

A Gentleman and a Rascal



Autobiography
by
Brian Buzzard

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CHAPTER 15

Living in Toodray

Front Cover: I wish to thank artist Laura Cole for her kind permission to use the second painting from the triptych **Kimberley Grasses**.

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CHAPTER 15

Living in Toodyay

The business at Toodyay handled Elder Smith and Co, HV McKay machines, Chevrolets and later the Holden arrived. We were the depot for Mobil Oil and the business also consisted of a good hardware and farmer's supply store. I employed three people who were excellent staff members. Marion Gibbons was in charge of the books and office. She was most proficient. Gerry Jeffries was in charge of the hardware store and did all the buying. He was a particularly honest and decent living chap. Charlie Riley, the son of the Anglican Bishop of Perth, joined me as a trainee and was shaping up to be very good, but tragically he was drowned at the notorious "Blue Hole" at Trigg when he went to the aid of the three nuns who were caught in the rip. He held them up and they were saved, but the rip then swept him away. He was a good lad.

The business was a very good one and I had built Elders business up to at least 75% of the stock, wool and merchandise sales in the district. New machinery from HV McKay and Massey Harris was still in short supply and selling the machines was not the trouble, it was the allocation of them in strict order of when they were booked and no trade-in, which was a problem. The same applied to Holden cars. I was always careful to allocate them in their booking order as long as there was no trade-in. Toodyay and Bolgart had a pretty strong Freemasonry Branch in numbers and active members. I have the greatest respect for Freemasonry because my father was one and many of my business associates and clients were also members. Like all religious and political parties you find a few bigots and when I allocated a Holden to Father Michael of the Catholic Wyening Mission I came under some criticism that I gave the priest one out of his turn. Some complained to Sydney Atkinson Motors, the West Australian distributors, but I was able to show them my records and he received his car in the correct order of booking.

I had some difficult clients at times, especially when auctioneering their sheep. It was the usual custom before each sale to approach each vendor and get a reserve price from him. Occasionally some would say, "See how you go," and refer to me before knocking them down. One day, Don McLennan, Elder's ace auctioneer, was selling sheep at a Bolgart sale and only one farmer would not give him a reserve price, but said, "Refer to me before you sell". In due course he came to the pen of sheep and got up to seventy five shillings offered per head. He turned to the owner and said, "Can I sell?" The owner said no he wanted seventy shillings. Don asked him again if he could sell at seventy five shillings. The owner repeated that he wanted seventy shillings. Don passed them in with the option of sale to his highest bidden After the sale we got both the seller and the buyer together and spent ten minutes trying to get the owner to sell. It took all that time to explain to him that seventy five shillings was a better price than seventy shillings. Thank goodness situations like that were few and far between. Gordon Eyres, a state cricketer and a thorough gentleman, was the Elder's Branch and Agency Inspector and he was very helpful to me. Cars were in short supply and you had to go through the Rationing Board in Perth to get one. I could not afford a new car when I took over the business. I had applied to the Rationing Board and they allotted me a new Nash car which was right out of my price range, and was in conflict with my Chevrolet franchise with Sydney Atkinson Motors. Elders got me out of the problem by selling me a cheap, secondhand but reliable Chevrolet utility and they took my new Nash with a big adjustment in price. That old Chev kept me going for a few years until the Holden arrived. By that time I could afford to buy one. I sold the old Chev for more than I had paid for it, so everyone was happy.

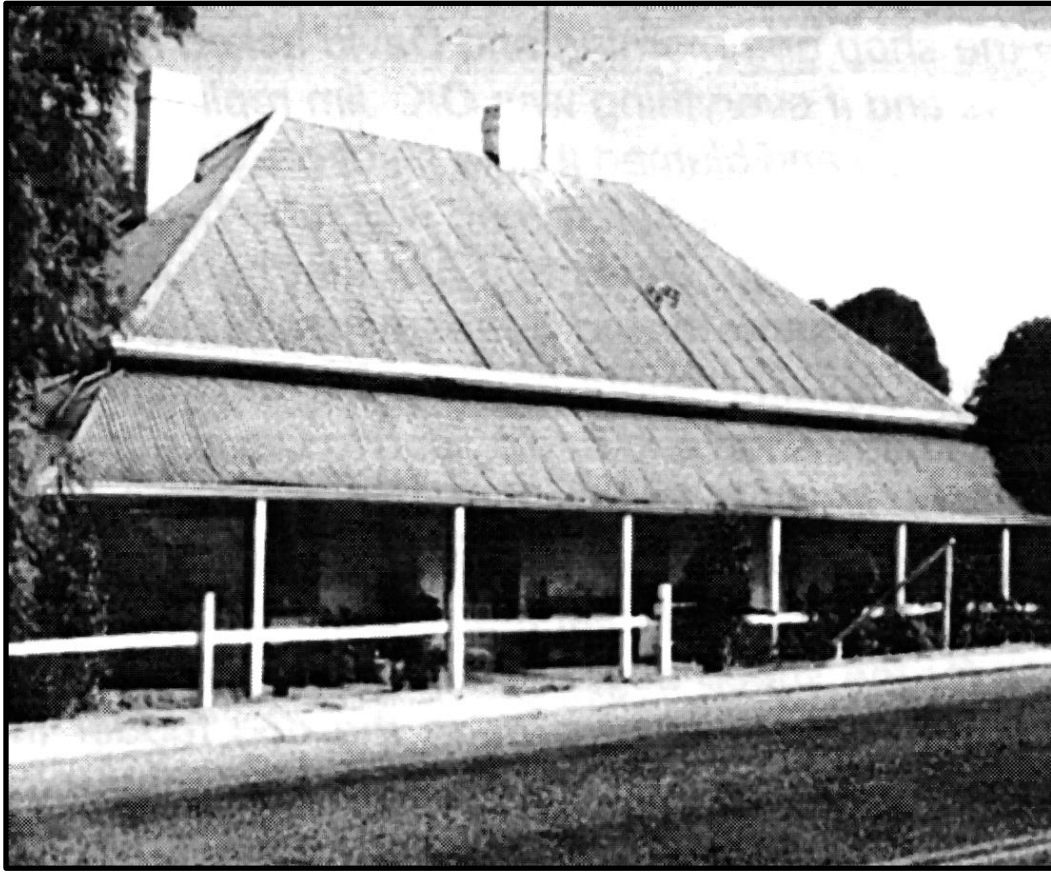
I made many good friends while we lived in Toodyay. Ted Hayes and his wife Josephine were very good to my family when we first moved there. Ted and I became very good mates. He never missed a race meeting on Saturday in Perth, Northam or York, in season. He owned and raced a few horses with mixed success. It was he who got me interested in racing. Ted was a keen supporter of the RSL in Toodyay. I transferred from the Northam RSL to the Toodyay branch when I moved there. Ted was

wounded in the Battle of Alamein in the Middle East and was sent home and discharged. He carried his war disability all his life but he never ever complained about it. We were both on the committee of the RSL and I later became President. Every Anzac Day we would march and have a service at the war memorial. Straight after the service we would all head for Ted's woolshed which was only half a mile out of town. There we would have a keg or two organised and the RSL boys would start their game of Two-up. In those days the pubs were closed all day so we had to make our own arrangements about a get together.

I met Jim Milner from Yerecoin when I moved to Toodyay in 1951. I played golf with him in the big day for the Toodyay Club, the Lee-Steere Cup. I took to him immediately, because like myself, he was a casual golfer and not worried about winning. We also enjoyed a few ales after the game. I kept in touch with Jim, he was the president of the Victoria Plains Shire Council for a record twenty six years straight. Victoria Plains took in quite a slice of my agency area. When the shire started a collection of old memorabilia I gave him a coloured belt with a silver buckle inscribed, "To Stephen Sheridan, The Champion Cricketer of the Victoria Plains, 1916. " Stephen Sheridan was my grandfather. When we left Toodyay and started Western Livestock, Jim became a director and we did all of his livestock and wool business. He built a beach cottage at Hangover Bay and invited us to use it whenever we wanted. When his sons took over his two properties at Yerecoin and New Norcia he spent a lot of time at Hangover Bay. He bought a house for his wife in Perth because she was not very interested in fishing or going out to the shack.

Jim had a habit of leaving some crayfish in my son David's freezer in New Norcia where he owned the local store, sometimes he would leave them there and other places for months on end. He would come to David's months later and ask for his crays. David became very embarrassed when he went to the freezer and found them gone. He assumed that they had been stolen and mentioned it to his wife Lynne that they had disappeared. She calmly answered that she had been eating two a week because she thought that they were theirs and a gift from Jim. That is

what a lack of communication can do. Jim bought most of his stores from David. He came into the shop one morning and David asked him how he was and if everything was OK. Jim replied that he was not well and blamed it on a tin of baked beans he had eaten the night before and which he had bought from David's shop. David told him that he had eaten some of the same brand beans himself and that he had no complaints about them. A few days later Jim came into the shop and apologised to David about his complaint. It would appear that after a session at the New Norcia and Yerecoin Hotels, he went home and put the can of baked beans and a can of Pal on the stove for the sheep dog, to warm them up. He found some left over baked beans in the dog feeder the next day and decided that he must have eaten the Pal himself and given the beans to the dog. His son sold out half the Yerecoin property and leased the other half and is now living very happily in Broome where he has some business interests. Jim's younger son still runs the New Norcia property and his wife Joan still lives on her own at City Beach. Jim met a very untimely end. After having a few beers at the New Norcia Hotel, he slipped on the small gravel stones when he was leaving. He was alright when he got up and the local, first aid sister bandaged him up. He drove home to Yerecoin but got sick with severe headaches during the night. He was taken to the Wongan Hills Hospital and from there to the Royal Perth Hospital where he only lasted a few days because a clot of blood had formed and they could not dissolve it. He was a great man to his district and very kind and generous to his family and friends. I miss him greatly.



"Our house in Toodyay."

They say that you can number good friends on one hand during your life and there were many others whose company I enjoyed but did not see on a regular basis after I left Toodyay. Ernest Lee-Steere, now Sir Ernest, was a very good friend in my Toodyay days. He and his wife Jessica lived at Hawthorden, Toodyay and he also had Belele Station out of Meekatharra and Chilomony and The Bowes which were out of Northampton. We handled all of his business with Elders where he was once a director. Ernest had a good war record. He was an army captain and spent quite a time as liaison officer with the RAAF. He flew many operations in Catalinas, Beaufighters and Liberators and was in the Philippines at Puerto Princessa at the same time as I was. I was never on the same plane as him but our Catalina and Liberator squadrons took him on several operations. His wife Jessica became very friendly with Don and called on her often in Toodyay. When Don became ill she was a great help and was one of the few people that Don would take any notice of.

One day the Reverend Mother of the Convent approached me and asked if I could help them, in their desire for several of the nuns and about fifty of the pupils, to go over to Northam to see Queen Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburgh who were on a visit to Australia and were being given a reception at Northam on the oval. All the surrounding districts were invited. It was the time when the polio outbreak was at its highest and the Health Department had advised children not to congregate in masses.

The headmaster of the Toodyay State School had instructions not to send any of the children over there, which meant that the four school buses in Toodyay were tied up and not available. At that time I owned and operated a double deck sheep truck, so I asked the Reverend Mother if she minded going over in a truck. She said, "We will go over in anything from a horse and wagon up. " Fen Markey, a member of an old Toodyay family, was employed as driver of my truck, so I asked him to give it a good hosing down, to clean it up and get rid of all the sheep and cattle droppings. I also told him to drive very carefully and not so fast as he usually did when he had sheep and cattle on board. I said, "You are now carting human beings, including three of my children, David, Brian and Terese. " I arranged for a few easy chairs and the Convent supplied the wooden seats which were lashed to the sides of the truck. Terese says that she remembers the day very well and that there were over seventy pupils who made the trip, many of whom had to stand all the way there and back. Just as well there were no rules on seatbelts in those days. Tom Callagher was our local policeman. He always introduced himself as Tom the John. Tom was a huge man, nearly twenty stone and had a kind and co-operative nature. He contacted the Northam police and told them of the truck which was coming to Northam loaded with nuns and children. They co-operated wonderfully and met the truck just out of Northam, escorted it right onto the showgrounds and parked it right on the edge of the oval where the children had a ringside seat to see the Queen and the Duke as they arrived to take part in the ceremony.

The Commercial Union Insurance had Harry Jacoby, a state champion tennis player as their representative and he called in regularly. I organised

for him to give tennis lessons to all the schools in my agency area and it really paid dividends because the insurance business increased greatly. Tom Starkovich VC represented Sydney Atkinsons and was most favourably received by everyone in the district. He was a guest of honour at the RSL branch and was given a civic reception by the Toodyay Road's Board which later changed to the Shire of Toodyay. I made some very great friends in the district who were very kind to Don. Several of them took my children home to stay with them for a few days when I needed help later. I still see some of them occasionally but most of them have gone to meet their maker.

The Toodyay Race Club had gone into recess during the war and a move led by Ernest Lee-Steere, Ted Hayes, Vince Keating the Shire Secretary and myself were able to revive the club and have allocated to us race-dates by the West Australian Turf Club. As we got closer to our first race-date there was a lot to do, including painting the race rail all around the track, which was over a mile. We had no finance to have the job done commercially so I thought of an idea. I asked the Reverend Mother if I could have some help from the senior pupils on a Saturday or Sunday after mass, to help get the racecourse ready. I told her that we would supply lunch with cool drinks and icecream, to the volunteers. There was no trouble in getting volunteers. I borrowed about twenty large paint brushes, donated the paint and set the girls and boys to the task.

It took them all day with frequent stops for food, drinks and the icecream which had also been donated. Not long after they commenced, it was easy to see that they had never had a paintbrush in their hands before. They slopped the paint all over their clothes and they must have flicked the brush at each other now and again because they had paint in their hair, on their legs, everywhere.

When we took the children back I did not wait to thank the Reverend Mother, but a week later at mass, she approached me and asked about the running rail. She said that there could not have been much paint on the rail as the children seemed to have brought it all back on their clothes

and bodies. They had a hell of a time cleaning the children up and in some cases had to throw their clothes away. I never asked her to lend me children again.

While we were in Toodyay, the remainder of my children were born; Terese in June 1948, Patrick in November 1952 and Philip in January 1954. Unfortunately, Don had a nervous breakdown after Philip was born. Because she needed specialist treatment in Perth, I had no choice but to sell the business and move back to Perth. The business was sold to Pat Loeper to manage and I kept a half share as a silent partner, but when Pat realised what a good business it was he offered me what I thought was a good price and he took over my share.

I needed the money because there was no medical insurance or Medicare in those days and trying to pay the psychiatrists and hospital bills was sending me broke. When I look back I often think that I was taken for a ride by the medicos who kept saying I had better get Dr So and So in for another opinion. Anyway that is now past history.