

Cedric, Cyril and Myrtle Stallybridge were all born and raised in a bark hut way up the end of our road, on the rim of the escarpment. It was a two-hour walk, barefoot, into the one-teacher school so, as Myrtle said, they didn't get a lot of schooling.

Jennifer Compton

The Stallybridges



Image Melinda Best

'Oh, he was a very good teacher. He was. None of us learned to read or write. But he was a very good teacher.'

None of them learned to drive either. They ignored cars. Myrtle never went far afield, but you'd see Cedric or Cyril walking up the road with a gunny sack slung over their shoulder, turning their face away from the traffic. Such as it was. We offered Cedric a lift once. He turned and looked at us, curiously. He made a decision. He got in the car. But as we set off he called out 'Stop!', and he scrambled out. It was too fast, it was too enclosed, it was too ... something!

Cedric had a horse and cart. He'd jogtrot down the road past us out into the forest to cut wood. The first time I saw him he was ploughing his potato patch with his black horse. But when the old horse died, he was so shocked at the price of a new horse, he gave away growing potatoes. And put together a handcart which he trundled into the laneway next to us, and surreptitiously beavered away at a scribbly bark. Cedric and Cyril and Myrtle had to have wood because they cooked on their kitchen range. Summer and winter, the chimney smoked.

They were surreptitious about everything they did. I think they had learned it was best to keep what you did quiet and then no one would try to stop you doing it. I would be out in the paddock and suddenly get spooked. I would look up and there Cyril would be, lurking in the trees in the laneway. Part of the landscape. When he realised I had seen him, he would startle and blush and fade away through the bush.

None of them ever married. They lived together in the tumbledown cottage. They bought their supplies at the local shop. Myrtle would ask Patsy, the woman who ran the shop back then, to put an iceblock down as a jar of jam on the monthly account Cedric would closely scrutinise. Myrtle would sit on the seat outside the shop, kicking her heels up, licking at her Billabong or Paddlepop. But if she saw anyone coming, she would quickly hide the iceblock behind her back.

Cedric had been to Ginndagong once to buy some boots. But he didn't like it so he never went back again. From time to time someone from a local charity would give them some clothes. But they were loyal to their old favourites. There was a red jersey Cedric particularly liked. He would put it on in March and take it off in September.

I got a relationship going with Myrtle when Alice was born. Myrtle would lurk behind the wisteria trellis and dart out to have a hold of the baby. But one day, as I headed down to the shop, I could see Myrtle waiting for me out on the road. She was waiting to say goodbye. Because she couldn't hold her water any more and they were putting her in a home.

'I just can't hold me water any more. They're putting me into a home.'

She died a couple of months later. Maybe she had just pined away. Even as an old lady you could still see the feral bush kid she had been. She always looked odd in shoes, as if she hadn't properly got the hang of them.

And soon after that, Cyril keeled over out in the backyard.

It was just Cedric left. He looked like a lost soul. His red jersey became more holes than jersey, but he was faithful to it, and now he wore it all year round.

The last time I saw him and his red jersey was at a morning tea at the fire shed. The Women's Auxiliary had put on a beautiful spread. Cedric was sitting as close to the table as he could get. He was holding his hands together tightly. His eyes were darting about greedily at the lamingtons, the scones with jam and cream. Everyone else was helping themselves, but he wouldn't take anything. It was as if he would get a ruler over his knuckles if he reached out his hand.

So I picked up the plate of lamingtons and offered him one. His hand darted out like a snake's tongue. Coconut all down the front of his red jersey and a big brown smudge of cocoa on his face. I wish I had offered him another plate of goodies. I wish I had said, 'Take two, Cedric. And get the ladies to wrap some up for you to take home.' Because the next thing we heard was that the ambulance came to get him, and he never came home again. I think it was cancer. He had been white-anted.

So. Now there are no more Stallybridges in the town. That part of the town's history is over. Cedric, Cyril and Myrtle. All gone.

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