

Guy Prior – A Young Boy’s Hero



Guy Prior outside the farm house on Blore’s dairy farm on the Cundle Plains.

Only my parents would have a greater influence on my early, and possibly later life than Guy Prior. This was not because of the fact that he was one of our family’s closest male friends. My adoration for this man, who was the same age as my father, evolved because he was a very colourful, physical person and was a living example of the men who were scattered among the many folk tales of my father. These two men, and the overlapping stories of my mother, plus her enthusiasm for literature and historical knowledge, sowed the seeds for my future passion.

My parents met the Priors through mutual friends by the name of Lukins, Eric (known as ‘Pan’), Vi and their baby daughter Marie. My earliest memory of Dot and Guy Prior was when I was a

little under five years-of-age and my parents and the Lukins had met at the Priors to play cards. Marie was in a pram or bassinette and was just beginning to talk.

We lived at 120a Victoria Street, Taree and the Priors rented a house only a couple of blocks away, tucked a short stone's throw from the highway – (Victoria Street was part of the Pacific Highway) – on the corner of Florence Street and Florence Lane. The Lukins had a milk bar on Victoria Street nearby, like us, on the riverside of the highway.

At the time (1942) Guy was working at the Peter's milk factory at Chatham. In reflection, this was an unusual occupation for a man who was one of the few who was a born-to-be dairy farmer. Many believe that dairy farmers are born, not made; the seven-day week, early rises in the morning, the floods and dry times, the cropping, the extremely low monetary return in those days and the hard physical work of seven days a week and no holidays, were not the choices of most men and women. Horses were still the main means of transport and for ploughing paddocks and all other heavy farm work. Tractors, though not unknown, were very few and far between. Electricity was connected in the towns, but its magic was yet to pulse out to the majority of farms.

Except for a few incidents I know very little about Guy's early life. He was born Guy Uriel Prior in 1906 at Albion Park on the south coast of New South Wales. At some time his family found its way to the Hunter Valley area. Here he became a well-known roughrider, winning at least one blue ribbon for his buckjumping ability. It could have been his horsemanship and accompanying no-nonsense, tough and independent manner that attracted a beautiful redheaded lady who was to become his beloved 'little Dottie'.

Margaret Dorothy Horadam was born at Singleton in 1914. People thought it possible that her most unusual surname was a misspelling by an immigration officer or other government official when the family first arrived in Australia, as was a common occurrence, particularly names of Celtic origin. Perhaps the family name had been Hourigan. Horadam is not a common name and a search on the Internet shows that the large majority of people with that name reside in the Hunter region of New South Wales.

Guy and Dot were married in the Hunter Valley, probably West Maitland, in 1937. However they met, their courtship was threatened by the common bigotry of the time. Redheaded Dot was of Irish Catholic ancestry and Guy was of Orange background, his family refusing to accept her as a daughter-in-law. Guy made his decision and his last words ever to his family were spoken as he stood on their verandah step with a saddle over one shoulder and a suitcase in one hand. 'Good-bye and bugger yers!' was his farewell. Guy always had a colourful turn of phrase.

No one could ever claim that Guy was religious, however he always respected that his wife was and supported her by attending Easter Mass with her every year. Guy was a very hard and tough man, however his love and tenderness for his 'little Dottie' was sincere and wonderful to see.

Two years after their marriage, and now living at Taree, Dot and Guy's happiness was shattered when her pregnancy resulted in her giving birth to a stillborn boy. Dot was unable to have further pregnancies, which further added to their despair. This terrible experience, I believed, had a life-long effect on Dot. Consequently Guy became very protective of her and spoilt her in any way he could.

No doubt living and working in town, for a bushman such as he, was foreign to his previous way of life and Guy found it difficult. One day at smoko at the milk factory a fellow worker and a person of dubious character, Bill Algie, 'accidentally' spilt some boiling water on Guy. The scalded man reacted in the way he knew best by punching and knocking the troublemaker to the floor. They were both given the sack, however Guy was offered his position back when management knew the full story, but Guy had had enough. It was his opportunity to break with this unfamiliar scene of domesticity he no doubt felt obliged to follow as a young provider for a family, a family that could no longer expand beyond husband and wife.

Guy went back to the land, becoming a share farmer at Wherrol Flat out beyond Wingham. That area was reasonably isolated in those days and during times of heavy rain the milk cans would have to be cabled high above the swollen creeks by means of what was known as a flying fox. Motor vehicles had difficulty in reaching the farm as the roads were very rough and the creek at the bottom of the hill on which the modest weatherboard house stood was a challenge to both driver and car. On one occasion my father's work utility became caught half-way across the creek. My young brother Denis, Mum and I followed Dad, stepping through the moderately flowing knee-deep water and slippery rocks to the bank. We climbed up the hill and sought Guy's assistance to extricate the immobile automobile. Both men freed the wheels and track of the large rocks and Dad drove the ute out of the creek and up the hill to the house.

When the Priors first moved out to the farm they found they had inherited a few white cats. Though never allowed in the house they made home around it and often created a nuisance by climbing onto the corrugated iron roof during the night. Once when the ladies visited the little house, which was always outside, they threw pebbles on the roof and laughed at the men and children inside cursing the assumed feline culprits. When the real cats were on the roof they were difficult to frighten away as they were unable to hear. Apparently it was common for white cats to be deaf.

Dad was always keen to pot a rabbit or two when visiting the farm. On one occasion he shot one with his shotgun on a creek flat (level ground was scarce in that area) on the other side of the creek from the house. Unfortunately, the poor animal was only wounded and sped off with its last ounce of energy. It ran towards a large blackberry bush with six-feet-three inches of Chris Woodland after him. Always behind the shooter – Dad was ever safety conscious – I was hot in pursuit. Dad was running into the late afternoon sun and next thing the most unexpected thing occurred and I saw him bounce back as though catapulted through the air, arms spread wide, holding his single-barrel 12 gauge Harrington and Richardson shotgun in one hand. He landed flat on his back as I noticed the fence wires that were difficult to see with the sun in

one's eyes. I dived between the wires and found the rabbit lying motionless on the edge of the blackberry bush. Had he expired a few feet further in he would have been unrecoverable.

Once when Guy and dad were trying to pot a rabbit, he was carrying a common rifle at the time, a Lithgow Small Arms single-shot .22. He declared that he had a 'six shooter': *One up the spout and five in his pocket!*

Chris, Denis and I crossed a little bridge over a creek on our way to the Wherrol Creek farm one day and Dad noticed a dead animal beside the road that had possibly met its demise by being hit by a motor vehicle. Bringing the ute to a stop Dad inspected the dead animal and found it to be a dingo. It was the first of my many sightings of the native dog through life and, by coincidence, it was at a stream bearing the name of Dingo Creek!

The life of a share farmer was a hard and poor paying one. The farmer worked the land for an absentee landholder and received little in return. In the late 1930s Dot and Guy told us that they received a mere £3 (\$6) cheque for a month's work. During the war the Australian Government assumed control of farm products bringing stability and better conditions and wages for many, including the dairy industry. Guy acknowledged their improved lifestyle was due to the Labor government, but said he could never vote for them as, 'I am a country man'. He was a supporter of the Country Party, later to change its name to the National Party.

Dot and Guy eventually moved to what was known as the Cundle Plains, situated just north of Cundletown on the way to Ghinni Ghinni. Today, a vastly improved Pacific Highway goes past the front gate, as did the earlier highway of the same name. The 50-acre dairy property was owned by one of the Blore family – he was still share-farming - and it fronted the Pacific Highway at one end and the Manning River the other. Usually the milk cans were collected by what was known as the cream boat, which called twice a day in the summer and once a day through the winter, cows producing less milk in the cooler weather. People along the river, mainly the women folk, would use the cream boat to go into town in the morning on shopping day, then return on it in the afternoon when the boat went for the afternoon milk collection. Children also used this to commute to school and back. When staying through the week, I also used this exciting diesel driven vessel, both for school and general visits. Sometimes I rode my pushbike from home in Taree to the farm and occasionally I would even walk from home out to Cundle Plains.

When the Manning River flooded and the swollen waters could not combat the tide pushing against it from the sea, Guy would take the cans to the highway by draught horse drawing a slide. The slide was a platform that had two timber rails underneath which slipped over the mostly level ground and grass that was devoid of rocks and stumps. Slides were common in this type of country and carried people and produce easily around the farm. From memory I seem to recall that the slide was used more than the dray. We would all hop onto the slide when we went on picnics in a rare cluster of trees that grew about halfway to the highway. Eventually I would ride Whinny, a horse of about fourteen hands, on these or any other occasion.

A pair of fine Clydesdales were the literal workhorses of the farm. They were both well-behaved animals, though Bonnie did have one unsociable habit. When being pulled around on the slide the passengers were not very far off the ground and would often suffer from the abdominal gasses emitting from below Bonnie's tail. When this occurred Guy would say disgustedly, 'Bonnie, you trollop!' Guy helped Denis and my vocabulary to expand and I can recall that he was the first to make me aware of the simple word *complicated*.

There were often problems when Bonnie and Prince were allowed to forage in the house paddock. I ran into the house one day yelling, 'Guy, the horses are in the garden.' The two draught horses had pressed against the wire enclosure and pushed it in far enough to allow them access to some of the enticing vegetables. Guy began swearing, saying exactly what I don't recall, but I remember vividly his reply to Dot as he grabbed his stockwhip off the wall on his way out the back door: 'Jesus Christ and all his bloody angels won't stop me!' In vain she had asked that he control his language.

Their main supply of water was a small corrugated iron tank outside the kitchen, which had a pipe through the wall and a two-way brass tap very low down the wall. Pressure was very low of course, more so when the tank was low. Out the back was a well from which they usually hand pumped their drinking water into a large jug. Further along was the toilet, which necessitated emptying and burying by Guy when required. There was no bath. Bathing was done in a large galvanised tub, usually in front of the fuel stove, particularly in the winter. Large amounts of hot water were heated in the copper and a large caldron on the stove would be used for topping up. The stove top was where we cooked the many mushrooms we found in the paddocks. A little butter was smeared on the stove top and the mushrooms placed there till cooked.

Often Guy would use a little kerosene to help light the fuel stove in the early morning. This accelerant was kept in an old lemonade bottle on the hearth where Denis noticed it one day. He didn't swallow much before he realised the contents of the bottle were not as he had thought. Nevertheless, the adults watched him closely until they thought his condition was not going to deteriorate.

From memory the dairy was only about fifty or sixty meters from the house. The barn was located on the house side of the dairy and, sensibly, much closer to the dairy than the house. The barn provided us children with another exciting area for play. Other than heaps of hay, corn cobs and the like, there was, unbelievably, the doped canvas fuselage of an aeroplane suspended from the roof. The building was not large and Denis and I spent many happy hours climbing into the cockpit, shooting down the Japanese or German enemies and sometimes 'parachuting' to safety when 'shot down' by Zeros or Messerschmitts. The hay provided a soft and welcome landing for the brave young Australian pilots.

Accidents come naturally to children, especially in the bush. Denis was sitting quietly on Whinny one morning when Peter the dog began barking. Whether this was at the horse or not I can't recall. Peter didn't respond to Guy's commands, so he uncoiled his whip from his shoulder

and cracked it across the dog. Peter shot off like the proverbial Bondi tram, while Whinny reared up and Denis came tumbling over her rump, hitting the ground with some force. That was another word I learned on the Cundle Plains – *concussion*. I was allowed into the bedroom sometime in the afternoon when he was feeling a little better and found him a little different and with some loss of memory. He could not remember the two rabbits we had taken from the traps that morning and a couple of other incidents. He continued to improve and was back to his usual self by the next morning.

One afternoon I had brought the cows in for milking on Whinny, whom I tied up to a length of barbed wire fencing while I closed the gate to the cow yard. The wire rattled as I went to undo it and the usually quiet mare shied, rearing back and breaking the wire which lashed me behind the left thigh, lifting me off the ground to land on the rough, dry ground, causing a cut of several inches in length. The yards were often a quagmire, churned up by the cow tracks in the mud, but in this instance it was bone dry and caused some minor bruising. The scar remains after all those years.

There was a five-acre paddock of lucerne where Guy would allow the cows – Jerseys and Guernseys, or crosses of the two breeds - to feed for a limited time when appropriate; feeding too long on such rich pasture could cause the cows to suffer bloat, which required fast, special treatment to save them from death in severe cases.

Other than lucerne the farm produced sacheline, maize and turnips. A vegetable garden provided the house with plenty of vegetables for the table and the chooks laid rich eggs and provided fresh meat at times. Occasionally we would get a feed of fish from the little wharf and rabbits were common fare. One day the silky oak tree beside the house was alive with the noisy leatherheads (elsewhere called friarbirds) and Dad and Guy sat down and shot some with .22 rifle using shorts (low-powered cartridges). The soup made from the leatherheads was considered a delicacy and provided a cheap meal in those hard times. They were different times.

I was about six-years-of-age when I began to ride Whinny and take an interest in the milking operations and join Guy in the early morning when he lit the fire at the dairy for the sterilising of all things associated with milking. I would also get the cows in and help with the milking. When the milking machines were used the cows had to be hand 'stripped' to relieve them of their last amount. Always barefooted, one day I had the misfortune of having a cow step on my toe and a day or two later had the nail completely removed by the bottom edge of a milk can while shifting it.

Guy taught me many things about farm life. He explained how to recognise when a cow was pregnant, suggesting that I don't pass on this information to my mother, insinuating that it was not proper for women to know such things. Ev, of course, was a progressive lady and always fed me information, as required, as to the doings of the birds and bees. Day-old calves were evaluated by Guy checking their little teats, considering the mother's milk output and general body shape. Those that did not pass the test were 'put down' with one quick tap to the

forehead with a hammer. It was then skinned and the skin salted. The skins, though of little value, were later sold for what they would bring in. They were different days and nothing was wasted and what little money could be raised was.

Whinny had a rope bridle plaited by Guy and he and I always rode bareback. The rope bridle was yet another sign of the economics of the day. People improvised or made what they could rather than buy it; even to buy the leather to make a bridle would have been considered a waste of money. Guy did have one possession that was considered special and would have cost a considerable amount of money. It was an expensive looking American saddle, which, I think, he won in his roughriding days. It was kept in the house and I never saw Guy use it. It was very special to him.

Guy also taught me to trap rabbits by the common method of the day, a steel-jawed, spring trap. Understandably, they are outlawed today because of their cruelty, but were then considered to be an essential means of combating the never-ending plague that changed the face of Australia. At first it was almost impossible for me to compress the spring to set the trap by placing the tongue under the plate. Guy would do this for me and I would toddle up to the one little creek that ran across the property or to the lucerne paddock, wherever there were rabbit burrows, or preferably dunghills, or where there was sign of their scratchings. I'd be carrying this device very carefully so as not to spring the trap and perhaps have the steel jaws snap closed on a part of my little body. Deciding the spot to set the trap I would dig out the necessary amount of soil, drive in the peg, place a square of paper over the plate and position a stick under the plate to prevent the soil I was using to cover the plate to set off the trap. Twice I was to find out the effectiveness and pain of these devices. While setting a trap one afternoon, it went off, sprung up and closed on my fingers. Unable to compress the spring, I pulled the peg out and walked back to find Guy, who was at the dairy. With one hand – and that is also how he would set them – he released the grip on my bleeding fingers and removed the offending trap. The second time it happened I pulled the peg out of the ground, laid it across the spring and released my fingers by compressing with a foot on each side of the spring.

Despite these setbacks I soon discovered that I was a born hunter. Even with the odd frost I would bound out of bed barefooted and race up the paddock to see how many rabbits I had caught that night. On returning to the dairy a rabbit or two would make my arms ache with the weight of the catch and traps. In the colder weather my hands would also ache from the cold traps as would my feet from the frost or near frost. Many people have said how, when bringing in the cows for milking on a cold and often dark morning, they would search for the cow pats with the steam coming off them (Guy called these 'meadow pancakes') and unashamedly step into them to relieve the suffering feet and digits. It is a fact, it happens!

It was a thrilling time for Denis and I when Guy let us have our own buckjumping show. Guy would hold a calf while one of us hopped on its back. We had nothing to assist us, not even a flank rope, so we gripped with our legs and held onto the calf's mane. Of course we never stayed on very long, but the excitement of the bucks and subsequent falls gave us great enjoyment and many giggles. I remember thinking I had rode one out when the calf just

propped and remained stationary. As I relaxed it took off again as quick as a bullet, leaving me literally sitting in mid air.

I can't remember Dot being particularly religious, as she never left the farm to attend Mass on Sundays. Perhaps she was excused from the weekly service because of her distance from the church, which was in Taree. However, I don't think she ate meat on a Friday, as was the custom in those days. I am sure that she made the yearly effort to attend Easter Sunday service in Taree and receive the sacraments. Guy would accompany her on this yearly occasion and once, while positioned in a pew beside his wife, he noticed a landowner whom he considered a very miserly man, especially with the share farmers who worked his farms. As this person knelt and received his communion wafer Guy commented, 'There goes the old bastard for a free breakfast.'

Guy had a great interest in horses and claimed that they should never get the better of you. A neighbour had a draught horse that refused to allow the farmer to remove his blinkers and wore them for some time before Guy accepted the challenge. I don't know how he did it, but the horse was free of blinkers the following day. When he was younger he was on a bolter that had the bit between its teeth and going flat out. Guy was riding bareback, which meant he did not have the advantage of stirrups or knee-pads. As they galloped beneath an old peach tree he reached up and broke off a dead branch, which he swung and hit the horse between the ears resulting in the horse collapsing as it fell unconscious!

One morning while it was still dark I was putting the bridle on Whinny to ride out and bring the cows in when I heard a particular song coming from the radio in the house. The radio was only played for the evening news – when any children had to keep very quiet, particularly during the war – and the hillbilly songs in the morning. The radio was the only electric powered device on the farm and I think the battery was sent in on the cream boat in the morning and returned charged on the afternoon run when its power had run down. I don't recall where it was charged; perhaps it was done at the milk factory. The song I heard that morning made a great impact on me as it was the first song I had ever heard which I could relate to. It was a so-called hillbilly song, which sang of flooding, cattle, a drover and gum trees. It was the song that was the nucleus of a long lasting career for a young man by the name of David Gordon Kirkpatrick, later better known to the world as Slim Dusty. The song was: *When the Rain Tumbles Down in July*.

My family and I arrived at the Cundle Plains farm one weekend to hear of an incident that had occurred during the week. Guy had taken Whinny and visited the Nicholsons who lived across and up the highway a short distance. Before he hopped onto Whinny to return home they gave him some prickly cucumbers to take. The cucumbers were in a sugar bag (everything that could fit into a sugar bag was carried in that ubiquitous hessian sack in those days) and Guy had a lot of trouble swinging onto Whinny's back, as she kept shying away from the bag. He finally mounted, but found that when the rough cucumbers touched the side of the usually quiet mare her behaviour worsened. Finally, he threw the bag back to his neighbour and said, 'Here keep you bloody cowcubmers!' Cowcubmers was Guy's usual term for cucumbers.

Another neighbour visited him one day and asked to borrow Guy's roller, a heavy round log that was used to roll the ground flat by being drawn by a draught horse. For some reason Guy did not want to lend this implement and said so. A few days later he saw the same chap trying to hitch up the roller behind his horse. Guy was dressing in the bedroom at the time and yelled out and ran across the paddock without his pants on, but the fellow got safely away with his horse. A week or so later Guy saw this unfortunate man while he and Dot were shopping in Cundle and went up and knocked him to the ground. That was Guy. I was later to liken him to a D'Arcy Niland-type character from the book, *The Shiralee*. Guy was obviously a good fighter and believed in fighting to maintain what he believed in.

In about 2012 I discovered that Guy had once been found guilty of assault in the Branxton Police Court. The Singleton Argus of Wednesday the 12th of February 1930 reported that Guy Prior, a farmer of Dalwood, was found guilty of assaulting a lorry driver by the name of Oliver Wheeler. Guy was fined 5 pounds for the assault, 8 shillings for court costs, 2 pounds and 5 shillings for witness expenses, plus 10 shillings and 6 pence for medical costs.

Everyone who knew Guy said how much he looked like the well-known Hollywood actor, Spencer Tracy, Katherine Hepburn's friend and fellow thespian. Photographs within these pages will confirm that likeness.



Guy Prior outside the farm house. It was said the Guy looked similar to the film star Spencer Tracy. Photo taken on Blore's dairy farm on the Cundle Plains.

The Woodland family left Taree in 1950 and the Priors moved shortly afterward. They returned to the Hunter Valley and finally bought their own dairy farm out from Paterson, near Vacy. At last they could work their own land, free from the restraints endured by the share farmer. The last time I saw Guy was when my cousin John Hawke and I came back from a nostalgic visit to the Taree area in May 1957. We travelled two-up on my BSA Golden Flash motorbike and arrived at their farm a little after dark. Dot came to the door and in the dark was unable to discern who the visitors were. Guy was occupied inside with a couple of guests. Dot went into mild hysteria – she was a very excitable person – even though I enunciated my and Johnny’s names clearly. As she was carrying on like a woman being assaulted Guy raced to the door and soon determined the identity of the visitors. Apparently Dot had thought we were members of a family they were currently feuding with, not an unusual state of affairs with the Priors.

Later, my mother told me of an incident Dot had related to her. There was a progress meeting held, at their local community hall and Guy commented on neighbours who were constantly listening in on the telephone party-line. People became heated and one man was toe to toe with Guy – little did he know he was on dangerous ground – but before Guy reacted in his usual manner Dot raced in and shoved the man with both hands, knocking him to the floor. They were indeed a hot-headed couple.

The morning after Johnny and I arrived at the Vacy farm I arose early and joined Guy in the dairy where he was hand milking. This was the last time I spoke to him. We had a lot to talk about and I recall two things from our talk that morning. He knew I wanted to be similar to him and end up with a farm, but he advised me against it and suggested to keep doing what I was doing with my life; have a good, solid job in town and visit the bush on weekends and holidays. The other memory is of him sitting, as he milked, in a position where he could keep his eye on the house. He was watching out for Dottie as he was smoking and he didn’t want her to find out. As far as she knew, he had given the habit up!

In his last years Guy taught himself the melodeon, better known as a squeezebox or button accordion. I never heard him play, but wish I had, as it was an instrument I began to play in the next few years.

My wife and I, with our two children, were living in Canberra when I received the disturbing news that the man who had taught me to ride a horse, milk a cow, trap and skin a rabbit, husk corn and many other skills, was dying from lymphatic cancer. He was making frequent visits to the Prince of Wales Hospital at Randwick for treatment and was visited by my mother who lived at Bondi. Of course, his beloved Dot was at his side. This very proud man, whose masculinity was so important to him, told my mother how ashamed he was of his body, a once powerful body that was wasting away day by day.

We visited Sydney and had hoped to see him while we were there, but were told that he had returned home to the Hunter Valley. Back in Canberra, a few days later I was to learn that he had actually been back in the Prince of Wales when we had been in Sydney. He had had to make an unscheduled visit because of failing health.

I am pleased that I wrote to him in his last days and he was apparently excited in reading it and had a good laugh when I reminded him of when he had lost his temper when Denis, Marie Lukins and I did something which now escapes my mind. I also wrote to Dot following his death in 1971 and she wrote a letter which is still in my possession. In it she also remarked on his good and bad habits. Of the latter she wrote, 'Such as the time when you, Denis & Marie spilt the calves' milk.' Perhaps that is the incident I have forgotten. Dot also wrote, 'I miss him so much I could curl up and die'. Dot died in 1979. Sadly, I was not to learn of her passing until thirty-one years had passed, as she had changed her address and passed away before we were notified.

It would be anachronistic to judge someone like Guy Prior by today's standards. Men like him do not exist today. As we have seen, he was not without his faults. However, he was, to me at least, superior in many ways to the men of his day. He had a typical bushman's laconic sense of humour, was a powerful and physical man, a good provider, a gentleman with women, but past a certain point, he would rather fight than argue. Especially, he was wonderful with the few children who had the good fortune to know and learn from him, no-one more than I.



L to R - Guy Prior with wife Dot on horse. Chris Woodland holding Marie Lukins, Denis Woodland and Chris "David" Woodland (author). Photo taken on Blore's dairy farm on the Cundle Plains.

Article by Chris Woodland, who is the son of Chris Woodland, a Timber Inspector for the NSW Government Railways stationed at Taree during the 1940s.
© Chris Woodland, October 2020.