

PROLOGUE

The road to nowhere

Saturday, 19 October, 1929

On the biggest day yet in the short history of Noosa Shire, the automobiles began to gather in front of Tewanin's Elanda House early in the morning, even before the express train had left Brisbane on the North Coast Line, filled with overdressed dignitaries.

By the time the train steamed into Cooroy Station mid-morning, they stretched from Donovan's Royal Mail Hotel past the famous fig tree and the new war memorial, down the Pelican Street hill to Parkyn's Wharf, and past Dan Martin's Tewanin Hotel, to which landmark some of the men of the district had already repaired to slake their thirsts with an ale or two, keeping watch over their motors from the wide and creaky verandah.

The elaborate plan was conceived over several day-long special meetings of the Noosa Shire Council in its airless chambers inland at Pomona, stifling even in early spring. A stately procession of motor cars would bear dignitaries from all over the south-east to christen the new Noosa Beach Road and the two state-of-the-art bridges that now linked the river settlements. It would drive along the winding banks of the Noosa River past what natural wonders the tractors had left unscathed, and finally arrive at Noosa Beach Estate, a clear-felled tract of sandy scrub beyond which a long banquet table set in the middle of an even longer lonely beach would await them. In short, it was to be a suitably auspicious celebration of the opening up of the river and beach towns to the dawning of the age of motor.

Charlie Freeman's immaculate 1925 Dodge Tourer, normally housed in the big garage at Martin's hotel, had been seconded to pick up VIPs at Cooroy, but young Lionel Donovan's recently purchased 1929 six-cylinder Chevrolet Tourer was well-placed to take a prominent position at the front of the procession, once the chains had been removed and the official vehicles had crossed the hump of the Doonella Bridge. Behind Lionel's Chevy were Fords, "reliable" Rileys (including several of the new Riley Nines with four-speed gearboxes), a few Willys Overlands, including a Whippet Six or two, and at least a dozen Buick Roadsters, now being put together in Australia by Holden Motor Body Builders of Adelaide.

As midday approached and the official motorcade made its approach down the escarpment along the newly made Tewanin-Cooroy Road, there were more than 400 automobiles, representing the upwardly mobile families from all parts of the sprawling Noosa Shire, from Lake Weyba to Skyring Creek, as well as keen motor tourists who had driven the partially completed Great North Coast Tourist Road from Brisbane or Gympie, all parked in a long line that snaked right through the village of Tewanin.

When a message was signalled to the revellers on the verandah at Martin's, the assembled councillors and dignitaries obediently left their beers, joined their wives and made haste down the hill to their autos, along with a bevy of chairmen and deputy chairs from the surrounding shires of Maroochy, Widgee, Kilkivan and Landsborough. (Noosa Shire chairman F T "Fred" Bryan and former and future chairman Charlie Crank were both on VIP driving duties.)

With more than a thousand spectators — the biggest crowd ever seen in Tewantin — gathered along Pelican Street and the riverbanks to witness the biggest occasion in the history of Noosa Shire, a sudden commotion broke out at the front of the line. Only those in the front row or at a higher vantage point could see what happened next. Two young men suddenly appeared at the approach to the bridge and lifted the chain high enough to allow Lionel Donovan to drive the Chevy through, hood down and windscreen folded flat. A huge cheer went up as the two accomplices — one of them identified as 16-year-old Howard Parkyn, son of the prominent businessman who owned the adjacent wharf — dropped the chain and clambered into the car as Lionel accelerated over the bridge, before pulling up on the other side of the river at Goodchap's Estate. The two policemen in charge of crowd control and the four traffic controllers employed by the council looked on helplessly, before giving up and joining in with the mirth of the crowd.

It was a warm and sunny holiday Saturday, and outside of Noosa Shire, the whole world was going mad, so why not find humour in a young man's audacious prank? Besides which, the driver's father owned half of Noosa, and his pub, the Royal Mail, was the official caterer for the sumptuous lunch soon to be served at Noosa Beach Estate. No, as far as the uniformed boys were concerned, this one could go straight through to the 'keeper.

The three-car official motorcade, followed by a stream of unofficial automobiles, drove at a stately pace through town, turned right at the fig tree and pulled up at the bridge approach. In the lead was Fred Bryan at the wheel of Charlie Freeman's Dodge Tourer, Home Secretary J C "Jens" Peterson in the passenger seat, their wives in the back. Next came a Buick Roadster driven by V H "Viv" Tozer, State Member for Gympie, with Mrs Tozer beside him, and Minister for Agriculture H F "Harry" Walker and Mrs Walker in the back. Behind them came a black Chevrolet Tourer driven by Cr Charlie Crank with Queensland sales manager for T M Burke Pty Ltd, Ross Duggan, next to him, and in the back Lieutenant-Colonel J J Corrigan, DSO, the war hero who was Thomas Burke's right-hand man in the fast-developing Queensland real estate market, and his wife Alma.

Fred Bryan, already sweating profusely in a dress suit, climbed down and invited his passengers to "stretch their legs". "A bit over six miles to go," he said. "All new road and pleasing views. Should have you at the estate at 12.30 sharpish." He ambled back and repeated the news to Viv Tozer and his Gympie mentor Harry Walker, who had been parking his ample girth on the back benches of the Legislative Assembly for decades since returning from distinguished service with a Queensland regiment in the Boer War, and had finally been rewarded for his longevity with the agriculture ministry. The minister nodded from the back, took a swig from a hip flask and passed it through the window to Fred.

"Might wait a bit, sir."

Harry grunted and said, "Give it to the colonel. He'll be parched, always is."

Fred Bryan hid the flask in his coat and walked to the final official vehicle. Charlie Crank and Colonel Corrigan were standing on the road deep in conversation, but as the Noosa Shire chairman approached, they burst into laughter. Crank turned and offered a thin smile but

no explanation of the joke. Charlie, now 62, was a legend in Noosa Shire, a one-time stockman for the even more legendary Walter Hay, a Cobb and Co driver on the Gympie track that Hay himself had blazed, a blacksmith and wheelwright, and for a decade an able and much-loved Noosa councillor and chairman. As far as the movers and shakers of Noosa were concerned, Fred Bryan was the worst chairman the shire had had in almost 20 years — and it had been a hot field for that honour — and he was merely a placeholder until natural justice saw Charlie back in charge.

Fred knew where he stood with Charlie — pretty much on the outer — so he turned his attention to the colonel. “Not far to go, sir, but Minister Walker thought you might enjoy a tippie for the road.” He handed the war hero the flask as though it were a grenade, prompting another bellow from Charlie Crank, who responded on behalf of the colonel. “Well done, young Fred! Now let’s get cracking before the staff drink all the bubbly.”

Fred Bryan, who never felt entirely comfortable in the company of men like these, hurried back to Charlie Freeman’s Dodge Tourer, wondering if it was true that the colonel, that rather taciturn man in a dark suit with his service medals displayed across the breast pocket and lapels, had single-handedly dispatched dozens of the Hun when he captured a trench on the Hindenburg Line in 1917, and why now, a dozen years later, he was selling real estate in the backblocks of Queensland.

He ignited the Tourer and led the way across the bridge.

The long procession of automobiles slowly made its way through town — picking up spectators as it went, many of them riding on the running boards, to the dismay of the traffic controllers — and across the first of the two bridges designed to end the era of isolation of the separate and sleepy villages of Tewantin, Gympie Terrace and Noosa Heads, and create in their stead the finest waterfront resort area in Queensland, offering river, lakes and surf. But on this steamy spring day of Saturday, 19 October 1929, the procession headed, not into a sylvan glade bordered by pristine waterways, but onto a featureless strip of flat land with swamps to one side and a working river on the other. The Parkyn family had already cleared the paperbark forest at the edge of Tewantin to create better access to their wharf, but this was nothing compared with the felling that had taken place to make way for the community of Gympie miners who had taken up land along the sandy riverfront since the late 1800s, thereby giving the locality its unofficial name. It was not as pretty as it had once been, but at least for this occasion, the shire had banned all signs and advertising along the length of Noosa Beach Road, the exception being official bunting and streamers, positioned strategically on the bridges and at the edges of each locality the procession passed through.

Fred Bryan waved to the Terrace-ites as he drove along the river past long dead Walter Hay’s Hilton Park, Colonel Reid’s stately Kilfinan, the Fergusons’, the Metcalfes’, the Massouds’ (whose catch of the day would soon be plattered for the official luncheon) shop and soda fountain, the Elys’ home and “café and cash and carry” (Mrs Annie Ely’s pies and tarts, sold from her one-day concession on the Noosa Beach Estate, would later ease the hunger pains of the unofficial spectators), the Gibson residence, and finally the Parkyn

compound at Munna Point, where another paperbark forest had been cleared to make way for four holiday rental houses and a general store and boat hire shed.

From here the procession turned inland before climbing onto the new Weyba Bridge, the creek's fish-rich sandbars and snags evident on either side. It then crossed into greener, hillier terrain, and then veered right along the edge of the Noosa Town Reserve to climb another hill and emerge onto a sandy parking lot, with the wild waves of Coolum Beach in the distance on one side, and a vast, vaguely triangular grid of hundreds of surveyed house blocks on the other, stretching back to the more northerly coast below. Dead ahead was a cluster of food and drink sellers housed in makeshift tents, Annie Ely's pastry shop prominent among them, and beyond, a sandy pathway leading down to the official enclosure on the beach.

As the official party made its way to the cordoned-off area on the sand, the vast crowd of spectators (estimated later at some 4000) suddenly scattered towards the ocean or the sand cliffs as a biplane landed from the south onto the firm sand. The crowd regained its composure in time to cheer loudly as B F Lloyd, president of the Royal Automobile Club of Queensland and well known as a daring aviator and close friend of Australia's most famous airman, Bert Hinkler, alighted and waved from the wing before jumping onto the sand to be warmly greeted by Charlie Crank, who admired daring in all its forms.

The formalities began with the toasts, chairman Fred Bryan proposing good health to Home Secretary Peterson and his wife, to which Jens Peterson responded with a long ramble about some franchising legislation that he would soon introduce. More in this vein followed before Viv Tozer proposed a toast to T M Burke, the company, to which Colonel Corrigan rose and in response read a letter from T M Burke, the man, to the effect that this was indeed an historic day, the opening of a highway that would make Noosa Beach accessible for this and future generations.

As the guests tucked into the sumptuous spread of local whiting, Weyba crab, Doonella duck and Pomona pork, the murmur going around the tables on the sand was to the effect of, "Where the hell was Tom Burke?"

Or at least his eldest son Marcus, who was being groomed for succession. Perhaps Tom had obligations elsewhere, maybe to do with his beloved Australian Natives' Association, which after years of fighting the good fight to keep Australia for the white man, seemed to be falling victim to changing times.

Or maybe there were concerns for the family's vast real estate empire as the world economy seemed to be spiralling towards a major crash. There were some who felt that Noosa had been honoured with a genuine hero of the Great War in their midst as Tom's emissary, but the vast majority felt it odd that the architect of Noosa's rich future could not be present as history was made on the windswept sands of a beach that had almost as many names — was it New Noosa or Golden Beach or Coolum? — as there were courses to eat.

The Cooroy Brass Band performed a selection of old favourites before Jens Peterson declared the Noosa Beach Highway and Noosa Beach Estate officially open, and Charlie Crank presented him with a gold-plated tulip walking cane (value £1) for his troubles. The T M Burke-funded Noosa Surf and Life Saving Club then led a march past before competing (unsuccessfully) in a three-way surf carnival with the Alexandra Headland and Mooloolaba clubs, the silver T M Burke Trophy going to the Alex club.

As the late afternoon left the beach in shadow, the official guests and thousands of spectators made their way back to Tewantin. There being no Brisbane train until Sunday, the hostelries of Tewantin had planned the biggest after-party ever seen in the village, except perhaps for the wild years of the 1870s, when diggers who had found success on the Gympie goldfields would alight from the Cobb and Co at Tewantin and drink and carouse their way up and down Pelican Street from Richardson's flophouse to Pillow's Tivoli Hotel for days on end. The centrepiece of these 1929 festivities was a dance at the Royal Mail, but the party spread itself all over the village, with revellers still vocal in the wee hours on the verandahs of Martin's Hotel and Elanda House, and along the riverfront.

Two days later, James Scullin was sworn in as Australia's new Labor Prime Minister on a tide of optimism for social change. On the same day, there was pandemonium on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange as frantic selling wiped millions off some of the world's biggest companies. "The entire fabric of capitalist society threatened to come down," wrote historian Manning Clark.

This was an opportunity for social reconstruction that some of Scullin's more rabid left-wing supporters were relishing, but the Australian press held firm to the belief that it was a stock exchange collapse, not a commercial crash. Within a week the Wall Street Crash had triggered a depression that would soon be felt around the world, even in Noosa Shire.

It would be a couple of decades before Tom Burke could sell much of his land, and a couple of generations before Noosa's true potential could be realised. The name of T M Burke — the company, rather than the man — would hang over it like a polarising cloud for most of that time. But on that spring day almost a century ago, 10 kilometres of rough "highway" and a couple of humpback wooden bridges (total cost £11,000) had opened the doors to an exciting, if challenging future.