

## HISTORY

## RICH PICKINGS

They travelled Albury streets selling wares from wagons — now Prue Laidlaw wants to honour their stories, writes **ELIZA ADAMTHWAITE.**

**A**L BURY has a rich history of Indian hawkers serving their customers with their covered wagons — a Myer on wheels.

And in the 1960s that history was etched into the street directory, with the naming of three Lavington streets in the Indians' honour.

The only problem is that the names Indianna, Sioux and Cheyenne do not relate to the sub-continent where the hawkers came from.

This story and others that reveal a colourful page in Albury and the wider region's history have been uncovered through Prue Laidlaw's research for her PhD thesis on itinerant workers.

The Charles Sturt University lecturer at the School of Environmental Science started her research in 2005 and investigated the stories of swagmen, rabbiters and shearers.

But it was the Indian hawkers who captured her interest.

"The older generation probably can remember seeing the hawkers and the cremation ceremonies," Dr Laidlaw says.

"But it's a story not a lot of other people know about. It's a really significant part of Albury's history and a case of looking in your own backyard to uncover fascinating heritage."

Indians first arrived in Australia as convicts or as servants of British subjects in India.

This was followed by a wave of Indian immigrants in the late 19th and early 20th centuries seeking employment as labourers or itinerant hawkers in rural areas.

The hawkers would travel across inland Australia in covered wagons selling all sorts of wares — food, books, homewares, jewellery and Indian products, such as silks.

For many isolated country people, the sight of a hawker turning in the driveway was a very exciting day.

"It was like a Myer on wheels with everything a homestead would want," Dr Laidlaw says.

"They were all quite different but some would have elaborate wagons they would pull around the North East and southern NSW with up to four horses."

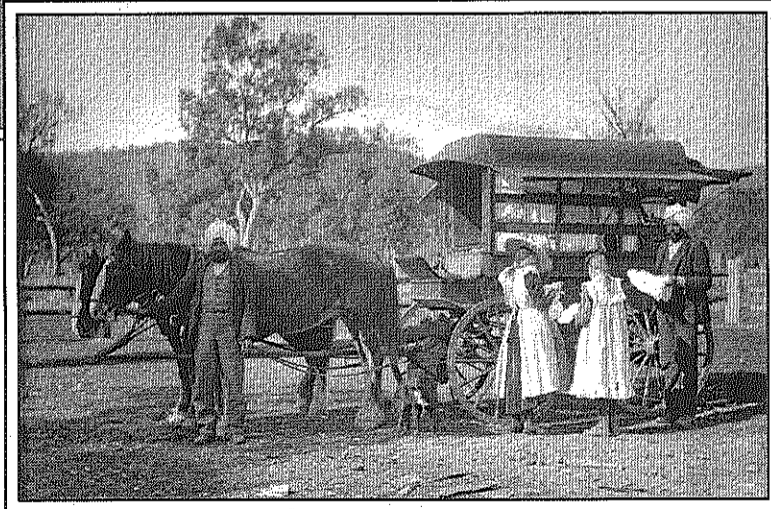
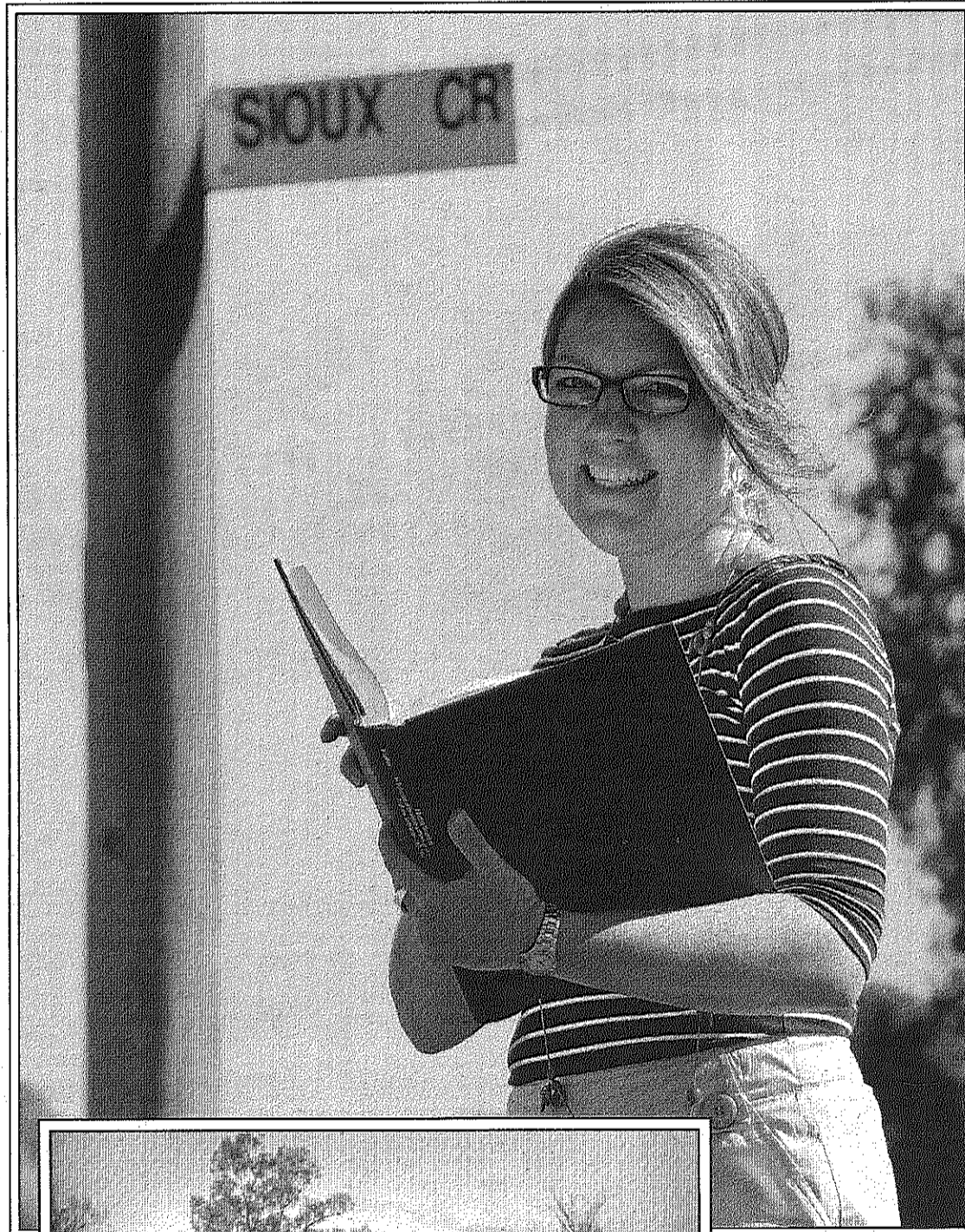
There were many hawkers from India but Chinese and Lebanese men also visited Albury, while Syrians were known in other parts of Australia. But the Indian hawkers brought a particularly fascinating culture to the Border.

"The male Indians came to Australia to raise as much money as they could," Dr Laidlaw says.

"The idea was always that they would go back to India to their families."

If they died on Australian soil, their Hindu faith required cremation ceremonies to be carried out and the remains to then be sent home to India to be thrown into the River Ganges.

Some of the hawkers were wise busi-



nessmen, such as Purtab Singh, who arrived in Australia in the late 1880s.

He made Henty his home for the next 50 years where he purchased several properties.

"At the age of 80, Purtab's health began to fail and he inquired of his countrymen about passage home to India," Dr Laidlaw says.

"Unfortunately, his health proved too poor to enable him to travel to his homeland and on September 29, 1951, Purtab violently took his own life after setting fire to his small hut in Henty."

At first, police believed he was murdered because his throat was cut. The Henty coroner found a verdict of suicide, supported by police evidence.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported on October 6, 1951, that a fellow hawker, Nue Patapa, from Myrtleford, testified that Purtab had asked him to travel back to India.

Nue had refused and Purtab had become depressed.

"Nue said Hindus had to be cremated after death," the newspaper reported.

"He identified fragments of a book as the Hindu bible and said Singh would have had to read the death ceremony before he died."

Purtab's remains were buried in an unmarked grave at the Henty ceremony until the hawker was recognised with a service in October 2008 featuring the Indian high commissioner Sujatha Singh.

"In 1951 only the undertaker, two gravediggers, four policemen and two members of the press were present at Purtab's funeral," Dr Laidlaw says.

"In 2008 more than 100 people honoured the life of Purtab.

"His last resting place is now honoured with a plaque and gravestone in the Henty cemetery."

While Purtab was appreciated by his community, it seems hawkers weren't welcome in all areas.

There were allegations of poor conduct and reports of the country being overrun by hawkers, especially at the turn of the 20th century — both of which tended to be false.

Newspapers across the country reported on disputes among hawkers and between hawkers and their customers who had debts owing, with allegations of violent behaviour on the part of the hawkers.

"Our Albury correspondent writes: 'This portion of the Riverina district is overrun by Indian hawkers,' the *Australian Town and Country Journal* reported on July 23, 1898.

"Residents are indignant and declare that licences should not be issued to these men."

The *Queenslander* reported in its intercontinental news column on January 18, 1896, that a central licensing court had sat to review the applications of hawkers' licences.

"Mr Addison, stipendiary magistrate, chairman of the bench, said the bench had fully considered this matter (of Syrian and India hawkers' licences), and though complaints were rife regarding the conduct of certain hawkers ... the police reports were generally favourable to the hawkers," the article read.

"Out of the 202 applied for, only nine were new and therefore it could not be said that the country was being flooded with aliens."

Dr Laidlaw says generally the hawkers were well accepted in the community although there is a history of them being known as the "Indian nuisance".

"People said they were quite troublesome and some would push their way into homesteads," she says.

"In the 1890s there was a lot of history of racism but in the Albury region they were quite well liked for all that they provided."

Dr Laidlaw says photos of Albury locals observing Hindu cremation ceremonies at Jelbart Park supports that claim.

Ironically, the place where the cremations were carried out has since been developed into a barbecue area.

Dr Laidlaw would like to see some form of commemoration at Jelbart Park to honour the hawkers, although the council did make an attempt in the 1960s with street names.

"The names are in the corner where the cremations were meant to have taken place," she says.

"It was an oversight of who the Indian hawkers were but it's an interesting story of misidentification.

"These are the stories I'd like to get out to local people."

**ABOVE:** Prue Laidlaw says Albury Council attempted to commemorate the contribution of Indian hawkers to the city by naming streets in their honour. Unfortunately, names from the wrong Indians were chosen.

Picture: MATTHEW SMITHWICK

**LEFT:** Two Indian hawkers, possibly in the Upper Murray area, serving customers from the covered wagon.

Picture: STATE LIBRARY OF VICTORIA