

Saturday 21st of November 2009

On the road again

I thought it would be uncontroversial to write about my road trip from Canberra to Deniliquin, but I can never tell what might fire the imagination of my small but perfectly formed readership. Every aspect of that uneventful journey was examined in detail by a multidisciplinary panel of experts.

I talked about the need felt by dads to point out a "cement mixer" to their children, even when there were no children in the car.

Reader John Burke, with the pained but tolerant air of a man who has made the distinction many times, explained, "There is no such thing as a 'cement mixer' (except perhaps when it's necessary to mix two different types of cement together).

"Cement is one ingredient of concrete and the agitator trucks to which you were referring ... are 'concrete mixers'. Just as you don't call bread 'flour', you must never call concrete 'cement'."

Who knows what John would have said if he'd heard my four-year-old call them "mint mixers"?

In the earlier column, I mentioned that the driver, Chris**, didn't make a diversion to "Historic Lockhart, the Veranda Town". Reader Gale Freeman, who must have been given a big box of question marks for her birthday, asked, "What happened to the 'h' in verandah???"

I believe the "h" in verandah has migrated to the word "dahl", where it continues to serve no useful function.

The issue of the Lockhart turn-off also fired up reader Stephen Wilson, who pointed out that if we had gone to Lockhart, cut across from there to Urana, and continued to Deniliquin via Jerilderie, we would have saved about 100 kilometres and an hour in the car.

At the risk of igniting further controversy, I'm going to describe the return trip to Canberra. This was even more brilliant than the first leg, since we just went back the way we came.

First, we stopped off for breakfast at Deniliquin McDonald's, where I noticed a ute in the car park with the windscreen sticker "Phar Cough".

"Aha!" I thought. "A local disciple of the French philosopher Foucault - perhaps Family First Senator Steve Fielding, who is extremely clever even though he can't spell."

There's only one place to go after breakfast at Macca's in Deni, and that's the carvery lunch at the RiSsoLe in Wagga Wagga. I've been fascinated by Wagga Wagga ever since I flew Air Pacific to Fiji and read a feature about the town in the inflight magazine. The story was unusual for two reasons: (1) Air Pacific doesn't fly to Wagga; (2) it managed to stretch out its single point - that Wagga Wagga is a funny name for a town - for eight pages. It is a funny name - although the Waggan suburb of Gumly Gumly is even funnier - but I'm buggered if I can get more than a paragraph out of it. Wagga RSL boasts panoramic views of the car park. Among the parked and moving cars sat two elderly couples around a foldaway table, having a picnic. "That's very hoity-toity," said the RSL waitress. "Very English." But I lived in England for 26 years, and I never once heard of anyone having a picnic in a car park.

Chris and I resolved to use all our skills as investigative journalists to get to the bottom

of the Waggagate mystery. I considered various strategies such as bugging the table, disguising myself as a car park attendant etc, but Chris eventually came up with the idea of approaching the picnickers and asking them what they were doing. By this time, however, they'd gone.

Luckily, Chris recognised a gentleman in the street as a member of the picnic posse, and he explained that the picnic was a protest staged by his wife. They had been planning to eat in an actual park, rather than a car park, but she'd started lunch without him because he'd spent too long at the orchid show at the RSL.

I await with interest your responses to this column. Could it be that Phar Cough isn't a French philosopher? Or that Steve Fielding isn't actually very clever? You, the readers, must decide.

* This is a rhetorical question.

** Not Chris Ryan.

Saturday 14th of November 2009

Must love utes

I was in Deniliquin, NSW, with my mate Chris* for the Ute Muster, planning our holiday with the aid of our Deniliquin Holiday Planner, published by Deniliquin Council (motto: "Achievement through action").

"What's your idea of relaxation?" asks the Deniliquin Holiday Planner. "Deni offers the lot."

To illustrate the many recreational possibilities in the town, the booklet's designer chose a photograph of a car approaching aroundabout at a quiet intersection, and a picture of a large family shopping at Target.

Deniliquin is, of course, the Ute Capital of the World (unless you are a member of the Native American Northern Ute nation, in which case the Uintah-Ouray reservation in north-eastern Utah is the capital of your world). My favourite parts of Deni are the ute-related attractions such as the Ute on a Pole, and the FB Holden ute that has been transformed into what the holiday planner calls a "magnificent mosaic sculpture". According to the plaque next to the sculpture, which has an inscription considerably longer than this column, the mosaic's design is a description of the local landscape that includes a summer sunset, the Edward River and hay bales, and also roadkill, the Milky Way and "the iconic Deniliquin town sign".

Not all of these references are apparent to the untutored eye, which might well mistake the ute's livery for a randomly assembled pattern of colourful tiles.

"I'm not seeing a lot of roadkill," said Chris (motto: "Snore through walls"), "but you'd assume that'd be on the front of the car."

Touchingly, a ute enthusiast had left a four-pack of Jack Daniels and Cola in front of the sculpture, like a votive offering at a Shinto shrine.

At the muster itself, I (motto: "Sleep through snoring") tried to find out why so many people love utes. The man to ask seemed to be David Nolte, curator of the muster's ute museum.

"I don't really know," said David authoritatively. "They're just a common sort of thing to have. They're pretty flashy and they're just really, I suppose, an Australian icon."

But why?

"I can't really tell you. Why do people play tennis?"

Search me.

"Or play cricket?" said David. "I can't imagine why anyone would want to play cricket."

I approached Robert Martin of Wollongong, NSW, the winner of Deniliquin's Ute of the Year, to see if he could tell me why he'd spent so much time on his ute.

"It's my wife," he said, "my personal wife."

What functions of a wife does it perform?

"She doesn't say 'no', mate. It's as simple as that. Put your foot on her, she says 'Go'.

Put your foot on the brake, she says, 'Stop'."

It doesn't sound much like a wife at all.

"It's a bit more costly than a wife, I think," said Robert. "I've spent about 90 grand on this car."

I found a tent selling a mug with the slogan, "If your tits were as big as your arse, I'd be

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interested".

"I think you should buy that," said Chris, "and never give it to anyone."

Deniliquin is a nice place with friendly people, good food, minority-interest crockery and a peaceful river, but it seems to have become Australia's ute capital simply because no other town thought of it first. Outside of the muster, there are no more utes per head in Deniliquin than, for instance, in Gundagai or Wagga Wagga.

A close reading of the Deniliquin Holiday Planner revealed that Deniliquin is really the Rice Milling Capital of Australia, "home to the largest rice mill in the southern hemisphere". Forty million people throughout the world eat rice milled at Deniliquin every day, although

it's unclear how you might be able to plan a holiday around that.

*Not Chris Ryan.

Saturday 07th of November 2009

A fish called Jetfire

My mate Pat asked if I wanted to take his freshwater tropical fish, because he didn't have room for it in his new house. I said it must be either a very small house or a very big fish, but it turned out neither was true. The fish was slightly smaller than my thumb, and marginally less interesting.

It didn't even have a name. My four-year-old son, Ben, christened it "Jetfire" after one of his favourite Transformers. But while Jetfire the Transformer could change into a jet plane and save the universe from the evil Decepticons, Jetfire the freshwater tropical fish just hid in his hollow log.

Ben was thrilled when he heard we were going to get a fish, and counted down the days until he arrived. Once Jetfire's tank was installed next to the bookcase, however, and Ben was able to see how limited a fish was compared to, for instance, a robot changeling, his enthusiasm disappeared.

Jetfire was a disappointment from the start. I didn't expect him to sing songs and tell jokes, but I thought he might, well ... swim around a bit. But Jetfire is a colourless creature of predictable behaviour patterns - a chartered accountant of the aquatic world. He wakes up and hides in his log, then he falls asleep in his log until he wakes up again.

I felt that if we knew a little more about Jetfire, we might learn to love him. One of Ben's friends' mothers is a marine biologist and, when she brought her son around for a play date, we asked her to identify Jetfire's species.

She told us he was a "freshwater tropical fish" - but even I knew he wasn't a smoked mackerel.

We thought Jetfire's problem might be loneliness, so we bought four small tetras to keep him company. But Jetfire is not a team player. He ignored the tetras and hid in his log. One of the tetras started swimming sideways, then died, but neither Ben nor his 15-month-old sister, Sara - nor, apparently, Jetfire - mourned the loss.

I remember I had a newt when I was 10 years old. I left him with my dad while we went on holiday to Essex so Mum could have an affair with the lodger. When I got home, the newt had escaped from his plastic container*, and I was sad for at least an hour. My parents' marriage ended a year later, although there was no evidence that the newt - or lack of him - had played any role in their separation.

My brother, my mother and I went to live in a drab two-bedroom unit with the lodger - who was now a tenant - and, as a family-building exercise, we all visited the fair, where the lodger won a goldfish, by the time-honoured means of bouncing a ping-pong ball into an empty bowl. We knew how to have fun in those days, I can tell you. We didn't need Wii or "party drugs".

One morning, we woke up to find the goldfish floating on the surface of the water, as limp and spent as my parents' relationship. I was distressed for a while, then excited by the idea that we were going to dispose of his body by flushing it down the toilet. As I said, there was no call for Nintendo or the iPhone in the early 1970s. Just give us a dead fish and a cistern and we could groove like there was no tomorrow.

The lodger is a homeowner now. He and my mum got married and still live together in England, where they have a large fish tank, full of colourful marine life.

Meanwhile, back in Australia, Sara seems intent on bringing about Jetfire's death.

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Whenever we leave her for a moment, she scuttles over to the skirting board and pulls the plug on the tank's filter. The temptation is to leave her for longer and longer periods, because I'm beginning to feel we just don't have room for a fish in our house.

*Or my dad had let him out.