

# Heritage Event

## RAILWAY PICNIC



Long-time Bundaberg and Burnett residents may remember the popular Railway Picnics which were held annually at Nielson Park, Bargara from 1922 until 1972. Originally for Railway employees and their families, these picnics were gradually opened up to the general public after locals would stop by to see what was happening and to visit with their Railway employee friends.

### BEGINNINGS

The Picnics were organised and paid for by the Railwaymen of Bundaberg as an outing for themselves and their families. A 1931 *Bundaberg Daily News and Mail* account states that Bundaberg railway employees held their first picnic in 1907 at Burnett Heads. A party of 25 attended and were conveyed in private "motor launches". However, organised Railway Picnics, as we know them, were, from 1892 to 1922 (with a break for World War 1), held at Pialba, Hervey Bay. The Picnics were moved to Nielson Park in 1922 for reasons not readily recorded in historical documents.

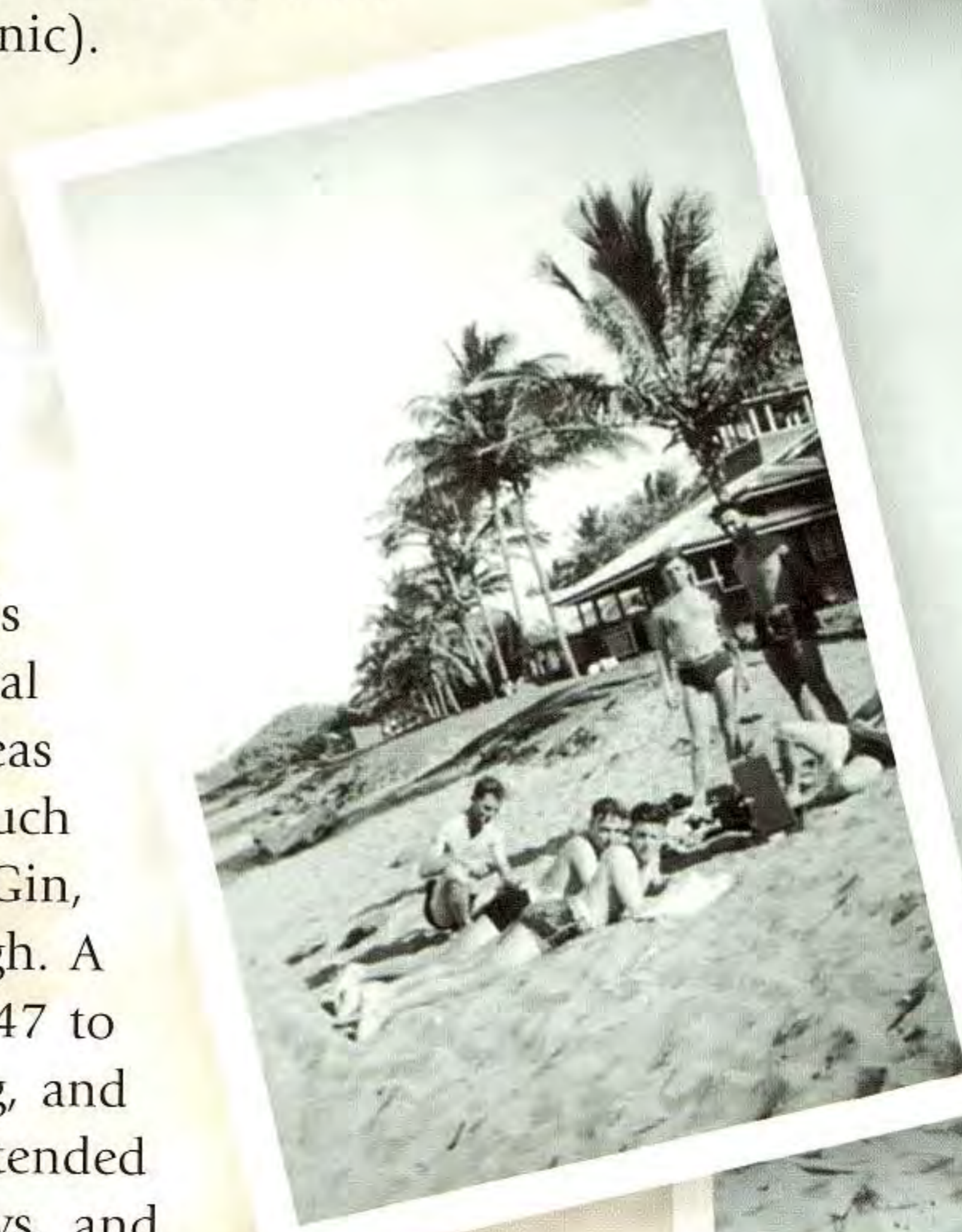
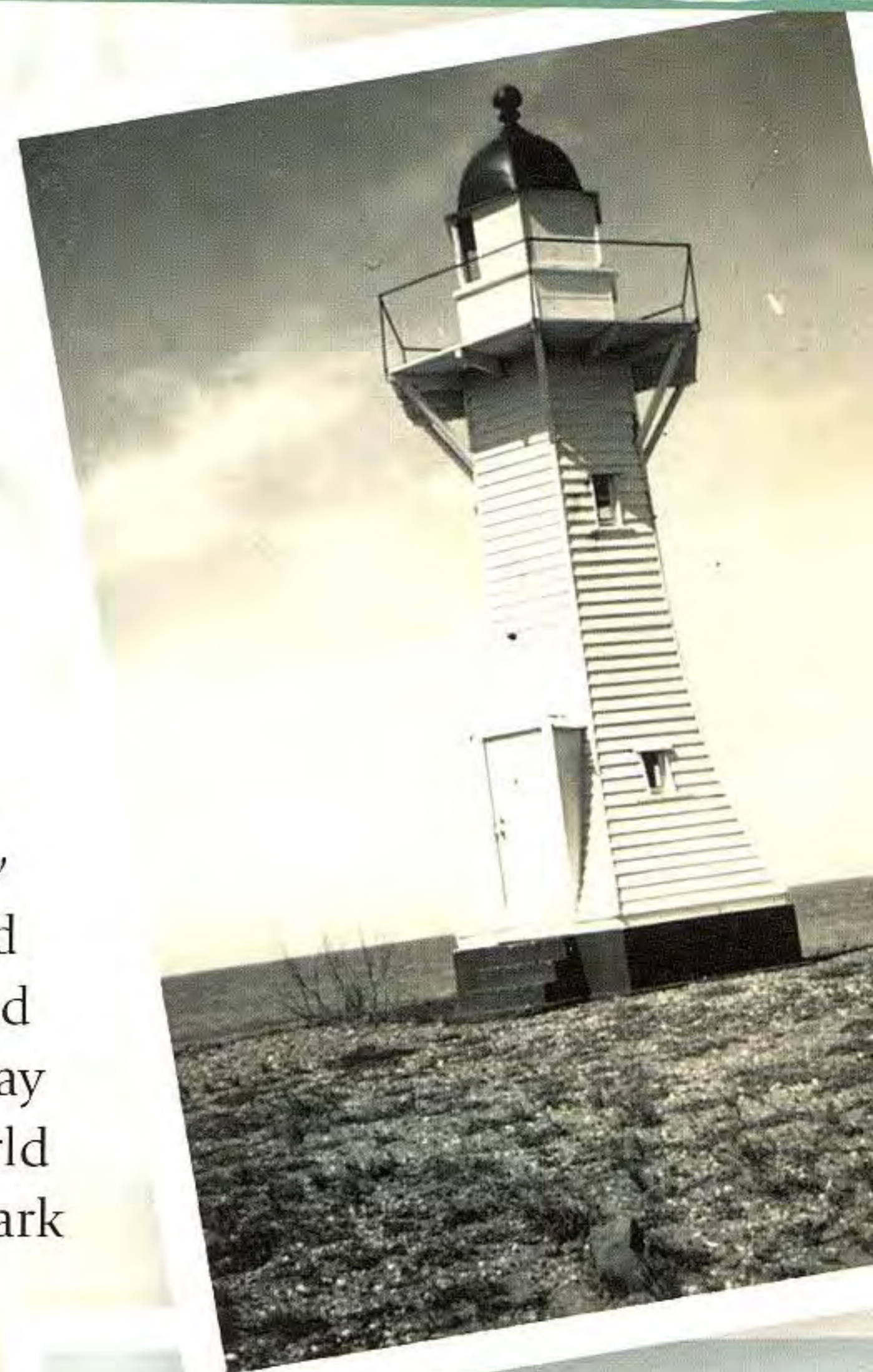
The majority of people wishing to attend the Picnic were transported by train (as it was the Railway Picnic).

However, many were also transported by car or bus. It was a great tradition that the lead train's locomotive be very festively decorated. In 1931 Engine 538 was given that honour, and thus the honour of leading the procession of trains to Bargara, for the fourth time.

It was not just Bundaberg and Bargara locals who clamoured to attend this popular social event. Pleas from those in outlying areas meant that trains also ran from places such as Mt Perry, Wallaville, Morganville, Gin Gin, Isis, Cordalba, Gladstone, and Maryborough. A contingent from Mooloolaba visited in 1947 to participate in surf contests with Bundaberg, and groups from Rockhampton also regularly attended the Picnics. The Commissioner of Railways, and other dignitaries, usually attended the event as well.

### 1920s AND 1930s

Certainly by the late 1920s, early 1930s, the Picnics were open to all who wished to attend. However, as late as 1947, the events were separate. The Railway events (for Railway employees and their families) were held in the morning, and 'All-comers' events (for non-Railway employees) were held in the afternoon.





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The size of the crowds reflected the extreme popularity of the event. In some years crowds reached up to 15,000, with an attendance of around 10,000-plus quite normal. Only inclement weather was enough to keep crowds down, with a 4000-strong crowd in 1938 due to heavy rain the night before the event and light showers during the morning.



The Railway Picnics were, at times, not without their dramas. Wars, coal strikes and shortages, and disappearing railway lines were all factors of the Picnics in various years. The occurrence of the Second World War meant that, apart from peoples' priorities being elsewhere, trains to transport people to Nielson Park were difficult to come by. The Railway Picnic was held in 1939, but not again until 1946.



In 1938 a coal strike meant the Picnic, originally scheduled for 9 October, was postponed until 6 November. This proved to be very unfortunate as 9 October was a beautiful day weather-wise, and 6 November turned out to be showery, which reduced crowd numbers. Numbers were also down in 1946 when 8000 attended. A coal shortage at the time (just after the end of the War) meant that only 3 trains ran from Bundaberg, and none from outlying areas.

With the passage of time rail lines were also pulled up in some areas. During the late forties, the rail line beyond Qunaba was pulled up. Many feared that this would be the end of the Railway Picnics. However, the Railway Picnic Committee organised for motor vehicles and other wheeled vehicles to convey people to Nielson Park. During the Picnic's history, trains were not the only mode of transport to the coast, as evidenced in 1939

when around 3000 people made their way to the Picnic by car.





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### THE PROGRAM

The Railway Picnics were always days full of fun events and demonstrations for adults and children alike. There were beach displays, sporting displays from local clubs, "physical culture" displays (including exercises, club swinging, skipping, and dumb bells), footraces, treasure hunts, three-legged races, wheelbarrow races, tug-o-war, and more. The running track was located beside where the Caravan Park is today, and was there until the late fifties or early sixties.

Ted Smith described the activities on offer in the following stanza of his poem entitled *The Railway Picnic*:

*With ice-cream stained red faces  
We ran three-legged races  
We chased the greasy pig and we raced with egg and spoon  
Swam in foaming seas a-briny  
With noses burnt and shiny  
'Til the time for our departure just came along too soon.*

In 1922, the first time the Picnic was held at Nielson Park, the cost was £23. By the 1950s the cost was over £300. However, sponsorship from local businesses was sought and gladly donated. This was the case particularly for the free drinks and sweets handed out to children. For example, in 1931 free Bundaberg Ginger Beer was provided to those children holding special tickets entitling them to free drinks and sweets.

An account of the 1946 Picnic mentions the setting up of a special bathing pool for children in a creek near Nielson Park. The creek was drained, installed with concrete pipes, and fitted with floodgates at either end. This allowed the pool to be drained and refilled with each tide. According to one long-time Bundaberg resident interviewed for this article, this pool does not exist today, but was located in the creek just before the entrance (by road) to Nielson Park.





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Keith Kinch remembers attending the Picnics as a child in the 1950s:

*We went with Gran and I think we would have caught a bus. Gran would pack a picnic lunch and we'd go early to get a good spot. There were all sorts of sports and games at the Picnic. [There were] events for kids in age groups and also adults – all fun stuff. A big highlight was our free lollies and ice cream. I also remember getting home completely exhausted and sunburnt. We'd swim and join in the games and generally run amuck all day.*

### SIREN OF THE SURF

A major feature of the Railway Picnics from the mid-1940s was the Siren of the Surf competition. The Siren of the Surf was first held in 1944, separate from the Railway Picnic, but was made the main event of the Picnic from 1946 until 1972 when the Railway Picnics came to an end. The event involved groups of girls and women marching, lifesaver-style, in teams along the beach. One woman was judged the Siren of the Surf.

Among the names long associated with the Railway Picnic are George James Child, Cyril Wendt, and Noel Bullpitt. George Child served on the Railway Picnic Committee and organised the Picnics for over 30 years.

According to his daughter Georgina, George always chose the dates for the Picnics in accordance with the moon and

the tides. Cyril Wendt was a Committee member for 46 years from 1926 and it was at his instigation that the Siren of the Surf was added to the Railway Picnic program. Noel Bullpitt was a prominent member of the Bundaberg Surf Life Saving Club and was responsible for organising the Bicentennial Railway Picnic in 1988.

### LAST PICNIC

The Railway Picnics did unfortunately come to an end after 1972. The Committee Secretary at the time, Mr C. R. Klinstrom, was quoted as saying the decision was made due to a lack of interest, lack of finances, and lack of committee members to run the Picnic. The Railway Picnic was revived, as a one-off event, in 1988 for Australia's Bicentenary celebrations.

*Many thanks to John Hampson for sharing information.*

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