

Vince Kinnear

Vince was born in 1930, the youngest son of Sarah Ann Kinnear. His Mother later married Bill (Wilhelm) Kornmann after the tragic death of Vince's father in a rail crossing accident.

He went to school in Tolga. When he left school, Vince became a Lad Porter in Tolga. He was transferred to Goondiwindi, Cairns and Kuranda and spent a long time in Kuranda before being asked to relieve at Chillagoe.

On his way to Chillagoe Vince first saw Pat standing on the platform in Almaden, in a yellow dress with buttons down the front. She had a mailbag over her shoulder. Pat was the Postmistress in Almaden. Vince and Pat married in Atherton on 21st June 1952 and settled into Almaden, where they lived with Grandfather Jack McKeegan, one of the Gangers looking after the lines to Chillagoe and Mt Surprise. Pat already had a son, John McKeegan, having been a single mother. At this time, John was 6 years old, and Vince became his dad.

Vince and Pat had other children - Vince (Junior) born in 1953, Ann 1955 and Brian 1964. While in Almaden, Vince worked with Normie Matthews cutting cord wood for the Ootann Lime Works for about 3 years; then he took over the Post Office.

Vince was very enthusiastic about realigning the Chillagoe road away from Crooked Creek, and he blazed the route with Hilton Graham of Ootann.

In September 1957 he was appointed a JP and later served as local Magistrate at the Chillagoe Court House.

In 1960, the Kinnear family moved to Chillagoe, having bought the Post Office from Charlie Merton. In those days Pat was the Bookkeeper at Jack & Newell's General Store.

In 1964 Vince was appointed a Ranger for the Forestry Department in Chillagoe. While in this position he opened up the Royal Arch and Donna Caves, making pathways and steps so that visitors could access the caves without further damaging them. This was no mean task as all the concrete was hand mixed and carried in buckets by hand from the cave entrance. Vince did all the planning and layout of all these access ways. The caves also had to be gated to prevent unauthorised access. Much work was done in cleaning out accumulated rubbish from the caves and in scrubbing visitors inscriptions from the walls.

When people interested in caves came to Chillagoe they found that Vince was an excellent guide. Expeditions made by the Sydney Speleos in the early 1960s became involved with Vince and lifelong friendships were made. Grace Matts remembers having a few beers with Vince in his kitchen and later the stubby stacking which became a new speleosport for them.

Don and Grace Matts, who spent their honeymoon surveying Spring Cave (and almost their divorce), encountered his wry humour when they were invited by Vince to come and survey his tourist cave, he said "only about 500 feet long, won't take long." They

continued with the survey on three trips and found about 5000 feet. Ever helpful, by their second trip Vince had found a better way to Spring Cave leaving the main road opposite Suicide Tower. He had dragged an old cartwheel several times over the track to clear it of the grass and rubbish.

Grace Matts believes that without Vince's hospitality and his enthusiastic assistance the Sydney Speleos would not have led so many trips to Chillagoe to study and document the caves and then to introduce Brother Nicholas Sullivan to the area. That led to the trips from America under the New York Explorer's Club including students from Manhattan College and numerous prominent scientists from Australia and overseas.

Alan Cummins was the first member of Chillagoe Caving Club to go caving at Chillagoe, commencing in 1964 and later joined by Margaret. He even had his honeymoon there in the 1969. He, Vince and Margaret did a lot of caving, a strange honeymoon! Les Pearson met Vince in 1971 when he took a group of Scouts to Chillagoe. Vince at that stage was almost retired from caving but he took the Scouts caving. His technique was to let the lads find their way rather than to just show them. He also aroused interest in the formations and in the way caves were formed. His enthusiasm and assistance led to continuing trips by Scouts, even to this day.

It was somewhere about this time that Vince stopped caving altogether. He broke his arm in a cave. However, he retained his interest and continued to assist cavers. He had the only maps and wire ladders in the North and was willing to help any cavers with a responsible attitude. He used to try people out. If they showed the right attitudes he was very helpful otherwise they only got sent to caves which were hardly worth visiting.

Vince usually encouraged people to explore for themselves and while he would suggest areas to look he often avoided telling exactly where the entrances were. I can recall after a half day climbing around the Queenslander main entrance area and finding a lot of fearsome holes he came with us far enough to give a closer indication of where this entrance was. We still had to work out how to get in but he thought we could manage and he had other things to do back in Chillagoe.

Mick Moylan went to Chillagoe as one of these Scouts and remembers Vince as follows:

"I met Vince 25 years ago when I first started caving in Chillagoe. I went caving with him on numerous occasions in those younger days, and Vince's knowledge of the caves in the area was second to none. Later on, we would go and find a cave and explore it and end up back at the Post Office telling Vince about our new find. Vince would then proceed to describe to us the details of our "new" cave."

Vince was not one to seek any personal glory by claiming caves he had found. He has only seven caves credited to him in Chillagoe Karst, but had on his own explored numerous other caves but left them to be "discovered" by others as indicated by Mick.

On many occasions Vince discussed the idea of a caving club with visiting cavers but it took till 1973 before an inaugural meeting was held in Chillagoe. Naturally Vince

was elected as President. While he only served a couple of years as President he continued to advise and encourage the Club for the rest of his life. He was appointed the first Life Member of Chillagoe Caving Club in 1977 and in 1983 was awarded the Edie Smith Award by the Australian Speleological Federation. (This Edie Smith Award is given for outstanding service to speleology over a long period of time.)

In the Chillagoe community Vince is remembered for his efforts in the Progress Association to provide facilities for the community. He pushed hard for the building of the public hall and the airstrip. Recently Paul Wilson returned to Chillagoe after a long absence and found that the town had changed considerably. When he reflected he remembered plans that the Progress Association had on their books in the 1970s and he saw that Vince and the Progress Association had initiated virtually all these improvements including bitumen roads, kerbing and channelling, concrete footpaths and even the water supply.

Vince is also credited with starting the tradition of lighting up the Smelters Chimney at New Year. He also discovered an unusual cave in 1972 in Byrnes's Pub, he created this cavern by accidentally driving his car through the Pub wall! The Hotel was open at the time and the Publican, Katherine Byrne, was apoplectic and chased everyone with her walking stick.

About 1973 Vince was transferred to supervise the northern coastal National Parks. The National Parks Department apparently moved Vince. He did improvement work at Barron Falls and some pioneering work in Davies Creek National Park. In 1974 Vince had enough of being away from Chillagoe. He resigned from National Parks and returned to Chillagoe where he worked at Jack and Newells. When Pat died in 1982 Vince took over the Post Office and continued in that position until he retired on an Invalid Pension in 1989.

In his time at the Post Office, Vince was always a character. In this position Vince had a fair idea of most people's business as he saw the mail they received, wrote out their telegrams he received over the telephone and assisted those who had trouble reading and writing with their personal business (including their banking). He never gossiped about these matters. Also, he knew where people were as they moved about town and often made a telephone connection to where they were rather than to their homes, talk about service.

In his retirement, Vince remained in Chillagoe, living on alone in the Post Office with it falling apart around him due to termite attack. His health was poor, no doubt as a result of his lifetime of drinking and smoking. He suffered from emphysema which even made walking rather distressing, but he accepted this as part of life. Late in 2000 he found difficulty in swallowing and was diagnosed with throat cancer in Cairns Hospital. He went back to Chillagoe when Ann, his daughter, came home from England to be with him and nurse him so that he could stay where he wanted to be, in Chillagoe.

Vince was buried in Chillagoe as he wished. He will be remembered as a great caver and one who appreciated the beauty of nature. The Donna and Royal Arch Caves will be his monument.

The Chillagoe Caving Club have permission to use Vince's name in a Club Award for significant caving work and this will maintain our memories of Vince. Who could forget him after being subjected to his wry humour, enthusiastic assistance and his willingness to have a beer with his caving mates.

Farewell Vince, and Rest In Peace.