
11

Acting Advisedly

Whilst the dams owned by the Commission and other public entities store the majority of the State's water supplies, there are hundreds of farm dams, some of them very large indeed. As farmers have endeavoured to improve their farm water systems, the Government has responded in a number of ways.

The 1957 change of government brought the Country Party to power in coalition. Their electoral base was obviously the rural community and they wasted little time in moving to assist this natural constituency. *The Farm Water Supplies Assistance Act* was enacted in 1958. Dave Morwood reports that Fred Haigh asserted that the legislation had been on the books before the change of government and was simply expedited by the Country Party. Given the inertia attached to the introduction of legislation, the Haigh story must be right. Minister AG Muller had claimed responsibility for the legislation at a public meeting. He and Fred Haigh had travelled to NSW to ensure that Queensland's legislation considered interstate practice.¹

According to Tony Horton, *it was a group of bankers meeting in Gympie in 1958 who sought "the Commission to station an officer at Gympie to give technical advice and assistance to landowners, particularly in connection with the design and construction of farm dams. Their request was based on experience which was embarrassing them very much, that they advanced money to landowners to build dams, only to find that in a very short time the dam failed and the asset for which they had advanced money no longer existed"*.²

WATERY SAUCES



Typical farm dam

This meeting resulted in the formation of the Mary Valley Conservation Committee, which introduced a scheme for providing financial assistance for water supply improvements. They then approached the Government for a wider scheme and this led to the introduction of the FWS Assistance Act in April 1958.³

In the parliamentary debate, the Member for Barambah (one Joh Bjelke-Petersen) said *the Farm Water Supply Assistance Scheme would “benefit many more people than if the Government concentrated merely on large schemes which would involve the expenditure of huge sums of money for the benefit of only sections of people”*. He went on to say that *the scheme was “an ideal way of helping as many people as possible in the State to increase production which will redound to the benefit of the State as a whole”*.⁴

The main thrust of the legislation was to provide a means by which the Government could provide financial assistance to farmers to install water conservation and reticulation works. The financial support was contingent on Commission certification and approval of the projects and provided low interest rates and allowed farmers to get more money than they could get from normal banks. The new financial arrangements encouraged farmers to apply for technical advice and assistance in order to gain the finance.

A significant benefit of the new arrangements was a major improvement in the standard of works (both farm dams and reticulation schemes). While there were competent contractors and suppliers catering for the rural market, the standard of work was not uniformly good. The overall standard improved markedly after the introduction of the scheme.⁵

The Commission took over, expanded greatly and charged for a service that had been provided free by the Department of Agriculture and Stock, mainly through the Soil Conservation Service. For some years there was little co-ordination between the two services which continued in parallel, particularly for small dams, drainage and surface irrigation. The Commission was an engineering organisation and looked at overall standards and economics of schemes, whereas Agriculture and Stock people seemed to look for lowest possible initial cost. Both philosophies still have their supporters. Conflict over these differences, and the Commission having to charge for services provided free by others, persisted for many years before the field was left

ACTING ADVISEDLY

to the Commission. Soil Conservation officers persisted with involvement in small farm dams much longer.⁶

Farm Advisory Services were added to the existing Rivers and Streams Branch well before the introduction of the new Act. Ken Carmichael, who had been Manager of Southern Cross in Sydney before the war and worked in Farm Water Supplies in NSW, was headhunted to come home to Queensland. He had seen distinguished war service, reaching the rank of Major, senior to Fred Haigh. His deputy was Reg Fox, who had served in the old Sub-Department for many years including a time as District Engineer in Cairns.⁷

Ken Carmichael (Mr Carmichael to most of his staff) was a brilliant, extremely hard working, absolutely dedicated leader who demanded performances from others similar to his own. He had been Senior Prefect at Toowoomba Grammar for **two** years and a Major, and ran his Branch without much delegation. He demanded that he be kept informed. According to Dave Morwood, *if you made a mistake you were well advised to get into his office and tell him what you had done before anyone else told him. You would still get the blast but it would last ten minutes instead of a fortnight.* People worked for Ken because they did not enjoy the consequences of not doing so.⁸

Grahame Bertram was Senior Clerk in the Branch and every afternoon he would take the whole bag of correspondence in to Ken for signatures and Ken made him stand the whole time at attention for up to an hour and a half, answering Ken's queries about correspondence and files. He was never asked to sit down – it wasn't proper.⁹

Barrie Fawcett was made to sit outside Ken's office as a buffer between Ken and the rest of the troops. When Ken was venting his temper on one of his victims, Barrie would have to get up and walk away.¹⁰ Ken and Fred Haigh didn't get on and they fought really badly, largely because Ken was so vehemently supportive of his own branch, programs and staff.¹¹



Flood irrigation from channel



Flood irrigation from plastic lay-flat pipe

WATERY SAUCES

Any failure to do your job at 100% accuracy was taken as a personal affront. But Ken had a very human and humane side to him too, and was very kind to people – once he forgave them. He was very active in the Legacy organisation, taking in Legacy wards and working in administration.¹² Even quite junior staff and their spouses were regularly invited to afternoon tea at the Carmichaels'.¹³

The new Act gave impetus to the creation of District Offices. (Minister) Muller said in the House, “in order to help the people more and to economise as much as possible we propose to set up district branches. We will probably establish a central office in Brisbane and a branch on the Downs, the Coast, in Central Queensland, in the West wherever we think it necessary.”¹⁴ Offices set up primarily to deliver advisory services included Warwick, Roma, Gympie and Mackay.¹⁵ Ken Carmichael liked District Offices because of the close contact they made possible between client and adviser.¹⁶ He found many of the offices – in Mackay in the old *Canegrowers* Building and in Gympie upstairs in the School of Arts. Some offices were primitive. In Roma, it comprised two little rooms off the school. One



Groundwater advice from Dave Schmiede and Dave Munro

was occupied by the foreman and typist; the other had chainmen and survey gear and a communication hole had been cut through the wall.¹⁷ In spite (or perhaps because) of these conditions, a great amount of excellent work was achieved by staff in the districts.¹⁸

The Act also brought an enormous expansion in staff. Don Clarke and Dave Morwood were transferred from Irrigation Branch in 1958. John Swales, Mark Siebel, Jim Ole, Peter Barr, Des Foster (transferred from Survey Section) and others were already there. Other early starters were Ian Pryor, Norm White, David Wilmott and Alan Vizer. David Wilmott later started the Bundaberg office. Col

Cornford came in from the Survey Section and opened the Gympie office. Barrie Fawcett, who had sold irrigation equipment in Sydney, joined the Commission in 1961. In early years, some recruits were hired as survey labourers. They did a training course, were appointed as Field Assistants and then to the Adviser range.¹⁹ Tony Bucknell, Graham Swann, Lenny Cummings and Johnny Brewin joined the Commission via this route. Training of water advisers was a very important function and successive certificate and diploma courses were set up to give them the necessary background and to allow promotion to higher level positions. In 1967 Warren Hutton, Ian Bell and Russ Robson were appointed as Advisory cadets. Warren was posted to Toowoomba while the other two were posted to Brisbane temporarily.²⁰ Most cadets spent some time in Brisbane initially, as John Swales liked to ‘start them off’ himself.²¹

ACTING ADVISEDLY

In later years, almost all junior engineers spent a 'training period' in Farm Water Supplies, including people who later became very senior officers indeed – Malcolm Pegg, Peter Bevin, Peter Noonan, Chris Robson and Frank van Schagen to name a few. It was a good environment for young engineers. They were able to be involved with all aspects of a project (and see them through to completion), from initial ideas to detailed design and construction and perhaps even the happy face of a satisfied client.

During his first year, Russ Robson was sent to the field to assist Tony Bucknell, the son of Rex Bucknell, one-time Sub-Accountant. Tony was at that time posted to Roma Office and the task was to assist people who, under the Brigalow Scheme, had balloted land in the Arcadia Valley where there is little or no underground water. The successful balloters had development conditions on their leases including supplying water. So, reported Russ, *we were up there helping them with stock tanks – investigating sites. It was a pretty raw experience at that stage. The Commission said you could camp provided you provided your own equipment and took your own tucker. I was on T(ravelling) A(llowance) because I was from Brisbane but Bucky wouldn't have got anything fancy. We'd go out for a fortnight, go to Roma and play up for the weekend and then go back again. We lived on tinned tucker out of a port under canvas, with an old Falcon ute that used to fall apart. We'd pitch the fly across some bush poles from the then new high tensile long-span suspension fences to the ute and that was our living accommodation. Some of the balloters had up-market accommodation like a tin shed or a converted bus and we could camp in that. And they might have had a tank where you could get a bit of a scrub down.*



Farm adviser Graham Swann on left

We drilled auger holes by hand. If you were lucky there were five or six feet of soil before you bit the sandstone. But you had to keep digging to about 20 feet. You'd grind away with a worm auger. The rules said you had to have five test holes.²²

The Commission must have come to the realisation that it might have been a bit much to ask staff to camp out for protracted periods. Shortly after Russ Robson returned from his sortie to the Arcadia Valley, John Swales informed him that he had acquired a four-wheel drive and caravan for Bucky and asked Russ to deliver it. *The jeep was an ex-hydrographer's vehicle written off.* Russ was to take the jeep and caravan to meet Graham Swann at Miles to take it all out to the Arcadia Valley. *No distance out of Brisbane, the winch fell apart. The wheels all had independent steering. And the caravan was top of the line stuff. It had finished its life with*

WATERY SAUCES

Construction Branch at a rural water supply scheme. When I got off the bitumen at Taroom, I could see all these screws coming out of the caravan. It was the screws from the internal cupboards and I had to stop every five miles and put all the screws back in again. Six weeks later I had to take out a replacement vehicle – the latest reject hydrographer's vehicle – and drive the old one back. By then it was even worse as it had no brakes. Good Work Place Health and Safety stuff.²³

After a year, Russ transferred to Toowoomba where the Officer-in-Charge was Francis Victor (Mike) Hopkins. Mike was an early, highly skilled water adviser and he also owned Toowoomba's leading jewellery shop. He said his Commission salary helped to pay his tax bill! He had many interests including amateur theatre and he had at least a mental image of a play about Farm Advisory. Characters included Mr Comical, Mr Fix, Mr Clueless and Mr Deadwood (for Messrs Carmichael, Fox, Clewett and Morwood). There was nothing vaguely comical about Mr Carmichael, but that was how Gerry Harris (ex Somerset) pronounced his name. Mike applied similar levels of imaginative skill to his water projects.²⁴

He had with him Jeff (Jephson) Cameron, who had farmed all his life but was a school friend of Ken Carmichael's. *A brilliant mathematician, he'd started doing engineering but was interrupted by the war and other things. At about age 55 he left the farm and joined the Commission. He could use a slide rule like you'd never believe.*²⁵

One of Russ's first jobs in Toowoomba was to work on the second farm dam on the Downs, on Oakey Creek. The first had been constructed by Cliff Zabel on the slopes of Mt Tyson, but it leaked like a sieve and was always a problem. Russ says *it's interesting to look at the proliferation and the increase in size of farm dams. The first one I did was 120 megalitres capacity, the next in the same area was much the same. After that they got bigger and bigger. Cubbie Station has gone to the other extreme (with a million megalitres). Now there are pots of water everywhere.*²⁶

A little later, John McKenna (who was in the second intake of cadets along with Kel Roberts, who has been resident in Rockhampton for many years) was posted to Warwick under the doyen of farm advisers, Des Foster who had *been there for yonks.*²⁷ Between them, Russ and John had the bulk of the farm advisers in the State during the late 1970s and '80s with five staff each. As there were no farm advisory staff in Goondiwindi or St George and only one in Roma, the Toowoomba and Warwick offices supplemented the needs of the western areas of what became the South Region.

ACTING ADVISEDLY

According to Jim Weller, *John McKenna was famous for driving like crazy and every minute or so, he would give the born a loud blast to try to scare off the kangaroos – while still driving at a hundred kilometres an hour. John had a thing about wildlife. He liked to either shoot it or if he didn't have a gun he'd pull up and throw rocks at it. One day in his determination to run over a snake he steered too violently and hit one of the big old guide posts – the snake, of course, didn't move.*²⁸

The Brigalow Scheme was not confined to the South Region. Frank Dwyer transferred from Bundaberg to Emerald to assist with its implementation. *In the late '80s, the Emerald office was doing a million dollars worth of designs and investigations in the year. In 1988, I had \$1M worth of jobs pegged out in the field ready to be constructed. It was a pretty hectic time and I spent two out of three weeks away from home.*²⁹

Warren Hutton was also a farm adviser at Emerald at the time of the Brigalow Scheme. Properties were balloted and successful farmers were required to carry out works on their properties within a certain period. Farm advisers were therefore in great demand and very busy.

Warren recalls *they were great days – we were everybody's friend. It was all stress-free. There was none of this animosity – it was all “Come and have a cup of tea.” It was a very cheap service. Unfortunately that meant that we did complete designs on many schemes that were never built.*³⁰

According to Frank Dwyer *the Brigalow Scheme, sponsored by the Government, involved vast clearing. Lands Department would clear so much of a block and the ballot winner or auction winner would have to clear so much within so many years. Today, with vegetation management, it's totally different.*

We went to the bush and slept under the truck, often in freezing cold conditions. We had no tents. Sometimes we could stay in old shearing quarters. One freezing night north of Clermont, a labourer put his bed near the stove and promised to keep the place warm. He'd put all the wood in the oven so it was freezing at 5.00 a.m.

One young assistant liked to shoot feral cats. He banged a big ginger one day. He was skiting to the farmer about how he'd got this big one. The farmer said, “About bloody time. But don't tell the Missus.”



Warren Hutton

WATERY SAUCES

Today we have remote area conditions where you have to have satellite phones. Back in the '70s in the bush all we had was black soil tracks. You'd be up there all week and there could be storms. Driving back on a Friday afternoon – or night, more likely – you could hit a patch of black soil. They wouldn't give us four wheel-drives in those days, so you'd pull up on a cattle grid and dig the soil out of your wheel arches with a crowbar. Air conditioning and laminated windscreens didn't come until the '80s.

When I first started you had to trace your plans off cadastral plans. There were no such things as photocopiers. You had to calculate all your daily runoffs by hand – now there are computer programs to do it in a fraction of the time.³¹ With computers you could have the whole farm dam pegged out and all the calculations done before you left the farm. Now it's all gone to consultants who have to learn the job from scratch.³²

Initially, field staff, engineers and draftsmen all worked in separate management areas. The workload and waiting lists were enormous and specialisation seemed to be essential just to get through the work. Senior management also believed that all designs of dams should be approved by qualified engineers, which meant they had to do them. Eventually the dam safety legislation clarified the requirements, and the benefits of 'multi-skilling' as opposed to specialisation were recognised. Much of the design had always been done by draftsmen and some field staff and this became more common from the late 1970s. Much earlier, Ian Pryor had added irrigation on the Downs to his full-time job as Senior Draftsman and became a true expert. Many on the Downs knew him and Des Foster (and no one else) as the Irrigation Commission. The irony is that the real concept design of most projects was done at the initial investigation by the field staff. The design engineer couldn't change it unless he redid the initial work himself.³³



Irrigation by micro and spray systems



Field staff did design dams,³⁴ especially in more remote areas such as Stages 2 and 3 of the Brigalow area, between the Carnarvon and Expedition ranges. They used to draft on the top of a plane table, or a log, or whatever was around.³⁵ The much later drive for multi-skilling was predated by such moves in Farm Advisory.³⁶

ACTING ADVISEDLY

Rod Terry served in the drafting section on rotation under Ian Pryor and Alan Vizer in the mid-1960s. *Among the crew were Jimmy Cook, Mick Garvey, John Cantor, Laurie Pappin, John Clowes and Harry Wright. Harry had a very bad smoker's cough and every time he coughed on Cookie he'd say, "Die, you bastard, die."* Ian Pryor ran a very tight ship, expecting high standards, but operating in an encouraging, totally fair fashion.³⁷ The training programme was not confined to Head Office draftsmen, but from time to time country officers were brought down for a crash course. In 1979, Ian Pryor took the opportunity to say to a visitor to the Branch Christmas party, *"This is Gary Luck. He's down from Mackay to learn things."* *"It's good for people from the country to come down here and learn things properly. We need to educate our country friends," responded the stranger. "Who is this bloke?" said Gary to Ian. "Is he too high up or can I hit him?" "Take it from me, I'm too high up," said Commissioner Don Beattie.*³⁸

On another occasion, new recruit cadet draftsman Lynden Druitt was manning the Commission's exhibit at the Ekka with Leon Leach. Leon returned from the gents just in time to see a client leaving the pavilion and he asked Lynden if he'd had a customer. Lynden replied that this old gent had come along and asked him what he thought of the display. Lynden had said, "I think it's terrible but what can you expect when you work for a cheapskate organisation like this one?" "You said that to Don Beattie?" said Leon.³⁹

When Ken Carmichael retired, Reg Fox was passed over for the top job and George Pearce was appointed. He could not have been more different from his predecessor. Dave Morwood sums up the difference as *if you made a mistake, you went straight to his office and confessed and apologised. George just said "Thank you for coming and telling me that."* However, *Bill Sharp warned us not to do that too often, because George was always on the interviewing committee for promotions!*⁴⁰

In the mid-1970s, a decision was made to publish all the design charts and codify the design practices that had been developed over the years. This was a major task and could only be done co-operatively. Graham Jobling was the editor who put it all together with a lot of help from Ian Pryor and the drafting staff with design charts and so on. The subject chapters were written by specialists: Dave Morwood wrote up dams and spray irrigation; Ian Pryor and Graham Jobling did surface irrigation; Graham Jobling did micro-irrigation; Alan 'Big Red' Niland and Ian Pryor did pumps; and Ian Pryor did stock and domestic supplies. This took an entire year to accomplish, but the result was so stunning that it won an award for Engineering Excellence from the Institution of Engineers.



Graham Jobling

Dr Graham Jobling was a notable and admirable Agricultural Engineer who joined the Commission in the late 1960s. A man of boundless energy, he had been Captain of Football at Melbourne University (Bill Souter, from the same Agricultural Engineering Department, was Cricket Captain in the same year). Graham continued to play First Grade football in Brisbane for several years. He wore shorts and short sleeves all year round although rumour has it that he wore a light sweater during a year's post-doctoral studies at Christchurch University, New Zealand. He was an engineer who loved field-work, but was just as happy sitting down and sorting out the integral maths of his observations. His contribution to the advisory service and his rapport with other staff were unsurpassed. Tragically, he developed cancer and, despite efforts with various types of therapy, he died in his early 40s. The high regard in which he was held led to many work-mates volunteering to complete some home renovations he had undertaken and to contribute to a fund that allowed the establishment of the *Graham Jobling Award* managed by Trustees

Dave Morwood, Barrie Fawcett and John Cantor. For ten years, nominations were called for officers who had made an outstanding contribution to the Commission. The winners were extremely proud to be awarded with this measure of recognition.⁴¹

The *Farm Design Manual* was used not only by Commission staff but also by consultants and resulted in a further improvement in standards of farm design. The *Manual* was subsequently revised, updated and metricated. Tony Horton was the editor of the second edition which came out in three volumes to replace the somewhat unwieldy single volume of the first edition.

John Harvey always enjoys the drive from Bundaberg to Maryborough past a source of great pride – the dam that couldn't be built. John inspected the site and thought *that it would be OK but there might be a bit of trouble with the by-wash. So Graham Jobling came up from Brisbane and said, "Yes, we can do it. We'll do this and we'll do that."* So John proceeded to the licensing stage before realising that others had given advice to the effect that it couldn't be done. The owner, one Harry Bonanno (Chairman of Canegrowers), was not pleased, claiming that he should have been allowed to proceed earlier. *It just goes to prove that you can know too much. If I had taken the trouble to read the files, there wouldn't have been a dam there today.*⁴²

The demand for the advisory service was always very high. The Commission couldn't afford to seek new clients because the waiting lists were always longer than

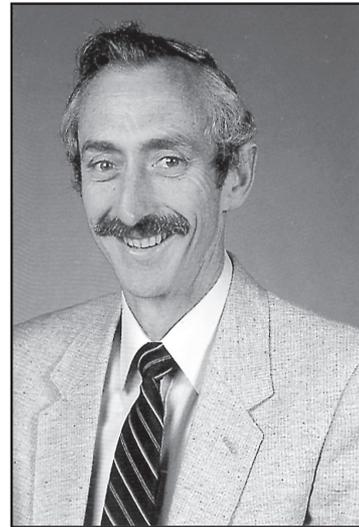
ACTING ADVISEDLY

could be managed despite concerted efforts to catch up. As Bill Souter reported, *when I went to Townsville there were 30 or 40 outstanding jobs, but as soon as I started to do them, it became 200 outstanding jobs.*⁴³ A lot of farmers asked for assistance because they wanted the money. They couldn't have cared less about the technical advice – that was sort of forced upon them. But there was always a heartening number of people who didn't want finance who came for the advice anyway.⁴⁴ Jim Weller records that *the services were highly regarded and responsible for a lot of development.*⁴⁵

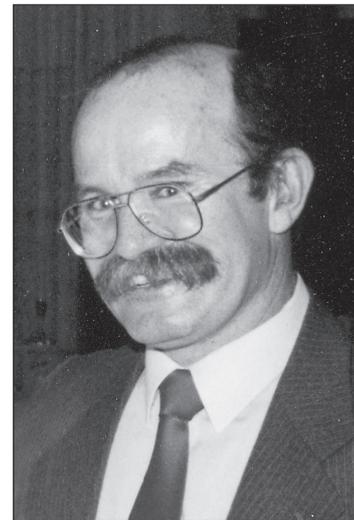
When George Pearce was appointed Assistant Commissioner, he was succeeded by Bill Sharp as Chief Engineer Rivers and Streams.⁴⁶ Two years later, the Chief post was abolished. Farm Water Supplies was amalgamated with Irrigation Branch with Stan Ross as Chief Engineer.⁴⁷ In 1988, Client Services Division was created under John Cantor.⁴⁸

In the 1990 reorganisation within DPI Client Advisory Division was created under Bill Eastgate.⁴⁹ By this time, Tony Horton was the senior officer in the old Farm Advisory group. There had been great deal of discussion over the role of the section, what constituted an initial inspection, when a field design should be done and what standard of plan should be provided. A Rural Advisory Conference in 1991 attempted to resolve some of these issues. When the service had been set up, Carmichael had attempted to define its function. "It is not intended that the Commission merely records the landowner's ideas of what he wants in the way of equipment. That is not, of course, disregarded, but the Commission's function is to ascertain from the landowner the purpose of the project – what he requires it to do – and then investigate and design it to achieve that purpose, to prepare an estimate of the cost and then to discuss the design and estimates with the landowner to ensure that he is satisfied with the details and the economics of it." Tony Horton was adamant that *we need to be confident in our knowledge and ability, be confident that we are the experts and that we know what the client needs and where that differs from what he wants, if it does so.*⁵⁰

The service was heavily subsidised. Commission charges were only 2% of the cost of works, where consultants would have



John Cantor



Tony Horton

WATERY SAUCES

charged up to 10%.⁵¹ Not surprisingly, some consultants considered that the Government was competing unfairly. In addition, changes in government philosophy were clearly moving the Public Service out of service delivery. Further reviews of the Farm Advisory Service were conducted and resulted in significant curtailment of its activities. By the time the Commission came to an end, the Farm Advisory Service was a mere shadow of its former self. As Warren Hutton said, *that's all gone now. The function has been taken over by the private sector who probably do an inferior job at a much higher cost to the farmers.*⁵²

According to Russ Robson, *it took a long time to kill. We were told from about 1987 on that Farm Advisory was a dying art, but the funding continued. Every budget it was listed as low priority but funding continued right through to the mid-1990s before the coffin-lid was finally nailed down.*⁵³