

Are We There Yet?



This picnic set served Reverend Carr and his family for more than 20 years.
Photo: Lannon Harley.

What do family picnics mean to you? Sand in the sandwiches and bare legs on scorching hot vinyl car seats? Perhaps it's cold roast chicken and cool shady river banks. Whatever your personal version, the picnic is something of an Australian institution that evokes our legendary love of the great outdoors.

As a Methodist minister in Sydney in the 1940s, 50s and 60s, Reverend George Carr took annual leave of three or four weeks each year. A feature of this holiday period was the family picnic with his wife Jessie and their three children.

In keeping with the wartime need for moderation and restraint, the Carrs put together a picnic set for use on these family outings. An old brown suitcase was painted in cheerful summer-sky blue, and leather straps were attached inside the lid to hold plastic plates. A thermos, knives, cups, and salt and pepper shakers were assembled. These may have begun as a matching set, but other versions were added as originals went missing over the years. Perhaps some were accidentally left behind on one of the family's outings to Potts Hill, near Bankstown in western Sydney.

In 1965 Reverend Carr retired, but he and Jessie continued their family picnic tradition. Perhaps it was around this time that they included in the picnic set two plastic trays that attached to the car window, providing a handy spot for that afternoon cup of tea while travelling.

The Carr family's picnic set brings to life for us so much of Australians' leisure time during and after the Second World War. In the late 1940s governments began to legislate for increasing periods of paid annual leave, allowing workers more leisure time to spend with their families. The production of the first Holden in 1948 made car ownership a possibility for many and, combined with the end of petrol rationing soon after, saw the birth of the Sunday drive.

Paid annual leave was intended to be taken in consecutive weeks. In response, many businesses introduced the holiday shut-down, making it easier for them to accommodate staff leave breaks, and establishing the 'holiday season'. By the late 1950s and 1960s the roads leading to the coast from Australia's major cities would be choked with cars at each end of the summer holiday season, back seats filled with children plaintively asking 'Are we there yet?'

Cheaper holidays enabled families to spend all of their annual leave period 'on holiday'. Beachside camping and caravanning provide some of our iconic images of the Australian family holiday. These kinds of holidays meant home cooking and barbecues, which in turn led to a rise in the need for holiday equipment. The portable barbecue, the Esky, and the folding table became the must-have comforts in the outdoor, holiday home-away-from-home.

The home-made picnic set served the Carr family through all of these developments. Assembled in the make-do war years, it went on Sunday drives and picnics to the Bankstown water tower as well as on longer trips. Home-made meals were an economy that allowed holidays away from home to last longer. The Carr picnic set survived the development of increasingly sophisticated camping and outdoor products to remain an integral part of annual holidays up to and after Reverend Carr's retirement. The car window snack trays are a concession to the modernisation of the picnic, and remind us of the importance of the car to many Australians' experience of the great outdoors.

On Jessie Carr's death in the 1990s the picnic set passed to her granddaughter Felicita, who in turn donated it to the National Museum. The Carr family's picnic set is an illustration of the Museum's desire to tell the stories of ordinary as well as extraordinary Australians. It is not only the iconic moments and heroic stories that the Museum's collection tells. It is a collection that also speaks to us of hot summer afternoons, a nice cup of tea, and the kids in the back asking 'Are we there yet?'

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