

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF RONALD JAMES DUNN

From gut runner to millionaire, Ron lived in interesting times. Pop often said, "You could write a book about my life."

This Ron's life story as he told it to me.

Ron Dunn was born on the 12th of July 1912 in Balranald, New South Wales. He was one of ten children, though not all of them survived childhood.

His younger brother Walter is here today.

When Ron was very young, the family moved to Melbourne to live in Yarraville.

Ron spent his early childhood and schooling partly in Yarraville, and partly with his grandmother in Balranald.

I think his grandmother must have been a big influence on his character. She ran a maternity hospital, and Pop said she would always help anyone, 'no matter if they were black brown or brindle'

Times were tough in Yarraville. The family sometimes lived on just rabbits and bread.

When Ron was about ten years old, his parents sent him away to live with relatives in the Mallee. They were there to clear mallee roots and dig an irrigation trench. They lived in a tent made of hessian, which at first had to be erected on the road, for want of any other clear land. Ron said there were dust storms out there that were so thick, he couldn't see his hand in front of his face.

He never found out why he was sent there, and wondering about this always made him melancholy. In other ways, his time in the mallee was a happy one, because he lived there with his aunty Bella, whose kind nature (and bread) he was still speaking about the last time I saw him. Ron said that she would put lime in the muddy bore water, making the red dirt sink to the bottom, leaving clean water for bread making. This process fascinated him. He was impressed with ingenuity. Whenever we showed pop some modern piece of technology he would say, "How the hell do they do that?"

About three years later he returned to Melbourne. He didn't want to leave Aunty Bella, but he was sent for as he was now old enough to work and bring in a wage.

Aged thirteen, he got a job as a gut runner in an abattoir. This involved cleaning out intestines by hand, and stringing them on a rack to be dried and made into tennis racket and violin strings. He wore only pants while doing this unpleasant job, and he said he could never get rid of the stink, even after thorough washing.

He was the only one in the family with a job at this time. His brother, the late Alan Dunn said that if it hadn't been for Ron, the family would have starved. A gut runner's job starts early and finishes early in the day. In the afternoons he went to a gym called 'Boy's Club' where he trained as a boxer, a sport that he continued to do all the while he was in Melbourne.

This gym must have been a good one, because quite a few Australian light weight and heavy weight champions came out of it. At this gym Pop told me he met a remarkable old man who could still train at boxing, despite being almost eighty. Pop said he learnt the secret of longevity from this man, which was to 'drink plenty of water as soon as you get up in the morning'

He later worked at CSR sugar works shoveling coal into a furnace. He did this job for nineteen

years. I asked him what it was like, and he said “It was a waste of time love” But it was during these years that he enjoyed his passion for hobbies - whippet racing, and dancing. Yarraville was the centre of whippet racing up until the Second World War. He and Emily could often be seen walking the streets with five whippets on each hand. Illegal bookies used to come to the meetings, along with a cast of colourful characters. Pop told us that at the entrance gates to the White City dog track, they had monkeys dressed as little jockeys clinging to the dogs backs. This memory delighted him well into old age.

The big dance of the time was the varsity drag, which had taken over from the Charleston as the biggest dance craze of the era. He loved going dancing, and claims that he and Emily won many dancing competitions, sometimes traveling in to the Collingwood Town Hall, where dance competitions are still held today.

He married Emily Eaton. How they met or where they were married I don't know. Ronnie, Pauline, John and Irene were born in Seddon, near Yarraville.

For some reason, probably partly because his parents lived here, Ron decided to move to Cohuna. Why he uprooted Emily, a city girl who owned a house, and moved her and the young children to a place with no running water or electricity, has been a topic of discussion in the family for many years.

Ron was not a natural farmer. Apparently he treated this as retirement (aged 33) and would sit under a tree smoking while his kids did all the farm work. He had a bad temper, and made life hard for his family. His children were well fed, but not well provided for in those days. Some of them remember at times having no other clothes aside from their school uniform.

In around 1960 the family moved into the ‘Whitehouse’ as it was called, in the main street of Cohuna, later moving to the property over the road.

It was in town that Ron took an interest in local politics, becoming the Shire President for two terms. He was on the council from 1965 to 1980. He was community minded, not allowing margarine in the house because he thought it was important to support the local dairy industry. He was most proud of Cohuna getting put on to sewerage, and the high quality of the town water.

Ron had an excellent sense of theatrical timing that he had opportunity to use in his time in council.

One year he noticed that the concrete used to make Cohuna's footpaths was not thick enough. He thought it was like a pie-crust, and suspected that the people paid to lay it had skimmed on the concrete and pocketed the savings. He dug up a slab of this concrete and banged it down on the table at the next council meeting by way of argument.

By now Ron had racehorses, and was involved with all aspects of this pastime, breeding, training and buying, and of course, talking.

Pop made an office for himself down near the shed in an old gypsy caravan. He had a telephone in there attached to an extremely loud speaker. Many people who live in town will remember the sound of his telephone echoing down the creek. He kept his papers and the stud book in there, along with bridles headstalls and saddles of all kinds.

He also kept his various medicines in there, which he claimed would cure ‘man or beast’ He had a big bag of sulphur that he'd gotten from the sugar-works in the 40's that he fed to horses for their ailments, and probably took some himself from time to time. He also had some black tar-like substance, to be used for all problems of skin, joints, muscles and anything else you can think of.

Everyone was welcome at Ron and Emily's house. However many people dropped in, there would be a ham sandwich and a cup of tea and bit of fruitcake for all of them. Macaroni and custard was a favourite desert, and Ron made delicious casseroles and curried sausages.

In later years, he would scrape the icing off cakes as a concession to diabetes, and eat them with jam.

His hospitality extended to people on the fringes of society. In the 70's he discovered there was a man living at the tip, going by the name of Bill Bonnie. Ron invited this man to live with him and Emily. Bill Bonnie didn't like being inside the house. Ron set him up in a stable. He lived there until his death, and when he died Ron and Emily paid for the funeral and had a plaque made for the Cohuna cemetery.

For many years Ron and Emily were a sort of double act, Pop telling stories starring himself as the hero, and Emily rolling her eyes at some of the less likely scenarios. When Emily moved to the nursing home, Ron drove to visit her every day until he dented a few too many of the nurses' cars and was forced to take a taxi instead.

Pop could always be found either sitting at the Victorian-era dining table topped with 50's green laminex, or dozing in front of the television in a reclining chair. If he was at the table he would see you coming, but if he was in front of the TV, no amount of banging on the glass door, shouting or waving would get his attention.

Ron lived in that house up until a couple of years ago, when after a fall he was moved to the retirement village. He didn't want to live there, but in characteristic fashion, he fought hard, and then decided to adapt to what he couldn't change. In no time he was stashing bananas in his room, and starting arguments with people about what should or shouldn't be done around the place. He was fortunate to have his long-time friend June Lester still looking out for him.

Pop had an excellent memory for names and dates. He never forgot names, even if he had only met someone briefly. At a back-to at Balranald School about fifteen years ago, he amazed everyone by being able to recognize and name long lost classmates who he hadn't seen since childhood. This ability, minus a few lapses, stayed with him until the end of his life.

We can truly say that Ron Dunn had a good innings. His passing marks the end of an era. There would not be many people alive now that can remember dancing the Charleston, clearing the mallee, or a time when whippet racing was a number one sport.

Now there is no one to ask about the manners, beliefs and fashions of the 20's and 30's. No one knew as much as Pop about the Dunn family. He could identify all the faces in the photos we found in old biscuit tins, and tell you where they lived, what they did and what they were like. He will be missed.

Caroline Dunn March 2008