

Robert James Michelmores

11/1/1917 - 19/2/1999

Laid to rest at Strathalbyn Cemetery on Tuesday 23/2/1999

Robert James Michelmores was born on 11 January 1917 at Strathalbyn, the eldest child of Annie Gordon Watt and Fredrick Andrew Michelmores. Five more children were to follow: Andrew, Gordon, Grace (dec.), John (dec.) and Annie.

He was educated at the Finnis and Strathalbyn Primary Schools, and left school at 13 after gaining very good marks in his QC to work horse teams at Glenfield—the family farm. Another job as a young boy was to rise at dawn and go down the paddock to the water trough and break the ice so the horses could get a drink. He also trapped rabbits with his brothers for pocket money.

Bert was a keen tennis player in his youth and played in Alexandra 'B' grade at Sandergrove club, where he played throughout the 1930s and most of the 1940s. During these years he met Jean Rose of Finnis, later to become his wife.

In 1932 aged 15 Bert flew with Sir Charles Kingsford Smith in the 'Southern Cross' plane, when Smithy toured the country giving joy rides at 10/- a ticket to raise money for his flight from England to Australia. These flights were done from the paddock opposite Strathalbyn Racecourse and drew a large crowd.

In 1934 his father bought a McCormick 10-20 tractor and two years later converted it from steel to rubber tyres, which totally amazed Bert's grandfather who had never seen such weird looking things before. Rubber tyres revolutionised farming and bigger equipment was required for the family sharefarming operations throughout the district.

In 1936 Bert joined the Strathalbyn and Belvidere Agricultural Bureaux, and has been a member of the Belvidere branch ever since, serving many years in executive positions. After the devastating bushfires of 1939 he became a foundation member of the Strathalbyn EFS, holding various positions with this service until the early 1980's.

During the Second World War, Bert was a member of the Volunteer Defence Corp and continued his farming, growing flax and other cereals for the war effort. The 1944 harvest was a failure, so Bert, his brothers Gordon and Jack, the Mattner brothers and others, went to the south east carting sheaved hay into huge stacks at Bordertown. Camping at the showgrounds they lived on prunes for breakfast dinner and tea. The cook was constantly abused for his lack of imagination in the food department—but food rationing was in force. After a while it became too much, so the cook shot through at 2 am one night on the Melbourne express, and left everyone to get their own prunes. After some pretty wild times including capsizing his overloaded semitrailer of sheaved hay, Bert returned to Strath, where he and his brothers Gordon and Andrew continued to grow and cart large quantities of flax to the flax mills at Morphet Vale. This continued until the early 1950s. In 1946 he was

the first farmer in the district to use aircraft to spray DDT powder onto pea crops for grub control.

On 14 April 1945 Bert married Jean Garner Rose of Finniss at the Finniss Church of Nativity. Five children were born of this marriage: Rob, Jenny, Sue, Charlie and Kathy. Bert bought land adjacent to the town of Strathalbyn and built his own house for his wife and young family. The economy boomed after the war and Bert launched into a program of modern machinery and more land, buying the largest rubber-tyred tractor in the district and the first International GL-200 header assembled in South Australia. He was backed up by Jean, who milked cows in a shed that Bert had built to further support his farming. She did this for many years while also raising five children. For ten years after his marriage Bert was a good rifle shooter, attending many shoots and camps with his father in law. He later was able to buy back some of the original Michelmore farm and also his father's farm.

In the early 1960s Bert invented a set of three-point linkage folding wing harrows and gave the idea to David Shearer. The Shearer 'RJ' three point linkage harrow was born and went into production at Mannum. Horwood Bagshaw took over Shearer of Mannum a few years later, altered the design and called it their own. Many 'RJ' harrows were sold and can be found around the country today. In 1967 he was elected to the Strathalbyn District Council, where he served for eleven years until 1978. During this time he served on many committees, including the Council's Machinery Committee, the High School Council and the Senior Citizens Guidance Committee from its foundation.

He was a keen competitor and committee man in the Hartley Hogget and Crop competitions for years after the war. Bert first went to the Strathalbyn Agricultural Show in the late 1920's as a young teenager, and attended every show until the late 1970s. He rose to be Vice President and over the years spent many hours preparing for the show and mowing the grounds, while cursing the Dandy Icecream cups that got stuck over the mower fingers. The grain and produce section was his specialty, and he carried this section for years, often being by far the main exhibitor. Travelling to other shows about the Fleurieu he won many aggregate prizes.

After the war Bert helped to create the Producers and Citizens Weighbridge opposite the old police station, where the new Mobil service station now stands. In later years he was a member of the Lions club, and played bowls for Strathalbyn first and then Langhorne Creek until recently. For many years he was also the landowners' spokesman with the Strathalbyn Hunt Club.

Life for Bert was divided into two parts: before the war, and after the war. He constantly talked of life before the war and I suspect this was the era he loved most of all. His recall of events was amazing, and he could pull out a story full of facts names and figures on anything you cared to nominate. Sandergrove was his universe and he knew nearly every paddock, back road and building in minute detail, with stories to match. He said recently that last year was the first year since the age of fifteen that he had not done any cropping or tractor work—a period of sixty-six years.

Recent years saw his active involvement in farming restricted by asthma, to the degree that he was hospitalised several years ago for treatment. While showering one morning Dad suffered oxygen deprivation, rushed for his bed, and pressed the buzzer as he collapsed dying. Quick action by doctors and staff got Bert going again. Since then he sometimes said at family gatherings, "Dying is easy, I've done that." After this set back he rallied and took control of his farming interests once again, but fluctuating health soon made him realise he could not do the things he once took for granted. However, only two months ago a huge Caterpillar Lexion state of the art self-propelled combine harvester was demonstrated at Sandergrove. Bert wasn't gonna miss this! Defying his ageing body, he threw his walking frame into the back of the ute and headed for the action. Getting into the machine was a problem, but willing bystanders soon lifted him up the ladder and he was off. This super quiet \$300,000 monster swept around the paddock doing in one hour what took several days with the horse drawn strippers he had started out on. In the world's most sophisticated header, it was a long way back to the rough and crude machines of the 1920s—and it all happened right in his back yard at Sandergrove!

Bert felt much better recently, parked his walking frame and went back to his walking stick. But it was not to last and in the early hours of Friday morning, Dad quietly slipped away without a murmur into eternal sleep, fulfilling his wish to die at home. Throughout nearly 54 years of marriage, Bert remained a faithful husband and loving father to all his children and their families. A proud man who thought he lived in a great part of the world.

We pay tribute to the life of Robert James Michelmore.

