

THE INDIAN HAWKER

In the early years of the 20th century many of the farms were visited by tradespeople delivering their merchandise. Bread was often delivered, as was meat. 'Bob the Baker' or 'Bill the Butcher' was a regular visitor in his horse and cart. There were also hawkers who came around perhaps a couple of times a year to display and sell their wares.

Frances (Forbes) Queale was a child in Merricks in the 1920s. Her parents had a dairy farm on the corner of Stanleys and Merricks Roads. She recalled:

"A travelling draper, a baker and a butcher called, in their horse and cart. Another kind of draper who visited the district in a covered wagon pulled by a large, slow, old horse was an Indian who wore a colourful turban wound around his head. He looked a bit scary but mum told us [her and her two brothers] not to be afraid of him. He always asked if he could camp for the night in our yard. He really was a kind old man and displayed beautiful linen to Mum. She often bought things from him."

The exotic Indian or Afghan hawkers made an indelible impression on the minds of the district's youngsters. Betsy (VanSuylen) Cook whose parents had a farm along Stumpy Gully Road also had stories about the Indian hawkers. "There was a swarthy, dark-eyed, turbaned man who came around visiting the various farms from time to time. He had a horse-drawn wagon from which he ran his business. He was what was termed a draper, selling fabrics, threads and such. He was always invited to a meal by my father's family. One time they were having cold meats. The table was spread with the usual fare for a meal, including a container of jam. The hawker, probably thinking it was chutney, spread it on his meat to the amusement of the children. Their parents' warning frowns stifled any laughter.

The youngest of the children were somewhat intimidated by this stranger, who would come into the farm leading his horse. On one of his visits, as he turned into the driveway of the farm, my Aunt Elizabeth who was a small girl at the time, was nearer to the gate than to the house. She ran off in fright, calling for her mother. The hawker ran after her, calling out, 'Missy. Missy. I won't hurt you.' Being pursued only made the child more terrified and she ran all the harder. He really was a kind old man and he was upset that he had scared her. He didn't mean to, it was just because he was different. All the same they must have looked forward to his visits because he brought all sorts of things they couldn't get elsewhere."

The women on the farms did indeed look forward to the hawker turning into the driveway. His array of goods included pieces of fine fabric, buttons and bootlaces, pins and needles, threads and ribbons. His visit was a welcome one.

Ilma Hackett

Balnarring & District Historical Society



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A hawker displays his wares at “Gleneira” in Flinders.
Photograph: courtesy Flinders District Historical Society

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