

“Life, Love and Lanes”

Let me ask you a question. When you walk around the township of Wyong and see the signage of the street names, do you ever ask the question; “Who are these people after whom the streets are named”? Don’t bother to answer because I know the statistical answer is 99.9% “No”!

So let me ask you another question. When it comes to “Love Lanes”, would you like to know a little of the stories that got them being called, what they are? Those that said “No”, stop reading now. Those who said “Yes”, well I’ve got a few stories that may help you appreciate your town just that little bit more. As with all subjects, the more we know about them, the greater the level of our appreciation and surely, Wyong is a town to be appreciated.

I didn’t arrive in Wyong until 1947, which was sixty years after what is generally recognised as the year that Wyong began (1887). So much had taken place before my arrival and some of the long-established residents could tell you stories about which I haven’t got a clue. Fortunately, two of my lifelong friends, George Katsoolis and Max Levenspiel have given me information that bring the stories of Love Lanes to “life”.

Let’s start with Peter’s Lane which runs parallel to the Pacific Highway (originally called Railway St.) from Baker’s Lane to Church St. Well, that’s how it is now but it wasn’t always that way. Prior to 1947, Erina Shire was the local governing body for Wyong. In that year the Central Coast was divided into Gosford Shire and Wyong Shire. The new Wyong Council set about making some changes in the town, one of which was to have a clear passage between Baker’s Lane and Church St. This required the removal of a number of sheds from behind shops that faced the Pacific Highway, where some of the properties extended across what is now Peter’s Lane.

Peter Katsoolis came to Wyong in 1917 and had established a Milk Bar Café facing Railway St. His venture was so successful, that over time he was able to purchase a series of adjoining shops. When Council approached him regarding the removal of the sheds, he generously donated the land to Wyong Shire and so fittingly, the lane became known as Peter’s Lane.

George told me that one of the sheds behind what is now the Pawn Broker Shop (it’s still there), was converted into a billiard room with a special concrete floor for the billiard table but also had a piano that young Irene Baker (everyone called her Rene) used to play as accompaniment for her mother who sang to entertain parties held at that establishment. Mrs. Baker was called ‘Dick’ Baker because people said she sounded like a ‘dickybird’. (Just what that sounds like I’m not sure but I’m assuming a high trilling voice).

The building at the southern end of the lane (“Always was Always Will Be”) was the first picture theatre where Rene also played to accompany the ‘silent movies’ of those times. She was a very accomplished musician and would have to improvise the style of music to fit the action or atmosphere of the movie.

Now the story takes another twist. Baker's Lane was named after Gersh Baker who was the town and district dentist. Besides running an essential business, Gersh was very involved in promoting sport, especially football, cricket and golf and as a result of his contributions, following his death in 1947, the Council named Baker Park in his honour. As a young man he played all the local sports but his son Micky, who developed a close friendship with Don Bradman, was arguably the best batsman the district has ever produced, while his wife 'Dick', was the local Ladies Golf Champion for many years. Quite a sporting family.

Now we link Robley's Lane to Baker's Lane. A young man called Phil Levenspiel, came to Wyong in 1932 as the manager of Chapman's Garage, which was situated on the southern corner of Robley Lane and the Pacific Highway. Chapman's had a small garage to service their fleet delivery trucks and vehicles. Phil found lodgings in building just above Peter's Lane. Each morning as he made his way to work, he would go via Baker's Lane on his way to the garage. To do so he passed by Gersh Baker's surgery. The surgery was on the bottom floor and the family lived on the second floor above it.

It's amazing how love finds a 'way', for Rene Baker was able to observe Phil's movements and position herself on the landing or at a window so she could say, "Good morning" to the good-looking young man passing by. Rene was not just accomplished in playing music but also in 'making things happen' and happen they did, for the couple were married in 1935. Phil didn't need a lot of encouragement as Rene was one of the most beautiful girls in town. Following negotiations, Phil was able to purchase the garage in Robley Lane from Chapman's and established the first "Wyong Motors". However, the site proved to be too small, and he moved to establish a larger operation on the corner of Anzac Ave. and the Pacific Highway, where he started the first Holden Dealership in town.

Back to Robley Lane. John Robley was a builder and entrepreneur and obviously liked people to enjoy 'a drink'. He built The Royal Hotel in 1889. This was demolished in 1919 for the current building. Then he built The Commercial Hotel on the corner of Robley Lane and the Pacific Highway. This was removed in 1912 and repositioned in Hely St where it still exists today as a childcare centre next to the Police Station. The Commercial Hotel was replaced by the current Grand Hotel.

There are other lanes in the town. Plaza Lane is really an extension of Robley's Lane and got its name when Wyong Plaza was built in the 1960s. Hardware Lane behind Aldi, got its name from Wyong Hardware and Building Supplies also of that era. Pauline Lane runs between Anzac Ave. and North Road next to The Art House. All these lanes and streets have stories to tell. Buildings and businesses have come and gone, tens of thousands of feet have crossed their surfaces, acts of good and evil have occurred and all the human emotions have been played out during their existence. But that's history.

The Love Lane celebration of 2025 is also part of that history. May it be a celebration of joy and thanksgiving for the builders of the past, on whose shoulders we stand, and the builders of the present, who encourage us by their efforts and example of making Wyong a place to be enjoyed, celebrated and appreciated.