



THE PICK OF THE GREAT NORTH ROAD

Pick Volume 3.11

A week on the Line – (it felt like a week)

Mel Jurd

T'was New Year's Eve and
Slowly across the Shadows low
The old Year was creeping
Where all old years Go!



Yes, it was New Years Eve when three inebriated Telephone Linesmen made their way down that tortuous track known as the Great North Road looking for a break in the landline which ran from Chatswood to West Maitland.

Melville John Jerrimia Justice Jurd, Licensee of the Wollombi Wine Bar swore as he missed the gears in the Blitz Wagon Truck, as it navigated its way slowly, slowly down the steps and stairs that part of the lines road was known for – its resemblance to a staircase – as ‘Rough as Guts’.

Sitting beside him was Harold Edgar Brown (brother of Stanley Milton Brown, Licensee of the Laguna Wine Bar). Harry, as he was affectionately known, shaded his eyes from the scorching sun – it was as hot as the Hinges of Hell – looking to see where the break in the line was. Standing on the back of the Blitz was Cleve, the third member of the line gang.

Cleve, Garnet Cleveland Crump or Cleve land Garnet Crump as he sometimes called himself, depending on the amount of liquor he consumed, was eagle-eyed, therefore stood on the back of the truck, scanning the telephone wires, looking for a break. At times the line ran down through gullies and up over ridges where the road did not go, so he had to be careful or the broken wires could be missed altogether.



It being New Years Eve, the three linesmen had been lolling about as the PMG Department depot – now Telstra – behind the old Wollombi Post Office, having a merry old time drinking home brew.

Joe Kerr – the Joker – came across the road to help drink some of Archie Meters latest batch of grog. (Archie was called the Fuehrer because when he was in his cups, he could take Hitler off to a T). All was going well when word came through that there was a fault on the Great North Road. Gotta be fixed, like it or not. Our three workers, somewhat the worse for drink, set out to earn their pay!

As they say, *“the track was Rough and the way was Long”*. It was dammed hot in this totally inhospitable place abundant in snakes, bull ants, scorpions and, at night, great big howling Dingoes. Bernice Brown’s father, Ken Brown (not related to Harry), was quite right when he described these big brutes to his children.

Proceeding along the track, the trio finally came to Hungry Flat where a small creek meandered its way across the road then dropped down over a cliff of rocks. The boys stood under this mini waterfall to wash the sweat out of their eyes and the booze fumes from their brains, then proceeded down the track. Here the only redeeming feature of the landscape was the vast array of native flowers, from Waratah and Giant Lilies (Gynea) and Christmas Bush.

Along the way Cleve, who was standing in the back, was struck by a low overhead branch which promptly knocked him off the truck. Our two heroes in the front, didn’t miss him for a while and when they did, there was no turning the Blitz around because the road was too narrow. They walked back, meeting Cleve, coming along, no worse for wear. He was a proper bushman, once showing Mel how to get a cool drink of water on a hot day, by fixing the billycan to a long pole and reaching down to the bottom of a water hole where water is sweet and cool.

So off we go again, having checked with Maitland that the break was still ahead of us, finally coming to Ten Mile Hollow, so called because it was ten miles from Wisemans Ferry. The booze having worn off, we were getting a bit peckish. What to eat? Not much. Harry had his old tucker box, baring a lettuce, and half a loaf of bread. Once again, Cleve came to the rescue by catching a couple of freshwater crayfish and boiled in an old can. Harry grilled some mushrooms he had found, over the fire on the back of a shovel, and it all was washed down with a bottle of sweet sherry. As Harry was fond of saying *“Creek water is very fine, but can it compare to sherry wine”*. Fully sated, the boys decided to have a kip, before venturing on. With their hats over their eyes to keep away flies, Harry and Cleve swapped stories of long ago and Cleve chided Mel for not coming-a-courting for one of his girls, Ruth, who ran the Wollombi Store and was known as Mrs Woolworth. She could not stand a bar of Mel – said he was a *“loud-mouthed yahoo, with the morals of an alley cat”*. In fact, quite a few people in Wollombi Township agreed with her!

Harry and Cleve fell to discussing the people who had worked on the Overland Telegraph on the Great North Road. Starting with Alf Parker, his wife was the Postmistress, and his son Reg Parker who worked for the PMG but fell off a pole and broke his leg in the 1930s.

The Lynchs and the Woodburys from Wattagan Creek were casually employed on pole renewals. Sid Bambach, Aub Forbes and Phonce Kerr (Joe’s father) were also on the payroll of the PMG. Still later, Harry Burgess and Ken Brown came along, and finally, our ‘three’ gentlemen in this story. Just south of the two ‘S’ bends in the road, where you couldn’t get the truck around without backing and filling, a tree was espied over the line! The damage was quite severe, there were eight 200lbs



copper wires and two 400lbs wires to be renewed. The heavy GI wires had to be soldered together – no mean feat for a soldering iron heated on the ground and quickly brought up the pole before it cooled off.

The job finished with clearance from both Chatswood and Maitland. The boys headed home down through Shepherds Gully and on the St Albans where they recharged their batteries with sly grog from the St Albans store, there being no pub there at the time.

Dusk was falling as they coasted into Laguna Wine Bar for another heart starter, (7 shots of Port Wine). Leaving the two elder gentlemen there, Mel headed home to find Clarence the Clocker who looked after the Bar on numerous occasions. Clarence lived a mile up Yengo Creek Road at Undercliff (a winery today). He always wore a felt hat jammed over his ears and a coat, summer and winter. He never cut his hair, and always had a dead cigarette butt clenched between nicotine-stained teeth. Behind him in the bar was a notice:- *“Drinkers: Shirts and Shoes required – Bras and Panties Optional”*

After a couple of strong coffees, Arabic Style – black as night, sweet as love and hot as hell, Mel felt quite good. He had a shave and a shower then was off to Wollombi for the New Years Eve dance where he hoped the goof ladies of Wollombi would be in kissing mood, not like last New Years Eve when a certain lady described his advances as that of a big hairy ape. He was in a buoyant mood, he’d sent his wife and children down to the lake for holidays – his daughter Cheryl said you could see the smile on his face as they drove away.

The line was repaired, all three of them were home safe and sound. Another thing – none of them thought to put in for overtime. In their own way they’d had a great day.



Afterword-

PMG (Post Masters General Department) was called Pigs must Grant by us children. This was Ken Brown’s strange sense of humour and we kids thought it was hilarious because it was stamped on everything. Bernice Brown.