

When were our very first Carols?



The very first Rotary Christmas Carols occurred at Rosalind Park on Christmas Eve, 1970. The New Projects chair that year was John Little. The idea was that the Carols would continue each year- just like Walkabout and the Art Show had done.

According to reports, despite it being a very cold night, around 2,000 people attended. The compere for the very first Carols was David Smith. The Benola Singers lead the community singing of the carols. Our very own, Val Broad, was one of those singers!

Val explained to me later: ***Mavis Webster formed the Benola Singers using her own students – I was one of them.***

During the night, they were joined by the Lamplighters and guest artists: Merryl Cohn and Lee Robertson. The pianist for the night was Zena Cohn. Proceeds for the night were given to our Youth Camp.



After reading about our first Carols, I decided to interview 3 of our Rotary members who have all had a very long involvement with the Carols. I understand that there have many members over the years that have contributed an enormous amount of work and time; unfortunately, it would be an enormous task to mention everyone (and at some risk if I forgot someone) that has

contributed to the success of the Carols over the years. Consequently, along with referring to our digital records, I have also chosen to ask Val Broad, Jim Mahoney and Ron Rogers to highlight some of their memories over the years while checking the information I have obtained.

Jim Mahoney and Ron Rogers

Below is a summary of the responses by Jim and Ron to a list of questions I asked. All members know that both Jim and Ron have been integral to the planning and success of the Carols over many years. May I just add that it is an absolute honor to interview Jim and Ron as they are two members we have all come to love for their tireless commitment to the Rotary Club of Bendigo community programs.



How many venues have hosted the Carols?

Members may be interested to know that there have been 6 venues. Apart from Rosalind Park, Tom Flood, Lake Weeroona, the Schweppes Centre, the Town Hall and the Exhibition Centre all have been used over the years to host our Carols.

What types of stages have been used?

A mobile stage, module units, scaffolding stages, fixed stages and a sound shell have all been used for the Carols over the years. The sound shell was demolished by the Council. They felt it had become outdated in the middle 90's.



Most memorable Carols for the wrong reasons?

Jim and Ron cannot recall the year and I failed to find any report amongst our records, but it was the year that the enormous crowd that attended our Carols that year had to quickly walk to the Town Hall. With participants all carrying **lit candles**, both Jim and Ron are amazed a catastrophe did not happen. Not sure we would get away with that this year!

They also recall the year/s that a Fire Truck was used to bring Santa. They explained to me of the danger with Santa throwing sweets from the truck. For instance, children being children would try to be as close as possible to Santa - it was another health and safety nightmare!

Finally, at one Carol's, some members may recall the year, a type of organ made from steam whistles (operated by an electrical steam compressor) was used which caused a total blackout at the event!

Best Santa over the years?

Just like it is always dangerous to ask any member who has been the very best president over the years, when they mentioned Santa, I just could not help but asking who had been the very best Santa over the years. According to Jim and Ron, Fred Trewarne was clearly the very best in the role over the years. They did add, though, that Cyril Hamley was the best looking Santa with respect to detail!



How did Santa's Sleigh come into existence?

According to Jim and Ron, it was an idea of Val's that a sleigh be introduced. Former member, the late Jack Paynting, built the sleigh and another former member, the late Ian Alexander, organized a dog team (Samoyeds) to pull the sleigh. Both Jim and Ron's eyes lit up telling me the story of when the sleigh was first introduced. All the audience that year could hear was: **a Ho! Ho! Ho!in the distance.** Then members of the audience could eventually see the lights of the sleigh, giving the illusion that Santa really was flying into Rosalind Park. They told me that one woman they were standing next to openly wept at this incredible sight!



Worst weather they had encountered?

Every President and Carol's coordinator I can remember always prays for good weather for the Carols. I guess even the very best President or Santa cannot control the weather. Research from the historical records indicated in Bryan McMahon's year we had the very worst weather conditions. Sorry Bryan. Many have quietly told me that Bryan was an absolute brilliant President, but even Bryan could not control the weather. Reports from long term members suggest there was a tropical downpour in Bryan's year!

I love the current supplement in the Addy, how did that come about?

We had to involve Larrie Winzar in answering this question. Larrie explained that she got the idea from the supplement that was inserted in English newspapers - providing the details of the funeral service procession for Dianna's funeral. It was brilliantly done and informative; hence, the idea for a Carols supplement in the Addy.

I am impressed that Inner Wheel are involved with the Carols, how did that first come about?

Again, we learned that this happened in Larrie's year. Larrie simply explored opportunities with Inner Wheel about how they could become involved; consequently, they now provide a sausage sizzle and sell drinks.

Come on Jim and Ron, let me into some of the secrets about how it has become so successful? Other Bendigo community groups have Carols, but why is ours the most popular?

Both Ron and Jim explained to me the numerous ways the club has promoted the Carols to always make them a success. For example, a town crier from Castlemaine was hired for 2 years. A utility from Ron Poysor with speakers blaring has been used to advertise the event. In later years, we had Cambridge Press print programs to advertise the event. (Importantly, businesses were always encouraged to pay for advertising to cover our printing costs).

Past member, the late Alan Cox, Ron and Jim informed me, came up with the idea of providing road signs on all entrances to Bendigo - 30 days before they are to be held. **Today, we have stickers for the signs just in the event there are any last minute changes to the event**, Jim added. Today, both Ron and Jim agreed that the website advertising the Carols is hugely successful – they have had around 50,000 hits on the site. The \$3,000 grant from the Council is vital with covering the costs of the free event and the supplements kindly provided by the Addy is invaluable.

I had to ask....come on and be honest, what does being involved in the Carols mean to you?

Both Jim and Ron were both very humble with respect to their own personal contribution with the Carols – both Jim and Ron were very quick to praise the brilliant work of Colin Nankervis, Val Broad and all the past coordinators. I could gauge that both of our silent contributors could see how much the event meant to the Bendigo community. I was able (after some urging) to squeeze out of them that many community members had told them they looked forward to the

event at Christmas every year. Attendees had often told them: ***they had attended as children and now they were now bringing their own children.*** One thing they made very clear to me is that people today get very upset if it does not go ahead. As a result, they have a meeting at 12 midday on the Friday before the event to sign off on whether the event is to be held at Roslind Park, or in the Exhibition Hall.

Once I finished talking to Jim and Ron, they both strongly encouraged me to speak with Val Broad and urge her to contribute her memories. Val is another icon in our club. Below is the contribution of **Val Broad OAM** about how and why she became involved in the Carols...

How did I first get involved with the Carols?

Well that's really a loaded question, much of the answer to which lies in the mists of history. After all (to my absolute horror and complete disbelief) it must be at least 60 years ago! I can't remember which group it was that organized the Carols at the time, but I think it was a Church Group and I remember, as a very young girl, singing solo from the back of a truck which was parked inside the park close to the View Point entrance. The Carols were on a very much smaller and more religious scale at that time.



One year the group decided that they would not run the Carols again and I was absolutely horrified. Even then the Carols were very popular. I remember that I approached various groups, including some Churches, without success. I was devastated when one of those Church groups told me that they held their own Carols Service on Christmas Eve and if people wanted Carols they could attend that Service. I felt they had missed the point completely.

It was at that stage that Rotary stepped in. This is Rotary's 48th presentation I think, so that must have been 1970.

I was invited to contribute, as a soloist or sometimes as a duettist and did so for many years. I have letters of thanks from various Rotary Presidents over the years. I was then invited by Rotary to organize the Carols. With the exception of one or two of those years I organized the Carols from then on.

I formed the Bendigo Youth Choir in March, 1984. In December, the Choir first performed for the Carols, starting a 30 year commitment - a commitment which all the kids have really enjoyed. Carols is one of the highlights of their year. We missed a couple of years when Rotary organized for Dawn Colbourne and once, Peter Butler, to organize the Carols- but other than that they have contributed every year.

Memorable artists?

I wouldn't like to choose between artists – sufficient to say that the standard of performance has improved immeasurably over the past 10 years and is now as high as anywhere in the State. Many people, both local and from outside of Bendigo, have commented on the quality of the Bendigo Rotary Club's Carols presentation.

However; I do remember several Carol's nights which have left an indelible impression on my mind. I cannot remember the year when the Carols were presented from the old Sound Shell which was practically where the Cascades are at present. I had had a dream of a Sleigh for Santa to arrive in and mentioned it to several Rotarians. The late Jack Paynting (of Paynting's Nursery) decided to run with the idea and constructed a beautiful sleigh, painted it gold and red and decorated it with tinsel. The late Ian Alexander who bred dogs had contact with a lady in Melbourne who had Samoyeds and contacted her. The Choir was on the stage singing 'Here Comes Santa Claus' and Santa came in riding on the sleigh with 6 of the most beautiful, perfectly groomed white Samoyed dogs all barking in excitement. It started in View Street, and when it came into view it was an amazing sight. Our lighting technician picked it up and it glistened in the light. It was a truly magical moment – so much so that some of my parents and helpers were reduced to tears. I was too. Jack and his helpers had made the most beautiful sleigh and the dogs were magnificent. Never had Santa made such an entrance.

In those early days we also had a Nativity Scene and on several occasions even used live animals – a camel and a donkey. Another night – never, ever to be forgotten. One of my most difficult yet most deeply satisfying moments:

I was the Community Services Director, Chairman of the Carols Committee and I was the organizer of the Carols Program. I was also a soloist and was the conductor of the Choir that night too. (I think Bryan McMahon was President.) It was a huge undertaking. However, everything was going smoothly until the night before the Carols and it absolutely teamed with rain. Phone calls went back and forth as to what to do and finally Jim Mahoney made the call – ***move the Carols to the Schweppes Centre.*** It took all day to set up and as evening drew on we could see a storm approaching. It was quite frightening – the sky was blue-black and a huge cloud of threatening darkness gradually built up. We stood in the foyer of the Schweppes Centre and watched it. About 7.30 it hit. Thunder, lightning, wind – almost a tornado. However, cars pulled up in the car park and people got out, splashing through the downpour, running for the door. The Schweppes Centre was soon packed with about 3000 people. I remember many things but mostly the awful smell. Thousands of people with wet hair, wet clothes, candles - wet dogs. Our camel was not able to get there. My choir began to dribble in but several from outlying areas could not get through flood waters across the road and

consequently I was down in numbers. We pressed on. During the night the power failed and we were plunged into darkness several times – except for the brave candles.

I lasted the night – and then developed a severe case of 'flu. It was very stressful. And another somewhat similar experience. Carols were not organized by me this time, but by Dawn Colbourne – and again, the weather was appalling and the Carols were moved to the Bendigo Town Hall. I picked up my mum who always attended the Carols and headed into Bendigo only to be forced back because of water across the road in Kangaroo Flat. I found another way through and pulled up close to the Town Hall. I had been asked to be a soloist and had dressed for the occasion. I was wearing the most beautiful (hideously expensive) new evening shoes. I got out of the car - up to my knees in a river of water. Mum and I, arm in arm, we kangaroo hopped over all the torrents of water running down the road and gutters and into the Town Hall. Incredible scene! The Town Hall only holds about 500 people, but every seat was filled and people were crammed around the hall. Extra chairs (many brought by the crowd) had been placed down the aisles (OH&S definitely NOT up to par!!). There could have been almost 1,000 patrons there. I went down to the basement which is where the artists usually congregated, but there was water everywhere so I had to sit in the hall – and that was a very scary experience. Throughout the hall, people had lighted candles in their hands. The seats were pressed so closely together that the long hair of girls in the row in front was in serious jeopardy. As for my beautiful, hideously expensive new shoes. Sad story – completely ruined, never to be worn again. Bev Leeson who currently coordinates the Carols with me often says ***'do you remember those beautiful shoes, ruined in the water.....'***

Another memorable Carols was last year. I felt that it was one of the best. The artists were superb, the program short and snappy and we had THE MOST beautiful sunset. From the stage the trees, which looked black in the light, silhouetted against the deep red sky. It was quite surreal – and when our young soprano soloist sang from her boat, it was a very memorable moment.