

# Two Bob Each Way

*Judith Lewis*

In the time I am writing of, the late 1930s to mid 50s, if you wished to gamble legally on horse racing you needed to visit the racetrack. Not many people in small country towns, or large ones for that matter, could afford this luxury. This didn't mean that the small average punter was deprived of the 'pleasures' of gambling. Rather, he was adequately catered for, by the local SP Bookie. Every town had an SP, Riverstone was no exception. There was probably more than one SP Bookie in Riverstone, but I only know about one because he was my uncle.

Townpeople referred to him as 'Stockie'. To my brothers, Bill, Robert and me he was our beloved 'Sheck' (my elder brother, Bill's, first attempts at pronouncing 'Jessop'). Sheck was married to my father's younger sister Vera, 'Booa' or 'Boo' to us kids, again for the same reason, Bill's early mispronunciation. Boo and Sheck were childless and like second parents to we three kids. My mother died when I was 12 and Boo was our 'second mother' for the next 25 years. Sheck conducted his bookmaking activities from behind a shop in the main street. Boo took bets at her home on the corner of Crown Road and Piccadilly Street.

Keeping the 'business' in the family, Clarrie, the husband of my father's elder sister, Ivy, 'Why' to us kids (you've probably guessed the reason!), for a time looked after a section of the business, known as "The Tips" from his home, also in Crown Road. My father, Garnet, also took a few bets for Sheck, from two families who lived in Market Street, who either couldn't, or wouldn't, go to Sheck. During the week, Sheck worked at Homebush Abattoirs and I believe he also took bets from work-mates there.

A neighbour, from Piccadilly Street, Sam, worked as 'Penciller' at Sheck's home. I believe it was the Penciller's task to keep a record of all transactions. In 1945, after Clarrie's death and the destruction of his home (another story), "The Tips" moved to Sheck's home and they would also have been the Penciller's responsibility.

"The Tips" was a favourite form of betting. For one shilling (ten cents) you could nominate a horse in each race of the Sydney meeting of the day, be it Randwick, Canterbury or Rosehill. A winning horse earned you three points, a second place was worth two points and a third place was worth one. The person with the highest number of points after the last race 'won the Tips' and collected the 'Kitty'. I believe it was a 'winner take all' competition. Maybe Sheck took a percentage of the Kitty, I don't really know.

Clarrie Neal reminisces, *The prize was sometimes as much as 7 pounds (\$14), not bad when you consider the basic wage at the time was less than 5 pounds. When making their selections some people had lucky numbers, others had their favourite jockeys or trainers, others selected horses that favoured a particular track. Most people were content to follow form, but this never seemed to work too often either. Some people followed jockeys who had reputations for certain races. For instance, Billy Cook became known as 'Last Race Billy' because of the number of last races he won. I clearly recall riding my bike up to put on Mum and Dad's tips and if they had selected a few winners I'd ride up again later in the day to see if anybody else had polled as well.*

My parents also used to 'have a go at the Tips'. I remember them winning once. There were also times when we kids were allowed to 'have a go'. At a shilling a time, I guess there were usually more important things we'd spend our money on, if we had any. The Tips was a fun way to allow ordinary people to have an interest with little financial outlay.

I guess the local police knew what was going on (they may even have been customers of Sheck), but every so often the town would be visited by 'The Ds'(detectives) from Parramatta or Windsor. This was something that was not talked about, at least 'not in front of the children'. If Sheck was caught, I believe he was taken to Windsor, bailed, then had to go to court at a later date. There was, I think, some arrangement whereby a local, present at the time of the raid, would take Sheck's place as the Bookie to be charged. I believe this had something to do with the fact that, after a number of convictions for the same offence, you could be sent to gaol. Presumably Sheck paid the person well to take his place, and he most certainly would have paid the fine, because there was never a shortage of volunteers to take the charge.

Boo had a great fear of 'The Ds' coming to the house, but I don't think they ever did. I guess there would have been no shortage of volunteers to take the charge there, either.

As Clarrie Neal recalls, *When you walked into the back room there would be a group of men sitting, listening, with ears glued to the wireless, to get the latest information from Cliff Cary, the tipster, and then listening to Ken Howard the race caller give his colourful description of the race. Ken Howard's best known phrase was his definition of an odds-on favourite as being, 'London to a brick on'.*

If Sheck took a bet for a large amount of money he would 'lay it off' with a Sydney bookmaker. The girls at the local telephone exchange knew about this and would always ensure there was a line available for him. Every Sunday Sheck would burn all the little scraps of paper with bets written on them, some for as little as 'sixpence (5 cents) each way', win or place in today's TAB jargon. He kept a little book with the names of people who owed him money, some of it from bets and some from people who had simply come to him for a loan. There were many down and out people in Riverstone, who looked to Stockie when they were strapped for cash, and many who were never able to repay those loans.

In the early 1950s Sheck bought a car, a 1947 black Chevrolet, a real bookie's car. He bought it from a former local who had a car yard in the city. I was there when Sheck paid cash for the car, eleven hundred pounds! I had never seen so much money. Being an SP Bookie was obviously profitable! Sheck had a driver's licence. He'd passed the test in his youth and kept his licence current, but drive he could not! Early in the piece we were in the car with him when he had a slight prang, outside the police station on the corner of Old Northern Road and Showground Road at Castle Hill. The policeman who attended the accident asked Sheck how long he'd been driving, to which Sheck replied, "Thirty years". His licence could verify this and, what's more, he'd never had an accident in all those years!

A few years later, not long before his death, Sheck and Boo moved to a house on the corner of George and Park Streets. Sheck's nephew, Jack and his family, moved into the Crown Road house and the bookie business continued from there. Sheck was an extremely placid, very quiet man, who never showed any emotion. When a favourite horse 'got up' and could likely cost him a lot of money his demeanour never changed. Ironically, stress caused his early death. He suffered a mild stroke one Sunday whilst burning 'the evidence' and a fatal stroke later, in October 1953. Boo and Jack continued to operate for a while, but finally called it a day. Boo didn't stop being a benefactor to others though. For up to twenty years afterwards some of her old clients would still be calling in 'for a loan to get me through to pension day' or be sending their children round, "Can Mum borrow some money till Dad gets paid?"

As a youngster I was rather embarrassed by my family's illegal activities. I recall the time when a girlfriend, new to the town, and I were taking a Saturday bike ride to Windsor. As we were leaving our house, one of the Market Street 'customers' knocked at our front door. My friend was curious as to what they were there for and I pretended not to know. I was not too proud, though, to spend the night with Boo once. It was mid-week and the trots were on at Harold Park. Sheck wanted to have the night off to go to the trots with his brother, Dick, who owned trotting horses. I was to be company for Boo, as she was betting on the trots. I gladly pocketed my share of the profits from the night. I think I 'earned' eighteen pounds, with which I was able to purchase a new topcoat.

I look back with pride and affection on our Sheck and, particularly, our Boo, to whom my family owe so much. I don't believe a more selfless person ever existed. What they were doing may have been illegal in the eyes of the law, but I believe the world, as we knew it then, was far less corrupt than it is today, with its many forms of legalised gambling. Having 'two bob each way' or more, if you could afford it, with the local SP, was a pleasurable pastime. It gave ordinary, hard working people a little joy in their lives, especially when the bookies they dealt with were persons of the ilk of Sheck and Boo.