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PHOTOGRAPHY BY DREW HOPPER

## Which pub with no beer?

In another classic case of interstate rivalry, two hotels – one in New South Wales and one in Queensland – are vying for that infamous Aussie title.

Timber cutters and farmers have long lined the bars of Australia's pubs with no beer (this is the NSW one), just as Gordon Parsons, songwriter and good mate of Slim Dusty, did. Inspired by his favourite watering hole, Parsons wrote the song that went on to become Australia's first international hit and made Slim a star.

▼ **Tom Sheahan**, son of bush balladeer Dan Sheahan, who penned “A Pub Without Beer” (see opposite), still enjoys a drink at the Lees Hotel in Ingham, which replaced the Day Dawn Hotel (see opposite far right) – aka QLD’s Pub with No Beer.



▲ **Dan Sheahan**, here with son Shaun Senior and grandson Shaun Junior, spent just 200 days at school in Ireland before emigrating to Australia, making his aptitude for poetry particularly impressive.



◀ **Slim's daughter**, Anne Kirkpatrick, says her father never tired of performing *The Pub*, and she can't recall a single concert where he didn't play the hit song.

Mary Barnes, daughter of canefarmer and bush poet Dan Sheahan, was at the local country show in Ingham, Queensland, when she first heard Dusty perform *The Pub*.

“There were six children in our family, and as we entered the showground, we could hear Slim Dusty singing “*The Pub with No Beer*,” she says. “We just stood and stared at each other as we listened and thought, ‘That’s Dad’s poem!’”

**D**AN SHEAHAN, AN Irish immigrant well known locally for his ironic sense of humour, had indeed penned a poem called “A Pub Without Beer”, years before Dusty’s song was released. The poem was published in 1943 in the *Townsville Daily Bulletin* and the *North Queensland Register*.

Inspired by real-life events, Sheahan wrote the verses after riding his horse into Ingham on a hot summer’s day during World War II, longing for a cold beer at the Day Dawn Hotel (now Lees Hotel) after a tiring day of tending to his cane farm.

When he arrived at his regular watering hole, publican Gladys Harvey informed him that the pub had been drunk ▶

**W**HEN SLIM DUSTY released his iconic song “A Pub with No Beer” in 1957, propelling him from relative obscurity to country music star, no-one was more surprised by its success than Slim himself.

Written by close friend and musician Gordon Parsons, *The Pub*, as Slim later referred to the song, was simply a B-side filler for his album.

By 1958, the song had become an international hit, eventually reaching number one on the Irish charts, and number three on the British charts – the first Australian song to achieve such a feat. It also became the first and only 78 RPM record in Australia to achieve gold status for its soaring sales.

Initially unaware of his rising stardom, Slim and his family – wife, Joy McKean, and daughter, Anne Kirkpatrick – were busy touring regional Australia with their country music show. Their first inkling that something had changed was the crowd’s increasingly positive reaction when *The Pub* was performed.

In his autobiography *Another Day, Another Town*, co-written with Joy, Slim says he couldn’t quite believe his newfound success until he’d heard it for himself. “Whenever I switched on the radio, up and down the whole east coast and inland throughout the eastern states, I heard my voice singing the tragic story of “A Pub with No Beer,” he wrote. “I became in demand for radio and television appearances, newspaper and magazine interviews, and parties. For the first time in my life I went to nightclubs.”

The song, by his own admission, was life-changing.

Daughter Anne, who spent much of her childhood living in a succession of caravans with her parents while touring the quaint country halls and dusty showgrounds of Australia, remembers the time when everything changed for her family.

“I was about six years old when I noticed everything stepped up a notch on the showgrounds,” she recalls. “It was a real turning point in Dad’s career.

“Even the clothes my dad wore changed...when *The Pub* became a hit he got a white Akubra and he had all these flashy white shirts with gold guitars on them.”

But while the song was a crystal-clear success, its origins were a little cloudier.

## A Pub Without Beer

Original poem by Dan Sheahan

It is lonely away from, your kindred and all  
In the bushland at night when the warrigals call –  
It is sad by the sea where the wild breakers boom  
Or to look on a grave and contemplate doom.  
But there’s nothing on earth half as lonely and drear  
As to stand in the bar of a pub without beer.

Madam with her needles still sits by the door –  
The boss smokes in silence – he is joking no more  
There’s a faraway look on the face of the hum  
While the barmaid glares down at the paint on her thumb.  
The cook has gone cranky and the yardman is queer  
Oh, a terrible place is a pub without beer.

Once it stood by the wayside all stately and proud –  
'Twas a home to the loafers – a joy to the crowd –  
Now all silent the roof-tree that oftentimes rang  
When the navvies were paid and the cane-cutters sang.  
Some are sleeping their last in the land far from here  
And I feel all alone in a pub without beer.

They can hang to their coupons for sugar and tea  
And the shortage of sandshoes does not worry me –  
And though benzine and razors be both frozen stiff  
What is wrong with the horse and the old-fashioned ziff.  
'Mid the worries of war there’s but one thing I fear  
'Tis to stand in the bar of a pub without beer.

Oh, you brew of brown barley, what charm is thine?  
'Neath thy spell men grow happy and cease to repine.  
The cowards become brave and the weak become strong  
The dour and the grumpy burst forth into song.  
If there’s aught to resemble high heaven down here  
'Tis the palace of joy where they ladle out beer.



▲ **Slim**, here with wife, Joy McKean, and Reg Lindsay, always wore his trademark Akubra hat turned down at the front.



After the success of *The Pub*, Slim released two follow-up songs: “Sequel to the Pub with No Beer” and “Answer to the Pub with No Beer”.

## The Pub with No Beer

By Gordon Parsons

Oh it’s-a lonesome away from your kindred and all  
By the campfire at night where the wild dingoes call.  
But there’s nothing so lonesome, morbid or drear  
Than to stand in the bar of a pub with no beer.

Now the publican’s anxious for the quota to come  
And there’s a far-away look on the face of the bum.  
The maid’s gone all cranky and the cook’s acting queer  
Oh what a terrible place is a pub with no beer.

Then the stockman rides up with his dry dusty throat  
He breasts up to the bar and pulls a wad from his coat.  
But the smile on his face quickly turns to a sneer  
As the barman says sadly, the pub’s got no beer.

Then the swaggie comes in, smothered in dust and flies  
He throws down his roll, rubs the sweat from his eyes.  
But when he is told, he says “What’s this I hear?  
I’ve trudged 50 flaming miles, to a pub with no beer”.

Now there’s a dog on the v’randah, for his master he waits  
But the boss is inside, drinking wine with his mates.  
He hurries for cover and he cringes with fear  
It’s no place for a dog, ’round a pub with no beer.

Old Billy the blacksmith, the first time in his life  
Why he’s gone home cold sober to his darling wife.  
He walks in the kitchen, she says “You’re early Bill dear”  
But then he breaks down and tells her, the pub’s got no beer.

Oh it’s hard to believe that there’s customers still  
But the money’s still tinkling in the old ancient till.  
The wine buffs are happy, and I know they’re sincere  
When they say they don’t care if the pub’s got no beer.

So it’s-a lonesome away from your kindred and all,  
By the campfire at night, where the wild dingoes call.  
But there’s nothing so lonesome, morbid or drear  
Than to stand in the bar of a pub with no beer.

Slim never went anywhere without his Akubra; he even wore it to meet Queen Elizabeth II in 1981.



PHOTO CREDIT, TOP LEFT: LACHE MILLARD PHOTOGRAPHY / NEWSPIX

▼ **Slim often toured** for 10 months of the year, sometimes covering up to 50,000km. Despite selling more than 7 million records, he still enjoyed playing small country towns.



▼ **The Slim Dusty Centre** in Kempsey, NSW, showcases all things Slim, including an impressive display of his costumes, 38 Golden Guitar awards and the original guitar on which he recorded *The Pub*.



dry by a contingent of American soldiers. Instead, Sheahan had to settle for a glass of warm wine.

It was then that he sat down and wrote the immortal lines: *But there's nothing on earth half as lonely and drear/As to stand in the bar of a pub without beer.*

After hearing their father's poem set to music at the local show, Mary says her older brother approached Slim's manager, who replied, "Sorry mate, nobody talks to Slim Dusty."

"My brother answered that he wasn't leaving until he did talk to Slim Dusty," Mary says.

In the end, Slim relented. "My brother said, 'That poem that you sang, my father wrote that!'"

Confused, Slim explained that his friend Gordon Parsons had written it one night over a bottle of whisky in his caravan with his mate Chad Morgan. The next day, when his hangover had receded, Parsons performed the song for Dusty, who later recorded it on 1 April 1957.

But the news must have rattled Slim and his team because, according to Mary, "That song was not sung again through the whole show even though the audience kept screaming out for it.

"We couldn't get home quick enough to tell our father!"

Slim addressed the controversy in his book, acknowledging Dan Sheahan's poem but explaining it as: "...a set of coincidences and circumstances where Gordon reworked two verses he thought were pub lore, and then he wrote the rest of the lyrics around the characters he knew at the Taylors Arm Hotel [the Cosmopolitan Hotel] out of Macksville on the [NSW] North Coast."

"He had no idea that he had written what was to become a worldwide hit, and there were times in later life when he said he wished he'd never heard of it – it had caused so much controversy," Slim added.

How the original verses made it from the tropical sugarcane farming region of Ingham in northern Queensland to the lush timber-cutting valleys of rural NSW is the stuff of Aussie pub folklore.

**G**ORDON PARSONS, who passed away in 1990, was a singer-songwriter. When not recording or touring, he worked felling cedar trees in the Nambucca Valley. He regularly called in to the Cosmopolitan Hotel, which has now

been renamed the Pub With No Beer, in the tiny NSW settlement of Taylors Arm. According to Slim's daughter, Anne, it's thought that Parsons possibly came across the original verses, seemingly anonymously written, stuck on the back of a toilet door.

However, in Slim's autobiography, he says that one of Parsons' fellow timber cutters "gave him a couple of verses from a poem about a pub having no beer, which tickled Gordon's fancy". Other theories abound, but regardless of how he came across the original poem, Parsons acknowledged he had seen or heard a couple of verses about a pub without beer, probably passed on by word of mouth down the east coast.

Slim's son, Dr David Kirkpatrick, who was born on tour in 1958 during the height of the success of *The Pub*, says Parsons' lyrical version, which differs significantly from the original poem, was said to be inspired by some of the characters he met at the Cosmopolitan Hotel.

"Dad always said Gordon was one of the funniest men he ever knew," David says. "He was a great Australian raconteur, a real larrikin. Drank far too much, but he was able to come up with comic verse very, very easily."

Former publican of the Cosmopolitan Hotel Joyce Tudor agreed that every character in the song was based on a patron of the pub.

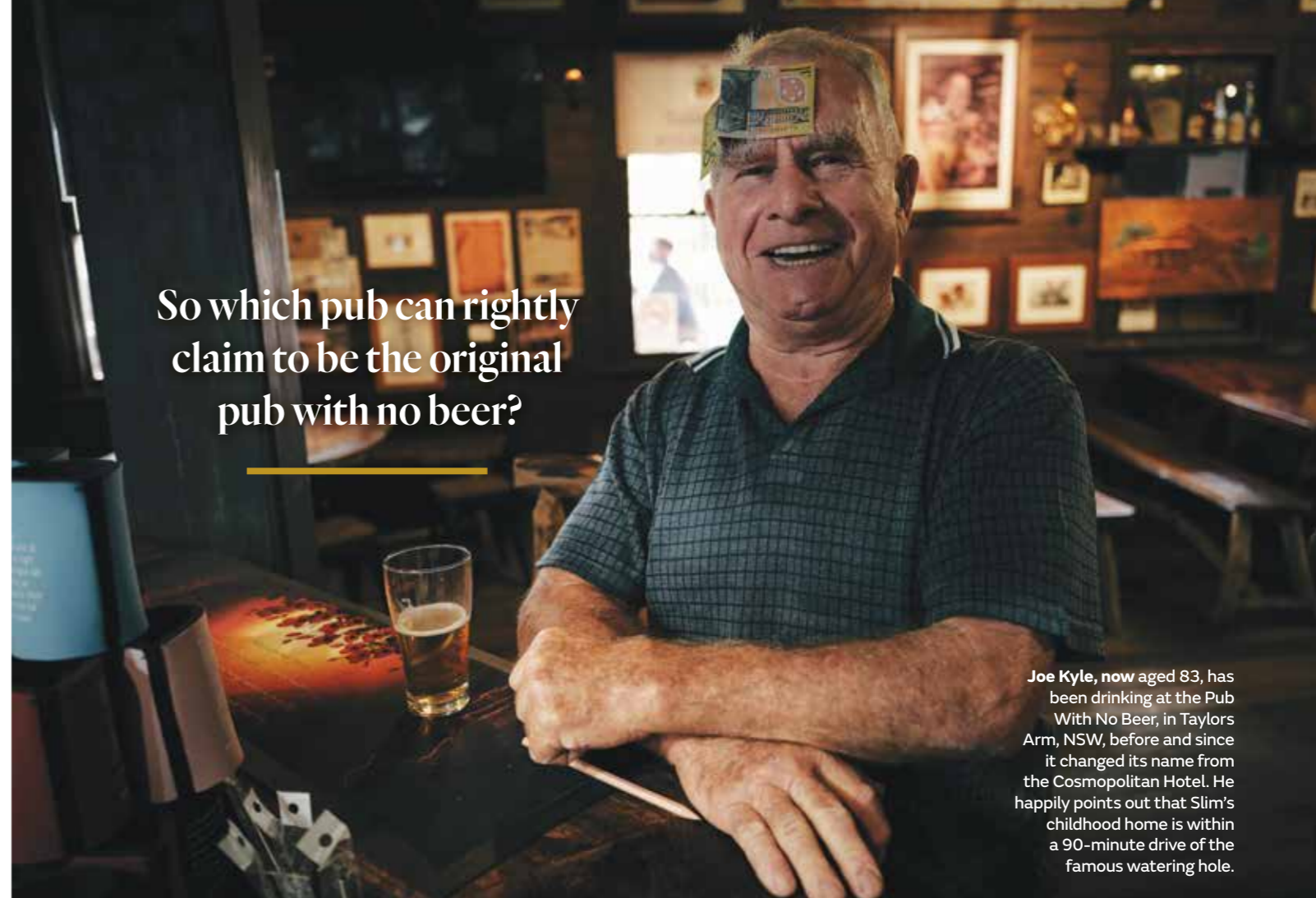
"The cook, the bum, the dog? I knew them all," she said, in an interview with the *Sunshine Coast Daily* in 2006. "You could put your money on the time the dog would arrive every day waiting for its owners."

One long-time drinker at the former Cosmopolitan Hotel is 83-year-old Joe Kyle, who's downed more than a few beers in the 50 or so years that he's frequented his local watering hole.

Sitting in the historic pub, built from local hardwood in 1903, Joe recalls stories of partying with Gordon Parsons and describes him as "a great knockabout bloke who was as sharp as a whip".

Pointing at the wall-to-wall memorabilia – photos, newspaper clippings, relics from the region's timber industry heyday and quirky antiques – he says that the Cosmopolitan Hotel also once famously ran out of beer. The story goes that, in the early 1950s, several floods cut off the supply line to the village of Taylors Arm, resulting in the pub running out of beer.

So which pub can rightly claim to be the original pub with no beer?



**Joe Kyle, now aged 83,** has been drinking at the Pub With No Beer, in Taylors Arm, NSW, before and since it changed its name from the Cosmopolitan Hotel. He happily points out that Slim's childhood home is within a 90-minute drive of the famous watering hole.

Other locals remember strike action preventing the flow of liquor from reaching the hotel.

It seems that history almost repeated itself this year, with the east coast floods in March causing the 250 residents of Taylors Arm to be flooded in for five days. The hotel, which watched as the swollen river seeped closer and closer, ran perilously low on beer.

**S**O WHICH PUB can rightly claim to be the original pub with no beer? Locals at each establishment insist theirs is the one and only, but Slim's family agree that both pubs deserve to be recognised.

"They're both a part of the legend, so to speak," David says.

In the same way, David believes that both Dan Sheahan and Gordon Parsons should be acknowledged for their part in the evolution of *The Pub*.

Slim himself recognised Dan Sheahan's contribution in his book, and Sheahan's daughter Mary, who is now aged 90, explains that was all her father ever wanted.

"My father received so many calls from solicitors, wanting to sue. And he said, 'No, I've never been in court in my life, I'm not going now,'" she says.

"As he said to me one day, he had a drawer that he had all his poetry in, and perhaps his poem would've still just been sitting there [if it had not been adapted into song]."

Although Dan Sheahan never received any royalties for *The Pub*, he became well acquainted with Slim and they would

spend the afternoon together whenever Slim happened to be in town.

Sheahan also went on to write more poems for the Australian country-and-western megastar, which he then adapted into song and released including "When you're short of a Smoke" (1960), "The Last of the Valley Mail" (1964) and "Pay day at the Pub" (1965).

Slim recalled yarning with Sheahan in his caravan at the Ingham showgrounds: "He'd recite his poems to me in a rich Irish brogue that got richer and thicker with each rum, until I gave up understanding the words and just listened to his voice."

As Slim brought his show frequently to the same small towns, often annually, it became quite common for ordinary country folk to offer Dusty bush ballads and poetry they had written, hopeful that he might share their stories in one of his more than 100 albums.

"He got people writing songs for the first time in their life," David Kirkpatrick says.

"People who were working in road crews in outback Queensland, guys in the Kimberley...they felt that Slim would do the right thing by it, that they could entrust him with their story, and he would give them a voice."

David's sister, Anne, agrees: "Mum and Dad collected stories and songs that people wrote about what was happening in their community.

"It's all here in Dad's music – the love of this incredible land and its people."

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