

# Colourful Characters I have worked with on the Wharf

By Alec Stevens

**BET A BOB.** Had a running feud with all authority. When we were leaving Appleton dock for a counter lunch one dinner time, the customs man asked anything in the car chaps? Bet A Bob with great sarcasm said, "yes you mug a bale of wool". The result was a dinner hour spent watching the customs search the car and us. Needless to say Bob found it very hard to get a lift in anyone's car after that.

**THE FRIENDLY PUP.** This bloke got his nickname from the fact that he would jump into anyone's car because he didn't like paying fares. One day while working at the Station Pier Port Melbourne we were in a mess room with at least 250 men, he jumped up on a bench and asked "anyone here going to Richmond". As he wasn't too well liked he only got one reply, "yes I'm going there" said a Big Bloke, "can I go with you", "yes" said the Big Bloke. "I'll wait for you at the Gate said the Pup". "OK I'll be there" said the Big Bloke. They met at the gate and as they walked off the pier the Pup said "where's your car parked". "Car said the big bloke I ain't got a car I'm heading for the train". Well the air turned blue, hardened wharfies had never heard some of the language the Pup came out with. From that day on the Pup made sure that his intended travelling companion owned a car.

**CHAMPAGNE CHARLIE.** This bloke was a cockney, with all of the East London humour and wit. He had a heart of gold but was always looking for a mug. He wore an old ex army overcoat, which had handy extra inside pockets, even when the temperature was a 100F in the shade. One foreman said to him, "when are you going to take that coat off Charlie", his reply was vintage Cockney. "Why guvner I earnt nearly a fahsand paans wiv it on last year". When he came to work half inebriated after lunch one day, the foreman went to sack him, but couldn't when Charlie came out with, "Look guvner I've got a family to feed don't sack me, take me up to the office and give me a good talking too". It's hard to sack a man when trying not to laugh.

When asked what he did for a living in London, his reply was "I was in the Iron and Steel business. I'd steal it and the old women would iron it". One day I drove past the Courthouse and saw him standing outside. When I next worked with him I asked him what sort of trouble are you in?. This was his answer. "Well as I was telling the beak, I want to divorce the old women, when he asked me why, I said well the house stinks and she won't do anything about it". The Magistrate said why don't you do some thing; open the windows or some thing. Charlies replied, "WHAT and let all me bleeding pigeons out". I got the impression that he was telling me to mind my own business. Another time when working at the Outer Harbour, we had a delegation formed to complain about the quality of the food at the canteen. Various complaints were put in until it was Charlie's turn to speak to the canteen manager. His classic was "look out the window guvner, see that dog out there licking his rear, I've just given him my dinner and he's trying to take the taste out of his mouth". Well what could you say to that - it brought the house down.

**PADDY THE PIG.** Paddy was a foreman on the Melbourne wharves, who was well named and hated by all. When working on logs being discharged into the river, Paddy fell in, "Help, Help", he called out "I can't swim throw me a lifebuoy, one of his admirers threw him a big iron crowbar.

**RANDY STONE.** In Adelaide there was a foreman nicknamed Randy Stone after a Radio drama character, whose theme was "I cover the waterfront". He couldn't keep still. Instead of staying on board he would be everywhere. One day when unloading steel from the tweendeck the wire slings kept slipping, so he was urging a wharfie to push down on the wire while it was tightened by the steam winches, around the steel, when the wharfie refused he said "you're a squib, this how you do it" and promptly showed the wharfie how to lose two fingers.

**UPLIFTING.** Quite a few wharfies were ex sportsmen, boxers, footballers, cyclists, horse trainers, ex-Jockeys and even a Commonwealth games weightlifter, who explained that he couldn't lift wool bales as it might alter his muscle development? A big percentage of them thought work was only for lesser mortals and their prowess in sport should enable them to take life easy until retirement. The weightlifter was sponsored by collections from workmates to travel overseas to compete at the Commonwealth Games in Cardiff, which he did. On his return he was asked how did you go? by a workmate who didn't know he had joined the enemy, and become a foreman. His gracious reply was

get below and get on with your work, or I'll sack you.

**THE MIRROR.** This man was a union rep. and well liked and respected, but he had a habit of saying I'll look into it, when asked about a union rule, hence the nickname. He also had an aversion to going down the hatches but would look down and proclaim, "yes lads I can see all the filth down there I'll get you dirt money, overalls and gloves". Well the strain of life told on him and he died of a heart attack. This is true I was there, as they lowered him into the grave one irreverent mourner's voice was heard to say "That's the first time he's been down below for years." I'm sure if he could of laughed he would have.

**THE VOMITTING V.O.** Vigilance Officer shortened to V.O. is the official title of a union rep. This man got his name from his constant reply to most questions. "I'll bring it up at the next meeting."

**THE WILLING APPRENTICE.** This wharfie had been a top apprentice jockey. When working with him one day I asked him why did you give it up? "Too heavy" was his answer. What about the jumps said I? He then told me this story, which was confirmed by another ex jockey. "My master had a few jumpers and we often schooled them over the jumps, so he urged me to take out a jumps license which I did". Well Joey got his first jumps ride in a field of sixteen and because of his reputation as a good rider was given the ride on a top jumper. The field left the barrier and all sailed over the first jump safely, then over the second where they spread out a bit. To the punters' dismay the favourite ridden by our hero was pulled up. Well there had to be an inquiry and an explanation was sought from the rider, "It was this way Sir" said Joey "I was terrified". The steward replied "but you jumped the first two superbly", "true" said Joey "but there was so many around me I couldn't pull him up until they thinned out." That was the end of Joey's racing career.

We also had a professional mourner who went to the trouble of looking through the morning paper and making someone in the funeral notices an instant relative. He would then tell all around him that his dear Aunt Dorrie had died and had to go to her funereal. On these days he would come to work suitable dressed, as they all seemed to be buried on Wednesday which was mid week race day, it started to get a bit suspicious.

**THE LONDON FOG.** He was hard to get motivated and it was said of him that he wouldn't lift before eleven. This man became very rich by sheer chance. Being single he used to live in boarding houses, but found them to dear, so he rented a house in North Melbourne and let a couple of rooms to other men, as it proved profitable he then leased another house and eventually bought them and others and retired a wealthy man.

**THE JUDGE.** Was said to have sat on the same case for 4 days.

I worked with a great bloke who was an ex-Jockey called Les Boots. His career was documented in the Waterside Workers Magazine. Les was a Jumps Jockey, but had an unfortunate habit of falling off hence his nickname **AUTUMN LEAVES**. He insisted that his wife pack two bags when he left for the racecourse, one with his silks and the other with his pyjamas for the hospital. It was claimed that he never completed the course. This he disputed saying he did once but was still on the steeple chase track and so was disqualified.

Another wharfie who shall remain nameless had a bus load of kids. The doctor came to see his wife who was ill, when the doctor sat rather heavily on the bed our Stud said "go easy doc or you'll shake another one out". It was rumoured that at Christmas with so many kids and no ships in to work, he would take the shot gun outside and discharge it, then go in and say I thought there was a burglar and I've shot Father Christmas by mistake so there wont be any presents this year. One story went that the house was so crowded that when one kid went to sleep he would be stood up in a corner so that another could take his place in a bed.

One wharfie whose wife was the boss, used to drive a tow motor, which pulled little 4-wheel trucks around the wharf. To keep a few bob for himself he told his dearly beloved that he was paying the tow motor off. Well all went well for a couple of years until his wife came into a little windfall and tried to pay the tow motor off, unfortunately the Adelaide Haulage Company manager didn't know of the scheme and let the cat out of the bag. He was the most miserable man on the wharf for months after.

**JOCKEY JACK.** Jack was a tally clerk known for his love of a bet. He loved going to the races and

seldom missed a meeting on a Saturday. One of his fellow workers worked on course as a bookmakers clerk, knowing our leviathan punter (he weighed 140 kilo's) liked to attend the meetings so he gave him a free ticket to get into Flemington, with the instructions to go in through the course staff gate. On presenting his ticket to the gateman he was startled to hear the advice he received, which was "good job you're here early mate get to the sauna as quick as you can, you'll need to get a fair bit of weight off". His friend had given him a jockey's ticket. His name from that day on was Jockey Jack.

THE FRUIT FLY. This bloke got his name from being a real pest. But he was also very cunning. One day when we were working on frozen sides of beef he had been making a real nuisance of himself, so his workmates locked him in the back of the truck they had just unloaded, with instructions to the driver to let him out at the dock gate. Well an hour went by and then another and no Fruit Fly so we had to keep doing his share of the work. When the truck returned later in the afternoon we found out Fruit Fly had asked the driver to drop him off at the pub, where he stayed for the rest of the shift. So we had to cop it sweet, but we never tried that one again.

All in all they were great workmates, never stopped pulling your leg and calling you a pommy bast--d but if an outsider tried anything on they would soon put him in his place. When anyone was in trouble they would hold a collection on payday these collections raised often more than \$3,000 and this was a considerable sum in the early seventies.