

‘City Meets Country Tour’ A Rotary Heritage Cluster Project

*I love a sunburnt country,
A land of sweeping plains,
Of ragged mountain ranges,
Of droughts and flooding rains.*

*I love her far horizons,
I love her jewel-sea,
Her beauty and her terror –
The wide brown land for me!*

Dorothea McKellar (1885-1968) never stood on a ‘lunette’ at Corop, Victoria, overlooking the dried up landscape bed of Lake Cooper. A dried lake that less than 10 years ago hosted the annual Victorian Water Ski Championships, speedboat racing, fishing and other water-based activities. Once a significant catchment area and an irrigation lake. And yet the words of Dorothea McKellar’s iconic poem, ‘My Country’, penned in the 1870’s, tumbled through my mind as I gazed out at that lunar landscape, that water-less troubled vista and watched the wind-blown soil, lifted from the lake bottom, blow towards me. The soil forming the ‘lunette’ (a hump of soil) was once part of that lake bed before it was dumped by the wind and banked around the lake shore, encroaching on neighbouring paddocks. The picnic areas, walking track, and boundary fences all covered; holiday and farm houses now caked in the red dust from what was Lake Cooper.

The little township of Corop (Corop means Brolga), in the Shire of Campaspe, had been home to 330 people. Farmers; grain growers, cattle and sheep farmers; tomato growers for the Heinz Co. cannery. Now there are only 30 people left in Corop. Like the wind with the soil, the drought has uprooted them too; driven them away from their homes, from their livelihoods, their business’. Blown about to who knows where. The local Co-op store is still open. But only just.

As a Rotary District D9800 initiative, DG Jim Studebaker suggested that each City Cluster connect with a country town in our District to see how we could assist our country cousins during this prolonged drought. The Heritage Cluster Presidents’ from the Rotary Clubs of Brunswick, Carlton, Collingwood, Fitzroy & Richmond unanimously & immediately took up the challenge, with Rochester & the Campaspe Shire their allocated area.

The 9 members of the Rotary Club of Rochester embraced the visit of 43 city friends on the weekend of the 16th and 17th May, with “good ol’ fashioned” country hospitality, along with an eye-opening program of events.

Saturday's sumptuous lunch on arrival was courtesy of the local CWA! The Saturday itinerary included boarding a coach to visit an irrigation farm followed by a working dairy farm, both within the Rochester district. To meet those farmers and their families and hear and see at first-hand the drought-driven issues they face daily was sobering. Their stress, struggles and fatigue were clear to us all and, as one, our hearts reached out to them. Their courage and commitment in the face of adversity to their beloved land, their animals and family members was inspiring. The heartbreak of having to sell off healthy, productive stock – often hand-reared - because the ongoing cost of hand-feeding is crippling.

We thanked them sincerely for hosting us on their properties. We traveled back to Rochester deep in thought - lost for the 'right' words to express our feelings more succinctly. Stands of dead trees stood silently like sentinels along the roadside. Dead old trees, many planted by the pioneers to provide shade and beauty and enhancement of this dry area.

*Core of my heart, my country!
Her pitiless blue sky,
When, sick at heart, around us
We see the cattle die -*

That evening over 80 people dined at the Rochester Tavern and heard more earnest speakers, farmers; social workers; health workers; outline the drastic situation resulting from over 12 years of drought and the extreme emotional, economic and human costs. From being one of the food-bowls of Victoria the Campaspe District has become a dustbowl!

Sunday we met at the Elmore Events Centre to inspect the RC Rochester Driver Training Complex. What an inspiring Club project! Then on to Corop to view the dry lake and hear first-hand from Corop locals. Sunday's gourmet fellowship BBQ was catered for by the Corop Community Action Group at Lake Cooper Estate Winery.

AG Chris Wang expressed special thanks and appreciation to RC Rochester President, Ray Lewis, Community Chair, Heather Watson, their fellow club members and families, along with Allannah Jenkins, a local social worker and farmer. He presented Allannah with \$3,000 worth of separate IGA food vouchers to be distributed to local families in need. We drove away Sunday afternoon with a far better understanding of this sobering and dire situation. Bonds have now been forged between the City's Heritage Cluster group and their country friends, with more projects and fellowship opportunities to be announced.

*But then the grey clouds gather,
And we can bless again
The drumming of an army,
The steady soaking rain.*

<http://www.dorotheamackellar.com.au/>



Fellowship with Rochester Rotary Club



Speakers at Dinner



Allanah Jenkins briefs Rotarians



Visit to a local Dairy Farm



Rotarians tour the Martins' Farm



Annie Wysham with Mrs Martin & child



The Attendees on the Rochester Rotary Club visit