

**From:** Rory Coffey  
**Sent:** Saturday, 14 March 2020 11:47 AM  
**To:** Trev and Pam; 'sstewart@sjshire.wa.gov.au' <[sstewart@sjshire.wa.gov.au](mailto:sstewart@sjshire.wa.gov.au)>  
**Cc:** 'Ray Coffey' 'Liam Coffey'  
**Subject:** RE: Brian Coffey information

Hello Trevor,

I am deeply touched by the effort that you have put in on this initiative and amazed at your recollection of aspects of Dad's life. I look forward to catching up on the 28<sup>th</sup> to share some recollections of mine regarding your family too. In the meantime I've added additional information below in blue.

Sam, I appreciate your efforts as well so please feel free to contact me by email or phone if you require further information.

Regards  
Rory

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**From:** Trev and Pam  
**Sent:** Friday, 13 March 2020 5:22 PM  
**To:**  
**Subject:** Fwd: RE: Brian Coffey information

Hello Rory, I hope you have some spare time this weekend to write about your Dad's life in Serpentine.

An extract from Neil Coy's book 'The Serpentine' (The Coffey family at Serpentine, of Irish descent, showed much grit by battling through on poor land while others fell by the wayside around them.)

Dad's parents migrated from Ireland to Australia separately in the early 1900's and met in Kalgoorlie where my grandfather was a contract miner. They moved to Serpentine in the mid 1920's to take up land under the Peel Group Settlement Scheme. They named the property on the corner of Gull and Rapids Roads 'Tralee' after the nearest big town in County Kerry to the farm on which my grandfather grew up. In 1935 when Dad was six years of age his father inconveniently died of silicosis contracted from his mining activities. Dad's mother then single handedly continued to develop the farm from scratch and raise four children until Dad was old enough at the age of 21 to take over the property. In that immediate area a number of other Irish families took up land and the common language used by that little group was gaelic rather than English (a bit like the wave of Italian immigrants after WWII who took up dairy farms in the Serpentine district). During grandma's tenure most of the other farmers walked off the land because it proved too difficult for them to survive. The only other family of that era and origin who remained long term was the Keily's on Utley Rd.

Brian commenced his schooling at The Old Bridge School at Serpentine in 1935, a 5km walk from the farm. Did his schooling through correspondence 1938 to Sept 1939 and then back to

Serpentine until May 1940. He then went to school in Perth. Rory, did he finish his schooling in Perth or go back to correspondence?

Dad was not doing well at Serpentine Primary (apparently, by his telling, due to a conflict with his “draconian” teacher Miss Rowe – I’m sure that his obstinate nature also played a part) so his mother decided to send him to Aquinas which had just relocated from the Terrace in the CBD to Salter point. He spent five years there and left after attaining his Junior certificate. Despite hating every minute of boarding school he subsequently sent his five sons there as well!

Brian was into farming at a young age and with hard work, resilience and forethought, I think he was probably the last and most successful farmer from the families that originated from the Group Settlement Scheme in the Serpentine District. His legacy is the purchase and development of new farm land in the Rocky Gully area 320kms to the south and then the opportunity for his sons to farm the land. Rory, can you elaborate on, apart from hard work, how he managed to work the two farms until the boys were old enough to join him.

Dad’s mentality as a framer and to work in general was that there are 24 hours in the day so you may as well use as many of them as possible. Unfortunately, to some extent that mantra was flawed in that often his approach was to work harder rather than smarter. Having said that he was also a farming innovator, albeit he still did it the hard way. A primary example was that he manually transplanted sods of the perennial grass Kikuyu all over Tralee and the farm at Hopeland that he bought from his older brother. By doing this he established summer feed for his cattle on sandplain soil which in summer turns into a desert (as still happens on many properties around Serpentine) In 1963 he decided that the milk quota he had on the Tralee property was not big enough to sustain his family so he purchased a third farm on Hall Road which effectively doubled his milk quota. The Hall road property had good winter pasture whereas Tralee had better summer feed so for six months of the year we milked the cows in the dairy on one property and then moved to the other dairy for the other six months. The day of each transfer was always a nightmare as after the morning milking on the given day all of the milking equipment needed to be pulled out of one dairy and transferred by truck to the other dairy and re-assembled as he did not want to pay for two sets of dairy equipment that would only be used for six months of the year. We also had to walk the milking herd the six kilometres from one dairy to the other in time for the afternoon milking. Dad did not want to get out of bed at 3.45am for the rest of his life so he had a grand plan to transition from dairy farming to beef production. To do this however he needed even more land as the margins on beef returns were much smaller per unit of production than milk so he needed to scale up. He discovered a new government land release at Rocky Gully (near Mt Barker) in 1966 but the Crown land being offered under ballot was all heavily timbered bush that needed to be cleared to establish pasture. He was successful in obtaining one of these parcels of land and set about clearing it over the next five years to establish a workable grazing property. For the next eight years he continued to operate the dairy at Serpentine and in his ‘spare time’ he established the grazing property 300 km away. Some years later he purchased the farm next door at Rocky Gully to further expand the beef operation. He used his dairy herd as his base breeding stock whereby the lesser performing milkers were mated with Aberdeen Angus bulls in order to establish his beef herd. My brother Garry ultimately took over the Rocky Gully properties and Dad remained at Serpentine.

Brian was a keen horseman and liked to use the horse when rounding up his cattle. In the early 2000s I remember him droving cattle from his farm across the bridge (he wired off the

areas between the bridge and adjoining fences to stop the cattle going down to the river) and up to a property he had leased on Lightbody Road. I always got the impression he was a very happy man when he was working the cattle with his horse.

Horsemanship was certainly a lifelong passion of his which for the first 50 years of his life was undertaken as a working tool. In the 1980's he was talked into taking up polo cross by his mate Ralph Lyster. It was basically his only leisure indulgence.

Brian is the only farmer that I know in the Serpentine area who employed an aboriginal family and it is pleasing to see the respect that they have for Brian as I am sure he would have had respect for them and their culture.

Dad employed members of a number of local Noongar families including the Walleys and the Nannups. In the late 1950's Joe Nannup told Dad that the authorities had taken his children away partly because his family had no fixed address. Dad interceded on his behalf and advised those authorities that the Nannup family would be residing permanently at the Hopeland property on Utley Rd and that Joe was his permanent employee. The Nannup family was subsequently re-united and remained at the property for a number of years and ultimately moved to Mandurah some years later when government policy changed and they stopped stealing indigenous children. Members of the Walley and Nannup families, some three generations later, attended and spoke at Dad's funeral in 2011. Unsurprisingly Dad received a lot of criticism for this action from many of the good burghers of the district, but mostly behind his back which didn't bother him at all.

Brian was proud of his Irish heritage and like my mother, Australian born but of Scottish heritage, they had some good conversations with poetry and literature in the mix.

The family property on the corner of Gull Road and Rapids Road is 500 metres from the bridge across the Serpentine River. It was a dairy farm where Brian lived from childhood. He took over the dairy farm and later switched to farming beef cattle and acquiring more land along the way.

Rory, was the beef also Tralee Charolais Beef Stud? I remember Dad saying that your Dad subdivided his property along Hall Road. They were originally in 10acre lots and did not sell, redone as 5acre and sold well. I am not sure about the lot sizes and whether he was talking of Steve Coffey. Would these properties now be mostly owned by people with horses. Also your Dad was a staunch member of the Labor Party in our area and I am guessing that came from his Irish Heritage and the treatment of the Irish and his desire to help and protect the poor.

In addition to his commercial Angus beef herd Dad also started a Charolais stud from scratch by crossbreeding his Friesian/Angus dams with Charolais semen. Ultimately he sold bulls and breeding heifers to other studs around Australia including a Queensland based breeder who was a regular buyer. Regarding the Hall Rd property, or Tallagandra as it was called, was sub-divided in conjunction with his cousin Steve's property next door. Out of that development came Coffey Road. As described the land sold in 5 acre parcels with most of those properties owned by leisure horse enthusiasts.

Dad possessed a strong social conscience and view of cultural history. He saw his Irish ancestors as being oppressed by English invaders (he was born only five years after the Easter uprising which would have been regularly discussed by his family and Irish

neighbours during his childhood). He saw people who only had their labour to offer as being regularly exploited by many with wealth and power and, whilst he personally was not exposed to this vulnerability, he took it as his responsibility or obligation to try to redress this imbalance – hence becoming a member of the Labor Party and standing for the local unwinnable State seat in order to help out the Party. Thankfully he did not win as there would have been mayhem at Harvest Terrace if he had. An interesting side note is that his youngest son, my brother Liam, is a longstanding Hansard reporter at Parliament House so he could have been reporting on his ‘Old Man’s’ shenanigans.

These are the way I saw your Dad and there will be things where I was way off beam. If you can use some of it, okay, but please delete the rest. Know doubt there will be a lot more you can add. Could you please send your information to Samantha and if it is okay we would like a copy for the Historical Society

Kind Regards, Trevor

*Trevor and Sam, please use this information as you wish and if you require any further clarification please advise. I will also be sending this draft to my brothers who may, amongst other actions, red mark any grammatical errors and correct any information that may have strayed from the truth!*

Regards  
Rory

*Info:*

*Married Betty Burgess in c1950*

*Father to Ray, Shane, Rory, Garry and Liam*

*Had Stock Brands in 1972 under Tallagandra farm*

*Passed away at Tralee farm, Serpentine 2011.*

*From Ted Bett’s book “Well Stranded in Mundijong”*

*An anecdote from page 122*

*“About ten years ago (book was published in 2007) I watched in amazement as three of my old ex-dairy farming friends, Sam Lang, Ralph Lystewr and Brian Coffey, all on horseback, batted a ball between them in the paddock next door to our dairy. This was my introduction to polocrosse...”*