, but it never really did. It's too small."

Mr Collins said the stockyards wasn't as busy as it used to be.

"It's nowhere near as big as it used to be. It used to yard 1200 or so cows and today there are only about 300."

Livestock has always been a volatile market, he said.

"It always had its ups and downs. About two or three years ago the market was very buoyant."

Mr Collins has very fond memories of the old stockyards where "everyone wore a hat" and buyers would sit around a big ring where the cattle auctions were held.

Times of the stock trade

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But when the Dandenong and District Roads Board became Dandenong Shire Council in May 1873, the new council felt it was better able to look after the market than the market committee.

So a conference was called on August 29 to arrange the transfer. Adopting a motion by Councillor Rodd and the shire president Councillor Keys, the council assumed control of the market and has kept it ever since.

To celebrate the council held a "spread" at Dunbar's Hotel on October 10.

In April 1874 the market site was permanently reserved from sale. In the same year the tender of Mr H. Wilson at £90 was accepted for one year's market dues.

Offices in the market were let from £2-£5 a year with shed stands costing sixpence a day.

Mr A. Potter was appointed market inspector at a salary of £10 a year.

Total revenue from the market in 1874 was only £112 . However, it continued to expand and the old yards, despite extensions became overcrowded. So much so the committee looked around for a new site.

Some years previously, the council had purchased 5.2 hectares for market purposes on the corner of Cleeland and Clow streets. By 1933 every inch of available space had been built on and the market again experienced growing pains.

In 1958 the stockyards were moved to Cheltenham Road and the produce market continued at the Clow Street site.