

THE COUNTRY FISH SUPPLY

by R.L. Heberle

Les Heberle and his sons Ron and Eric established a regular fresh fish supply to Katanning in 1938 after having made some sporadic sales in 1937. The family, then based at Hopetoun, had established an itinerant fish supply as far as Wagin. Fish were delivered door to door by basket and sold direct from the truck and any surplus was railed on to Perth. Ice for each trip came by rail from Perth. Fuel, stores and other supplies were purchased locally.

The family had had previous experience when based at Esperance, having established a weekly run to Kalgoorlie although this was practical only in the cooler months. Poor transport, bad roads and the long haul had reduced this effort to a break-even exercise.

A second-hand two and a half ton Ford V8 truck, a removable ice box and much better roads made the Hopetoun-Wagin venture more viable. Bad fishing weather in the winter was a problem, but this was partially overcome by alternating the fishing grounds along the coast between Cape Riche and the Gairdner River to the south-east of Katanning. A major drawback was that boat and fishing gear had to be carried both ways. However, this was compensated for with better quality fish and sales.

The country people welcomed the regular fish supply and local government made regular selling places available in the various towns. In Katanning we sold from the northern end of the railway parking area opposite the Flour Mill.

The monthly pig market days provided our best sales when farmers converged from all around the district. They were paid in cash and had money in their pockets (not common in those days when farming was often at subsistence level). When cash was short a barter system often prevailed — assorted farm produce of eggs, meat, bacon, poultry (live and dressed), fruit or vegetables were exchanged for fish. The price asked was met with the equivalent in fish, there was no haggling, the produce was sold on the spot and all were happy.

Mrs Heberle and youngest son Cyril moved from Perth in 1939,

thus uniting most of the family. Shortly afterwards Eric joined the Navy and Norman the Army. However, the fishing industry had become a 'Reserved Occupation' and Ron, having been provisionally accepted for the RAAF, had to convince a manpower court that Cyril (still at school) could fill the breach. The court ordered that Cyril be given six months' training on the job.

As was common then, a gas producer had been fitted to the truck. The ensuing loss of power caused endless problems in negotiating steep, rough creek and river crossings, heavy sand and boggy tracks. Cyril was in the thick of all this and quickly picked up net making, mending and boat handling. He was already experienced in fishing practices.

After Ron was called up in 1941, Les and Cyril carried on by themselves until 1944. They had much to contend with and, to their credit, were able to cope. Replacement fishing gear was unobtainable; fuel, spare parts, tyres and batteries were rationed; everything was patched up to keep going.

In 1944 the Fisheries Department and the Westella Canning Company provided assistance to establish salmon production for an Army food contract and Norman was manpowered out of the Army to join his father and brother. Surplus camouflage nets (hand-made) were made available and fishing commenced at Cape Riche. The net pieces were loosely knotted together and allowed the meshes to run when the salmon hit, sinking the corkline and causing losses of fish.

Initially the salmon were carted whole to Perth but later they were filleted by hand at the beach. This was labour-intensive but provided a much better payload. These were the first salmon canned in Western Australia.

Ron returned from overseas and was demobilized in early 1946. The enterprise moved to Doubtful Island Bay with the emphasis on shark meshing and lining, proper hooking, beach seining for small fish, and salmon in season.

The fishing, although often difficult, was easy compared with transportation. The access through the Hassell properties of Jerramungup-Quaylup and Doubtful Island involved numerous rough and stony creek crossings, heavy sand and clay pan sections. All a bush track, the most difficult section was the last 10 miles (16 km) of heavy peppermint sand through hillock country. There were seventeen post and rail gates to open and close and all this tried out the 1942 Ford lease lend truck to the limit (acquired when a shipload of trucks were diverted to Fremantle after Singapore fell).

Most of the catch had to be sold in Perth, a daunting 338 miles (544 km) each way over rough bush tracks and dirt and rippled gravel roads. The trip took around eight hours and tired out both vehicle and driver.

Ice, always a problem, suffered severe melt. It was often over-carried by the railways to Albany and when returned later was just wet

bags of straw.

The defunct Great Southern Butter Factory building in Creek Street was purchased in 1947. With the assistance of Reg Marris and Ralph Craigie, both resourceful people, an icemaking plant was built using mostly second-hand equipment. A freezing plant was added later, the cool-room being already there. This overcame many problems, particularly with fish oversupplies which had previously been disposed of in Perth often with returns scarcely meeting overheads. A spin-off of the ice plant was a door-to-door ice delivery and ice being available on a seven-day basis.

After the family home had been established in Katanning in 1939, the fishing emphasis shifted from the eastern areas, where the access was mostly on surveyed roads, to the south-eastern areas, where the bottom end was mostly through private property. We were fortunate that the late Job Haddleton, well-known farmer and honorary Fisheries Inspector, introduced us to the farmers who owned the land and we were able to establish amicable relationships. We were happy to pick up mail and transport goods from merchants and railheads, particularly the churns of cream that earned pin money for farmers' wives and daughters. There was no charge.

In return we often needed and received assistance such as having the truck towed across flooded rivers and creeks and use of telephones. Farmers' local knowledge of tracks was of great assistance, particularly in the winter. This was a reciprocal co-operative relationship and was the basis of the lifestyle of people of those times. We made many friends.

Areas fished ranged far and wide on a seasonal basis — Stokes Inlet, Hopetoun, Doubtful Island and Cape Riche have previously been mentioned. Other areas were Oldfield River, Gairdner River and estuary, Bremer River and estuary and Pallinup River and estuary. All these inland water systems had seasonally open and closed sandbars and carried large quantities of fish — sea mullet, black bream, yellow-eyed mullet, salmon trout and many varieties of sea fish. These fish were in high public demand.

When the bar broke there was an exodus of mature fish into the sea and stocks were renewed by mostly immature fish coming in. Unfortunately fish stocks were often denuded by spontaneous mortality caused by lack of inland rain coupled with evaporation causing over-mineralization of the water. The natural food died and fish lost condition rapidly, became covered in sores and died in hundreds of tons. Thus bar breaching was critical.

Inland water fishing methods were set net, ringing and half-circle meshing and seining at the bar sections. The fish were 'farmed' by the use of large three and a half to four inch (90-100 mm) mesh, thus ensuring only mature fish were taken. Catches were limited, where possible, to what could be sold in the country and the constant moving

ensured that stocks were neither harassed or overfished. There were always plenty for all somewhere.

The Kalgoorlie run in 1935 was done with a Nash Six converted to a ute and pulling a trailer. The next vehicle was a second-hand 2.5 ton (2.5 t) 1934 Ford truck followed by four new Fords supplied by Katanning Stock & Trading Company between 1942 and 1954. These trucks proved to be fast, tough and reliable. Three were eventually written off after crashing into trees on road verges. Two were rolled over on slippery and sandy roads.

To keep the vehicles going and provide for emergencies, a wide range of spares and equipment was carried. To cope with bog and running off roads and track we had assorted wooden blocks and two large Oregon hatch covers — kangaroo, bottle and hydraulic jacks — two shovels and axes, a mattock, sledge-hammer, crowbar, length of chain, wire rope, coil of wire and heavy-duty skid chains.

In addition there were two spare tyres and wheels, complete front and rear springs, a rear axle, an ignition coil, condenser, fuel pump and flexible fuel lines, spark plugs, high-tension leads, light globes, fuses, insulation tape and battery cables.

There were radiator hoses, radiator sealer, a bar of Velvet soap (for big repairs), fanbelts, syphon hose, soldering outfit and a full kit of tools, plus an auxiliary fuel tank, a water tank and waterbag, emergency 2 gallon (9 L) petrol tin and a gallon of oil. All this was necessary because the likelihood of receiving any assistance in the case of a breakdown was remote. Most spares were needed and eventually used (except the axle). Some gear was loaned to other wayfarers in need,



Ron and Eric Heberle en route to Cape Riche in 1946 with the Ford truck fully laden with gear and the 18 foot power boat on the trailer behind.

especially the 2 gallon emergency petrol tin.

While returning from the first trip to the Gairdner Inlet, the truck was rolled on a glassy wet clay road between Jerramungup and Ongerup. The ice box, full of fish, was not bolted down and landed upside-down in the middle of the road with the top opening lids underneath. The truck was on its side in the watertable, full of water. Whilst the boys were busy using the jacks, blocks, planks, big mallee roots and rocks to raise one end of the box to get the lids off and the fish out, Father was displaying pure artistry with the kangaroo jack. The truck was back on its wheels in twenty minutes. The box was loaded, fish and gear replaced, a quick cuppa and we were off.

A hundred yards (90 m) further on, steam began pouring out of the front end. Off with the radiator and fan and out with the soldering gear. We were mobile again after nearly five hours repairing the radiator in drizzling rain.

Another disaster was stripping a fibre timing wheel around half-way between Ravensthorpe and Stokes Inlet. Father took off to Bill Dunne's farm about 10 miles (16 km) away on the Oldfield River. He was lucky to find some visiting relations about to return to Ravensthorpe. A ring to Eric Thomas at the Trading Company and the replacement fibre wheel arrived with the mailman from Newdegate. Meanwhile Father had stayed at Lou Hambley's pub and met the local Roads Board Secretary/Engineer who just happened to need to inspect the road in the general direction of our truck. Meanwhile the boys had done their bit by removing the fan, radiator, timing case cover, and the offending wheel. The new wheel was boiled in a tin of oil to expand it for the press-on fit and driven home by a bit of 'four by two' and a gypie hammer. In a little over an hour the truck was running. The Roads Board Secretary, finding it hard to believe, asked Father if he ever messed up these wayside jobs. 'Often', he said, 'but not when they count this much'.

After four and a bit days we were on our way and in that time had not sighted another vehicle. The sequel three days later was that our benefactor was the recipient of a 40 pound (18 kg) box of nice black bream. He said, 'There are too many', to which Father replied, 'Give them to your friends'.

On one trip we had a most unusual experience. Way behind time after dark, we were travelling between Lake King and Lake Grace. Having just crossed part of a salt lake over a narrow causeway, we were slowly negotiating a pot-holed sandy finger of land that jutted out into the lake. The headlights, tunnelled in between large salmon gums on either side of the track, picked up a huge dark shape with two blazing red eyes, closely followed by two others and three more much smaller apparitions.

We took violent evasive action and skidded to a halt in the watertable, shaken and incredulous to see this parade of elephants no

less, miles from nowhere, unattended and padding down the middle of the road. Clutching each other's tails in their trunks, they disappeared into the murk. We thanked our lucky stars we hadn't met them on the causeway where we would have had the choice of meeting six elephants head on or going into 2 feet (60 cm) of salt water and black oozy mud.

Down the road about 40 miles (65 km) we met two circus attendants on horseback. Had we seen their elephants? We certainly had. The story was that elephants and non-caged animals walked between towns. A noisy truck had stampeded the horses which disappeared over the sandplain and they had left the elephants to move on while they rounded up the horses. All was well in the end though because the circus, plus elephants and horses, performed the next night in Ravensthorpe.

The floods of 1955 had overflowed the Dumbleyung Lake into the Blackwood River for the first time in the living memory of the white man. With the lake full of water and likely to stay that way, we were approached by 'Choc' Sunter, spokesman for the Dumbleyung Roads Board, with a proposition to help introduce fish into the lake. We would.

A previous experience in stocking upriver pools elsewhere had indicated that the smallest fish had the best survival rate during the transition.

The Roads Board had obtained permission to remove fish from the Pallinup estuary. A party consisting of Choc Sunter, a Roads Board member with a ute and 100 gallon (450 L) tank, Herbie Green and Arthur Wallis similarly equipped, and the Heberles' truck with two tanks and a beach seine net set off for the Pallinup bar. Black bream were considered the best bet. The fish were caught, transported, and over 600 lively little fish were released into the Coblinine River which flows into Dumbleyung Lake. A check with a mesh net two years later caught seven fat bream in excellent condition. However some years later lack of rains caused the lake to dry up and the fish died.

By 1950 all the sons had married and left the industry. Les and Ron carried on through the 1950s, with Ron and family moving to Albany in 1957. In 1960 the factory was sold and the Les Heberles retired to Perth, thus terminating the country fish supply which had, with many ups and downs, endured for twenty-three years.

Les and Eva Heberle are now deceased, Eric and Doss live in Perth, as does Phyllis and husband Frank Norman. Vi lives in Gnowangerup and Cyril, Peg and family remain in Katanning. Ron, Pauline and family live in Albany and maintain the fishing association, operating during the salmon season at Doubtful Island.