

1 My first car ride

It was a hot January day in 1955. My mother and her newborn son were travelling home for the first time. The trip from Nan-Org Hospital took mother and son through the small country town of Croydon, past the local livestock market, along a narrow bitumen road for four or five miles before the final bumpy stretch down a half-mile dirt track. The journey terminated in the community of Wonga Park, at a small, old weatherboard house on top of a hill. There was no electricity, no mains water, no bitumen. The nearest shop was back in Croydon. Surrounding the house was an abandoned and decrepit orchard, testament to the failed dreams of the previous occupants.

The farms along that last bumpy mile offered my father the hope that he could build a livelihood from those failed dreams. The first driveway along the road belonged to the Dockings. Mrs Docking was driving the car carrying my mother and me that day. Mr Docking had no licence to drive a car, relying instead on his horse. My parents' only motorised transport was a motorbike, and although they regularly travelled as a twosome on the bike, there was no room for a junior third passenger.

The Dockings ran a small dairy farm. They had shifted from northern Victoria and moved closer to Melbourne so their teenage sons could find work. Each day they sent their cream by train to a dairy in Melbourne, running the risk of regular cream pilfering. Mr Docking was a valued source of advice on many matters agricultural. I remember some years later watching as he demonstrated to my father the traditional skill of castrating calves using a pocket knife and one's teeth. To this day I am unsure whether he was genuinely marking steers or genuinely pulling my leg.

Further down the track were the Smiths and Colellas. Both families owned multi-generational family businesses built on apple and stone-fruit production. Patsy Colella had arrived before the Second World War from the impoverished Calabria region of Italy. His achievement of building one of the larger farming businesses in the district had earned the respect of the locals. Within a decade his farm was to support the families of his two sons and daughter in a multi-generational partnership. Both families owned and operated cool stores on which surrounding small farm businesses depended. Only the largest farms could afford to make such a large investment. But all the orchardists needed cool storage to protect their fruit before marketing.

Sandwiched between the Colellas and the Smiths was the Fisher family. Mr Fisher owned a small apple orchard, but made his living by selling fruit and vegetables door to door. Each day I would pass his large green truck while walking home from school. It was parked, waiting for the daily very early morning trip to the Victoria Wholesale Fruit and Vegetable Market to be followed by the door-to-door rounds. He sold fruit and vegetables to women such as my mother, whose only chance of getting to the shopping centre was Saturday morning when the single family vehicle was available.

Round the next corner were the Musgroves who bred and raised meat chickens. This was, perhaps, the largest business in the region. As a young boy I was oblivious to the standing this gave the family in the district. It was the Musgrove kitchen table that riveted my attention. In the 1960s chicken was considered luxury meat, and my friends were in awe of our classmate Geoff Musgrove who seemed to eat chicken most evenings of the week. The meat on our table was more likely to be lamb chops, or rabbit caught in traps set by my parents. Rabbit trapping and skinning were my mother's special skills, developed as a young woman saving money for her

'glory box'. Today rabbit is gourmet game meat, but in the 1950s it was disparagingly referred to as 'underground chicken'. When the first take-away chicken franchise appeared in the local town some years later, we were convinced they were selling rabbit dressed up as chicken.

At the end of the road were three properties; that of my parents and their two immediate neighbours. As an omen for a successful financial future, it was perhaps best to overlook these blocks. The Rogersons grew raspberries, but the business was clearly in a terminal phase when my parents arrived in the district. Within a few years the harvesting of berries was limited to the rampant wild blackberries on both abandoned properties. On the other side of my parents' farm were Billy Bourke and his mother, 'Granny Bourke'. Their house was a dirt-floored shack leaning on an alarming angle halfway down the hillside. I only learnt of the significance of the lean and the location many years later. Apparently Granny Bourke's husband had taken a dislike to the previous occupants of my parents' property. His solution was to hitch the bullocks to his house and drag it down the hill to get some peace and quiet. The two continued living in the ramshackle building for another decade. Unlike her husband, Granny Bourke enjoyed the company of neighbours. When my mother and I arrived, it was Granny Bourke who took on the self-appointed role of mothercraft nurse for the new mother in the district. As a young child I was never short of a carer. At five years of age I was walking the two kilometres to school alone, stopping at various neighbours on the way.

This was the farming community in which my parents chose to live. In 1955 no one was wealthy by a contemporary yardstick. Many were poor. There was no electricity, no telephone, no mains water, few cars and few aspirations beyond making a success of the farm. This community was 25 kilometres from the heart of Melbourne. Fifty years on, in April 2005, my father picked the last fruit from his last one-acre block of peaches—all that remained of his 20 acre orchard. It is also all that remains of the orcharding history of this little community. When this last acre of trees was grubbed out a few months later, there were no productive trees remaining from the orchards that once covered the landscape. When my mother and father drive down the road today, they traverse the divide between residential and rural-residential planning zones. In the residential zone, most houses are double storeyed, often mock Georgian. Large four wheel drive vehicles stand in driveways. Ironically, the old dirt track has been asphalted for many years now. On the other side of the road, planning controls designed to protect the rural nature of the landscape ensure the residential housing blocks are no smaller than ten acres. The community on these large blocks is notable for having the highest average income of any postcode area in Victoria.

The fate of the farms that my mother and I drove past in 1955 tells a story of the dramatic changes that have transformed the farming industries of Australia in my lifetime. The Dockings retired from the dairy industry soon after my arrival, having reached an age when the prospect of milking cows for a living no longer seemed appropriate. The requirement to convert to a stainless steel whole-milk supply system doubtless would have encouraged them to retire. They would not have been able to afford the cost of the conversion. Other district dairy farmers left with the crash in prices on Britain's entry into the European Economic Community. A younger dairy-farming family living across the valley shifted to Pakenham where land was cheaper and they could build a larger dairy herd. The advancing front of suburbia overtook them in their new location three decades later.

The Dockings' farm was purchased by the Richardsons, who operated an egg farm. Over the next ten years we were to visit their sheds regularly to buy eggs. My memories are of seemingly endless

cages of birds and boxes of eggs, though my mother only ever purchased the 'cracks' put aside for the 'locals'. I suspect the sale of cracked eggs was illegal even then. The land surrounding the Richardsons' poultry sheds was later leased to my parents for grazing beef cattle. I was to spend quite a few hours after school driving cattle between this and other paddocks along the track. The egg farm was unable to keep pace with the relentless escalation in the farm size required to remain financially viable. It was eventually sold and the property transformed into a rural residence.

The Musgroves' meat-poultry business was purchased by a feed-grain company and became part of a vertically integrated farm agribusiness. Eventually the facility was closed as part of a company rationalisation. The decision would have been in part motivated by the difficulties of maintaining an intensive animal industry in an increasingly residential community.

Mr Fisher, the door-to-door greengrocer, died of a heart attack while working. His death was the end of his business. It would not have lasted with the rapid changes in women's employment and the adjustments in the retail industry. With more and more families gaining second cars, and increasing numbers of women entering the workforce, the market for this old-style door-to-door service industry was rapidly dwindling. Today even the traditional strip-shop greengrocer is under intense competition from the convenience offered by supermarkets.

The raspberry farm was burnt out by a bushfire in 1962. The owners never returned to live on the property. Eventually it was purchased by my parents as they strove to increase the size of the orchard towards a scale that would enable my father to leave his painting trade. The Bourkes' orchard was in disrepair when I was first brought home in 1955. It was never rebuilt, and the property was abandoned for many years. The blackberries provided my parents with a secondary income source in their more desperate days.

The larger orchards were among the last remaining farming businesses in the district. Eventually each family succumbed to the temptation to sell the land for rural-residential development. The first to sell were the farms within the boundaries of a new residential zone. Today this land is covered with quarter-acre housing blocks. The last to sell were the farms within the rural living zone, created to preserve the rural character of the landscape. After a number of years of fighting for a rezoning, the Colella family made the decision to subdivide their orchard into ten-acre blocks. The economic position of the moderate-scale horticulturalist was becoming increasingly difficult with the transformation of the retail fresh-produce business from a world of many small-scale greengrocers into a retail world dominated by two supermarket chains. None of the next generation wished to continue the business. The final straw in this decision was the tragic death of one of the family in a tractor accident. The loss reverberated through the remaining 'old' farming community. It marked the end of the farming era for this locality. It had been absorbed by the city.

The social and economic forces that transformed my childhood community have been transforming communities across agricultural Australia. This book is an exploration of these social and economic forces and of the new rural landscapes they are creating. The story begins with the fundamental force of innovation in agriculture. This forces farms to grow larger, and the number of farms to decline. It creates older farm communities by encouraging the young to migrate to the cities. The speed of this transformation is accelerated by changing consumer behaviour and the tightening of the food-supply chain that shifts foodstuffs from the farm

to the supermarket. Overlaying this are the changing social values of our society as more of the population becomes interested in protecting the environment, the welfare of animals and in particular, owning their own patch of the countryside. The influence of these social and economic forces varies across locations and between industries, creating a patchwork of new social landscapes across rural Australia.



Suburbia's hard edge viewed from the back paddock.



Orchard community re-union 2001 (photo Ian Barr).