Round the Horn to a life’s work

Harold Carl Hagerstrom
Cape Horner, labourer, fisherman, ETSA linesman

Born: January 19, 1907; Turku, Finland
Died: September 17, 2005; Inkoo, Finland

HAROLD Hagerstrom’s life was long and varied. Born in Turku, Finland, his father, a mounted policeman, died while fighting in the Finno-Russian border war in 1918.

The family struggled for a number of years after the loss of their father but Harold completed his high school with excellent results in 18 subjects. While undertaking compulsory military training, he excelled in skiing, running and swimming (his teammate was Paavo Nurmi, the legendary Finnish Olympic athlete).

Realising that to help his family financially, he had to have a secure job, Harold joined a steamship company, then joined the crew of the four-masted barque Ponape, on which he later sailed to Port Lincoln and Port Victoria in South Australia for a cargo of grain for Europe.

The barque sailed to Australia via Cape Horn, the southernmost tip of South America, qualifying Harold to become a Cape Horner, one of a worldwide association of seamen who have crewed a cargo-carrying windjammer which has rounded the Horn. On the Ponape’s return journey to Australia, Harold decided to jump ship and make a new life in a new country and, with help from his shipmates, got his few belongings ashore in Port Lincoln. His seacatch is now in the Axel Stenross Maritime Museum in Port Lincoln.

Harold had landed in a strange country in the middle of the Depression but, being big and strong, he soon found work with his future father-in-law Arthur Bennett, a builder. He also worked on building the bridge at Big Swamp, and many other projects. To earn more money for his growing family, he worked as a labourer in the government abattoir as a slaughterman and then in the freezer section. He later tried his hand at professional fishing, with moderate success, on fishing vessels Amphitrite and Hecla.

For the last 25 years of his working life, Harold was an Electricity Trust of SA linesman, rising to the position of leading senior linesman.

Away from work, he entertained his family playing a Russian balalaika he had brought with him on the ship from Finland.

As a sportsman, he won the Swim-Through Port Lincoln in 1937, and was a belt man for a local surf lifesaving team.

In 1980, Harold decided to “go home to die” in Finland, an event that was to take 25 years to come about.

In 2003, Harold was “the star” interviewee at the final world congress for the Cape Horners in St Malo, France. At the age of 96, he was the oldest Cape Horner present and was able to speak to the congress fluently in four languages.

He is survived by his five children and their families – Eric, Bob, Jennine, John and Brian. Harold’s wife, Edna, died in April, aged 92.