

## **THE BIRTH OF THE ISOLATED CHILDREN'S PARENTS' ASSOCIATION**

The 1950's are recorded as some of the wettest years in rural Queensland. However the end of December 1956 was the last monsoon to cross over the border in New South Wales. This was the beginning of a period when there was a dearth of rain and drought grew across Queensland and by the beginning of the 1970's it had engulfed all of Australia. At the same time rural incomes had fallen from an astronomical high to such a diminished level that it caused families with properties to change to a solely family operated business. This caused an exodus of working families from the bush and in most areas halved the population of rural towns.

Hand in hand with the economic disaster came the fact that the Student Hostel in Bourke, NSW was a building that had been condemned as "unfit for humans" and needed financial assistance to remain open. A group of graziers led by Pat Edgley and Bob Ridge held meetings and visited State politicians to have the Burke Hostel rebuilt, or another form of assistance for the children to gain access to an education. On the 16<sup>th</sup> April 1971 they formed a lobby group, calling themselves the ICPA. They were supported on National Rural ABC Radio by Colin Munro, June Barton and Alex Nichol. The messages that started coming through the airwaves, was that the educational opportunities of the student in rural Australia was suffering and their access to a continuing education had diminished considerably.

The United Graziers Association in Cunnamulla asked Bob Ridge to attend a meeting and talk about the Bourke Hostel situation, their Isolated Children's problems and outline what was envisaged by the people of Bourke. Bob was keen racing man and this meeting coincided with a race day at his hometown of Engonnia. Bob had not missed a race day since he was in short pants; but he went to Cunnamulla, such was the need. This resulted in the first ICPA Branch to be formed in Queensland, seeking educational opportunities for the "kids in the bush," on the 28<sup>th</sup> August 1971.

Tony Gall lived near Dirranbandi and his friend Geoff Arthur had been at the Cunnamulla meeting, so he was invited to come to Dirranbandi and address a public meeting in September 1971. This meeting was attended by residents from Bollon and St. George and resulted in ICPA Branches being formed in these towns in September 1971 followed by Blackall and Langlo Crossing in October 1971.

The Bourke people were heartened by the interest shown around Australia and envisaged a National organization. The NSW State Government had not been interested in their proposal but a subsequent trip by a delegation to the Federal Government in Canberra engendered some hope. A meeting organised in Bourke on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1971 was attended by delegates from Branches in NSW and Queensland, and the National ICPA became a reality. The formation of this body led to Branches mushrooming around Australia.

The people from Queensland attending this meeting discussed the possibility of forming a Queensland State organization as education is a State Government obligation. Due to the persistence of Mac Patterson from Langlo Crossing, a meeting of Queensland Branches was held in Charleville on the 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1971 – Melbourne Cup day. The meeting was attended by 10 people, representing the Langlo Crossing, Blackall, Cunnamulla, Morven, Dirranbandi and Bollon Branches. Bunny Powne had been elected Vice- President of the Federal ICPA in Bourke and he was elected Queensland President, with Tony Gall as Secretary and Geoff Arthur on the inaugural committee.

At the Federal ICPA meeting in Bourke, following the listing of nine educational needs of children living in isolated regions, the most important motion passed: "That Branches of ICPA in Australia wishing to join Federal ICPA endorse these objectives, and further, that no more will be added, until major benefits had been achieved on the listed requests." This had the effect of having ICPA Branches and Members across Australia speak with a unified voice. This was a major factor in speaking with the Education Departments and Politicians living in Canberra, or while they were in their own electorate.

The Bourke meeting was also very clear in its Policy that children from isolated regions should only receive sufficient assistance that enabled them to gain access to an education, comparable to that delivered to children in the City.

*[With thanks to: Bunny Powne MBE, inaugural President of ICPA Qld, inaugural Vice-President of ICPA Australia, and Life Member of ICPA Aust Inc, ICPA Qld Inc and Bollon Branch ICPA].*

Today, 50 years later, while the aim of ICPA remains the same, the objectives have changed as they have been achieved and to keep pace with the growing world of information, communication and technology. The areas of education that it now covers are broad and diverse. The future of our children is almost intangible, the choice of careers seemingly endless and education today so much more than the three R's. Therefore, it is more important than ever before that ICPA works to maintain the equality of access to education for all rural and remote students.