

# YARRA GLEN & DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY Inc.

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## NEWSLETTER

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### FROM THE EDITOR

Now that we are well into 2011 a lot of infrastructure work is being undertaken in the Yarra Glen area. The one which affects the Society the most is the renovations to the Memorial Hall which commenced in April. See the box below for the re-location of our meetings for the next three months. Most of our documents will be stored during this period but we will endeavour to respond to research queries with resources such as our computer files which will still be available to us.

Other works proceeding at present include the roundabout at the railway crossing which feeds into Melba Highway bypass, and the restoration of the railway by Yarra Valley Railway. Some members of our Committee attended a presentation given by YVR at the railway station on 30<sup>th</sup> April. Considerable work has been done on the line between Yarra Glen and the Train Trak vineyard at Tarrawarra with the aim of having a trolley service in operation in 2012. Work will also commence soon on the station building to restore it and the station grounds. A public meeting is being scheduled for 8<sup>th</sup> June to inform the community and appeal for volunteers. YVR is now boosted by a considerable body of skilled and enthusiastic people who formerly worked on the development of the Puffing Billy service.

*Helen*

### Historical Society Monthly Meetings

**12 June, 10 July & 14 August 2011**

will be held at the

Yarra Glen & District Living & Learning  
Centre,  
12 Anzac Avenue, Yarra Glen

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**The History Room will be closed**

June – August 2011

### INDIAN HAWKERS

When older residents of the Yarra Glen district have reminisced they often raise the subject of the Indian hawker who visited the area several times a year. As with most memories of long distant childhood their accounts of Gareeb (also known as Okum or Yokum) vary in detail, but one thing they all agree on was that he was an honest man and very friendly.

#### Maria Taylor (née Beach 1913-2004):

*Okum Gareeb was an Indian hawker with very brown skin, black hair and black eyes. He wore a turban and drove around with his 2 draught horses and big black van, visiting us about twice a year. When one of the family said that Okum was at the gate, I ran and hid because I was scared of him, although he was quite a friendly fellow. But as I grew older I found it very interesting to see all the pretty materials and things he had for sale. Buttons and pins, hooks and eyes, press studs, bootlaces, needles and cottons were some of his goods. Sometimes Mother bought a few things and perhaps a pencil or rubber for me, so I was very pleased.<sup>1</sup>*

#### Gordon Hubbard (1914-1999):

*In the early days of Steels Creek we used to have an Indian Hawker calling on us by the name of Okum. He used to service the area and I remember as a little kid looking up into the mysterious interior of his wagon. I was rather frightened at the time but he was a great old guy.*

*Okum was followed by two young guys, Reg Scroll, and a person still on the job at this late age, Frank Ricardo. These two travellers serviced the whole area and their service was much appreciated.<sup>2</sup>*

#### Mary Mann (née Walker b.1918):

*Okum called at our house when we lived opposite the Presbyterian Church [now the Uniting Church]. He also went to the Kennedy's and the Mills' and other houses nearby. He had a horse-drawn wagon which was*

<sup>1</sup> F. Maria Taylor, *Daughters of Dixon's Creek*, Albury

<sup>2</sup> Gordon Hubbard, Interview by John Crossley, February 1996

*replaced from time to time with another. As children we would run to our mother calling out: 'The Indian man is here!' We were excited to see what was in his van.*

*One day Okum called at the house and found that we no longer lived there. The people could not tell him where we were. As he moved through the district he came upon us at our farm in Steels Creek. He was very excited to find us and ran down the yard to my father calling out: 'Missa Walker, Missa Walker, I have found you!' He was a very friendly man.*

*On our way to the Yarra Glen school from Gulf Road we saw him camped at Alf Hubbard's place [now the corner of Steels Creek Road and Hubbard Road]. He would be pottering around a fire near his van and his clothing or rugs etc would be hanging on the fence. He was able to put his horse in one of their small paddocks.*

*When he went away another Indian man took over from him.*

### **Alma Goss (née Ellis b. 1923):**

*Gareeb called at our place 'Rose Hill' in Dixons Creek soon after I was born. My mother was telling him that they had not decided on a name for me and he said to call me 'Alma' which was a name used by his people in India.*

*As children we loved to sit around his campfire at night and shared his Johnny cakes. He would slap them around in the pan and then stand them up near the fire to dry. We thought they were better than the one's Mum made – no doubt the campfire helped. I also liked to take my plate out and receive a helping of his curry – it was pretty hot.*

*At first he came on foot, carrying a pole over his shoulder with a heavy bundle tied at the end. It was covered with a white calico like fabric. These bundles would be sent out for him to collect at strategic places on his route. My mother and my older sister, Thelma, would help him put price tags on the items when he obtained a new bundle. He usually only stayed one night at our place, maybe longer if he had to do the pricing. When on foot he slept in someone's shed or outdoors, he did not sleep in the house.*

*Later, he had a dark-coloured wagon pulled by a white horse. He then slept in his wagon and his horse was put in a paddock. Gareeb would also ask for some dry feed for the horse such as chaff.*

*There was another hawker named Jimmin whom Gareeb referred to as his 'cousin'. They travelled the same route although not together. Jimmin had a wagon drawn by two bay horses harnessed side by side. Underneath the wagon were some hens which Jimmin would kill and eat from time to time. Jimmin did not wear a turban as Gareeb did.*

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In the late 19th to early 20th centuries many immigrants sought work in rural areas as labourers or itinerant hawkers. These hawkers, who came from a variety of countries

including India, travelled from town to town. Sometimes on foot and, as their business increased, in covered horse-drawn wagons. They sold a diverse range of products including food, books, pots and pans and sometimes jewellery, exotic silks and spices. As well as their products, the hawkers were a diversion from everyday routines<sup>3</sup>

Newly arrived Indians in Australia established links with their countrymen who were already in business, many as traders. Large Australian warehouses and wholesalers sold goods on credit to the hawkers who travelled the rural areas. The credit extended to their clients who, in some cases, would pay for their purchases the next time that the hawker came to the district. "The hawkers sold work shirts and trousers, boots, fabrics, dishcloths, [haberdashery, sweets and other items]. In those days it might take as long as six months or even a year, for a farmer or his farmhands to pay off a bill of 6s. 6d." Hanifa Deen *Caravanserai*

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The hawker who travelled in the Yarra Glen district in the first half of the twentieth century was known variously as Yokum, Okum or Gareeb. The latter is the name found in official documents. He was born in Mirpir, Punjab, India in 1879. Mirpir is at the southern most point of Kashmir, about 125kms southeast of Islamabad. Prior to 1947 it was part of Kashmir and under British rule, but it is now under the jurisdiction of Pakistan.

Immigration Department records state that Gareeb stood 5 feet 9 ½ inches (177cm) tall with a medium build. He had a dark complexion with brown eyes and always wore a turban. In a statement to a Customs Inspector in 1926 he said that he came to Australia about 1900, working his passage on a ship. After leaving the ship in Melbourne he applied for a hawkers' licence. For the first twelve months he travelled between Melbourne and Bendigo. After that he made his base in Yarra Glen and travelled to the Mansfield and Yea areas.<sup>4</sup>

Gareeb obtained his stock from Denniston & Co, Wholesale Clothing Manufacturers of Flinders Lane Melbourne and S & M Taboor, Importers and Manufacturers of Exhibition Street. In a letter of reference for Gareeb, Taboor wrote that he paid his accounts promptly and was honest and straightforward in his dealings.

In 1926 Gareeb applied to the Australian Government for permission to leave Australia for three years and to have his exemption from the Dictation Test extended.

The Dictation Test was a key tool in the administration of the White Australia Policy. It was administered to the indigenous people of Africa, Asia and Polynesia unless they were exempted under Section 3, as Gareeb was. English was the language generally used for the test – a passage of approximately 50 words. However if the Customs Officer administering the test believed that the 'undesirable' migrant was proficient in English he could substitute any other language. Gareeb had been granted exemption when he first arrived and he was now asking for an extension so that he could re-enter Australia on his return.

<sup>3</sup> [www.museumsvictoria.com.au/immigration\\_museum](http://www.museumsvictoria.com.au/immigration_museum)

<sup>4</sup> National Archives of Australia, Record s Search

John James Hunt (1884-1928) of Steels Creek provided a reference for him:

Steels Creek  
21<sup>st</sup> April 1926

Sir,

*I have known Gareeb, hawker, of Yarra Glen & I have done business with him for the past 14 years & have always found him very honest & straightforward in his dealings with me.*

*The last I saw him was six weeks ago when he informed me he was going to India. The Photos produced by the Police are the real identity of Gareeb.*

[signed] J. J. Hunt

This reference had to be endorsed by the police officer at Yarra Glen.

Yarra Glen  
21 April 1926

Sgt. Hall  
P. C. Branch  
Melbourne

*Certificate of Character of Gareeb from Mr J. J. Hunt of Steels Creek attached herewith & who positively identified the photo as that of Gareeb.*

*Gareeb is not known to the Police here but from inquiries made he made Yarra Glen as his stopping place & is spoken very highly of by those who have met him.*

[signed] L. B. Murphy  
Constable

On 30 December 1928 Gareeb sent a letter from the village of Ratta in the District of Mirpur, India asking for a further extension of his passport because he had been ill for two months. The extension was granted until 28<sup>th</sup> June 1932.

In December 1931 he sent another letter for a further extension, once again citing illness as the reason for his delay. This letter is written in a different hand. Gareeb had signed documents in Australia with a mark and was apparently unable to write in English. It appears that he used the services of an amanuensis<sup>5</sup> at the local post office in his village of Ratta to send his letters to Australia. Once again he was granted an extension, this time until 28<sup>th</sup> June 1935.

Gareeb returned to Australia on the SS *Strathnaven* in May 1935

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**Barry Watts** remembers the hawker's irregular visits to his grandmother's home in Forest Street, Yarra Glen in the early 1940s.

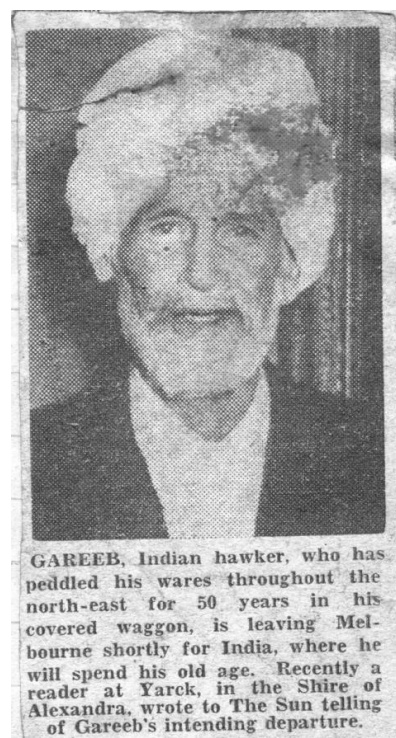
*He was tall, dark skinned and wore a turban...He drove a high covered wagon with two horses, but they*

*were unlike any other wagon and horses seen in the district. Yokum's wagon had exotic, colourful scenes of distant landscapes painted on its sides. To a child it looked fantastic...and I danced around it with a feeling of excitement and discovery. The tray part of the wagon was highly decorated with scrolls and flourishes as well. The horses were driven one in front of the other, and their collars and harness had small bells and reflective sequins attached so that every step, every movement, every shake of a horse's head, produced a soft tinkle or sparkling glitter.*

*Yokum sold drapery, with a little haberdashery thrown in. He had bolts of cloth, all carefully wrapped for dust-proofing, stacked in his wagon – from cheesecloth and calico to damask and tulle, linen patterned or plain, bleached and unbleached, nets and rare fabrics. He catered for the making of bed linen, curtains and clothing, and anything else for the home and family. He [also] carried family news from one relative to another, and passed on general information from neighbouring districts.*

*One reason Yokum favoured our place was that it enabled him to let his horses go free at night rather than hobble them...and he would set up his wagon...and establish his camp. After watering his horses at our dam, he would set them free between the wagon and the gate...Then, beside his wagon, he would set a fire using sticks he gathered during the day. I'm unsure if he slept in the wagon or on the ground...*

Gareeb eventually returned to Mirpur but many other Indian hawkers remained in Australia, becoming storekeepers and traders.



The ways of the old Indian hawkers were being superseded by motor vehicles.

<sup>5</sup> a person who writes from dictation, usually for payment

In 1934 **Frank Ricardo** (1915-2005) inherited a business established by his father who had began hawking with a horse and cart in the Whittlesea, Kinglake and Hurstbridge areas in 1919. He sold work wear, general clothing and manchester.

Young Frank took over the cart in 1934 but soon bought a 1928 Chevrolet for £90. Over the next couple of years he upgraded his Chevrolets until in 1963 he purchased a Bedford truck. It is this red truck with the customised body that people recall when they think of Frank. He drove it from his home in Ivanhoe on the same roads his father travelled, but soon extended the route to Warburton and the Yarra Valley. He had special keys that he twirled in the locks to open the sides and the back to reveal shelves of neatly packed clothing, linen, and fabrics, boots, shoes and slippers and other goods. Still as full of wonder to young children as the carts of earlier times. Many will remember the small bags of boiled sweets that Frank handed out at Christmas time. He made many friends and over the sixty-five or more years that he travelled he knew some families over two or three generations. Like the Indian hawkers before him he not only provided useful goods, but also carried news and messages and assisted individuals and families in a number of ways.

*Eltham & Whittlesea Shires Advertiser 26 Sept 1941*



*Does anybody have their own stories to add about the Indian hawkers and Frank Ricardo?*

*Especially photos!!*

*We would love to hear from you.*

## NEW PUBLICATIONS

Yarra Glen & District Historical Society  
Publication No. 8

*Alan Adams of Steels Creek  
World War II Commando*



Published April 2011

21pp. \$10 + postage available from the Society

Based on an interview conducted by Jo Ghirardello in 1995, this is the story of Alan's service with 2/2 Independent Company in Timor, New Guinea and Borneo. It also includes his memories of living in Steels Creek.



Compiled by Kath Hercus (daughter of George Muir)

Edited by Helen Mann

Published April 2011

George Muir's letters from the Front are set in the context of his family in Christmas Hills, the various places that he saw service overseas, and the life he led with his wife and children as a returned serviceman.

51pp (A5) \$10 + postage available from the Society