

Dazed but not so confused

- one student's view of life at Riverina College in the 70s

By Robin Julian, participant observer from 1972 to 1975

Many of us remember our time as students with fondness. Was it really a simpler, more carefree time of life? We would probably all agree that it wasn't stress free, but at least in my experience, life became more complex as the following years unfolded. Generally, I prefer to focus more on the present, but from time to time memories from student days work their way into my consciousness, welcome reminders of some of the experiences that helped shape the person I am today. For me, as for many I'm sure, student days were largely joyous; big on freedom to choose, and low on responsibility, but this was also a time of growth, a final launch into independent adulthood. What follows is a collection of recollections, some formative, others just representing the sheer enjoyment of being a student in Wagga Wagga in the vibrant 70s.

Beginnings

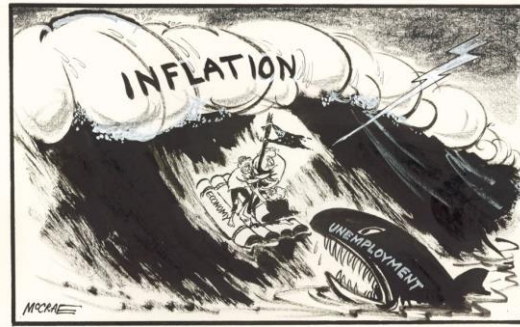
During our time there, the popular view was that Wagga Wagga meant the 'place of many crows' in Aboriginal language, but more recently that definition has been corrected by Uncle Stan Grant, local elder and author of the first Wiradjuri dictionary. He says "Wagga, is the word for dance, so if you're saying Wagga Wagga, you're saying dancing or celebrating." Maybe Riverina College's first students had some subconscious understanding of the correct meaning of their new hometown's name.

I arrived at Riverina College in 1972, carrying the wounds of a year working in the corporate world while studying Commerce part-time at university. I think it was the very unattractive idea, presented during one of the orientation addresses, that I may well still be working with this company when I turned 65 that planted the seeds of rebellion in my mind. That, and the emerging counter-culture creeping inexorably from the outside world into the consciousness of young Australians like me. The Vietnam War loomed large in the lives of young men my age, and I had already 'won' the birthdate lottery of selection for national service. Being enrolled as a student meant that I could defer my call-up and instead add my voice to protesting about the immorality and injustice of this conflict. Being a twenty-something, 'the future' didn't extend beyond more than about year ahead, so I never really thought through what I would do once my studies were over and the army said 'it's time'.

Thankfully, the Australian voting public were also thinking 'it's time', albeit in a much broader sense, and along came Gough and Labor to pull the plug on conscription. My inescapable political awakening began early in 1972, a small break in the levee, but after election day 2 December a full flood was underway, sweeping away the stultifying, anaesthetised Menzies years and making way for the chaotic excitement of redefining Australia, with Gough at the helm of the tinny. By 1974 Gough and his tinny would be cartooned as 'up shit creek without a paddle', much like the citizens of North Wagga, who customarily bore the full load of the mighty Murrumbidgee River's overflow during flood times. However, while that tinny was still defiantly making headway upstream, many great initiatives came our way that aimed to make everyone's lives better and more interesting.



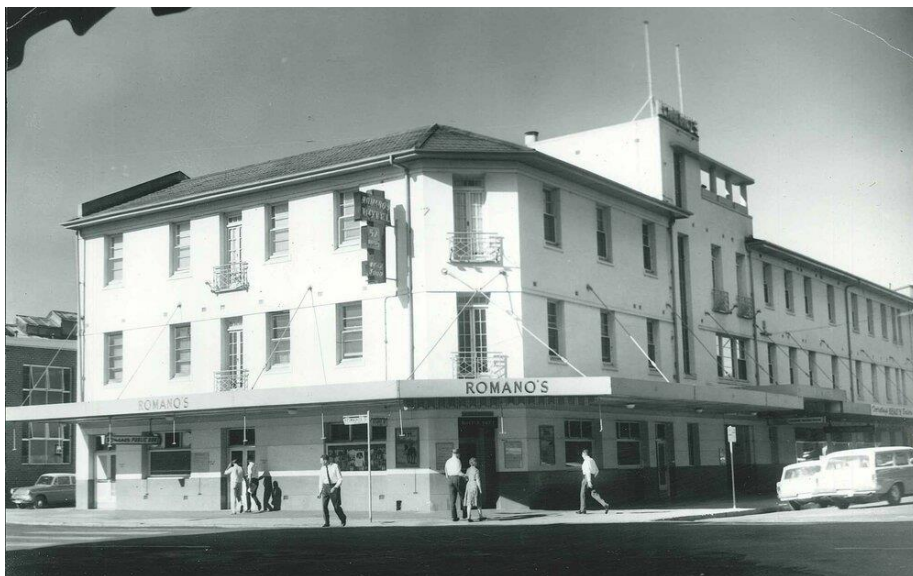
Gough with Little Pattie during the 1972 election campaign
(<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/oct/22/gough-whitlam-and-its-time-what-happened-to-political-campaign-songs>)



Couldn't find the 'shit creek' cartoon, but this one is a good substitute
(<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-10-21/gough-whitlam-remembered-as-giant-of-australian-politics/5828836?nw=0>)

A room at the inn

Riverina College was busy turning itself from a sleepy Teachers' College into a more dynamic regional academic campus when I arrived. Exciting times, but this meant that student accommodation was in short supply. Locals were invited to open their hearts and homes to absorb the surfeit, so unused farmhouses, spare bedrooms and budget rentals were offered to the newbies. One local with an eye for an opportunity to make an extra few dollars was Warwick Musto, the proprietor of the once glorious, but then faded Romano's Hotel. Built as the Commercial in 1857, Romano's was considered to be one of the most substantial buildings in the Riverina. According to *'Time Gents' Australian Pub Project*, T.S. Bellair took over the hotel in 1885 and it was renamed the Bellair Commercial. It was occupied by the RAAF during WWII and then purchased in 1946 by Azzalin Orlando Romano. Hailing from Padua in Italy, Romano was a restaurateur who had worked at hotels and restaurants in Nice, Monte Carlo, Paris, Berlin, Madrid and London, eventually becoming head waiter at London's famous Ritz Hotel. In 1923, he came to Australia to run the stylish Ambassadors restaurant in Pitt Street, Sydney. Four years later Romano's Restaurant opened in York Street and then in 1946 he bought and lavishly rebuilt what is the current Romano's Hotel.



Romano's Hotel, I'm guessing a few years before we arrived
(<https://www.romanoshotel.com.au/history>)

The grand old hotel had seen better days by the time we students dumped our bags on beds in their largely unused rooms, long ago displaced by that imported American concept, the motel. However, room and board for an affordable price, and in a pub to boot! Perfect, I hear some of you say, and in many ways, it was – the crew that took up Warwick's offer became great mates. Many a good time around the dining table was had, sharing jokes and learning about each other's 'before now' lives. Dave Hodgson and Wayne Cooper had infectious senses of humour, guaranteed to displace any sombre thoughts you may have. One topic we regularly explored was the supposed fact that for every male student at college there were five female students. We waited in vain for girls to throw themselves at us. Meanwhile, Greg Mason and I both played the guitar, so we enjoyed making music together, experimenting with our very own songs. But more about that later.

I also made friends with an interesting variety of 'townies' through spending certainly far too much time in the slightly seedy bars that laughed and tinkled enticingly beneath my room. There was Bernie the stock and station agent, who liked to entertain the group with his mock saleyards auction calls, and Peter the life insurance salesman, who carried around a small notepad in his top pocket in which he would annoyingly try to write down the names and phone numbers of any friends you had to whom he could possibly flog life insurance. Then there was Pauline, a hairdresser, who changed her hair colour weekly, her brother Bob, who played bass in a local band, and her friend Alan, 'the only gay in the village', who would delight in pointing out the conservative, straight-looking men in the bar who he had slept with. What bravado it must have taken to be 'out and proud' in a country town in the early 70's.

Returning home to Romano's after a respectable hour could be problematic. Old Tom, the night porter would have to let you in, but first you had to wake him up, not an easy task. Sometimes his pet ferret would poke his head mockingly over the top of the reception desk, then go back to doing whatever it is ferrets do when they are cooped up in a small space. But Old Tom either refused to stir from his slumbers, or would grudgingly shuffle to the door with a blanket shawled around him and then abuse you all the way to the top of the grand staircase. At other times you had to wake up a fellow student hotel dweller by throwing stones at his window and ask him to come down and mobilise Old Tom. Once, in a lucid moment, Old Tom showed me his ancient station wagon which he kept out the back. Inside, his ferret was cavorting with a great many pieces of paper which he explained were fines from the local council for failing to clear the noxious weeds from his allotment in North Wagga. I imagined Old Tom bunking down in the paper-filled station wagon on his overgrown allotment when he wasn't sleeping behind the Romano's reception desk.

There can be no doubt that, for me at least, living at Romano's was something of a mismatch with what a student should be doing, that is, diligently attending all lectures and tutorials, making a good fist of assignments, and so on. My minimalist efforts enabled me to scrape through the first semester, but the straight C's frightened me a little, inspiring me to seek a better balance between fun, and as Fran Berringer, a student friend, described it, 'seriousity'. Share house living seemed to strike a better balance.

Greg and I and my girlfriend Karen teamed up with future SRC President Paul Carroll, and soon we found a suitable timber cottage right down the end of Kincaid St, complete with open fireplace for Wagga's freezing winters, horse stables out the back, and shared ownership of a lovable, energetic, Labrador-Greyhound cross dog who answered to 'Elvis'. A few dollars well spent at the local second-hand furniture warehouse yielded beds, tables and chairs, which were supplemented by my Mum's

old 'stereogram'. The fireplace in the kitchen was a godsend, but it nearly led to my demise. One cold afternoon I tried unsuccessfully to re-light the fire with greenish kindling. I then decided to accelerate the process by adding petrol, poured from my bike's detached fuel tank, only to watch in slow-motion horror as an unseen ember ignited the fuel, causing fire to rapidly run up the stream of fuel still pouring from the tank. Only a super speedy yank away of the tank, breaking the flow of petrol, prevented a very likely explosion.

Other student households could be found dotted around the town and on nearby farms, forming something of a party circuit. At least one household per week could be relied on to put on a keg, or provide a comfortable space for more chilled gatherings. When at home we took it in turns to cook meals, although the term 'cook' is loosely applied here. Paul's speciality was Bolognese sauce making use of any leftover ingredients, including overripe bananas. To avoid this delicacy, we hoped to score an invitation to Don and Gaye McNaughtan's house. While most of us struggled to put chops, surprise peas and potatoes, or maybe a lentil stew, on the plate, Gaye's cooking was definitely cordon bleu, also extended to more exotic fare, such as curries that didn't involve Keen's curry powder, tomato sauce and sultanas.

Our weekly rent of \$16.00 (\$4.00 each) was pretty attractive and didn't dent our teacher's scholarship funds too much. Nevertheless, in search of wealth, Paul and I found ourselves jobs delivering breakfast trays at the Koala Inn motel, where we would hotly contest the right to take the tray to the room that reportedly housed the hottest looking girls. Usually the motel occupants were suited sales reps, but on one occasion I knocked on the door of a room to have it opened by a scantily clad, curvaceous blonde. I ran back excitedly to the kitchen to make Paul envious, but then the manager added a new dimension to the discussion by informing us that the cast of the 'Les Girls' revue were guests and had been performing at the RSL club.



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Making a little music on the stoop at Kincaid Street

The Students' Union lounge had a communal Leak hi-fi system and a collection of albums that you could play, or borrow overnight. Somehow these records survived rough handling, beer spills, and high-altitude stylus drop-ins. Even though their surfaces looked so scratched as to be unplayable, these ever-looping platters filled the lounge with enticing, formative music from bands and singer songwriters who I still enjoy today. The early 70's was definitely 'the time' of the singer songwriter, so Neil Young's *After the Goldrush*, James Taylor's *Sweet Baby James*, and Joni Mitchell's *Ladies of the Canyon* filtered through conversations, with their memorable tunes and thoughtful, introspective lyrics. Grab a coffee and a single 'durry' from the ever-smiling Smithy in the cafeteria, spread out on the couch, and take a little time out, absorbing David Crosby's mesmeric chords from the album *If I Could Only Remember My Name*. There was that magic line "I thought I met a man who knew a man who knew what was going on, I was mistaken", that seemed to sum up perfectly the constant confusion of the ordinary person.

Band-wise, the Students' Union record collection also included Crosby Stills Nash and Young's *4 Way Street*, arguably one of the greatest live albums, with its spine-tingling close harmony singing and indelible individual performances. Neil Young's haunting renditions of *Cowgirl in the Sand* and *Don't Let it Bring You Down* always brought a hush to the room, as did the final track, *Find the Cost of Freedom*, finished acapella style. In amongst the contemporary music I enjoy today, I always find the time to give *4 Way Street* a spin and enjoy losing myself in the extended electric version of *Southern Man*. There was also the cerebral, clever music of Steely Dan on *Pretzel Logic*, *Led Zeppelin III*, showing they could rip acoustically too, and the Stones *Sticky Fingers*, the album that cemented their moniker as 'the greatest rock 'n' roll band in the world'. Even now, on my umpteenth listen to the 7 minutes of *Can't You Hear Me Knocking*, I anticipate the deliciousness of the jam section at the end, with Bobby Keys' sax scat and Mick Taylor's coolest of guitar solos. Cameron Crowe hadn't yet made his iconic film *Almost Famous*, but this clutch of classic albums from the Students' Union lounge would be right at home waiting to be discovered by young William Miller when his leaving-home big sister says 'look under your bed, it'll set you free'.

Some of these singer songwriter songs would find their way into Riverina College Folk Club folklore, given a local twist by keen amateurs. Alongside renditions of Neil Young tunes, plenty of good original music filled the air at Folk Club concerts. By the time the club formed, Greg and I had written a repertoire of our own material, which seemed to be appreciated by our unsuspecting audience. Maybe they were just waiting patiently for the next would-be Neil Young, who knows. Buoyed by our reception, we scored ourselves a gig at the Straw Chook, a local restaurant owned and run by a guy who was an announcer with the ABC's regional radio station. The peak of our local stardom came when the owner of a Wagga jeans store asked us to write and record a jingle for a commercial that would be played at theatres in the area. We made the recording at the television studios of RVN2 and received the princely remuneration of a free pair of jeans each. Some weeks later I heard the jingle at the drive-in through the tinny little speaker that you had to feed through your car window. Maybe I was a little overexcited by this experience, because at the end of the movie I drove away with the speaker still anchored inside my trusty FB Holden, prompting a trip to the wreckers the next day for a new back side window. Some years later, on a wet Sydney morning, Bob Hudson played one of our songs on his Doublejay radio show, *Pouring Rain*, written by Greg's friend Ross Nobel. No phone calls from EMI or Sony though.

Greg and I also enjoyed doing music spots in the Colin Anderson directed annual College Reviews, performing curiosities such as *Pencil Thin Moustache*, *One More Cigarette*, and *She Love You* in

German. Being in the cast was a perfect opportunity to see up close the comedic talents of Lynne McGranger (later of *Home and Away* fame) and Geoffrey Giuffre. I have a vivid memory of Geoff dressed as a lady bowler saying 'I'll see to the urn, girls'. He only needed to walk on stage to make people laugh. Then there was Bernie O'Connor's reading of the news, Ronnie Barker style. I don't know how he managed to keep a straight face throughout.

Despite being well off the touring track of many well-known bands and other musos, Wagga did manage to attract some important performers, and some of these left a lasting impression. Blues and country influenced Mike McClellan left us open-mouthed at his roots guitar picking – I remember being awestruck by his blitzy interpretation of *High Flying Bird* and marvelling at his flying double-thumbing bluegrass guitar picking.



Mike McClellan - RivColl auditorium

Billy Thorpe and The Aztecs (Mark II), then reportedly the 'loudest band in the country' packed out the local movie theatre, where security guards tried in vain to prevent punters dancing. Billy's support act was the then up-and-coming Richard Clapton, but the hard rock audience was not in the mood for his solo acoustic set. I'm sure he returned later with his band to set the record straight. Many of us also journeyed to Sunbury Rock Festival, Australia's response to Woodstock, where Thorpie, Tamam Shud, the La De Das, Captain Matchbox, and other great Aussie bands got the crowd going. But that's another story.



Sunbury 1972

(<https://nostalgiacentral.com/music/music-by-decade/music-1970s/sunbury-festival-1972/>)



(<https://johnkat5.blogspot.com/2017/11/billy-thorpe-aztecs-live-at-sunbury.html>)

And then there was Split Enz. Some of us knew a little about this band from ‘across the ditch’, but, in the small College Auditorium, we witnessed a stunning, quirky show unlike anything else we had seen or heard. Zany, colourful costumes, whacky hairstyles, makeup, and a very theatrical performance guaranteed that the eccentric music of Split Enz remained imprinted in our minds forever. ‘True Colours’, the album that brought the band fame in 1980, is perfect pop, but the innovative ‘Mental Notes’ music we experienced that night was something else again.



Split Enz - circa 1975
(<https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/enzology>)

The final piece in my student days musical enlightenment puzzle slipped into place from quite an unlikely source. Peter Baker, a fellow student who came from a local farming family, had really interesting tastes in music. With his wide, grinning drawl, you might have expected him to have a country music collection, but no, Peter would pull out Ry Cooder’s *Into the Purple Valley* for a bit of bluesy roots guitar, with the irresistible riff of its opening track *How Can You Keep Moving*, or Rare Earth’s *Ma* for some funk. The cover of *Into the Purple Valley* still rates as one of my favourites. I feel like I hopped in the back of Ry’s old Buick convertible back then and have enjoyed riding with him through the years as he champions roots music of various styles – blues, Tex-Mex, Cuban, folk, gospel, Americana, world music. I think we were listening to Ry Cooder on the cassette player in Peter’s old EJ Holden, coming down a gentle hill somewhere in the country outside Wagga when I noticed a car wheel rolling along beside us. I pointed this out to Peter, who said nonchalantly it was probably ours because he might have forgotten to tighten the wheel nuts after a tyre change yesterday – sure enough, the car settled slowly onto its rear left corner as we cruised gently to a halt.

Politics

As was the case on other campuses around Australia, there were abundant opportunities to engage with politics at local, national and international levels, not to mention student focused politics, with groups and individuals competing to make themselves heard via the SRC and the Students Union. Opportunities for protest were willingly taken up, concerning issues ranging from greedy local landlords to changes to the teacher’s scholarship conditions. We like to think that students of those times were less apathetic, and more interested in issues outside their own worlds than students today, but in reality, then as now, the most emotion was stirred over matters of education and livelihood, and many students didn’t care about much at all. However, the war in Vietnam and other big picture issues filled at least some of our minds and gave rise to vigorous discussions in tutorials, the Students’ Union lounge, pubs and parties.

My two years as co-editor of RACE, the student newspaper, afforded an up close and personal view of student politics. The inimitable Chris Jones, arguably the soul of our embryonic campus, shared with me the duties of editorship, but Chris, through his editorial writing and sympathetic management of content became indisputably the 'student voice'. Despite his long hair, substantial beard and strong advocacy skills, Chris was also held in high regard by the Administration of the College, which meant that communication between students and administrators generally led to positive outcomes. He also ensured that the differing political and social views of the many and various students' interest groups were represented in RACE, while constantly raising the spectre of student apathy and the inherent risk it posed to the collective human conscience. No wonder that he would go on to become the Student Union President. Not only that, but an influential group of women students awarded him the 'Best Bum' award for 1973 – I had to be content with being the runner-up. But Chris's sexuality was more comfortably expressed in other ways, and he and others negotiated being gay at a time when it was not yet so easy to 'come out'.



Comic in RACE depicting Chris Jones when he was President of the Student Union
(https://cdn.csu.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/161487/Kathleen-Linder-A-Student-Voice-at-RCAE.pdf)

RACE at that time provided a platform and a forum for presenting and dissecting student culture. The editorial team, which wasn't immune from criticism by other students, included the incomparable, sassy Vanessa King, whose feminist commentaries informed the ignorant and sparked debate. Small 'l' liberal 1970s ways of thinking about sexuality, health, the environment, and anti-materialism filled the pages, along with information about drug use, and a myriad of reports from the wide range of sports and social clubs that students enjoyed. The fact that we procured the services of the ultra-conservative Wagga Daily Advertiser to print and publish our 'lefty' student journal was deliciously ironic.



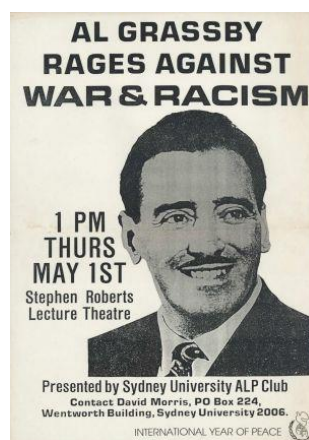
RACE editorial committee 1973 – self third from left, Chris Jones centre

From time to time we students would interact more directly with politicians. In 1975 Dick Gorman, Mayor of Wagga, ran as the Labor candidate in a state by-election. He was narrowly defeated by the sitting Liberal member, Joe Schipp, but his campaign was a lot of fun, and for a time we thought that a little rural pocket of democratic socialism might materialise in conservative NSW. Greg and I wrote a little jingle around Dick's slogan, "Gorman gets things done", and played it at a gathering attended by the flamboyant South Australian Premier, Don Dunstan. In that same year Gough's time at the top would come to a controversial end via the infamous 'dismissal', and we were left clutching our copies of Jim Cairn's book, *The Quiet Revolution*, wondering what might have been. At least Al Grassby, Federal member for Riverina, and Minister for Immigration in the Whitlam Government, had been a 'colourful' presence as he unpicked the undesirable tangle of the White Australia Policy. It made perfect sense having Ajit Singh, a Sikh, as our senior librarian at the College.



Al Grassby in action in the 70s

(<https://theconversation.com/modern-australias-defining-moment-came-long-after-first-fleet-31160>)



(https://www.joseflebovicgallery.com/searchResults.php?action=browse&cat_conj=or&category_id=542&orderBy=author&recordsLength=25&p=5)

On the town

Social life pivoted on whether you were a 'juice freak' (that is, you enjoyed drinking beer or other forms of alcohol), or preferred the contemplative alternative, weed, or perhaps both. Migrants from Italy had brought their viticultural expertise to Griffith, a two-hour drive from Wagga, producing wine ranging from premium to plastic, hangover-guaranteeing 'goons' that students could afford. There was nothing quite like that dulled, fuzzy feeling the morning after a shared flagon of De Bortoli marsala. But during the 70s the Griffith area was also rapidly becoming known as the marijuana growing capital of NSW. Wandering around the wineries during the annual wine festival, you wondered how the producers of some pretty average wine could afford to build lavish mansions and extensive facilities on their land. In later years we learned that one of those producers, Tony Sergi, was a Mafia boss, allegedly responsible for the murder of anti-drugs campaigner Donald Mackay. I think it was at the Sergi winery that my mate Bob remarked that the chardonnay "tastes like Pine O Clean disinfectant".

For those who enjoyed a drink, Wagga's pubs and clubs hummed along like those in any country town, but the Aussie Rules Club stood out by thoughtfully supplying ties at reception that t-shirted students could pop over their heads once it passed the obligatory 'dress rules' hour. Meanwhile, the Turvey Tavern, mindful of the need of some students to get plastered as economically as possible,

invented the 'aeroplane fuel' cocktail, consisting of double vodka, double ouzo, raspberry juice and lemonade, served in a midi glass. \$1.20, one drink, all that was necessary.

Formalised in-college fun happened periodically at the Students Union Balls, always fun, with plenty to drink and eat, and a good band to dance to.



*Uncharacteristically well-dressed at the Students Union Ball 1973:
From left: Sue Monte, Tina Malve, ?, Elia Bastianon, Self, ?*

Two wheels

On Riverina College Motorcycle Club (RCMC) outings, you could find almost every type and size of two-wheeled machine registerable at that time - little Hondas, throaty Ducatis, Yamaha and Suzuki trail bikes, and of course, Clive Needham's Honda Four 750, which at the time seemed slightly more like a car engine balancing on two wheels. A pillion guest spot behind Clive brought new meaning to the old term 'ton-ten, two-up'. Meanwhile, at the other end of the spectrum, Tony Dean's 250 Yamaha ultra-low geared trials bike could inch over obstacles while barely moving. Perhaps the most frightening bike I remember was someone's borrowed Kawasaki Mach III 500, which some of us took for a spin. The 'powerband' on this two-stroke machine must have been akin to the thrust experienced by astronauts at lift-off.

Darryl Mildenhall, the previous owner of my Ducati had resprayed it a cool, deep maroon colour, with just a hint of metallic finish. I added a megaton exhaust muffler that accentuated the characteristic sweet throb that all Ducatis seemed to have, and enjoyed settling into the ergonomic, forward-leaning riding position to hum along the highway. I rode to Sydney and back in one day to pick up my new Yairi acoustic guitar from the factory in Homebush, strapping it to my back and hoping that the return trip would be incident free. It was, but the next morning, when I went out to kickstart my bike, the pedal stopped hard half way down. A phone call to Darryl, who had offered to help should I have any problem with the bike, and 15 minutes later he and fellow Ducati rider Fred Lynne were at my place, toolboxes in hand. Half an hour later the motor was totally stripped down and the problem, a dropped valve, identified, Darryl un reassuringly saying that if the valve had dropped during my ride home I may well have ended up pitched off at speed. A lucky escape, it seems. That incident, along with the unfortunate news that a friend had been seriously injured when his bike slid under a truck on the Hume Highway, prompted my transition from road bike to trail bike, a Suzuki

'Skunk' 250. Chris Jones had taken the same decision, so on occasions we enjoyed exploring nearby bush trails together.



Chris, Bob, the ute and the bikes – en route to Perth



Chris, Bob and Travis – Nuriootpa, Barossa Valley

One summer holiday, the two 'Skunks' were loaded onto a bike trailer borrowed from the RCMC and towed behind Chris's EJ ute on a memorable trip across the Nullarbor to Perth, with Bob Wilson, sans bike, and Fred Lynne riding Clive's old Honda Four, now sporting a 'four-into-one' exhaust system. But that's a story for another time.

Of course, we were not the only motorcycle club in Wagga. The local branch of the Finks, an 'outlaw' group whose motto was 'violence and attitude', cruised around the area doing their very best Hell's Angels impression. One Friday night at the pub I met a Finks member, a very imposing, more than slightly scary man named 'Nuts', who made unexpectedly friendly conversation once he had established that I didn't ride a Japanese bike. The Finks rode almost exclusively Harleys, with the odd big British machine as an exception. One Easter I rode my Ducati over to Bathurst to meet up with some friends at the annual motorbike races. About half way there I found myself surrounded by a posse of Finks riders, who slowed me right down and seemed like they meant to make trouble. Then I looked at the bikie cruising right next to me and saw the toothless grin of 'Nuts', who gave the thumbs up and the Finks roared off. Saved by my Italian made motorcycle.

Academia

But it was our studies that had ostensibly brought us all together in that time and space. Many of us were education focused, likely to become primary or secondary teachers. As we threaded our way through directions of study and course selections, we developed our interests and refined our focuses. For me, an interest in the social sciences sharpened to focus on sociology, a direction that shaped my future passions as an educator and segued to later post graduate studies in anthropology. But a degree in secondary social sciences needed the breadth necessary to equip you to manage often diverse teaching allocations, so I double-majored in sociology and geography, with a minor in economics. (Perhaps no surprise that my first Department of Education teaching job saw me struggling with classes in Economics and Commerce.) All the 'assumptions' of economics left me sceptical about its practicability, but geography and sociology dealt with human issues that could be realistically debated, considered, theorised and potentially improved. The always interesting, contestable concept 'culture' underpins both sociology and human geography, and remains at the heart of my thinking today.

Our lecturers, a mixed bunch, generally inspired an interest in learning about their areas of expertise. David Jones, not much older than we were, opened our thinking to the variety and complexity of urban communities, Ken Page reminded us of the importance of understanding the natural forces shaping our environment, and Brian Cambourne shared his soon to become globally renowned insights into literacy education. Sandy Santmyers, a free-thinking refugee from Haight-Ashbury, asked us to grade ourselves at the conclusion of his course in school counselling. I think most of us went for a B, feeling that such a claim could be argued, whereas an A might not be defensible and a C was not worth fighting for.

But Mona Ravenscroft, lecturer in Psychology and Sociology was my biggest source of inspiration. She not only introduced me to the wonders of exploring human life through a sociological lens, but was always so passionate about the potential of our burgeoning new campus. Writing in the final edition of RACE for 1972, the first year of the College's existence, she said "I would like us to realise how lucky we are to be here, still small enough to care, not lost in mass tertiary education midst the urban sprawl. I'd love these crazy, enthusiastic first days to be remembered and relived. Student apathy? It'd be impossible."

My longstanding fascination with rivers – I grew up on a farm beside the Lachlan River – drew me to shape my final Geography thesis around the topic 'an empirical study of flood hydrographs on the Murrumbidgee River between Gundagai and Hay' (stifle yawns here...). In the absence of the world wide web, I needed to make several visits to the Water Conservation and Irrigation Commission Head Office in Sydney, to obtain the necessary data to analyse, some of which needed to be converted by hand from Imperial to metric units. Thank goodness that that handy little device, the pocket-sized calculator, had recently been invented. Many hours of graph plotting later, and following consultation with my supervisor, Ken Page, I developed a mathematical formula that could be used to accurately predict flood peak heights. Optimistically, I donated a copy of my thesis to the Wagga Wagga City Council, fully expecting to be lauded by the Mayor for my insightful work. Dream on.

The river

Rivers influence the disposition of the places through which they flow, and the stamp of the Murrumbidgee, which snakes its way through farms, forests and towns to meet the Murray River near Balranald, is certainly present on Wagga Wagga in both a physical and a social sense. Levee banks, built in an attempt to protect the town from disruptive periodic flooding, had created the social divide of North and South Wagga, North Wagga being largely unprotected and always the first area to flood. Property values there were significantly lower than on the other side of the river, so a lower socio-economic group had made it their home. In times of flood often the first task of the Emergency Services volunteers was to rescue stubborn North Wagga locals from the roofs of their swallowed homes.



The Great Flood of 1974
[\(https://onrecordblog.wordpress.com/2016/09/30/the-big-test/\)](https://onrecordblog.wordpress.com/2016/09/30/the-big-test/)



Emergency levee work – 1974 flood
[\(https://onrecordblog.wordpress.com/2016/09/30/the-big-test/\)](https://onrecordblog.wordpress.com/2016/09/30/the-big-test/)

Because a flood peak takes days to make its inexorable journey down a river, it can be tracked along the way and predictions made about how high the water level might be when it reached your town. During my time living in Wagga, in August 1974, the third largest flood ever recorded came the city's way, testing the 'new' levees built since the last flood, and creating some nervous moments as frenetic sandbagging patched up some vulnerable points in the town's defences. Some of us volunteered to help with the sandbagging, having already moved our belongings to high points in our houses – there's nothing like an impending natural disaster to bond a community. It was a tense time listening to updates on 2WG and the local ABC radio. Thankfully, the levees held, inundated areas recovered, and life by the river resumed its rhythm.

The Murrumbidgee also provided Wagga with a wide, sandy beach, courtesy of a substantial point bar at one of the river's many meanders. The legend of a '5 o'clock wave' was propagated and shared with new students, the almost believable explanation being that an additional surge of water was released from Burrinjuck Dam each day, creating a river wave that reached Wagga Beach at 5.00 PM. This wave could allegedly be surfed and ridden all the way downstream to Narrandera should you feel inclined. Students from beachside suburbs of Sydney were sceptical, but nevertheless went down to have a look at their first opportunity – just in case.

It's time

Like the muddy waters of the mighty Murrumbidgee, students ebbed and flowed in and out of the city of Wagga Wagga. The curtain settled gently on my time as a student in the 'place of dancing and celebrating' at the end of 1975. Equipped with a Bachelor of Education, and by then married to Karen, I loaded up the car with our few possessions and traced the course of the river upstream towards Sydney to take up my first teaching position. By then the College's new Boorooma campus was well under development, located on a picturesque parcel of land adjoining and absorbing the old Agricultural College, so signalling the beginning of the end of our cosy appropriation of the old Teachers' College site. Most of the buildings on the old grounds are gone now, but, if you visit, it's not too hard to imagine the sights and sounds of the young idealists who once made the place hum.