MHS
Roundabout
Monbulk Historical Society Newsletter
No: 32
Autumn 2023

BONFIRE NIGHT AT FLEMING'S NURSERIES

It was traditional for families throughout Australia to celebrate 'Guy Fawkes Day' on 5th November each year with a small bonfire.

Prior to fireworks being banned in Victoria, families enjoyed the yearly event by purchasing fireworks as the day came closer. Such items as the tiny 'Tom Thumbs' and the larger 'penny bungers' were very popular. Little skyrockets were also available and they came attached to a thin stick, which was placed in a bottle before launching them into the air.

In 1968, Monbulk Fire Brigade members and their families were invited to join the Fleming family to celebrate 'Guy Fawkes Day' as the Fleming's burned the large heap of trees left over after the lifting season. From this small family gathering, an idea was born, 'why don't we turn this into a fundraising event?' and so the planning began.

MONBULK RURAL FIRE BRIGADE

BONFIRE
Fireworks Display
SAT., 27th NOVEMBER
6 p.m. at
FLEMING'S NURSERY
MACCLESFIELD ROAD, MONBULK (follow the signs)
Admission: 51 per car

PARKING GUIDE
If weather is doubtful listen to 3UZ news at 5 p.m. on the day. If in doubt, ring 754 8200 after 3 p.m. on the day.

PROGRAMME OF EVENTS
1.00 p.m. ... Stall on Girls and Kids Shows begin.
Highlights ... Grand Trophy Competition Display (Rs-BIG BANGS).
Novelty Events — 1st Prize Ticket "3" Car valued at $5,400.
Ist Prize Trophy valued at $75.
3rd Prize Trophy valued at $25.
Trophy All-round, Runner-up Boy, Girl, Prizes, 750 KMS.
Trophy Best Stall.

OTHER FEATURES INCLUDE —
- Trampolines
- Pony Rides
- Spinning Wheels
- Lucky Envelopes
- Lucky Dip
- Darts Stall
- Kiddy Slides
- Lolly Stalls
- Ghost-walk
- Dart Balls
- Money Boxes

Thru Fires, Pin Wheels, Rockergets, Red Rags, Soft Drinks, Ice Creams, Lollies, Refreshments.

This is a PETROL-proof Family Night — Inquiries: 758 6105

ANDERSON'S TIMBER & HARDWARE PTY. LTD.
Red Gum and Eucalypt Logs, Sawn Timber, Palings, Fencing Material
Joinery, Builders' Plinthes' and Flooring Supplies — Agent United Insurance Co. Ltd.
Main Road, Monbulk — Telephone: 758 6300

The Bonfire!

Brigade members worked from one year to the next on the car Raffle and bonfire. A carnival atmosphere was achieved with the setting up of lucky straws, knock-ems, darts, mini-bowls, money board, lob-a-bob, hay rides, train rides, trampolines, merry-go-round, ferris wheel, hoopla, lucky envelopes, push'n'peg, junior push'n'peg, spinning wheels, and other money raising ideas. The Ladies' Auxiliary worked tirelessly to cater for the increasingly large crowd that attended each year. A highlight for the children was the arrival of Santa Claus who arrived early in the evening on the back of the Monbulk fire truck.

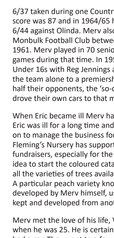
Each year the Bonfire Committee and members spent many weeks preparing Fleming's sheds for the annual event. Numerous signs were painted and barricades, shelving, posts, light and power poles, strings of flags, and coloured lights erected. Equipment such as gas coppers, sinks and barbecues for hamburgers, were set up.

As the years progressed and the event became more popular, cars started to arrive 'bumper to bumper' along Macclesfield Road, well before starting time. Fleming's Nurseries turned their heeling-in ground and a vacant paddock into a carpark and the sides of the roads for several kilometres around the site were packed with parked cars.

The bonfire grew to an amazing fundraising event with over 150 people working in a voluntary capacity at the last bonfire fireworks display in 1981. The Brigade raised over $100,000 from the bonfires and car raffles over its 12 year history with an estimated 10,000 people passing through the gates in it's final year. The money was used to purchase fire trucks, essential equipment and to build a new fire station.

www.monbulkhistoricalsociety.org.au explore@monbulkhistoricalsociety.org.au Find us on facebook.

Pictured in the 1981 Brigade's version in fireworks of a tender guelling a house fire. The ladder and the fire-fighter on the ladder moved up and down to spray the house

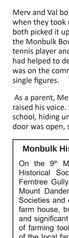


Drawing the car raffle

Ladies' Auxiliary members

Don and Graham Fleming giving hayrides

VALE MERV FLEMING



Merv celebrated his 95th birthday

Mervyn John Fleming was born in the small Bush Nursing Hospital in Belgrave in 1927. He was the fifth child of thirteen born to Eric and Nellie, eleven of whom survived to adulthood (Connie, Len, Ken, Merv, Myra, Marjorie, Don, Maurie, Beryl, Thelma and Ray). With that number of siblings Merv learned to be very quick at the dinner table. He grew up on the banks of the Woori Yallock Creek in Monbulk. Most of the Fleming children went to Macclesfield Primary School, which they called 'Macclesfield University'. At that time it was a one-room school where half the children were Flemings. While at school one of Merv's best friends was Bib Stilwell. Merv remembered Bib had started the first "strike" at the school. Some of the girls cleaned the school for $1 (10 cents) a week and the boys were expected to dig holes and empty the 'dunny cans for a measly 6d (5 cents) a week, so Bib led the boys to strike action.

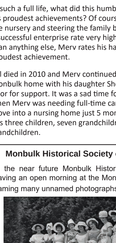
After losing everything in a fire, (see page 4) Merv and his siblings were farmed out to various places. Merv was sent to stay with the family at the Macclesfield Post Office. He was subsequently removed from the Post Office because he enjoyed using the Post Office stamp rather too much!

In the early days Merv's family also earned money by selling firewood to a wood dealer. A drag saw was used to saw one foot blocks which were then split by Merv with an axe. Merv clearly remembered the terrible bushfire on 'Black Friday' on 13th January 1939. He and his siblings were helping their dad, Eric pick beans when someone noticed a huge column of smoke in the distance. It was heading in their direction, toward their valuable and 'hard earned' 300 tons of stacked firewood, left to dry before being sold to the local wood merchant, Tom Harbinson of Ferny Creek. The Fleming's raced to quell the fire with the equipment of the day; a green branch and wet bags. The kids carted water up the slope for about 500 yards from the Woori Yallock Creek. They tried desperately to stop the fire from destroying their stacks of firewood but unfortunately the fire completely destroyed the heap.

Merv was always fond of sports, but during the World War Two, cricket and football games were not held so Merv and his brothers took up bike racing. The road races started at Box Hill so they rode there first. From there the race route took them along Canterbury Road, Springvale Road and Burwood Highway out to Ferntree Gully Road and then back to Box Hill. After that they rode home back to Monbulk. "The roads were single lane bitumen roads, but traffic was almost non-existent" Merv recalled seeing only a handful of cars on the roads during these races.

After the war, Merv played cricket for Monbulk Cricket Club for over 15 years and was also chosen to take part in Country Week Cricket. His best bowling performance was 6/37 taken during one Country Week. His top batting score was 87 and in 1964/65 he took a hat trick bowling 6/44 against Olinda. Merv also played football for Monbulk Football Club between the years of 1947 and 1961. Merv played in 70 senior games and 30 Reserves games during that time. In 1959 Merv co-coached the Under 16s with Reg Jennings and then in 1960 coached the team alone to a premiership flag. He recalled that half their opponents, the 'so-called. Belgrave Under 16s', drove their own cars to that match!

www.monbulkhistoricalsociety.org.au explore@monbulkhistoricalsociety.org.au Find us on facebook.



Val and Merv Fleming

When Eric became ill Merv had to take over the business. Eric was ill for a long time and died in 1953. Merv went on to manage the business for 30 years. Over the years Fleming's Nursery has supported many community fundraisers, especially for the fire brigade. It was Merv's idea to start the coloured catalogue for the displaying all the varieties of trees available at Flemings Nursery. A particular peach variety known as Red Gem, was developed by Merv himself, using a "sport" which was kept and developed from another variety of peach tree.

Merv met the love of his life, Val, at a dance in Belgrave when he was 25. He is certain she picked him because he had a car. They went to a few dances and pictures and after a while Merv had to meet Val's father. The main thing he remembered about that meeting was what wide shoulders her father had. Val and Merv married and had 3 children: John, Sherree and Gayle.

Merv and Val both came from sporting backgrounds so when they took up bowls it wasn't surprising that they both picked it up swiftly and enjoyed the friendships at the Monbulk Bowling Club. Val had been an excellent tennis player and Merv played golf at Beacon Hills and had helped to develop the 2 courses there and of course was on the committee for 14 years. His handicap was in single figures.

As a parent, Merv's daughter Sherree said Merv NEVER raised his voice. She remembered the day she wagged school, hiding under the house. Her dad noticed the door was open, so he shut and bolted it, unknowingly locking her under the house for the whole day! Sherree also remembers lots of friends calling in. No-one was ever turned away. Friday nights were when the family all got together. It was a time for spinning great yarns much loved by the family.

As Merv and Val stepped back from the nursery in retirement, and had more time to themselves, they started to travel. Each year they would head north to Merimbula and later to Bateman's Bay, as well as spending family holidays at Eildon and Phillip Island. Four times the caravanned around Australia. They also had trips overseas in the 1980s.

In such a full life, what did this humble man see as his proudest achievements? Of course, managing the nursery and steering the family business to such a successful enterprise rate very highly but, more than anything else, Merv rates his happy family as his proudest achievement.

Val died in 2010 and Merv continued to live in his Monbulk home with his daughter Sherree living next door for support. It was a sad time for the family when Merv was needing full-time care and had to move into a nursing home just 5 months ago. Merv has three children, seven grandchildren and six great grandchildren.

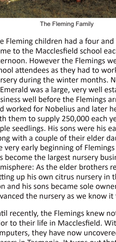
Monbulk Historical Society recent excursion:

On the 9th March some members of the Monbulk Historical Society visited Ambleside Homestead in Ferntree Gully. We met up with some members from Mount Dandenong & District and Foothills Historical Societies and enjoyed a tour of the house. The former farm house, built in 1899, is on two acres of gardens and significant trees and shrubs and includes a variety of farming tools, machinery and implements reflective of the local farming history. Thanks to the members of the Knox Historical Society for a wonderful morning. Ambleside is also now the headquarters of the Knox Historical Society.

MHS thanks Sherree Creek and Beryl James for sharing Merv and the Fleming family's stories with us. We also acknowledge Monbulk Bowling Club Newsletter Oct. - Nov. 2010, Go Ta Blazes - Geoff Sands, Where Hawks Fly - MHS & MFNC and 125 Not Out - MCC.

Monbulk Historical Society coming event:

In the near future Monbulk Historical Society will be having an open morning at the Monbulk Hub in hope of naming many unnamed photographs in our collection.



Berry Festival c. 1961

www.monbulkhistoricalsociety.org.au explore@monbulkhistoricalsociety.org.au Find us on facebook.

THE FLEMING CLAN

Eric and Nellie Fleming came to the Monbulk area in 1919. In 1925 Eric bought the first of his land on the banks of the Woori Yallock Creek, just where Swales Road becomes Macclesfield Road. For a time the family moved to Essendon where Eric got work with the Lands Department eradicating Prickly Pear but by 1931 they returned to Monbulk so that Eric could seriously concentrate on his nursery. The original house on the property, known as "Briar Patch", burned down one night. The story Merv told was that his father needed to go into Monbulk but the car was low on petrol so Merv's older brothers proceeded to transfer petrol into the tank from a big twelve gallon drum, using a big teapot. The hurricane lamp got a little too close and disaster struck! The only thing that could be salvaged was a Singer sewing machine.

The Fleming Family

It wasn't long before Eric had built a new home for the family to live in. Vegetables such as potatoes, beans, carrots, tomatoes and peas were grown to supplement the food supply, and also to sell for income. The vegetables were taken to market in Eric's 1932 Hudson Super 6 sedan. To do this they had to remove the back seat. Sometimes their produce would be sent into the market with a commission agent. Chicken was a treat that they mostly only had for Christmas (unless one of the laying hens stopped doing its job and would met its sad end). Rabbit was part of their regular diet. Kangaroo tail soup, which suggests there would have been kangaroo steaks and minced kangaroo rissoles. Also with the Woori Yallock creek running below the family home, and fishing a favourite pastime for all, a supply of fresh blackfish, trout and eels often made it to the table.

A family house cow, milked twice a day by Nellie gave them milk and scalded cream, and a special treat - BUTTER! Firstly though, the girls had to help their mum churn the cream in the wooden butter churn, which took ages to turn to butter. Hens for their egg supply meant another family chore, but they gave Nellie some of the necessary ingredients for her cooking. Flour and sugar was bought in bulk, in calico bags. Nellie's cooking was a treat for the whole family, making perfect sponges, scones, queen kisses, raspberry and coconut slice and apple pies and of course, the traditional Christmas cake and puddings.

Merv had shared a story of the large chimney space in their home when growing up being used as a cooler in the summer months, before there was any proper refrigeration. It was Christmas and Merv's mum had prepared many sweet treats for Christmas putting them behind the curtain that hung in front of the cold fireplace. Someone accidentally left the door open and the young pig got in and scoffed the lot! However, revenge was sweet when the family enjoyed some delicious bacon a couple of weeks later.

The Fleming children had a four and a half mile walk from home to the Macclesfield school each morning and each afternoon. However the Flemings were only part time school attendees as they had to work in their father's nursery during the winter months. Nobelius Nurseries at Emerald was a large, very well established nursery business well before the Flemings arrived. Early on Eric had worked for Nobelius and later he secured a contract with them to supply 250,000 each year "under stock" for apple seedlings. His sons were his early working crew, along with a couple of their elder daughters. This was the very early beginning of Flemings Nurseries in what has become the largest nursery business in the southern hemisphere: As the elder brothers retired, and Maurie setting up his own citrus nursery in the Swan Hill area, Don and his sons became sole owners and have now advanced the nursery as we know it today.

Until recently, the Flemings knew nothing of their family prior to their life in Macclesfield. With the help of computers, they have now uncovered many convict fore-bearers in Tasmania. It turns out that their real name was not Fleming at all. Merv's Mum and Dad assumed that name on their arrival in Melbourne when they eloped here, never to be in touch with their Tasmanian families again.

Don, Merv and Ray Fleming

www.monbulkhistoricalsociety.org.au explore@monbulkhistoricalsociety.org.au Find us on facebook.