

## **Paying a Penny to the Night Cart Workers of Yesteryear.**

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Every little country town has its memories. Sometimes these are laudable snippets of historical significance. Sometimes not. To be fair, if we were to put an historical slant on certain aspects of country towns and cities of yore, large and small, we'd be amiss if we ignored the ubiquitous "Night Cart". And the Night Cart Drivers and their workers - keepers of personal secrets amidst a sea of night soil. Again, seeing as how we are in an historical frame of mind and our subject matter bears relevance way before modern political correctness, we should clarify that these fellows were often quite unceremoniously referenced as 'S\*\*t-Carters'. No two ways about it.

Those of us who experienced country towns in the 1950's and 1960's will relate to this story I am about to tell. In my hometown the S\*\*t-Carters were not exactly looked down upon, because everyone recognised that theirs was probably the most important job in the whole town. Town blocks simply could not accommodate the digging of huge dunny holes which, when full, could be covered over and a new dunny hole dug whilst the actual dunny was hoisted up and carefully placed over the new hole. Besides, the night soil cans represented an exciting piece of deftly-designed innovation that brought the whole town into the modern era. Just imagine how ecstatic people were when sewerage systems came into play! The cans,

albeit on the flimsy side (at least they were in my hometown), allowed residents a certain measure of dignity and pooh containment previously unheard of.

So... yes, the Night Cart Workers had their place. My family lived out of town on a property and we had a full-on country dunny. I only got to experience the genteel aspects of a more modern dunny when we visited relatives in town. My aunt had one such dunny, up the back of the yard, backing onto the “S\*\*t-Carters Laneway”. Most country towns still have such a laneway and if you go looking you are likely to stumble upon these archaeological gems. The laneways provided access for the Night Carts and their horses, allowing them to discreetly change over the cans in the wee hours of the morning. They used to come to my aunt’s place around 5.30 am on a Friday morning, if my memory serves me correctly. Don’t know how they managed in wet weather because the actual dunny used to flood and a wooden plank was kept handy to facilitate urgent dunny visits. Hence the term “walking the plank” took on a whole new slant. Most houses also had a chamber pot or “po” in each bedroom but we won’t go there....

Another thing I remember about Night Cart workers is that they were probably amongst the first people in Australia to wear blue jeans. These heavy-duty clothing items were the very latest thing to come out of America and most Australians had not only never heard of them, but they were aghast that blokes would actually wear something like that. At least that is what the ladies (our mothers) thought. They were infinitely practical

as work pants though, but even that did not stop the inevitable label of “S\*\*t-Carters’ Pants”. My father refused to even contemplate anything other than his usual work pants and my mother just thought they were disgusting. Getting the message? Respect and yet the class thing happened, and still does today.

And that, is why a lot of people of my era have never owned a pair of blue jeans. Oh, I had those fancy brightly-coloured jeans that were trendy (they really looked like tailored pants) when I was at Uni, but I have never owned a pair of real, ridgy-didge blue jeans. When I was in my early teens I so desperately wanted to look like the other kids that I begged my mother for some jeans and she finally relented. So, I got my jeans. Thin, baggy “S\*\*t-Carters’ Pants”. Not the gorgeous and stylish jeans the other kids were wearing. I sucked it up and put them on anyway and when the boys next door (we had moved to town by this stage) saw me they laughed at me.

So that was it for the jeans, stashed in the bottom of my wardrobe never to see the light of day again. My father thought it a bit off that someone had bothered to get me something I didn’t even wear but I stood my ground. I wasn’t going to look like some dork “S\*\*T-Carter”. It wasn’t my mother’s fault, really, her fashion expertise simply just didn’t reach beyond the concept of “S\*\*t-Carters’ Pants” and that is all that ever registered whenever she saw blue jeans.

I still don't wear blue jeans – I figure it is a bit late in the day and I really would look like a dork anyway. Let's face it, you are either born to wear jeans or not. No, it's not that... and if you grew up in the country you'll know exactly what I am trying to say. And before anyone starts going off – that is just how it was back then and people barely thought about a lot of the stuff that keeps people pre-occupied these days. You just accepted that life was what it was and that's all there was to it. And if it meant not wearing jeans it meant not wearing jeans.

But... the Night Cart Drivers never seemed to mind. And some of them were real characters. If you sift around enough you will discover that there are stories still being told today. Though often the butt (ah... sorry) of many jokes, these blokes were also often highly respected and they earned gratitude of epic proportions. And no doubt the odd shout down at the local pub. My own family has some stake in this and we have our own "S\*\*t-Carter" story.

Seeing as how we are a big Irish family we had members with many talents and skills. One such celebrity was my Uncle Jimmy. People remember him fondly as a respectful man with lovely manners. Sadly though, Jim had a penchant for the demon drink and on one particular occasion that may have served him very badly indeed. You see, Jimmy was the Night Cart Driver, with his old-fashioned cart, and I can't remember how many horses, but I suspect it may have been two. So, the story goes....

Jim had scurried around town on his own this particular day, collecting and changing over the cans from the backyard dunnies. By the time he had finished the cart was rather... full. So Jim takes a turn into the main street and as he and his horses come careening around the corner they totally lose it and the cart tips over. *You-know-what* spills all over the middle of the street. Another uncle of mine and some of his mates were in my uncle's shop and when they heard the commotion they came out, with their hankies over their noses. And they see poor old Jim slipping and sliding in the middle of the....

So, one of them shouts out, "Jimmy, what are you doing?"

And Jim looks up and says, "I'm lookin' for me overcoat."

So they say, "Well, don't worry about it. It'll be no good now."

And... wait for it...

Jimmy says...

"Me sandwiches are in the pocket!"

True story, still told today, and you'd be right in thinking that it doesn't take much to amuse on occasion. *Ah... country towns....*

## **A Princess and a Wee Piglet.**

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Firstly, I must apologise if this story is a little sketchy. I was only a little kid when I became aware of my family chuckling over this story to anyone who would listen. As a child my father was a Station Manager (like a Ranch Foreman) on a property in Central Western New South Wales, Australia. Life was pretty rugged on occasion and the um... amenities, often left a lot to be desired. I briefly mention this story in my novel, *Dead Cedar*, with a little literary licence. By that I mean the names were changed to protect the innocent!

Our property seemed to be out in the middle of nowhere and well, we just did the best we could. Growing up I remember heaps of animals and I probably learned all I needed to know by the time I was seven and started “real” school because from the age of two my father would strap me on a

horse and take me to work with him. He was always teaching and so was my mother. And there were always plenty of dogs, horses, poddy calves and lambs to look after and feed.

Oh, and one piglet. I must have been real little because I don't remember it but I remember this story being told over and over by the family real well! Seems one of our neighbours was involved in something or other and he had visitors with the aim of showing them what life on a rural property was really like. Trouble is, he didn't have many animals at the time so he rang through to us and asked if we would mind if he brought the visitors over to see our animals.

OK... everyone was cool with that, except my brother nearly blew it big-time. He just had to take the piglet to the dunny with him, didn't he?

Our dunny was the real country outhouse variety. It was almost 200 yards from the house and you practically had to take a cut lunch to get to it. Night visits were particularly perilous because you had to pass the duck enclosure on the way. Dim torches gave little light or comfort. If you heard

a *hisssssssssss*... you would take off full-pelt to the dunny, do your business (carefully checking for snakes and redbacks in the process) and then try and navigate a track back to the house without having to face the possibility of an encounter with a snake trying to steal duck eggs in the night.

To me, being a little kid, the actual dunny pan was HUGE and I struggled with the fear of falling in on each visit. In all fairness, I must state that a stool was very kindly placed in the dunny solely for my use. That still did not negate the fact that the dunny was a horrible, creepy place. No toilet paper in those days either, and it was usually my sister's job to tear up the old newspapers to be used as dunny paper. We were each given strict instructions not to "waste the paper". And there really was a gun behind the door because you just never knew what could be in there....

*Euuuuwwwwweeee....*

Anyway, brother dear got himself in hot water with this piglet. The bloomin' thing slipped out of his arms and fell in. *Er, yuk!* It was alright but by all accounts my dad wasn't real amused at what was required to fish



the thing out. Those dunny holes can be very, very deep and to my widdle self it seemed like it could go all the way to China. I would have loved to have seen how they managed to engineer that piglet out of there....

So... said piglet is fished out and has to be all cleaned and made lovely before the visitors came. Clean clothes for everyone else too, I presume. And when the visitors did come... they turned out to be visiting royalty from some obscure European country no one had ever heard of. *All la-de-dah* stuff, etc, etc. My brother must have been real impressed with the princess because he made a point of talking about this a lot. For years. That young lady fell head-over-heels in love with that piglet. Personally, I find it very hard to believe that she had never seen a piggie before or that they didn't have them in her country, but what do I know, I was only a bub myself at the time. Anyway, this bird coos over the piglet, kisses and cuddles it and everyone else is winching and trying soooo hard not to gag. I can just imagine my mother would have read the Riot Act to make sure no one let slip any mention of piglet + dunny hole + rescue mission + de-stinking said piglet.

These sorts of stories are not uncommon in country areas and I have already heard from a couple of people who have stories so no doubt there will be more down the track.

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