

TOO OLD TO RAT

The Radical Miners of
South Gippsland

1893-1904

by
P. D. Gardner

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**The Radical Miners of
South Gippsland
1893-1904**

by

P.D. Gardner

by the author:

Gippsland Massacres

Through Foreign Eyes

Our Founding Murdering Father

Names on the Omeo Highway

Names around the Gippsland Lakes

Names of the Victorian Alps

Names of East Gippsland

Names of South Gippsland

Names of the Latrobe Valley and West Gippsland

The Scab Train

This edition is limited to 300 copies. This is copy²³⁴

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Abbreviations

AMA	Amalgamated Miners Association
ACMA	Austalian Coal Miners Association.
ACSEA	Australian Coal and Shale Employees Association
CCPCAFS	Coal Creek Proprietary Colliery Accident Fund Society
CCMA	Coal Creek Miners Association
CCMU	Coal Creek Miners Union
CRDMU	Collie River District Miners Union
GCMA	Gippsland Coal Miners Association
IWW	Industrial Workers of the World
JCEAS	Jumbunna Colliery Employees Accident Society
OH & B	Outtrim Howitt and British Consolidated Mine Ltd.
OCEAFS	Outtrim Colliery Employees Accident Fund Society
PLC	Political Labour Council.
THC	Trades Hall Council
VCMA	Victorian Coal Miners Association

Brief Chronology of the VCMA

1893	CCMA formed
1896	VCMA formed
1902	Commencement of Martell case
1903 Jan	Commencement of great strike
1904 May	Great strike called off
1904 Aug	VCMA disbanded
1906	Royal Commission into Coal Mining Industry
1907	VCMA re-formed and registered federally
1908	Jumbunna case
1913	ACMA formed
1915	Miners affiliate with ACS EA

I don't care if the cause be wrong
Or if the cause be right -
I've had my day and sung my song
And fought the bitter fight.
In truth at times I can't tell what
The men are getting at.
But I've been Union thirty years,
And I'm too old to rat
Henry Lawson

Introduction

This is my second booklet on the coal miners of South Gippsland. I have borrowed the title from the little known poem by Henry Lawson of the same name. The title alone clearly delineates Lawson's position in regard to the labour movement, as I hope it does mine. I have nothing but admiration for the courage and perseverance of these otherwise ordinary people in the face of such overwhelming odds. If nothing else, the title acknowledges in a negative fashion the loyalty of the miners to each other and their cause, even when that cause was obviously lost.

This booklet is in three sections. The first is a short essay outlining the politics and organizations of the miners and in particular their union - the VCMA. Some reference is made to various other organizations and the fate of the union after it was resurrected in 1907. The second part is a series of biographical sketches, many of which were first written as entries for the Biographical Register of the Australian Labour Movement [BRALM] published by the University of Western Sydney. Many of these entries here are unchanged.

The third part is a list based on a database that I have compiled on the union miners from a variety of sources. The aim in this section is to list as many as possible of the union miners and their supporters. It is to be hoped that genealogists and others using this list may be able to assist the author with more material on the VCMA, the accident societies and the co-operative mines. I am interested in any records including minute & letter books, financial records, diaries, plans and photos, folk history and other anecdotal accounts. Also of interest are the records of the lodges, [Coal Creek, Korumburra, Korumburra and Jeetho, Outtrim, Jumbunna, Strezlecki, Silkstone, Black Diamond and possibly others] accident societies (same as lodges) any personal records (diaries, letters, photos) and records of the co-operative mines in the Korumburra district for the same period. These mines include the New Extended, Newcastle party, The Outtrim Co-operative, Silkstone and the early Austral. I would be pleased to correspond with any readers or researchers on these matters or on any of the individuals who appear. This book was originally written and partly researched with the assistance of a Victorian Ministry of Arts Grant in 1989.

PDG July 1994

Part 1

Notes on the Miners' Organizations and Politics

When one hundred disaffected contract miners from Coal Creek met in late 1893 they decided to form a union which they called the Coal Creek Miners Association (CCMA). Thus began a highly unusual, but well organised and militant union. In 1896 the CCMA joined with other miners' associations on the South Gippsland coalfields to form the Victorian Coal Miners Association (VCMA) in a loose federation.

The Lodges

The CCMA seems to have been the basic model of organisation of the miners associations or lodges later formed at Korumburra and Jeetho, Jumbunna, Outtrim, Silkstone and elsewhere. Until 1896, and the formation of the VCMA, these associations were essentially unions based on industry and locality. After 1896 the lodges became de facto branches of the union. The lodges remained highly independent and parochial organizations. More importantly they were seen by the miners as their main form of organization and the VCMA was perceived as a co-ordinating and facilitating organization between the lodges. The independent nature of the lodges was evident in the way that they were commonly referred to as miners associations, such as the Jumbunna Miners Association.

The basic form of organisation of the lodges appears to have been the aggregate or general meeting of members. The rules may have varied from district to district but meetings generally were held regularly - every 3 months or less - often at the pit mouth and included all miners. Everyone had a right to speak and these very democratic meetings appear to have decided crucial policy, especially over strikes and other grievances. The results of these meetings were passed on to the VCMA by the lodge delegates.

An interesting feature of the lodges was that the only paid employees were the checkweighmen. These men were elected by the lodge members at the same time as other committee positions. It was their duty to make sure that the amount of coal produced by each team of miners was correctly weighed and accredited. This was because the miners were contract workers and paid by the ton. Prior to the introduction of checkweighmen the

miners were always suspicious of weighing by company employees. After the great strike one of the companies' first actions was to dispense with checkweighmen. They did this by first resorting to wages and then returning to the contract system without the miners having their own controls. The men had to submit to this as they had little power at this stage (1904-8) and even after the Jumbunna case the battle continued for some years over the men's right to appoint their own checkweighman. (1)

The Union

The VCMA was formed in 1896 by a federation of the Coal Creek and Jumbunna Miners Associations later joined by the Outtrim Miners Association. A number of features of the VCMA are distinctive. The VCMA was a highly decentralised organisation of member lodges each of which was based on a particular mine. Miners at mines with less than fourteen members joined the lodge of their nearest neighbour. In the brief history of the VCMA there are a number of instances of secession of lodges, such as the CCMA withdrawal in 1897 which clearly illustrates this aspect of the union organisation .

Although the CCMA and other lodges originally started as miners unions and thus were initially a "trade" union they eventually admitted wheelers, labourers and boys [the latter were not given a vote in union decisions] to their ranks and they were much more "industry" unions. The fact that the union branches were based on an industry at specific localities is of more than passing interest. It is also interesting to note that engine drivers, deputies and anyone else promoted from ranks resigned their union membership once their promotion had been accepted. The power and appeal of the organisation, and loyalty to it, remained however, as became evident during the great strike. The failure of the companies to recognise this was one of their biggest mistakes in their conspiracy to crush the VCMA. (2)

The VCMA became adept at playing off the coal companies against each other and between 1896 and 1902 won substantial gains in conditions, union matters, and other work place gains. In 1902 the main companies combined and forced a confrontation that ended with the disbandment of the VCMA in August 1904. In 1907 the VCMA registered under the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Act of 1904. This registration was fought by the companies and set a precedent in what was known as the Jumbunna case (that a union could register federally, even if it was located only in one state, as long as it had the potential to be an interstate union).

The companies continued their rearguard action against the VCMA and the continuing conflict was only definitely decided in favour of the latter after the State Coal mine opened at Wonthaggi in 1909 and the Powlett River lodge quickly became the biggest branch of the VCMA.

The Accident Societies

After the lodges the accident societies were next in importance to the working miner. The societies were closely allied with the lodges and their membership was almost identical. Activists in the union were often prominent in the societies. The societies were mutual aid organisations designed to protect the miners and their families against the loss of income as a result of injury incurred in the work place. They invariably provided sick pay for injured miners, support and payment to families in the case of a mortality, could make a special levy on members in the case of a death and provide 'sick' visitors for those injured. The societies were democratic and all members including the office bearers were working miners. Some of the societies allowed for small payments or honorariums for services rendered by some office bearers. Office bearers were elected annually and general meetings open to all members were held quarterly.

Union Factions

Like all union and political organizations the VCMA had a number of factions. These were loose and by no means exclusive groupings. Industrially there was a division over compulsory arbitration and conciliation. A small hard core with VCMA stalwart John Connolly at its centre argued that compulsory arbitration would do away with the necessity for strikes. After the registration of the union under the 1904 act in 1907 this group became dominant and in 1909 a breakaway group - the Gippsland Coal Miners Association - registered under the state friendly societies act, their major if not whole concern being centred on the right to strike, which was supposedly prohibited under the 1904 act. (3) The breakaway group was centred in the old districts of Korumburra and Jumbunna and lasted 2 years. The VCMA remained the dominant group at Wonthaggi. Before his death in 1913 Connolly must have realised that his ideals with regard compulsory arbitration had not been fulfilled. The opposition to compulsory arbitration was generally loose and barely organised, and in the early days the bulk of the miners remained suspicious of it. Aside from this division the VCMA industrially was committed to thorough organization and a militant and aggressive policy of direct action to assist and protect its members.

The most important factional division in the VCMA was over the means by which working people would obtain the full fruits of their labours. In this the union was divided into two camps. The political group believed that working people would gain most through the parliamentary system with legislation to protect miners, and in particular through supporting the then fledgling labour party, originally known as the Political Labour League. The other grouping, which appears to have always been a minority but more prominent in the early period, was the group that believed workers co-operatives were the answer to working class problems. In a co-operative the workers owned the capital as well as the labour and thus eliminated the conflict between the owners of capital and labour. Due to polarisation of ideas the co-operativists were often anti-parliamentary and at least one lodge and one VCMA president in the late 1890s were in this faction. (4)

Each faction had its strengths and weaknesses. The political wing was severely hampered by the failure of the various Coal Mines Regulations bills to pass through the Legislative Council, still at that stage Melbourne's most exclusive club, and members with obvious vested interests, such as W.L. Baillieu, spoke and voted against these bills with impunity. (5) The labour party was still in its infancy and a minor party, although it supported the Peacock minority government in 1901-2. Its members were often ineffectual in representing working people and the support of the VCMA and the striking coal miners in 1903-4 was left to a handful of labour members. The party also appears to have split over the Emergency Railways Legislation which was brought before parliament in May 1903 with the purpose of preventing the railwaymen from affiliating with the Labour Party. A number of labour members spoke against the railwaymen and none of them supported their strike which was squashed in a week. On the other hand the labour party elsewhere and especially federally appears to have continued building up a wave of solid support.

On the co-operativist side the workplace aspect had some obvious benefits. The men had an equal say in working conditions and thus ventilation and safety features were generally better in the co-op mines. They had other privileges such as small daily issues of coal for domestic purposes and generally considered the co-op mines to be a freer, more democratic place to work. On the other hand their take-home wage was often less than that of the privately owned mines. Also the co-op mines were generally only successful on a smaller scale and for relatively short periods of time, and even