

Garry Le Get (LAC 1958-59) passed away February 2018. Gary wrote of his Life & Times in September 2014

My parents believed that we should be educated privately from the very beginning even though they could not afford it. Hence, I commenced kindergarten at Haileybury College in Brighton and stayed there till Grade 2. Part of that time was embarrassing as I was required to wear a home knitted school jumper that made me feel odd.

In 1949 I was sent to Wesley but had to jump a grade starting in Year 4. I always played 'catch-up' from then and eventually fell, having to repeat Year 11. Along the way I was given poor careers advice that saw me undertaking the lower-level maths even though I had expressed interest in Agriculture. This meant that I had to have special maths tuition in a lower class to get me into Longerenong. Another embarrassment.

1958 and 1959 saw me at Longerenong Agricultural College near Horsham. I started in Year 2 of the course because I had sufficient subjects to skip Year 1.

In the 1950s Longerenong, in keeping with the times, lights out was at 10 pm, except on a Saturday when we were allowed to go to Horsham (13 kms) for the local dance or pictures. The College provided a truck with a canvas top and seats down the side. Singing en route was ribald, but the standard improved when we reached the outskirts of the town. The truck returned to the College at midnight. However, some students then caught a taxi back to Horsham to continue the liaisons that they had established. The students were generally unpopular with the local lads as they were direct competition for the girls.

Incidentally, at the time, there were 70 all male students. The rules were strictly no women, no cars, and no grog. But there were ways around each of these problems. Each semester we held a dance commencing with a hayride from the front gate - about 2 kms from the premises. In my first year, the College was still powered by its own plant. SEC was yet to be connected. At one dance (carefully supervised by the Principal), the students arranged with the College Electrician to have a power failure - which duly occurred. By the time the Principal had rounded up enough cars to provide light, the students and their girls for the night had well and truly disappeared!



It's worth noting that there were two semesters per year each of five months with one long weekend per semester. (Remember that Melbourne was four hours away by train). We alternated between one day in class and one day on allocated farm work. Lectures went from 8am till 5pm plus some night lectures and Saturday mornings. Farm work commenced at 7.30am unless you were on dairy duty or stables when you would start at 5am. Those essential duties, plus piggery and poultry, required you to work Sundays as well. We learnt to shear and slaughter (mainly sheep but also cattle, pigs, and poultry). Running the contents of the guts of sheep was not particularly popular. The 'clean' guts were then rendered down.

We learnt to harness and use Clydesdale horses and carts as the produce generated on the farm was delivered to the College kitchen and staff residences. We did have tractors as well! Harvest was demanding. In those days there was no bulk handling, so many hours were spent in the paddocks in the blazing sun stitching wheat bags. They would then be taken to a seed cleaning plant where they would be opened, the seed cleaned for the certified seed market and the bags re-sown. I was one of the few strong enough to pick a 180-pound (81.6 Kg) bag off the floor and place it on my shoulder. Perhaps that contributed to my back problems today!

In all, I consider that time spent at the College, though not as academic as University, has stood me in good stead for all round handyman skills including painting, house maintenance, etc. Later with the SCA, the agricultural knowledge gained from Longerenong coupled with excellent mentor training, made all of us who took that path excellent extension officers. Finally, Longerenong was an eye opener for me as suddenly I was in a completely different world of education: not the protected environment of private schools that I had been in since kindergarten.

Career

- 1960 Worked as a labourer on a farm at Terip near Alexandra for Arthur Fishley. The main role was clearing forest to establish pasture, which was a bit of an irony as I later became involved in tree planting.
- 1961 Joined the Soil Conservation Authority and spent several months at different locations in Victoria. Appointed an Assistant Soil Conservationist at Broadford.
- 1963 to 1973 Soil Conservationist at Bacchus Marsh, Charlton. Maryborough and then Broadford.
- 1979 Regional Soil Conservationist for South Eastern Victoria based at Box Hill. Resided at North Balwyn. *1983 drought. Seconded to Rural Finance Commission.*
- 1985 Manager, Regional Support for Conservation, Forests and Lands. (The Soil Conservation Authority was abolished as a separate department). Office was at Bourke Street, Melbourne.
- 1987 Assistant Regional Manager, Resource Conservation for the Geelong Region of CFL based in Geelong. Commuted each day for six years.
- 1993 Executive Officer, Division of Flora, Fauna and Fisheries, CFL. Based in East Melbourne.
- 1994 Project Manager for the Water Bureau, Dept of Sustainability and Environment. Office in East Melbourne
- 1996 Project Manager, Dept of Sustainability & Environment Based in Dandenong.
- 1997 Retired from the formal work force.
- 1998 Consulted for DSE on drought management in the Port Phillip region.
- 1999-2001 Did field work collecting & sampling soils for 'Soil Solutions' run by Lindsay Jones.
- 1997-2011 Sowed the crop on 14 occasions and undertook 4 harvests on Koobabbie, WA.



Career Highlights

- Being mentor trained by highly professional and experienced staff and mentoring others over a number of years. So much was learnt on the job which proved far more important than academic qualifications.
- As a relatively inexperienced Soil Conservationist at Bacchus Marsh, being given credit for the best Group Conservation Area plan presented to the Soil Conservation Authority (SCA) to that time - 1964. An unusual occurrence at Bacchus Marsh for a public servant was the farming community holding a farewell function in which I was presented the anchor thermometer/barometer that still hangs in the family room.
- At Charlton 1967/68 being able to advance project planning so much that years of work lay ahead for the works crews.
- Being appointed District Soil Conservationist at Maryborough at the age of 28.
- After four years at Maryborough, being appointed to run the SCA's most complex District based at Broadford. Not only did it have the routine individual and group farmer work, but it also oversaw military property restoration at Puckapunyal and Mangalore, the Eppalock catchment project and complex water catchment management in the Macedon Ranges.
- During my field career I succeeded in planning and implementing some 21 group conservation areas and the Army's Mangalore ammunition property. Working with individual farmers and various major construction authorities was additional to group work. Group conservation later evolved into Landcare.
- The opportunity to work closely and cooperatively with the farming community to see major improvements in land and catchment management. (It couldn't happen today as departments are so concerned with risk management that if they allowed an advisory officer to give advice - and it is wrong - the department might be sued).
- Convincing the SCA to restore eroded gullies by battering the raw sides into reclaimed waterways rather than leave them raw with such control measures as groyne, concrete structures, and tree planting.
- Operating contractors' machinery such as tracked bulldozers - large and small, wheeled articulated dozers, graders, or large motorised scrapers. Imagine doing this today with occupational health and safety restrictions? However, this activity served a major purpose: If I could operate the machinery, I was in a strong position to supervise and direct contractors. The way it worked was that if the operator needed 'smoko' or lunch, I would hop on the machine and fill in the time till he was ready to resume.

- Judging the 1972 Western Region Hanslow Cup (for best efforts in soil conservation and land management).
- Hosting a Parliamentary tour of Puckapunyal in 1977.
- Organising the 1979 annual Soil Conservation Authority conference at Bendigo.
- On becoming Regional Soil Conservationist for south east Victoria, my role expanded to include dealing with major construction organisations such as the SEC, which was then building the Loy Yang power stations, Vic Roads and the then State Rivers & Water Supply Commission.
- Being a member of the state-wide 'State of the Rivers Task Force' which considered the current condition of rivers and their catchments and the appropriate means of future management.
- Being Technical Secretary of the state-wide 'Reference Areas Advisory Committee (which oversaw the production of management plans for undisturbed land/vegetation types for future reference).
- Secondment to the Rural Finance Corporation to deal with state-wide water supply issues during the 1983 drought.
- Making a submission to the Parliamentary Public Works Committee in 1983 on the saving of topsoil at the proposed Driffield Coal Reserves Inquiry. The SEC was hostile.
- When departments including the SCA, National Parks, Forests Commission, Fisheries and Wildlife and Lands Department were all combined to form Conservation, Forests and Lands, it was assumed that if you had a science background you could fit in anywhere. While this sensationally broadened one's experience, it was hardly good for the clients. For example, I had management of the ocean-going Fisheries patrol vessel, 'Delphinus', which I duly went to sea on. On meeting the skipper, I told him that he'd have to bear with me for a while as I had a soils background. His response: "Yes I know. I checked you out"!
- The development of Serendip Sanctuary and Macedon Nursery.
- Working on the Environment Effects Committee for the proposed re-location of the Coode Island chemical facility to Point Lillias and channel deepening in Corio Bay where there were divergent views between industry and green groups.
- By contrast, the lowlight of my formal career was towards the end when I spent two years seconded to the Water Bureau that was charged with re-structuring the management of water authorities across the state. This was a highly political body with the attitude of "which water authority can we knock off today"? It didn't sit comfortably with my background of hands-on advice and operations.