

## Thomas Mitchell October 14 1903 to February 14, 1989

Tommy Mitchell was born In 1903, just 3 and a bit years after the British Colonies in Australia finally agreed to federate and Australia became a nation. He was the second of Charlie and Blanche Mitchell's four children. Like David before him, he had only one given name - Thomas - after his grandfather, Thomas Blayney, a pioneer winegrower in the Goulburn Valley. The third and fourth children, Helen and Blanche, were given two names, although Blanche only ever wanted one - Billie.

Tommy's early years were spent at Cave Hill. It must have been a child's paradise. A farm and farmyard complete with factories for cheese, butter, ham and bacon, and soap manufacture. And the wonderful limeworks. Scores of horses and drays, hauling limestone from the quarry and dumping it into wood fired kilns. And a private railway bringing firewood from the nearby hills to fuel the kilns. Family pictures of children clowning in punts on an unnamed lake or lagoon, of picnics in fern surrounded clearings and beside rivers are further clues to a most memorable childhood.

When Tommy was about 11 it was time for more serious pursuits and he was started as a boarder at the Grange School, South Yarra. The following year he and David were transferred to Geelong Grammar School at Corio. It was a stoic existence. Each morning the boys would rise and walk half a mile for a swim in the sea baths on Limeburner's Bay - pleasant enough in summer, but a real trial in Geelong's bitter winter. Nonetheless, he enjoyed the experience, as most before and after him have. Term holidays were spent at home, or with friends on some of Australia's most famous grazing properties throughout the Western District and Riverina.

In 1922, his final year of school, Tommy, very much the outside bet, got up to win the school one mile open championship and later the same day took out the one mile handicap. He went on to represent the School at the Public Schools Sports and was awarded school colours for athletics. In the same year he was a house prefect and was awarded house colours for cricket, football and athletics.

The year after leaving school an uncle bet him £50 that he could not travel around the world on the name amount of money. Within months Tom was on his way, working his outward passage as a ship's steward. He spent time on each of the five continents working and travelling. His time in America coincided with the period of prohibition. When he finally returned home almost 2 years later his uncle was dead. He didn't recover the wager, but he thanked his uncle posthumously for a wonderful adventure.

Back in Melbourne he went to work with a company, led by Sir John Monash and formed as a partnership between the David Mitchell Estate and Monash's own company to use the new technology of reinforced concrete to construct buildings and bridges. The venture later became the Monier Concrete Co.

During this period he played hockey with the Elsternwick Hockey Club and was selected to play with the Victorian A grade team for several seasons.

The 30's brought depression and in its early early years, Tom gathered together several agencies, including a brand of hairbrush and Passiona soft drink and headed for Hong Kong where he traded for 6 months. It was a fascinating experience and he developed a lifelong passion for Chinese food.

On his return to Australia he got up business in Lilydale and took on other agencies.

He soon became involved in community affairs. He was elected to Lillydale Shire Council and was its President for several years.

He also served as President of the Lilydale Football Club and during that period Lilydale won the Yarra Valley League premiership twice.

He was actively involved with the Lilydale Bush Fire Brigade and was presented with an illuminated address for his efforts during the disastrous 1939 fires.

He was a Justice of the Peace and for many years took his place on the local bench for this most thankless task.

During those years, he also worked a small gold mine (The Morning Star) at Kevington. Over the following 4 decades he was involved with several other gold mining ventures including the reopening of the A1 Consolidated Mine at Gaffney's Creek late in the 1960's.

Golf became his main sporting interest and he became founding secretary of the Croydon Golf Club. One day returning home to Lilydale from golf at Croydon his car was forced off the road into a telephone pole not far up the hill from what was Burt's corner. Tommy was badly injured and spent many months recuperating in Mount St. Evans Hospital. It was here that his sister Billie, herself a nurse, introduced him to another young nurse whose parents called Helen Eugene Wood, but whose friends called "Woodie".

Tom and Helen married in 1939 and soon after bought the modest cottage they chose to call 'Doonside'.

War was declared in the same year and Tom left his business and joined the Australian Intelligence Service. During the last years of the war he supervised the shipment of war goods to Bougainville.

Tom and Helen's first child Jenny was born in 1941. John, their second in 1944.

At the end of the war Tom resumed business in Lilydale in premises in the delicensed Artis' commercial Hotel. He took on the agency for Harry Ferguson's new small tractor. Many of the post war Italian migrants were moving into the hills around Lilydale where the rich red soil was perfect for market gardening. The little Fergie tractor was ideal for their purposes and Tom's business flourished. In the early 1950's he built a new showroom in the Main Street. It was the main street's first large modern building and a great party was thrown for its opening.

Several years later Massey Harris moved to take over the Ferguson company. The Ferguson dealership would become redundant. Tom set up a new partnership with Don Hudson which they called Rural Tractors, built new premises and took on the Massey Harris dealership. They now had a foot in both camps. When Massey Harris takeover was completed, the first business was closed down. The new business grew and thrived and for several years was the most successful Massey Harris dealership in Victoria.

In 1956 Jenny and John went off to boarding school. Tom and Helen were liberated.

The following year they made their first journey overseas together, visiting the United Kingdom and Europe. Over the next 25 years they were to return to those countries often, and saw most others as well. Interestingly it was only on one of their last trips overseas that Tommy finally agreed to visit America again and then only a few cities, for a short time. The experience of prohibition was still clearly in his mind. He also showed no interest in seeing China again after his visits in the early 1920's and 1930's.

They were fascinated and fascinating travellers. They studied their subject widely before setting out. They shunned five star hotels and instead sought lodgings and company which better represented their host country. Tommy became a dilettante photo journalist and during the 1950's and 1960's, the early decades of television, was eagerly sought after to give slide shows to friends, clubs and other groups.

During these years he stepped back from the day to day business of Rural Tractors, concentrating instead on Cave Hill and his own investments. In the 1950's the last of grandfather David Mitchell's heirs died and the David Mitchell Estate was released from the trustees who had managed it under the terms of his will. A board of directors was appointed, Tom being the representative for the members of Charlie Mitchell's branch of the family. He remained a board member until his death and was chairman for 12 of those years. The major task before the board was to change the firmly entrenched attitude that existing plant should be patched up, for fear of making a capital commitment, to an attitude that a substantial investment must be made both to modernise the existing plant and to establish new operations if the business were to survive into the future. It is in no small part due to Tommy's foresight and determination that David Mitchell Limited has developed into a highly successful business with interests in 5 states and territories. In 1988 Tom was made president of the company in recognition of that contribution.

Tom and Helen left their beloved Doonside in 1987. The modest timber cottage had been extended a little, and in the bare paddocks which surrounded it they had established one of Lilydale's most beautiful gardens.

They had come to realise that Doonside was now beyond their collective ability to maintain. So they moved to a new Doonside where they had more time for each other and for their family and friends.

It was apparent that Tommy was ill last Christmas. By the end of January it was diagnosed that he had an advanced leukemia and that he may live for up to 2 months. Mercifully, the end came much sooner.

When Jenny and I were at boarding school we received regular letters from both our parents, sometimes from home, more often from far way places with strange sounding names. Helen's handwriting was beautifully formed - she was no doubt the darling of her handwriting teacher. Tommy must have been the despair of her. His writing was a series of uprights connected by a scrawl which looked like diminishing radio waves. The uprights were the only clue to what the word may be. He always closed his letters with "your loving father, Tom" but at first glance those words looked like "your big father, Tom". Both sentiments say a lot about Tommy Mitchell's life.

For it was a big life. Eighty five years, spanning most of this century, starting sixteen years after our first centenary and ending one year after our second, embracing 2 world wars, the moon landing and who knows how many premierships for Melbourne, his football team. Eighty five years, all fully and fulfillingy used.

But above all he was a most loving husband, father and friend. Of the many tributes we have received over the last few days this one seems to say it best: "One meets in a lifetime certain special people - your father being one. Wherever he went and whoever he met he had this gifted way of making one feel he was genuinely interested and really brought out the best in one."