



NSW DEPARTMENT OF
PRIMARY INDUSTRIES

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The metropolitan areas thus have a large 'voice'. Rural regions have often felt the 'poor relation' and over time, smaller and more remote inland centres in particular, have struggled to retain their populations.

With the rationalisation of employment opportunities out of rural areas into the regional centre resulting in a pull of people out of rural areas, the ability of the rural community to retain and attract residents and future investment is impaired. As services are withdrawn from rural areas, the quality of life, measured in terms of access to essential and higher value goods and services, declines (Collits, 2000).

One of the key challenges for communities battling out-migration is to achieve critical mass in order to attract investment and retain services.

The greater the remoteness, the greater the challenges – communications are often unreliable and expensive, fuel costs are high, fresh food is harder to find and expensive, and locally available health services are non-existent, minimal and often under-staffed. Homes can be expensive to build and maintain, roads are poor and young children may have to leave home or rely on the School of The Air and their own parents' close involvement for education (Rural Health, 2005).

Salt (2006) estimates that 1000 people leaving a country town extract \$7 million in retail turnover from that community.

It should however also be noted that size and remoteness is not necessarily a negative feature for all country towns. Some smaller centres such as Gulargambone have developed their own 'strengths' because of their distance from larger centres, and other villages such as Millthorpe have benefited from being closer to a larger centre such as Orange.

...the problem of 'small towns' is really a problem for certain types of regions, not necessarily related to size alone. (Collits, 2000).

GROWTH ON THE COAST

About 86% of Australians live in cities or within 80 kilometres of the coast (Walquist, 2003). Coastal regions, such as Northern Rivers, the Mid North Coast, the Central Coast and the Illawarra, have experienced substantial population growth, based largely on lifestyle choices, tourism and retirement. Many coastal regions must now deal with the competing needs of development and fragile ecologies. Salt (2006) believes this third, distinct, rapidly growing coastal demographic group can't be ignored and that they have little or no allegiance to the city or the bush.

GROWTH OF SOME INLAND TOWNS

Despite the coastal and urban magnetism, Salt (2006) and Collits, (2000) identified a number of inland smaller centres performing strongly against the general trends, particularly if located on major transport routes or have other attractors. Echuca on the Murray in Victoria is one of Australia's fastest growing inland towns. It has golfing, fishing, wine grape growing and manufacturing which attracts people.

Most growth occurred in larger regional centres or due to the opening of new mines or other events specific to the area concerned. (Collits, 2000).



*Abi Spehr, South Australia
2007 RIRDC Australian Rural Women's Award Runner-up*

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY & COMMUNICATIONS:

Internet use by Australian farmers is among the highest in the world despite poor access and line speeds in many areas. Farmers increasingly use the Internet for business purposes, information gathering and electronic commerce. (Rin & Groves, 1999).

With telephone service delays up to three working days and possibly five days over a weekend, we are left without any means of communication at all. The area concerned affects people living on farms, and most are at least 50 km to 150 km from their nearest medical help. (HEROC, 1999 p.17)

GROWTH OF 'SPONGE' CITIES

Improved transport has facilitated 'out-shopping' and growth of what Salt (2006) terms 'sponge cities'. Over the last 20 years these larger regional service centres have continued to grow. Their economies have been able to diversify. They have become transport hubs and provide better infrastructure and access to increasingly diverse shopping and services. Regional centres such as Dubbo have grown since 1976 and no longer rely primarily on farming.

While Dubbo has expanded, some villages on the fringe such as Brocklehurst have benefited from being in the 'commuter zone'. However, every Local Government area around Dubbo (Lachlan, Bogan, Warren, Gilgandra, Coonabarabran, Coolah and Wellington shires) have all experienced population loss (and in particular the younger people have left).

The decline of country towns in the 1990s proved to be one of the most important social phenomena of that decade. In fact, smaller Australian country towns (with populations under 2000) have been in trouble since the coming of mass car ownership in the 1950s and 1960s. With the rise of supermarket chains and the rationalisation of banks – most marked in the 1980s and 1990s – many medium sized regional centres (4000 to 10 000+) have grown at the expense of smaller towns (Beeton, 2000).

DECLINE IN 'REAL' FARMING INCOMES AND DIMINISHING LINKS BETWEEN FARMERS AND TOWNS

Australian farmers are among the most efficient (and least protected) in the world. Rural communities can no longer rely on the farm sector for their economic wellbeing, and the former strong symbiotic relationships have declined. Agriculture now contributes proportionately far less to the state's economic output. Farms are becoming fewer and bigger and increasingly mechanised, leading to less jobs. Other factors such as drought, inconsistent and declining commodity prices, increased farm debt and a general decline in agricultural profitability for many, has impacted on communities who are required to 'adjust' to these forces (Collits, 2000).

Declining terms of trade (price received over price paid) means that to remain efficient, farmers need to expand the land they farm and/or farm more intensely. This also means more capital (ie. machines), and intensive production over time (ie. bigger tractors wider ploughs etc.). This results in fewer farmers per hectare, while production per hectare increases over time. This also means that there are fewer families relying on their local town infrastructure, which, combined with better vehicles, facilitates families shopping in the cheaper 'sponge cities' rather than their local town.

A 1999 study by the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics (ABARE) showed:

- agricultural industries have faced a long-term decline in the margin between real farm receipts and real farm costs, a common feature of resource based industries world wide;
- between 1955–56 and 1998–99, the volume of farm production rose by 187%, and the real gross value of farm

production rose by 25%, with falling real prices for farm product;

- with rising costs, the net farm value of farm production fell by around 54% in real terms, with a decline in the number of commercial farms of 1.3% or 2000 farms per year; and
- many small farms were sold and amalgamated with other farms.

DROUGHT

The current drought has exacerbated the decline of many rural communities with the most profound impacts hitting those living in smaller rural centres and remote areas. Stehlik (2003) refers to research of QLD and NSW farm families' experiences during the drought of the 1990s. The impact of policies, a lack of a consistent profile in the media and a feeling of abandonment by the city of rural Australia has made coping with this current drought much more complex. The research concluded:

- that families are the first line of defence against the hardship of drought [often both husband and wife (and children) are involved in moving, feeding and watering stock on a daily basis];
- men and women experience drought differently [women often were the 'buffers' and were more likely to discuss their own and their husband's stress levels, while men played these down]; and
- their communities should not be taken for granted by broader society. [Especially by city people for whom drought meant perhaps not watering the garden or washing the car regularly].

It also found that the majority of producers do:

- strive for self-reliance;
- manage risk;
- try to plan and operate sustainably;
- have an environmental consciousness; and
- undertake 'whole-of-farm' strategic planning (Stehlik, 2003 p.91).

Stehlik (2003) looked at rural people's resilience and ability to bounce back. Strategies for coping with trauma varied across individuals, families and networks. Often farming families relied heavily on spouses and by using friendship and community networks to cope. Others planned for the future to relieve anxiety of the present or sought professional help.

Stehlik (2003) also found that gaining off-farm employment or value adding were often strategies women did (and still do) to supplement lower incomes impacted by drought or declining income. Increasingly farm labouring jobs were being undertaken by family members, with wives often found managing the whole property themselves with little time out.



SERVICES & INFRASTRUCTURE: The greater the remoteness, the greater the challenges – communications are often unreliable and expensive, fuel costs are high, fresh food is harder to find and expensive, and locally available health services are non-existent, minimal and often under-staffed. Homes can be expensive to build and maintain, roads are poor and young children may have to leave home or rely on the School of The Air and their own parents' close involvement for education. (*Rural Health, 2005*)

book reviews

Resilience

By Anne Deveson

Review by
Kirsty White,
Guyra



Anne's study of resilience begins with: 'When I think about resilience, I think about my mother.' When Anne considers her mother and their circumstances when she was 11 years old, she recalls her mother saying, 'It's bad enough being in shit, we don't have to lie down in it as well.'

In writing this book, Anne wanted to better understand why, and how, individuals and communities develop resilience.

Her work is well researched and draws on her experience with mental illness, grief, working with children in refugee camps, motherhood and journalism. The many case studies featured in the book about children in difficult circumstances, families, her son's mental illness, and troubled communities give you a better understanding of the enormous scope of resilience.

I believe Anne's work would be of interest to individuals or groups facing difficult times, providing them with understanding and insight to enable them to keep going when things get tough.

She concludes her book by saying 'resilience is about facing adversity with hope.' I encourage you to remind yourself and others facing adversity that there is always hope.

Allen & Unwin
ISBN 1-86448-634-1
RRP: \$24.95

Bad Hair Days

By Pamela Bone



Pamela Bone was a prominent newspaper journalist and columnist when, in 2004, she was diagnosed with multiple myeloma, a cancer of the bone marrow that can be treated but not cured.

Dry-eyed, but often darkly humorous, *Bad Hair Days* describes a journey many baby boomers make – working and meeting the demands of everyday life, minus hair and under the influence of chemo, while, outside the front door, the world seems to be going to hell in a hand basket.

In Pamela's own words, 'This book is an account of a journey with cancer: two years of my life in which the state of the world at times seemed to be reflecting the state of my health, or – to be less solipsistic – my state of health seemed to be in a similar condition to the world's. It is not an autobiography, though there are elements of that in it. It is not a textbook for cancer sufferers, although there are descriptions of cancer treatments and the various philosophies involved in treating cancer. It is about cancer, war, journalism, chocolate cake and a few other things.'

Melbourne University Publishing
ISBN 0-522-85369-2
RRP: \$32.95

St Jude's

By Gemma Sisia

Review by Kim Deans, Inverell



Growing up on a family farm near Guyra in northern NSW, Gemma decided while at school that she would one day go to work in Africa to help those in need. After training as a teacher she embarked on her first trip to Africa and realised that most children would be lucky to be educated after the age of eight or nine, and that a good education was reserved for the elite. She soon learnt that the best way to make a difference to the greatest number of people in Africa was through education.

Returning from her trip, Gemma was passionate about making a difference. She decided to raise funds to put the sister of one of her African friends through school as her family could not afford to send her and Gemma wanted to give her the opportunity to do something with her life. Gemma began sharing the plight of the African children with many community groups in Australia including Rotary and church groups. Her

story inspired many to donate money to her cause and she was soon able to raise enough money to help many more children attend school.

Gemma later returned to Africa to continue her work in transforming the lives of African children. She has now made Africa her home and is married to Richard, a Tanzanian she met and fell in love with on her first trip to Africa.

Her book tells the amazing story of how she began The School of St Jude (named after the patron saint of hopeless causes) which is funded entirely through sponsors and has grown to over 700 students, achieving one of the best academic records in the country. It is the story of fighting poverty through education and the hope that a good education brings for the future of the children of The School of St Jude. The challenges she has overcome in order to make her dream a reality are a true inspiration. She is an outstanding example of how one person can make a huge difference to the world.

Pan Macmillan Australia
ISBN 978-1-4050-3795-2
RRP: \$32.95

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Recovery and resilience – getting back on my feet

By June Birkett, Crystal Creek

After the terrible sound of tearing metal stopped, I realised that I was trapped by my legs under the wheel of my small Japanese vehicle. I had dropped to near unconsciousness when I heard my doctor's voice, 'I know that woman, let me through.'

On a major highway on the mid-north coast, in full holiday season, a four wheel drive had ploughed into me. One minute I was alright and the next I was fighting for my life – what violence can be seen in the act of torn metal, broken bones and blood.

My doctor, who lived in the area, was returning home when he came across my car. He stayed with me providing medical treatment until the ambulance arrived one hour later and I was taken to the emergency ward at Taree hospital.

For the next few days I was kept under full sedation. I vaguely remember being in a great deal of pain and trying to explain what had happened to a police officer investigating the accident.

When the official medical report came in I was told my neck was broken – I had five spinal breaks in all, with two fractures at the base of my neck. In addition, almost every muscle on my right side was torn from head to toe. I also had numerous cuts and road metal embedded in my face and arms. Worst case scenario I would be a paraplegic or at

least partially paralysed. I wept at the findings delivered so bluntly to me.

A week later I was transferred from the intensive care unit to a general ward. I still couldn't sit up or lay down by myself and life was a struggle. However, I decided from that day onwards that I would set small goals for myself, no matter how small, and pull myself through – no matter what it took.

A few days later I asked the nurse for a pen and some paper and I began writing a letter to a magazine to thank all the wonderful people (including my doctor and the ambulance officers) who helped me while I was lying on the roadside.

As each day passed I grew stronger and as my first grandson arrived, almost a month later, I was finally released from hospital – still a dreadful mess but at least I was going home.

This was probably the most frightening time for me as for the past month I had had everything done for me and now, all of a sudden, I was on my own. My neck and back brace were my constant companion and did not allow me to move about freely and if I tried to bend or lay down my head would spin like a spinning top.

Things seemed to get easier after a while as my strength started to return. I remember my first trip to town after the

accident. It was a terrible affair as I could only cross the road at a snails pace. It brought home to me what elderly people faced every time they went to town.

Simple everyday things like getting in and out of a car had to be well organised now – I had to think things through thoroughly before doing them – how do I fill the jug with one hand or how do I climb those stairs or can I go another way.

After many months I started to get my life back on track and while I have never fully recovered from my ordeal it has made me a much stronger person. I have realised that the most important things in life are a belief in God and the power of prayer and my wonderful family and friends. I encourage each of you to show empathy towards one another as one never knows what another has been through. And while not all of us fully recover from our ordeals we need to keep being resilient and bounce back – it's the only way to keep going in a difficult world. ■

AFRICA CALLS

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- Largest rotary dairy in the Cape
- Olive processing plant and tasting
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- Cape Town

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Contact Tertia Butcher,
Travelscene Hay on Ph: 02 6993 4444

MURRAY DARLING BASIN IRRIGATION MANAGEMENT GRANT

Grants of up to \$20 000 are available to irrigators in the Murray-Darling Basin (MDB) to implement water management strategies that address reduced water allocations and improve on-farm practices to maximise production from the water that is available. More information and application forms are available on the Centrelink website, at Centrelink offices and through your local Rural Services Officers and Rural Financial Counsellors.

Ph: 1800 050 015

www.centrelink.gov.au



THE DICK CONDON SCHOLARSHIP

Aims to assist young people on the land with schooling expenses as they enter Years 11 & 12. To be eligible, the applicant must have a residential address in the Western Division of NSW and submit a 500 word written composition in response to a section of the Dick Condon book, *Out of the West*. A total of \$2,000 (\$1,000 for Year 11 & \$1,000 for Year 12) is available. Applications close 1 February 2008.

Ph: 03 5027 2416

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