

## The Milk Round

I knew that I was fortunate to be offered the job at Birbeck's Model Dairy but for me it came as a blow confirming what I had already guessed, that soon I would have to leave school. For a long time I had known that financially my family were struggling to make ends meet. The hours dad worked on the railway had already been drastically cut and Mum worked round the clock looking after the younger kids, especially Sally who was only two years old, and Billy, the new baby. She also took in laundry to make a few extra pennies and sometimes it seemed as if every day was wash day in our house. "Every little bit helps," she would say. It's not that we ever went hungry, although I suspect our mother sometimes did, but we didn't have much.

My teacher had told me some weeks earlier that I was achieving a high standard in all subjects and there was no reason why I shouldn't be awarded a scholarship to Perth Modern School. 'Some hope,' I thought bitterly, wishing that I could apply and feeling resentful of my circumstances. But in my heart I knew I would have to leave school and help my family. In those days when times were hard, and with the war only recently ended, we all stuck together.

I could imagine dad going to pay our milk account and taking an opportunity to talk to the manager at the dairy about me. "He's a good lad, a hard worker and willing to do more than his share." Then he would add, proudly, "He's strong too. Strong as one of those horses you use to pull the carts."

I think dad got the idea of looking for a job there from an advertisement in the newspaper. It stated, in no uncertain terms, that country visitors to Cottesloe would be well advised to try the unrivalled milk from Birbeck's dairy which was reputed to be the most hygienic in the Commonwealth. Many local households and businesses patronised this place and kept a note of the phone number, F 2601. My father must have thought it would provide me with steady employment. The character reference he gave me was definitely not what he had to say at home, and I squirmed when I thought of the arguments over my apparent reluctance to help with the dishes or mind the babies. I used to wish that I had an older sister who could help mother while I got on with chores like chopping wood for the chip heater or sweeping the yard. It wasn't just school I would be saying

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goodbye to as I knew that from then on I would be classed as an adult and some of my interests would be considered childish. Besides, there simply wouldn't be time for them.

I remember that at that time I was occupied with a school friend making a hill trolley from pieces of timber that had come with a truckload of firewood. Reg, one of my younger brothers, had found a good piece for a base platform and I was going to put four wheels on it. With your feet on the axles you could propel it along and precariously steer it down the steep hill at the end of our road, where local kids risked serious injury every day without giving it a thought. We always had great fun. Now, I thought gloomily, I'd probably never get to ride on it much less have the satisfaction of construction.

As you can tell from its name, Birbeck's Model Dairy was an exemplary business as well as a busy one. It prided itself on having a refrigerator rather than outdated water-cooled methods still used by some of the other dairies. The building was surrounded by well kept lawns and gardens. It had been founded by George Birbeck, an English migrant, before World War 1, the block of land having cost him fifteen pounds in 1915. Areas of land bordering Swanbourne in the northern part of this coastal suburb were proving suitable for establishing dairying businesses. As well as Birbecks, there were Cooksley's and Newman's in the present Cottesloe Avenue.

There were eight milk rounds up and running, which meant eight horses and carts going out on their rounds which had to be finished by 7am. Usually I was out on the road soon after midnight. I knew I would be fired if I was late as people wanted their milk early and wanted it fresh, especially in summer months; there was no refrigeration in homes at that time. Birbeck's also took the responsibility of customers' orders being promptly attended to seriously. I knew that with the high number of unemployed, many people would be happy to take on my job.

My first job was to go and pick up my horse and harness it up. The horses were stabled just over the road from the dairy on the corner of Elizabeth and Balfour Streets. To start with, as the new boy, I was given a horse that no one else wanted; it was a mad bastard. When we set off on the round Harvey would be as good as gold but half way through he would suddenly decide to bolt for home, taking off at a gallop guaranteed to challenge me. I solved the problem by chaining the wheel on it.

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My next horse, however, was a dream and I became very attached to him. He learned the route and the various stops very quickly so I began leaving the horse and cart in one street and would pick him up in the next section where he was waiting for me. There was not much traffic in those days and I hardly ever saw a car which might have alarmed a horse.

My round took me through Cottesloe to the cable station. Gradually I became used to the night noises in the area and enjoyed the sound of waves breaking on the beach while the Rottnest Island light became a familiar beacon. At dawn the corellas would break into a great cacophony of sound as they rose in clouds of from the Rottnest Island pines which lined the beach.

Of course there was hardly anyone around during the night. That changed one day when, in the early morning gloom, I was surprised to glimpse a boy with a white, pinched face loitering behind a fence in the night- quiet street. I noticed that he was wearing a ragged coat and broken boots. In amazement I watched from the front step where I was placing a milk order as he grabbed a billy of milk from the back of my cart. He looked round and I noticed how dark his eyes burned in his thin face as he caught me staring at him. He had appeared so suddenly and silently out of the grey dawn light and was already turning to run as I returned to my cart.

I had recognised him as he attended the same school but he was younger, probably in Reg's year. I realised that his family must have serious problems and be living in poverty if he was forced to steal milk at night and I determined to ask Reg about him.

Reg was dashing out the door to school when I arrived home so I had to wait until later in the day to try and discover some answers. I lay on my bed in the sleep- out trying to rest but my mind was spinning with questions and I was uneasy about what I should do. I must have dozed at last and the noise of the younger ones coming home roused me. I found Reg in the backyard feeding his pet rabbit and immediately set about asking him about the boy I had seen and his family's circumstances.

"Do you know much about him?" I asked my brother urgently as I finished describing what had happened.

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“Yes, his name’s Danny Lane and he is in my class, but he hardly ever comes to school now,” Reg replied. “He’s a good kid. He was in my gang.”

“Why has he stopped coming to school?” I asked. Our school had a good attendance record and most families were anxious that their children attended school.

Reg turned round from the hutch and gave me his full attention.

“Something really bad happened. A few months ago his dad had an accident at the factory where he worked and died. For a while Danny stayed on at school but now he has to help at home looking after the other children and helping out. Anyway, that’s what I heard our teacher say.”

At that moment our mum returned from the corner shop where she had been for groceries. She enjoyed the outing as it was a good place to catch up on the neighbourhood gossip.

“And Danny’s mother has a baby too, I believe,” was her comment on overhearing our conversation. I didn’t ask any more questions as I had heard enough to make a decision. I made Mum a cup of tea and sat down at the kitchen table. She had put the food in the pantry and had started cutting slivers of Velvet soap to use in the next wash. She looked at me before saying,

“That boy might need a bit of help.”

“I know, Mum,” I said. “That’s what I was thinking.”

The next morning was extra cold and I shivered through my round, longing for my warm bed. When I loaded the cart I placed the billy in the usual place and beside it I placed a few slices of mutton wrapped in a muslin cloth. If mum noticed it was missing she never said anything. I concentrated on delivering the milk and tried to ignore the icy rain that had started drizzling down. The horse was plodding along slower and slower and looked as miserable as I felt. I couldn’t help thinking of my class mates still sleeping and a day of lessons was suddenly very appealing.

About half way through my round I stopped and heard footsteps in the street. Meanwhile the horse started tossing his head restlessly making his harness creak. I deliberately stayed still and didn’t turn around. The boy was by now so close that I could hear his breathing in the raw air and when I did turn I glimpsed a figure running away clutching the provisions under his shabby coat. I could hear his

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boots clattering on the wet road. He turned once, probably afraid I would pursue him, and I noticed how pale and hungry his face looked.

I enjoyed my job at the dairy and eventually managed a run of four hundred customers which took me four to five hours. The workload wasn't too bad as it was my horse that moved everything and did half the work. However, as the decade of the Forties turned into the Fifties life began to change in Cottesloe. Everyone was affected by this and I watched with interest as motorised vehicles started to replace horses on the milk rounds. I noted that they actually took longer to complete the round. After a few more years had passed the dairy was sold and all the rounds were leased out. I never saw Danny again but some years later I heard that he had moved to the south west of the state, around the Manjimup area. In my mind I wished him well and since that time, whenever I am out early in the morning, I still half expect to see a slight figure wrapped in an old brown coat hastening home with a billy full of milk.