

ALF ROBINSON - DIARY OF THE SYDNEY TO MELBOURNE WALK, SEPTEMBER 1931

In 1931, two Victorian walkers attempted to walk from Sydney to Melbourne. 'Heel and Toe', the magazine of the Victorian Race Walking Club, published the diary of this trip in 1991. I am very pleased to be able to reproduce that diary here for all to read.

Attempted by A. E. Robinson and R. V. Blackley, walkers, and accompanied by F. J. Watts as manager, masseur and general attendant on a cycle. For the purposes of brevity, these three will be designated as Alf, Rupe and Jack respectively.

As a preliminary to this attempt, Rupe left Melbourne on Wednesday, the 26th of August, having in view competition in the 50 Kilometres Road Walking Championship of New South Wales on the 29th of August. He competed in this event securing 4th place. During the few days he was staying in Sydney, he stayed at the home of the Daintry's at St. Peters.

Unable to leave Melbourne until after the 7 Miles Team Race between the walking clubs of South Australia and Victoria on the 29th of August, Alf and Jack accompanied the party of club members and their friends, and the interstate visitors, to Nathani Springs on the Sunday (30th), and leaving there at 3.30 pm were driven to Melbourne by J. O'Farrell. Left Melbourne at 5.30 pm by the Sydney Express, and arrived in Sydney at 11.00 am Monday the 31st. Met at the station by Rupe and Miss C. Dahm. Went to the home of the latter for lunch, visited the Amateur Sports Club and friends in the afternoon, while Rupe and Jack paid a rushed call on the various prominent sights of Sydney. Later they visited the Capitol Theatre in the company of Misses C. Dahm and F. Daintry.

Tuesday 1 September.

Leaving city at 9.30 am, crossed Harbour by ferry, passing under bridge, to Millson's Point, thence going by tram via Cremorne Junction to the Spit. Crossing the Spit Bridge, and taking another tram to Manly, viewed this seaside resort in a hasty review before taking the ferry back to the quay. Rupe and Jack left the quay again immediately to visit Tooronga Park, spending a couple of hours there, returning to their respective lodgings. (Jack was staying at the People's Palace, Pitt Street) Alf Spent the afternoon visiting friends. Meeting together at 7.30 pm, arrangements were made for an early start in the morning, Rupe having transferred his place of abode from the Daintry's, also to the People's Palace. Rupe and Jack spent evening in a further review of the prominent city landmarks.

Wednesday 2 September.

Alf met Rupe and Jack at the People's Palace at 6.00 am. After packing packs, it was found that Rupe has forgotten some of his belongings, which he left at the Daintry's, so after clocking in at the Sydney G.P.O. at 7.00 am, a conference was held outside that building, the result of which it was decided that Rupe and Alf would carry their packs while Jack went to the Daintry's to pick up the missing articles. Left the G.P.O. at 7.10 am, proceeding by way of George Street, passing the Central Railway Station, and turning right at Grace Brothers Store, passed through the inner suburbs of Sydney, viz. Camperdown, Annadale, Summer Hill, Ashfield and Enfield, at 8 miles. From here on the population quickly thinned out, and after passing Bankstown at 12.1 miles, open country was reached. Shortly after passing the Yagoona Railway Station at 12.7 miles, Jack picked Rupe and Alf up, when it was decided that the packs could be transferred to the bike. Spending 15 minutes in adjusting same on the cycle, we again started on the road passing over undulating country. The weather was all that could be desired, there being just that little bit of breeze which took the heat out of the bright sunlight. The next prominent place to be passed was the Warwick Farm Racecourse, the appointments of which were extremely good for a course situated as far out of the city as this was (18.8 miles)

Our first main stop for the day was at Liverpool, 20.3 miles, which we reached at 12.07 pm. Not having had any substantial breakfast, we felt the need of a good dinner, and did justice to a good meal at this town. Leaving again at 1.25 pm, passed through open country, taking the new road from the Cross Roads Hotel. The country was extremely dry in these parts, it being particularly noticeable that the growth of trees did not go to any appreciable height. Many cyclists on road training for the Goulburn to Sydney race to be held the following Saturday. Road surface very good, but heavy banking on turns made hard going for walking. Reached Narellan at 5.10 pm. and without stopping went on to Camden which we reached at 5.55 pm. Jack had in the meantime gone ahead and arranged for tea to be ready on our arrival. Stayed at the Commercial Hotel, receiving every consideration from the proprietress. Day's mileage, 40.9 miles. Immediately after tea, we had a hot bath, and later gave attention to our feet, which were troubled with blisters. Retired at 9.30 pm having in mind an early start

Thursday 3 September.

Rose at 5.30 am. Prospects of a good day ahead. Leaving Jack to stay for breakfast and settle accounts with the hotel proprietress, Rupe and Alf set off, at 6.20 am, hoping to secure breakfast at Picton. First four miles over easy country was followed by stiff climb for the next four miles to the summit of the Razorback Range. Country

becoming a little more wooded in these parts, while the road surface was not quite up to the standard of that previously passed over. Steep descent followed the passing of the range. Reached Picton at 9.25 am, ordered breakfast, blisters troubling Alf. Jack came in later, and all set off again after procuring fruit in the purchase of which Jack made the unforgivable mistake of asking for apples by the pound. During the remainder a fairly heavy breeze sprang up, bringing with it the signs of rain. Passing through Tahmoor and country fairly heavily timbered, we reached Bargo at 12.53 pm, having covered 22.7 miles since leaving Camden. Had dinner at the Bargo Hotel, and spent time again in giving attention to blisters. Set off again at 1.56 pm, country becoming more hilly in these parts. Roads again good. As the afternoon wore on, the signs of rain which had been showing in the morning, materialised, the showers starting intermittently, but gradually increasing to a steady downpour. Over the last hour or so however, it eased a little, and by the time Mittagong was reached at 6.03 pm, extensive breaks in the clouds gave promise of better conditions for the following day. Jack had in the meantime arranged for accommodation at the Exchange Hotel, the proprietor of which, W. Ryan, showed a keen interest in the attempt, and gave us every consideration. The day's mileage had been 38.9 miles, during which Alf had shown signs of weariness towards the latter end of the afternoon. Both Alf and Rupe were troubled by blisters, the former in particular, having them in places which could not be relieved in walking. Retired at 9.00 pm with the intention of setting off again at 4.30 am.

Friday 4 September.

During the night signs of a heavy storm were apparent, and on rising at 4.00 am it was found that a foot of snow had fallen during the night. After inspection of conditions we decided to defer the time of departure till after breakfast. During breakfast about 8.00 am information was received that the road through Berrima was impossible on account of snow drifts and fallen timber. Decided to attempt a start at 9.30 am when motor traffic through from Moss Vale and Bowral would have broken up the snow to some extent. Left Mittagong at 9.37 am, taking road to Bowral. Cars had ploughed tracks in road which made the going fairly easy, although sloppy. Wonderful views of countryside, carpeted with a mantle of snow as far as the eye could see. Passed through Bowral, and a barrage of snowballing from the townsfolk at 10.20 am. Snow invigorating, and a blessing in disguise in that it froze the blisters on our feet.

Country in these parts very sparsely timbered, creeks running high following the early melting of snow. Had to ford several during the journey from Bowral to Moss Vale. Several steep inclines just before reaching Moss Vale, 9 miles at 11.50 am. Stayed here for lunch, leaving again at 12.25 pm. Country very open in these parts. Weather after leaving Moss Vale gradually getting worse, cold wind and heavy rain making progress heavy. Jack had trouble with his brake cable during this stretch, making it essential for attention at Moss Vale. Reached Marulan after 35.3 miles for day, at 6.35 pm, staying at the only hotel in the town, a new building where we were cordially received. So far our schedule had permitted us to obtain good meals at the times most needed, but from this stage onwards until reaching Albury, it was a noticeable fact that vegetables were entirely absent from our menu.

The delay during the morning of this day had set us back some 10 miles on our original schedule. Blisters improving, while the bracing air of the day had made the stage appear very easy. Retired at 9.30 pm.

Saturday 5 September.

Making a start at 5.15 am, we immediately struck a section of the road under construction, in fact the entire section from here to Goulburn, 19 miles, needs a considerable amount of attention. Thawing snows had considerably increased the volume of the many creeks, and made it necessary to wade through them up to depths of as much as 18 inches. Alf's shoes were needing resoling, having changed to leather and discarding crepe soles. Climbing to the summit of Governor's Hill some interesting panoramic views were obtained, then descending steeply into Goulburn, reaching there long before Jack, at 10.30 am. Securing breakfast, and having shoes resoled, left again at 11.20 am. Weather now good again, plenty of water in evidence. One of the few stretches of straight road was encountered shortly after leaving Goulburn, and we were fortunate to pass this section at a time when there was little wind. Some climbing was necessary before reaching Breadalbane, where we had a snack. Daylight began to wane shortly after leaving here and we covered the last 8 miles in darkness, reaching Gunning, at 8.07 pm feeling fairly tired. Jack had previously gone ahead in order to secure accommodation, but was refused same at Fowler's Telegraph Hotel. Proprietor was evidently of the opinion that we were not to be respected, probably doubting the authenticity of the attempt. Secured accommodation at the Gunning Hostel, where after a fair meal, we stayed for the night, retiring at 10.00 pm.

Sunday 6 September.

Another early start at 5.30 am walking into the dawn of what eventually turned into a perfect day, we were faced with the climb over Mt. Mundoonen (2300 ft) in the 15th mile. Stopped here for a snack on eatables procured overnight. Steep descents make hard going on ankles swollen by walking on **banked roads**. The roads are continually twisting and turning to avoid hills, while the direction of the going seemed at times, and actually was, away from Melbourne. After having covered 24 miles for the morning, the latter part of which was very hilly, we reached Yass at 12.31 pm. Lunching on steak and eggs in considerable quantities at the Monte Carlo Cafe, we were agreeably surprised when the proprietor refused to take any payment for what we had consumed. Leaving there at 1.10 pm and passing over fairly hilly stretches, passed over Browning Hill, and reaching the township of the same name at 3.27 pm. Stopped there for 20 minutes, then after passing over flat country and

several creeks, passed over the black range. Darkness set in about this time and again we walked the last 5 miles in darkness. Plenty of water was encountered in these last few miles, the darkness adding to our difficulties in keeping to the best part of the road. Bookham, an extremely small town, which might have been passed in the darkness was reached at 7.15 pm. Accommodation very crude, followed by a cold meal. Day's mileage had been 44.8 miles, but distance was now becoming easier.

Monday 7 September.

Off again at 5.20 am, passing through sparsely populated country, and over many creeks, fortunately bridged over. Weather still holding good, there being practically no wind to hinder progress. Following closely to the Murrumbidgee River and the extensive mud flats which fringe it, we reached Jugiong at 10.50 am. A late breakfast and a stop for an hour was followed by a stiff winding climb to the summit of the Jugiong Hill, from which a considerable expanse of undulating country could be viewed in all directions. Were disappointed on reaching Coolac in being refused a hot meal at the local hotel. As a makeshift we procured bread, cheese and biscuits at the store. Darkness again overtook us before reaching Gundagai, the hilly section over the last stage appearing longer than it actually was. Reached there after having covered 44.6 miles for the day, at 7.25 pm. Still unable to procure vegetables, although securing a good meal otherwise at the Niagara Cafe. Stayed the night at Lavelle's Club House Hotel, securing a good hot bath in preparation for what was to have been a big day on the morrow. Secured provisions for the morning as the first call was to be at Mundarlo Store, some 23 miles distant. Retired at 10.30 pm.

Tuesday 8 September.

Made a start at 5.25 am, passing over the Murrumbidgee Bridge on the outskirts of the town, and taking a winding road to avoid hills, we passed over undulating country. Road surface deteriorating, in parts very sandy, following the river practically to Mundarlo. Breakfasted on the roadside with little delay. On reaching Mundarlo after passing over hilly and sandy sections, secured a scratch meal of buns, jam and preserved pears at the local store. Stopped here an hour, resuming over fairly hilly country terrain, till reaching Hillas Creek Bridge, a concrete structure which had been washed away in the recent floods. Fortunately the temporary wooden structure was advanced sufficiently for a single plank to span the stream, which as about 100 feet wide at this part. Jack with his additional burdens of the packs on the bike made a precarious crossing, midst the strained attention of the workmen engaged on the work. Pebbly road followed, and it was at this juncture that Rupe began to show signs of illness, which although diagnosed as biliousness at first, eventually proved to be a touch of ptomaine poisoning. At the top of the Tarcutta Hill it was necessary to call a halt in view of Rupe's condition. His eyes were beginning to puff up, while his visibility was impaired. Our pace slackened considerably, and it was not until 5.40 pm that we reached Tarcutta, having covered 38.5 miles for the day. Received every consideration from the proprietor, M. Egan at the Horse and Jockey Hotel. Rupe's condition did not improve after tea, and we had a conference as to what was the best procedure to adopt. In view of the fact that as far as the full journey was concerned, Rupe would have to cease on the Sunday in order to be at work on the Monday, and also that we were behind schedule which would have permitted us to reach Melbourne on the Sunday, it was decided that Rupe would not continue the journey, but would travel to Wagga, thence taking the service car to Melbourne, meeting us on the way at Albury.

Wednesday 9 September.

Setting out alone at 4.45 am, Alf had in mind the picking up some of the time lost at Mittagong and during the latter portion of the previous day. Sections of roadway in the first ten miles were under construction, making it necessary to reduce the pace a little. Carrying a small pack also hampered him, but still he had covered 27.7 miles to Little Billabong before being picked up by Jack. Lunching here on biscuits and fruit and after stopping for an hour we set off again at 12.45 pm. Country now becoming rather flat with occasional streams. Reaching Holbrook, 43.3 miles for the day at 4.33 pm, and realising that we would be too late for a hot meal at Woomargama, we took the opportunity of having eggs and pies here, staying for an hour before resuming the journey. Alf set out along again, while Jack rang up the hotel at Woomargama to ascertain the possibility of obtaining suitable accommodation. This was not available, the hotel being very small, and after picking up Alf about three miles out from Holbrook, it was decided that the best plan would be to push on in the hours of dark in order to reach Mullengandra. The smart pace of the early morning seemed to be having no effect and the nine miles to Woomargama was done in good time. After a brief spell here we pushed on again, and although tired over the last hour, reached Mullengandra at 9.55 pm, having covered 59.7 miles for the day, the longest stretch up to date. Sleep was not easy however, and although to be on the safe side, the alarm was always set for the hour at which we wished to rise, the hours of sleep only averaged 4, the rest of the time being spent in lying awake waiting for the sound of the alarm.

Thursday 10 September.

Feeling refreshed after a rest, and no affects from the long previous day, Alf set off again at 6.10 am. but from this stage onwards Jack accompanied him, as it was found that much greater progress could be made if travelling without the small pack. Stopping for brief spells at Table Top Road, 8 miles, and Thurgoona Hall, 13 miles, for snacks, good progress was made over flat country. The nearness of the Victorian border made a vast difference to the mental side of the trip, and this combined with the good weather and the ability to hold the faster pace than

hitherto, made the going far easier. Rup went to the Post Office at Albury, picked up the mail, but officials were rather officious in handing over the telegram which was obviously meant for him. However, with the arrival of Alf, and another attempt to secure the telegram, success followed our efforts to obtain information from Rup. Had to wait for an hour for his arrival from Wagga, went and had a good meal, the first three course meal which we had obtained since leaving Camden. The effect was magical, perhaps more mental than physical, effective in reducing that craving for vegetables which had been so obvious during the past few days. Rup arrived at about 12.45 pm., and reported that after seeing the doctor, his case had been put down as ptomaine poisoning. He was improved however since we had left him at Tarcutta, although still feeling the effect of the meat which was given as the reason for his illness. At this stage light rain began to fall, increasing in strength as the afternoon advanced. Left Albury at 1.25 pm., crossed the Murray and surrounded flooded country. and over good roads to Wodonga. Received good reception from the townspeople here, they were evidently being well advised as to our progress from the reports which had been appearing in the Sun News Pictorial. Excellent gravel roads followed on which pace was made without effort. Just before reaching Barnawatha, heavy rain set in, and we called a halt here for an early tea, at 5.20 pm. Left again in light rain at 5.45 pm., having traversed 45 miles thus far for the day. Arrived at the telegraph Hotel (H. Smyth) at Chiltern at 7.00 pm., where we given every consideration by the proprietor. Off again at 8.15 pm., with 9 miles to go before reaching Springhurst. Jack had gone ahead again to arrange for accommodation, and was delayed a little in doing so by the late hour of our arrival, 11 pm. Here we received telephonic news from Frank Scully, who had been following out progress at several places of importance on the route. Felt a bit tired at the end of this day, but the nearness of Melbourne had a great effect in warding off the weariness which would have otherwise been more pronounced. The day's mileage had been 58.8 miles, which on top of the previous day's effort of 59.7 miles had greatly reduced our deficit on the original schedule.

Friday 11 September

Set off from Springhurst at 6.30 am. after waiting for a break in the weather. Sky very overcast, and showing decided promises of further rains. Country adjacent to road very flat and mainly under water. Long stretches of straight road made conditions very different to the winding roads of the northern state. Heavy rains started at this stage, and by the time Wangaratta was reached at 10.05 am, we were wet through. Changed at the hotel, and found it necessary to have shoes resoled. Breakfasted on eggs again, which commodity seemed to be our main staple food. Set off again at 12.10 pm, still raining, forcing use of overcoat in order to retain some semblance of dry clothing. Bought a cap to keep rain from beating on Alf's face. Wind and rain began to take toll before reaching Glenrowan and three miles out Alf cramped in the upper part of the left leg. He also had the unusual experience of being attacked by magpies for nearly a mile, it being their nesting season. Reached Glenrowan at 3.50 pm., with the intention of drying clothes and making a further start after tea. Was disappointed however, for when ready to move off again, heavy rain with indication of a further continuance of same, made us give up hopes of getting further along the road that evening. Retired at 9.30 pm, hoping to get an early start.

Saturday 12 September

Still raining when we rose, and although it eased a little about 7.00 am, we were not too hopeful when we left at 7.15 am. Made good progress on good roads, having to ford creeks occasionally, but making good time to Benalla, where we arrived at 10.42 am. Splendid reception here, which considerably bucked us up. Mr. Egan of the Broken River Hotel made every effort to cater for our requirements.

Only stopped for ten minutes, having in mind making progress while the break in the weather lasted. Occasional showers and cold winds were bringing on a recurrence of Alf's cramps and a halt was called at Violet Town to give him a rub on the effected part. On the road again at 3.10 pm, feeling much better. Weather looking very threatening. Promises of heavy rain were fulfilled shortly after, and about three miles before reaching Euroa, drenching rain with bitterly cold winds made the going extremely hard. Drenched to the skin on arrival at the Seven Creeks Hotel at Euroa at 5.44 pm, we changed and had tea. Local residents very interested in record attempt, which was now nearing completion. Slightly troubled again by blisters. A break in the weather gave us an opportunity to make another start at 7.45 pm, and although cold conditions prevailed, the rain held off. Made good progress over undulating roads as far as Old Longford, which was reached at 10.00 pm, and had a snack. After a brief spell set off again, but could not shake the cold, even when walking with an overcoat on. Pitch darkness made conditions unpleasant, finding it difficult to keep to the road in parts. Cold and cramps forced Alf to slacken the pace after eight miles had been covered, and the remaining five miles into Old Avenal were done at a greatly reduced pace. Reached there at 2.15 am, having done 64 miles for the day, only to find that accommodation was about 1.5 miles away from the main road. Knocked up the proprietor after a long delay, feeling very tired after stoppage. Hopes of keeping inside 12 days for the journey now abandoned.

Sunday 13 September.

Had a good rest before rising at noon. Weather still not promising after having dinner. Just preparing to leave when a carload of Walkers Club members, including Joe O'Farrell, Jack Coffey, Rup Blackley, Jack Pretty, Frank Scully and Dick Cecil arrived, delaying our departure by an hour. Set off at 2.35 pm. having in mind reaching Kilmore late that evening, and leaving an easy stretch for the last day. Accompanied by car, playing the

gramophone, and several of the party on foot, made good time to Seymour, prior to reaching which, the rain set in again. Arrived there at 4.52 pm., had a good tea and after bidding the walkers farewell at 5.45 pm. set off again. Plenty of water on surrounding country. Inky blackness after darkness set in, made holding of the crown of the road difficult. Two miles before reaching Tallarook rain set in with a vengeance. Jack's brake failed, and in the darkness and blinding rain, he nearly came to grief at the railway crossing at Tallarook. Appearances in so far as the weather were concerned gave indications that the extremely heavy rain could not last, but it rained solidly for four hours. In the meantime we had decided to remain at Tallarook Hotel for the night and get an early start in the morning. This day's stretch was the shortest of the trip, having been only 17.4 miles.

Monday 14 September.

Fifty five miles to go to Melbourne, and friends advised that we would reach the G.P.O. at 9.00 pm. We made an early start at 4.10 am. Water everywhere, even on the heights where such was not to be expected. Passed through Broadford just after the dawn, 6.24 am. Roads literally covered with long worms, and in places silted over as a result of the previous night's rain. Stretches of climbing on the next section to Kilmore, which we reached at 8.18 am. Breakfasted here, and stayed for 1¼ hours at the Red Lion Hotel. Troubled with cold winds over the plains before and after passing Wallan. Country very bare, roads good. Reached Donneybrook in time for dinner at 1.57 pm., and after treating a troublesome blister, left again, with only 20 miles to go at 3.15 pm. In the realisation that we were well ahead of time, and that the promised car load of club members might miss us, we did not force the pace at this stage. Reached Fawkner Cemetery at 6.45 pm., having a spell, while Jack rang up the Sun Office. Strolling along at an easy gait, reached the Sarah Sands Hotel at Brunswick at 7.59 pm., picking up some of the Club members here. Jack Cummins, Joe O'Farrell, Dick Hingston and Jack Coffey were in the party, and all except Joe O'Farrell accompanied Alf on the last two miles of the journey. Reached the GPO Melbourne at 8.53 pm. A press interview was followed by a good meal, following which we were driven home by Joe O'Farrell. The day's mile age had been 54.4 miles. Felt very fit at the end of this day in particular.

The total time of the journey from the GPO Sydney to the GPO at Melbourne had been 12 days, 13 hours and 43 minutes, while the journey covered 563.7 miles. The actual walking time was 5 days, 21 hours, or an average of 4 miles an hour throughout.

Contrary to expectations we had not noticed the passage of time along the road. Meeting different people every day, passing over varied country and going through experiences which do not come to us in everyday life, had made the journey one long to be remembered. Into those thirteen days were crammed a wealth of experience which would take many months to forget, panoramic views from the mountain tops at different places were indelibly impressed upon our memories, while comical and interesting incidents had the long tramp those breaks considerably eased what might have otherwise become monotonous.

As an effective weight reducer, the trip was certainly a success for Alf left Sydney weighing 11 stone 5 lbs; weighed in at Albury at 10 stone 6 lbs and the same at Melbourne. Jack, even on the bike, lost 9 lbs.

When different facts are taken into consideration in so far as lost time is concerned, it is apparent that from the 4 hours lost at Mittagong, the slowing up of Rup on his last day, where we lost 15 miles, and the blinding rain which was the cause of us doing only 24 and 17 miles on two days in Victoria, the time on this journey could be considerably reduced if weather conditions could be relied upon.

One prominent fact remains as a result of the trip, that of the wonderlust feeling which has been created in us, making us desire to be on the way again on another trip of a similar nature. One can easily understand now that gripping impulse which takes some people and leads them to tramp all the year round. It is a great life, and one which far too few people indulge in. Here's hoping that the date for on other trip is not too far distant.

Editor's note: So ends an epic journey. I guess it would be different these days. More townships, more traffic, better roads but more pollution. Rup died in 1946; he was made a life member of the VAWC in 1938. Alf Robbie, as he is still affectionately referred to around the club, was made life member in 1933; he died in 1977.