



QUEENSLAND ALUMINA LIMITED

WHEN QAL CAME TO TOWN

Living through the construction years in Gladstone 1964-1967

Bronwyn Roper

It was huge, it was bigger than anything I'd ever seen before...to see something that was just growing out of the ground, a brand new site in the middle of nowhere, it was rather unusual.

Ken Nicholson

*It was bedlam. How it happened I don't know...
But it happened.*

Tony Warren

I thought it was exciting, I thought it was interesting, it was stimulating, you had to motivate yourself, you had to learn new things, do different things, it was a whole eye opener.

Ruth Crosson

If QAL hadn't come there would have been no real reason for this place to stay anymore because the meatworks had closed down, it was about to just fade away. And then suddenly all this happened.

Marilyn Haertel

Construction workers were no fairies in those days. They were a tough brand.

Dave Burns

You look over at QAL and you go yep I helped build that and I helped build that.

Bevin Newitt

I liked Gladstone, I liked the people, they were friendly to me and I thought well I'll hang my hat up here and I'm ever so glad I did. I'm still here. My family's all born and bred here. We've had our good times and our bad times.

Frank Bowen



**this is
a job
with a
difference**

(and you can put most of it
in your savings account)



Long-term residents of Gladstone often speak of when QAL came to town, dividing the community's history into two distinct eras, before and after the arrival of Queensland Alumina Limited (QAL). The turning point for these two eras did not happen overnight, but lasted four years while Stage 1 of QAL was under construction from 1964-1967. Not only were they creating the world's largest alumina refinery but they were attempting to meld together an established community with an itinerant one. The existing community had to adapt and learn to accept outsiders and those outsiders had to come to terms with their new environs, which for many became permanent.

The established community in Gladstone pre-1960s depended on the local meatworks for employment and this income flowed throughout the town. The closure of the meatworks sent the town into turmoil and a cloud of dread hung over the residents while rumours spread about what was going to happen to them. In 1963, QAL was announced and construction began, creating an atmosphere of hope and excitement, however; with a population of around 7000 this town was not prepared for what was to come. In the next five years the population would nearly double with construction workers and their families from all over Australia and internationally. Local infrastructure could not keep up with this rapid growth and many social problems arose due to living conditions and soaring prices. In southern newspapers Gladstone became known as a 'frontier town'. The people of Gladstone, old and new, were swept up on a rollercoaster ride which would make industrial history around the world. Amid this turmoil and rapid change a group of individuals was thrown together. A group of individuals who would never normally come face to face.

◀ *View of Gladstone from Radar Hill, 1966.*
Image courtesy Ken and Judy Nicholson.

▼ *Demolition of the chimney at the meatworks, 18 July 1964.*
Image courtesy QAL.





▲ Frank Bowen outside his Dad's house opposite the Railway Dam in Gladstone, 1957.

Image courtesy Frank Bowen.

Settled in 1853 and declared a municipality a decade later in 1863, Gladstone is situated in Central Queensland in the Port Curtis region adjacent to a deep water harbour and the dominating peaks of Mount Larcom. The community was mainly a farming one however as railway lines were forged through the area several industries were established to service these farms such as a dairy company and a meatworks. The harbour was ideal for shipping goods and eventually the meatworks, with its own wharf and loading facilities, became the lifeblood of the small community with nearly two-thirds of the town being directly or indirectly dependent. The meatworks established in 1896 and situated at Parsons Point provided seasonal work with many workers coming to town for six months and then finding work elsewhere for the remainder of the year.

Over the years the meatworks, by then owned by the American company Swifts, did not keep abreast with modern technology and started to decline. In 1960 they employed 900 workers but by 1963 this had declined to 600. After the 1963 season rather than spend the dollars to upgrade the facility a decision was made to cease all operations. This

move sent workers and the town into a downward spiral creating a great deal of unrest amongst the tight-knit community. Many local businesses were in the practice of giving meatworkers and their families goods and services 'on tick' tiding them over until the next killing season began. All of a sudden in 1963, there was not going to be a 'next killing season'.

A former meatworker Frank Bowen moved to Gladstone after living and working on properties out west. His father was residing near the Railway Dam in a hut made with flattened 44-gallon drums and Frank lived in a tent at the rear. 'You could go away, leave everything there and come back for the next season and nothing had been touched. I don't think anyone was game to touch anything because everybody knew everyone,' Frank recalled.

Joining the itinerant population employed at the meatworks, Frank would work a season and then return to cattle stations out west. 'During the slack period of the work if you were a local, more or less born or bred here, you always picked up a job, but if you were a newcomer like I was you found it very hard,' Frank stated.

When a new killing season would begin Frank would always get the call to return to Gladstone for more work. It was during one of these seasons that Frank met his wife Joyce who was working in the cannery at the meatworks and when they started courting Joyce's father made it clear his daughter was not going to date someone living in a tent and asked Frank to move in with them. Frank and Joyce married in 1959 and Frank continued to head out west in the off seasons until 1963 when he was called back for the last time. 'My number was called again. So I came back to the meatworks in Gladstone and got three weeks work in 1963. Then it was finished,' Frank remembered. With no job prospects, Frank and Joyce had little money and would get credit at local businesses as did other meatworkers and their families adding a financial burden to local enterprises.

The closure of the meatworks was felt throughout the township and local businesswoman Ruth Crosson (nee Bennedick) remembers many locals were depressed. 'Everyone was racing around trying to find other work on cattle properties around the area or over at the coalfields. There wasn't anything to look forward to, if you didn't

work for Friends Store or the railway or the wharf or something like that you didn't really have any future,' Ruth stated.

On 18 April 1963 it was announced to the community in the local newspaper, the *Observer*, the meatworks site at Parsons Point had been purchased for construction of the world's largest alumina refinery by an international consortium operating under the name Queensland Alumina Limited. The international consortium was made up of five different parties: Alcan Aluminium Limited (Canada), Conzinc Riotinto Limited of Australia, Kaiser Aluminium & Chemical Corporation (United States), and Pechiney Compagnie de Produits Chimiques et Electrometallurgiques (France). The design, construction and operation of the plant were managed by Kaiser.

The following week on 24 April the Central Queensland radio station 4R0 hosted a special half hour segment congratulating Gladstone on the pending industrial development. Radio announcer Bill Crane interviewed several local identities to the strains of 'Waltzing Matilda'. Bill spoke passionately about the announcement: 'Yes, it was to Gladstone that all eyes turned when our

ears heard the news that Gladstone was to get the 35 million pound Comalco alumina plant. Gladstone, who had been trying so hard for so long to get that one big break, who had shared in promise of promises in the past. But this was real. This was news. This could be the Central Queensland breakthrough!

Although many were surprised at this announcement it did not come as a shock to everyone as a great deal had been going on behind the scenes. Gladstone was not initially looked at as the site for the alumina plant which would process bauxite mined at Weipa in far north Queensland. Initially Papua New Guinea, the south island of New Zealand and Brisbane were considered as well as Weipa itself however Gladstone had several important aspects. There were the sheltered deep water harbour, the nearby coalfields at Moura vital for the production of alumina and a ready workforce due to the closure of the meatworks. In the end, the Queensland State Government insisted the plant be located within the state. Secret trips had been made to the area with representatives from Kaiser being met by W.R. Golding, a local Councillor and businessman. Golding played tour guide leading the party

around various possible sites including that of the meatworks and nearby South Trees Island. The Gladstone Harbour Board, of which Golding was chairman, then went to extraordinary lengths to obtain South Trees Island from the Austin brothers. The decision to acquire the land went all the way to the Supreme Court before it was officially handed over to the Board. Eventually the consortium chose Gladstone and bought the meatworks site from Swifts. More secret trips were made to Gladstone, this time with the purpose of buying land for housing before prices started to soar. Something big was about to happen in Gladstone.

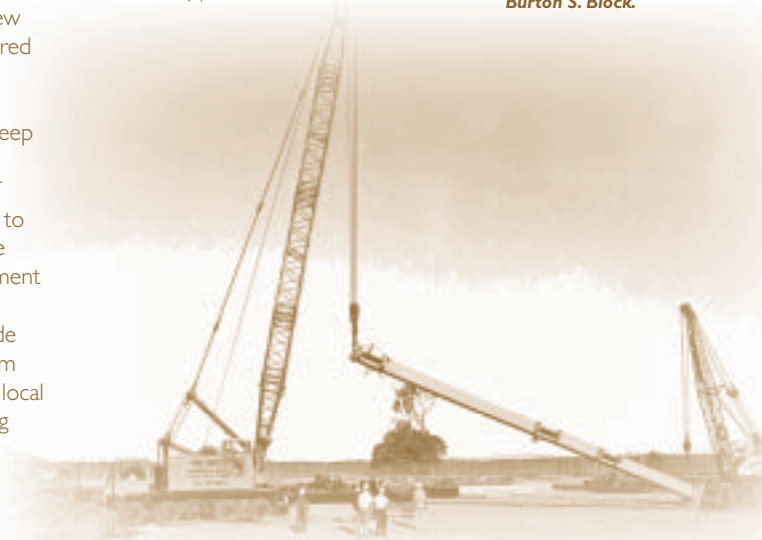


▲ *Open cut mine at Weipa, December 1960. The first 30,000 tons of bauxite was mined here.*

Image courtesy Tony Warren.

▼ *Column erection at the boiler house.*

**Photograph by
Burton S. Block.**



One of the first men to arrive in Gladstone after the announcement of QAL was Tony Warren, a surveyor with Enterprise Explorations who had just spent five years surveying the mine lease at Weipa which would supply the QAL refinery with bauxite. The lease had been 'pegged on paper' by stating the latitude and longitude of each corner. Tony, and other surveyors before him, had to determine these corners on the ground by observing the stars. 'It was a really challenging job. I liked it in the bush at Weipa. There was plenty of game, plenty of water and we were well cared for,' Tony remembered.

▼ *Aerial view of QAL construction, 9 August 1965.*
Image courtesy QAL.



It was in Weipa that Tony first met Jack Vanholland before Jack was relocated to Central Queensland as the first official Comalco representative in Gladstone. 'It was top secret, we didn't know why, but Jack was going to Gladstone. And then later on it worked out that Comalco had purchased the Swifts Meatworks,' Tony recalled. Tony soon followed Jack arriving in Gladstone in early 1963 and boarded with his aunt and uncle in Oaka Street.

Tony remembered that first day, driving along Toolooa Street on a narrow stretch of bitumen with salt water cooch growing where the curbing and channelling of footpaths should have been. 'It wasn't such a beautiful place. I know some of the houses were shabby. Some of them I doubted if they'd ever been painted. I can still remember thinking there's an avenue for a good paint salesman in this town until I realised that nobody had any money and they weren't the slightest bit interested in painting their houses,' Tony stated.

Tony soon reunited with Jack Vanholland who had been in Gladstone negotiating with local authorities about the development of residential land Comalco had already purchased. Jack had felt great resistance to his presence

and Tony remembers him saying 'I'm the big bad boy around town; I've closed the meatworks down'.

Jack and Tony were not readily accepted by the locals when they first walked into the Young Australian Hotel. They were met by silence even though the pub was filled with patrons. 'There was a deathly silence and Jack said 'keep walking', so we kept walking to the bar and a gap opened up and we ordered two beers each and then we retired to a back corner of the bar and drank our beers and the gap closed over. We weren't game enough to venture forth to get any more. We just drank our beers and then we quietly disappeared,' Tony stated.

One day while having a drink at the same pub, Tony was recognised by a local man sporting a blue shirt and braces who revealed he knew Tony from years before when he had introduced his father to possum shooting. This small moment of recognition led to Tony and Jack finally being accepted at the Young Australian. 'After that people came and wanted to know what we were doing and where we came from and what was Comalco, why had they come to Gladstone and what was happening and how it was going to work and all these sorts of things,' Tony recalled.



At the QAL construction site one job Tony recalled was marking the corners of the various sections and QAL Managing Director Al Sangwine arriving to see firsthand the proposed site. 'I remember he went to each corner of each section and he just stood there and contemplated. He was the Managing Director and one didn't question him. To this day I often wondered what he saw, what his vision was as he stood and looked at that site. Did he see the plant as it was today? I think that somehow or other he would have done,' Tony said.

One major issue facing the Gladstone community during the construction of QAL was the shortage in housing for the workers and their families. At least 354 houses were built predominantly in the Barney Point area mainly for

supervisory staff including both contractors and QAL employees, approximately 1600 men were housed in the Yaralla single men's quarters and around 300 families resided at the Boles Street Caravan Park. As well as these official residences, rooms were let, suburban backyards housed up to two caravans each and several private hostels were in operation.

One of Tony Warren's tasks was to oversee construction of the Boles Street caravan park after Jack Vanholland negotiated with the town council. Tony, Jack and the principal contractor, George Young, met at the Boles Street site and laid out the plans using a stick in the dirt. After the plans were drawn up several weeks later the pressure was on to complete the caravan site as soon as possible. 'It was given to me how much it meant to construction if I could get one other tradesman in accommodation one day earlier. It would mean so much for the advancement for the startup of the plant,' Tony remembered. 'As soon as the caravans went on, the power and water was connected to them, they were occupied... They were brought up

on the train, loaded onto trucks, lifted off with a crane, put on the stumps and then there was the slab alongside it and a canvas annex attached.'

One couple to take up residence at the Boles Street Caravan Park was Marilyn and Herbert Haertel who had been residing in Tasmania where Herbert worked as a fitter and turner at an alumina refinery called Tempco at Bell Bay. It was through this job that Herbert heard about the construction going on in Gladstone, prompting Marilyn to write to the town clerk asking about the local area. After receiving a glowing reply, they packed everything they owned into a Kombi van and headed north to Brisbane where they waited to hear the call for more construction workers.

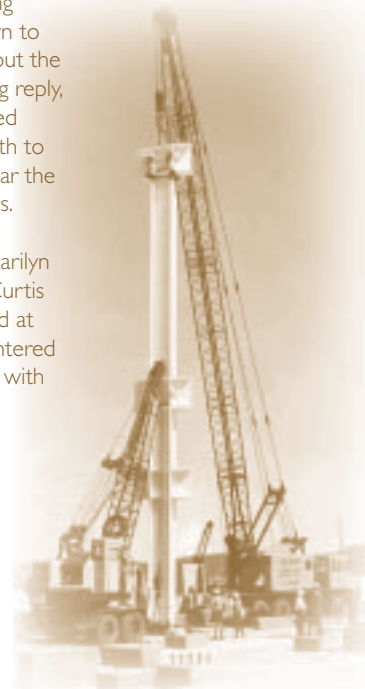
While in Brisbane, Herbert and Marilyn took a short trip up to the Port Curtis region to look around and camped at Tannum Sands where they encountered several men Herbert had worked with previously in New South Wales.

◀ Columns for the boiler house.

**Photograph by
Burton S. Block.**

▼ Erection of the boiler house.

**Photograph by
Burton S. Block.**



'We went back to Brisbane determined that as soon as we could we'd get here,' Marilyn stated. Back in Brisbane, she applied to the Department of Education for a teaching position in Gladstone in preparation for the move.

When Marilyn and Herbert finally arrived in Gladstone in early 1966 construction of QAL was well underway. The Boles Street Caravan Park was occupied as was the Yaralla single men's quarters and Marilyn remembers seeing people camped out in backyards all around the town. They headed straight to the QAL gates and joined a queue to sign up for work and accommodation. 'We signed on and I keep meeting people today who were at that gate at that time,' Marilyn said. From here they were directed to the Coronas' Caravan Park for several nights before relocating to a permanent van at the Boles Street Caravan Park.

▼ *Boles Street Caravan Park.*
Image courtesy QAL.



At its peak the Boles Street Caravan Park had over 300 vans with a thousand men, women and children and was managed by Dot and Clive Pincham. As well as the vans there was a shop, a post office, playgrounds and a hall where the women could have Avon parties and dances. It also had bitumen roads which still had not appeared in other parts of Gladstone. There were privately-owned caravans and onsite ones. Two caravans would share plumbing and drainage and were about two metres apart. Each caravan had an annex which could be used for storage and a small patch of grass. Marilyn remembered taking pride in their outdoor area: 'We planted a garden around the edge of our 'lawn', at the back of the van between it and the wall and also at the front on the road side. We cut our lawn grass with scissors and won a garden competition section once.'

With Herbert working on the construction of QAL, Marilyn soon took up a position as an art teacher at the Gladstone State High School which by this stage was overflowing with students from all over Australia and internationally. 'It was exciting, it really was. The local kids were challenged by all these new ones and also astonished,

inspired...and they all just got on with it,' Marilyn recalled. She also began teaching an adult education art class and had about 30 pupils: 'There was a desperate need for things other than just going to work and coming home.'

One day when Marilyn was lying on the bed in their caravan resting an injured foot, rocks came flying through the roof. Blasting had been taking place nearby in order to expand the caravan park and a representative from QAL's public relations team, Alex Scrivener, arrived on her doorstep to look at the damage. This meeting led to a friendship forming between the Haertels and Scriveners with Alex helping to find them a block of land where they lived in another caravan while they built their house.

Another short-term resident of the Boles Street Caravan Park, Dave Burns, was also glad to move out when the time came: 'There were some people in there, that if you had the option you wouldn't build a house next to them.'

After completing his apprenticeship as a boilermaker in Sydney and Wollongong, Dave moved to Brisbane after receiving an offer to play A-Grade football with Wynnum-Manly.

After playing the 1965 season, Dave heard of construction going ahead in Gladstone and moved there in October 1965. His first impressions of Gladstone were less than favourable. It was absolutely filthy and there was no sewerage. You were better off getting the water from your tank cause when you turned your tap you'd get mud through it. Curb to curb bitumen was non-existent. You had a strip of bitumen down the road and the edges were dirt. There was very little curb and channelling,' Dave remembered.

Dave began work at QAL and took up residence at the Yaralla single men's quarters which he acquired through his new employer: 'I applied for the job and got the job. I drove up, had a letter to the hostel, booked in and got my room'. At that stage Dave was being paid £35 per week for a 48 hour week which included accommodation and meals. 'Yaralla was no paradise, but for a single bloke it wasn't too bad,' said Dave.

The rooms were about 3x5 metres with two single beds, a desk and cupboard and it paid to get a good roommate: 'Too bad if you got in with someone that snored or you didn't like. You'd do your best to get rid of him.' One hazard

Dave remembers was trying to find a vacant toilet block at night. Because lights were on in the amenity blocks, men would often gather in them to hold dice games. Occasionally one of the residents would lose it: 'Once a bloke ran through naked firing a .22 in the air'

From the Yaralla hostel the men followed a dirt track across the mudflats to get to work: 'There were various forms of transport. They did run a bus out to the site but most of the blokes had their own transport. They got there one way or another.' Onsite Dave worked for John Thompson on the construction of the boilerhouse and remembers there was not a lot built yet with the foundations still being laid and very little standing: 'The old meatworks buildings were still standing, but were knocked down shortly after that. It was just a bare site. Wimpey's were the contractors for most of the foundation work. It didn't take long for things to start to rise up out of the ground.'

Whilst working at QAL, Dave became heavily involved with the unions starting as the boilermakers delegate for the contractor John Thompson and later being elected site chairman where he would often have to chair meetings:

'I had 1400 blokes who knew me and if I knew their names I'd say Harry, John, Dick or whatever and if I didn't know their names it'd be Brother and if they were a member of the party it was Comrade,' Dave stated.

As a construction worker belonging to a union was strongly advised. 'You had to be in a union to get a job on QAL and I'd say union membership would have been in the high 90 percent,' said Dave. 'Nearly everyone was a member of the union in those days, otherwise you just didn't get on.'

▼ *The Yaralla Single Men's Quarters with new housing commission residences in background, 10 May 1965.*
Image courtesy QAL.





▲ (Top) The men's hostel at 2 Roseberry Street before renovations.
(Bottom) The men's hostel at 2 Roseberry Street after renovations.

**Images courtesy
Marshall Gunston.**

There were a lot of stop work meetings during the first construction stage at QAL and there is some debate over the seriousness of the issues raised with a common belief that a good day for fishing came into the equation on a regular basis. If there was an issue such as a demarcation dispute, the men would have to down tools and go outside the gates for a meeting. Often

disputes were between the different unions, not just between the union and the employer. As a union delegate Dave could see both sides to the story: 'The boys would look at the weather and they'd go fishing. Bear in mind we were working six days a week, we worked Saturdays, it was a 48 hour week and a lot of the locals had never seen that kind of money before. Some were from Yarwun and they had small farms so they appreciated the odd day off.'

As an A-Grade football player, Dave also took up coaching the Yaralla football team which was made up of construction workers living at the hostel. They would play against other local teams and this offered a chance for different groups living in the community to mix, however Dave remembers friction did exist between the locals and construction workers: 'The construction workers were all a bit up themselves the way they behaved. They'd get on the booze and there weren't many women around. They'd chase the local girls and upset some local bloke.' The sporting fields also presented a challenge having somewhat different surfaces: 'I came from Lang Park with pristine conditions to playing on Fry Park and it was top dressed with bloody sawdust and if a bit of grass was growing there you stepped around it. You didn't want to destroy it.'

As well as the Yaralla Hostel, single men could also find lodgings in several privately-owned hostels around Gladstone, one of which was owned and operated by Marshall Gunston. A local resident himself, Marshall had worked several seasons at the meatworks with his father and brother before moving out to Calliope for work. When QAL was announced Marshall

decided to move back to Gladstone and open a hostel capitalising on the influx of workers needing a place to stay. Marshall found an old Queenslander-style house at 2 Roseberry Street: 'It was pretty dilapidated, the old house, the paint was all faded and the front steps were falling off it.'

After finding the house his bank would not grant Marshall the loan to buy it. In a story indicative of the small community prior to the boom, Marshall found where another bank's manager lived and visited him on a Saturday morning: 'He was mowing the lawn in a pair of shorts and a tee shirt, I introduced myself and explained my situation, so we went to inspect the house, went up and opened the bank, opened an account, took out a loan and purchased the property,' Marshall said.

At first Marshall kept working out at Calliope while his neighbours, the Denhams, looked after the house with Mrs Denham acting as housekeeper. After awhile Marshall resigned and began renovating the house by replacing the front stairs, building an amenities block at the rear and closing in the verandah to accommodate more boarders.

The hostel was often overflowing with as many as 30 men living there at one time with several others sleeping in cars parked in the backyard until a bed was vacated. At first Marshall let out the rooms for \$7 per week but soon realised he would get a better class of tenant if they were prepared to pay \$12 per week for full board including meals, which meant trying to employ a cook. 'You could get a cook for five days a week but getting ones on the weekends was a bit hard. I had a couple of live-in cooks there at different stages. One bloke and his wife lived in the backyard in their own caravan and she was cooking,' Marshall said.

Marshall had all manner of boarders at the hostel and men would often come to town with little money looking for work and lodgings: 'If you just said to them, 'You haven't got any money, on your bike,' then you wouldn't have too many tenants, and they wouldn't have anywhere to stay.' If the men did not have enough money for board until they found work, Marshall would ask them to leave some of their belongings as a deposit until they could pay. The majority of men agreed to this system which worked well. 'Some would come back months later, they'd have the money

and they'd pay and pick up their gear and others never came back,' Marshall remembered.

Similar to the single men's quarters there was often excitement at the Roseberry Street hostel as well: 'The boarding house experienced everything from theft, arguments, fights and evictions to police intervention and the occasional arrest.' With so many different men coming and going, Marshall put a set of rules up on the wall in the dining hall, however, he still had trouble particularly with men drinking too much: 'When you get single men like that, there's not much else to do, so they go to the pub, and then of course it becomes a habit.' Marshall also recalled some of the men would steal from each other: 'When one boarder was ready to leave town he would wait until his roommate went to work and take his valuable belongings to sell at a local pawn shop.

Eventually after seven years of running a boarding house, Marshall decided to buy a mobile crane in order to also work on the construction of QAL. After selling the Roseberry Street house he hitched a ride with one of his boarders to Brisbane and purchased the crane

before driving it back to Gladstone. The journey took two and a half days and at night Marshall would pull up on the side of the road and sleep in the cab.

Although they travelled much further than Marshall, Ken and Judy Nicholson's journey to Gladstone was much quicker, however they did arrive before their newly built house was completed.

When QAL was announced Ken was working at a nuclear energy plant in New South Wales. He was already married to Judy with two children, Greg and Katie, when he saw an ad in the paper for employment at QAL in Gladstone, a place he had never heard of. 'I thought there was a good opportunity to get in on the ground floor, so we applied and after lengthy negotiations I flew up for an interview and after some more negotiations, they finally made an offer that was good and we came up,' Ken recalled.

▼ Precipitator tank erection.
Photograph by
Burton S. Block.





▲ *The Nicholson's first home in Gladstone at 5 Quoin Street. Furniture arrived before the house was completed and was left on the verandah.*

Image courtesy Ken and Judy Nicholson.

▼ *Ken Nicholson and John Mawer save a kangaroo from the Gladstone West State School grounds, 1967.*

Image courtesy Ken and Judy Nicholson.



On the flight to Gladstone for his job interview, Ken remembered sitting next to a local woman who complained about all the new people coming to town and how dreadful they were. After his interview Ken looked around the township to make up his own mind. Having worked at Port Kembla in New South Wales, he saw that Gladstone was not nearly as rough as what he had seen previously and decided to relocate his family interstate.

As a QAL employee Ken was given a new house to rent at minimal cost, however it was unfinished when they arrived and they stayed in temporary accommodation at Barney Point. Their furniture also arrived before the house was completed and was left on the front verandah for several days with no concerns about theft.

Coming from a larger city, the Nicholsons had to adapt to life in Gladstone, in particular to the water. Judy remembered the trials of trying to wash clothes using the local untreated water supply: 'You couldn't wash your clothes and use the spin dryer because the dirt and silt would just go through them.' Every morning there would be a report over the radio stating whether the water was fit to drink that day. The majority of local residents had water tanks and the Nicholsons soon followed suit.

Overall Ken and Judy liked Gladstone and wanted to stay. 'Coming from a big city like we did, we thought Gladstone was wonderful because you could go up the main street and park within a block of where you wanted to go,' Judy recalled. They also found a compassionate community that was forming in Gladstone due to the lack of extended family support. 'There were no grandparents here. There was no childminding places. We had to come together and build those, get them going ourselves. And we had to rely on each other to babysit and look after families. If anyone had to go into hospital we'd look after each other,' Ken stated.

Ken started his long career at QAL as a mechanical engineer primarily in the digestion area. When he first started his office still had no furniture and he worked on the floor. The refinery was becoming fully operational and Ken recalled the continuous process: 'Once you lit the wick you couldn't go back.' During strikes it came down to QAL staff to keep the continuous process going.

For the opening Ken had the task of sourcing an aluminium flagpole which proved difficult. He finally located a 40ft ship's mast in Western Australia however as time was running out the flagpole had to be stowed along the length of a chartered plane. Ken referred to the trip as a 'solo flagpole flight' and 40 years later the pole still stands at QAL today. Ken had a long association with QAL and, apart from two years in Sardinia, worked there until his retirement. Ken and Judy still reside in Gladstone today.

Someone else with a long association with QAL but of a different kind was Bevin Newitt. As a labourer, Bevin followed construction work all over Australia before finally settling in Gladstone and still plays a role in QAL community forums and the Clean Air Group today.



Originally from Mount Perry, Bevin had previously visited relatives in Gladstone and has childhood memories of the Harbour Festival, Friends Department Store and seeing big boats in Auckland Creek. Bevin first heard of QAL when he was on a fishing excursion to 1770 with some mates. 'We just happened to have the news on and the Premier of the day announced that they'd signed the deal to build an alumina refinery in Gladstone at Parsons Point. So that's where I very first heard it,' Bevin recalled. It was two years before he took up a position on the construction site.

Five weeks before moving to Gladstone, Bevin married Gloria in 1965 after meeting her at a service station in Biloela. In Gladstone, they lived at Gloria's mother's house in Margaret Street and Bevin started work at the end of June with Tylemans, building three concrete chimney stacks behind the boilerhouse.

Bevin painted a good picture of work conditions on the construction site: 'During the construction of the first stage of the QAL plant it was a condition of employment to agree to work a six day week. My hourly rate of pay in 1966 as a rigger was \$1.15 per hour for ordinary time plus penalty rates for overtime. We were required to work 10 hours from Monday to Friday and 8 hours on Saturday. Over the years the wages progressively increased but so did the cost of living.'

At QAL Bevin would start at 7am each day and work a six day week. Onsite he would wear a hard hat, shirt, shorts and shoes: 'Working with boilermakers you had to wear elastic-sided boots so if you got a spark down there you could get 'em off in a hurry.'

At its peak in November 1966 there were 2800 workers represented by no less than 14 unions and Bevin remembers it being extremely busy. 'Some companies had to wait until other companies had finished the section before they moved in,' Bevin said. 'Site conditions were adequate and basic, there were no luxuries.' Each contractor supplied their own crib shed where they ate lunch and a 'peggy' made sure

there was plenty of boiling water for the tea and coffee and would go into town to pick up lunch orders. A 'peggy' was usually an older worker about to retire.

Safety was always an issue onsite with mates looking out for each other: 'Safety was not enforced like it is today. In the old days, in hindsight, we took a lot of risks,' Bevin recalled. 'You looked after yourself and your mate... If we thought it was unsafe we wouldn't do it.'

Overall the men worked well together and left all their arguments in the pubs: 'We all worked in harmony. If you didn't like it you just got out. There were no arguments, no blues.' Bevin remembered there being plenty of work to be had on site if you were unhappy with any of your fellow workers: 'There was that much work on the first stage that you could finish with one contractor on the Friday and start with another one Monday.'

◀ Aerial view of completed rotary kilns, 3 February 1967.
Image courtesy QAL.

▶ A bogged scraper at the Red Mud Dam.
Image courtesy Frank Bowen.



► *QAL administration staff, 1967c.*

Image courtesy QAL.

Bevin also recalled the role of the unions on site: 'They were there to make sure everyone got paid the award wage, their entitlements and everything else, and everyone was treated fairly and just.' One issue arose with the American company Chicago Bridge and Lennox. When the men were ready to down tools the contractor offered a barbeque steak for the men every Wednesday during the cooler months of the year. This tactic worked and the stoppage was avoided. 'That was a really great event but the only trouble was you had blokes from other contractors coming over as well,' Bevin recalled. One of those blokes was Dave Burns, who would change his hat in order to get a steak for lunch. 'I remember my hat was grey and I'd always borrow the orange one of Chicago Bridge to get a free lunch,' Dave said.

▼ *4th of July celebrations at Ferguson Park, 1966.*

Image courtesy Ruth Crosson.



After Bevin completed construction work at QAL he and his wife Gloria joined the mass of construction workers travelling around the country in caravans following jobs. 'We were like caravanning gypsies,' said Bevin. 'It was just a big brotherhood.' They would encounter old friends everywhere and Bevin remembers walking onto Coogee Beach in Western Australia and seeing two men fishing. They were both wearing bright yellow QAL jackets. Bevin and Gloria returned to the Port Curtis region permanently in 1988. 'Age catches up with you,' stated Bevin.

With the American company Kaiser in charge of the construction a contingent of around 35 American families also found themselves on Gladstone's doorstep with mixed emotions from locals and construction workers. Bevin Newitt liked working with the Americans at the QAL site: 'There were no empire builders. All the senior management at Kaisers, they used to drive around the site in little jeeps and they'd pull up and talk to you on first name terms. They were quite a good bunch of guys,' Bevin stated. Dave Burns, on the other hand, said there were a lot of power struggles between the Americans and Australians which led



to work stoppages. 'The stoppages were a power game. The Yanks weren't very well liked at the time. There was a resentment there that ran fairly deep and so the stoppages were quite frequent,' Dave recalled. Merle Larsen (nee Breslin) was a secretary for the Owners Representative Group during construction where she loved working with some of the American managers at QAL because of their sense of humour. Merle remembered they used to call her 'Miss Merle' in a southern drawl.

In the township, the Americans injected life into the social scene. Local hairdresser Ruth Crosson remembered being invited to 'pot luck parties' where everyone brought their own dish. It was at one of these parties she met her American husband, William Crosson. After marrying, Ruth learnt more about cooking from the American women. 'I learnt a lot about their style of eating. Things like we'd have mashed sweet potato or baked sweet potato, they'd

have candied sweet potato coated in brown sugar. They'd do all sorts of different dishes and I learnt a lot from those women, they were all so helpful. Each one giving me recipes and telling me how to go about it and the differences between flour in America and flour in Australia and what cake flour means and what you use to make a cake out of an American recipe,' Ruth recalled.

On the other side, Deborah Files (nee Melancon) came out to Gladstone from America with her parents in October 1967 and remembered how her mother was faced with challenges when shopping for groceries and had to adapt her recipes to suit the local ingredients. Deborah also remembers after her first day at the Gladstone State High School coming home and shortening her skirt because hemlines were longer in the USA than in Australia.

In the salon, Ruth Crosson also had a lot of American clientele and had to adapt to their needs but also found them extremely friendly and interesting: 'They were always very nice to me, very friendly, and would always give you a Christmas present.'

The majority of Americans who came out to work on the construction of QAL were housed at Barney Point and had spent years moving around for work. 'They were very well travelled and they had a lot of experience and they had a lot of funny tales to tell about all of the things that happened to them in these times of moving from job to job,' Ruth recalled.

Having married an American and a construction worker Ruth remembers William spending a lot of time at work: 'I became what you call a construction widow because he worked 365 days of the year. He didn't take any days off. He was just always on the job. He just lived for it. It was so interesting and there were so many challenges to be met. That was his life so I managed to keep my end of it with my own career.'

Another American family to come out to Gladstone was John and Katherine (Kay) Holeman with four school-age boys who had to adapt to new schools, foods, language and lifestyle. John was with Kaiser Engineers and had been working on the plans for the refinery since 1964 before taking up the position of QAL's first Works Manager in September 1965.

John did not hesitate to take up a position in Australia after serving as a US Navy lieutenant in the South Pacific during World War II where he encountered Australian troops. 'I liked their attitude, I liked their beer and thought I'd like to go there some time. That thought had been out of my mind since the war's end but when the opportunity arose to work on the project in Australia, I didn't have to think about it twice.'



▲ *Water breaking through the first attempt to build the Red Mud Dam.*
Image courtesy Frank Bowen.

▼ *Welding.*
Photograph by Burton S. Block.



► *Goondoo Street, Gladstone, 1966.*

Image courtesy Ken and Judy Nicholson.

The family arrived in style having to take a sea plane from Brisbane to Gladstone because the airport at Gladstone was closed for maintenance. John remembers the airport in Gladstone being very basic: 'The Gladstone airfield was not a thing of beauty at the time. There was a wooden shack out there and a runway that had been put together at the last minute.'

Although many of the American families had moved many times before, some still found it difficult adapting and Kay Holeman remembered a fellow American, Gladys Donaldson, having a lot of trouble with the Australian currency which had not changed over to decimal currency yet. Gladys' husband

Don opened a kitchen drawer one day and found it containing many small bills and loose change. 'You see, Gladys didn't comprehend pounds, shilling and pence but she had discovered that if she went to the grocery store with a 10-pound note, she could get anything she wanted. She simply did that, brought the change home and put it in the drawer,' Kay recalled.

Kay also remembered the local hospitality when they went to open a bank account and the manager then invited them to the residence above the bank where they had morning tea. As with many of the American women, Kay involved herself in the local community by volunteering at the school tuckshop and rolling bandages for the Hospital Auxiliary as well as joining tennis and bridge groups. John and Kay would also entertain newcomers at their home on a regular basis to help them assimilate with their new surroundings. In 1967, the Holeman family moved to Brisbane and later went back to America.

▼ *The Gladstone airport shortly after opening on 27 April 1957.*

Image courtesy QAL.



Old and new residents slowly watched QAL rise up out of the ground and bus tours were often held so everyone could see what was going on out at Parsons Point. 'The engineers from Kaisers would be on each bus and they'd give you a rundown of everything that you saw as you travelled all around and that was really interesting. It was a good public relations exercise... They were always packed, everyone loved it,' Ruth Crosson remembered.

Gladstone struggled through these years with a strained town council desperately trying to keep up with the rapid growth of the area. Not only were they supporting a huge population with only a small number of ratepayers but they also could not maintain suitable staff because of the lure of construction

wages. Marshall Gunston remembered a number of men arrived at his hostel without a job lined up so would take up work with the council in the meantime. 'It wasn't always easy to just blow into town and get a job, so a lot of them used to sign up for the dole or they'd get a job on the council or Australia Post, they had trouble getting posties to deliver the mail. So they'd get a menial job for awhile and when they got on at QAL they'd go out there and Australia Post had trouble keeping posties and council had trouble keeping blokes out there.' Grace Swenson (Stobo) owned and operated a newsagency in Goondoon Street and remembers it was extremely difficult to find employees especially deliverymen. An added difficulty was just trying to make a phone call to the Courier Mail in Brisbane to place a job advertisement. It could take several hours to get a line out.

There was a great deal of sympathy for the council. 'The council did the best they could with what they had,' Bevin Newitt stated. Eventually they progressed and started to clean up the town by putting in curbing and channelling to reduce the dust problem and with QAL's assistance instigated a more reliable water source with the

construction of the Awoonga Weir and later the Awoonga Dam as well as building a water treatment plant.

Around the township local clubs were established and existing ones were overflowing with new memberships, old-time dances were being replaced by American style discos, new shops were established, old ones were expanded, new schools opened and suburbs slowly crept over the surrounding area. Local pubs did a good trade often filled to the brim with construction workers on their way home from work. 'I never went to the pubs. I was a wowser. I kept out of the pub scene. It was just too rough in the pubs. There'd be arguments and fights and brawls,' Bevin Newitt stated.

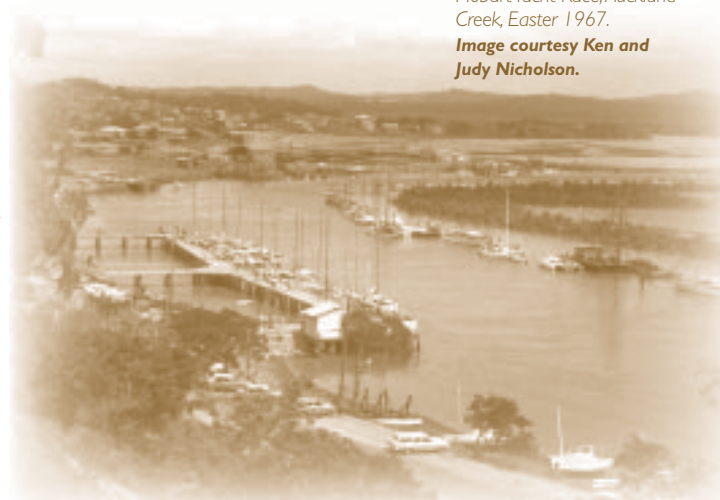
'Construction workers were no fairies in those days. They were a tough brand,' Dave Burns said. 'The police were too scared to go to hotels and break up fights. You're talking 50 to 100 blokes in a hotel, a blue breaks out, nearly everyone's involved and the police force here wasn't all that big in numbers.'

Not everyone went out looking for trouble as Ruth Crosson learnt working as a hairdresser: 'Some of the women I'd met in the salon lived in the Boles Street Caravan Park. Most of them went out Friday and Saturday night and they all got their hair done and they all wore long patio dresses and they really lived life to the fullest. They didn't just believe in working all the time. They believed in having a bit of fun on the weekends.'



▲ *Harbour Festival street parade in Goondoon Street, mid-1960s.*
Image courtesy Angus Bauman.

▼ *End of the Brisbane to Hobart Yacht Race, Auckland Creek, Easter 1967.*
Image courtesy Ken and Judy Nicholson.





▲ Official delegates on a guided tour of QAL for the official opening, 4 August 1967.

Image courtesy QAL.

Time seems to be one answer to all the social problems created during this boom time. Most of the itinerant construction workers moved to Gladstone with the belief it was only temporary, which is why so many lived in

caravans and hostels, however before Stage 1 of QAL was completed in 1967, Stage 2 had begun and soon after that a smelter and power station were built and eventually more industries were established in the area. There was plenty of work to be had. Many itinerant construction workers became semi-permanent residents and many made the decision to stay, buying land and building their own houses. 'I swore when I first got here I was only going to earn some money and get out. Except for two years playing football in New Guinea I'm still here,' Dave Burns said.

In March 1967 the first alumina was successfully processed at the refinery and big celebrations were planned. Because Gladstone did not have enough adequate accommodation for the VIPs it was decided celebrations would begin in Brisbane at a formal dinner with guests being airlifted into Gladstone the

following day to tour the site before heading back to Brisbane. Guests sported colour-coded rosettes to know which flight and bus they would be on. A picnic celebration was also held for the local workers and their families at the recreation grounds where Judy Nicholson remembered everything was laid on including fireworks: 'It was the most fantastic fireworks display anyone had ever seen because they actually ended up with a skyline of QAL. When it all lit up it was QAL.'

In the meantime it was business as usual at the refinery because it was now operating continuously. 'I was not really involved in the official opening. I remember I was a bit cut up about it at the time. But somebody's got to run the plant while the official opening was going on,' Tony Warren remembered. Ken Nicholson also had to keep working: 'All that was only an interlude in the middle of all the important stuff.'

In June 2006, Gladstone had 29,288 residents compared with 7181 recorded in 1961. Today, the Gladstone region has at least 12 industry providers and the port can load over 45 million tonnes of coal each year. The city has a university campus, five supermarkets,

chain clothing and discount stores, an eight theatre cinema complex and every major fast food outlet. New housing estates are being built at a rapid pace and surrounding areas in the Calliope Shire such as Calliope, Tannum Sands and Boyne Island feed into this industrial city with commuters, shoppers, and those pursuing entertainment and sporting events. QAL is still one of the largest employers in Gladstone contributing around \$200 million dollars annually to the local community in wages and contracts as well as assisting community groups and individuals through grants and bursaries. QAL's production rate has increased from 600,000 tons of alumina in 1967 to 3.9 million tonnes annually. One major achievement for Gladstone is being awarded Queensland Tidy Town honours ten times since 1984. This is a far cry from the dusty streets and houses in desperate need of a coat of paint.



▶ The Board of Directors visit the QAL lookout, 8 February 1965.

Image courtesy QAL.

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I call em the good ol' days. I go through my collection of photos and colour slides. You reminisce, a tear comes to the eye and you wish you could go back to those old days.
Bevin Newitt

It was an era in Australia's history that will never again be repeated.
Tony Warren

It was an exciting place to live and an exciting time and I had the feeling this was something Australia had to learn. It was something we hadn't done before.
Ken Nicholson

There'd be another big stage of development and everybody would come and then it would fade away a bit and then there'd be another big development. Like how it is now I suppose.
Marilyn Haertel

I liked the place. Gladstone's a very friendly place, always has been and it still is. I hope that never changes but a lot of my friends stayed. They stayed for 1, 2, 3 stages and then they were getting too old to move on. 'Wanna move? No, not today'.
Dave Burns

It certainly put Gladstone on the map. I don't know what would have happened to Gladstone if QAL hadn't come. It might have still been a fairly sleepy little town. The coming of QAL put the coming of the smelter down the Boyne and the coming of the powerhouse. It was like a snowball. Probably none of that would have happened if they hadn't built QAL.
Marshall Gunston



Pressure vessel being transported through Gladstone and being put in place at QAL, 1965. (including cover)

Images courtesy QAL.

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