

# THE LGMA HISTORY PROJECT

PODCAST SESSIONS OF LGMA MEMBERS



**Charles Grant - OAM FLGMA (Merit) (Life) (Ret)**

July 1926 – September 2017

Joined IMM (now LGMA): 2/10/1950

Charles (Charlie) achieved a distinguished local government career, commencing in 1945 as Cost Clerk with Isis Shire Council and retiring in 1991 as Shire Clerk of Boonah Shire Council. He has been a devoted advocate for Local Government and played an integral role in its advancement. He felt strongly about Local Government, particularly that this was the tier of government that could make real differences to local communities and local people. He was honoured to receive the OAM in 1989 for service to local government. Charlie was appointed as a Councillor to fill a short-term vacancy on Boonah Shire Council in 1995-1996. In October 2010, LGMA awarded Charlie a certificate of service in recognition for his 60 years of service to local government. He resides in Boonah and has done so for quite some time making significant contributions to the local community.

Charlie was a long-serving member of the Executive Council of the IMM and was an active advocate not only in Queensland but also nationally. He represented IMM in a number of capacities such as in the review of the Local Government Act and on various bodies including the Local Government Clerks Board over the years and continued as a representative into his retirement. He was Divisional Secretary of IMM for 3 years in his early retirement. He was conferred life membership of IMM in 1976.

How did you get into local government?

Charlie was born in Gayndah on 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1926 and grew up in the small country town where his father was a baker and the family lived in a cottage behind the bakery premises in the main street. There was nothing out of the ordinary about his upbringing other than he suffered from rheumatic fever in his mid-teens and had to make-up a year of school.

He did his secondary schooling as a boarder at Brisbane Grammar School for five years to senior level and had a liking for mathematics. He wanted to follow in the engineering field and go to university. However, he was encouraged to take up the offer of a secure job as

Cost Clerk with Isis Shire Council at Childers in 1945 after completion of his senior year at age nineteen. He had no idea what he was getting himself into at the time but the prospect of big roadworks projects with main roads to Maryborough and Bundaberg was alluring. He was employed by the Main Roads Department but worked at the Isis Shire Council and eventually was doing costing and clerical work for both organisations. As he was having difficulty with the mathematical side of his engineering studies, the Shire Clerk, "Bill" Miske, convinced him to undertake local government studies in the best interests of his future. He started study in 1946 and qualified as a Local Government Clerk in 1949 with the Shire Clerk allowing him to gain all-round experience including the minutes and the accounts. Being now qualified, Charlie embarked on furthering his career realising that he would have to move around to gain broader overall experience. He had met Theresa who was the secretary to the boss of WJ Reinhold & Partners, Consulting Engineers to Isis Shire Council in his early days at Childers and she had since moved to Brisbane in her job, so Charlie sought to move to not only gain experience but also be closer to Theresa.

Where did you start and where did you go?

Charlie's career started as Cost Clerk with Isis Shire Council at Childers in 1945. He moved to Crows Nest to take up the position of Assistant Shire Clerk with Crows Nest Shire Council in 1949 where Kevin Gleeson was Shire Clerk. After twelve months he felt he wasn't going anywhere with this job so in 1950 he moved on to be Accountant/Deputy Shire Clerk (the position was titled Accountant but paid at the higher salary of Deputy Shire Clerk) at Atherton Shire Council with Geoff Colless as Shire Clerk. He deliberately took the job at Atherton for the northern exposure, however this was short-lived as he became engaged to Theresa in 1950 (the night before he went to Atherton actually) and desired to go south for proximity to both their families. To this end later in 1950, he accepted the role of Chief Clerk in the Engineer's Office at Gympie Shire Council. He and Theresa were married in 1951. They had their first child, John, in 1952. To get on and for a higher paying job, Charlie became Shire Clerk to Peak Downs Shire Council in Capella and he and the family moved there in 1953. Their second son, Kevin, was born in Emerald in 1955. As it was a difficult birth, they moved south again for the sake of Theresa's health. Charlie was appointed as Shire Clerk to Boonah Shire Council in 1956 when the incumbent Vic Reith moved to that role with Moreton Shire Council in Ipswich and the Grant family settled in Boonah. Their third son, Graham, was born in Boonah in 1956. He continued in the role of Shire Clerk with Boonah Shire Council until his retirement in 1991 having served with distinction his local government profession and his local community (both of which he is passionate about).

Last role?

Charlie retired from his role as Shire Clerk with Boonah Shire Council in 1991 but remained an active member of the IMM and its representations and of local community organisations for many years thereafter. He was only a month or so into his retirement when he was asked by Rowley Edwards, Shire Clerk of Stanthorpe Shire Council and then the State President of IMM, to do the part-time job of Divisional Secretary which he did for the next three years. He then nominated and was appointed as a Councillor of Boonah Shire Council in 1995-1996 to fill a casual vacancy arising with the sudden death of Cr Kevin Heraud.

While he has happily made Boonah his home, he had applied for other jobs without success; namely Bursar at Queensland University, Deputy Town Clerk at Gold Coast City Council and Town Clerk at Ipswich City Council. He was short-listed for the Ipswich City Council Town Clerk position but Alan Milton was eventually appointed. (He says now that the best thing that ever happened to him was not getting the job as Town Clerk of Ipswich).

What do you enjoy doing now?

Upon retirement, Charlie busied himself with community and family whilst maintaining his active involvement with the IMM. His community interests include Boonah Rotary Club, where he is now an Honorary Member, and Boonah Golf Club and Senior Citizens Club, of which clubs he is a Life Member. He and Theresa enjoyed some travelling including overseas, courtesy of son Graham's posting in Hong Kong with BP. Sadly Theresa succumbed to cancer and passed away in 1995. Charlie himself subsequently has survived bowel cancer. He has done further extensive travelling overseas in USA and Canada, and Great Britain and Europe together with long-time friend Thelma and sister Heather again through Graham's postings to Los Angeles and London respectively. More recently, he has become interested in the histories of bush poets Banjo Paterson and Henry Lawson as they have recorded the history of the far outback (he is just as passionate about the history of the outback as he is on local government history) and can recite a few of their poems at will. Charlie is currently experiencing ill-health with heart ailments and is confined to his home with the aid of community and family care.

Role models?

Charlie nominates Bill Miske, Shire Clerk of Isis Shire Council as being a mentor and, along with Kevin Gleeson, Shire Clerk of Crows Nest Shire Council and Geoff Colless, Shire Clerk of Atherton Shire Council, having an influence on his early career. He particularly remembers J C Slaughter, Town Clerk of Brisbane, who started the Queensland Branch of the IMM in 1950-1951, and Arthur Forno, Shire Clerk of Mulgrave and Arthur Angove, Town Clerk of Gold Coast, who were strong supporters of the IMM and the local government clerk profession and made an impression on him as role models to follow in his professional career. He further nominated Harold Jacobs, Director of Local Government for his knowledge and integrity and for the strong working relationship he established between the Local Government Department and Local Government in each of the local government areas of the day. He also has high regard for Paddy Beehan, Chairman of Isisford Shire Council, as being the symbolic advocate of Queensland Local Government in his era.

He praised the many Town and Shire Clerk and IMM colleagues with whom he worked closely over the years. He also paid tribute to his long-serving colleagues at Boonah Shire Council;

namely, John Chapman (Deputy Shire Clerk) and Arthur Devin (Shire Engineer) and Ernie Mifflin and Chris Cooney (Shire Health Surveyors) and George Johnson (Shire Overseer).

What changes did you observe in your time (regulatory, political etc.)?

When Charlie commenced with Boonah Shire Council, there was himself as Shire Clerk, a Deputy, an Overseer and two girls in the office. Boonah was a small country town with basic services. He has certainly seen changes in the organisation and automation of the Council and in the development and orientation of the town and the Shire. He is extremely proud of the infrastructure improvements achieved and the community service contributions made in his time at Boonah Shire.

Charlie was instrumental in the many changes that came about because of the IMM's involvement and interaction in local government affairs, raising the profile of local government and achieving better outcomes for local government and ultimately local communities. The IMM and its purpose became an obsession with him right from the first moments of being inspired by attending the inaugural meeting at Brisbane City Hall in 1950. He served on the Executive Council of IMM for ten years and was a National, State and Local delegate over that time. He lists the introduction of a Chart of Accounts to standardise local government accounting, the facilitation of Computerisation for local governments through a negotiated local government loan program and the review of the Local Government Act as significant changes on the State scene and the adoption of Reciprocity between the States as being of significance on the Federal scene. (He particularly recalls the protracted disagreement he had as IMM representative with the Director of Local Government over computerisation with the Minister for Local Government eventually having to step in to rule in favour of the position put forward on behalf of local government). He credits enhancement of the Local Government Clerk qualifications both academically and practically and establishment of the professional development course for local government practitioners through the Canberra College of Advanced Education as further notable factors in the advancement of local government in Queensland. As well as representing IMM on the Local Government Clerks Board and on the Local Government Act Review Committee for extended periods, he was delegated to attend the Board meetings of LGAQ along with co-delegate Dawson Phipps of Gatton. The LGAQ provided good support to local government and its officers, with the strong representation of the IMM, and the allocation of funding and the provision of office space for IMM by LGAQ was instigated under Charlie's representative term. He was also heavily involved in the District Associations which strongly bonded Councils together particularly in the south-east corner and was delegate to the SEQ regional local government body, which was the forerunner to the Moreton Region Association of Councils then SEQROC and now Council of Mayors (SEQ), under the initial stewardship of Clem Jones.

Highlights – stories?

Charlie attributes the provision of infrastructure assets to Boonah Shire as the highlight of what he was able to achieve through local government in the service of the local community. These include upgrading and bitumen surfacing of roads, provision of water and sewerage services,

establishment of parks and gardens including playgrounds, conversion of cow paddocks into sportsgrounds and facilities, construction of a swimming pool for the town and development of the Cultural Centre for the district.

He recalls the civic reception for the Queen Mother in Boonah when she stayed at Coochin Coochin Homestead for a night as a guest of the Bell family as a particular personal highlight. His recollection is the Queen Mother saying "Thank you for arranging this wonderful reception Mr Town Clerk" to which he replied "It is an honour Your Majesty".

He further stated the term he served as a Councillor on Boonah Shire Council in 1995-1996 was a particularly rewarding highlight.

His voluntary community service also provides many highlights including Boonah Rotary Club of which he has been a long-serving member and has held all offices over the years and Boonah District Cultural Centre of which he was the long-serving Secretary/Treasurer. He has received many accolades for his honorary services to the various local community groups of the district as Secretary/Treasurer and Auditor. He was most recently made an Honorary Member of Boonah Rotary Club in recognition of his 60 years' service. He is also a Life Member of Boonah Golf Club which he played a major role in the establishment of both in sourcing the venue and securing the means of financing its acquisition. He expresses gratitude to the Council for its leadership with this project and gives credit to having a good committee to work with in the formative years of the Boonah Golf Club and especially commends John Maynard and Selwyn Pfeffer.

Low lights – and worst thing about a local government career?

Although it was a long and hard slog more often than not, Charlie did not see the work as a burden – it was simply what he had to do to get the job done. He knows that many of his colleagues were eventually health-affected from the constant rigours of the job but he always found that the outside interests that came along with the job kept him contented with the job. The involvement in the community which he passionately engaged in provided an outlet for him and this proved to be not only to his benefit but also of benefit to the community and the Council. For instance, his role in getting the Boonah Golf Club up and running satisfied his love of a round of golf as well as a community service need for such a facility.

He was also fortunate to have had strong Chairmen in Harold Stark and Jim Pennell who were not swayed by politics but were focused on the community. The Council was not distracted by political agendas such as in other areas and was able to work together and with the community on budget priorities for the overall benefit of the Shire. This stability and solidarity of Council helped him immensely in that it allowed him to get on with the core responsibilities of his role and was no doubt a factor in his longevity.

He does say that community expectations can be unreasonably high and therefore very difficult to satisfy and this leads to having to grin and bear the unfair and sometimes unsavoury criticism that you are subject to as part and parcel of the job from time to time. He also now concedes that the time and energy devoted to the job did come at the expense of his family life and again he notes that the demands of the job are such that this impact is extremely hard to manage.

As CEO/Officer, what worked for you?

As Shire Clerk of Boonah Shire Council, he personally engaged in going around the office and, in the early years, the yard and greeting people in the mornings. This allowed him to develop a friendly and cooperative relationship with the staff and a ready rapport with the outside workforce. He treated Councillors with courtesy and respect and kept himself at a working distance from them while being open and available to providing advice and assistance as required. This was reciprocated by Councillors and enabled a professional and productive relationship to be furthered.

What did you have to change about yourself or your approach along the way?

Charlie knew how to stand up for himself and what he believed in but he became a strong advocate for local government and the local community too. He learnt the importance of communicating in the proper way with different approaches adopted dependant on the audience. He ensured he canvassed all of the relevant facts and paid attention to detail no matter how small the task. He gained a reputation as a quiet achiever as his patience and perseverance often won through to the desired result. He enjoyed the particular challenge of negotiating with government bureaucrats to free up their way of thinking to look at things from a local government practitioner's perspective.

What was the most difficult part of your role/s?

Dedicated officers having to adapt to being subject to ridicule by members of the public – he learnt to develop a thick hide as the years went on. (He quickly learnt to choose his golfing partners carefully after having a round spoilt by constant criticism of Council!)

Best thing about having a local government career?

The service to the local community which is what local government is all about. Also, the involvement in outside bodies which gave an extension to the local job.

He is very proud of his 50 years working in local government and extremely chuffed with his OAM for service to local government, an honour which came as a complete surprise to him. He also highly values the various life and honorary memberships bestowed upon him.

Has it changed?

Charlie is not backward in coming forward to say that Local Government has changed and not for the better which is very disappointing for him given the ground that was made in progressing Local Government in his time. He did qualify his remarks by saying that he may be ignorant of all the facts since he has been retired and out of the business of Local Government for quite a while but his aim as a straight shooter is still not far off the mark.

All he sees now is a rate notice with tremendous increases in rates and charges and he does not see any evidence that Council is being economical which was supposed to result from local government amalgamations. His opinion is that more inefficiencies have come with more funds

for larger Councils and that proper controls of staff and expenditure are not being exerted as needed. He states that the organisation itself has become the concern and not the reason why it is there, i.e. to serve the people of the local community.

He is critical of the LGAQ and the ALGA for allowing themselves to become the “lackies” of the State and Federal Governments. He sees that Local Government has lost its fight and its way to now be the third tier of government and not the first tier of government where it rightly belongs as closest to the people. His view is that we are in desperate need of an independent role in the Federal Constitution as we are in danger of being irrelevant with the maxim “if you don’t use it, you’ll lose it” being pertinent to our situation.

He has no hesitation in saying that amalgamations are not good not only for Boonah Shire but also for Local Government as a whole. He is adamant that financial sustainability is just not possible for most local governments under the present system as reliance on rates and charges is simply not feasible. He firmly believes that Local Government should have an “as of right” share of FAGs/GST. He stresses that indirect taxation is the way forward for Local Government and further states that GST should be 15% not 10% with a designated percentage guaranteed to Local Government.

Advice to newcomers and prospective LG CEOs (It would be great to video this response if you have that facility!)?

Charlie’s advice is that a Local Government CEO is a fine occupation but a demanding one. It is an important role and not to be taken lightly. The CEO should not lose sight of the reason for being there which is to run an efficient organisation that is committed to serving the people of the local community and should at all times project the professional status of the office.

Potential CEOs must first see if they are emotionally suited to and able to cope with the highs and the lows of the job. They must also have the expertise needed to do the job and be prepared to upgrade their skills and qualifications to keep abreast of the demands of the job. An understanding of the workings of local government through practical experience as well as satisfying the academic requirements has proven to be necessary.

Local Government at its various levels offers a worthy and satisfying lifestyle and is highly recommended to potential applicants.