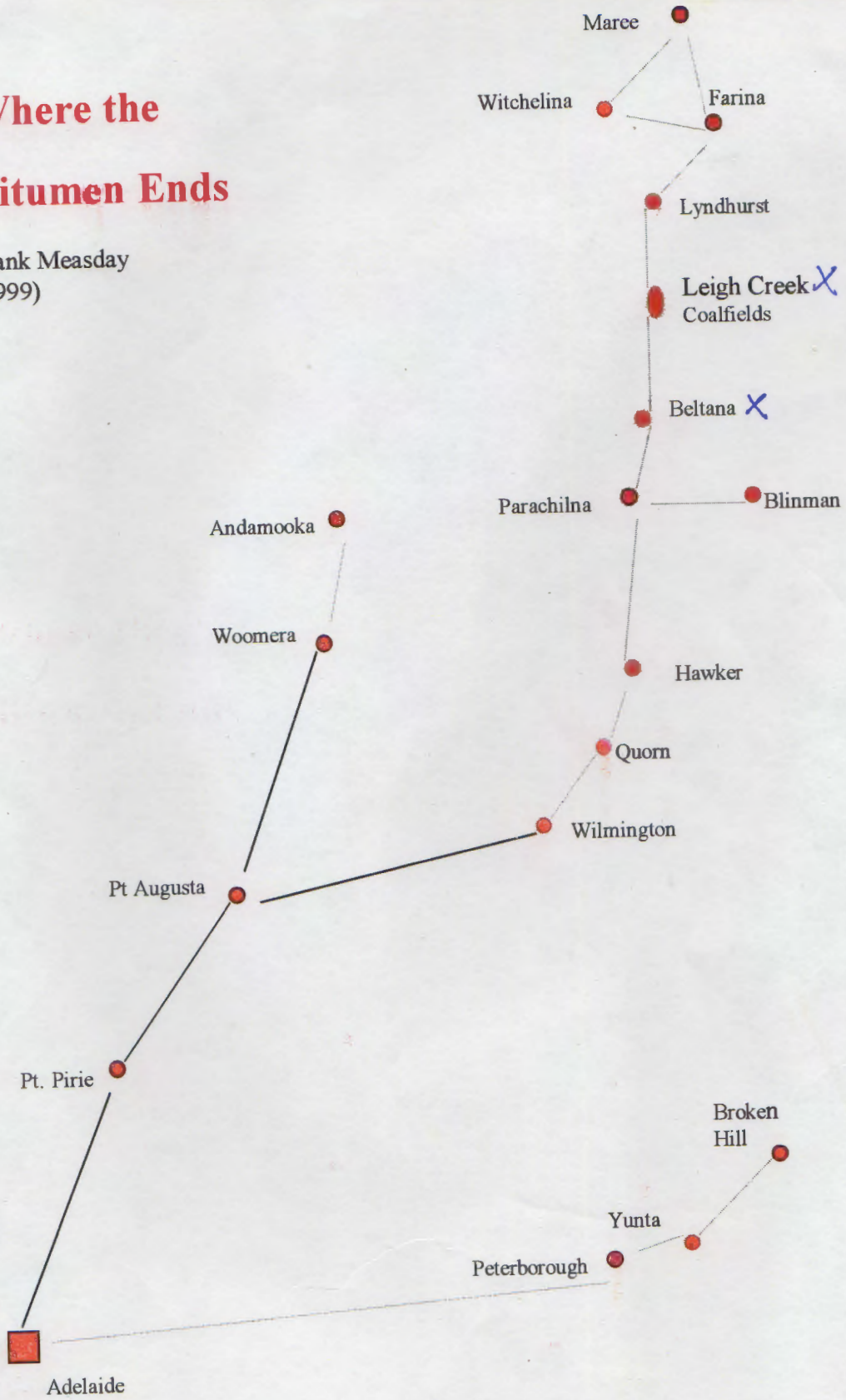


Where the Bitumen Ends

Frank Measday
(1999)



FORWARD

There are many stories to be told from 45 years of ministry, 45 years of interest in and working with people. Eventually you realize it is people that have made a place like Leigh Creek Broken Hill and Woomera. The locality plays its part and isolation underlines any eccentricity.

Of course stories could be told of Laura Blair Athol Modbury and Millicent Especially is this true of Millicent in the time of the Ash Wednesday fires in 1983. But for the moment I am content to move beyond the bitumen road. In the last eight years as Presbytery Minister for Eyre and Frome, I revisited Leigh Creek and Woomera as part of my pastoral care. I am filled with wonder at the two strips of sealed road that now link those once far flung places to 'civilization.' It was the old timers that talked about the metropolitan area as beginning with Pt Augusta as you traveled south. I wonder how they would redefine the metropolitan area now?

But there continues to be a further ingredient to the three areas I have chosen to write about. All three were threatened by a sense of impermanence. Mining towns in remote places have a threat hanging over their heads. I well remember how quickly Radium Hill was converted back to the donga, just as our Broken Hill neighbour had vivid memory of Silverton fading and loading their house onto a truck to come to Broken Hill. I have seen Leigh Creek Coalfield buried at the bottom of an open cut then Leigh Creek South blossom with beauty and convenience, and almost as quickly the population there halved and houses transported away. Woomera had a population of over 5,000 people in our time there, and is now more than halved and who knows by the year 2,000 whether it will exist.

What am I trying to say? That the people who come to such places to live rarely consider them home. They take up temporary residence, but home is somewhere else. Add to that the fact that the three places I am writing about were 'one company towns', This meant that many of the residents never really accepted responsibility for where they were and the conditions under which they lived,

Some couples thought the move to Woomera or Leigh Creek, or to a lesser extent Broken Hill was an escape from problems they faced. Perhaps this is some of the Australian romance with 'the bush'. Of course it never worked like that. If you came to such places with problems then they were amplified and aggravated. Things that could stay hidden in the city were laid bare in these slices of suburbia relocated on the gibber plain.

No doubt the city has its characters but they remain hidden. The characters in the bush stand out

My children have urged me for some time to write down these stories, I found it quite easy to do because the memories are vivid. Should you read these episodes I hope you enjoy them and if you know the writer well you will perhaps understand him a little more, because all this is part of what I have become.

I hasten to thank my wife who shared most of these experiences with me. She has proof read the text. She has also compiled her own diary a record of these and other events in her own style and this also will be left to our children,

Frank Measday

(July 1999)

01/2017

LEIGH CREEK COALFIELDS

1955 to 1957

The incidents related here refer to the old Leigh Creek Coal Fields township and the old dirt road.

Leigh Creek South as it stands today is some 8-10 kilometers south of the actual coalfields.

The old township was demolished to enable an expansion of the mine.

As today, the town was / is a company town. It exists purely to service the mine.

The road up through Melrose, Wilmington Hawker Parachilna Beltana and Puttapa Gap is vastly different now. The new bitumen road by passes Beltana township and Puttapa Gap .

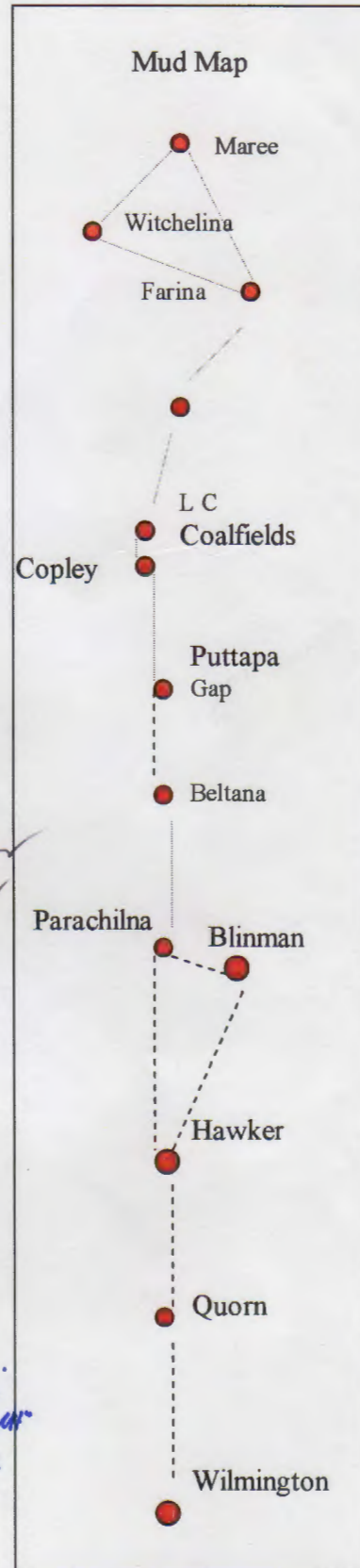
Puttapa Gap was not a town, but a rather spectacular bridge which supported the railway line over Puttapa Creek The road traveled along the creek bed and under the bridge

The bitumen stopped just out of Wilmington. *+ TOWNSTON VIA CARRINGTON HAWKER*

The trip to Adelaide took from 8 to 10 hours. With less regard for your vehicle you could do it in less.

The road was terribly rough and stony with patches of 'bull dust' which filtered down over and through your car as though someone had poured a bag of flour on the hood.

Audrey and I were amused in later years as we visited the new Leigh Creek at the end of the bitumen road to hear a newly arrived couple complaining about the long trip and the conditions.



LATE, 1957 Rev. Geoff Lippase was off't' By Inland Mission - He lived 5 years of church. "Inland CHURCH ASSOC"

I arrived Nov 1957 with Pubs/P.O for 3 years!

Helped Geoff. playing organ S/School

*+ Going to: Blinman - SMITH DUNESK. Mission Building
Beltana - ...*

A Volunteer

I spent two years in Wesley College as a C.A.B.I (Chapman Alexander Bible Institute Student) and two years in training as an accepted Candidate for the Methodist Ministry.

For the first year my father insisted I continue as an Apprentice Motor Mechanic. So while studying as a Theological student in Wesley College, I was also studying at Muirden College in King William St to gain my matriculation and also doing my Apprenticeship subjects. In all it totaled 13 subjects in that first year. I passed 12 of them missing out on Geography.

In the second year I was visited by two people in charge of Apprentices. How was it that I was sending in my assignments from a Theological College when I was supposed to be doing a full time apprenticeship ?. They understood my father's apprehension but on them visiting him I was relieved from that area of study.

In the fourth year, (second year of my 6 years as a Theolog) I completed my studies required in those days for ministry in the Church. I was home in the College vacation over Christmas when I received a call from the then President of the South Australian Methodist Conference, Rev Frank Hambly. "I want to see you as soon as possible."

It was Friday, I suggested I could come to Adelaide from Bute on Saturday morning. The President was due to catch a plane to Kangaroo Island about lunch time, so that suited him.

I had no idea what he wanted, but a call from the President was not to be ignored or disputed so I was in his study at Lincoln College about 10am on the Saturday. He was most cordial. I remember be draped one leg over the armrest of his chair and leaned back.

"I understand you have become engaged to be married. You appreciate that the church will not give you permission to be married until about the fifth year of your probation, and certainly not until you have spent about 12 months in an appointment."

Audrey and I were only too well aware of that.

"We are looking for someone to go to Leigh Creek Coalfields with the Inter Church Association. Now we have agreed not to appoint anyone there, the person that goes there has to volunteer to go. If you will volunteer to go and do a reasonable job for 12 months, and it is only a 12 month appointment, then I will give you permission to be married in January the following year."

"I will volunteer" Now I had no idea where Leigh Creek Coalfields was, or indeed what was involved..but I volunteered.

That first year in the Flinders Ranges was magnificent. We had no idea just how good the wild Hops and Salvation Jane and Sturt Peas and wild flowers were. It was just when



coloured 35mm photography was becoming accepted and Audrey purchased such a camera and sent it up to me.

The months passed. Audrey was in Adelaide still working as secretary for the Home Mission Dept of the Church and I was 350 miles away at the end of a dirt track, the bitumen ended just out of Wilmington.

More months passed. Still no word from the President, certainly not that vital letter of permission. So we planned the wedding anyway, we included Rev Frank Hambly in our wedding guest list and at last the letter came

Into the Donga

1955/56 ?

Sole Bank Manager

EDITHS FRIEND ?

I had nine months in Leigh Creek on my own before we were married. Audrey came up for her holidays and stayed with Chris and Edith Gust. The Gusts had another lodger George Tyler. ⁺⁺ George offered to take Audrey and I on a trip out to the stations. ^{GEORGE'S GEORGE}

George had a 6 cylinder Morris / Wolsley It was a bit rough but he had the suspension altered to cope better with the tracks in the area. The first night out towards Balcanoona we came to a sandy creek bed and decided to camp for the night. After tea around a fire, we set up our swags in the creek bed where the sand was clean and relatively comfortable. At about midnight it began to rain. Now we knew better than to camp in a creek bed, but it was a balmy night and there was nothing but bright stars in the sky so we thought it was OK, But the rain came. We rushed around and collected our gear and threw it into the back of the car and slithered down the track to Balcanoona Station... It was pitch black of course, but in the car lights we saw a promising building. The others sheltered in the car and I knocked on a door seeking shelter. There was no answer, I walked along the verandah to another door and tried again, nothing! Then I noticed that there was a whole series of doors all shut, I tried a few more, but no response. Getting back in the car we drove around several buildings till we came to an open garage. We set ourselves up in this garage and spent the rest of the night. In the morning men were going to work and did not seem a bit surprised to find people camped in the garage. They just waved and we waved back.

As we left the station to continue our trip in the morning, we realised that I had been knocking on the doors of empty shearers quarters.

STATION

We travelled right out through Wertaloona to the shores of Lake Frome and had a relaxing time in the bush. Coming home we were pushed for time. George was due to begin work the next day and we thumped our way over the indifferent track. Night came and it was more difficult to negotiate. The lights began to fade and we found the fan belt on the car had broken. George was not fussed he had two spares. Neither spare was the right size.

Nothing for it but to continue as best we could, hoping that the battery would last the distance. The battery had other ideas. We reached the point where we couldn't keep the engine running with the lights on. So the lights were switched off. We had a torch, so I held it out the passenger side window trying to pick out the road and the worst of the obstacles. It was quite a trip home. We made it, but I have been very careful since to make sure that my spare fan belt really was a spare.

Our First Manse

Now this was our first manse.

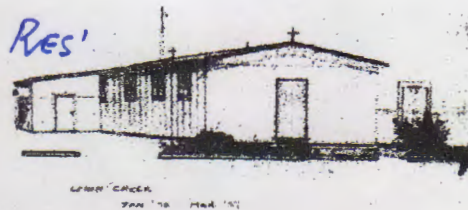


A small section behind the sanctuary was partitioned off to provide two rooms, about 8ft by 6ft. This was my residence. Because I wanted to get married at the end of the first year I built a bedroom on the side of the church about 9ft by 12ft. Mr Bill Dicker assisted me with this and we used packing case timbers from a new piece of machinery the mine had purchased. The cement floor was the first I had ever laid. We put a water cooler in this room and in the summer

we did most of our entertaining in the bedroom, it was the coolest room. I built a sliding door into what we used as a kitchen, which also doubled as a vestry. There was no hardware store so I built a track out of angle iron and used ball bearing races as the wheels for the door.

The table in our kitchen was supplied (goodness knows from where?) it had three legs, so I cut another one off and built a cupboard under the supported end. It worked fine so long as no-one tried to sit on the wrong end. There was a small one-person wardrobe / dressing table, such as you would find in single men's quarters and a single bed. The two latter were hired from ETSA together with a small fridge.

But there was no kitchen equipment such as cupboards and stove. There were certainly no bookshelves. The running water in the kitchen came from a pipe pushed through the kitchen wall with a tap on it under which you put a bucket to catch the drips. The kitchen had no ceiling.



Because of the nature of the construction it was not dust-proof. I was expected to eat at the mess and did so for the first 9 months but because Audrey and I expected to be married and live there for the second year I sold my BSA Bantam bike and bought a kerosene pressure stove. To provide bookshelves and cupboards I went around the coalfield collecting the explosive boxes and put them into domestic service.

Now the 'bathroom' was really tricky.

A lean-to had been built on the back of the church to provide a bathroom and toilet. These were both unlined. Access to the toilet was from outside. Access to the bathroom was through the second partitioned room, which we used as a lounge/study. You stepped down about 8 inches into the 'bathroom'. The door opened into the bathroom. A barrel bolt locked the door from the study and a "hook and eye" kept the door closed if you were in the bathroom.

In the bathroom was a chip-heater shower and a box to hold the paper and wood. Later I gained a used hand-basin and fitted that. But everything in the bathroom / shower room got wet when the shower was used. So you left your clothes etc in the study.

It was Saturday afternoon. Audrey decided to have a shower (she was about seven months pregnant. I decided to do some visiting. I knocked on the bathroom door, she opened it, I told her I was going out and without thinking pulled the door closed and threw the barrel bolt on the study side.

When I came back, about two hours later Audrey was still in the shower and almost blue with cold. She had let the chip-heater run its course, burnt up all the fuel then realised she was locked in. She tried to rekindle the fire but the only paper was a National Geographic magazine which wouldn't burn. She ran out of matches.. and so had to wait till I got home.

I opened the door and astonished exclaimed "What on earth are you still doing in here?"
She was not amused!

When we had guests to stay over night, we hung an old theatre curtain up around the pulpit area in the church on cup hooks attached to the rafters and borrowed a bed. One visiting President said he was awake all night expecting to hear his name called " (Samuel! Samuel!)"

When we were married we got rid of the single bed and scrounged a double bed and mattress from one of Audrey's relations. It had one problem. Every few weeks the end of a coil spring would protrude. Audrey and I would kneel on the mattress and cut the end of the spring off and let it snap back below the mattress cover...till the next time !..

When our first child Stephen was born it was over 100 degrees farenheight and stayed that way for three weeks. So Stephen was confined to the bedroom. We didn't have to take him to church. If he cried we could hear him from the pews.

Just Before Bed

The trip to Blinman was always an adventure. There were five gates to open as you travelled through the Parachilna Gorge. Later these gates were replaced with ramps. *Mrs Rippling?*
You couldn't have an evening service at Blinman before 8.30pm. The postmistress was the organist and the mail and telephone exchange didn't close before then. I tried to organise my visit there to coincide with tourist buses which were making Blinman an overnight stop. After tea I would go over to the hotel and invite all present to come to the worship service. There was one proviso, each person had to bring a chair.

Come the appointed hour 8.30pm. There was no street lighting in Blinman so we would take a strong torch and go over to the hotel to guide people carrying an assortment of chairs from the hotel across to the little CWA hut. The CWA hut didn't have electricity supply either, so we had two kerosene lamps, one suspended from the ceiling in the centre of the building and the other sat on top of the pedal organ. If it was cold then we fired up a combustion heater protruding into the room.

At times we could have 20 to 30 people jammed into that little galvanized iron square room. For many it was a sheer novelty. There was little else to do in the hotel, so why not?. Some would bring kitchen type chairs, others light lounge chairs etc, so people would be seated at all different heights. The hymn books available were of very small print and with only one kerosene lamp in the middle of the room, people had to 'turn to the light, to read at all. I had no hope of using notes for my sermon, I simply could not see, so it was a memory exercise. During the sermon, after a long coach tour, with poor light, it was not unusual for some to go to sleep.

I remember a woman was sitting on a kitchen chair her husband was in a lounge type chair, he went to sleep. After the sermon she gave him a shake and in a loud 'whisper' said "You can wake up now!" He responded in a louder whisper "I wasn't asleep!"

It was as much as one could do to keep a check on oneself the whole set up was hilarious. But one further complication added to it all.

The organist was a large woman and insisted on wearing a hat. She also had bi-focal glasses. She sat facing the congregation and as opportunity allowed she would peer over the organ to see who was in church. To do this she had to look through the upper part of her lenses. But further, when she played she kept time by swaying on her stool. Remember there was a kerosene lamp sitting on the organ, so every movement she made cast a shadow display on the wall behind her. It was fatal to notice this display during the singing. When we took visitors to Blinman we found it necessary to warn them about all these idiosyncrasies. But such warning was not enough I have seen people unable to control their laughter and forced to get out of the church altogether. Just outside they could contain it no longer and this could often be heard from inside.

The journey home from Blinman to Leigh Creek was an adventure. In the first year I often did it on my own. What with the kangaroos and the gates through the Gorge it was an eerie and exhausting drive. But if it was threatening rain, or there was a thunder storm then a desperate urgency was added. One such night I was desperate to get out of the Parachilna Gorge., I was on my own, coping with the gates and the many crossings of the creek, thunder and lightning all round. I rounded one of the many bends, then headed down into the creek crossing. There to my horror was a car and caravan, in the creek bed. The husband of the couple was equally disturbed because I suddenly rounded the bend and caught him in my headlights relieving himself before joining his wife in the van to sleep. I pulled up and shouted at him "What on earth are you doing?"

"What do you mean?" he spluttered indignantly.

"Do you realise the danger you are in? These creeks can suddenly come down with a wall of water 9 or more feet high washing everything before it. Look at the weather, it may not be raining here, but it can rain 25 miles away and still the water has to come down through this creek. You wouldn't know what hit you!"

"Are you serious?" he demanded

"I am deadly serious" I rejoined... "I can't get out of this situation fast enough" and with that I drove off. Now I swear he followed me down to Parachilna and remember he had to re-hitch his van.

Then there was the occasion when one of my church leaders in Leigh Creek had purchased a second hand Vanguard and offered to drive me to Blinman for service. Max brought Harry with him and we set off during the afternoon. Not familiar with this particular vehicle Max did not know that his petrol guage was faulty. On the way home between Parachilna and Beltana we ran out of petrol. Max and I decided to walk. We had been talking driving along so we could only guess where we were. I thought the section of the road looked familiar, but it was night. Harry elected to stay with the vehicle. Taking a torch we set out. Max had belonged to the Adelaide harriers and set the pace. We walked for three hours without stopping and covered 12 miles, only to be picked up by a local carrier from Beltana on his way home from Adelaide, with Harry as his passenger. This carrier took us the further 4 miles into Beltana, got out another vehicle and a can of petrol, took us back to our stranded car and wouldn't even allow us to pay for the petrol.

We arrived back in Leigh Creek at about 7.30 in the morning, to be met by Harry's wife who was pregnant and 'due' I could go to bed and sleep but Harry and Max had to go to work.

Put it in your Pocket

I was the only marriage celebrant for 106 miles. Hawker was linked to us by an indifferent dirt road.

The grader driver came to my door one afternoon to ask if I could marry people. I assured him I could. Would I marry a couple who were friends of his. They spoke no English. He told me they were Yugoslavs. He was also a European and spoke reasonable English, and he agreed to act as an interpreter. We arranged our first meeting.

It was difficult and I was aware that I had no means of checking what he was telling the couple. The required month passed and the papers were in order, so we arranged the date. Then I learned they didn't want to be married in the church. They wanted to be married in 'Hollywood' *

Now in the 15 months I had been the minister in Leigh Creek I had not managed to get past the door of any of the huts in "Hollywood". I had made many calls, but always any conversation was on the doorstep. You see, "Hollywood" was the area designated by ETSA for those unmarried and living together.

Disenchanted by this couple not wanting to be married in our little church, but intrigued to see this as my opportunity to finally gain entrance to "Hollywood" I agreed.

The language was a problem. We had agreed that I would say the vows in English. The interpreter (the Grader driver) would translate into Yugoslavian, I would repeat them in English and the couple in turn would repeat them in English. I was uncomfortable about the accuracy of the translation, so I asked a friend of ours to come and observe, and indicate to me if anything was amiss. Now George was a Czechoslovakian. I was ignorant enough not to know the difference between Yugoslavian and Czechoslovakian. George came with me but before the ceremony, gave me one of those dark looks and whispered that he was Czechoslovakian, these people were Yugoslavian!. However he said he could still do as I had asked of him, because there was enough similarity in the language.

We were shown into a large room which served as kitchen and living room in a converted 'Nissen' hut. The room was full of people. The bride was one end of the room and the bridegroom the other. "You can begin now" the bridegroom said in faulty English. I suggested we clear a space on the floor and they could stand in front of me for the service. Halfway through the service, there was a knock at the door. It was about 6 pm and the grocer had arrived with the weeks supply of groceries. "Excuse please?" the bride said. She paid the delivery man, then proceeded to put the groceries away in the cupboards. That done she fronted up to have the wedding continue. The service over I was ready to leave. The Bridegroom made it clear that I was to stay for the celebration meal. I had eaten my evening meal before coming, so I wasn't at all hungry. But he was insistent, so George and I took our place with the guests around large trestle tables set up across the room. After an hour the Bridegroom noticed I wasn't eating very much and was not drinking anything. This obviously made him uncomfortable. He came to where I was and suggested I have a beer. Now I am a teetotaller so I said, "No thank you, I don't drink beer." "A little wine then?" he prompted. "No I don't drink wine." "Then some cognac?" he suggested. "No I don't drink

* SILVER CITY

* NISSEN HUTS
□ □ □

cognac." The Bridegroom was quite anxious. I really couldn't understand why, so I suggested I would like some coffee. Immediately the Bride went to the stove and prepared some coffee. George gave me one of those looks, but I didn't understand why and we were not sitting together so I couldn't pursue the matter. The same George in the meantime was indulging freely. I felt responsible for him, I didn't want to take him home worse for wear, so after another half hour I stood to leave. The Bridegroom again became agitated and in broken English requested me to stay. I sat down. That was a mistake. Having mustered the courage to stand and announce my intention, I should have carried the action through. George looked hard at me and said "Sit down!". I sat down.

The time passed and I was really out of place. I wasn't eating, I wasn't drinking, I couldn't understand the language, apart from George, I really didn't know anybody, and my wife would be wondering where in the world I was. After what I judged to be long enough I stood again and made it obvious I was leaving. The Bridegroom wasn't happy, but he came over and pressed ten pounds into my hand. Now this was twice the agreed wedding fee. I fortunately had five pounds in my pocket I handed him the change. No way would he take it. George with another "look" hissed, "put it in your pocket!".



The dressing down from George as we drove home in the car was quite firm. "You didn't eat much, well I know you had had tea. Then you didn't tell the man that you didn't drink alcoholic beverages, you said you didn't drink beer, so he offered you wine. You didn't drink wine, inferring it wasn't good enough, so he offered you cognac, that was the best he had, you said no to that, so what was he to do?. Then you wanted to leave. Don't you understand the celebration will last all night and breakfast will be served in the morning, and you want to leave in the first hour?"

he paused, "Then to cap it all you refuse the man's money!"

At this point I was not going to be brow-beaten any longer..." George, that man is now married, he has to set up house. I know the financial pressure he will be under now and five pounds is five pounds."

George looked at me, "Don't you know who that man is? He is the roulette king up here, he is worth a fortune!."

Second Funeral

Six miles south of the Leigh Creek Coalfields is Aroona Dam. Audrey and I arrived when the dam was three quarters finished. In our second year it was completed. To protect the area ETSA had a resident caretaker. He and his wife lived in a house overlooking the project. At this time, Stephen our first born was only a few weeks old, he had come home from hospital into the bedroom I had built on the side of the church. It had the luxury of a water cooler built into the wall. We experienced some three weeks of temperatures over 100 degree F. The Conference of the Methodist Church was held in February and we planned to travel down at night to Adelaide. In those days the trip to the city took about 10 hours. We met the bitumen road at Wilmington. Because of the baby's gear we were taking our trailer down. I must explain that the trailer we had bought from a fellow who transported greyhound racing dogs. It had a masonite cover with two doors at the rear, but more importantly it ran on beaded rim tyres on Chevy wheels.

As we made preparations to leave, the wife of the caretaker at Aroona Dam died. I was asked to conduct the funeral. The husband and friends wanted the funeral at Hawker. This was 106 miles away over a dirt road, either loaded with 'bull dust' or impassible with mud. I wasn't unhappy about the funeral at Hawker, that was on our way to Adelaide so it suited, we were going down to Conference anyway. But to take our new baby out in that heat was another matter. I rang the Methodist Minister at Hawker to see if he could take the funeral. He was driving out of his yard with his wife and children on board to go to Conference, when he heard the phone and dashed inside to answer it. He made it clear he was not willing to take the funeral, it would delay his departure 12 hours. I negotiated with the husband of the deceased and we compromised planning the funeral for 7pm at night. It should be cooler then. However that meant beginning the journey at about 3.30 in the afternoon, the hottest time of the day. So we put Stephen on a pillow with just a nappy on and started out.

About half way down the track we came upon the Humber Super Snipe which was the ambulance and serving as a hearse. It had broken down and a note was pinned to the side window, " Crown wheel and pinion broken, gone to Hawker for Land Rover." I really felt for the mourners coming down the track and being greeted by this scene.

We arrived at Hawker. The minister had left the back verandah door unlocked so we could at least have some shelter, but he had also turned off the ETSA supply and the metre and switches were inside the locked house!. The back verandah was made of that small fluted galvanised iron standing about four feet high, with fly wire up to the roof, and with roll up canvas blinds held down by straps. This manse family was moving in April, so the area was stacked floor to ceiling with tea chests and cardboard boxes ready for packing.

I uncoupled the trailer in the back yard and set out to find the RSL group who were accepting responsibility for the funeral. The deceased had been an army nurse. I found three men in a garage making preparations. They were quite agitated, they had not taken responsibility for a funeral before. I should mention that there was no undertaker in Leigh Creek or Hawker, in fact I believe the nearest undertaker was Pt Augusta, so these remote towns made their own arrangements in those days. I commented that "surely nothing else could go wrong" I was referring to the hearse breaking down, but also to the fact that a storm was approaching with the rapidity that seems a feature of an inland storm.

At 7pm. we travelled to the cemetery, about 3 miles out of Hawker. The coffin was placed on the cross bearers. I asked about the ropes for lowering. Panic was evident, they had overlooked the ropes. Now remember this was only my second funeral. With more experience I would have conducted the funeral and let them lower the coffin after the mourners had left. But I was inexperienced. The RSL members drove furiously back into Hawker. I stood around with the mourners. The storm continued to roll in and darkness fell. The lightning was flashing, fortunately it was not raining. After what seemed an eternity head lights showed the men were on the way back with the ropes. On arrival, I again expressed that surely nothing else could go wrong!. "Don't you believe it, one of the RSL men said, that is not the size coffin they said they were sending, it won't go down that hole!. We might get away with it by lowering it slightly tilted. Again my inexperience showed, it would have been far safer to simply have the service with the coffin above the ground. They began lowering at the appropriate time, the coffin jammed half in and half out the grave. I quickly finished the service by torch-light as it was so dark, the wind was whipping across the gibber plain and my black gown was flapping, I pronounced the Benediction and hurried the mourners into their cars and away.

Meanwhile Audrey was coping with baby Stephen. Remember he was dressed in only a nappy. The storm hit and the blinds flapped in the wind. There was no light. She opened the nearest case and found a jumper of mine. She wrapped him in that, sat on a tea chest and fed him. All the time she was wondering where in the world I was and what had happened. Eventually I got back, hitched on the trailer and we struck south. As we left Hawker in the storm over in the cemetery we could see the lanterns as the RSL men widened the grave to allow the coffin down.

At Red Hill one of the beaded rim tyres ran off the trailer. We saw it pass the car. I pulled the trailer off the road and left it there and we continued to Lochiel. My sister and brother in law manage a property there. David and I went back in a truck and loaded the trailer and found the run-a-way tyre. At Lochiel we reassembled the wheel and crossed the Hummocks to Bute where my father ran a garage. I re-drilled the hubs and fitted two Vanguard wheels. We arrived at Bute just 24 hours after leaving Leigh Creek.

Stephen survived a rude introduction to our North.

Stop the Train

During the day there was a phone call from Beltana. The publican's wife had died. The Inland Patrol man was away out bush. Could I come to Beltana and conduct the funeral. I agreed to go. The following evening dark angry clouds began to roll in as only they can in the desert. Heavy drops began to fall. I decided that if I was to get to Beltana, some 26 miles away over the dirt road, then I should go now. The Inland Missioner's wife agreed to put me up for the night. But I had left my run too late!. Six miles south at Copley the car spun around on the greasy road and faced the way I had come. I cautiously reversed it around, but a few yards further on it spun around again. It wasn't that I was a novice in driving in mud. The heavy rain on the deep red dust created pure grease. I simply couldn't control the car.

I headed back to the Coalfields. There was a train in the station. I asked the Stationmaster if it was stopping at Beltana...when was it leaving? It was already late, it was leaving now, but if I

wanted a ride he would hold the train. After all he said, the coffin was on board, so without the coffin and the parson there could be no funeral.

WARIDOTA CV

We arrived at Beltana railway station about 11.30 at night. To go from the railway station into the settlement of Beltana, we had to cross a large creek. People had come from the town in a large ex-army 4 wheel drive truck. The creek was roaring. It had obviously been raining up in the ranges for some time and the water was draining through the creek. I had heard about the sudden change in these creek beds, normally dry, transformed into raging torrents. This was the first time I had witnessed it. The truck slowly picked its way across the creek, about two chain wide.



Next morning it was still raining, though not so heavily. There was a knock at the door of the Inland Mission House. "Would the parson mind if the funeral service was held in the hotel parlour rather than the church?" I had no objection so the flowers etc were taken out of the little Smith of Dunesk Mission Church and put in the hotel parlour. About an hour later, a knock on the door. They had had conversation down at the hotel. The deceased had attended church, perhaps it was more fitting to have the service in the church. So the flowers etc were moved back to the church. Certainly no more than an hour later, they had second thoughts down at the bar of the hotel, wouldn't it be more fitting if the funeral service was held in the hotel? I decided some direction was necessary so announced that the funeral would be in the hotel parlour.

The ambulance from Leigh Creek was to substitute for a hearse. The road was in terrible shape and real doubts were expressed if it would arrive in time, or if it would arrive at all!. So the locals cleaned up a tray top Land Rover just in case. In the middle of the funeral service there was a blast from the twin horns of the Humber Super Snipe. It was a terribly muddy mess, but it had arrived. The bearers carried the coffin out and into the hearse. We drove gingerly out to the cemetery, water and mud everywhere. I felt so sorry for the mourners, but there really was nothing we could do to improve the conditions. The hearse stopped at the gates, not daring to drive closer to the grave. The bearers took the weight of the coffin and two of them sank down to their ankles in the mud. On lifting his foot to take a step, one of them left his shoe behind in the mud.

We made our way, squelching in the mud and water to the grave side and made the committal.

Sequel

Some 15 years later I took some Americans from Woomera across to Leigh Creek. We visited what was left of Beltana. At that stage the old hotel was a ruin. There was still a mirror and a fireplace and an old counter / bar in what had been the parlour. I was telling my friends about this funeral. Another couple was also looking around the debris. They stopped to listen to my tale. At the conclusion they came up and said, "Yes! that's what happened, we were here!."

The Bishop got through

Being the Minister at Leigh Creek involved being available to the communities of Blinman and Maree. The Inter Church Association (Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational) provided their appointee with a rail pass from Hawker to Maree. This mainly involved a monthly service at Blinman and a monthly Religious Instruction class at Maree with an occasional evening service.



Thanks to my father I had a Vanguard car in good condition, This car I had resprayed myself. It was meant to be Champagne..a conservative mustard yellow. Remember all cars in those days were conservative colours. But something had been omitted from this paint and it turned out bright yellow. It was a beautiful coat of paint. A friend who knew what he was doing had helped in the spraying and applied several

coats. At each application we believed the next coat would break the color down, but it didn't happen. To break up the colour I had painted the wheels red. Now this was not the sort of car a minister drove. The first time I took my fiancée out in it a man stepped out from the kerb to hail us as a taxi.

I had a car, but no provision from the Inter Church Assoc to run it, "After all" they said, "We provide a rail pass". To use the pass meant two to three days to do what you could do in an extended day by car.

I decided to go on my first trip to Maree using my car. I was not familiar with the road, and we had experienced heavy rain that meant extensive flooding. So at Lyndhurst (25 miles up the track) I made enquiries and was assured that all was well to Farina. I pulled into Bell's general store in Farina, trying to look nonchalant in this yellow car. I was wearing shorts etc..but I didn't fool old Mr Bell. He was leaning against the verandah post of his store in a woollen button-up singlet with short sleeves, a waistcoat and braces on his pants over the lot. He was chewing on a straw. I could feel him looking me up and down and writing me off as some city slicker out of his depth in the North.



I asked about the road. "You can't get through the main road" he said "Its under water. You have to go through Witchelina". Now I had no idea where Witchelina was, and he wasn't volunteering anything.

"How do I get to Witchelina ?"

"You go down the street to the corner where the butcher used to be and take the track to the left!"

Now there were only about half a dozen buildings left in Farina, mainly tumbled ruins here and there.

STATION
NOW
OWNED
CONSERVATION
TRUST!

"Where did the butcher used to be?" I asked

A long pause followed. Anybody would know where the butcher used to be and if you didn't know, then you had no right to be in this part of the country. No! he didn't say that. He didn't have to!

At last "The butcher shop was two 'streets' down on the left."

Now I wasn't getting on too well so I thought a little conversation might improve relationships. "I am on my way to Maree to take RI in the school. This is my first trip. I am the minister of the church from Leigh Creek. What are my chances of getting through?"

"The Bishop got through" he rejoined.

Now the Bishop..the Anglican Bishop of Willochra was some 80 years of age. He ran two big Chev. cars. He would often simply pull up wherever he was and go to sleep. Everybody knew him and sort of kept an eye open for him through the North.

"Well if the Bishop got through then I guess I can " I stated.

"Perhaps" he said.

Somewhat discouraged I left Farina and found the track to Witchelina Station. Here they were yarding cattle. I pulled into the yard definitely feeling out of place. A tall blue eyed stockman came over, and I told him who I was

"So how do I get to Maree?"

"Go through that gate over there, see that track along the fence.... follow it through three more gates. Can you see those hills in the distance? See that faint line up through the hills. That's the track. Follow that and you will come to Maree. It's pretty rough so be careful."

"What are my chances of getting through?"

"Oh! It's passable with care.....the Bishop got through.

I followed the directions and after several miles came to the hills. It was rough alright. Over a hill I came to a creek bed. I gingerly edged the car down into the creek, dodging the worst of the boulders. The car stopped. That is the engine was still running but I wasn't moving. Now I was a motor mechanic by trade so I suspected a broken axle. But Vanguards didn't break axles. So with the motor running and still in gear I got out to see what was going on. I was balanced on one front wheel and one back wheel. So the other back wheel was spinning in the air .

It was a hot afternoon and the flies were terrible, but I had no option but to jack up the rear of the car and pack the wheels with stones to get traction and drive out. It was very awkward because the sides of the creek were steep Several minutes later, covered in dust and perspiring profusely (no air conditioning in those days) I climbed out of the creek and looked down into the next.

Would you believe the same thing happened again several minutes later.



Now by this time it was about 3.30pm . I still was several miles from Maree and certainly in no condition to face an RI class etc. So I found a place to turn around and headed back. I was disconcerted at failure and didn't stop at Witchelina to let them know I had returned. This nagged at me on the track back to Farina, so while it was the last thing I really wanted to do I pulled in again at Bell's Store at Farina.

Mr Bell was still leaning against his verandah post. He eyed me off again as I pulled up.

"That was a quick trip," he said

"I didn't make it" I said.

"Not surprised, " he rejoined, "It took the Bishop three days!"

The Day the Church Collapsed

Actually it happened prior to my appointment to Leigh Creek, but it is worth telling.

With the aid of the Inter Church Association a kit-type building was purchased to provide a church building at the Coalfields. This was the first Protestant Church in Leigh Creek, the Anglican Church came later, the Catholic Church was already there. After I left a church building was brought down from Radium Hill and became the Inter Church Assoc Church.

The kit arrived. It had a frame of upright timbers that were grooved along the length each side. Into this groove was slid two masonite sheets that were glued together to form the outside and inside walls. This type of construction proved hopeless for the weather conditions at the Coalfields. After a short time the heat contracted the masonite and bowed it so that it not longer engaged the grooves along its length and you could see through the joints.

But it was a great day. The floor was down and the sides put together and stood up. Now the structure depended on the roof to hold it all together. So the roof was lifted on. It was all a last minute-rush job. Enthusiasm had invited the heads of the three representative churches in the Inter Church Association to be present for the grand opening. Saturday night the building was up, the roof was on, though not bolted to the sides..but it seemed fairly secure..... and the choir practiced about 7pm for the Sunday event.

Saturday night a northern storm blew up, wind and dust and rain, and more violent wind. The roof lifted off the church, the walls collapsed. The opening was postponed!

Three Bars Only



In a remote place like Leigh Creek Coalfields musicians were at a premium. Our Church was fortunate in having Tom Beare a resident Engineer as its organist. Tom played by ear, he couldn't read music. This was no problem for hymns, so long as it wasn't a new hymn. But when it came to a wedding it posed a problem.

Now most weddings were out of the ordinary, like the elderly couple who came in from one of the stations to be married. They told me they were doing this because their grandchildren had urged them on. The station was so remote that for most of their life-time no one had called who was licensed to marry them, or, they just hadn't bothered. So they didn't want a full-blown wedding with an organist.

But here was an exception. ... An important exception. A young couple choosing to get married in our church in Leigh Creek Coalfields. I asked Tom to play for the wedding. He was

concerned, he was confident he could play the first few bars of the wedding march, but not beyond that. So we practiced. We approached the door and walked down the aisle to see how far we could get on what Tom was capable of playing. We also agreed that the same bars could appropriately get the couple down the aisle after the ceremony!

So the day arrived. Tom was signaled when the bride reached a certain spot on the approach to the church and we safely got her to the altar within the prescribed music.

We also got the couple out again to the same few bars. It was a well drilled event and apart from those in the know, most people were not aware of our limitations.

Wearing a Hat



A bus pulling a trailer came into Leigh Creek. The SA Government provided this bus with three people, one man and two women, to test for TB in all the country areas. They stayed in the town for a five day period which covered a weekend.

I wanted their stay to be a pleasant one and apart from the bus they had no other transport. So I organised the Church families to extend hospitality

to our three guests. They were most appreciative. We suggested a trip to Mt Termination after church on Sunday. The Sturt Peas were in bloom and Mt Termination was carpeted with these beautiful red and black flowers. A week before a cattle truck had come in from the Mt Termination area it had been loaded with Sturt Peas with a pitchfork and it was quite a sight. Amongst the normal plants there was one white Sturt Pea. (These days all this would be quite illegal)



The Church families determined to go the 50 odd miles out and see the sight, and if possible discover some more variations, especially white.

The X-Ray unit decided that if they were going out with the Church people after Church, then perhaps they should come to Church. This was not their normal practice and the two women confided to me that they didn't have hats. This wouldn't matter today, but in those times a woman didn't consider herself properly dressed for Church unless she wore a hat. I persuaded them that in Leigh Creek many women didn't wear hats to Church. I then went to my women parishioners and requested them not to wear a hat to Church on Sunday. Now this

was no simple matter. Horrified, several told me they had never been to Church without a hat. But to be accommodating they agreed.

Sunday came. Family after family came into the church, and female after female complied. ... no hats. Then the X-Ray team arrived and the two women were wearing hats. They had gone to the trouble to borrow hats in order to go to church and be comfortable.

Better than a drug.

Graham K worked on the coal mine. His wife was in Adelaide expecting a baby. Word reached him that he was the proud father of a son. Finishing work on Friday night he put a stretcher in the back of his covered utility and set off down the road for Adelaide. He arrived in the early hours of Saturday morning. As soon as the shops opened he did some frantic shopping. The family needed a new washing machine and there were other purchases to accommodate the baby. After lunch he went to the hospital and spent as much time as visiting hours would allow with Jean and the baby.

About 5pm on the Saturday evening he set off for Leigh Creek. He was due back on shift Sunday morning. He was dog-tired but struggled with sleep till he lost the battle between Parachilna and Beltana. The road came up to meet him. If you have similarly struggled with sleep then you will know the experience.

He slammed on the brakes and pulling to the side of the road, he switched off the lights while slowing to a stop, he opened the door intending to use the stretcher in the back of the ute .

Whack! Something slammed into his open door and knocked him to the ground. Bewildered he struggled to his feet and whack! He found himself on the ground again. By this time his eyes were accustomed to the darkness and he lay on the ground trying to make sense of what had happened. He saw it was a kangaroo. Apparently the animal had been hopping towards the light when suddenly the light went out and in its confusion it had jumped into the open door. Then in a state of further confusion it had lashed out at the figure suddenly appearing before it and Graham found himself on the ground again.

Graham stayed on the ground till the roo hopped off into the darkness. He said he got back into the ute without an ounce of sleep left in him and drove fully alert back to Leigh Creek.