



# Citrep

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Newsletter of the Murray Valley Citrus Board

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Robert Mansell

## Chairman's Report

### Welcome to the March 2006 edition of Citrep.

The Navel season is nearly upon us, and as we reflect on the worst season we can remember, we can only look forward to a good season to give us encouragement for the future. Most growers are wondering what their saviour might be in the future. Is China going to take the extra Navel production and bring supply and demand back into balance? Will we be able to get through the tough protocol that demands cold disinfestation at 1°C and area freedom from Fullers Rose Weevil? Talk about a challenge.

A meeting was held at the MVCB on 30th January 2006, comprising Chairmen and Chief Executives of the southern regional citrus growing areas, to discuss some of the challenges facing our industry. All organizations were fully represented.

The following issues were discussed:

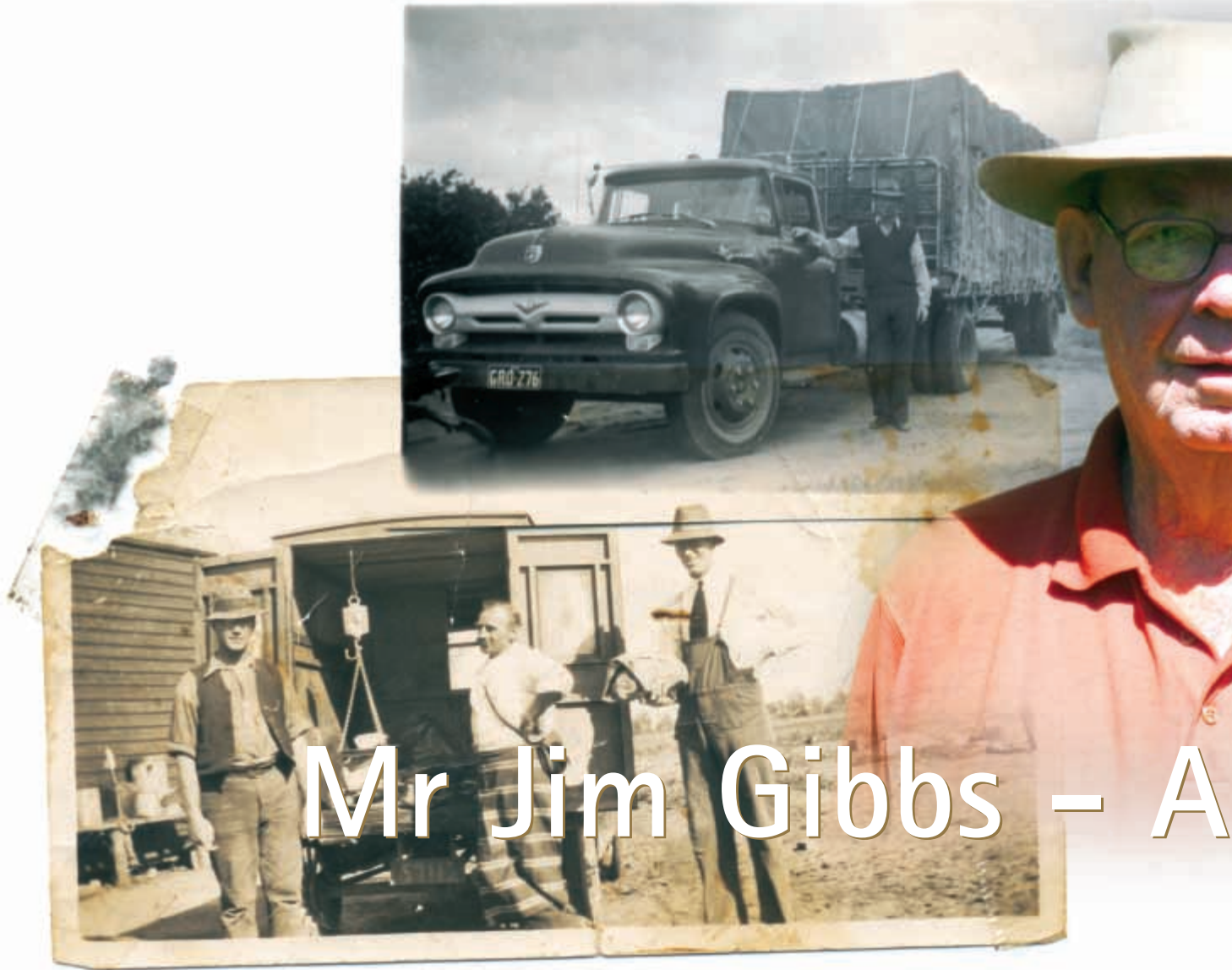
- *Concern over the increasing costs of legislative compliance on the citrus industry.* These include superannuation, Workcover and OH&S issues. In addition, AQIS red tape and inspections, fruit fly area freedom, food safety, MRL testing and export protocols all add to our industry costs. Compliance costs are running at 30% of all on-farm costs, which is a burden we can do without, particularly when our southern hemisphere competitors are not subject to the same level of compliance costs.
- *The need to review the anti-dumping legislation.*  
The three state Boards resolved to take up the issue with the Minister for Agriculture.

We have recently been advised that the Federal government has agreed to seek industry input for a review of delivery and administration of the nations anti-dumping laws. The MVCB and Sunraysia Citrus Growers have lobbied hard to ensure the legislation is amended, so that swift action can be taken against countries that dump product on our shores.

- *Information exchange between growers, packers, exporters, Boards and ACG Inc.* A web based information exchange system is currently being developed by ACG. It will provide up to date market and harvest information to participants, to enable better decision-making throughout the citrus industry.
- *The need to identify new markets particularly for 2nd grade fruit was high on the agenda.* India and the Middle East were identified as having the most potential.
- *Over-run strategies need to be put in place to keep cheap fruit off local markets.* Last year we saw large quantities of low-grade fruit flooding domestic markets, distorting prices and significantly reducing returns for higher-grade fruit. As an industry we can't afford to allow that to recur. It is proposed to call a meeting of packers, exporters and processors within the next few weeks, to develop strategies to address the over-run issue.

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Murray Valley Citrus Board  
PO Box 1384 Mildura Victoria 3502  
Telephone (03) 5051 0500  
Facsimile (03) 5021 1905  
Email [executive@mvcitrus.org.au](mailto:executive@mvcitrus.org.au)  
Website [www.mvcitrus.org.au](http://www.mvcitrus.org.au)



# Mr Jim Gibbs – A

Clockwise L-R: Thomson travelling butcher shop, Fully loaded lease lend Chev truck ready for market, Jim Gibbs, Load of lettuce at Castle Bros. 1940, Steve Gibbs & Les Irwin at the 1st camp 1921.

The publication, 'Citrus Growing in Mildura and Surrounding Districts' (compiled and published for the Mildura and District Co-operative Association, 1955) identifies the diverse production that had emerged in the Nangiloc-Iraak Colignan-Karadoc area at that time.

'This area expanded its citrus plantings in recent years and is entirely of private enterprise origin, with settlers installing pumps on the river to provide for irrigation of their groves and for the production of vegetables. A speciality has been the growing of early lettuces which have earned for the district a valuable position in the Metropolitan Markets.

The establishment of a most successful citrus nursery at Nangiloc and the enterprise of other growers from the older irrigation areas in developing the potentialities of this section, have made a notable contribution to the expansion of irrigation along this part of the Murray.'

This extract sets the scene for my recent discussion with Mr Jim Gibbs given that the time sits somewhere in the middle of his considerable involvement with the development of the citrus industry in Colignan.

Jim outlined some interesting history from the outset. Colignan was the name of an aboriginal chief.

Between 1921 and 26, soldier settlement blocks were surveyed from Carwarp Station, from the Kulkynne boundary to where Castle Crossing Road now runs. The land was mainly scrub and pine. There were no roads, only a track from Kulkynne to Mildura. The parcel of land given to each settler was one square mile, (640 acres), said to be sufficient to earn a decent living. Not all blocks were of equal quality. One block had a 300-acre salt pan. Another was seven miles from the river, which meant a great deal of time was spent carting water for the animals and domestic purposes.

Water was lifted manually, until the State Rivers put in three windmills along the stretch of river at Colignan, Castles Crossing and Nangiloc.



# Colignan Pioneer

There were 5 permanent fishermen on the river, two or three of them having horse drawn carts to take the fish to Nowingi, about 2 1/2 hours away. They brought back any mail. The fish were packed into containers about the size of a clothes basket and covered with gum leaves, to protect them on their trip by train to Melbourne. (One of the fishermen, Gus, faced with the death of his horse, pushed his six baskets of fish out to Nowingi to meet the train.)

In 1922, there were no women in Colignan. The first houses were built about 1924 and women started to arrive. Men camped on their blocks, built shelters and proceeded to clear the land with axes, rollers, bullock and horse teams. The scrub was rolled down, allowed to dry and then burnt.

Settlers cut pine posts to fence their holdings. Extra posts were cut, stacked at the river bank and taken to Red Cliffs or Mildura by paddle steamer for use in trellising on the

fruit blocks. (A valuable source of income for these early pioneers.)

There were also two or three timber cutters felling timber for the steam-driven pumps in the irrigation areas of Red Cliffs and Mildura and also for the paddle steamers.

In 1924, a slaughter yard was set up by a Mr Thompson, on a corner block of the Colignan Township. He supplied meat to the settlers from his travelling butcher's shop.

'A day's outing then might go like this - an early morning start by horse and cart to Boonoonar, where the horse was tethered and the family boarded the train for Mildura. Some people booked a room at the Grand Hotel, which was used as their base for the day. In the evening, it was back on the train for the return trip to Boonoonar and then off to Colignan in the horse and cart, arriving well after dark.'

In 1925, Thompson built a store and Post Office at Boonoonar, which by then had a railway station. The Castle family later purchased this store.

Mail would arrive at Boonoonar twice a week, Tuesday and Saturday, and Mr Harold Brown bought a truck and carted mail, bread and other requirements to Colignan. Bread came from Mildura and meat from Melbourne.

By 1926, there were sufficient people at Colignan to warrant building a hall. This was built on a township block at the corner of what is now Lewis Road. The hall was later used as the first Colignan school. Some of the pupils were fourteen years old and had not attended school before. They proved quite a handful for the first teacher who was only eighteen years old herself.

## Mr Jim Gibbs – A Colignan Pioneer *Cont'd...*

Jim's father, Stephen Leslie Gibbs returned to Australia from the First World War in April 1918. Jim was born in 1925.

'I have been here for a fair while – probably the man who has been around the longest. Our family were among the original landholders in Colignan, planted the first citrus in Nangiloc and were the first to grow commercial citrus in this area.'

Mr Robert Mansell, Chairman, MVCB states that Mr Gibbs is highly regarded as the local historian for the district. 'Jim is a real gentleman. Everyone looks to him for knowledge and reliable advice and he remains vitally interested and involved in his local area. He has a brilliant memory and Colignan is in his head and his heart.'

Jim lives on a section of his father's original Soldier's Settlement allocation (1921) of 590 acres. This was one of the first blocks (Blocks 8 and 8A) of 28 allocated in Colignan at the time.

1929 saw the worst drought yet experienced by the new settlers and life became very difficult. Any wheat that grew was required for feed. It was taken to Mildura, milled and brought back to feed the animals.

'The virgin land was all Mallee and pine. My father cut it all down with an axe and began to grow wheat with some success. After the 1929 drought there was a shortage of wheat and the Government, through the then Closer Settlement Board, agreed to pay ten shillings a bushel. However, this created an oversupply and the price dropped to one shilling and nine pence a bushel.

As a result, by 1937 the Victorian Government was pushing people off the land. Landowners were given a choice. They could take one hundred pounds and go, or shift their house and go without the one hundred pounds. As a result, only one house was moved to Mildura and the Board sold the rest. The offer was made to people who had not paid enough money up-front to be able to hold their property. As a result, only four blocks remained.

The Government also stated that if a landowner signed a purchase lease they would be given seven blocks on an annual lease. (The Millewa and Carwarp areas also came under the same requirements.) The growers fought against the proposal and eventually freehold was granted.'

In 1933, a school was opened in a building on Moore's property, and remained open until 1938.

Initially, the Gibbs ran sheep and grew a small quantity of wheat. They established a small pump on the river driven by a Bamford engine.

'Dad first planted orange trees in 1928 and some of the original trees are still here. Harold Brown and my father purchased two hundred trees each (100 of Valencias and 100 Navel variety) from Catts' Nursery in Sydney, but Harold Brown's property went under in the 1931 flood.

From about 1930 to 1936, Mr Ray Licence had the passenger and parcel service run to Mildura.

In 1936, Castles commenced using channel irrigation, the first in the district. They grew crops of lettuce, carrots, peas and beans. When children were leaving school and asked what they wanted to do, often the reply would be '*work at Castles*'.

In this same year there was a passenger and parcel service, twice a week to Mildura, in a covered truck, which carried seven or eight passengers. By this time some settlers had their own cars and others still relied on their faithful old horses and carts.

By 1937, only four of the original 26 settler families remained... Browns, Gibbs, Irwins and McKenzies.

Also in 1937, when the lease came up, Dad bought a windmill on the river and located it down behind where the Colignan school then was. The windmill could fill a 5,000 gallon tank twice a day providing sufficient water to irrigate the trees.'

Robert Mansell acknowledges this ability to provide early furrow irrigation on the sandhills and states that the Gibbs family became one of the successful dryland farmers through diversification that came with the ability to get water to crops when available.

Jim left school in the year World War 2 started. He wanted to grow oranges and vegetables from the outset. Oranges were sold to the Ramsays' citrus outlet in Red Cliffs and praise was forthcoming for 'the beautiful oranges' produced on the Gibbs' property.

Throughout the War the family grew vegetables (carrots, peas, lettuce and rockmelons) for the Australian Armed Forces.

'It was really good money then. We pumped water with a Southern Cross (20hp) pump from the river to the top of the bank and transferred it by channel across the road. Later, we constructed a channel around the property and irrigated from the high point. I started carting vegetables to Melbourne in 1945, and did my last trip in 1984.'

Jim emphasised that during the War the Government pushed growers to produce all they could, particularly vegetables. Consequently, the Gibbs family became one of the three main market gardeners in the area, in conjunction with the Castle and Irwin holdings.

'In 1938 Castles began carting their own produce to Melbourne by truck.

During World War 2, all the blocks in Colignan were used as market gardens, to supply the army with food for the troops. When a shortage of quality seed for the required vegetables developed, the Colignan farmers became seed merchants. Carrots and lettuces were grown for seed, with a bag over each plant. Twice a week, for about a month, the plants would be shaken and seed collected.

The commercial market gardens gave Colignan a great financial boost and after the War, a lot of vegetables continued to come out of the area. Everyone learnt a lot from the Castles in terms of vegetable growing. (As stated earlier, many local youngsters went and worked for them when they left school.)

In many ways, it meant that you grew the produce and transported it by truck to Melbourne. I had a grower's stand in the old Victoria Market (Stall B9) from 1945.

I carried the produce to market on a 4 ton lease lend Chev truck with a gas producer on it. A rail strike at the time was the catalyst for this development. I was allocated 11 gallons of petrol for the trip and this was enough to get me down and back with the gas producer attached.

However, a stipulation was that you could not come home empty and were required to load supplies from Carlton United (who also supplied the army). The beer was brought back to the Working Man's Club in Mildura because this organization supplied the air force stationed at Mildura. The speed limit at the time was 30 miles per hour. I had never seen so much money in my life and can remember counting 32 trucks of lettuce from this area, in the market'

In 1945, after the war, application was made to the Government to open up Graces and Buxtons Bends, for returned servicemen. Six blocks were established in Graces Bend and eight in Buxtons Bend. Orange trees were planted on these blocks, with vegetables grown between the rows of trees. (7 to 10 acre market garden allotments.)



Gus Kakoschke – a fisherman on the river in 1921 at Colignan.

1947 and 48 saw the Castle and Irwin blocks cut up into smaller sections and planted with citrus.

1967 saw the first plantings, in any quantity, of grapes.

'While growing vegetables we planted some 20 acres of citrus. In 1960 we bought a citrus grader and bagged oranges in plastic bags and took them to Melbourne. Even though we could not sell anything over half a case in a plastic bag, we eventually grew fewer vegetables and took more oranges.

I could have sold 3 truckloads a week if I had them. I always made sure that there were green leaves in the bags to maintain the fresh appearance of the product for the citrus inspectors at the time. However, growers were eventually stopped selling their oranges in this way.'

(When Jim's brother Bill, suffered a heart attack, the family sold out in 1984/85. Jim retained some land where he built his current house.)

Jim relates that big development started in the Nangiloc/Colignan area in the late 1970's. 'When this first happened it created a lot of work, but as time has passed it seems the large holdings only want picking labour and overall employment demand has dropped away.

I used to know everyone, but now it is hard to know who is who, in terms of land ownership. Wine grapes have been the biggest change to this area since 1937. Sheep and wheat have gone and there are some 2500 acres under vines now.'

Throughout his long association with Colignan, Jim has maintained a strong involvement with his community.

'There had to be a sense of community from the beginning. We struggled, but were able to progress.

Before the war, a cricket club was formed and became a part of the Pioneer Association, which also comprised teams from Boonoonar, Ginquam, Carwarp, Yatpool and Karadoc. The Pioneer Association continued until the Red Cliffs Cricket Association was formed. Overall, there had to be a high level of co-operation as it was the only way you could keep going.'

For many years, Jim was a citrus delegate from the Colignan area. As such, he is concerned that in another ten years time, the smaller operators will be gone from Colignan.

'It is just getting too hard. Money is the difference. You get a lot of money today, but it doesn't go anywhere.'

Looking to the future, Jim considers that unless the citrus industry becomes tariff free it will struggle. 'Perhaps we listen to America too much and are frightened to do anything to offend her. If concentrate hadn't come in, the industry would be thriving.'

Like so many of our citrus industry pioneers, it was a privilege to spend time with Mr Jim Gibbs. He remains actively involved in the Bowling Club, the Red Cliffs Historical Society and has been on the committee of the Mildura Harness Racing Club for the past 22 years.

Jim still enjoys relatively good health and often acts as a volunteer driver to overcome the lack of public transport in Colignan.

Above all else, he continues to enjoy fishing on the river which means so much to him.

As he states, Colignan has always been home and he wouldn't live anywhere else. The respect and credibility extended to Jim Gibbs can be summed up in the words of Robert Mansell. 'Go and see Jim if you want to know what's going on in the district.' Many continue to do so.

**E. Warhurst Compiler**