

April 6, 2023

Stories from the Field

We celebrate Land Surveyors United's 16th anniversary with a couple of stories from their website.

Dingoes and Tall Tales

Dingo is a small town located just across the railway line from the Capricorn Highway in a remote area of Queensland, Australia. The origin of the town's name is shrouded in mystery. Some say a railway surveyor saw a dingo on the creek bank and gave the town its name. Others claim that Moses Wafer, an early pioneer, heard dingoes howling at night and named the town.

Whatever the genesis of the name, a bronze statue of a dingo stands in the town commemorating the name. This little town sits on two major highways that service the beef, mining, and coal industries. Up to 1,000 industrial vehicles pass through in one day, and it's not unusual to see 10 triple road trains outside the roadhouse.

Perhaps Dingo is most famous for hosting the annual World Championship Dingo Trap Throwing and Picnic Races each July. There is accommodation at the Dingo Roadhouse and any information you could possibly need about Dingo, just ask at the 24-hour service station on the Capricorn Highway. If you think Dingo is a sleepy little hollow now, you should have seen it in the mid 1960s, where my story begins.

Early in my career I was asked to do a circuit of surveys by the Main Roads Department, which brought us to Dingo to survey on the Fitzroy Developmental Road about 5 kilometers out of town. We were towing a new caravan proudly designed by my master surveyor and custom built in Brisbane. It had all the bells and whistles one could ask for—as caravans go—and a short wheel-base Toyota Landcruiser to tow it.

My cadet/chainman and I had setup camp on the far side of a picturesque creek from the Fitzroy Developmental Road and contently did our work. One afternoon we could see those tell-tale storm clouds rolling in, so we put down our tools to move the caravan back to the roadside of the creek as a precaution. Before we did so, a truck leaving Dingo blew by in a heap and blew his horn to say “G’day” to us, as they do in the bush.

Well, the storm hit just as we got across the creek and parked the caravan into the wind. We could see the hatch on the top being forced open by the wind, so we jumped inside the caravan and literally hung on the hatch to force it shut.

Suddenly the wind changed direction and the caravan started to rock. Over it went with us inside. Flour, eggs, food, plates from the storage above came flying down, and as luck would have it the caravan door was under us. What a mess. We had to break the back window to get out. After the storm, the same truck passed by in the other direction headed back toward Dingo. He said “G’day” with his horn again.

With great effort, we righted the caravan, but both inside and out were severely damage. How could we tell the master surveyor who had spent so much time on his “masterpiece” that it was towable, but that was about all that could be said for it. We waited a couple of days till the floods abated and the creeks along the road to Dingo had gone down before we braved our return to town to phone the boss.

Back in town we tried to dig up some courage at the local pub to tell the boss what had happened. We told our story about riding out the storm to anyone in the pub who would listen when the guy beside me opened up the local newspaper and showed me a story how the storm had blown the surveyors' caravan from one side of the creek to the other and flipped it over—as told by the truck driver.

The boss never saw the funny side of things.

– Nick de Weger



My Days of Mischievous Youth

I started spending all my summers about age 8 working with dad's survey crews in Central North Carolina. I loved it. I vividly remember my first day in the field. We were on an asphalt road somewhere between Smithfield and Clayton, and my job was just to carry stuff.

Dad and his crew measured down a road, set a point, and started cutting line. I asked what we were doing, and dad said. "We are going to build a road." Now, as an 8-year-old, I thought this was almost as cool as the new TV show "Lost in Space." So, here we went through the woods.

Later in the day, we crossed some railroad tracks a few hundred feet from a small crossing. A few seconds later the bell went off and the crossing gate lowered. I started freaking out and yelling for them to hurry and pull the chain (remember those?) across because a train was coming. Dad's old

helper, Felton, calmly told me, “Timmie, you ain’t got to worry,” he said in his slow Carolina draw. “When you lay any chain across them tracks close to a crossing, the gates will come down.”

Well that old man shouldn’t never have told me that. I was cheap labor and loved to help the crews, and I had carte blanche access to the workshop where the old chains were kept for repairs.

The next Saturday morning I rounded up my best friend, Jimmy, and we nabbed a section of chain about six feet long from the workshop. We tied a good cord to it and got on our bikes and rode to the edge of town.

My grandma lived right by the tracks at one of the two crossings in our little town of 900 people. We hid in the ditch a few hundred feet from the one that crossed the busiest street and anytime a car would approach I’d pull the cord until chain lay across both tracks. The lights and bell would go off and the crossing gate would lower. We’d make cars wait until the drivers got mad and started turning around. Then we’d pull it on across and the gate would go up. To a couple of mischievous kids, it was a hilarious way to spend a Saturday morning. We did it at least 20 times.

Then I saw my great uncle, the town constable, coming. We ran, crawled, and clamored thru that muddy ditch like Marines for a couple of hundred yards then took off thru some woods before doubling back for our bikes. It was one of the few times I ever got away with anything. I don’t know what happened to old Felton, but I still thank him for that little bit of knowledge.

– Timothy Blackmon

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ISSN 2373-7018 (print), ISSN 2373-7735 (online).
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