

Memories

I remember when the only colour discussed in Lightning Ridge was the colour of the opal somebody found; the only race issues we then had were about who ran the fastest. Marko Zagar

Memories of growing up in Lightning Ridge

By Marjan Zagar

In 1968 we moved to Lightning Ridge and my parents built a house next to the school. I was four. Next to our house was a drain where sometimes during floods the yabbies would be washed down and I would catch them. I used to stick my finger in the hole and pull the yabby out until one time there was a big one and it cut my finger. I loved it when it rained so I could walk and play in the mud.

I liked living next to the school so I could go home during lunchtime. We used to have plots to grow vegetables at school. I got Brussels sprouts. Very boring I thought when other kids were growing radishes and beans. I remember stealing other people's radishes and beans.

I remember times when we went to Glengarry to mine for opals. On the trip home we used to stop in Cumbora to have an ice cream. It was so special that ice cream. Marko and I would try to make it last as long as we could while driving home.

We would sometimes stay overnight in Glengarry and sleep on a trailer. My brother and I would go into the mine and dig with dad. Once we stumbled on a patch of opal. I remember when we made a long corridor but there was no trace of opal. Dad gave up and went up to switch off the compressor. In the meantime mum lifted the jack hammer to see how heavy it was. She pressed it against the side of the corridor and just inches under the surface was a nice patch of opal. It was worth a few thousand dollars. We drove another corridor in that direction but there was just that one spot.

Life at Lightning Ridge was very laid back and safe. I would often be gone for hours playing with my friend Emil. We would wander all around LR. There was never any fear of bad people just dogs that were roaming loose. One thing that we all learned in LR as children is that if we wanted entertainment we would have to use our imaginations and improvise. Today there is entertainment provided for children but nothing can compare to what fun we organised.

Everything was a hand-me-down back then. I was so happy when I got my first bike (hand-me-down). There are millions of burs in Lightning Ridge and we were forever fixing the tires. There were no tar roads and the cathead burs were thick.

We would have BBQ's all the time. I remember we would buy a cow or a sheep from the farmer. We had a bowling alley on the block and friends would come for BBQ and to play bocce which is a European kind of bowling. When the bowling alley was being built we went to gather termite mounds in the bush and use them as the base for the alley. The soil was fine and when levelled, screened, watered, salted and compacted with a roller you would only have to drop the ball gently and it would glide across the surface to the other side of the alley.

There were many exciting arguments about the rules of the game and about measuring how close the ball is to the jack. Precise measurement tools were used. Everything had to be by the rule. I like to play like that knowing your partner was not letting your side down by playing haphazardly. This made the game very competitive.

For every school holiday and long weekend we would go on holidays mostly to Canberra. From there we would often go on fishing adventures with other families. We would go to places that required great determination and often found the adventure of getting there very memorable. We felt rewarded when we reached our goal and everyone enjoyed each other's company. One particular time I remember is when seventeen of us packed onto an old army Land-rover; we also had sleeping gear and provisions piled on top of us. I bet the people who were there would remember the jar of pickled paprika that opened on us all and of the fluid seeping over us. The bush track was so rough that we had to cut our way through fallen trees at times. When we got to our destination there was a lot of talk and laughter about the adventure while we prepared for the fishing. The food was always the best. My friends who were not accustomed to European food absolutely loved it. Slovenian custom is always to welcome friends with food. Whenever I went to other places it was rare to be offered something.

High School was seventy five kilometres away in Walgett. The first thing that springs to mind is the school bus. A large part of my younger days was spent travelling. I travelled about 32000km a year and in six years about 192 000 km. My mum travelled on a high school bus for twenty six years to work in Walgett. How many kilometres is that? She sat at the front preparing lessons, studying, reading or talking to other teachers. We had to be at the bus stop at 7.00 in the morning each day. The bus would arrive home at about 5.00pm. Now if you think of today's buses with air-conditioning and comfortable coach seats you would think it was not so bad. The buses we had were hot and packed with kids screaming and running around. The temperature was often above 40 degrees; the best we could do was open the window to let a hot breeze in. The seats were vinyl bench type so you were sweaty and stuck to them. After a time we established our regular seating positions with the older students getting into mischief at the back of the bus.

I am not particularly fond of my Walgett memories. The teachers were inexperienced; it was usually their first job and they stayed only until they got a posting of their choice. Every now and then a good teacher like my English teacher Thomas Grey would show a genuine interest in the welfare and

learning of the students. He would organize trips for the school and try to bring the outside world into our school. While in Walgett I found that people from surrounding towns looked up to Lightning Ridge. This made me proud.

What made me happiest in Lightning Ridge is my family. We may not have had everything but you can't ask for better caring and loving family. We had hardships and different views but I know that my parents tried to provide the best. I wouldn't trade it with another. I sometimes worried because our customs were different but now I realise that every family in Lightning Ridge is different. I often felt self-conscious when my parents spoke Slovenian with me in front of my friends. I think that all children growing up feel the same at some stage in their life while dealing with new experiences and learning to find their place in life. At times I felt that my parents were too controlling but really it was only when they felt I needed it. Other times they allowed me more freedom than many other people; I was able to roam the opal fields all day specking when I was 11 or 12 yrs old; I could ride my motorbike unattended all over the country side. I drove my first big tip truck back to town from the field when I was 12. Once I remember the police car passed me and I thought he would stop me as I was so young and the truck was not registered. The only thing I could think to do was wave like everyone else does and they waved back. That's how it was in those days. The policeman probably thought I was helping my father so he turned a blind eye.

My mother was the one to ask if I wanted something; she was the compassionate one. My father was the strict and forceful one although fair. We often clashed but most teenagers do with their parents. I will never forget pig chasing at Deshen's. We had a new Fairlane with a bull-bar. Dad would run the pigs over and then kill them; he would cut choice cuts of meat from them. One particular time we had to run over a pig a few times before we got him.

When we had motorbikes my brother and I would often go pig chasing with dad; we would catch the pig alive with our hands. We never used dogs because we preferred to choose the pig that we wanted. Our motorbikes would be loaded in the trailer and we would go to a nearby farm. The motorbikes would be unloaded and we would carry a wheat sack with us. Then we would ride about 50 metres apart on the bikes until we came across a group of wild pigs. We would pick one out and make it as tired as we could by chasing it into the open and circling around it. You usually knew the pig was tired when it would start to chase the motorbike. That's the time to jump off the bike and catch the pig. This would be done by grabbing it by the back legs and lifting it up and rolling the pig onto its back and then placing a foot onto its neck to keep it steady. The other rider would then come and we would slide the sack over the pig's nose and onto its body. Once this was done the pig would become still; we would place it onto the handlebars of the motor bike over the tank and ride to the trailer and put him inside the cage. Often we would catch 3 or 4 pigs. After taking the pigs back to the sty; my brother and I had a job to feed them every afternoon with boiled wheat. We had a big silo for wheat storage and a 44-gallon drum to boil the wheat.

Slovenians know how to prepare a variety of special meats. We made Bacon, Krankies, Pursutto, blood-wurst, speck etc. Everybody loved these delicacies.

As I got older I would often help dad in the mine. I remember my pay was \$10 a truck or 10% of the opal found. That is OK even in today's standard when you think there are a lot of miners who can't even cover their expenses.

When I was free from chores I was roaming the fields on my motorbike looking for something to do with my friends. In the summer I would go for a swim in sheep dams with my friends. These were fun times. We had no cold swimming pool in Lightning Ridge so this was the best we could do to keep cool in the 40-degree heat. We would have mud fights and swing of a rope from a tree. We even had a very crude way of waterskiing on the dam. Most teenagers would either have a motorbike or an old barely running car to drive on the opal fields; neither were registered or registrable. To be able to water ski we would find an old car bonnet with a curved shape at the front, get some fencing wire and tie it across the front so you could hold. Then we would find another long length of fencing wire and tie it to a car. The car would then drive around the sheep dam and we would go for a water ski. It got a little dangerous at times when the person started driving too fast as the bonnet would come out of the water and onto the bank and over the bumps. Also when there were about 20 of us anxious to jump on the bonnet and avoid the wire that was coming around. All in all no one was really hurt and we all had lots of fun. I would never trade this experience with a computer game or TV. Lightning Ridge taught everyone who lived there to "improvise, adapt and overcome" My dad was always improvising and adapting; he is clever like that.

I remember the first phone we had was a wind up one. The phone was very expensive to use and all calls had to be made after 9pm when the call rate was cheapest. In a way telecommunication made people drift away from friends and family; they communicate much less face to face. There is nothing like looking at someone in the eyes and seeing their true feelings. On the phone it is always a guessing game. They sound happy but are they really? You can only tell by looking at the person face to face.