

REGINALD VIVIAN STEPHENS

2/12-1901-10/03/1978

{This document written by my Dad and acquired by me (Irving Stephens) from OLD BROWN COAL MINE MUSEUM on Sunday March 14th 2010 after a Yallourn Old Girls/Guys reunion at the Woorabinda Camp Site on the Latrobe River just west of Yallourn North township. I had not sighted the document previously and have been delighted to get a copy from the museum. Dad rarely fails to date a document. This script suggests it was written in 1967 when he resided at Boronia. I am converting the script to electronic text in order to be able to distribute widely to family and friends, and to make it available to the Museum which has my permission for distribution.

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Reg Stephens writes:

Not a life story, just some happenings in the Old Brown Coal Mine. I was born in Kalgoorlie in Western Australia on the 2nd of December 1901. My parents were natives of Wandiligong, Victoria (near Bright) and immediately after being married there on New Years Day 1901, they went to Bulong a gold mining town near Kalgoorlie. My father had been there previously from 1898.

Most of my schooling was obtained at Boulder Central State School and I left at the end of 1916. My mother died in January 1917 and this brought my father to the realisation that if he succumbed to miner's phthisis, like so many of his workmates were doing at an early age, the younger children (Eric then nine and Amy seven) would be left without support.

So he returned to Victoria in 1918 bringing the two children with him. Being in employment at that time, I remained in Kalgoorlie temporarily but followed eastward in 1920 going direct to Brown Coal Mine where my father was at this time and I commenced work shovelling brown coal on 11th August 1920.

We lived in a bark hut (the roof and walls were made of bark, with an earth floor and open fireplace). It was a community of hard working people with very few amenities either in the home or the shopping or public areas.

Morwell the nearest town, was popular on Saturday afternoons (we worked until midday in those times), but to get there was a problem which only a good pair of legs could overcome. So we proceeded on foot along the lane towards Godridge's, at one time stopping place for the coaches on the Sale - Melbourne route, but some distance short of this landmark we crossed the Morwell River via a useful log and made straight for our goal across the scrub and farmland. The return trip at night, by moonlight if we were lucky, was often accompanied by many stumblings over brambles and crab hole edifices.

In 1921 I commenced work on the flat, and engaged in such activities as horse driving with the plow and monkey-tailed scoops in the formation of levy banks to protect the open cut from flood water, excavation at the main power station site, and earth removal at the water screen pits at the entrance to the circulating water conduits. This latter function consisted of loading spoil into horse drawn drays by hand shovel.

Then followed the work of driving the tunnels for the circulating water system and I became the bracman unloading trucks from cages hauling spoil from underground. This was followed by winch driving on the same job, going on to concrete mixers and concrete hoists, even to pile driving for the foundations for the 400 volt switch gear along the turbine house retaining wall.

In 1923 I transferred to the Electrical Section installing cables in the switchyard under the direction of Mr JR Wilson, Mr Roy Irwin, and Mr Bert Arnold. When the Power Station commenced operation in June 1924, I was the telephone switchboard operator in the main

control room and thus saw much of the electrical operating facilities during the developing years.

In 1926 a transfer of duties was made to the work of battery attendant, which was soon followed by plant maintenance records and the reading of electric power meters in Yallourn Town and the Works Area. There were kilowatt hours by the million and they were with me for thirty years. Did some one promise to make me a model of one?

My wife was formerly Miss Mildred Chance daughter of Mr and Mrs E Chance who had lived in Walhalla for many years. We were married at Yallourn Methodists Church on 6th March 1930. Our first home was at 24 Strezlecki Road, Yallourn but by April 1934 the financial depression and 10% reduction in wages forced us to move out in search of cheaper rental.

With the steady improvement of the standard of living we were able to take up residence again in Yallourn in 1937, this time at number 1 Fernhill, only to be upset by World War II and the dramatic events of December 1941.

Soon after the disastrous and the morale –crushing losses of the “Prince of Wales” and the “Repulse” a public meeting was held in the Yallourn Theatre one Sunday afternoon at which recommendations were made that the woman and children be evacuated from the town before the Japanese bombs arrived. I was in Army camp at Nagambie Road north of Seymour at the time and soon found accommodation in nearby Avenel to where the family transferred in March 1942.

A housebreaking by army personnel during my wife’s temporary absence did nothing to instil confidence in Avenel as a secure place to reside and a transfer was made to Euroa some 22 miles north in May 1942.

Two weeks later my unit was moved up to the south Queensland coast and in December 1942, a transfer, not of my choice, was made to the Jungle Warfare Training Centre at Canungra, Queensland. I was discharged from the Army in November 1943 and resumed with the State Electricity Commission at Yallourn. It was essential for the family to remain at Euroa temporarily pending availability of housing.

For people who were in the Yallourn area on 14th February 1944, the disastrous fire which swept the surrounding country to the outskirts of the town and engulfed the open cut will always be an outstanding memory. While our experience could not compare with the sad loss of many homes in the district, nevertheless, it was just a little different. It so happened, that Rita, then twelve years had moved from Euroa to Yallourn in January 1944 so as to commence school immediately upon resumption after the holidays. The rest of us selected February 14th for a furniture removal and at 5 am we left Euroa with George H. Grey at the wheel of Horrie Devine’s furniture van, Percy Grundy his assistant, my wife, Irving (10years), Jeanie (9years), myself, a crate of newly acquired chickens, one dog and one cat. It was not long before we realised we were to face a torrid day from the weather if nothing else. We made good time to Melbourne assisted by a hot northerly but lost the value of this by shopping in the city and having to obtain first aid for the removal of a foreign body from Jeanie’s eye. The dust was really bad being whipped from the ground by a powerful hot wind.

Stopping for a refresher at Beaconsfield we heard a radio announcement that gas producers were banned for the day. Fortunately we were operating on liquid fuel and were able to proceed. (A gas producer was a cumbersome device in times of petrol shortages. They were

often improvised in the home and fitted to motor vehicles to enable operation on gas produced from charcoal.)

Some miles from Moe, an extensive bushfire could be seen ahead and we were brought to a stop at Newborough where flames were crossing the road from west to east. This of course was before East and North Newborough housing settlements were established and when the whole area from there to Yallourn and Hernes Oak was covered with scrub and forest. For safety with our load of furniture a retreat was made to Moe and after a wait of about three hours and an assurance that the Haunted Hills route was passable we passed through that way and reached Yallourn just before dusk where we were reunited with Rita. Time passed and at about 9.30pm a message was received to say that George was too busy mopping up fires to unload that night. So the family bedded down where they could and I slept on the load of furniture with the chickens, the dog and the cat all of which had survived to date.

We sorted ourselves out the next day at 60 Parkway Road and managed to remain there for almost twenty three years. Life took its normal course, the children completed their schooling, went on to various employment, got themselves married and drifted off one by one. Rita (born at Yallourn 2/10/31) left school at the end of 1947, became a typist with the State Electricity Commission and for some time was a receptionist at the hospital. In 1956 she became Mrs Maurice Lloyd, lives at Thorpdale and they have four children.

Irving (born 25/05/33) obtained diplomas in Mechanical and Electrical Engineering at Yallourn Technical School. In 1960 he married Miss Betty Harris of Dandenong. He is teaching Mathematics at Warragul Technical School. They have three children.

Jeanie (born 29/10/34) left school at the end of 1950 and after a few months with the State Electricity Commission pursued a career in nursing firstly at the Eye and Ear Hospital followed by general nursing and midwifery. She is Mrs Rex Gotch of Nunawading and they have four children.

With the distant approach of retirement there came a bomb shell from the State Electricity Commission to the effect that retired personnel would be required to vacate their SEC rented premises within one month of retirement. It was true that alternative accommodation was proposed in the nature of elderly citizen's quarters, but this was not very attractive to us.

After this cloud had been hanging over our heads for some two to three years and retirement was looming on the horizon it was decided to make some provision for future housing and a block of land was purchased at Boronia in October 1963.. This appeared to be a nice tree- covered area at the very foot of the Dandenong Ranges. Also not being car owners it was conveniently situated on an electric railway line, giving direct communication with our younger daughter in Nunawading.

With the reversal of the State Electricity Commission policy on housing in December 1964, whereby it was announced that up to 10% of Yallourn homes could be occupied by retired personnel, the situation was reviewed, but some how having worked towards moving into the security of one's own home and considering the circumstances the answer was Boronia. I retired in November 1966 and moved to 8 Daffodil Road, Boronia on December 9th 1966. The move ended a forty six year association with the Latrobe Valley.