You've Got to be in it to Win it

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In the first in a new series by local historians, Colleen O'Sullivan writes about her family's racing background. An extract from *Once a Day Dawn.*

One thing we learn early in life is that life itself is unpredictable and unfair. That we have no choice in our beauty, intelligence, country of birth, ancestry, life expectancy, physique, skin colour or cultural heritage. That others have less or more than we have, and there seems no reason for it. And that life can change or end in a moment. A fatalist will say: that is the way life is; I must accept it. A religionist will say: that is God's will; I'll get my reward in heaven. An optimist will say: my luck will turn soon. A gambler will say: I'll lay a bet that it will turn soon. And a gambler who takes probability into account will say: I might lay that bet, but first I'll work out the odds.

Where did my grandfather fit? Well certainly he was a gambler though my mother never mentioned that. I often heard her say: *My father was a butcher, we all knew about meat.* I never heard her say: *my father was a bookmaker, we all knew about gambling.* And yet that was his main relaxation and passion, certainly in his middle years. I think for my mother there was a question mark hanging over bookmaking: *Is this a respectable pastime for my very respectable father?* Somehow it had a faint odour attached, which ironically, butchering didn't have. That was to do with the times of course. A middle-class, church-driven faction railed against the exploitation of the working class by publicans and bookmakers whom they believed encouraged the weak working man to squander his money on booze and gambling, leaving his poor family destitute. Rev C E Schafer declared in 1916 that racing *struck at the moral fibre of young men…there were more slackers and shirkers on the racecourse than in any other sport…insensate fellows who made spielers and bookmakers fat.* But there was ambivalence towards racing also. After all it was the Sport of Kings, and the most prominent men in town were associated with it.

I have no doubt my grandfather was attracted to the heady atmosphere of racing when Carbine won the Melbourne Cup; and later when he was a young man scouring the red sands of Western Australia for a glint of gold. Racing was popular on the goldfields. It was another opportunity to make a fortune. The saying *Australians will bet on two flies crawling up a wall* was arguably truer in my grandfather's day than it is today. Every community that had a few houses, a pub, a church and a hall also had a racecourse.

While scanning the local newspapers for Portland and Kandos I realised racing was not just a pastime for Will, a relaxing day on the track; it was another family business, a racing fraternity, a syndicate. His brothers Jim and Jack, and brothers-in-law Arthur and Vin Irwin are mentioned well over one hundred times as horse-owners, racing officials, race club members, trainers, and in Will's case, bookmaker. Rosebud, a favourite of their horses, raced in at least thirty-two races in the Kandos-Mudgee district. Other horses included After Dark, Lady Growie, Chance, Callodian, Almissa, Midnight and Jinnie Lee.

The earliest mention of the Walsh racing syndicate that I have come across was at Piper's Flat Race Course just outside Portland in March 1913 where one brother was a steward, another was clerk of course, and a Walsh horse After Dark came second in two races. *A peaceful spot is Piper's Flat* begins the bush poem 'How McDougal Topped the Score' (about a cricket match there). So peaceful is Piper's Flat today there is no evidence of the

locality, the railway station or the race course. Like so many places where Will found excitement, including Kandos race course, it is submerged beneath the dust of the Australian landscape.

The Walsh and Irwin men helped start a race club and a trotting club in Portland, a race club in Kandos, and were active members of the Rylstone Race Club. They moved fluidly across the track taking on different official roles and club positions, and attending race meetings at courses within a hundred-mile radius. They gambled on making money out of racing, just as they gambled on making money out of new towns. In horse-racing, Will found company and friendship, and not only with his brothers and brothers-in-law. A good racing friend Thomas Blunden became a son-in-law; a stipendiary steward William Henry Underwood became his executor.

Someone once said that what one needs for a fulfilling life is something or someone to love, something to do and something to look forward to. Horses provided Will with all three, certainly in the 1910s, 1920s and 1930s, the golden age of racing, when he was in his thirties, forties and fifties. Fridays after closing the shop they'd polish off a demijohn as they discussed the form. Sundays he'd rub down the horses, take them for a ride and no doubt ponder their next win. Saturdays were race days when he went off with his brothers and brothers-in-law in the Bluebird, wearing his tussah silk suit and carrying his bookmaking satchel.

Let us imagine 4 November 1922. The Kandos Race Club had formed only a year before. It is Saturday. One of those days that starts with a nip in the air and then folds open a bright blue canopy; where every rock on Rocky stands out; where magpies strut like gentlemen taking the country air. Of the seven hundred or so people on the Kandos race course this day there are plenty of gentlemen. You can see one now in his blue serge suit and grey felt hat opening the door of a hire car for his wife (or is it a girlfriend?) in her cream frock, cloche hat and sun umbrella. A quick search in his fob pocket to pay the hire car, then he escorts his dearest through the paddock gate (a wave of his season ticket saves him three shillings) and onto a rug to join a corral of cream frocks and white stockings. A short consultation over the race book, a clink of coins and he's off to see a man about a horse.

And waiting in the bookmaker's ring is a tall confident gentleman in a tussah silk suit, with his clerk beside him. You'll note there is plenty of noise from the seventeen sonorous-voiced bookmakers and there is plenty of money changing hands. Mr serge-suit listens to the odds. Miss Simbi, 2 to 1. Five shillings to win. He'll have Miss Simbi as a double in the Kandos Handicap as well. He gives his ten shillings a quick kiss for luck. For the moment all his hopes rest on Miss Simbi. But wait, his dearest wants one shilling on that horse with the regal name and impossible odds, Coral King, 10 to 1.

Just enough time to stop at the publican's booth for a quick one. Mr P Squires of the Globe Hotel Rylstone paid five pounds for the privilege of supplying strong drinks at the course and with patrons ten deep at times, he has trained his staff to pour, take money and move to the next customer in one deft action. Serge suits are plentiful, the noise loud and animated and the mood expectant. Suddenly glasses go down and there is an advance, not a rush or a drift, but a purposeful progression from the bar to the saddling enclosure to watch the eight horses, recently saddled, move to the barrier start. Here, it is more than money that feeds the excitement. It is the beauty of the horses, the colours of the jockeys, the tension of the start, the tautness of the necks, the thunder of the gallop, the roar of the crowd, the pride of the

winner. In this case two winners. Miss Simbi and Schoolboy fought a desperate tussle over four and a half furlongs to finish in a dead-heat. Coral King - unplaced.

It is said that on a racecourse in the 1920s the biggest owners and the biggest betters were also the biggest bookies. That was no doubt true of William Henry Joseph Walsh, that gentleman in the tussah silk suit. Every bet he took was a bet he made; a bet that the winner of the next race would bring him more money than he had to pay out. And just in case that didn't happen, well their own horses might win. There was Rosebud, on this November day, in both the Novice and the Trial Handicaps, ridden by Harvey. Surely a good chance. And yes Rosebud came second in both races. By the way, that hire car. It belonged to the Walsh syndicate as well. Purchased in February 1921. *As there are no cars in the district this will be a great benefit to the people of Kandos who were waiting anxiously for one*.

Yes, Will was a gambler, but one who looked carefully at the odds. His risk-management strategy was to venture into all aspects of racing. His philosophy could be summed up as: *enjoy the flutter; manage the risk*. But he also knew *you have to be in it to win it.* It was in bookmaking he thought most about probability. A bookie tries to know everything he can so that he can decide the chances of each horse. That's how he works out his odds. Pick a price to ensure profit and make sure you can cover every bet. Energy, thought, study, analysis, bookkeeping, consultation – all these things are involved. It is not enough to have a satchel, program and book, pay your thirty-shilling bookmaking fee (in those days) and set yourself up in the ring to come out winning – though some punters think so. As well as knowing the field, a bookmaker has to have a good memory, a good head for figures, a good clerk and a good voice. His penciller writes down details about every bet – the identity of the punter, the amount from the punter, the amount that has to be paid out if the horse wins, and the total amount held on the horse. As more bets come in, the bookie changes the odds to ensure profit. He might send a runner to cover his bet with another bookie. All the time his brain is 'making book' and estimating the profit margin. He can truly be called a Turf Accountant.

My generation knew nothing of this rich part of our grandfather's life despite two horse photos on the wall at 'Day Dawn'. Yet most of us have or have had an affinity with horse-racing: Randwick race meetings; country race meetings; a form-guide, a beer and a TAB. One brother was an SP bookie until he made enough money to buy a pub. Then he sponsored the Publican's Purse. My mother admonished another brother for smoking and followed it with: *I don't mind if you bet because you could strike it lucky*. Yes even Jean was a gambler, *in moderation.*

A belief in luck is the song of the gambler and it was sung loudly in our house: when a lottery ticket arrived with a birthday card from our grandfather; as we played cards around the kitchen table for a chocolate prize; when my mother rubbed her opal for luck; as the chocolate wheel spun at the school fete. They were reminders to hope and dream.

A non-gambler would say that the safest way to double your money is to fold it over and put it in your pocket. A gambler knows *you've got to be in it to win it*.