

## PLOD ESSAY

### Tales from the Underground

The following stories are part of Wonthaggi's culture. For most of us – those of us who are curious about where we live – these stories are familiar and well loved. In my relatively short experience here, the best place to hear these stories is at the Railway Station on weekends or hanging around after a Historical Society meeting or at the State Coal Mine where the guides, who take you into the mine itself, can talk a blue streak.

People love it when John Bordignon gets started. His fascination with the mines and miners of this town goes back to when his dad took him down into the tunnels at Kirrak not long before the final closure when all the ponies and skips and miners were winched up for the last time and the Wonthaggi Mines became the stuff of legend.

The following is essentially a transcription of the stories John told in his 15-minute talk to a large and enthusiastic group late this last summer. He started on time at 11:30 am but his audience was so rapt that he didn't take a breath until the Mine Whistle blasted him into silence half an hour later.

#### **This is how he started:**

For many years I worked at the State Coal Mine Heritage Area, as many of you know. Along the way I worked with many of the old miners who had tales to tell. We used to have a lot of fun, especially at morning tea-time, when the men would start with their yarns. Most of the stories I will tell today are ones I heard the old timers tell as they guided tours down in the mine. Some of these stories are true and some of these stories have elements where the truth got in the way of a good story. So, I will tell you the stories as they were told to me.

#### **The pit ponies:**

The ponies were an integral part of the mine. The wheelers worked with them and they became very attached to those ponies. The wheelers were characters in their own right, but

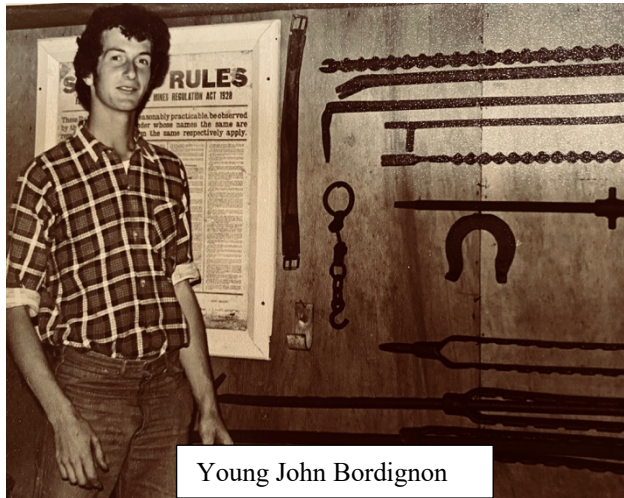
so were the ponies. One pony that really stands out is Porky. Porky was a bit of a cantankerous old pony. He'd bite you and he'd kick his wheelers. If you were going along a tunnel and you called out to him to go right, he'd go left and derail the skip. He would then go along the roadway and come to a narrow spot and decide he would not go through. His wheeler, one day, came along the side of Porky in an attempt to get ahead of him and pull him through. So, Porky

pinned him to the side of the wall. The old wheeler was stuck there so he yelled out to get some help. Another wheeler comes along and says, 'I'll walk along the other side of the pony and get him.' So just as he starts to move along the clear side, Porky puts his rump over and traps that miner as

well. Both men were stuck. That's the kind of pony he was.

It actually got to the point where no one wanted to work with Porky. Nobby Smith, who was the head stableman at the mine, managed to move him off to the speed coursing track where the greyhound races used to be. Porky's job was to drag the smudger around the track for maintenance work. Eventually, the track closed down and so they had to get Porky back to the mine. They brought him back to Western Area in the truck and the minute they let him out he walked straight into his old stall as if he had been there yesterday.

The ponies were very alert to danger, very intelligent. My father at one stage was a wheeler and he had a pony named Socks with four white feet. This particular day, Socks had to take a couple of skips together down an incline. What the wheeler did in a situation like that was he would get the pony to pull the skip forward and as the skip was going past, the wheeler would sprag the back wheel [*in other words, put a steel rod through the spokes of the wheel to stop it*



Young John Bordignon

*from turning and make it drag*]. Sometimes they would also put sand on the rails so the wheels would not slide quickly. Well, this day, Dad missed the sprag and also missed the second go at spragging on the next wheel. Socks heard that Dad had missed so he took off in an attempt to outrun the skip, but Dad knew there was a door halfway down the descent and he thought Socks would be tripped up and killed by the skips when he hit it. Dad ran after Socks knowing he couldn't get to the door to open it before the horse got to it and dreading what he might see, but sure enough, Socks had outrun the skip, somehow shouldered his way through the door and went on until he got to the flat on the other side where the road levelled off. When Dad got to him, there was Socks quietly waiting for him to catch up. Remember, this was done in the dark since there were no lights in the tunnel. Tells you something about the instincts of those ponies. *[And makes you wonder what Socks was thinking about John's Dad right at that moment.]*

Jack Keltie, another one of our guides at the Coal Mine who had been a wheeler, was telling us one day about one of his ponies. He said that some of the ponies would actually back up if a sprag was missed and lean against the skip to stop it from moving. This day, the pony had braced himself against the skip but he couldn't get enough traction on the track to hold it and so he slid down the incline sitting on the skips' buffers. When I heard this story I thought it might be a bit of a stretch but another miner, corroborated the story. He said, 'Yeah, I was actually in a side tunnel and I saw the pony sliding past sitting on the skip's buffers.'

Old Harry Sainsbury one day told the story about how he used to come to a wooden door which he would open and call his pony through. This day, his pony wouldn't budge. Harry coaxed and coaxed and coaxed, but the pony wouldn't go through so Harry used a few more adjectives that the horse would understand. Suddenly the pony bolted through the doorway, but no sooner had he done that than the roof caved in. The horse was trying to tell his wheeler of the danger by not moving but gave up and bolted through. luckily the pony wasn't hit by any stone, saving both himself and his wheeler.

Here is a story from 20 Shaft: The miners were having their Crib [*lunch*]. Sometimes when you finished your food, you'd sit back and have a rest. One of the wheelers was having a little kip and all of a sudden they heard a pony running like a bat out of hell. The miners switched their lights on and looked up seeing a bit of dust sifting out of the roof and saw three rats run past. They cried out, "We'd better get out of here!" and sure enough not long after they had taken off the roof caved in.

Rats in the mine were the miners' friends. They were the alarm system. If they were suddenly on the move, you knew something was wrong and you'd better move, too. No one worried too much about working near rats. The only problem with them might be after the holidays, say for the few weeks at Christmas time when the mine was always closed. Then the rats were glad to see the miners because they hadn't had anything to eat for a while and they would start climbing their legs trying to get some food. Because they had been starving there was always evidence of the rats turning on each other as there were uneaten heads lying about and the smell was a bit strong. But the miners knew they were an important part of mine safety.

#### **But, back to the ponies:**



Shimma Donohue used to pack an extra sandwich in his crib. When it was crib time and he sat down to eat, his pony would sidle up to him and sit back on his haunches and wait for Shimma to give him his bit of sandwich and then he was happy.

Danny Carr worked at the mine workshops, which was situated where DonMix is now. He regularly had to come down into the tunnels for maintenance duties. One time he was in Western Area and witnessed the following: Pit ponies knew their way around the tunnels, so they knew how to get around, even in the dark. Ponies would pull the skips along the tunnel at a normal pace until, at certain spots, they would begin to race along. One pony in particular was very clever and always knew when he got to a certain rise that there was a bend in the road and the only way to get those skips up to the top was to go for it. His hooves would hit the rails and sparks would flash out from his metal shoes until he went round the sharp bend at the top of the rise and slowed down to his normal pace while the wheeler caught up with him.

**Now here are some descriptions of working conditions:**

Western Area was a very wet mine, not far from the ocean. The miners could work with water dripping on top of them all day long. The opposite extreme was Kirrak Area where they had some of the deepest tunnels and they worked in heat about 35° to 40° with 80% humidity. It was murder. At Kirrak, Dad and his mate, Blueboy, were putting a connection between two main tunnels that they called a 'cut-through'. It was in an area they called Siberia. There they were working in a cut through about a metre high and the heat was so intense that they were getting hives all over themselves. You could go in there and work for half an hour/three-quarters of an hour and then get out in better air to recuperate for a while before they had to go back in again. The backs of their knees would just split open from all the sweat as they were kneeling while working. They had to take salt tablets while they worked in that section. Well, that's the way it was.

In Western Area you worked all day in the wet and could get 'Wet Pay.' It used to be a shilling and six pence per shift. It was up to the Deputies to record all the allowances you were entitled to for special conditions. Sometimes, it was known that they would shortchange you rather than pay it out as they should. One day one of the miners put a piece of string on the end of his tamping rod [*an inch-and-a-half-thick piece of dowl the miners would use to tamp the*

*explosives into the holes*] and tied some bread to it leaving it hanging over a pool of water. A Deputy comes along and says, "What are you doing?"

"Well, I'm fishin'."

"What the... What are you fishing for??"

"Well, I'm fishin' for Wet Pay!"

His point was made.

Sometimes when miners drilled a hole in the stone in order to set a charge, the dust that came out was dry and if there was water, as there always was in Western Area, the dust wouldn't sink but would float on the water making a puddle look like solid ground. It was a great joke to lure deputies to step on what seemed like solid ground and watch them sink up to their ankles. They'd come out soaking wet and yelling: "What's going on here!?"

The miners would ask them for their wet pay there and then.

The wet conditions in Western Area also meant that the miners had to put up with the ground heaving. Mud stone, as they called, when it got really wet, expanded. So, the miners might leave the tunnel one day with all the bords and rail in order and come back the next day with the tunnel having shrunk from the expanding mudstone. They would have to rip up the rails and sleepers and dig out the floor to maintain the road height and then re-set everything before they could hew any coal.

Well, Danny Carr told about one section of Western Area that was like this for more than a month. It was just total stupidity because no matter how much they dug out, the miners would have to do the same over and over again, day after day. Finally, they just gave up and closed that section of the mine down.

Gas was another hazard in the mines.

Western Area had a little bit of gas in it, but it didn't seem so dangerous as it was in 20-Shaft, so they used carbide lamps in there. If there was gas discovered, the miners were supposed to stop work and alter the ventilation to clear the gas out before they got to work again, but for some of the miners they figured if you stopped work, well, you wouldn't get paid for the time you lost. They would get their carbide lamps and tie them onto their tamping sticks and lift the flame of the lamp up to the roof



while they lay down on the floor and let the gas burn off so they could get back to work.

As the miners' extracted coal from the pillars, which were approximately 20 metres square, they would put in timber props to support the roof and prevent cave-ins. Once they had finished extracting the coal, the timber props were withdrawn and the timber re-used further down the line. Timber drawers would come in during the night shift and use what they called a Sylvester, which was really a large fence strainer. The Sylvester was anchored in the tunnel and steel cables wrapped about the props in the pillars so they could pull out all the timber safely and recycle it. They re-used the timber as much as they could.

After this operation, sometimes that roof caved in straight away, but sometimes it would just sit there for two or three weeks. Eventually, it would give, and when it did, it made a hell of a noise as you can imagine with all that stone caving in. Just imagine a young fellow newly working in the mine and he hears all this rumbling for the first time and if it is a dry area all this dust comes with it flying up the tunnel, he would be off, running to save his life, frightened out of his wits. The older miners would laugh their heads off, but, in fact, they would be remembering their first time running for their own lives.

During the entire operation of the mines, over 58 years, about 80 men were killed – a shocking number, but when compared to coal mining throughout the world, Wonthaggi coal Mine was considered one of the safest. Nevertheless, there were thousands of accidents from cut fingers and toes to rocks coming down on you, and there were some amazing, amazing escapes. Some of you will remember Ducky Stephenson. One day they were working in my dad's bord at Kirrak and all of a sudden they heard this thump and knew something was going on. So Dad and Blue Boy went rushing in to the bord where Ducky was working and some others from the next bord came rushing in as well. They found Ducky, who had been trying to pull a sheet of coal down from the roof so he could break it up. He had been standing on a piece of stone trying to bring it down with a crow-bar and it wouldn't give way, so he kind of gave up what he was doing and jumped off the rock, but at that

point the slab of coal did give way by itself and it knocked Ducky to the ground. He was buried under this slab of coal, but his head landed next to the stone he'd been standing on, which took the weight of the slab and saved his head from being crushed. Dad and the other men spent hours digging around the piece of coal, putting timber supports underneath because they were afraid the stone would crumble and crush him further. They packed and packed and packed. Then with some levers got under the slab and lifted it enough to pull Ducky out. He was still alive, but Dad thought he wasn't going to make it. He was pretty smashed up, but he did make it, finishing up with one eye which was injured from the crush injury. He was a very lucky man to survive that.

Skippy Dalla Rosa is another: Him and his mate one time were working in one bord and there were miners working in another roadway nearby. These other miners didn't realise that they were working very close to Skippy and his mate. And they bored an explosive charge into its hole and fired it but the blast blew through the wall between them and Skippy. Skippy had his back to the wall and the blast blew him across the roadway he was in, badly injuring him, but his mate was unfortunately killed. Skippy can remember being semi-conscious when they got him out of the tunnel and Doc Sleeman warning the family he was not going to make it, this made him very determined and he survived.



The reason he is called Skippy is because he was one of those really good miners who worked fast and hard. He would fill up his skips and then have to wait for the replacement skips to be brought in. He used to call out to the

wheelers, "I want more skippy! More skippy!" He became famous for calling this out, thus his name. His wife always said of him that he was a very good provider.

Allan Birt was another one. He was a jack of all trades and master of none. If you named something for him to do, he did it or had already done it. He was the inspector of the shafts. He would go up and down in the cages and make sure everything was alright. He was saying at Kirrak the shaft gave trouble because it was crushing and would jamb the cages so they would get stuck. He had to go up and down standing on the cage with an axe and chip away at the skids in the shaft when it became too narrow. Remember the shafts were the only way in or out for the men, the skips and the ponies.



One day Allan was below, and he came up to the surface with all his tools and things and he's stopped at ground level but the top of the brace where the skips had to go was still 60 feet up.

He said, "I stepped out of the cage with my tool bag and put it down and then spun around to pick up the other tools I'd left in the cage, but the winder driver who controlled the movement of the cage up and down took the cage away to the top without waiting for my signal. When I spun around, I had one foot ready to step into the cage and all that was there was a dirty great hole."

He said he had only enough balance when he saw what was happening to throw himself backwards onto the ground rather than falling 1000 feet to his death. He also said that all those

stories you hear of watching your life go before you are true. You can imagine what Allan had to say to the winder driver about that. The cage was never moved again without Allan's signal being read loud and clear!

After the mine closed in 1968, Allan said people were talking about keeping Kirrak open and turning it into a tourist attraction, but he was against it because he reckoned the whole shaft was ready to collapse and they had closed it just in time.

Bob Seeber told about the day he was working on pillar extraction in 20-Shaft. Roof conditions were really bad in 20-Shaft. It was a heavy roof and sometimes when you were extracting the pillars, you wouldn't take it all, it was just too dangerous. So, this one day, the Deputy came into see how they were going and Bob said, "I reckon we've taken enough, it's time to get out." His deputy reckoned that was fair enough if that's what he thought and so the men downed tools, picked up their crib and went out to eat and while they ate their crib the whole place caved in. I asked Bob why he knew they had to get out. Was it sifting dust or creaking or something?

"No," he said, "just gut feeling." He got out of it.

Other tools the miners used were power borers. These were big electric drills, and you could drill holes a metre or two metres very quickly. One day Paddy Sleeman and his mate were in their bord and they could hear a power borer drill coming through from the bord next to them. So, they grab a great big lump of coal and when the drill comes through, they whack that lump of coal in front of it so the miners on the other side think they are still boring their hole. Eventually, the drill stops, and they pull it out of the drill hole and not long after a stick of gelignite comes through to their side. The miners, who were boring, not suspecting a thing, then begin tamping the hole they made by pushing bits of clay and stone into it from their side. But, while they are doing that, Paddy and his mate cut the gelignite off the fuse and lit it. The guys who had drilled the hole suddenly see the lit fuse coming back at them! Great confusion: "What the hell is going on here?" they yell and take off for their lives!

Yeah, they had a bit of fun down there.

Many of you will remember Dickie Keast, or Keastie, as everyone called him. He was one of the biggest, most annoying wheeling pranksters they had in the mine. He was always up to mischief. Dad's mate, Blue Boy, was the butt of many of his pranks. (Blue Boy was called this because when he started in the mine he didn't know what to wear so he bought a blue boiler suit to work in, thus the nickname Blue Boy) One day come crib time, Blue Boy and Dad sit down and Blue Boy takes the lid off his crib tin. Next thing Dad knows is an almighty yell with crib tin flying one way and Blue Boy running the other. While he wasn't looking, Keastie snuck a dead snake in there. He would do things like that to Blue Boy, who just got sick of it in the end and Blue Boy got him back. One day he'd had his shower in the miners' changing room which was a great place for catching starlings, which they called starkers. Blue Boy caught one and put it in Keastie's crib tin so the next morning when his wife was making his crib, she opens the tin, and the bird comes flying out at her. There was an almighty chase through the house. Back at the mine Keastie has a go at Blue Boy who tells him, "Now you know how I feel, don't ya!?"

Another time Keastie stuck a bit of gelignite in some one's lunch box and blew the lunch up. In retaliation they got a hold of his coat that was hanging on a prop and nailed it to the prop so that when Keastie ran past at knock off and grabbed it, the coat got ripped in half. Things like that went on all the time.

One time, Ron (Pump) Motherwell, when he was young, was working on a winch that lowered the skips when they went down steep dips in the tunnels. He got pretty good at this and as he pushed the skips over the brow, he would throw the cable onto the draw hook of the skips and lower them slowly with the winch. One day, he knew that old Alf Keily, who was a pumper, was

working on one of the pumps in the tunnel near the lower part of the dip. As Pump pushed the skip over the brow he missed the draw hook with the cable and off goes the runaway skip. At this time Alf had actually got the pump going and he had settled down to have his crib. Imagine him sitting there, feet across the rails; he can't see the runaway for the heavy hessian curtain hanging to direct the air along the tunnels; neither can he hear the rattle of the skip coming down the dip because the pump is going. While he is sitting there, he just happened to look up and he saw a piece of fuse wire hanging on the prop by the hessian. He had just bought a new pair of pliers and thought to himself, "I wonder if they are any good." So, he stood up to cut the fuse wire. This was just when the skip came flying through the hessian curtain with Pump running after it yelling, "Watch out! Watch out!" When that skip came through the hessian, Alf turned white, knowing he could have lost his legs if he hadn't decided to cut that bit of fuse. He said it wasn't his turn.

It seemed that John had just got going with his stories when, suddenly the Mine Whistle sounded and caused all the rapt listeners to jump out of their seats. No one had realised how much time had gone by and I believe they all would have been pleased to keep listening for another half-an-hour and that John could certainly have continued except for the fact that the kettle had boiled and tea was ready to have with Barbara Robertson's scones.

In fact, John finished his talk by saying, "That's only some of the things that went on in the mine. I loved hearing

those stories the miners told. There is such a vast history there."

Clearly John has not lost his fascination of coal mines and mining. In fact, there is a lot more to tell about John Bordignon and his well-known obsession.



MAY 2022