

LIFE STORIES

STORY JESSICA OWERS PHOTOS ITALO VARDARO

THE PARLANCE 'from little things big things grow' was never truer in Waikerie, SA, than when someone casually commented, in reflection of the local old folks, "there won't be another generation like them". The weathered faces of Waikerie's ageing population grew up during the Depression. They lived through the war years and have stories the likes of which are quickly disappearing from consciousness, so when a group of intrepid locals agreed that it was time to record them in word and photograph it resulted in *Conversations ... History comes as a story*, a locally compiled book and a photographic exhibition at Waikerie's Rain Moth Gallery. "These people had no airs and graces about them," Deb Morley, project manager, says. "It was amazing to be allowed into their lives and we treasured the experience." Celebrated local photographer Italo Vardaro captured 24 individuals in various poses that reflected the stories accompanying them, from athletic butcher Stan Burnett to knitting identity Edie Wilks. The resultant black-and-white images are arresting portrayals of a disappearing generation – since the exhibition opened last November a few of the local characters have passed away. "The photos and the stories can't be separated," Deb says, "and that is the special thing about this exhibition."

Conversations ... History comes as a story is at Rain Moth Gallery until the end of February. The book can be purchased by phoning the gallery on (08) 8541 2802.

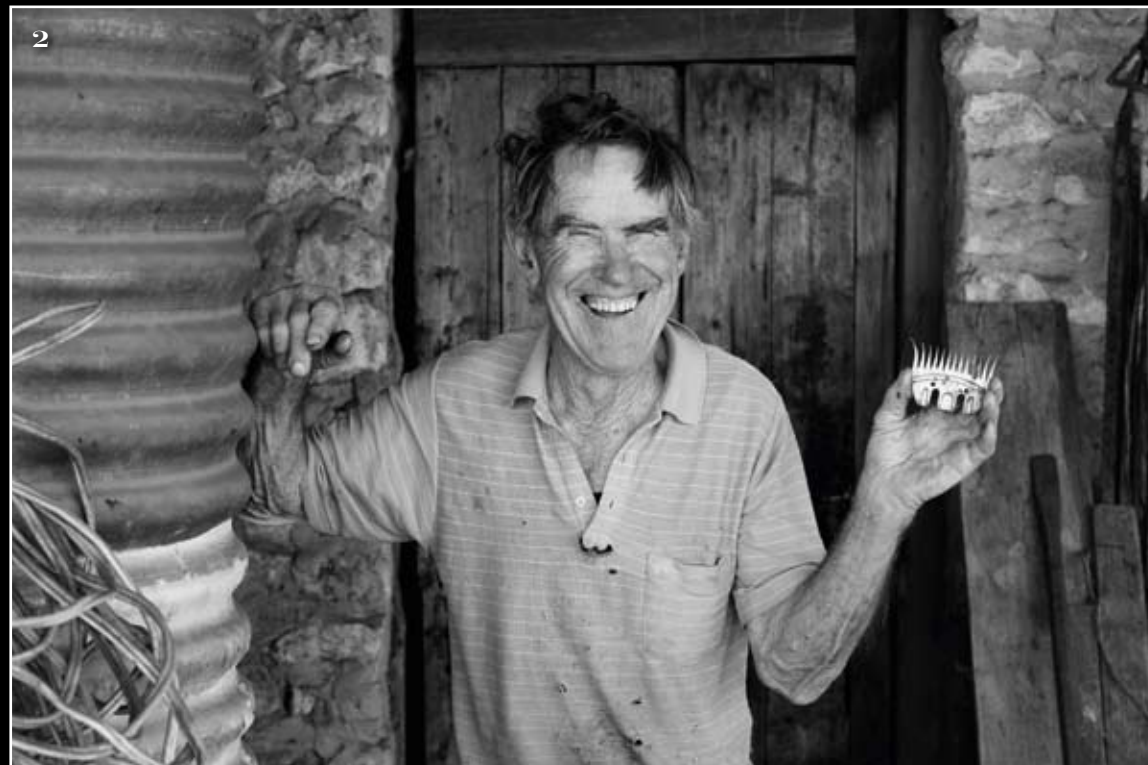
Bill Politt graduated with a Diploma of Agriculture (Horticulture) in 1933 and after the war was instrumental in the development of a fixed-sprinkler, pump-operated irrigation system that is still in use the length of the Murray today. Bill is pictured with an early theodolite he used to open up 300 acres (121 hectares) of country around Golden Heights for citrus farmers in the late 1950s.



Evelyn Dorothy Watkins was 12 years old when she moved to a property opposite Hart Lagoon in 1928, about a kilometre outside of Waikerie. Photographed on the lagoon, 'Dorrie' still spends her days out there shooting, swimming or just exploring as she did when she was a little girl.



Irish-born Bill McClelland and Barmera girl Anne Bawden met in the 1950s at a local dance. Not even the 1956 Murray floods and the closing of the Paringa Bridge could keep the new lovers apart and Bill earnestly paddled a canoe across the Murray to the Cobdogla Oval for a stranded, soon-to-be Anne McClelland. The couple are pictured after 53 years of marriage with reminders of Bill's struggle across the river to get to his girl.



1. Jimmy Carter still keeps a set of drums in his shed at home, harking back to the days when he played in various bands around the district in the 1950s and 1960s. Though never formally taught, he played in halls, hotels and clubs from Paringa to Robertstown.
 2. Gun shearer Les Mickey began shearing at the age of 17 and stopped at 77. He remembers being told that he would always earn a living from it and, when although broke his back and neck chasing sheep from the shearing paddock and was told he would never pick up the shears again, he was back at it 12 months later.
 3. At one point in Waikerie history, Stan Burnett owned every butcher shop in town, but it was his sporting prowess that set him apart. Country football's Whillas Medal winner in 1947 and 1952, Mail Medal winner in 1952 and nine-time winner of the lawn bowls Club Championships are just some of the notches in Stan's belt.



1. John Gregory became the packing shed manager at Waikerie Cooperative Packing House in 1962 when it was the largest fruit-packing shed in Australia. In his 29 years with the company he witnessed many developments, including the disappearance of the wooden bushel boxes (pictured) that eventually gave way to wire-bound types and, ultimately, cardboard cartons.

2. Edie Wilks remembers spending an arduous three months in a Salvation Army Reformatory, a school for girls run with extremely strict discipline, in Gilbert Street, Adelaide, in the early 1920s. The experience nurtured a love of knitting and needlework and since her retirement in 1972 she has become a familiar figure knitting outside her Waikerie cottage.

3. Lloyd Copeland remembers earning £5 for every 100 sheep he sheared in his early days as a shearer; not bad for a time when £2 10s was average pay for a day's work. When a chap in south-east South Australia couldn't find anyone to shear his 3000 wethers, Lloyd took off on his Harley Davidson "down the Coorong to get there, dust flying everywhere".

4. The Waikerie Winery happened to be next door to Max Thompson's family property when he was growing up and he later went on to become its chairman of directors. A seasoned grape-grower these days at more than 80 years of age, Max stands in front of the district's daily rainfall figures.

