

Pride of Place

Sunday 8 December 2019

By the end of the 1970s, the Department employed some 300 foresters plus a further 500 technical and administrative staff, and well over 1000 works and fire crew, spread across country Victoria in 48 districts and 7 divisional offices.

Most of them lived and worked in small country towns or larger regional cities.

More importantly, there was a growing recognition of the significant social and economic contribution that departmental staff, and their families, had long made by simply living in the country and being part of the fabric of rural society.

Families sent their kids to local schools... shopped locally... drank at the local pub... bought coffee at the local café... picked up fish 'n chips on the way home from work on Friday night... and just fitted in...

Significantly, most of the departmental purchases like fuel and hardware were done locally too...

Along with other professionals such as school teachers, bank managers and police, departmental staff often volunteered for important community leadership roles in local sporting, social and civic groups such as CFA brigades or service clubs like Rotary.

Also, it wasn't uncommon for the tanker, or tents and pumps from the fire store, to be used at a local community event like a school fete, or the grader to quietly run a firebreak around the local footy ground or golf course on the edge of town.

Some chopping logs to a country showground in time for the annual fair. A load of dry firewood delivered by the crew to the old folk's home in winter was always welcomed with fresh scones and cups of tea.

There were unstated boundaries of this philanthropic largess, but the District Forester was a respected figure in the community and allowed some discretion.

"Give-back-day" was where staff and the crew chose and organised an activity in their local community as a gift. The kindergarten at Erica received a lick-of-paint and their garden tidied up while a cancer respite centre near Powelltown had some dangerous trees felled as chainsaw practice and a bit of earth works done with the D4 to create a walking path.

The Nowa Nowa Nudes festival was sponsored, with many raised eyebrows and muffled giggles, to support a local community arts project.

But best of all, the winning sculpture was selected by a panel including local staff at a gala evening complete with burley blokes in Blundstone boots, ladies in colourful frocks, complete with a nosh-up of party pies, canapés, chilled bubbles or a cold frothy beer.

It was always a fun occasion...

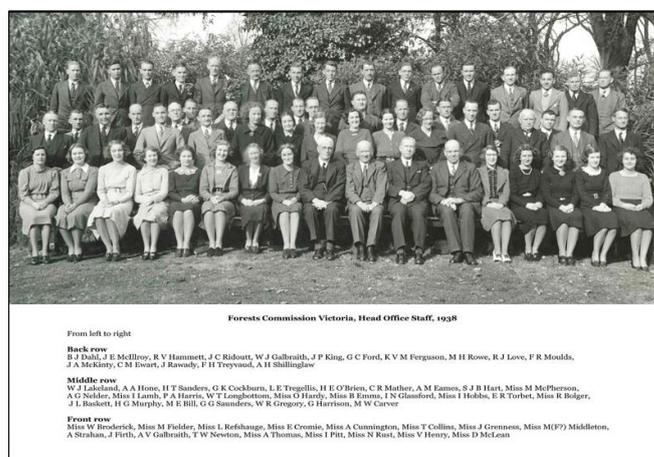
The winning entry was then mounted by the local crew in a section of walking track on a bit State Forest near the river and more importantly everyone in the town enjoyed a strong sense of "Pride of Place".

I have been fortunate enough to study community forestry in the UK, Canada, Sweden and Indonesia and have seen the power of partnerships when staff and their families are encouraged to build purposeful long-term friendships and networks with people in their town.

Successful partnerships were certainly not just about attending meetings, sausage sizzles and workshops to talk about stuff... or about handing out grant money to others for stuff... but it was about planning, sharing and doing stuff together...

Taking a few risks and investing in local relationships takes time and energy but "paid-off-in-spades" when things got difficult or tough...

<https://imfn.net/model-forest/>



A photo of the entire complement of Head Office staff in 1938....

Yep... that's all of them... I count 60.... that's from the Commissioners right down to the typist. The Department had a long-standing policy of putting most staff in the field. Source: FCRPA collection.



That so many departmental staff, crew and their families lived in small country towns made a big difference to the fabric of rural society. L – R: Carmel McCabe, Jack Gillespie, Gordon Anderson - District Forester and Maureen McClelland. Erica - 1946, Photo: Jack Gillespie.



The Nowa Nowa Nudes arts prize was sponsored as a way to strengthen relationships in a small country town. Photo: Peter McHugh 2006.