Panel Discussion: **Our Stories - Our History.**

'Personal Stories and unwitting lessons in history' Angela Goode, HTSA regional ambassador

Thursday, November 28, 2024.

Leeches in a Waterhole

For this session I will tell you a few of my stories about this part of South Australia that's been my home for 35 years. This region has influenced and shaped me since my first visit as a child a very long time ago.

I am a writer and I live half way up a volcano here in Mount Gambier. But until a few years ago I was a farmer.
My view of the Limestone Coast is clearly very different from Uncle Ken Jones' indigenous experiences and perspective.
My story is that of a settler, an outsider with a culture shaped by city life. With outsider's eyes and much to learn. I came as a skater over the landscape, rather than cradled within it as were Ken's people.
This is a region of beauty, regarded as a land of plenty that's green and productive. Some might say it is just too beautiful for its own good - because it is not all sweetness and light. Droughts still happen. And the horrendous fires of Ash Wednesday '83 and others since emphasise how powerless humans are when nature rages. Its social history too is complex and sometimes violent.

So come with me on a journey through the Limestone Coast to visit three farms from different times of my history - each contributing to my personal getting of wisdom about this region. And taking me deeper into its history - beyond surface beauty and scars

It was 1956 when I first went to what was then known as the 'South-East' - said with a certain amount of reverence. There was a pioneering aura about this destination. My intrepid mother drove the grey Austin A40 from safe sensible Kensington Gardens to an untamed landscape on skinny bumpy roads with four fighting children in the back seat, fritz and sauce sandwiches and me yelling to stop for yet another car-sick chunder.

But that was a luxury trip compared with what the first white settlers in the 1840s to this region experienced. Mostly Scots, pushing from the east and travelling on foot and with bullock wagons and large flocks of sheep.They took up land along the Victorian border….. grasslands and big timber country from the south and up to Padthaway. Women wore cumbersome huge dresses and lived in tents. Trees were chopped down and sawn by hand. We in our shorts and with the car windows down blowing our hair had it easy.

We landed on Dan and Ann, AMP settlers on their new block near Marcollat in the mid south east. Fresh from world war 2, Dan was taking on wild country, scrub and snakes with soldiery zeal.

Even as a child, you could feel there was something different in this place with its sand and searing heat, made worse by cooking done on a wood stove. There was a spirit of optimism, which I only recognise now. As kids we noticed that the adults were always laughing and bunching together talking earnestly. There was no electricity, nor mains water. So we didn't have showers, just swam in the swamp. But adults lit the chip heater and dashed in and out because rain water was scarce. Horses were used to muster sheep. They didn't have motor bikes. Trace elements were yet to be introduced. We stood and watched the scrub and tall trees collapsing as huge anchor chains were dragged between two crawler tractors. I didn't like seeing that but everyone else was excited.

The property was called Bimbimbi. We used to say the name enjoying its alliteration. We would swim in a waterhole surrounded by enormous gums and saplings growing in its centre. It was slimy and wonderful and full of sticks, but deliciously cool. Suddenly we would feel things sticking on our skin. And we would race to our mothers screaming. Big black slimy creatures had clamped themselves onto our arms, legs and back. Our horrible mothers would laugh and put salt on them. And send us back into the water. No helicopter parents in those days. We heard the word Billabong for the first time. We knew nothing about aboriginal people who would have enjoyed that same waterhole and whose blood also was sucked by the relatives of those leeches.

They were simple times. Windlights for power, and generators that activated at night if some stupid city kid turned on a light switch to go for a wee. And got yelled at for wasting diesel. We were fascinated by the shining guts of the sheep Dan slaughtered for our meals. I don't think we ate vegetables because there was no garden. We just had bread made by hand.

This was a time for me of discovery, of being in awe at a life so different to ours in the city and with people whom I realise now had no experience as farmers but who were prepared to toil and learn through trial and error. Lots of errors. My first immersion, a baptism perhaps, told this little kid that there were wondrous discoveries down this way if she could put up with carsickness. And leeches.

Let's skip forward to Padthaway in 1981 with a grown woman who had mustered buffalo in the Territory, cooked for shearers in WA, trained horses and had been an Advertiser journalist who rode a bike from Norwood, and who sometimes after night shift was a little wobbly on her wheels after teacups of rough home-made red wine from the magnificent italians at the BBQ Inn in Hindley Street.

I had married a cattleman and become a farmer.

Except women weren't called farmers then. For a journalist used to doing the same as men, and involved with the women's lib movement of my student days in the 60s and 70s, I stepped into another era where I was ashamed of my ineptitude at the womanly arts. I came from front page Advertiser stories to learning to bring a plate and putting something edible on it. It was lucky I knew how to cook chops.

My home was Nyroca station, also a former soldier settler property. But by this time well developed, productive with modern fertilizers and livestock technology.

There I began 40 years of farming - and writing about the issues and adventures of this complex landscape and its resilient, resourceful people.

I took my city horse and city border collie with me and in the winter of 1981, all we saw was water. Floodwater stretched across paddocks to the horizon. Calves swam, and their mothers held their breath to grab at submerged grass. Work had to be done on horses and my city horse was puffed and unfit. And got his foot caught in a gate and put me under water too. Thankfully, without leeches. The noise of horses and cattle marching through deep water made conversation impossible but I could still hear laughter.

Drains would solve flooding. Debates raged. The digging began. This land was too productive to be drowned.

But the next year, rain did not fall. Animals got thin. Cows sold for as little as $10 at market. Sheep could be picked up for a dollar. This was nothing to do with the drains. Just the weather. Fickle, unreliable. Something you had to work with.

I learnt that being subservient to the weather was my new normal. Women's lib was another country.

My mission was to write for the Advertiser's city audience about a life which few of them knew. About the mail arriving three days a week in a canvas bag and left in a dog kennel type construction at the front gate. About being required to play district tennis, and no excuses even if you were hopeless.

I was absorbed into the rhythms of the land. And incorporated into its depths and mysteries. I loved the way the sun made the red gums glow each summer evening. I didn't like being bitten by a tiger snake though. Luckily they are unco-ordinated creatures and the venom didn't go in.

I wrote also about changes happening to the land.

With a baby that wouldn't sleep, I often drove around the Padthaway Valley at midnight where I saw massive pyres of ancient redgums. Vineyards were going in. The water beneath was pure and plentiful we heard. But others warned that the trees kept the water table down and salinity would rise. It's progress I was told. Wine markets of the world are insatiable. But salinity rose and wine lakes formed.

The land I now loved was being violated. But love, as we know, must be accommodating - until alarm bells loudly ring.

The outsider in me was horrified when I heard at a field day in 1983 that DDT was still widely used. Scientist Rachel Carson had written in 1962 an earth-shattering book called Silent Spring. It told of the damage DDT, a pernicious insecticide, was causing to beneficial insect population and humans. The US banned DDT in 1972. But in 1983 South-east farmers were using it with gay abandon to control red-legged earth mite amongst other pests. Some tipped DDT into their irrigation bores so it could spread easily over their paddocks. I wrote a fierce column. The government was embarrassed. It still took four years, until 1987, for DDT to be banned in Australia. Of course, farming needs chemicals. The land and its wildlife and humans need care too.

What makes farming land in the Limestone Coast so valuable is our exceptional underground water. Huge aquifers stretch throughout the region. I am sure Ian Lewis will talk more of those. They are the envy of Victorians over the border.

Windmills were intrinsic to life at Nyroca. They creaked and groaned as their huge blades turned and delivered underground water to troughs and tanks. When the wind stopped for its

autumn break, cattle and sheep would bellow and bleat. In the 1980s, we were bemused to hear that wind-power could provide significant amounts of electricity. After all, we only knew of windlites which generated an unreliable flicker to power perhaps a radio and little else. Huge pylons were built across the land to carry cables between the states. We negotiated to have them further from our house. And now marvel at the white clustered mills of self-sufficiency. Those wild winds that hit our coast had been harnessed. And solar pumps now lift stock water.

I revelled in being self-sufficient too. I bottled fruit and made jam. Milked a cow. Made butter and icecream. Grew vegetables.

That all stood for nothing though when in February 1983, Ash Wednesday's horrific fires ripped away 28 lives, hundreds of thousands of animals, thousands of houses, sheds, and tonnes of equipment. Men disappeared from their farms in unaffected areas for days to shoot livestock and bury them, returning home black like coal miners. Communities supported each other but many people never recovered. A kind of shock lay heavily over the land. And with each subsequent bushfire, we shuddered at our powerlessness. For the bush and trees and grasses are what we live amongst and they will always be there.

Padthaway life honed my pen. I learned the land was more complicated and its issues were more layered than any of the aquifers and limestone and clays beneath.

The romantic bride was taught lessons and saw that the land needed to be protected, but also that it could turn savage.

And so to January, 1992 and our final farm. This time my Getting of Wisdom came from a mysterious landscape that was once under the sea.

We moved to Field of Mars, east of Naracoorte, at Hynam. Our own place at last. The house was built of 2 million year old limestone. Fossils were in road rubble.

The land had caves beneath and when a wet winter filled our swampy paddock a drainage bore sent up geysers when the barometric pressure changed. The horses we were riding nearly exploded with terror. The rumble of water crashing into the caves beneath made the house walls shake.

This was a farm linked closely with those first early Scottish settlers who arrived in the 1840s after their trek with sheep from Sydney and Port Philip Bay. Seeking wealth and success like

so many of their fellow expatriates were Adam Smith and William Brown. At Hynam, Adam Smith made his mark as a revered wool grower amassing a great fortune and built himself a fine house.
However in 1908, again to increase population in rural areas as it had with the soldier-settler schemes, the government acquired Smith's 41,000 acre run and divided it into 1000-acre blocks under the Closer Settlement scheme. Field of Mars was one of these subdivisions.

As is common with agricultural products, there are cycles of boom and bust. The wool industry crashed in 1991 when the wool floor price was removed. Wool growers were in despair. Vines for grape growing were seen as the replacement industry. Blue gums also, driven by managed investment schemes and the lure of tax deductions for city investors. Gluts and scarcity drive desperate changes. We had stud cattle at Field of Mars, but on another block we ran merino wethers. Wool was virtually worthless. Huge numbers of sheep were shot and pushed into pits for burial. I did a course and became a woolclasser to see off the final shearings before we too quit our sheep. Our girls tennis group was disbanded as time off was cancelled to plant vines, drive tractors, muster and work in yards. Having taken on the work of farm-hands, some with their own teams of dogs, proficient with farm machinery and at driving trucks, women on the land refused to any longer be called farmers' wives. They were farmers.
This was a time of change. Women's liberation had taken twenty years to reach the bush from the cities.
Whether it was women having more say on their farms, I am not sure, but in the nineties, the push was intense and backed by governments to plant more trees and revegetate the land. Field of Mars had ancient buloke trees throughout its paddocks and along a track on the boundary. Each January, a flock of 25 or so critically endangered red tails would feed on them. We planted about 2000 bulokes to ensure food for their future. Uncle Ken visited and suggested scrub varieties to add to the redgum tree lines. Slowly the wind speed across paddocks reduced and bird numbers and varieties increased.
We also had a pair of bush stone curlews living in a bit of regrown bush in front of the house. We shot foxes to protect them and fenced their site with electric wires. Over the years nine babies were born.
One paddock adjoining a watercourse and the Dyne Swamp was called Canoe Tree. It had in it a large tree scarred from where its bark was peeled off to make a canoe. An elder from Bordertown told of the creeks flowing and trade being done with tribes meeting in

Naracoorte. We felt a sort of reverence for this paddock and its history and planted even more trees. We celebrated birthdays at barbecues beside our paddocks' other ancient trees, gnarled and hollowed and growing on their sides and imagined the indigenous gatherings they hosted well before Adam Smith's sheep were there.

One afternoon, the quiet was punctured by the shriek of the last South East bluebird train rushing through to Adelaide. It was 1995 and after 114 years of carting wheat, cattle, sheep, wool and schoolkids to and from boarding school, the train line was closed.

In Hynam, over from the train station with its sign hanging at an angle and the paint peeling, there was an abandoned cemetery. It stood in a paddock near a shearing shed and across the road from Adam Smith's homestead. Ancient pine trees had fallen and smashed the walls and bent the gates. Inside there were three visible burial plots. Most imposing was the column of grey granite of Adam and Jane Smith. A battered one lying in the grass from 1845 interested me most. Under the lichen and moss we could make out the name William Brown.
A group of keen locals was formed. We won grants to remove the pine trees, and repair the walls, and the headstones, and search for more graves. We had heard the story of four children poisoned by mushrooms gathered while their father cut wood. Aged 7, 5, 3 and 18 months, their graves were discovered using ground penetrating radar.
But that earliest grave of William Brown linked us with the disturbing side of aboriginal history. Brown, a single man, was reported to have hung around the wurlies of a group of Martadjali people. There were altercations. Sheep were stolen, and Brown was killed. A group of men with pistols rode in from Naracoorte and retaliated by killing many aboriginal people at Mount Light, south of Hynam.
We felt a deep sense of shame. And discomfort. Those men on horses might have been locals' ancestors.

We honoured the stories revealed by this small cemetery with plaques erected on redgum posts made possible through a grant from the History Trust of SA. The Cemetery plans to be part of the History Festival next year. It is well worth a visit.

I have evolved far since those leeches in the waterhole. I opened my heart to the land and it embraced me and shared its stories. My observations and experiences, despite their seeming

inconsequence at the time, are unwitting contributions to the region's rich and complex history.

I thank the History Council of SA and the History Trust of SA for the opportunity to participate in this discussion of the Limestone Coast's history.