

## Interview with Ron Gray, Woolgoolga

**Don Clinch, 5th July 2012**

This interview consists of a history of the Gray Family but also involves the history of the banana industry in Woolgoolga as it involved the Gray family. Ron has a distinguished record in the industry.

His Great Grandfather Tom Gray settled on land at Nana Glen. His Grandfather Tom Gray came to Woolgoolga and grew bananas up Woolgoolga Creek road, and lived on the plantation in a house he built for his family, buying the land from the local blacksmith Bill Firth whose "Smithy" was adjacent to the Temple in River Street. Tom moved into town in 1946. Ron's father "Clarrie" Gray later took over the plantation and son, Ron, followed in his father's footsteps as was the custom in those days. Ron has been growing bananas for fifty nine and a half years, and has just retired.

So six generations of the family including Ron's children and their children have lived in the town. His grandmother on his Mother's side was born on a farm at Upper Corindi. His mother has lived in the town or its environs since birth.

Ron believes that there was more to do in the 1950 – 1960 era for young people and greater interest in making your own fun. They tended to form groups of ten to fifteen who got together in their parents' home for music sessions, and they attended all the dances and balls between Bonville and Halfway Creek during the season. They did not patronise Clubs and Pubs. Christmas time at the Beach Reserve dances and concerts and other forms of entertainment – woodchops and the like – was the highlight of entertainment. Football was always an attraction and the Woolgoolga Juniors won the area competition in 1954.

He speaks in 2012 with a note of wistful contentment.

There were other families of older identities in town in his childhood, who seemed to have shifted into Woolgoolga and he names the Charlie Newmans, Charlie Gandertons (about 1928), Frank Hewitt, and no doubt there were others.

**The banana industry:** Ron has seen this industry in its ascent, and in its decline, over his lifetime. In the mid seventies Coffs Harbour / Woolgoolga was producing 95% of the Australian consumption of Cavendish bananas. In 1988 Queensland entered the market and materially influenced the local production. Now in 2012, the local area produces from 5 to 7% of Australia's needs.

In early times bananas were sent to market in wooden cases which were nailed together quite a lot of time by the grower's wife and children. Before the railway came to Coffs Harbour, bananas were sent to Sydney by ship. But the convenience and speed of rail, and the cessation of shipping coming to Woolgoolga ultimately made rail the way to go. The wooden cases contained one and a half bushels. In time the size was reduced to one and one third bushels, then to one and a quarter bushels and finally one bushel per case. Later in a great departure from tradition the 15 Kg cardboard carton was introduced, and it was reduced again to the currently used 13 Kg pack.

Ron has shared his experience and time with his fellow growers. His record of service with the banana industry is outstanding.

The Foundation Director of the original Banana Growers Federation was a Woolgoolga identity, Charlie Ganderton, who settled in the town about the time that Grandfather Gray came. Another Director was Stan Holloway. Ron also served a term of nine and a half years during which he was Chairman for three and a half years. He also served as Chairman of Australia's Banana Growers Council for two and a half years. During that term he Chaired an industry meeting sponsored by the United Nations at the Gold Coast. He counts that as the highlight of a very happy time at the top of the industry.

At times he was away from home as many as 180 days a year.

In 1955 there were 55 producers between Sherwood Road (Upper Corindi Road) and Grafton. In 1995 there were 247 plantations between Bucca Road and the Clarence River and over 400 between Bucca Road and the Bellinger River. In the mid 70's in NSW there were 3,300 growers working over 33,000 acres. This data is recorded in a time- capsule laid down by the Coffs Harbour City Council.

There have been a number of disastrous periods in the industry, the worst being bushfires in the summer. The 1944 fire which started in Black Gully about 5 Km from town started on a very hot day with a hot westerly wind. In ten minutes wind driven burning leaf debris was blown eastwards and dropped into many plantations nearer the coast and decimated a vast area right up to the hilly area which can be seen from the Pacific Highway. After the first break out, there was nothing could be done to stop the conflagration.

There have been other disastrous outbreaks with similar results.

Banana stools start life as a "sucker" or small shoot. They are planted in September - November. Harvesting can be expected in June - August of the next year.

Ron's mind is a storehouse of historical fact. He has reported that an Aunt on his mother's side, Mrs. Jacq. Ganderton (another member of a pioneering family ) now 96, has been recording her impressions of life in Woolgoolga in book form, which may be released shortly.