

CL Miranda

with Genevieve Barlow



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Exchanges win a place in the heart for life

IMAGINE. You are 20 years old. You live on a farm that's been three generations in the family in the dry north of South Australia. It's 1961. Your destiny lies before you. You will farm stud sheep.

The Treaty of Rome in 1957 created a common market in Europe, opening up free trade between its members. The world was opening.

And then by great fortune and the fact that you are a member of the local Rural Youth Group you are whisked into the world — well to Britain, anyway — as an exchangee, hosted and sponsored by none other than P&O Cruises and the British Young Farmers. The day you turn 21 you are somewhere between Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and the Suez Canal.

You spend a month each way travelling by boat to and from Britain. You are away from home for eight months. You are treated like a king. When you arrive in England, you go on English hunts with the cruise company chairman. You are taken to Northern Ireland to see the cruise ship, *Oriana*, being built. Such is your standing that you meet the Duke of Edinburgh not once, not twice but three times, by which time he says "not you again". On your trip through Britain, farm families treat you well and kindly.

On a Loch Lomond sheep farm in Scotland you join in a host family wedding where "mad shepherds come down from the hills with their crooks and drink copious amounts of whisky".

You meet a man who is to become one of your closest friends, a man done with overseeing the 100 staff who farm the deep rich soils of his inherited farm in Worcestershire, England and who sells up and heads for the sandy flat plains east of Geraldton in Western Australia so he can do the farming himself.

The overseas youth exchange experience has a proud legacy that should be carried forward

Almost 60 years later as you slow into retirement, these memories make more than album material. Your network of fellow Rural Youth exchangees remains vast. You visit them, they visit you.

Such is Kim Kelly's experience. Now 78 and retired in Robe, he will be among the 50 or so who travel to Echuca this weekend from across Australia and New Zealand for the biannual reunion of young farmers or rural youth who were interstate and international farm exchangees in the 1960s.

Co-organiser Elaine Lees says many went on to be active in rural communities, some as state and federal MPs, others as leaders of farm organisations.

Elaine (then Hewlett), 66, recalls returning to Australia after her three-month exchange to Ontario, Canada "looking, really looking" at eucalyptus trees for the first time. Such was her awakening after being selected for an exchange in 1976 by her local Lockington Young Farmers Club. She was 24. She gave talks as an exchangee. Many emphasised how vital water was to farming in Victoria. "I would never have done it without this happening. I wouldn't have been game."

Ensay sheep and cattle farmer John Poynton went to the US and Canada for four months. He was 24 and active in the Tambo Valley Young Farmers group when the Reserve Bank of Australia sponsored his exchange in 1976. "I made lifelong friends out of that, people I still correspond with at Christmas".

Oregon-born and farm-raised Barbara Maidment, 71, says the exchange raised her awareness in ways that stay with her even now. She met her Australian husband at a former reunion of exchangees. She was 21 and a fresh science graduate when she left for Uganda in 1968.

"I'm as Caucasian as they come and where I grew up there were no people of any ethnic background, at least not in the farming community: we were pretty much white middle-class Americans.

"I remember I was having a nap one afternoon and my host brother ran off to his primary school to tell his friends he had a white woman staying in his house. I woke with this feeling that I was being watched and I looked up and there staring through the open windows were all these kids from his class."

She recalls seeing John Deere tractors with the US foreign aid mark stamped on them in paddocks in Uganda with weeds growing around them. They'd broken down and no-one could afford to replace parts.

"What they really needed were better ploughs for their oxen to pull and better hoes," she says.

These days Barbara runs a club in Margaret River, WA, where young backpackers, mostly Asian, can practise English, an idea seeded from her awareness of people's struggles elsewhere.

Today, Victorian Young Farmers doesn't appear to be very active and in NSW the Rural Youth organisation has extended the membership age to between five and 30.

Maybe government-sponsored community leadership programs have taken their place as a training ground for young rural leaders? And young farmers fund their own research trips overseas. How times have changed.

Focus on

Fungi are the unsung heroes of our forests and fields, and **IAN GILBERT** meets someone spreading the gospel about mushrooms

IN THE stillness of the Wombat State Forest, autumn sunshine glints through the forest canopy and dapples the gum trees with light, warming the crisp morning air.

This enchanted wood is a wonderland of greens and browns — but it's the teeming life below our feet that excites Alison Pouliot, environmental photographer and natural historian.

Where the casual observer sees greens and browns, Alison sees fungi and its mysterious ecosystem, spreading below and beyond the mushrooms that stand to indicate its presence. And it's a world she loves.

"I just think it's an amazing privilege to spend my days working in the fresh air," she enthuses.

From her Trentham base, Alison runs workshops and seminars on fungi, and photographing the natural world.

You might assume this is just another foraging foray, but Alison's scientific background gives these sessions a far broader relevance.

Attendees range from chefs who are concerned with matters of edibility to farmers who want to understand how fungi can affect soil structure.

"Farmers spend a fortune on fertiliser and irrigation, so they want to know what fungi can do," Alison says.

"They do want to look after their soil. I think, 'Where is their area of interest and how do I find the conduit?'"

"I found that most people respond to a story underpinned by science.

"If you give it relevance and

context, people connect with it."

The above-ground mushroom that you see is only a small part of the fungi network, which can extend a tree's capacity to glean water.

In fact, 95 per cent of plants form a symbiotic relationship with fungi.

"We just see the fruit but if you scratch around in the soil you'll see mycelium — the white stuff that latches on and extends the tree's root system," she says.

"It can get way more water, way more nutrients, and in return the tree gives the fungus a feed of sugars.

"It's a two-way relationship."

Alison's career as an ecologist took her via various government departments, including fisheries, before her love of photography was reawakened — having worked in a photographic shop as a teenager.

Having realised where her passion lay, she ran her first workshop in 2000 and now runs sessions in forests across Victoria and beyond, dividing her time between Australia and Switzerland.

Where others follow the sun, Alison follows the fungi: she heads to Europe each year for the northern hemisphere autumn and runs sessions there.

Alison grew up in Melbourne but was born in Tasmania.

Appropriately, she is inspired by Tasmanian photographers such as Peter Dombrovskis, who galvanised the Green movement in the state.

It was Rock Island Bend, Dombrovskis's striking image of the Franklin River, that appeared in an advert during the 1983 federal election campaign with the caption: "Would you vote for a party that would destroy this?"

READERS SAY ...

Let them be kids

A STUDY by the University of Western Australia found that two-thirds of Australian preschoolers are not active for the 180 minutes daily recommended by the Australian Government.

If children are not developing their age-appropriate brains, bodies

and social skills, the long-term effects mean society will pay. Too many parents have the misguided idea that children must start school later than the normal in order to achieve highly, when really the children just need to run, tumble and play actively with friends.

**Adrienne Dyall,
Yackandandah**

Plastic-free vision

WOULDN'T it be amazing if every small town in Victoria could be plastic bag-free. Cohuna is!

From little things, big things grow, and maybe big towns and cities could follow. Just a thought.

**Judith Hipwell,
Cohuna**

CLONAKILTY PUDDING COMPETITION

Originally from Ireland, Clonakilty black pudding combines traditional techniques with top-quality ingredients to create an exceptionally tasty product.

It's become popular among Australian chefs and its appeal is extending beyond the traditional breakfast menu into dishes such as risotto with black pudding, with wild mushroom and smoked bacon.

For a list of stockists visit clonakilty.com.au

We have five prize packs comprising three 200g packs black pudding, two 200g packs white pudding, hessian jute cooler bag, apron, spatula and recipe card, each of them worth \$75.

Prizes will be express-posted to winners.

To enter, write to Miranda about a regional issue that interests or concerns you.



Send your entries to:
The Weekly Times Clonakilty Competition
PO Box 14693, Melbourne VIC 8001
Email countryliving@theweeklytimes.com.au

**Entries
close May 1**

