

A Brief History of The Crowley's Of The Upper Yarra Valley

By Shane Crowley, grandson of Con, great grandson of James

Research data was provided by Rosemary Crowley

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“It seems preposterous that I shared the first 20 years of my life with a man born in 1882”.

In the beginning,

Our story starts in the Bandon region of Cork, circa 1830. James Crowley (my great grandfather) was born in Enniskeane about, 1836. He was baptised in Enniskeane on April 5, 1836. He died in the Upper Yarra district, Victoria, Australia in 1921, aged 85. Representatives of the Tobin and Deasey families were present at his christening. Mahoney's were also connected to the family. He was the son of James Crowley and Johanna Tobin, married in Bandon February 19, 1833. My great grandfather's siblings were Cornelius, Thomas, Daniel, Julia, Johanna, Barbara and Eleanor. At age 17 James departed Cork for the USA aboard the “Samuel Lawrence”. Also on the passenger list was a Cornelius Crowley, who is likely to have been his older brother. James was joining his relative John Crowley (son of Cornelius O’Crowley and Catherine Ahern) who had already established himself there. No records have been found to show how these families are related. John and James may even have been related through a shared maternal link via the Ahern's. While the pair carved out a living in America John heard about the gold rush at Sandhurst (later to be renamed Bendigo) in the State of Victoria, Australia. He departed for Australia and upon arriving at the new Gold Fields, struck gold. He realised that this was the opportunity of a life time. He returned to America, wound up his affairs and made the permanent move to Bendigo. Meanwhile James continued on in America. At age 31, in the year 1867, he applied for American citizenship. In the same year he married Catherine Wilson in Boston. Catherine was a native-born American from Wheeling West Virginia. On October 7, 1867, James and Catherine set sail for Melbourne to reunite with John. James had lived in America for 14 years.

Meanwhile, back in Bendigo, John unleashed his considerable entrepreneurial gifts. He teamed up with William Heffernan and briefly took up sheep grazing. They then purchased the famous Shamrock hotel (now, a tourist attraction) in the centre of Bendigo. The pub was the centre of information and gossip, providing opportunity for any man willing to listen. The pub became the launching pad for an astonishing series of business triumphs. John purchased prime real estate in View Street on which he built offices for professionals, a luxury hotel called the Albion and the grand, ornate, Princess theatre. All this real estate, he owned in his own right. He also invested in gold mines. John had seen Bendigo go from tents and shacks to bricks and stone, and he had been a main player. During this time, he became a close personal friend of Henry Backhaus, the Catholic goldfields priest. The canny priest opened his own personal bank account and funnelled the flood of goldfields donations into it. On his death, his will moved the money into a trust. I have no doubt that John helped him plot this strategy. At this time Bendigo was the richest city in the southern hemisphere. The establishment of a personal bank account and then, a trust, stopped the Archbishop of Melbourne confiscating the money and using it in Melbourne. The Archbishop was

enraged but powerless. This trust is still working today, providing money for the building of Catholic infrastructure in Bendigo. By far the greatest product of the friendship was the Bendigo Cathedral. The two men formed the plan to build it and chose the site. The Cathedral was finally finished in 1977 and has become world famous. The interior of the Cathedral is white and all the side windows are gold glass. In the bright Bendigo sun, the interior glows an unearthly gold! Backhaus lived in John's home in his later years and died in 1882. All this while, John assisted family and friends from Ireland, to immigrate to Australia. At some point before his death John had a monument erected in the St. Bartholomew's Kinneigh Church yard, Cork (the one with the monk's tower in the top corner). It lists his parents and brothers. The monument is located near the middle of the bottom row, close to the front road. John died at age 72. He outlived two wives. His second wife bore 3 sons. One became a solicitor and other two became doctors.

The trajectory of James' life in Australia could not have been more different from John's. On arriving from America, James and Catherine found they were too late to catch the gold boom. To make things worse Bendigo's water supply had become unsafe to drink. The population suffered from typhoid fever and other water-borne diseases. Many died. Children were most at risk. James and Catherine produced all of their eight children while living in Bendigo, starting in 1868. Their children, in order, were Mary, Hannah, Barbara, Margaret, John, Annie, Daniel and Cornelius. Of the eight children, Hannah, Barbara, Margaret and John died in early infancy. The last born, Cornelius, is my grandfather. James and Catherine moved to the Melbourne suburb of Fitzroy in 1884. James then decided to try his hand at farming. He purchased a block on the rich Upper Yarra river flats, about half way between the towns of Wesburn and Yarra Junction. Luck was not on their side. The block that he purchased had been affected by a flood of sour silt from a hydraulic mine in the nearby mountains. I imagine that they would have had to drain the property to make it usable. They had great difficulty establishing an income. And James was no longer a young man. Adding to their woes Australia was moving into one of its worst economic recessions. It is at this point I will pick up the amazing life of Cornelius Crowley. Some accounts come directly from my grandfather and some come from family members. Some stories come from eye-witnesses. He was 69 years old when I was born and I was 20 years old when he died, aged 88. His robust good health was undermined by an accident. I was fortunate to spend a lot of my childhood in his company.

Cornelius (Con) Crowley (1882-1971)

Who was the grandfather I remember?

My grandfather was a larger-than-life character. He was in his 70's when I was old enough to remember him. He had a dignified, strong, handsome face that exuded good humour. His eyes were dark brown, almost black and he didn't wear spectacles. He had a straight back, a barrel chest, a huge pair of hands and a full head of hair. In old age he stood about 5ft 10 (5ft 11 as a young man). He exuded strength and worked as a labourer well into his seventies. He had the bearing of a leader of men. He showed no signs of being worn-out. Every day he dressed in white shirt, tie, sleeveless jumper, suit jacket, suit pants and hat. My sister and I sometimes accompanied him when he led the house-cow down the main street. He was greeted enthusiastically by locals and he never failed to lift his hat to every lady he passed. He liked to be visited by his grandchildren and would often initiate a game or a walk. He was interested in ideas. During his lifetime he had gone from the days of the "horse and buggy" to the "Space Age" and he couldn't wait for the next surprise. You could say he had "a powerful lust for life".

Dingos

In 1891, James was aged 55 and Con was aged 9 years. The family were desperately poor and were in danger of losing their farm. Con was pulled out of school and sent to work. His father arranged for Con to work as a shepherd. The sheep-run was located near McVeigh's pub, about 20 kilometres upstream. It was very close to the headwaters of the Yarra river. The surrounding mountains soar to over 4000 feet. The area is nowadays submerged under the Upper Yarra Dam. Back in 1891 this was where civilisation ended. From this point on there were hundreds of kilometres of unbroken forest and in this forest lived packs of Alpine dingos. The area is still like this today and residents who live close to the dam can sometimes, on a still night, hear the hair-raising howls of the dingos. Con was taken to a hut on the remote sheep run, given food to last one week, a shot gun and a box of cartridges. He was left alone until his father made the next delivery of food, a week later. Nine-year-old Con was expected to yard the sheep before sundown and fight off the dingos at night. A dingo is capable of pulling down a child and killing them. The experience, for Con, must have been terrifying. When he recounted this story to me, the only thing he regretted about his experience was that it put an end to his schooling and left him unable to read. It also plunged Con into the world of men. Surprisingly, he developed a long-term affection for McVeigh's and turned up there regularly until it disappeared under the waters of the Upper Yarra Dam.

Annie's death

On May 13, 1899, his sister Annie, aged 22, died. Con was 17 years of age. The circumstances of her death are shrouded in mystery. That so little is known, is suggestive of an unpleasant scenario. The old people were very good at hiding things that they didn't want discussed. Although four of his siblings were already deceased, this was Con's first experience of family tragedy.

Carrying his swag

At around the time of Annie's death, Con started travelling. This became his way of life for the next five-or-so years. He would set out for a district where he could expect to find work. Along the way he would hear of other places where workers were needed. He could walk, ride a bike or, if he was heading for a bigger town, catch a train. He recounted an experience where he had acquired a bicycle and was travelling on a sandy, dirt road. The road had endless ripple-ruts. He said that by the time he reached his destination his testicles were so bruised that they had turned black. He said that they remained black for days and that he was greatly relieved when they recovered. On another occasion he was working along the Snowy River when he was invited to play in a local cricket match. He was very proud that he scored 100 runs. It was a tough and dangerous life. Workers were often injured or killed doing farm work and bush (forest) work. Disputes were settled with fists. There were always people waiting to prey on others. It was the world of men. Con seems to have thrived in this domain. His travels took him all over the State of Victoria and across the sea to the island state of Tasmania. For the rest of his life, Con travelled whenever he could.

Dan's Death

In 1903, at age 25, Dan Crowley was a strong, handsome and well-liked young man. He had been the mainstay of the family in tough times. Unlike his younger brother, he stayed close to home. At the time disaster struck, Dan was working on Anderson's chute. The chute went straight up the face of

the 4,500 ft tall Mt Donna Buang. In those times there were usually no roads into timber-felling areas. Instead, the timber operator would construct a timber tramline into his patch of forest. The tramline was packed underneath with split timber and then WOODEN rails were NAILED on top. At the high end of the tramline two bogeys were loaded with a huge log cut out of a 250 ft tall, Mountain Ash. The fresh-cut hardwood logs were enormously heavy. The load was then lowered down the mountain by a wire rope attached to a steam winch. Photos of Anderson's chute show logs descending the tramline at incredibly steep angles. What could possibly go wrong? To make it even more dangerous, workmen at the high end of the chute, would ride down on top of the last log of the day, so as to avoid a long and difficult walk down the mountain. On the day he was killed, Dan was riding the log. The steam winch brake failed and the load took-off. Dan was thrown off and struck his head. Still alive, Dan was taken to the Alpine Retreat hotel in Warburton. Several hours later a doctor pronounced him dead. The Coroner's Inquest records the distress of the witnesses.

At the time of Dan's death, Con was travelling in Tasmania and was incommunicado. When Con travelled back to Melbourne, he was standing on Flinders Street station when an acquaintance from home, noticed him. The man stepped forward and offered Con his condolences. Con was shocked and became distraught. The man was so worried by Con's condition that he abandoned his train trip and stayed with Con overnight. The two of them returned to the Yarra Valley the following day.

Bare Knuckle

In the period when Con was a young man, Australia was a very violent place. An old-timer and contemporary of Con, Jim McGinn, related this anecdote to my father. "On Saturday nights when the grog started to talk and rivalries bristled, men would spill out of the Wesburn pub and fight. If you didn't like the fight at the school corner, you could go and watch the fight at the War Memorial." Any man (or boy) who refused to fight was regarded as a coward and slipped to the bottom of the pecking order. Con once told me that a boyhood rival of his, who he could always defeat, left the district only to return as a dangerous, trained boxer. It could be the reason that Con took up boxing. Whatever the reason, Con hooked up with a trainer called Alan McFayden. When I was about 5 years old, I can remember Alan visiting at my grandfather's house. He was older than Con, tall, thin and frail looking. My grandfather liked his company. My grandmother did not. I later discovered a reference to Alan in a bunch of old letters circa 1916. It recorded Con's brother-in-law expressing disgust at news that Alan had knocked Con down. When Con developed into a strong and skilful boxer, he and Alan joined the touring, bare knuckle, prize fighting circuit. The circuit was well organised with a gold watch and a championship belt for each weight division champion. I suspect that the circuit followed the regional agricultural shows, as these drew big crowds from far and wide. The circuit definitely attracted big betting rings and all the shenanigans that goes with it. I suspect that this is where Con developed some of his theatrical flair (more on this later). Con was 5 ft 11 inches tall, with a barrel chest, and a huge pair of hands. He was one of those men that looked bigger when he stripped down. He fought as a middle weight. On the dining-room wall at the "old house", were two photos of Con, dressed in fighting kit and wearing the Championship belt. I assume that he won the title on two different occasions. As an old man, my grandfather had a straight nose, all his teeth, normal ears and no scar tissue on his face. I can only conclude that his fights were short and ended badly for his opponents. When my father sparred with him (he taught all six sons to fight) he was amazed at how strong his father was. In the Upper Yarra, men treated Con with respect.

Cricket

Con liked playing cricket. I have already mentioned his century, batting on the Snowy River. He and like-minded sportsmen were greatly restricted by a law forbidding the playing of sport on Sundays. Workers in the timber industry finished work at midday on a Saturday. By the time they walked out of the mountains, the day was over. Con and his fellow gladiators plotted a way around this problem. On Sunday, after mass, they travelled out to McMahon's Creek, about 15 kilometres towards McVeigh's and well away from the Warburton Police Station. Here, there was a pub and a creek-flat big enough to use as a cricket ground. Matches were organized, battles fought, and a great time was had by all. That is, until the local policeman got suspicious. Con and his fellow sportsmen were arrested and charged. They were all found guilty and fined.

Literate at last

Not long after Dan's death Con started stepping out with Mary Morris. Mary was working as a Sewing Mistress. This meant that she helped the primary school Head Master to teach the infant grades. When they married, Con asked Mary to teach him to read. It must have been humiliating to do this but clearly, it was far more humiliating to be illiterate. Con succeeded famously. One of his most prized possessions was an early addition of the poems of Robbie Burns. From time to time Mary may have regretted teaching her husband to read, because one of his favourite reads was the horse racing form guide.

Graffiti and the Shotgun

One day a local Policeman was walking down the road on his way to shoot rabbits. He needed to relieve himself, so he propped his shotgun against a tree and stepped into the scrub. An in-law of the Crowley's stepped out of the bush on the other side of the road and made the shotgun his own. It was always a matter of great mirth among Con's sons when one of them would announce that they were going up to uncle Tony's to borrow the Policeman's gun and go shooting.

In another development Con received a visit from the local policeman. He was investigating the defacing of a billboard advertising the Warburton Chalet. Some wag had painted the words "the Chalet is a brotholl" across the sign. Con triumphantly informed the policeman that it could not have been one of his sons because "no son of mine would spell brothel with two L's". Although these incidents were humorous, Con had no time for dishonest people.

A grocer and a timber strike

When Con married Mary Morris on May 1st, 1911, they went to live on his father's farm. Mary loved the location and farm life but Con had bigger ideas. Around 1922 they moved from the farm to set up a Grocery business in the main street of Wesburn. Con was about 40 years old at this time. My father said that he had been born in the front room of the new house, attached to the shop, in 1923. I'm not sure how the businesses at Wesburn unfolded. I know that the first one was a grocery and that a later one was a butcher's shop and slaughter yard. There may have been a third business that combined the grocery and the butcher's shop. I understand that all these businesses operated out of "old house" that my sister and I spent so much time in. The "old house" had 5 acres at the rear, just enough for a house cow, a potato patch and chooks. When my father was small, they also raised a couple of pigs each year. Con hired a hall next to the Wesburn pub and ran a gymnasium and billiard

parlour. His first venture, the Grocery, seemed to do well. He had customers at the bush sawmills as well as townsfolk. His forest customers required him to take a pack horse up into the mountains to make deliveries. His 3rd son, William (called "Will" inside the family but known as "Bill" to others), would sometimes do the day-long trek. Will told me that the house-wives in those lonely forest locations were disappointed when he made the delivery because they had been looking forward to having his father regaling them with news, jokes, stories and the like.

Then disaster struck. The timber workers went on strike. You couldn't blame them. It was low paid, dangerous, unpleasant work. Con was sympathetic to the strikers. He'd done this work himself. Unfortunately, the strikers made up a big portion of his customers. As the strike dragged on, many of the families had to ask for credit. Con refused to see families go hungry and continued to feed them. His business went bankrupt. Many people (including my father) admired Con for his stand. At a later date (probably when the bankruptcy expired) Con and Mary ran a butcher's shop. Animals were slaughtered in the paddock behind the house. The slaughtermen were blamed for Con's 4th child, Neil, developing an embarrassing swearing problem. No one was game to blame Con!

The Race Track

Con loved punting on racehorses. Any win was welcome in lean times. He also loved an outing and an "occasion". Flemington (home of the Melbourne Cup) and Caulfield (home of the Caulfield Cup) were his favourite tracks. In the 1950's and 1960's Con's 3rd son Will, was rising through the ranks of the Victoria Police Force. As a detective, he was encouraged to go to Flemington to see which criminals were laying big bets. This often identified who had been involved in a recent bank robbery. Will, told this story. He said, "If I spotted my father before he spotted me, I would avoid him. You know that he mostly backed favourites. When his horse ran poorly, Dad knew the race was rigged. He would take off his hat and throw it on the ground. He would jump up and down on it, swearing and giving a commentary on the parentage of the jockey and the connections. A crowd would gather around." Will continued, "A man in my position couldn't afford to be associated with a man behaving like that. It could ruin my career". It wasn't all bad. My father, Brian, recounted the time when he was a boy in the 1920's. "Dad got a hot tip on a big race and headed for Flemington. The horse ran home at 100-1. Dad came home a few days later driving a brand-new car." Back then only rich people could afford a car.

The Tivoli

Whenever he could, Con took in a show at the Tivoli theatre. He liked the chorus lines of dancing girls and he liked the comics. Con had a good memory and committed many of the best jokes and routines to memory. When he returned home to the Yarra Valley, he would regale workmates and friends with them. People always seemed keen to stop and chat to him.

First Day on the job (MMBW)

Sometime, not long after the second world war, Con got a job with the Melbourne Metropolitan Board of Works. The "Board" as it was known, built dams and maintained infrastructure for Melbourne's water supply. It was one of the biggest employers in the Upper Yarra Valley. The pay was reasonable and it was a life-long job. Con was very pleased. On his first day, Con and a crew of men were put to work maintaining the aqueduct. When the foreman finished giving his instructions, he turned to Con and said, "hurry up you silly old bugger". Con would tolerate disrespect from no man. He snatched the foreman off his feet and pitched him into the aqueduct. The foreman couldn't swim. Con jumped in and rescued him. Con's first day on the "Board" was also his last.

Unsympathetic sons

One sunny day, long ago, so my father says, the family were lazing about in the yard. Con had unfolded a deck chair and was leaning back and relaxing. As he lazed, he ran his thumbs up and down the rails of the deck chair. The rear strut suddenly slipped. The chair collapsed. Con's thumbs were jammed. Con's weight kept them jammed. The pain was intolerable. Con swore a blue streak. His sons rushed to his aid, lifted him up, and freed him. They then laughed till their sides hurt. Con withdrew muttering profanities and nursing his bruised thumbs and bruised pride.

Pub Fights

Australian pubs have always been dangerous places. The worst ones were nick-named "blood houses". Con had a reputation and there were plenty of up-and-comers who could improve their position in the pecking order by knocking him down. The Yarra Valley was chocked-full of strong young labourers and bush workers. My father related a story to me, that had been told to him by a contemporary of Con's, and who had witnessed the incident. The incident took place while Con was still a young man. Out at McVeigh's (the pub at the end of civilisation) two Tasmanians had appeared. They were big and nasty. They took to standing-over patrons and extorting free drinks. Then Con turned up. When the Tasmanians tried to intimidate him, he punched one on the jaw and one in the guts. The two men hit the floor. The Tasmanians shouldered their swags and left.

Con had a strict rule that he only had two beers per visit to any pub. He couldn't afford to be caught at a disadvantage. I was talking to an old mate of Con's one day and he related another incident. He said a drinker at the Wesburn pub, picked a fight with Con. They were standing at the bar. The man took a swing at Con, right then and there. Con promptly knocked the man senseless. Con then turned his eyes to the ceiling and, in a loud voice, prayed this prayer. "Lord, grant this man the strength to rise-up and fight on". The Lord didn't and the man couldn't.

Don't annoy Mary "behind every great man is an even greater woman"

Mary Crowley ne Morris (1883-1976) died aged 92

Mary's kitchen had been built on to the side of the "old house". The original weather board house looked to be circa 1910. The kitchen had no stumps, just bearers resting on the ground. The floor was only about 2 inches above ground level. The outside-door was at one end of the room and the

wood stove was right next to it. Next to the stove was a disused open fire that had a chain dropping down from inside the chimney. It had been used for cooking before the stove was installed. Sometimes the chooks would run into the kitchen and have to be chased out. The front of the stove's fire-box was always open, causing the room to be smokey. Wood hung out of the front of it (despite having a husband, six sons and a heap of grandsons, nobody bothered to cut the fire wood to the right length). A kettle was constantly on the boil and sometime, a big kerosene tin of boiling water sat next to it. The tin supplied water to a galvanised iron tub that was used for washing the clothes. She carried her kitchen water from a tap outside the back door. The small elongated kitchen contained a long table, chairs, a dresser and a sofa. For most of my childhood, they had no refrigerator and used a meat safe instead. She often had a crowd of eight or more people milling in her kitchen. From time to time we could hear possums thumping about in the ceiling. A bucket of milk stood at the end of the table forming its yellow skin. At some point in her day, Mary would peel off the skin and make butter (the richest butter I ever tasted). Every morning she rose at 5am and milked the house cow. The house had no electricity until the 1950's.

Mary Morris came from a big family. She was tall for her times and had strong, good looks. She and Con made a handsome couple. Mary had five sisters and four brothers. In order, they were Jane(Ginny), Teresa(Sis) John(Jack) Mary, Josephine(Josie) Elsie, George, Desmond(Des), William (Will) and Dora. The Morris sisters were scary. They didn't need to be liberated, they were born liberated. At least two of them were involved in incidents where they intimidated men. In one incident a sister horse-whipped her unfaithful husband and his girlfriend. Another sister drove the local Policeman out of her yard with a stock whip. The brothers were no shrinking violets either. Mary and Con had an adversarial relationship, fiercely loyal and, at the same time, fiercely independent. This made for a volatile and entertaining household. Mary used a full array of strategies to have her way. When dealing with her six adult sons she would remind them that she could die at any moment and asked them how they could deny her this last wish. If all else failed, she wept at them. They were powerless, and gave in every time.

During World War 11, Daniel (Mick), Jack and Neil enlisted. Brian, my father, wanted to, but he needed a parent to sign him in. Mary was having none of it. Her two brothers, Will and Des, had been killed in action in World War 1 and she never stopped mourning them. Brian finally convinced Con to sign him in. They didn't tell Mary. After the signing, Con didn't return home for three days, such was the storm that awaited him. Jack went to the Middle East where he helped inflict Hitler's first defeat. The four brothers then went up to repel the Japanese. It's hard to imagine Mary's anxiety during the War years. Remarkably, all four brothers made it back alive. Had my father been killed, Mary would never have forgiven her husband.

Mary was a pious Catholic. The Wesburn church adjoined the Crowley property. She cleaned and maintained the little wooden church, washed the vestments and never missed Mass. She offered her sons as altar boys. Clearly her faith was a mainstay in her daily life. Mary's last born, Jim, was a sickly child. He was cursed with bouts of pneumonia and came close to death more than once. During his worst bout, the doctor was standing at the bedside. He declared that if little Jimmy survived the next few minutes, he would probably live. Mary turned her face to the ceiling and said, "if you take Jimmy, I'll never set foot in a church again". The Lord erred on the side of caution and pulled little Jimmy through. Sickly little Jimmy grew up to become a big, rough, tough, professional footballer. Some of his opponents probably wished the Lord had made a different decision!

“Never spoil a good story by sticking to the facts”.... Con Crowley

One day I was sitting in the kitchen of the old house. My grandmother had just served Con a cup of tea. He was recounting some exciting event and was warming to the task. As he waxed lyrical, he got off the sofa, walked to the stove and put his cup and saucer on the hob. Con must have been distracted because he actually put his cup and saucer on the top of the stove. He talked on as he walked about the kitchen. Just as he was reaching the climax, Mary interrupted him and contradicted a critical fact. Con was upset. “Of course, you know everything”, he spluttered. With his climax ruined, he strode to the stove and picked up his cup and saucer. He let out a roar, and ringing his burnt fingers, shouted “you’d Jonah Christ off the cross”. Grandma flew at him shouting “don’t you dare blaspheme in my house”. Con retreated out the door and into the yard. For us kids, this was more entertaining than TV!

Carrying the plate and taking round the hat

Con was a Catholic by tribe and supported his wife in her devotion. As in keeping with his “reputation” Con took on the job of “taking round the plate” during Mass. He liked to lead. We kids felt proud as we watched him move about the congregation. The job fitted in with another of his self-appointed duties. He liked to “take around the hat”. I once encountered a man who had benefited from Con’s hat. He was a small man near retiring age and stood barely 5ft tall. This fellow had been an athlete in his youth and had entered the Wesburn Gift, a long-distance running race. Being a professional race, it attracted high quality runners. One such runner was a class above all the other entrants. Our little local decided his only hope was to sprint right from the start. His strategy worked a treat. He was beaten on the line in his last stride. The locals were thrilled. Con decided to honour this brave effort by taking around the hat. The little man said that he walked away with more money than the winner. Con Crowley’s hat retained a warm place in his heart.

Education

Con had seven children. In order, they were Catherine (Elsie), Daniel (Mick), John (Jack), William (Will or Bill), Cornelius (Neil), Brian (Barney or Bill) and James (Jim). There were also two still-born. Con and Mary were determined to educate their children to the highest possible level. They saw this as the only sure way of securing their futures. In those times, primary schools went to what is now, the second year of high school. Every little town had its primary school but secondary schools were few and far between. Some secondary schools did not educate up to university entrance. Most working-class children finished their schooling at the end of primary school. To go further you had to win a scholarship or have money.

Con and Mary encouraged their children to compete with each other for scholastic honours. Con took the role of School Committee president and made it clear to his sons that he would not be happy unless they were top of their year. His sons dutifully met their father’s expectations. My father missed only one day in the entire eight years of primary schooling. When they entered high school, they had to make a round trip of 67 kilometres, by steam train, each day, to Lilydale. Most of the boys had to board in Melbourne to finish their secondary schooling. They then enrolled in one of Melbourne’s universities or colleges. By the time my father came along, he could finish high school at Box Hill. This required a daily round trip journey of about 118 kilometres.

When my father was starting school, the Great Depression struck. Times were grim for the next 5 or 6 years. Con found himself with no income. Mick was summoned home to help support the family. Con was out of work for 2 years straight. During those two years, my father said that Con got up early every morning to go in search of work. He never gave up or lost heart. The family lived on the brink of disaster. Con and Mary refused to abandon their goal. They scrimped and saved and kept their children at school. The only exceptions were Will and Elsie. Will left school and went to work as a bush worker. His first job required him to take the place of a man that was killed on the job. Elsie was regarded as being as clever as any of her brothers but she was expected to marry and become a house-wife. Mick qualified as a refrigeration engineer. He also collected exotic vintage cars. Inside the family, he was regarded as a genius. Jack joined the PMG (later to become Telstra) and rose to a high level. He collected watches and clocks and small machines. Some are on display in the Melbourne museum. Will left forest work after the horrendous 1939 bushfires nearly claimed his life. During the war he joined Victoria Police. He became the highest achiever in the family. Australia-wide, he could lay claim to being the cleverest, (Interpol adopted his method), most feared (the worst gangsters and corrupt police came to grief at his hands) and most trusted policeman (other elite policemen turned to him for help). He also became an all breeds dog judge, judging the top dog shows world-wide. It would take a whole book to detail his amazing achievements. Neil became an economist, helping plan the post war recovery, a real estate developer and a ruby miner. Brian trained as a primary school teacher and served as a Principal. He was a leftist activist, was heavily involved in the Australian Labor Party, was a novelist, book collector and prolific letter writer. Jim trained as a primary school teacher and taught all over the state of Victoria. He was also a professional footballer in an era when very few footballers were paid. He was a top-quality shooter and fisherman, a woodturner and he collected clocks. Jim told me that he hated studying and that he would have been much happier being a carpenter. None-the-less, it's fair to say that Con and Mary succeeded famously and against all the odds.

A daughter has the last word

One day I was visiting my aunt Elsie, Con's eldest child. I turned the conversation to the subject of her father. She stopped what she was doing and stared into the distance, then she said, "they don't make men like that anymore!"