

AGA Landline Blog
Three Men and a Boat

Here's a question. What has 77-year old Port Lincoln tuna fisher Jack Bellamy and the 1912 Nobel Prize-winning physicist Dr Gustaf Dalen have in common? The answer is a stove and staying safe at sea.

When Jack Bellamy was informed the MFV Tacoma was going to Hobart to be a feature vessel in the Australian Wooden Boat Festival, he put his hand up to do the cooking for the 12 person volunteer crew.

The Tacoma pioneered the tuna industry in Port Lincoln in South Australia. It's 60 years old, 84 foot long and weighs 120 tonnes. It's a substantial wooden vessel of character and charm. When it was launched in Port Fairy in 1951, it was Australia's first purse seiner tuna clipper and it revolutionised the Australian fishing fleet.

Jack Bellamy and his identical twin brother Keith joined the three Haldane families on the Tacoma's maiden voyage from Port Fairy to Port Lincoln in January 1952. For the past 59 years, Jack has been connected to the sentimental centrepiece of the tuna clipper's galley – the AGA stove.



After they arrived at Port Lincoln, the Bellamy brothers lived on the Tacoma until Keith was tragically lost at sea in 1959 and Jack married in the mid 1960s. After a lifetime of experience, Jack knows how to get the very best from the cooker.

Say AGA and think Outback Australia. The cookers are installed in the kitchens of many older pastoral properties. So what's the connection with them, the Port Fairy born apprentice butcher Jack and one of Sweden's finest?

Swedish Nobel Prize-winning physicist Dr Gustaf Dalen invented the stove in 1929. His is a story worth reading. Google his name and be inspired. The inventive Gustaf was employed as the chief engineer of the Swedish AGA Company. AGA is an abbreviation of the company name Aktiebolaget Gas Accumulator.



His name is also associated with a number of other important agricultural and shipping developments and inventions. These include the use of acetylene gas for welding and an ingenious sun valve. The valve revolutionised the illumination of lighthouses and warning buoys by automatically switching them on at sunset and turning them off at dawn. A good thing if you are a tuna fisher working the southern oceans.

Gustaf lost his sight as a result of an explosion during an experiment with pressurized liquids and gases. The cast iron AGA cooker was in part developed for safety reasons. The Dalen's had four girls and the sightless Gustaf was spending more time working from home. He became aware a warm to touch cooker that didn't burn young fingers was worthy of his consideration.

In 1912 and still bedridden, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics. The citation reads: "For his inventions of self-operating regulators which in combination with gas accumulators can be used to light lighthouses and light buoys".

Even though he's never heard of Dr Gustaf Dalen, the good doctor's influence on the life of Jack Bellamy the fisher and Jack Bellamy the cook is obvious.

The AGA company foundry in Sweden has produced every one of the cast iron AGA stamped stoves since 1929. A website www.thisismyaga.co.uk encourages AGA owners around the world to register their much-loved cookers.

The one Jack used to prepared a couple of meals a day during the six weeks the Tacoma was on the high seas - or tied up in Hobart, Portland and Port Adelaide, came from a property near Lobethal in the Adelaide Hills. It needed a serious rebuild. When it was picked up to be transported to Port Lincoln, it looked as if it should have really been taken straight to the tip. The Tacoma mob are made of sterner stuff and were up for the challenge.



The bloke with the necessary skills was Tacoma Preservation Society <http://tacoma.org.au> supporter Derek Huntley. Society members searched far and wide to get their hands on parts to do the job. They tracked down bits and pieces from various locations in the bush and as far a field as Alice Springs.



The stove is powered by a couple of shovelfuls of coke every morning. It not only keeps the billy on the boil and bakes whatever Jack has decided to prepare for dinner or tea. It also keeps the Tacoma toasty warm around the clock. Indeed at times it makes the vessel uncomfortably warm.

The rich and unmistakable smell, produced by the slow burning coke, permeates the galley, cabin and everyone's apparel. It reminded me very much of the smells and sensations of spending time on wood fired Murray River paddle steamers.



One modification to the Aga installed in Tacoma galley are the three slotted stainless steel ribs attached to the stovetop on either side of the heating hobs.

A ruler like restraint can be slotted across the ribs to prevent a kettle, frying pan or saucepan from sliding off the stovetop in a rolling sea. A critical modification for a seafaring AGA and one Jack insisted on when the restoration was being done.



The original AGA stove installed on the Tacoma when it was launched at Port Fairy in November 1951 came from ex WW2 supplies in Sydney. When the vessel went prawn fishing in the early 1970s, the routine in the galley changed and the decision was made to replace the AGA with an electric stove and oven. Like the original 240 HP Atlas diesel, the AGA was tossed over the side.

How times have changed.

Three Men and a Boat, a story about Australian pioneering boat builders and fishing brothers Hughie, Alan and Bill Haldane and their tuna clipper Tacoma is produced by Ian Doyle and airs on Sunday 17th of April.

