

# True Tales of an Antique Dealer

By Robin Kelly



Commemorative Booklet 2019



True Tales of an Antique Dealer

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Robin's Commemorative CD – 'Songs I Love to Sing'

Sincere thanks to

Paula H. Jones

David & Jill Langdon

For their kind assistance.

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Q & A: Robin, what will you do now with your life?  
“I will perform ‘The Story of my life in Song’ and I will be an Entertainer on Cruise Ships around the world.”



# Robin Hood Antiques

Established for 48 years

Founded August 1971 and closing August 2019



Proudly Established 1970

Ms Robin Kelly

**Robin Hood Antiques & Beds**

BRASS / IRON BEDS, ALL SIZES INCL. QUEEN SIZE  
 FANCY SHOPCOUNTER SCALES – Grocer, Fruiterer, Butcher  
 Laces, Cradles, Furniture, Collectables,  
 Kitchenalia, Curiosities, Photographs & 1000 Books

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# How it all began.....

In 1970, Robin restored and sold fancy antique brass and iron beds from her front verandah in Deepdene.

This was towards the end of her 10 year singing career.

In 1971 she established Robin Hood Antiques at 68-72 Whitehorse Rd, cnr. Barnsbury Rd, Deepdene,

By 1979 she moved to a bigger shop at 245 Canterbury Rd. Canterbury. After 10 years she expanded both sides into 243 and 247 with fabulous window displays featuring antique canopy beds and canopy cots, big fancy shop counter scales and lots of bric-a-brac.

In 1994 she moved across the road near Canterbury Station to a dynamic small corner shop at No. 200/202 for 6 years.

By 2000 she had purchased the block of 3 heritage shops at 243, 245 and 247 Canterbury Rd. before auction.

Her antique business continued to boom with so much more space available and a pianola was added for her singing.

In 2019 at nearly 80 years of age, Robin is selling up and celebrating nearly 50 years as an Antique Dealer.

This was a job she absolutely loved.

With this little book she has pleasure in sharing with you... **'True Tales of an Antique Dealer'**.

To see Robin singing in her shop in 2011 go to Youtube.

'Robin Kelly, Canterbury, Melbourne, Youtube'.

# Robin Hood

People often wonder how I became interested in old iron beds, and how I found the name 'Robin Hood'.

Well, it happened back in 1970, when I was travelling to Horsham to visit my sister, who was teaching there.

As I passed through Halls Gap, I noticed an old rusty bed spilling out of a barn. I acquired it somehow and brought it home on my pack-rack; it was a brass and iron double bed, made about 1890. After a paint and polish, I then sold it and went back to the country to buy some more – thus began my bed business.

I was a professional singer at the time, doing corporate shows at the weekend, and during the week I would paint up the beds on our front veranda in Balwyn.

My then husband Peter Jones, was a brilliant pianist/arranger for top singers and musicians such as Shirley Bassey, Cleo Laine, Deborah Byrne, Colleen Hewett, Bruce Woodley, Ronnie Burns, Brian Cadd, Liv Maessen, Bruce Rowland, John Williamson etc., and as they approached the front door they would eye off the beautiful beds, and most of them bought one from me.

I made many trips to the country, and one day when I rang Peter, he said, 'Where are you? What have you bought now?' I jubilantly said, 'Oh, lots of bargains! I got two beds for a dollar each, and a rocking chair for two dollars.' And with that, he said, 'Oh Robin Hood, come on home!'

The next year I opened my first shop in Whitehorse Road, Deepdene, and guess what I called it?



# The Doll Hospital

A few years back, the shop next door to me in Canterbury was a Doll's Hospital, run by the lovely Anita. She had a sign in her window saying if she was closed, customers could leave their dolls with me.

Well, I used to get the most amazing stories from these people. One lady told me that when she was a little girl in the 1930s, her mother was so cruel, she deliberately put her beloved celluloid doll close to the open fire, and yes, it melted.

Another lady told me that when she came home from school one day, her deranged and sadistic mother announced that she had washed her teddy bear, and it was hanging out on the clothes line.

When she went outside to look, her beloved teddy was hanging in pieces on the line, two arms, two legs, torso and head. She screamed in terror, and ran to her neighbours for comfort.

Yet another lady told me that during a terrible and lonely childhood, her dolls were her only friends; she would talk to them, and they were such a great comfort to her. When she turned sixteen, she put them all in a suitcase, and left home with them for good.

Now here she was, a stout married woman now in her late sixties, with the same large suitcase of dolls, which she had decided to bring to the Doll Hospital for refurbishment.

'They saved my life,' she said softly.



# The Potter – Gwen Watson

Back in the late 1970s, I had a phone call from a lady in Canterbury, Victoria. She had seen my advertisement, and wanted to sell a lot of Victorian furniture. She explained that she and her daughter were moving to a shop in Deepdene, where they would set up a pottery shop. She said that she had recently moved from Leongatha to be near her daughter

It was just a few streets from me, so off I went. I pulled up at the 1940s solid brick house; all the large windows were covered in stained glass decoration. One was Pegasus the horse, another of peacocks. I stepped inside, welcomed by the flamboyant owner resplendent in wigged coiffure. The stained glass windows glittered beautifully with the light flooding through, and when I remarked on them, the lady told me she had made them herself.

All around the walls of the main room were floor to ceiling wooden panels displaying mythological pottery plaques, with curved ones over the doorways. Apparently she had worked on these for six months, when she had broken her ankle and was housebound. There was Leda and the Swan, Apollo the Sun God, Neptune, Cupid, etc.

Even the bathroom was decorated. The bath top was encrusted with a border of ceramic seahorses, fish and mermaids all around the edge. I was amazed!

The quality was as good as the greats like Castle Harris, Marguerite Mahood and the Boyds. She told me she had been supplying George's in Collins Street with pottery during 1940s wartime, when imports were scarce. She continued to supply



Georges and the Myer Emporium for many years. Julian Sterling at Southern Cross Gallery also bought from her, and she was presently working on a major twenty-two piece exhibit for Colonial Mutual Life Insurance, on The History of Australia, to be displayed in the Royal Arcade, Melbourne. I was very impressed.

Everywhere there was hand-modelled pottery. Cupid clusters, nude fairies either side of a tall aqua vase with magnolias, dancing goats and satyrs on lamps and vases. Cleopatra, Thor, Dragon vases, lamp bases of clustered classical scenes with 18th century figures, lizard bowls, frog bowls, fairy bowls, mermaid vases, encrusted shadow lamps, wall vases with cherubs, tall blue vases with cut out Art Nouveau trees with cherubs dancing underneath.

Then we went into the shaded back garden where roamed a real peacock and everywhere were her creations of hand-modelled pottery. There was a two foot high green head of a Medusa with dragons entwined around her, two big coloured contented pottery cats sat under a tree, pottery galahs sat on a wooden platform, and on another were sulphur crested cockatoos. On a wall was a huge three foot wide turquoise eight piece round plaque of Apollo and horses with surrounding plaques of cupids, all hand modelled.

I came away with no antique furniture but lots of pottery purchases, and I commissioned lots of work in their new pottery shop: Australiana pieces and koala orchestras, and kangaroos and fairies, possums and fairies, a large koala and gumnuts lidded bowl.



After five years at the pottery shop, they moved to Coronet Bay, Victoria, their paradise by the sea, where she continued to work. The gate entrance posts were decorated with sensuous classical statues of Summer and Spring nudes, garlanded with flowers, and the garden filled with more statues. Inside, the subject matter was very much mermaids, penguins, and starfish on plaques, bowls and vases. She was prolific in her output and joyous in her creativity.

She died in 1993, in her late seventies, and I have acquired many of the pieces and wall hangings of pottery. With the help of famed pottery dealer Marvin Hurnall, I am hoping to negotiate with a regional gallery for a showing of her work; because in the pottery circle she is yet to be discovered, as she never exhibited outside of her own shops.



## Pillow Shams

I always have an antique canopied bed fully set up and on display in my shop. It usually has a pair of lovely old lacy pillow shams on the two pillows, but this was my last pair, so they were Not For Sale.

A phone call came through this particular day from a lady who really wanted to have them. 'I know they're not for sale, but I would like you to think of an outrageously ridiculous price that you would ask for these pillow shams, and I will pay it.' I was astonished. Was I hearing things?

'Yes, don't be frightened to say anything you like, I really want them and I'm prepared to pay for them! I'll be in this afternoon to talk it over with you.'

So, in she came. I said my price, outrageous and ridiculous as it was, and she paid it. Amazing!



# Stranger Danger

It was a very spooky pine forest, deathly silent. The only sound was my breathing and my boots sinking through the spongy carpet of pine needles.

The year was 1983, and I had had a response to my newspaper advertisement for old iron beds wanted. He said there were lots of them in this forest, and had arranged to meet me at the general store. He was a rugged, well-built man in his forties, with long, curly dark hair.

I was very late, and he looked angry, in fact, a bit too angry I thought. He said to follow him to the pine plantation, and after about a mile we turned off the road through a gateway, where in the distance I could see a log cabin with the pine forest behind.

Amongst all the trees were big old rusty cars from the 1950s and '60s, covered heavily in pine needles. The man told me there were lots of iron beds and rails throughout the forest, but he still kept glaring at me like he absolutely hated me. He's really got a thing about being late,' I thought to myself.

So one by one I dragged beds down near to where I'd left my car, then went back for more. He would disappear and reappear again with a bed end, still looking hard at me. Sometimes I wouldn't see him for a while, and in the eerie atmosphere of the dark forest, I had an uneasy feeling that I was being watched. I added more beds to the pile, and was heading along the side of the log cabin when I saw him again.

This time he was facing the back wall, side on, and I think he was aware that I was walking past. He was naked from the waist

down, and exposing himself to high heaven. I nearly died of shock, and realising the danger I was in, tried to keep calm and not react. I quickly turned away like I hadn't seen anything unusual, and grabbed a bed end on my way back to the car.

I started to pile them up against a tree, watching out for him to appear. When finally he did, he was still glaring menacingly at me, and I knew I must not show my fear. So I avoided eye contact with him, and casually said that these beds would be enough for me. We arrived at a price, and loaded them on the pack rack, with me being careful not to turn my back to him. I chatted on in a normal sort of way, then thanked him and climbed into my car.

'I've got to get out of there,' I thought to myself, my heart pounding.

As I turned the key in the ignition, his red flushed face suddenly appeared at the car window. By now my mind was screaming, 'Oh no, I've got to get out of here!'

He spoke but I didn't hear with the window up. Then he shouted desperately and intensely, 'Do you want to use the toilet?' his frightening face filling the window frame.

As my shaking hands tightly gripped the steering wheel, I managed to blurt out politely, 'No thanks. My husband is meeting me at the intersection in town, and I'm running late.'

With a frantic turn of the key, the car surged forward in a wide sweep to turn for the gateway. I don't think I took another breath until I got through that gate.

Ten years or so later, a chap came into my shop from this same country town. I described my experience to him, and he told me he knew of the man I was talking about.

‘A very weird guy,’ he said. ‘The police have been trying for years to convict him of rape charges.’

I realised how lucky I’d been to escape without an even worse experience.



## Best Call

The best call I ever had was in 1972, just after I opened my shop. This ‘country bumpkin’ sounding man phoned from Camberwell to say he was disposing of the contents of his brother’s old home. He was going to take it all to the tip, but saw my advertisement. ‘I don’t want anything for it,’ he said.

When I got there in my little mini van, it was an 1880s Victorian double-fronted house, filled with antiques and bric-a-brac. There were beaded lampshades, sideboards, carnival glass and ruby glass, silver, clocks, Persian patterned velvet couches and a dining suite. Under the house were ornate wall gas lamps with coloured shades and other treasures. I stood at the front door. I saw a rifle there and numerous locks on the door. I tried to discuss payment. I remember I had to literally force him to take \$40 for all the furniture, and \$30 for the bric-a-brac – he simply didn’t want payment.

After that I happily made numerous trips backwards and forwards, removing all the treasures and putting some into auction, and giving some to family. That was the most amazing buy I’ve ever had.



# Frank Laurie

Back in October 1988, I received a phone call from a Frank Laurie. He saw my advertisement about wanting to buy old paintings. He had some that sounded very interesting, but you never knew until you saw the quality, so I asked for the address.

‘Lilydale!’ he said, ‘the showgrounds at Lilydale! Just look for Frank Laurie’s Merry-Go-Round! We’re here for a week!’

Arriving late afternoon at the Lilydale Show a few days later, I looked around for the merry-go-round. There it was, right across the paddock, past the clowns with balls and the shooting gallery. As I looked more closely, I became alarmed as it looked like the merry-go-round was on fire; there was smoke pouring out the top of the tent. I walked quickly towards it, wondering why there wasn’t more concern from bystanders - the wooden dapple-grey horses were laden with children, and pipe organ music was playing Anchors Aweigh!

Much closer now, I was amazed to see a middle- aged man shoveling firewood into a furnace in the middle of the merry-go-round. Up above I saw the big sign, Frank Laurie’s Steam Merry-go-Round.

A ruddy-faced man wearing a battered hat was changing the music book in the pipe organ, as the children climbed off the merry-go-round and others eagerly climbed on. I called out to him. A gravelly voice answered, yes, he was Frank Laurie.

What a beautiful smile! He asked would I like to hop on for a few rides, and then he’d be closing for the day. I sat happily in one of the chariots and watched the horses rise and fall on the brass

poles, and was entranced by the mirrored panels of painted ladies up high, and down below them, a picture gallery of panoramic scenes of the world to entertain me.

Actual drums were beating near the large statues either side of the fancy pipe organ, and flutes and trumpets sounded.

Eventually, Frank Laurie and I headed for his caravan to show me the paintings. Outside the caravan sat a long-beaked Corella cockatoo that kept saying, 'Is that you Leonie?'

Frank said, 'Leonie's my daughter; she has the food van and fairy floss. Two sons run the 'Octopus' and the 'Paratrooper', brother Max runs the Dodgem Cars, and wife Pat is in the ticket box.'

We sat in the very comfy huge caravan, and all around me were carousel ornaments, which they had collected. The paintings I had come to see were very amateurish, but I was thrilled to be here meeting this intriguing man, and he seemed happy to talk to me.

'I was born on this merry-go-round,' he said, his bright blue eyes twinkling. 'My dad had it before me, and we travel down the east coast from Darwin to Adelaide every year, I've never lived in a house longer than twelve days!'

'In my dad's day, it was a more simple merry-go-round, and was carried by horse and dray. Then came the steam train, and more decorations and mirrors were added, and then came the semi-trailer truck. The whole thing folds up onto its own big trailer now.'

I noticed a needle sticking out of his old hat. 'Oh, that's for getting splinters out,' he said, 'or for sewing up a dog gored by a wild pig,

or for sewing up the canvas tent over the merry-go-round.’  
He showed me his collection of fairground books, and he told me that all merry-go-rounds of this vintage have been electrified but that he refuses to give in to ‘progress’. He loves people being fascinated when he throws logs into the blazing iron furnace, whilst above it the 1890s marine steam engine huffs and puffs, with smoke billowing from the brass funnel above the canvas roof.

‘When I was a little boy,’ Frank said softly, ‘I thought our merry-go-round was the most beautiful in the whole world. As I grew older I knew there were bigger and better ones, but to me it will always be the best.’

Every year at Lilydale Show I visited Frank and his merry-go-round, and he visited my shop, too. One year I photographed him standing on the deck of the merry-go-round, with a horse close by. I presented this to him in a large frame.

When he died suddenly in his 70th year in 1997, I was very sad, but also delighted to know that this framed photograph was displayed on the coffin at his funeral in Dubbo.

I am pleased to say that Frank Laurie’s Steam Merry- Go-Round continues to be run by his family to this day.





# The Kondors

Just after I opened my first shop in 1971 in Whitehorse Road, Deepdene, I was visited by a middle-aged man, a Mr Kondor, who was a Polish Jew.

He had a very big carry bag full of things for sale; there were lots of iron and brass fire tools, brass jardinières, flat irons, horse brasses, a bit of china and jewelry.

Mr. Kondor had no car, but spent most days walking to Op shops and scouring nature strips on council rubbish days. I became very fond of him, and loved to hear his stories. He and his wife had escaped from Poland after its invasion in the 1940s. They had been marched from town to town by the Germans. Many of his companions, starving and exhausted, collapsed and died by the side of the road, or fell into refuse pits. Mr. Kondor said he kept alive by breaking away from the group and picking fresh fruit to eat.

He never ever said the word Poland, he always referred to it as 'in my country this...', and 'in my country that...' He spoke with a very thick accent, and was so expressive that I was entranced by this little man. He had large hooded eyelids over very kind blue eyes, and I knew he appreciated the kindness I gave him in return.

After a few years he asked me to their small house in Camberwell to see larger things he could not carry to the shop. Metal bed ends, furniture, garden furniture, mirrors, and always lots of brassware, filled his tiny backyard. He always had good things for me. Afterwards we would sit in their tiny kitchen, where his wife showed me jewelry for sale, and various smalls. She was very shy and quiet, but beautiful, with curly blonde hair and peachy cheeks.

He told me she was very depressed since their only child, a daughter, was killed in a car accident on her way home from university. He said his wife wanted to die too, to be with their daughter.

I remember him saying to me in his thick rich accent, 'You don't know how lucky you are in this country. I stand in supermarkets surrounded by all this wonderful fruit, it's like paradise! In my country you could only buy one apple, compared to a whole bagful here.'

He was working as a caretaker at a nearby technical school and couldn't believe the wastage by young people. 'Every day', he said, 'I see boys throwing beautiful cut lunches into the bin. Their mother has gone to all the trouble of making them this lunch, and they don't even open it – they just throw it out – and buy junk food!' He would hang his head in despair and shake it from side to side in disbelief.

He had a stall at Camberwell Trash and Treasure on Sunday mornings, where he was known as Gino.

The one time I saw him there, he was a different person from the quaint Mr. Kondor I knew. Because he displayed all his wares on the ground, not on tables, people tripped over them and knocked them, and he seemed irritable and impatient with the people around him.

Now and again I would run into him or his wife at various Op shops, waiting with their big bags for new stock to be put out.

I still went to their house to buy stock, but the china pieces were obviously being repaired by his wife in a very amateurish way. It annoyed me that they thought they could put one over on me, and it hurt me that they would try.

After nine years, I moved my shop to Canterbury. He came sometimes, but less and less. We were all getting older. I saw them on and off over the next fifteen years and then we lost contact.

Last year I had a call from a lady in Camberwell. She said she had to clear out a house for a neighbour who had died. She was going to ring the Salvation Army, and then she saw my ad in the paper. She gave me the name of the street, and I asked, 'Is it Mr. Kondor's house?' She said yes. Apparently he had died two years before his wife; their only relative was a distant one back in Poland.

I made arrangements to go the next day, but thought to myself it would either be a lot of chipped rubbish, or some real treasures.

Well, I walked into the lounge room. I had never been beyond the kitchen before, and there was the biggest treasure trove you have ever seen. Just the best of everything in smalls you could ever imagine. Silver, ruby glass, carnival, tea-cosy heads, fancy linen, statues, clocks, blue and white china. I was there for hours loading the car up. I felt they would be glad it was I who was there, and not a stranger. I also came away with large old photographs of them and their beloved daughter. I cherish a brass letter rack which hung above their kitchen mantelpiece and which now hangs in my kitchen. It says, 'The journey is made. Its joys remain forever in our hearts.'

Mr. & Mrs. Kondor must have been forever grateful that Australia gave them refuge in a troubled world.



# The Shoplifter

It was a slow day in the shop, and I was having a read of one of my books. Just in front of me a very large, friendly lady was fingering the silver chains hanging on a stand on the counter. She looked about forty, had an old-fashioned face and lovely shiny dark hair in a long plait. We made polite conversation, and I remember she said she had a bad cold.

A few days later I noticed that the chains were gone, and after racking my brain over the different customers I'd had over the last few days, I remembered her. It probably was her, but 'I'll never see her again,' I thought to myself.

The next Saturday it was busier, and I noticed a bulky lady waddling slowly down towards the counter. It was her! She was holding a large brown carry bag, and wandered down towards the book room. For a moment I was speechless. But perhaps I was wrong in suspecting her at all. Just to be on the safe side, I followed her and asked about her bad cold. She looked surprised at my remembering. Then I nicely asked if she would please leave her bag at the counter, which she did.

After a while I thought I would have a quick peep inside the bag as I slowly walked past. To my astonishment, there was my five piece green Art Deco brush and comb set from near my front window. She was definitely the thief who stole those silver chains! I rang the police and they said they could not arrest her in the shop; they would catch her coming out with the goods. I was serving other customers in another room when I noticed that the goods had disappeared from the bag, and she was back in the book room.

I went outside and spoke to the police hiding in the doorway of the shop next door and told them the situation. About ten minutes later she picked up her bag and off she went, with me following at a safe distance behind. The police were hiding to the right, and as she was going around the corner they confronted her. She immediately burst into tears.

I couldn't believe the sight of her — she had goods sticking out all over. There was a lidded box sticking out of the neckline of her frock, and other items were planted all over her body. She kept sobbing and went on about a boyfriend in America, and how she was trying to raise funds to join him there. How her parents didn't understand her or trust her any more, how unhappy she was, how lonely she was. All the time sobbing. My heart went out to her, despite what she'd done. The policemen took her back into the book room, where she removed all the items.

I spoke to one of the policemen, who told me this wasn't her first offence; she had been charged before. I asked them all to come in and sit down. We had a long talk about her life and situation. The police told her that we had an unusual situation here, that I was in fact interested in helping her, and did not want to press charges.

She seemed very grateful and offered to pay for everything, including the chains, and wanted to buy something extra as well. She wanted to drive home a short distance to get the money. She gave me her address and I told her I would hold her briefcase as security until she returned. The police went off, totally bemused at my attitude. Back she came and paid for everything. We had a cup of tea together, and I told her she was welcome to come back any time to talk with me, but she was not to walk around the shop at all.

A few days later she came in with a present for me, all neatly gift wrapped and sealed with a sticker bearing the name of the shop where she had actually bought it. There was also a card saying: "These days, for me, words are so hard to find. So I will just leave it at thank-you for the good things of last Saturday. Yours very sincerely...."

She rang me once, deep in despair. She was lying in bed and talking of suicide. I told her that it would certainly be sad if she ended her life, but it was really up to her to get counselling and be responsible for her life. I told her to put on her tracksuit and runners and go for a walk to clear her head, or come in and have a cuppa. I never saw or heard from her again.



# Miss Hyland of Castlemaine

I am in the beautiful gold mining town of Castlemaine, Victoria, the 1850s home of the famous inland explorer Robert O'Hara Burke before he left on his ill-fated expedition in 1860. Here I am outside the quaint old home of a local lady to look at some old iron beds she wants to sell. Her goldfields cottage is wedged in a tiny cul-de-sac behind the little Bridge Hotel, facing the showgrounds, and behind her cottage and through her backyard and up the hill is the historic Castlemaine jail, perched on a cliff top overlooking the town. On the opposite side of the city on another hilltop is the huge monument to Burke & Wills.

I walk to the front door along a path lined with the tallest and loveliest foxgloves I have ever seen, the air filled with friendly bees. I see a large shadow through the fly wire and hear a strong pull of a snib on the wire door, and there she is, the lady of the house. Elderly, but a picture of health! Amazon built, tall and straight and stout, soft brown trusting eyes, no makeup on her cream skin and pink cheeks, with wavy grey hair pulled back into a bun. She is wearing one of those long aprons that tie around the neck and the waist. She says she has been making jam. Her voice is feminine but authoritative, and she tells me she was a matron at the hospital there for many years.

The wire door squeaks as we go through the dark front room, where I can hear clocks chiming, right through to a marvellous old kitchen. It is warm and cosy with the one fire stove blazing away. There on the top to one side is a cast iron water fountain with a brass tap. Next to the stove is a pet bird, a pink galah in a large square cage, and sitting next to the cage on a chair is a smiling old man, her brother. He is little and peering out from under an oversized hat, and with his sharp features he looks very much like the galah.

On the table there is a lovely spread of home-made scones and her fresh plum jam; 'that's for us later on,' she says.

After chatting for a while, we head towards a shed out in the yard where the ground becomes quite hilly. Bantam hens scratch around happily in the bush garden. She tells me that she occasionally had an escaping prisoner from the jail sneaking through her garden on his way down to the hotel. She doesn't seem to be too worried at this.

She pushes the stiff and creaky shed door open, and there they are, leaning amongst the draping cobwebs and creeping ivy, lovely old iron beds with nickel fittings and decorated with glinting mirrors and porcelains with roses. The iron frames are rusted and the feet have been cut off, but they are still worth restoring. One end has a mousetrap tied to it I am very excited at the sight of these old beds, silting iii this shed for so many years, waiting for me to come along to rescue them and rejuvenate them.

My price is offered, and she actually squeals with delight. They are mine, and we drag them out of the shed and into and onto my car. Then back to the kitchen for afternoon tea. The brother is back in his position next to the galah, and he is quietly sinking his teeth into a juicy scone, they are certainly scrumptious. She tells me she was born here, and of her young days roaming the hills with a rifle hunting for rabbits, and that she has never married and how one day she would love to see the ocean, which she's never seen in her life. Afterwards she shows me the side garden where she grows climbing beans and peas. There are pumpkins, cucumbers, radishes, turnips, cabbages, lettuces and lots of fruit trees for her jam making. She gives everything away to the neighbours and friends. I go away laden with jam and vegetables and fruit.

Over the years I visited her many times, and was made most welcome, having the splendid afternoon teas over and over. One day the jam making stopped when 'sugar became too expensive'. She didn't grow veggies any more because all the friends she grew them for had died. The homemade afternoon teas were now packaged cakes and sweet biscuits, and if you arrived with a cold you weren't welcome inside the house. I guess she was becoming very old, tired and cranky. We eventually lost touch, but she was a beautiful pioneering woman I will always remember.



# Unbelievable

A young Italian mother purchased a single, half- canopy, brass and iron bed for her young daughter. The bed was \$1600, and she put \$200 deposit on it.

The following week my mother, who was working in the shop that day, rang to say that the young mother had just paid the balance of \$1400 in cash, and if I was passing by, to come and pick it up.

An hour later she rang back, very concerned, because she was just rechecking the money, and the woman had paid her \$14,000 instead of \$1400, all in \$100 notes.

Mum was really concerned in case the woman thought her dishonest. She said that when the woman was paying the balance in cash, she had a big suitcase in front of the counter, and she was reaching in and counting one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, and putting the notes on the counter until she did this 14 times. Her father and sister stood and watched, and her father muttered in thick Italian, 'A lot of money for a bed.'

I got to the shop and Mum was becoming most distressed, and wanted to ring the lady immediately, which we did. She came in and weakly said her husband would have killed her when he saw the money missing that night.

Mum naively asked her, 'What does your husband do for a business?' and she quickly said, in her thick Italian accent "He is in computers." And she left.





# Les Horne of Ballarat

In the dealer door-knocking days of the 1970s, I discovered this old hermit with a lot of cats living in a broken down house in Ballarat. He was a gorgeous old bloke called Les Horne. He had jowls like a bloodhound and big, soft, kind eyes. He was the last of his family, and the house was falling down around him.

I'd call and have cups of tea with him, and sit in his old kitchen with the tannin stained cups, and the smoke stained windows, with one clean circle to look through. Hundreds of empty matchboxes went right up to the ceiling, and cobwebs hung down in drapes. He still ran a herd of cattle on his surrounding land, and picked blackberries for the Blackberry Nip people.

Old Les would collect for me coloured glass insulators along the railway line, and write me lovely letters. The house did finally fall down, and I bought a lot of the antique doors with blue and red coloured stars.

Then he moved into a small caravan under his big pine trees, which also eventually filled up with cardboard boxes. Les wore his pyjamas under his clothes with large, visible safety pins. He cooked in the outhouse with a little stove and frying pan, and he slept in the haystack with the cows.

He was badly injured riding to town on his bike one day, when a car bowled him over, and ended up in series of nursing homes. In the last letter I received, he said, 'I would love to just crawl into a hollow log by the creek and stay there.' He died soon after that.

His land became a housing estate off Strickland Parade, and when I drive along the freeway and see the big pine trees, they remind me of dear old Les Horne.



# William Ricketts of Mt Dandenong

In 1972, John Browning a respected dealer in Canterbury moved in with me. We both had our separate shops, and a great love of art and pottery brought us together.

I had recently bought a small pottery aboriginal head by William Ricketts for \$150, at Joel's Auction. The week after, John bought himself one for \$300; his was of an aborigine seated on a log. When I saw it at home later, I told John I had my doubts it was a Ricketts. Too greasy looking, and too red. 'Let's go and ask the man himself,' I said.

So off we went to Mt. Dandenong, where Ricketts lived within a sanctuary displaying his sculptures through the forest. This quietly-spoken gentleman held John's small statue and shook his head. 'Not mine,' he said softly, but very definitely, looking at us with piercing blue eyes.

We strolled back towards the front gate and, feeling sorry for John, I paused at the kiosk where they were selling a few postcards and souvenirs, and said eagerly, 'Look, my friend here has bought this

William Ricketts at auction and it's not genuine. Would you have something he can buy here?'

With that she pulled a lovely sculpture out from under the counter. It was about 35cm x 20cm oval, and depicted Ricketts as a princely young man, surrounded by aboriginal faces, and on the back it was signed and inscribed, 'The essence of my spiritual self'.

Both our jaws dropped. She said it was \$70! It was probably worth more like \$500! John couldn't get the money out of his wallet quickly enough.



# Arthur and Bonnie

So here I am on the Princes Highway to Warragul, to buy two sets of very old shop counter scales. It sounded so interesting from my telephone conversation with this Baptist Minister, Arthur Bartlett, earlier today, that I shut the shop, and mid- afternoon I am on my way to a horse ranch for children, set deep in a valley which was once a timber mill.

After an hour or so travelling I arrive at Nar Nar Goon, go past Pakenham and further on I see Tynong. I turn off north for five kilometres, Arthur had said: 'You'll see the gateway to the ranch on the left, but when you arrive come up to our log cabin on the right.' It is a narrow winding road, thick with trees, and going deep into a valley, with beautiful vistas each side, and farms dotted everywhere.

I must be close now, around the bend, there it is, the gateway to Mill Valley Ranch. I remembered he said to come to his log cabin first, but I am so intrigued by what I am seeing, I want to explore there first before darkness falls.

It is truly amazing; it's like a mini Sovereign Hill. There's a cluster of interesting old buildings around a picturesque lake, an old church, a schoolhouse, various old shops and a meeting hall. There are covered wagons up on the hill, little streets to drive around, and opposite the lake there is an old blacksmith's shop.

The door is wide open, and it seems to be filled with old wagons and horse-drawn vehicles. In the doorway is an old dray, and sitting on it is a pair of shop scales, very tall and fancy, with a large scoop. He'd said they were butcher's scales, but they aren't. They're for weighing fruit or grain, and a beauty; I hope it's one of the two I am buying.

There's an elderly man on a tractor, it could be Arthur, and yes it is. He meets me later at the log cabin; he looks in his seventies, very fit and with a kindly face. Arthur sizes me up with amusement as I ask him question after question about the ranch. But let's do the business first.

He retrieves the other scales from another shed nearby. It's a fan style grocer's scale, about 1890, with mirrors in the front and back, and trays each side, magnificent scales. We do a deal for the two, and drive down to pick the scales up from the first shed. This shed is indeed filled with fascinating vehicles, cars and signs, donated when the ranch began in the late 1960s. Arthur tells me there are some things they don't need now, such as the scales.

The old church came from Cockatoo, the schoolhouse from a nearby town, and shops from all over Gippsland. Mill Valley Ranch is the realisation of Arthur Bartlett's dream in the 1960s, to have a Christian Youth Holiday Ranch, a first for Australia.

When they found this property, an old sawmill, the then owners were so impressed with Arthur's dream, and also being interested in the welfare of children, that they actually donated a large portion of the land. In 1967, Arthur and his wife, Bonnie, and their three small children, came to live in the valley.

They travelled 4000 miles in the first year, speaking about their project at clubs and churches, gaining sponsors and patrons. Wagon wheels and chassis were donated, and four sleeping wagons and a dining wagon were built, and a World War I church wagon was restored as a kitchen.

In 1969 the first camp was held. There were 28 children, four leaders, four kitchen staff, and two horse staff. Add a 16 year-old horse called Jock, a mare with a quivering bottom lip called Donna, plus Nelson, an ex pacer, blind in one eye, and they had the makings of a camp!

Children would learn to saddle and ride a horse, and go on trail rides through the nearby State forest. They enjoyed swimming, boating on the lake, a ropes course, archery, hiking, outdoor and indoor sports, campfire sing-a-longs, Chapel, and delicious ranch food, served and fully catered for at the Stagecoach Inn. An ice cream parlour, book nook and trading post are open daily during roundups. Cassettes, CD players, radios and televisions are not allowed.

Arthur takes me up to the office to meet his wife, Bonnie. We pass the six log cabins overlooking the village and lake, which accommodates the church staff and their families.

It is nearly dark, and Bonnie is packing up the office switchboard for the night. She is an immaculate vision of blonde and pink, puffed up gossamer hair with perfectly applied make-up, sporting a smart two piece pink suit with short skirt, stockings and high heels, out here in the middle of nowhere. She must be in her seventies, and I suddenly feel very shabby, but she is an inspiration, so friendly and so bright.

We go back to their log cabin which is filled with her grand piano, and she plays and sings for me. She shows me her frog collection, which is all around the cosy home, then we have coffee and Arthur tells me about some of the troubled youths they have had stay at the ranch. Some had to be sent home, but some did eventually become leaders themselves, which made it all worthwhile.

Arthur is proud that a lot of them remember the stories he tells at Chapel. He is always careful to base the stories on nature, such as the story about the birds who lived in a nest, and how each one had the responsibility to keep the nest clean, and how one bird fouled the nest and made it so uncomfortable not just for himself, but for the whole family. It made everyone unhappy, not just him. And for the boys to remember if you make one thoughtless mistake you are affecting your whole family, and your friends, not just yourself.

As I was leaving this lovely unique couple, I paused to read a framed sign on the wall near the door, which said it all: 'One hundred years from now it will not matter what kind of house I lived in, how much money I had, nor what my clothes were like... but the world might be a little better, because I was important in the life of a child.'





**WEYMOUTH'S**

Built c. 1888 as a restaurant/wine hall, it was taken over by John Weymouth, plumber, in 1902. It operated as Weymouth's hardware business until the 1970s. Robin Hood Antiques first took over the premises in 1979.

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