MY TOWN

Macksville

Halfway between Sydney and Brisbane – and just down the road from Slim Dusty's pub with no beer – this NSW river town was once infamous for its traffic jams. But a highway bypass has put an end to that and now the place is really getting into gear, as the locals tell **Susan Horsburgh**. Photography by Jade McDonald.



TRACTOR COLLECTOR

John South

"I've been in Macksville since 1967. It's nice to come home because it's usually green here and the town itself is neater than a lot of others. You could say that life on the land is hard but there's no way I could live right in town – I can see my neighbours here and that's too close, really.

I've been in the machinery game all my life – I was a plant mechanic for many years. Now I'm the president of the Mid North Coast Machinery Restoration Club, which runs The Rusty Iron Rally and has well over 200 members. I enjoy doing the commentary for the rally. I just do it off the cuff but I've got a bit of knowledge – and if I don't know something, I'll make it up.

The rally has been going for 23 years. It's for vintage machinery – engines, motorbikes, cars, tractors – plus we do some novelty events. We have a tractor race where the slowest one wins. For another event, we put a bucket over a driver's head and they've got to travel in an arc to a given point; whoever drives the shortest distance to get there is the winner. We also do a 'cranky handle race' where drivers have to run to a tractor, start it with a crank handle and then drive up to the finishing line. Some tractors start easy, some don't – and that can be quite fun.

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We always hold the rally on Father's Day weekend. Last time we filled the Macksville Showground arena with cars, tractors and trucks – there was no room left. We usually have more paying spectators than the Macksville Show; we'll get close to 5000 people on the ground in one day.

I've also got a museum on my property, Southy's Olde Tractors. I just got into collecting tractors and now I've got about 50. I spent nearly $50,000 on one but they start at $200. My oldest is from 1925 and they go up to 1970. I've got a German O&K that's one of only three left in the world. The museum occasionally has visitors. We go through the tractors, talk about them and have a cup of tea as well."





HISTORIAN

Joy Lane

"The Nambucca Valley is a forgotten area. It's beautiful but no-one knows about it. I don't know why. I grew up on a dairy farm at Utungun, 12 kilometres west of Macksville, and worked interstate for many years as a recreation officer, customer service manager and in the nursery industry. I came back in 1995 and bought a hobby farm at Taylors Arm, about 30 kilometres from Macksville. But even when I was away, this area was always home.

We were never taught local history at school but that's what I find most interesting: the strings that tie people together. Once you get involved in history, you can't get out of it – you've got to keep going. Now I'm secretary of Mary Boulton's Pioneer Cottage & Museum in Macksville.

About 20 years ago, I wrote a book called *A Taste of the Nambucca*. The front looks at what Aboriginal people used to eat here and then goes into the dairy industry, beef cattle, bananas and vegetables. The rear has all the old recipes – people used to eat a lot of wild duck and wallaby.

Now I'm writing one about the early hotels, wine saloons and sly grog, called *Raise a Glass to the Nambucca Valley*. There was a sly grog dealer in the 1800s who'd hollow out a pumpkin, fill it with young corn then replace the top and leave it to ferment in the sun. Apparently that was a fierce drop.

The Cosmopolitan at Taylors Arm got its licence in 1903 but it's now known as The Pub with No Beer because it inspired the Slim Dusty song. I don't know whether it ever ran out of beer – some say it did, others say it didn't. The Star Hotel in Macksville was built in 1885 and it's still going. It's the oldest two-storey licensed hotel of timber construction on the north coast. It's right by the river and the view from the upstairs verandah is just fantastic.

The cricketer Phillip Hughes used to go there. He was a lovely young man. When he died in 2014, it stopped the town. A local truck business put up three concrete piles in the main street to signify a wicket. Macksville is a beautiful place."



SHOPKEEPER

Marguerite Langham

"As a young girl, I used to compete in rodeo events – campdrafting and barrel racing – and that's how I met my husband, Graham. He was a bull rider. I grew up on a dairy farm in Kempsey, one of six children, and Graham and I decided to settle in the Nambucca Valley because it was close to family. Plus, it has a beautiful climate – it doesn't get too hot or too cold. We live on a cattle farm in Macksville.

After high school, I worked in a department store in Kempsey then moved on to another store called Fossey's. I now have a little variety store called Megasave Bargains. Macksville is only a small town so we sell all the bits and bobs: giftware, pet goods, stationery – a bit of everything for everyone in town.

If there's an occasion, say Christmas or Easter, I decorate the streets. I run tinsel around the poles and put up balloons and streamers. I do it the week before Father's Day and Mother's Day, too; sometimes I just throw them up for the hell of it. I sneak out and do it early in the morning. It creates a bit of atmosphere and if someone drives into town, they might pull up if they think something is going on.

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I sweep the streets as well. I get a bit carried away but it just encourages everybody to try to stay tidy. I don't know how to relax, really. I love working.

A few weeks ago, I left my iPad at home and had to go back to get it. Then when I got there, my cow was out in the paddock having trouble calving. I put the farm clothes on, tied some ropes around the little calf's feet and delivered it – it was nearly 50 kilos. I went inside, had a quick shower and then went back to work. So I was meant to leave my iPad at home that day.

I try to exercise every day. This morning I was up at 5am and did a 10-kilometre bike ride. I go for a walk on alternate days; my favourite is the beach track at Nambucca Heads. We have a gorgeous river in Macksville and lovely hills behind us, plus it's only 15 minutes' drive to the beach."

ROTARIAN

Rod Edwards

"I was born in Bowraville, about 15 kilometres up the river. I studied electrical engineering in Sydney and worked interstate before retiring to Macksville in 2011. It feels good to be home. You appreciate the weather and how beautiful it is but it's more than that. My grandmother's grandfather was the first person to sail a ship into the Nambucca River, in 1860, so I have a connection to the place because my family has been here for generations.

I'm involved in a town revitalisation project through the Rotary club. We're converting a neglected laneway into an outdoor gallery. Now that we have the highway bypass, the community is keen to see some traffic come in. Macksville is halfway between Sydney and Brisbane so it's a convenient spot to take a break.

The murals are all by local artists who've volunteered their time. The original one [below] is in the style of Reg Mombassa – very colourful, almost cartoonish. There's another fantastic one by a young Indigenous woman who's a bit more like a graffiti artist. One will be a tribute to Phillip Hughes. He was proud of the town and it was always, 'Phillip Hughes from Macksville', no doubt about that.

We're also busy planning the inaugural Macksville Music Muster [27-31 March]. Vanessa Sanger, a big-time country-music performer, suggested it. We've still got to work out how we're going to accommodate up to 350 caravans at the showgrounds so that's a bit of a job. The money we raise will go to a program called ValleyCat for kids starting school with unresolved developmental issues. Some of them can't speak so they're socially isolated – the poor little buggers, it's terrible for them. It's a very important project.

I don't know what you do if you retire and you don't do this sort of thing. You've got to keep busy. I say to people, 'I haven't stopped working; I've just stopped getting paid.'"





BOTTLE-SHOP MANAGER

Butch Laverty

"I'm fourth-generation Macksville. My real name's Kenneth but my dad had four brothers and five sisters and they didn't like Kenneth so when I was about 18 months old they called me 'Butch'. Some people who've known me all my life don't know that my name is Ken.

After high school, I did an apprenticeship as a butcher but starting at 4am and making sausages after being on the drink the night before got a bit hard. So in 1973 I began working at The Nambucca Hotel. I've been there ever since.

I've run the bottle shop here for about 25 years. You meet different people every day. Early on, when I was behind the bar, you had to be sort of a counsellor because you'd get all the blokes coming in saying they'd broken up with their wife and you'd be sitting there of a night talking to them. Now I mainly serve the old girls. They like to come in and have a chat. Some have lost their husbands and I've known them for a long time. The hotel is doing a major revamp – it's going to look Mickey Mouse, I can tell you.

I've been patrolling the beach for the Macksville Scotts Head Surf Life Saving Club for 51 years. Years ago, when one of my mates lost his eight-year-old son, he was down and depressed so I said, 'Mate, what say we get a boat crew together?' We started rowing in the masters competition in 1996. I had new knees put in three years ago and nine months later, we won the surfboat rowing at the Australian Surf Life Saving Championships on the Gold Coast. Everyone said to me, 'Mate, you're mental.'

I live right on the river. There's a lot of waterskiing, a bit of sailing, kayaks and canoes. Everyone said the town would die when the highway bypass opened but it hasn't – it's growing. You put a house on the market today and it's gone tomorrow. Everything seems to be just kicking on."

NATUROPATH, HAIRDRESSER AND AUTHOR

Tamara McWilliam

"My mum, sister and I have been business partners for 15 years. We own a store on the main street called Elk on 38, where we run a hairdressing salon, naturopath clinic, DVD rental store and tapas bar. We've always been a bit quirky in Macksville. I do a full day of naturopathy, a day of hair and then spend the rest of the time in the tapas bar and coffee shop area. I get to catch up with people I haven't seen for a while and I like the creative side of hairdressing. I know everyone in town – I've been here since I was three.

A few years ago, I thought I'd do something totally off the wall and write a romance book. I didn't expect to sell it. I printed out a copy so the family could read it and it ended up going berserk. That's the beauty of a small town: one person heard about it and told their friends, who told their friends. Then everyone was like, 'When's the second book coming?' So within 18 months, I wrote the five-book *Willow Tree* series. I was doing all my own covers and I still do.

One of my books, *Beneath the Snow of Gnojnik*, is about a local couple – I went to school with their grandkids. That was picked up by an English company, Olympia Publishers, and came out last August. But I self-published it here first, in 2017, and launched it at the military museum in Bowraville. More than 100 people from our valley came.

I market my books on social media and I've sold more than 3000. My writing is very gritty, very realistic – it's not flowers-and-rainbows romance – and I wouldn't let my two kids read it. Now I'm up to the third book in a mafia-type series.

Macksville is becoming a bit more of a boutique-y town – since the bypass, we've become a lot more modern – so we decided it needed a tapas bar. I know so many people here that it's almost like a big family network; they're very supportive so trying new things isn't hard. If I walk from my shop to the post office, I get stopped about 50 times. Macksville has always had that community spirit. I think we've got a hidden treasure here." ●



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