

Jockey Stephens

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Riverstone has had a number of well known local identities over the years. One of the best known was 'Jockey Stephens' This article was originally written by Lorraine Forbes in 1983 and has been updated to add in some more information for this Journal.

Jockey's real name was Roland Stephenson, but he was better known as 'Rollie Stephens'. He lived in the 'hollow' near Crown Road and Bourke Street, in an old split slab cottage, with his mother, an elder brother and a sister, Millie. His sister moved to the Pitt Town area after her marriage.

Jockey had been a keen horseman in his youth, hence the nickname. He rode in most of the district races and was an accomplished Show jumper.

He appears to have been a kindly man who loved children. He took care of his elderly mother until her death, but then, unfortunately, went into decline himself.

Jockey served in the Army during World War I and despite rumours to the contrary, he was never decorated. Indeed his war records show that he was in trouble with the authorities on a number of occasions. One can hardly hold this against him, for many others were to behave in the same way, due to the horrors of the war.

Anzac Day was a memorable day for Jockey. Charlie Fisher, who had, I believe, served with Jockey in the War, would take it upon himself to make Jockey presentable for the Anzac March. Mr Fisher owned the Bakery, which until recently was a veterinarian's surgery and is now a private home and is just behind the corner shops of Garfield Road and Railway Terrace. Charlie would bath Jockey in the horse trough (he still used a horse and cart to deliver his bread), and would cut his hair with the horse clippers. A new, or 'new' second-hand suit was provided for the March. Jockey promptly sold, or pawned, this straight after the March to buy a bottle or two of 'plonk'. Never-the-less Charlie Fisher repeated the process each following year. Charlie also provided Jockey with the left-over bread from the day's baking and was always there with 'two bob' when Jockey needed it, which was frequently.

After his mother's death Jockey continued to live in the house but systematically dismantled it, using the timber to fuel his fire to keep himself and his numerous dogs warm. Lettie Brookes clearly remembers the night when the neighbours were awakened by an almighty crash. Jockey's house, or all that remained of it, had collapsed. All that was left upright was the roof which was leaning at a precarious angle. Unperturbed, Jockey simply used what remained as a lean-to.

After the land was sold Jockey camped wherever the mood took him. A favourite spot was in the paddock where Marketown now stands. He could be seen curled up with his dogs around the remnants of his fire, covered in frost and blissfully ignorant of it all. When the Referendum for extended trading hours for hotels was approaching some wag painted a huge sign along the fence of this paddock. It read: "Vote No For Jockey!" Another favourite spot was under the morning glory vine opposite the old pub near the railway gates. He probably defrosted there while waiting for the pub to open!

Mr Dick Stacey Snr. was good to Jockey, giving him the bruised fruit, some vegetables and cabbage leaves etc. which Jockey would boil up in an old tin over his fire in the paddock. Jockey, however, set such store by his dogs that it is debatable just who got the largest share of the 'tucker'!

Jockey had a passion for collecting stray dogs, always handy when a free meal was offered. The young people who frequented the Friday night dances were always known for buying Jockey some fish and chips with their limited spending money. Upon receipt of this treat Jockey would sit in the gutter and distribute his goodies on a 'one-for-you, one-for-me' basis with his stray dogs. To the credit of his benefactors this practice continued for some years.

My Nanna (Marie Locke, nee Strachan) used to send me to the pub nearly every Sunday with some hot corned beef and freshly baked bread wrapped in a tea towel for 'poor old Jockey' as she called him. He always thanked me kindly, blessed my Nanna for the goodly woman she was, folded the tea towel as best he could and sent me off with the words, "If you grow as fine a woman as your grandmother the likes of me will rest easy". Words which, I'm afraid, were lost on one so young as I, but which now fill the heart with regret and sorrow.

My Pop always gave Jockey a shilling every pay day. Jockey was known for borrowing threepence or sixpence from the men on pay day. None of it was ever repaid, but then, it was never expected.

The town drunk, or 'dero', today is treated with disdain or ill-disguised contempt. In days gone by he was the local identity, someone with a past, if little future, who, in their own way, contributed to the character of this town. Roland Stephenson at some time had a future, he most certainly had a past. What changed this man from a fine upstanding young man to the town's beloved drunk? I leave you with this to think about!