

Coorong National Park *secrets*



Personal Stories Series **Jack Mincham**

What is your connection with the Coorong?

My grandfather went across to New Zealand with a chap when gold was discovered. He didn't make a fortune but he must have made a few bob. Later my grandfather bought a big boat and he was fishing the lake at Meningie. There was a lot of fish in the lake then, cod and the like. My father, the eldest, born in 1880, remembered he was about four when grandfather sold the boat across the lake and bought a lot of the land along the lakeshore in Meningie. He owned from the south side of the jetty, where Frank Goode had a store and a baker's shop, to right up past where the motel is now. Land was cheap in those days.

Meningie was laid out in 1866. It's one of the few areas in South Australia, I think, where they surveyed blocks out into the water. From the jetty south when my grandfather got land it went right out. They thought all traffic would be like on the Mississippi river and you would have your own wharf. Road transport wasn't thought of in the early days.

The stations fenced their blocks east and west so the cattle and sheep could walk down to Lake Alexandrina for water. There was a track but there were umpteen dozen gates to open on the way. Gradually old trucks started to come and people came through by road.

Why did you stay?

I got married before I went away to war. We had been married nearly 70 years when Julie died. We had a daughter Diane who married, moved to Adelaide and had three boys.

When I came back to Meningie after the war, I bought two blocks of land. Dad was still looking after the old farm. I got a job at Sid Reed's near Auburn in the mid-north looking after stud sheep, teams of horse and doing general farming.

I came back to Meningie and used to go up the Coorong. Along the old track, from Sandy Wells through to Coonalpyn, people gradually took up the land and cleared it because they could grow crops and lucerne. Water wasn't very good but the land carried sheep. A mate and I dug 60-odd wells out through the country there inland and along the Coorong. The deepest was 38 feet deep. That was the last one I dug. The sandy track was firm until heavier trucks came through when they started clearing. So then the council put gravel roads down.

What was school like in those days?

My earliest days, I started school when I was six and I walked the two miles to school at Meningie. Finished my Qualifying Certificate at twelve and that was it - there was no other schooling here. For about the next two years my father paid the schoolteacher to teach me the extra two grades to year 9 but when the new teacher came that was the end of it. So when I was 14 I had to go out and work. A lot never completed grade 7 then. There was no high school then and no buses to Murray Bridge.

What do you remember generally about earlier days on the Coorong?

The track to town was sandy and Dad had a buggy so he would come in once a week. Mum would trade eggs for vegetables and that sort of thing at the small store. We grew our own vegetables. I helped at home. We had a scrub block and it was only partly cleared.

When we were young, Mum made a lot of different meals out of rabbits. Young rabbits could be done in butter or batter. Some you could roast with onions or bacon and serve with roast potatoes. You could boil them and make rissoles with bacon pieces but you'd never take an old rabbit. The rabbits were a curse to the farmer but a lifeline to a lot of people that caught rabbits for a living. You wondered how they fed a family in those days.

Relatives were closer in those days and they handed down material for clothing and all that. My first suit I got from a cousin in Adelaide - he'd grown out of it.

What changes have you seen the Coorong go through?

I remember I was four years old when the last paddle steamer, *The Jupiter*, came across the lake. Out from the jetty there were about seven or eight piles, big posts, driven into the mud with a big iron band around them and one pile further out. When the lake used to get low, the paddle steamers couldn't put their paddles in the mud but the flat bottom could slide on the mud so they'd put a winch out and winch themselves back into the jetty. That's what the posts were for. They were pulled out in the late '70's.

Earlier, when I came back from the war, the road to Melbourne was shocking. We used to put shell grit on the road but in about a day or two the single land track would be corrugated again for miles.

I remember the Coorong used to dry way back in the summer and there were crabs in it. The men used to use cotton nets for fishing. They would dip them in a tan of wattle bark to preserve them and dry them on the flat at Stony Well. There was a big highways camp at Stony Well.

What is an interesting thing that you heard of related to the Coorong?

Tom McCallum owned and leased land from the 10-mile (Moonee Hills) gate. He and his neighbour Martin had a row over a waterhole on their boundary. Martin found Tom had fenced in the waterhole so his cattle couldn't drink. So Martin pulled all the posts out of the water and took them to his place in Meningie. So when Tom's man Gordon told him, Tom said "Let's go and get the police and we'll charge him with stealing our posts because I've marked each post with a nail". He was overheard by a young chap who was going with one of Martin's daughters. So he got on his horse and galloped out to warn Martin.

Tom and Gordon turned up with the police and Tom said "That's our posts. I can identify them because I've got one nail driven in the head of every post". The policeman looked and said "I'm sorry Mr McCallum but there are two nails in every post." Apparently Tom said "Let's go Gordon, the scoundrel has beaten us".

Did you spend time on the Coorong when you were young? If so, what do you remember from those days?

We used to go over to the peninsula for shark fishing and camp at Parnka You could swim across from there but the men had a boat or used the punt. My dad, uncle and I used to camp at Parnka and we'd take a boat over with all our gear. I had to get two four-gallon buckets of blood from the butcher. I had to carry the two buckets like a Chinaman, on a pole, over the sandhills. In the morning there was a lot of clear water and the stingrays used to come in and get the big cockles. You'd catch

stingray with a harpoon. Then we'd drag it down and peg it and cut bits of meat off it.

In the afternoon, about three o'clock, you'd pour blood out and the sharks would come in, generally bronze whalers up to nine feet. One day I got a grey nurse shark. You could catch them on a hand-held very strong line. Sometimes the women joined us for a picnic.

Bill Coad had a house on the peninsula at Parnka. He used to look after Bascombe's cattle and he also trapped rabbits. Bill used to punt across to deliver his rabbits. Then he'd drive his car to this side of Woods Well to meet the rabbit catchers on the road. He never registered his vehicle because he drove it on private land. We had a policeman here called Symes, He was very stern, not liked at all. He heard about this so one day when Bill pulled out of the private land onto the main road Symes caught him and fined him. The locals were very savage about that.

What was it like living the area?

We used to live about two miles out of town on a partly cleared scrub block which is called Mill Farm today. My mother had chooks and grew vegetables. The ground wouldn't produce crops until trace elements such as copper and zinc were available after the war. That's when the development of all this country went ahead. It made a difference because you could grow lucerne and other crops. Phosphates were very cheap in those days. A bag of plain super and a bag of trace element were added.

In the early days there were only horses and they couldn't plough the scrub much. There was an old stump-jump plough that would jump over stumps. The families would roll down scrub and burn it and then put a crop of wheat in. Then when the ashes and crop exhausted the soil they moved on.

What was it like working in the area?

My older brother, Hans (nicknamed Bill), took on school teaching and he went down to Adelaide. He had to wait for a while to get a posting. My elder sister, Judy, our cousin looked after her. She became a governess in her young days and she married a station-owner up north.

When I left school I helped dad at home. Then for a year I worked at the main store by the lake in Meningie. I had to walk the two miles in every morning and I started at 7am. I used to take the baker's cart out around the town.

Then Len Ritchie Snr. came to see me because Poltalloch was overrun with "millions of rabbits". They had a concerted effort to eradicate the rabbits. He asked me to join them for two pounds, ten shillings and a quarter of mutton a week because he knew I could set traps. This was a big help because I only got one pound a week at the store and mum had to keep me. So I gave in my notice at the shop straight away without telling my dad. Dad was crook at me because he thought I didn't have another job prospect.

Len Ritchie, Laurie Major and I went up to Poltalloch where a trapper had built a house out of pine posts. He had formed a big kitchen and two bedrooms. He had tapped wheat bags on the outside and inside and whitewashed them with lime, fat and something else that made them stiff and waterproof. In summer it was quite a cool place with a well close by. I was given a quiet old horse and a buggy and a hundred traps. They had a chap ploughing in the rabbit holes. Len and another chap had to fumigate the rabbits with sulphur. I was supposed to trap behind to stop the rabbits coming over and digging out the holes. In the evening you'd see hundreds of rabbits in a nearby wombat hole. Well, we cleaned up the rabbits and I came back home.

You could buy either a fishing or a kangaroo licence for two pounds a year, but leather went up to a big price so I went kangarooing with my uncle Harry. The basic wage was three pounds a week then for a man but I could make six pounds a week out of skins. We caught the 'roos on horseback using dogs and a shotgun. We had five or six dogs and they were each given a two-day spell. The dogs would catch the kangaroo and it would back up into a bush. The good dogs soon learnt to bark but they wouldn't tackle them. If the dogs got injured they would get cut or stabbed. I lost two dogs through a big kangaroo. It grabbed them and squashed their ribs. Kangaroos are powerful. I always carried a .22 gun when on horseback.

You could buy sheep, shorn wethers, up north for a shilling and then put them out in the scrub for twelve months. About April the scrub was burnt in patches and when the shoots came up the sheep would be put in those areas. They never had fires get away from them. You'd get a clip of wool off

the sheep but you had to sell them because there wasn't enough feed so each year they'd buy fresh sheep. So they took up big areas and ran sheep on them but the 'roos came too.

So we'd shift our camp far out into the scrub to catch the kangaroos. We took two tents, one you'd sleep in and one you'd put the chaff and skins in. You'd clear a patch and stretch out and dry the skins. You had to give your dog a two-day rest - it was pretty hard on them. I did that job for two years and when I turned nineteen I joined the army. I did training at Woodside in the Adelaide Hills and Seymour in Victoria. Then I went up to Darwin through the bombing and I nearly copped it there.

In 1964 I sold my place to Sir Michael Pope and he established lucerne down there and I became his farm manager. I lived there for awhile and I had to clear country, just scrub, and get it perfectly level. I had a big labour force. Then in 1965 he bought Haymen's and I moved out there. It was 1,100 acres and we put down 400 acres of irrigation.

Later, he bought Warrengie and I moved out there and lived there for years. Warrengie was his downfall. In those days you could put a pump in the lake wherever you wanted to. No water restrictions or anything. I dealt with agronomists about what to put on the land and everything. I got to know the land and I would have to estimate what I thought the tonnage would be on the different places. But Sir Michael Pope, he would always overestimate and he'd raise the estimate. It went bung in the end. It went into receivership. I ran it for three years before it was finally sold off.

In 1967 the river failed and the lake went out and dried up. We had to dig channels into the pumps to get water.

What was your favourite place in the Coorong?

My wife Julie and I used to take trips to the Coorong to the mulberry tree this side of Salt Creek. The tree was there when I was a small boy. I was told by an Aboriginal fellow that the root stock to that tree came from Kangaroo Island.

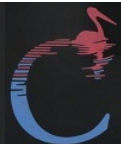
Are there any other recollections that stand out for you?

During the school holidays a mate of mine would stay with his cousins at Ashville where the old road to Taillem Bend had one of the last gates. The kids would open and shut the gates for the travellers who would often toss them a penny or, if lucky, a sixpence. In those days you could buy sweets for a penny or an ice cream for three pence. Mrs Fleet had a shop where you could buy ice creams. That was where the car wash is now.

Are there any other thoughts that you would like to share?

When I was a boy, Mr Tom McCallum, who was head of the Council for years and also on the Legislative Council, owned McGrath Flat. He sponsored a Scotsman called Swan to emigrate but he had to work for a few years to pay for his passage out. On the left-hand side as you come up to Meningie there was a valley with a beautiful well where the Scotsman grew all the vegetables for the station. On the right-hand side he set up a fruit orchard. He worked for Mr McCallum for several years. Swan had several boys and girls - they are the ancestors of the local Swan families in the Meningie community.

During the holidays I used to go out to my uncle Harry's block over the range to trap rabbits. Sometimes I'd sit with Old Nulla at his camp and listen to his yarns about early Aboriginal days. He used to shear sheep for my uncle. I went out there on a horse kangarooing one day with two dogs. Along the way I got six 'roos in no time because the dogs would divide and take one each. Nulla couldn't believe I had six 'roos. He got me to save the kangaroo appendix which is quite long and bigger than a human's appendix. He would wash them out and make a big sausage out of them.



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