

Profile

I worked around the district on different blocks and was put off when the owner's kids took over or the block was sold off

MERBEIN and Ray Slade virtually grew up together.

As the oldest living resident, 99-year-old Ray cut the cake at the town's centenary celebrations at the weekend and in five months, he'll celebrate his own.

Bright as a button, Ray remembers his primary school days when the kids "dlobbered" on him for shooting them with his water pistol.

"I was a naughty boy at school and the headmaster put me over his knee and whacked the dust out of my pants," the talkative and recently retired man from Merbein said.

"I started work when I was 14 years and three weeks old and finished when I was 96."

Throughout his very long life, Ray has had many jobs.

"You took whatever job that came along."

Ray was born in Creswick, near Ballarat, in January 1910 and first came to Mildura as a 16-year-old.

"We got a train at quarter to nine at night from Creswick and when we got to Maryborough, we changed trains, arrived in Mildura and changed trains again and got to Merbein at 11 o'clock the next morning."

"I stayed around Merbein picking grapes for about six weeks and then went back home and worked 'down south' trapping rabbits - anything for a living."

'I didn't have a bike, I was too poor for that, I used to walk anything up to eight mile (12 kms) and then back home again every day'

"I later had a few jobs on the railways with the relief gangs."

"I got promoted to spiking and driving and got eight pence a day more than the ordinary labourer," he smiled.

"I used to go shearing with my father - five pence a sheep and digging spuds for sixpence a big bag."

"I didn't have a bike, I was too poor for that, I used to walk anything up to eight mile (12 kms) and then back home again every day."

"Six o'clock in the morning till eight o'clock at night for 10 pence (less than 10 cents) an hour - and we thought we were being well paid," he said.

Ray kept returning to Merbein at picking time for the next few years and also worked at digging drains at Coomealla.

"I got 21 shillings (\$2.10) for every 22 yards - the length of a cricket pitch (about 20 metres) - I dug, to a depth of two metres. It was pretty hard going."

"I met Gladys Keen and married her in June 1931 - we had two sons, Frank and Noel ('Hurtle') and three daughters, Margaret, Helen and Merte."

"We lost one daughter, Beverly, at nine months to a diphtheria epidemic which claimed a lot of young lives at that time."

"Polio was also rife at the time and I remember a mother and father returning home after a night out to find their son lying on the floor, unable to get up."

The concerned parents rushed him to hospital where they found he had both legs in the one leg of his pants.

"There were another couple of kids put into hospital with suspected polio, but it turned out they had drunk their father's bottle of wine," he laughed.

"In 1936 I saw the first lot of



BRIGHT: Five months off 100 years old Ray Slade is looking forward to his big party.

Ray, Merbein go way back

He's ready for his own centenary bash

ground getting ploughed out at Trentham Cliffs, two Italians started that district off.

"In those days there were about 36 trucks on the road carting wood for the pumps and the powerhouse - there were a string of them on the road all the time."

"I moved to Mildura with my wife and our first two kids in 1937 and I got a job working on the deep drainage at Coomealla."

"We were driven out to the site in the back of the work truck every day and back to Mildura at the end of our 14-hour day."

"We shifted to Merbein after six months and raised our family there. "I worked around the district on different blocks and was put off when the owner's kids took over or the block was sold off."

I worked at Yelta for a few years for Col Smith - he was a good boss. "I tossed it in when I was 70 and then went casual until I was 96.

"I could get a job anywhere - I used to run the picking for two years

for Col and picked up grape, apricot and peach picking with Ern Hillier at Wentworth Road.

"He was a real good bloke to work for - you couldn't get any better."

"I took crook when I was 96 - I had a cancer in my stomach."

"I went to Adelaide and had all the 'big nobs' around the bedside urging me to have the operation."

'I decided to take my daughter's advice and shift into Chaffey Aged Care in Merbein'

"I decided to say yes and had the operation in June 2007."

"I was given a 50/50 chance and I'm still here."

"I was crook for a while though, at times I wished it had gone the other way."

"They took my stomach out and

replaced it with a little one.

"They were after the record - the oldest person to have that major operation and survive."

"I came back home and thought I could carry on my hatching again."

"I'd been on my own for 18 years, but the family took it in turns to keep me for a couple of weeks each when I came home from hospital."

"But they had their own things to do and I decided to take my daughter's advice and shift into Chaffey Aged Care in Merbein."

"It was a good move - the relatives come to visit me."

"They travel from Stawell and Ballarat - one bloke visited me from Tasmania the other week."

Ray has 58 descendants, seven in the fifth generation, some in Perth, Queensland and Tasmania.

"I've got 'em everywhere," he said.

"Four have died over the years - my wife Gladys, daughter Margaret, son Frank and daughter Beverly."

"We used to live in the bush when

we were kids and there were all sorts of things you could eat.

"Cranberries, cherries, yams and the gum from the wattle tree was our 'sweet'."

"We started smoking when we were about eight years old - we used to cash in 12 empty beer bottles and get sixpence (5 cents) for them - just enough for a small packet of 12 cigarettes."

"Stringybark or pine needles rolled in newspaper were our cigarettes when we didn't have any money."

"I saw no future in smoking when I was 15 - I somehow woke up."

"I made a promise to my mother that I would never drink and apart from a bit of stout in the bottom of

'Not smoking or drinking could have had a bit to do with my long life'

a glass at one time under doctor's orders, I have never had a drink."

"Not smoking or drinking could have had a bit to do with my long life," Ray said.

Ray was the oldest bowler in the Merbein and Wentworth district having started playing when he was 82 and finishing when he was 96.

"I played with the veterans and beat a lot of them too," he said.

"My team captain let me do what I liked when I played," he smiled.

Ray looked around the large dining room at the Chaffey Aged Care and told me this was the venue for the big lunchtime party.

"I don't know how many will be here, but I'm expecting a big crowd," he beamed.

"After I turn 100, I'll take what comes."

"If I live longer, it's a bonus."