

## PLOD ESSAY

# Frank Coldebella's Memories: The Coast Dwellers

**“If you’re in trouble, hurt or in need, go to poor people; they’re the only ones that’ll help, the only ones...” -- Ma Joad in *Grapes of Wrath***

In 1971, when Frank Coldebella was about to turn 19, 40% of Australia’s population of 12 million was under 20 years old. On TV – if you had one – or in the newspapers, the Vietnam War was always in the headlines. In ’71, it had been raging for almost a decade, and had resulted in sending young people, who lived in fear of conscription or whose brothers were already conscripted, out into the streets as a culture of dissatisfaction grew amongst them. In Wonthaggi it wasn’t until 1969 when the rhythm of life controlled by the mine whistle changed forever at the closure of State Cole Mine, that Frank and his peers began to realise the tempo of life was quickening everywhere especially amongst the young whose futures were no longer assured as they had been.

Inspired by pop music being played constantly on the radio, young people began to see their futures open up with un-foreseen possibility. The Animals’ songs, “We Gotta Get Outa This Place” and “Hit the Road Jack,” encouraged the possibility for escape and adventure. As did the Rolling Stones’ songs which romanticised the *us vs them* mentality of ramblers who yearned to be somewhere else, away from the war, away from a controlled and possibly brutalized life. Bob Dylan’s lyrics sealed the deal, as did Procol Harum’s “Whiter Shade of Pale.” Dreamers lured by the floaty melodic tunes of Moody Blues’ and all the songs on the *Morning of the Earth* soundtrack began heading away from the city towards the coast where they could camp in the bush and shed their anxieties.

Melbourne youth headed west to Torquay and Anglesea where the beaches were easier to reach from the city, but when the new bridge to Phillip Island was built, they headed east, hitchhiking to the southeastern coast. People happily gave the kids a ride in those days, even the police in small towns would give you a lift, especially if you carried a surfboard.

Of course, the free-range kids of South Wonthaggi, of which Frank was one, knew the beaches well, and welcomed the visitors. As kids on weekends or during school holidays, they had regularly gone in groups, the older ones looking after the young ones, across the wetlands towards Harmers, Cutlers or The Huts. As long as they were home for dinner or before dark, no one worried. The miners knew their kids looked after one another.



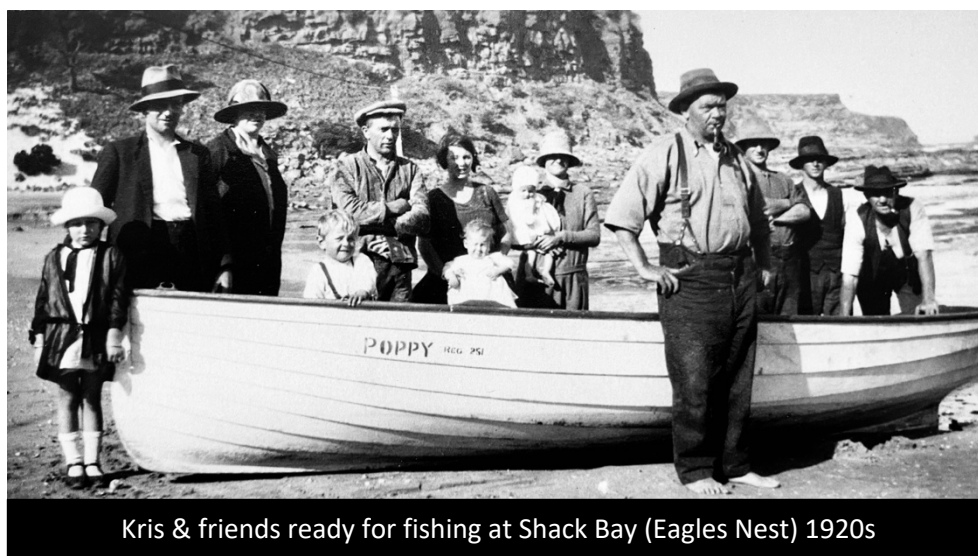
Beach kids 1940's; Ethel Brown is one of them

As they got older and more adventurous, the boys especially, camped at the beach through the weekends with their mates. With warmer weather, every Wonthaggi teenager, whether at school or working odd jobs, had Friday on his or her mind. For some, all they could think of was the violent fury of football. For others, who longed for escape from brutal competition or from oppressive religiosity or from tension in the family, and in '60s and early 70s, the possibility of being conscripted, the Huts along the coast were the place to escape to. The (mostly) boys, including Frank, would hop on their bikes, grab their smaller, affordable surfboards then being made in a Grantville farm shed, and go. It was there that the Wonthaggi boys met the escaping city boys.

For many miners, escaping to the beaches just South of Wonthaggi – between the Mouth of the Powlett and Flat Rocks – was part of the culture in the mining town. When miners were laid off for Christmas break, for instance, the best thing to do was head for the beach with the whole family to recoup from the dusty coal pits. The fishing was great: the youngsters could catch lobster (or crayfish) and collect abalone, while their fathers and older brothers went out in boats or climbed along the rocks to their favourite fishing spots.

The Legg family, for instance, first camped at Cape Peterson in the early 1920s after Jim Legg got to know Harry Hopner, who told him that Cape Paterson was the place to catch fish. “Jim was fond of fishing and liked the information, so Harry Hopner sold him a horse and cart, a good solid hut made of driftwood and tin situated near where the toilets are now at Cape Paterson, plus a dingy. £20 for the lot. Jim thought it was a good deal, but it took two pays to come up with the money.”

People began camping at Shack Bay about the same time Leggs set up at Cape Paterson. Kris Olsen, a Norwegian bachelor, was the original settler at Shack Bay and made “a nice little camp for himself there, where he built a hut and spent his time fishing and exploring. By the creek some distance from his hut, he built a corral, in which he planted a solitary cypress tree to shelter the horses... (the tree is still there). Kris had a boat shed there as well, dug back into the sand... Kris used to invite his mates – Tom Last (miner), Mr Patterson (mine office), Mr Cook (miner), and Snobby Studham (bookmaker) – to join him fishing. Young Bert Allen was included as well.”<sup>i</sup>



Kris & friends ready for fishing at Shack Bay (Eagles Nest) 1920s

Historian William Hayes reckons the reason Shack Bay eventually became the most coveted place for building huts and spending time was because it was “secluded and hidden from the road, sheltered from prevailing winds and had a small stream trickling from the hillside which was clothed in scrub and flowered in the springtime. It was an idyllic spot, one that the inhabitants were loath to leave.”<sup>ii</sup>

In the 1930’s a number of shacks were built there, mostly in 1934 as a result of the prolonged strike that year. Harry Hadden remembers when they weren’t working for the Broad Committee in town, they were down at Shack Bay: “We used to go camp at Eagles Nest [Shack Bay]. There were quite a few people camping out there as well as us. We lived pretty well because we were living on garfish, crayfish, ducks and everything else. Nobody would stop you from doing anything on the coast back then. We were living like royalty: plenty of food and plenty of vegetables. We really enjoyed ourselves for five months! I remember we would go up the mountain every day and pulling a bag of sand behind us to see who could go the fastest. We didn’t have any money, but we had a good time.”<sup>iii</sup>

“Most of the coast hut builders came from south west Wonthaggi,” according to Frank, “a section of the town where on a still night the sea could be heard humming its tunes. These resilient, frugal families had inherited the distilled communitarian wisdom of their ancestors aware of a purer kind of aesthetic sensibility. Not regular church goers, they held the beach almost like a religion where they were in close contact with friends and relations who tended to live within yelling distance or nearby. A hut on the coast was held more in custodianship than ownership; most weren’t locked so anybody could stay if a bunk was vacant. Swallows arrived every year to nest under the eaves. Huts on the west-facing beaches were a strict secret from authority and the category of males who get pleasure from destruction and vandalism.”

The city kids, who made their way to the Wonthaggi beaches in 1970, went to Cape Paterson first of all. It was there that Frank got to know some of them. He remembers Kenny Hamilton and Ronny ‘the rat’ McLaren, who were refugees from Melbourne’s Sharpie wars. He said their instincts could detect aggression in a syllable. They had come to Cape Paterson to join the surf club for its free accommodation, but couldn’t handle the marching, drill and crash-through mentality of surfboat rowing. Ronny didn’t want to surf; he just wanted to swim, wander and write a bit of poetry. So, they went AWOL and set up their own camp in the coastal ti-tree above the Channel. It was handy to toilets and taps near the boat ramp. Ronny just had a hammock and tarp. At first it was him and Kenny, including Peter, who had survived a stabbing, but others joined them.

“Around the campfire, Kenny and Ronnie used to tell us locals horror stories about their experiences in the city and what they heard about Vietnam,” says Frank.

The channel camp kept expanding. Frank remembers that in winter, a fire was kept going to warm numb hands after a surf, but the area was starting to look like the day after Woodstock, tramped plants and mud everywhere. One Sunday morning Dave Cook, the Caretaker at Cape, came with two policemen and told everyone they had to go because the council was going to build a caravan park. Some relocated to secluded banksia woodlands towards Harmers Haven or Cutlers beach. Ron, Kenny, the Kavanagh and Sherrin brothers, piled their stuff into a mate’s EH ute and retreated to what was then remote Shack Bay.

“There they underwent a gradual identification of self with nature: fear of snakes and isolation gave way to joyful aimlessness; happy ideas came unexpectedly without effort,” according to Frank.

Frank had already drifted over to Shack Bay where the non-competitive Wonthaggi rovers and ramblers went with their surfboards, bed rolls and not much else, in the late 60s and

70s. The well-worn track to Shack Bay started at the corner of Carneys Road and went across paddocks winding through woodlands, skirted wetlands. After the grey of town, the line of blue sea was pure joy, and they would pause on the hill to take in the scene. The boys camped among the Banksias or shared bunks in some of the huts when they were offered. Frank, his brother, John, and sometimes his sisters, went there when time and weather was just right, and they were in the mood. Hidden from the road, sheltered from westerly winds with a view of sun and moon rise, Shack Bay had evolved since the depression into an extended community of the earth and sea. The coast road then was narrower, longer, windier and very rough with rabbit and wombat holes to avoid, so the community which called it their own, was a tight group. It was paradise.

“About when I joined the State Electricity Commission in 1972,” Frank remembers, “Percy Williams, father of 10, wise, knowledgeable survivor of the Depression, mentor on all things, decided to give up on Shack Bay because it was becoming too busy with the onslaught of the city kids and he went to spend his time at another shack in Licola. The Sherrin brothers took over his hut and renovated it, putting in floorboards that were a patchwork of different timbers between the door and fireplace, building extra bunks for the visitors. By the time they finished, there were houses in town that were little better

“Before dawn on Monday mornings, Kenny would leave for work in Melbourne, but always return the next Friday in his Kombi even more captivated and drawn in by the freedom and beauty of the coast after a week of living in the brutal city atmosphere. He always stayed in the smallest hut that had been built by George Kiely: one room with green tin walls, red roof, a single bed the length of the south wall which doubled as a couch, a small open fire opposite one chair and one fruit box and one window facing the bay.”

Norm Perry was another Shack Bay personality. He was a plumber at Coldon Homes. His father had been killed in the '37 mine disaster at 20-Shaft and Norm inherited his dad's hut at Shack Bay, which was on the east side of the creek next to the Featherston's. Like others of the shacks, Norm was a good bushman and camper. The life on the coast had soaked into him over decades. Weathered, earthy and steadfast strong bronzed hands evidenced his life's campaigns. His experience of the Depression was averted with 'we got by.' He never tied up his shoelaces maybe from all the time spent in bare feet. He only ever used a number four fishhook, kept detailed records of all his fishing in a battered book, only fished between Flat

John Codldebella & sister, Theresa, at Featherston Hut





rocks and Cape Paterson. He shared an old boat with some mates. According to Ron Gilmour, his neighbour in Broome Cres, 'Norm could not swim a stroke.'



shopping for Ethel and the rest of the camp. For everyone back then, it was an ideal life.

"Ethel looked after all of us," says Frank.

Frank has fond memories of those dreamy, lazy, carefree times. He says the freedom of life at the beach was the beginning of his enlightenment, his true education after enduring less than ideal teaching methods at school. His thoughts of those days are like poetry:

At the beach, daydreaming or having your head in the clouds was never chastised or ridiculed. It was just a part of being human...

You could bask in the glory of colour, light, space, nature, watching an eagle or albatross wandering on a breeze...

Observing daily contentedness and rhythm of people in coastal activities...

Quarter moon, clear night, steep vegetated gullies muffling sounds, waterfalls, dreaming in deep silence, hushed by sea murmur...

Drowsy morning,

Idle midday,

Afternoon walk or activity surrounded by nature's colours, sounds and smells, hours at the beach absorbed in tranquility.

Time was suspended; an afternoon lasted for ages...

The imagination could delve into the places that had been smothered by the tangles of modern world

Walking in unobstructed nature steadies the nerves at the right time and place surrounded by the deep stillness when the wind and sea stop can be an almost spiritual experience

In such a place and under the right circumstances time-stretched colours blended

Looking, listening and even thinking could be fun.

The beach and bush can heal a state of multi-dimensional positivity."

The huts are gone now, but the combination of light, colour, sound and smell is still there. Time and tides have removed the human footprint and the bay is now pristine for all of us.

In the mid 70s, Lands Department put notices on all the huts stating that if the owners could not produce a current lease they would be demolished.

Overall, there were fourteen huts at Shack Bay. Twelve of them were demolished in 1976 and the last two were removed in 1977. Mrs Ethel Brown was given permission by the Stipendiary Magistrate to remain in the last two houses where, according to her statement to authorities, she had lived for two-and-a-half years, until she found alternative accommodation. Frank believes Ethel had been a regular at the beach and in her shack for many more years than that.

After much anxiety she was moved to Sout Dudley. Her eviction was traumatic for the whole family of beach dwellers and like most native species she did not transplant well and died not long after.

Frank says, “Like a coast species on a cliff with nowhere else to go, Ethel held on to her home as long as she could. My last memory of her was a late Sunday afternoon in winter as fading sunlight crept up the cliffs. Ethel walked out on the rock platform where Kenny was waiting for that one last wave before going back to the city. She yelled as many mothers of her generation were used to doing, “KENNYYYYY!! YA TEEEEEs READYYYYY!”



Carolyn Landon, July PLOD 2022

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<sup>i</sup> Terri Allen, PLOD Essay: “Eagle’s Nest Settlement” 2009

<sup>ii</sup> W.R.Hayes, The Golden Coast; History of the Bunurong, , 1998

<sup>iii</sup> Harry Hadden recorded in 1983, PLOD Essay, “Wild Times in a Mining Town” 2020