

## **Francis William Baker – aka Frankie, our travellin’ man**

*by Wendy Baker, Frank’s sister-in-law*

Frank was born 30 October 1946 in London, U.K., second child of Harry and Mabel Baker. As Mabel was to say in later years, “Frank was always in a hurry to get on with life.” She used to relate how, climbing the stairs in their London house with a bucket to fetch water for his impending birth, Frank was suddenly – very suddenly – there, slippery and bawling, caught neatly in the bucket! John was his “big” brother, born in 1944.

Frank’s first travel experience was at the tender age of 21 months when the family migrated to Australia in 1948. Frank slept in a cot in a small cabin he shared with his four year old brother in the bottom bunk and his mum in the top bunk. They travelled first-class, having sold their home, as in the post-war years prior to the “ten-pound Pom” assisted migration scheme it was their only way to secure a passage. Even so, fathers were not permitted to occupy cabins with their families! The R.M.S. *Orion* left Tilbury Docks on 9<sup>th</sup> July and arrived in Australia first at Fremantle where the family passport was stamped, and then in South Australia on 7<sup>th</sup> August.

Post-war accommodation was scarce and at first Frank’s family stayed at the Del Monte Guesthouse at Henley Beach, then spent some time at The Chalet, a guesthouse at Waterfall Gully, before being helped with accommodation in an old shed-cum-studio at 45 East Tce Henley Beach. Frank’s dad bought a bond-wood caravan and a canvas annexe to help accommodate his family; perhaps it was where Frank’s love of camping began!

In 1949 Frank’s parents bought a double block of land in Burnside for about two hundred and ten pounds, and over a couple of years their home was built. Harry built the garage first and the family lived there until the house was finished in about 1951, the year Frank’s sister Pam was born. Andy arrived a couple of years later.

Frank’s primary schooling was at Pulteney Grammar School. The Baker home was close to “Undelcarra”, home of the Simpsons (of Simpson washing machine fame). Frank, who loved animals, soon made friends with the Simpsons’ dairyman and Chloe was his favourite cow. He also loved the family’s pet orphan lamb, rescued by Frank’s Uncle John Soole, who worked for the R.S.P.C.A.

It was a boisterous childhood. With three boys sharing one bedroom for many years there were inevitable squabbles but it also developed a strong sense of “family”.

Ordinary school life was never enjoyable for this boy of the outdoors, so he spent 1960-1963 at Urrbrae Agricultural College, studying Agricultural Science as well as the compulsory mundane subjects. While there he had work experience on a Mallee farm at Jabuk. He also worked, with John, at the Royal Adelaide Show tending stock during his holidays for ten bob for a ten hour day.

His first car was an Austin 7 which he and his brother bought from their parents’ friends at Henley Beach, the same good people who had offered the family accommodation not long after they arrived in Australia. Without synchromesh and with a dubious braking system it required great co-operation between Frank and John to not only drive the car but safely stop it!

Frank had dreams of being a farmer, but he was realistic enough to aim first at going into share-farming. With this in mind he decided to join the Navy, hoping to leave with enough capital to set up on the land. He joined the Royal Australian Navy during the Vietnam War, training on HMAS *Cerberus* in 1964/65, and serving briefly in Vietnam in the engine-room of HMAS *Sydney* on her first troop-carrying mission.

Aside from his naval service, Frank went jackerooing and managing farms in the sixties. As a jackeroo on Yarrandale and Minamurra stations in the South-east, among other jobs Frank chased and shot 'roos from horseback, sheared sheep, cleared scrub, drove a combine harvester, and shot rabbits and foxes.

Frank used to gather up salvage from the station dumps, bring it back home and sell it to Mr. Stott, who had a salvage yard on Lockwood road near the junction with Nilpinna Street, Burnside.

In the mid 1960's Frank worked for Harry Ramsay, a farmer on the West Coast of South Australia. Brother John joined him during his holidays at one point and they worked together for Ramsay. One Saturday, after a night on the town in Pt Lincoln, they decided to sleep in the car rather than drive back to the station. A little way out of town they took a back-road in the dark and settled down happily for the night. In the morning they woke to find themselves in the local cemetery!

After leaving Meningie, Frank took his Valiant Ute and went to Tasmania where he worked in the tin mines at Renison Bell as a plant operator and day-shift Leading Hand for some 18 months. He was living in a caravan he'd bought; he worked a lot of exhausting double shifts, saving money for some planned overseas and Australian travelling. Because he was so close to the mines, it was handy for his boss to bang on the side of the van. 'Hey Frank – So-and-so's not turned up for shift – can you do a double?' His answer was always 'yes'!

Frank went to answer nature's call one day, leaving a pan on the stove, and his caravan burnt down when the curtains caught alight. It was an expensive trip to the toilet! He had used a wardrobe in the van as a pantry, well-stocked with tinned food. After the fire the contents were discovered melted into a very messy gooey stew.

The dream of owning his own farm never eventuated, but Frank was then and always remained an enthusiastic traveller and in 1970 he and a good mate Peter Brandt had the "great Aussie trip", travellin' on in a panel van, "The Overlander", driving and working through most states in the country.

John and I married in February 1971. Frank was John's best man – and well John remembers his hazardous journey from home to church, with Frank trying to discourage him from getting there at all! He tried to get John into several pubs they passed along the way, but luckily Frankie boy didn't succeed! I remember the Frank of those days as the charming handsome young brother-in-law who, in spite of his prankster nature, would do anything to help anyone else in the family. He must have been busy preparing for his first major overseas trip, but still found time to help John fix our old FJ Holden, on his back under the car on Military Road outside our Henley Beach flat which had no driveway.

Frank loved discovering other places and cultures and in the early 1970's spent months overseas. Sometimes he travelled alone, well off the beaten tourist track, and

sometimes he went with those he met along the way to many places which might now be forbidden to tourists or considered too dangerous - including the Khyber Pass.

His meticulously hand-written diaries and stamped passports show that in 1972-73 Frank was travellin' on – from Tasmania through Australia from south to north; Timor, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Burma, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, England., Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Austria, Germany, Belgium, Holland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, East Germany, Luxemburg, France – some 25,000 miles by air, sea and overland. Frank married his first wife Barbara – whom he had met on his travels - in Barking, England in October of '73.

In the mid-1970's Frank put his early experience in sales (as a boy, selling olives he and his brother and sister gathered, and in his teens, selling salvage from station properties) to good use when he worked for Beaumont Tiles as a sales rep for several years.

This gave him the finances to go travellin' on again – an action packed Thomas Cook two month tour September and October 1978 exploring Hong Kong, China, USSR, Germany, and the U.K.

Early to mid-1980's saw Frank once more working in the building industry, this time as a sales rep and estimator for Humes-ARC.

Frank married his second wife Penny in December 1986 in the garden at 18 Petrel Avenue, Victor Harbor (to where his parents had retired in 1980). Always the romantic, he made sure their wedding transport was a beautiful horse-drawn carriage, and his little niece Katherine was their flower-girl.

In the late 1980's and early 90's Frankie worked casually for several hotels in Adelaide including the Sportsmen's, the Grosvenor and the Crown & Anchor. During this time Frank owned and operated his own business, Fabracan Renovations, to better facilitate the extensive renovations he made to his house in Rugby Street, Unley.

From 1986-88 Frank was travellin' on again – with Penny – first managing the Lake George Caravan Park in the South-East, and then a caravan park in Ipswich, Queensland, where he used his expertise in renovation to completely upgrade the facilities. This gave them funds to travel on once more – to Canada and the U.S.A. in 1989-1990.

In the early 1990's Frank worked in security for the Adelaide Entertainment Centre and later in security, and maintenance, in three TAFE colleges and Warinilla Rehab Centre. In 1993 he became a Park Assistant at Belair National Park.

Frank was nothing if not versatile. Along his life path he gained a Security Guard licence, a Firearms Licence, and he was licensed to drive coaches and semi-trailers – the latter was necessary when he was working on the station properties. Frank would always “have a go” at anything – he once applied for a short-term production line job, assuring the prospective boss that he was able to do the job. On his first day he grabbed a fellow worker. ‘Hey, do you know how to work this thing?’ and within a very short time he really was able to do it!

He had a great love of Australia and the bush, its characters and music, and he had a great respect for the work of the Royal Flying Doctor Service. He became a regular supporter for fund-raising efforts for the organisation and he combined this with his passion for country music. He was well-known in this field for his generosity and practical help in supporting rising young singing stars, and in 2004 the R.F.D.S. acknowledged Frank's support of their organisation with a certificate of appreciation. Frankie was a regular contributor to Country Music S.A.'s "Prelude" magazine as their "Roving Reporter" and he also volunteered his time to Coast FM radio. He was a member of the R.S.L. and attended Anzac marches and Dawn Services.

Frank's marriage ended some years ago but he and Penny remained friends to the last. Once more a "single", Frank bought an old used camper-van and began to follow the country music scene in earnest after injury forced an early retirement.

In 2007 Frankie enjoyed a wonderful cruise around Australia with Princess Cruises, leaving from Sydney, with ports of call in Brisbane, the Whitsundays, Yorky's Knob, Darwin, Broome, Perth, Fremantle, Albany, Adelaide (an opportunity for him to catch up on his mail!), Melbourne, Burnie and Hobart.

Frankie had plans for a world cruise, but then decided instead to put all his time and energy into following the country music scene around Australia. He bought a better van, more suited to his roving lifestyle, and had it fitted out with bed, cupboards and all his home comforts. In latter years Frankie's home base was at his apiarist mate Glen Wright's at Coonalpyn, but whenever opportunity presented in the form of a south coast gig at Encounter Bay or Hindmarsh Valley, Frank parked his van beside his brother Andy's holiday shack at Middleton.

At such times he'd ring us. 'Hey listen what're you guys doing? Can I pop over and see you and have a chat?' And chat he did, telling us all about the latest up and coming young country music stars and the places he'd seen, the concerts he'd been to, in the past few weeks.

Sometimes we'd get a call in the early evening. We'd say 'Frank! How're you going? Where are you?' and he'd say 'How am I? Not so dusty for an old cowboy! Listen, I'm sittin' on my chair on the banks of the Murray at a little place called (wherever) – have you heard of that? – and I'm just sittin' here, enjoying a beautiful sunset and the gum trees and the birds and jus' listenin' to ol' Slim. Life can't get any better than this.'

Frankie did have two more ambitions, apart from the cruise to Vanuatu that, if things had been different, he would have been enjoying this month. One ambition was to see the Birdsville Races; the other was to fly over flooded Lake Eyre. Always anxious to get things done in a hurry, our Travellin' Man managed to achieve both these experiences, complete with photos and a write-up for "Prelude" – and phoned family members to share his delight and excitement – only weeks before he died.

Now, on what should have been his 65<sup>th</sup> birthday, we remember Frank with one of his favourite expressions "To cut a long story short" – he was a good brother, a good Aussie, a good mate. He sure packed a hell of a lot into his life.

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