

Coorong National Park *secrets*



Personal Stories Series **Ron Ayres**

What is your connection to the Coorong?

When I was about six years old and living with my grandparents Fred and Maud Applekamp, their eldest son Melville and Jack Jones, a Welshman, would visit us. I pestered Uncle Melville to take me with him to Jack's camp to go fishing.

Jack's camp was on the Seven Mile Loop Road as it is known today, and his camp later became Jack or Eddie Black (his son's) camp. The original camp consisted of a one-room hut built out of flattened tar drums, with a bed in each corner at one end and a wood-burning stove at the other end. There was a roughly built table, wooden Dawes boxes turned upside down for chairs and a sand floor.

I am not sure how long these visits would last, but I think it was about a fortnight at a time and then my Mum would visit my grandparents at Potters Lane again and I would stay home. The visits to Jack's became quite regular. Looking back it was probably to give Gran a spell as she still had three sons and grandfather to look after.

Jack had two flat-bottomed, double-ended dinghies that were rowed, and also a 29-foot motor-sail boat called the *Joanne D*.

We would fish with Jack from the Needles down to near the Murray Mouth. The days when we went in the *Joanna D* to the mouth, we would be away for three or four days. Jack would take large blocks of ice that came to Meningie by Lucieer Carriers and were kept in their chillers.

The ice was packed tightly in sawdust inside wheat bags, with the tops sewn up. We would call into other fishermen's huts on the Hummocks so Jack could catch up with them and we would often have a meal. Some of the shacks were constructed from timber collected from the beach.

On one occasion we visited Creamer's camp and the men chatted about their fish catches. Mr Creamer told the story of how he was gutting a big mulloway when he felt something hard in the gut and on looking closer he found an unusual coin with a hole in the centre. Jack, on seeing the coin, said that "If Mr Creamer took it to the right people, he probably would not have to work again.' From then on I would always feel the gut of the mulloway thinking I too could be lucky.

I also lived for a short time with my mother, stepfather, brother Leon and sister Iris on the Coorong about one kilometre north of Woods Well. Later in life I became a professional fisherman.

What about school?

At about nine years of age I moved with my mother, brother and sister into Meningie. It was hard starting school in Grade I at that age with the rest of the class being so much younger and of course I copped some teasing. I could already write my name and found arithmetic quite easy, so I was moved to Grade III shortly after.

I also attended Tulkinera School, at Meningie West, when my mother moved for work. For a short time Leon and I rode Mum's horse bareback to school, but we were then given pushbikes.

My attendance at school over the years was quite irregular due to not living close enough or lack of transport and shifting around. I went to school when I lived with Aunty Win and Uncle Bill Coad in Meningie, but then lived with another auntie and uncle and went kangaroo shooting and trapping over towards Coonalypyn and out the back of Tintinara. It was at Coonalypyn that I saw very long trains hauling loads of army tanks, trucks, guns and army personnel towards Adelaide, and then similar American Army convoys travelling by road towards Melbourne.

At twelve years of age I was sent away by the Welfare people to Inman Valley where I was supposed to continue my schooling and help milk the cows seven days a week, but this did not happen. The family were very mean-spirited as I worked each day apart from Sunday when only the cows were milked. I was paid five shillings a week but after complaining about other conditions to the Welfare people, I moved to another farming family at the Finniss which was far better and paid thirty shillings a week.

Jack, who had by this time built a more substantial shack, often expressed his opinion about my lack of education and said that if he had his way I would be at boarding school. However, Grandfather did not believe in formal schooling although I have been told that he was well educated himself.

How have things changed?

When I returned to fishing as an adult, I used cotton nets and a small dingy that I rowed. Cotton nets could be ruined overnight when the Coorong became infested with crabs, and the nets needed to be picked up nearly every day and hung to dry on gallows and rubbed clean of weed.

Years before cotton mullet nets would be tanned every so often by placing them in drums of hot water that wattle bark had been boiled in. This helped preserve them. Mulloway nets were also tanned and then the bottom two-and-a-half feet or so would be dropped into hot tar. This was to deter crabs.

Hemp nets were mainly used for mulloway and cod. We carried no ice so we placed the fish into wooden Dawes boxes and covered them with wet bags and then a dry bag on top to keep the heat out. Then I would bring them into Meningie to be iced down and put into Hurtle Lucieer's chiller.

It became much easier to fish with larger aluminium dinghies and outboard motors. A few years later nets went from cotton to nylon then to monofilament. Crabs still ate the nylon nets and the fish.

Fish came and went as they always did, but over the years the quality and lack of water coming into the Coorong saw a decline in fish stock. Pelicans became more abundant seemingly, but other marine birds such as ducks and swans dwindled off. Human activity such as campers and tourists just may have had some impact on bird life.

Tell us about your family leaving the Coorong

My grandparents, after living at Noonameena, built a house about one-and-a-half kilometres south of Noonameena, and lived there until 1958 when grandfather passed way at the age of ninety-five years. Grandmother shifted to Meningie to live with family members and passed away six years later.

Jack Jones had sold his shack, boats, and fishing gear some years earlier to Jack and Earl Gibbs. Jack then lived in a covered-in Dodge ute and trapped rabbits around Meningie West or stayed with friends in Adelaide. Jack passed away in Wales in the early 1970's while on one of his many trips back home to see his family.

Jack's shack had been a place where all walks of life gathered from the Meningie area and beyond. Many a send-off or welcome home for local men in the forces was held there. The local publican in Meningie would bring some of his guests out to Jack's to party or go fishing. His Aboriginal friends would be made welcome to share in the gatherings – something the authorities would have pounced on had they known.

There was a large boxthorn bush down between the house and the water where sometimes his dark friends would be hidden should a strange vehicle be seen coming along the track. Jack's opinion was "Everyman should be treated the same." We still enjoy our visits to the Coorong.

What are some memories of early days on the Coorong?

I remember living with my family at Woods Well and my mother use to walk two nets out in the Coorong and set them. I would go with her and have a tin tub tied to my waist so Mum could put the fish in. Mum had made a smoker, to smoke fish, using square tin kerosene cases jammed together to carry the smoke to where the fish would hang in a square box about one metre by one metre.

These smoked fish were often given to swaggies who were travelling through the Coorong looking for work. Some swaggies pushed bikes, wheelbarrows, prams or homemade carts to carry their belongings. Some just carried what they could. The well had good drinking water so they filled up their bottles and billy cans.

It was just north of Woods Well where a cattle grid had broken through and vehicles were unable to use it. A gate on the fence line joined at this point so I would run over to open it when vehicles came along. Often I was given small change as a thankyou. My mother gave me a jar to collect my earnings and the money was later used to buy my first three-wheel trike.

What was some of the work you did in the area?

When I returned at eighteen years of age from the Finniss, there seemed to be plenty of work. My first job was working for P.J. Turner scrub-clearing, driving a D6 pulling two Majestic ploughs. I left the area for about four months to go with Tom Kruse up to Arrubury Station in the south-western corner of Queensland to build an earth tank, or turkeys nest as the locals called them, and we sank a dam.

When I returned I worked on properties and was offered a job to manage Ballantrae, but declined. I moved into Meningie to live with my own young family and decided to go shearing with Tam Bourne, an old schoolmate, but I often fished at weekends or when shearing was quiet.

After about seven years I bought my first tractor and plough, and I built up a rural land developing business. I ran it for about nineteen years and employed quite a number of men. I returned to fishing yet again until I retired.

Recollections

The night before my eleventh birthday Jack asked me what I would like to do the following day. Not knowing anything myself, Jack suggested that we go for a shot over to the Hummocks as we had seen ducks pitching into a fresh water soak.

I filled a Woodroffe screw-top lemonade bottle with water, dug a hole in the ground and put the bottle in. Then I filled the hole in with water and sand. This was to cool it off for the next morning as the weather was hot.

Preparing to go the next morning, Jack took a double-barrel shot gun and gave me an old single-barrel that had a broken stock. A flat iron dropper had been fashioned and bolted on for a stock. I was given three cartridges and told not to miss. I was to stay in the dinghy on the water some distance from where Jack would take up a position on the edge of the suck on the shoreline. My job was to shoot and retrieve any wounded ducks that fell into the water.

After rowing across the Coorong we each took up our positions. I waited and waited with the day getting hotter. The Coorong was like a sheet of glass. In my excitement that morning to get underway, I found I had left my bottle of water behind.

I wondered what Jack was doing as the ducks were pitching in, but there was not a shot fired. Being very thirsty, I rowed over to the *Joanna D* hoping to find water. The motorboat had been anchored there for shelter. Not finding any water, I came across a quart bottle of homemade wine that had been given to Jack by some Adelaide friends. I returned to where Jack expected me to be, quenching my thirst with the wine.

Strict instructions had been given to me not to come into shore until Jack appeared and beckoned me in. The sun was about to go down behind the Hummocks and still no shots and no sighting of Jack. When

he did appear, I could barely manage to get into shore. Jack thought I had been sunstruck as I floundered to bring the dingy in. He helped me from the dinghy and had me lie in the water of the soak and shade of a boobialla bush, and tried desperately to cool me down. I told him what I had drunk so Jack headed across the Coorong to his shack.

He told me later that he had never been so worried and sat up all night trying to get tea and dry toast to stay in my stomach. All I knew was that I was horribly sick, but found out later that Jack had also taken a bottle of homemade brew to sip and he himself had fallen asleep.



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