

The Fruit-picker's Dream

Picking fruit sounds like a fun way to earn money; but it isn't easy

Back in 2002 we decided to sell up and go on the road. It was an exciting prospect, especially because we had no idea what we were going to do; only that we needed to continue earning a living. One idea was picking fruit. This was something we had both done in the mid 1970's; but with a young family in tow the initial rewards were too meagre and supplementary work had to make up the shortfall. 27 years later once the kids had left home we were free agents; so, we sold the house, put the furniture in storage, loaded up the car with three tents and other camping gear; then set off from Western Australia bound for the Eastern States.

Victoria was our first port of call, in particular Shepparton. It being cherry season, we thought we'd give it a go and were doing quite well to start with. The market required the fruit to be picked with stalks intact, something I found both hard and easy. My fingers were too fat and tended to pop the cherries off their stalks; but I discovered that my tough finger-nails were ideal cutters and this seemed to be the answer. Then I developed an infection under both thumb nails which eventually fell off, and that was it for the cherries.

Finding an advertisement on the notice-board of the caravan park where we were camped, we applied for a job with a local farm. The owners, Sam and Carmel, were wonderful people who took us under their wings and gave us invaluable advice on how best to pick the various crops they grew. There were apples of various types, apricots, pears, plums and peaches. By the time we had seen the season through, it could be said that we were pretty much experts; except in one area – making an independent living. If not for welfare propping us up, we would never have survived. Being proud, however, we needed some kind of picking that would pay us a decent living wage without having to rely on support.

Chatting to other pickers was a great way to find out where to go next, and a place called Gayndah in Queensland sounded a good bet. On arrival, however, we were put off by the sour, Little-Hitler attitude of the caravan park owner and decided to continue on to Mundubbera about 50 K's further along the highway. This was citrus country and we realised it would be a challenge because we knew nothing about picking oranges and mandarins. Once again, we fell on our feet, scoring a job on a large property with a great manager. Thanks to his help and plenty of tips from the rest of the pickers in the team, also encouraged by their tireless work ethic, we were soon pulling our weight, and some. It was hard, certainly; often sunup to sundown, six and seven days a week; but we were having a ball and eventually earning enough to get us off welfare.

Just getting one day off a week, if we were lucky, made "home" life a bit difficult. There was equipment like picking-bags and fruit-snips to maintain; plus clothes to wash. Both of these were Sunday jobs. More free time was taken up with daily showers and the

preparing of meals. Here was something we were quite proud of. With just our three-burner gas stove, a few pots and pans, and a bit of imagination, we could turn out meat pies, quiches and pizzas which even surprised seasoned caravanners who thought that people living in a tent only ate baked beans.

From what we were told, other pickers lived and ate more or less the same as they always had. Perhaps the roofs over their heads weren't canvas like ours and they did stay in caravans and dongers (pre-fabricated chalets, really); but the difference was that most had wives and kids that they'd left behind to go on the road. One bit of advice they gave us was: "Never look back." It referred to fruit that had been missed, and if you didn't look back down the row of trees just picked it couldn't be seen so you didn't need to worry about it and moved on. This didn't fit with our sense of pride and we chose to ignore it.

The saying, we discovered after a while, probably applied to the lives of these people as well. What many had left behind were wives and families, presumably when they went on the road because work wasn't in abundance in their places of origin. Good pickers, as we ourselves found out, could make quite a bit of dough; and this helped us to begin building a reasonable bank account. These more-experienced people should have been quids in; but although they claimed to be sending regular payments back home; they never seemed to generate enough to return to their families; usually thanks to a gambling habit.

There were two pubs in Mundy (Mundubbera), both with pokies (slot machines). A classic example of addiction was a guy we knew as Souley who, being a gun (top) picker, could earn \$1,000 a week and promptly blew most of it on his day off. Others were the same, leading us to believe that they had no intention of returning to their "loved" ones; using the excuse that they didn't have enough money yet. Needless to say, under those circumstances they never would; so there was no point in looking back. It was sad, really. They were in general a good bunch; but obviously preferred to be loners and free spirits.

Anyway, back to the picking. Except for a stint in Kumbia Queensland where the nectarine trees were small due to the fact that the boss liked picking; and being short himself he kept the trees pruned so that the fruit could be picked from the ground. In the main, though, most of the trees were tall and needed ladders to pick the tops. For some, tripod ladders were okay. These had two feet at the front with a swinging leg at the back which could be fed through the lower branches of the trunks making it possible to reach the fruit further in. Then there were the much bigger trees and these required climbing up bow ladders.

They were up to thirteen feet high and were curved like an archer's bow with two spiked feet spread far apart at the bottom and the rest of the ladder tapering considerably at the top. What about the leg to support them, we wondered? Not needed, as we were to discover. The routine was to pick up the ladder which wasn't too heavy because it was aluminium; take it to the tree; raise it a bit; slam the feet down onto the ground to drive the spikes in; then lower the curved top to rest comfortably against the tree. Then, up we went. Bear in mind that we were picking into canvas bags strapped to our shoulders and these held up to 20 kilos of fruit. So, when using bow ladders it was best to start at the top with an empty bag. A little concerned at first that even this was pretty risky; more so as our weight tended to push the ladder further into the foliage; but it would eventually contact a branch strong enough to prevent it and us going any further.

We soon got the hang of bow-ladder picking, and learned enough to start at the very top with an empty bag, filling it as we worked our way back down, taking extra care not to lean too far sideways. We came to this conclusion when I did just that causing one of the foot spikes to come out of the ground. The ladder spun on the remaining leg and it was only fortunate that I managed to hang on, stuck in the tree until Ruth straightened the ladder. We'd seen other pickers do the same, so it wasn't just our inexperience and no-one thought the worst of us. It did, however, prompt the comment: "That's nothing. Wait till you ride the wild pony."

We weren't in ignorance of this delight for too long. Many of the navel trees, as well as being huge were also quite old; and some of their branches had a tendency to break under weight; as I discovered when up the top of my bow ladder. Following a loud crack, a branch or two broke and there was I, riding the wild pony right into the middle of the tree; and not so gaily either! The ride stopped short of plunging me to the ground, I was tipped off the ladder to be left quaking and standing on one branch that luckily stayed intact. Not wishing to waste the opportunity, I noticed a mass of fruit before me that I would never have been able to pick from the outside of the tree; so I hurriedly stuffed it in my bag. Wrong move – I couldn't see anything below past the bulging bag in front of me and had to feel around with my feet as I wormed my way down. Needless to say I survived to pick another day, harbouring an eternal mistrust of bow ladders.

Eventually we returned to Western Australia where we continued picking for a further four years. In many instances machinery made it easier for us, learning to operate cherry pickers and fork-lifts; and again we thoroughly enjoyed this hard but simple life. As is the way, however, good things must come to an end and these times did. Poor health dictated an earlier retirement than we had originally planned and a more sedentary lifestyle took over. In a way it seemed meant-to-be. Thanks to our fruit-picking earnings which set us up to be financially comfortable we were able to start running this website. We now spend our days with me creating the content and Ruth scripting and loading it onto the Internet.

As for looking back we do this frequently, reminiscing over those good times on the road and the colourful people we met along the way, some of whom are friends we keep in touch with to this day. Needless to say, we do miss it; but adopting my mum's philosophy that a day past can never be taken away from you we can honestly say that we've led full, enjoyable lives. It may only have begun as a dream, but we turned it into a reality. No-one can ask for more.

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