

# BINGIL BAY BOTANIST

THE STORY OF NORM BYRNES & HIS ARBORETUM



By Dr Bob Jones and Ken Gray

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Cover

A brown pine named in the Norm Byrnes Arboretum.

# A HISTORY OF NORM BYRNES (1921-1988)

## BY BOB JONES

This story is from an article written by Dr Bob Jones in the Community for Coastal and Cassowary Conservation (C4) publication, *Mission Beach Bulletin*, Issue No. 34, December 1998. Thanks to Bob and C4 for allowing us to include Bob's valuable history here. We add some further details on Norm after this chapter focusing on the creation of the Norm Byrnes Arboretum.

The details of Norm's early life I have mostly obtained from his wife Joan and his son Ron, who shared some wonderful stories about his father at a tree-planting ceremony held in Norm's honour on November 25<sup>th</sup> 1997 at C4. Apparently, many of the stories came from Norm's sister Bonnie who has clear recollections of their childhood. Anyway, here's what I've been able to put together from a number of sources. Because I'm uncertain of the dates of several events, I can't give any guarantee that this hasty biography follows exact chronological order.

### Childhood in Adelaide

Norm was born in Adelaide in 1921. Fortuitously, he spent part of his childhood growing up in a house directly opposite the botanical gardens—a fateful landmark in the life of someone later to become a botanist. Ron relates that during the years of the Great Depression the gardens were surrounded by fences to prevent homeless people from settling on the park grounds. This however proved no barrier to young Norman who managed to continue his explorations of the gardens by entering through the drain pipes. If anything, the subterranean route only added to the boy's sense of adventure.

Many years later, Norm was still boldly going forth – whether braving NO TRESPASSING signs and tangled Wait-a-While vines in order to track down an illusive plant or wading through croc-patrolled waters while collecting evidence against a proposed development scheme.

Apparently, there was a morgue at the back of the botanical gardens and this too seemed to require investigation. On one fact-finding mission Norm perversely thought to heighten the excitement by shutting the door on his sister Bonnie who was his companion on this particular foray. For obvious reasons Bonnie has a vivid memory of the experience.

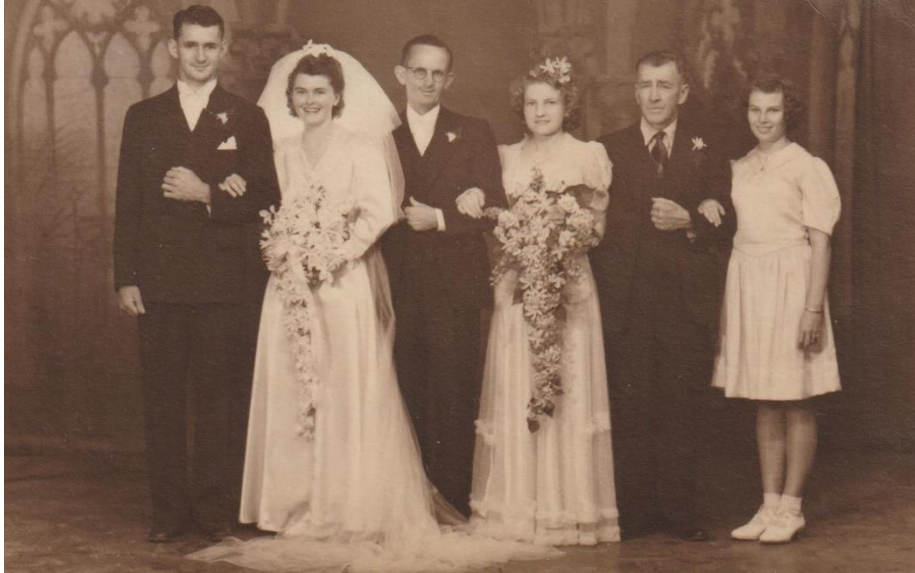
### The move to Sydney

Following a breakdown in the relations between Norm's parents what was left of the family eventually moved to Sydney, more exactly to Yowie Bay. We of course tend to think of Sydney mainly as a big city but Yowie Bay was actually a bushy location. So Norm's love of nature was once again well served.

At the age of 15 Norm became a high school drop-out—not for lack of interest or satisfactory marks but simply because the boy hoped to get a job to help pay family bills. He reasoned that since he had the second highest marks in his school he'd have little problem in finding at least some sort of work. But he was wrong: he found none. Therefore, he enrolled in night school at the local tech and began his formal study of science. The tech science course also was never finished (though a high school diploma was received) for at the age of 18 Norm was drafted to war.

## War years and marriage

He was stationed for a time on the Atherton Tablelands and for a time in New Guinea. Both locations proved significant: the Tablelands gave him a love of north Queensland and New Guinea gave him a taste for tropical wildlife. Ron believes that it was his father's fond memory of Atherton that brought him back to north Queensland when he was 65.



Marriage of Joan and Norm, 1945.

In 1945, Norm married his lifelong wife Joan who he'd known from the age of seven. With the war over, he tried to resume his science course at the tech while working as an apprentice scientist. An acquaintance suggested that he might go further at uni. Norm didn't see how that would be possible since universities were expensive and he needed to earn a living. But the acquaintance informed him that as an ex-serviceman he was entitled to assistance from the government. Thus began Norm's career as a university student of science, botany in particular.

## "Mr. Science"

Diploma in one hand, wife in the other, he eventually arrived in Casino where he worked as a teacher of high school maths and science. Later he worked as a lecturer at the teachers' college in Bathurst and then again as a high school instructor, this time in Coffs Harbour. Perhaps these were the years when Norm developed his *Mr. Science* demeanour: his ability to convey complex information simply and in a fashion that revealed his own sense of excitement.

These were also the years during which the young couple were involved in child rearing. I say *couple* advisedly because Joan insists (and Ron concurs) that it was a cooperative effort. She wasn't a *married single mum* with a husband and several other kids besides. Norm changed nappies, made meals and took charge of the three children so that Joan would have time to herself. She reports that, thanks to Norm's participation in the family, she was never once forced to miss her much-loved sporting fixtures.



## Chemical research

From this point my chronology grows very hazy. At some point (1961), there was a move to Lismore where Norm took up a career as a chemist -working for the Department of Agriculture. Because this phase of his life is the only one I have directly from Norman himself I'll relate it in some detail.

Norm's job in Lismore was chiefly to investigate the effects of arsenic and DDT in cattle-dip formulas. Norm managed to develop a technique for detecting minute quantities of toxins, one that far exceeded the best tests available in the United States at that time. On the basis of his studies (I gather that this was when his first scientific papers began to appear), the Americans found traces of harmful chemicals in meat products from New Zealand and acted to ban their importation. Meanwhile, the reaction of government officials here in Australia was to ban Norm Byrnes! That is to say, he was forbidden to publish any more articles on toxin detection lest the yanks applied his techniques to Australian meat.

## Illness

Nonetheless, the government recognised Norm's talent and wisely invested in his education, training him (in Sydney) to be one of Australia's first experts in spectrophotometry. By analysing the colour-bands of burning substances Norm would soon be able to detect even more minute quantities of poison than he had in the past.

Was his close involvement with lethal materials at least partially responsible for subsequent bouts of ill health? I put the question to him. He replied, *Ho ho, ho, who knows?* Well, as a matter of fact, he did know. He was responsible for the discovery that the organophosphates used in insect sprays accumulated in humans and could eventually cause illness. The first ever documented case of such poisoning was ... Norm Brynes himself who was hospitalised owing to his long exposure to the phosphates.

Norm's mum hadn't raised any stupid kids. He'd got the message: research into toxins didn't bode for a long and healthy future. In any case, Norm never had a desire to be a chemist: he was supposed to be a botanist. It was time to move on.

## The botanist

After the job in Lismore, the family moved to the Northern Territory where Norm had landed a position planning and collecting plants for a projected herbarium in Darwin. Later, he worked in another herbarium in Brisbane. More scientific papers were published and a master's degree completed during this same hectic era.

Norm retired from public life to start a tree farm in northern New South Wales apparently astonishing his neighbours with his ability to turn a windswept wasteland into a lush forest. This was actually his second tree farm: the first was a hobby farm he'd operated while working in Lismore. That farm too had been an amazement to his neighbours but two years of drought had undone all his efforts.

Despite the success of this new venture, neither Norm nor Joan were very happy. *The place was too windy and wet*, says Joan. *We didn't like it*. So the couple put the tree farm behind them and set off for north Queensland, the area Norm had loved so much during his war years.

Eventually, in 1988, they arrived at Bingil Bay. Norm Byrnes was 65.

## A tribute to Norm

Of his life here, of his participation in the community and especially in C4; of his tireless activities finding, identifying, documenting and propagating rare species; of his determination to regenerate rainforest wherever possible; of his ongoing mission as a teacher; of his daily courage in contending with a debilitating degenerative disease; of his bright spirit and wonderful sense of humour—of all these things and more, I'll say next to nothing, trusting to the tributes of others who knew the man longer and better than I did. Instead, I'll focus on the one trait that impressed me most about Norman: his wholehearted commitment to communication.

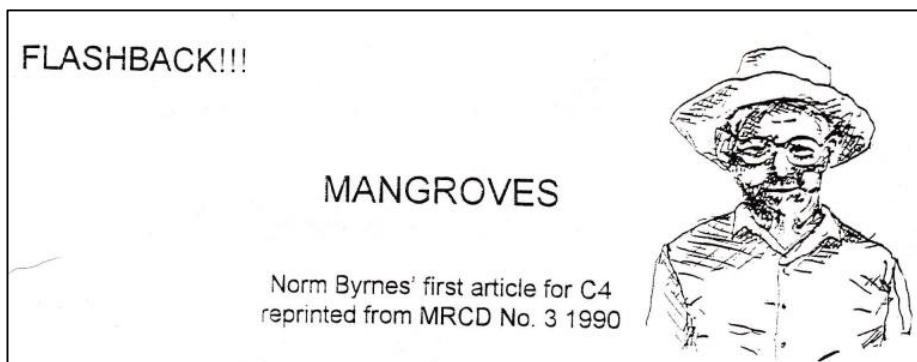


Norman Byrnes 1978.

Joan Byrnes with sons Ron and Allan.

Norm was determined to share himself whatever the obstacles. He would brook no barriers between himself and the people he wanted to reach. It didn't seem to bother him (though I'm sure it did) that he often stuttered and had to wait for a break in his palsy before he could go on. Certainly no one else was put out by these delays. It was always an inspiration to watch his excited happy face—almost too exuberant for words—as he pushed past his limitations, counting his physical ailments for nought. It was always a privilege to share his joy in knowledge.

As I've been writing this potted history, I've periodically had the words of a popular song running through my head: *Didn't you know that you're my hero?* Though I knew him only a short time (much too short) Norm Byrnes was already one of my heroes. I suspect that that's how it was for very many of us.



## NORM BYRNES ARBORETUM BY KEN GRAY

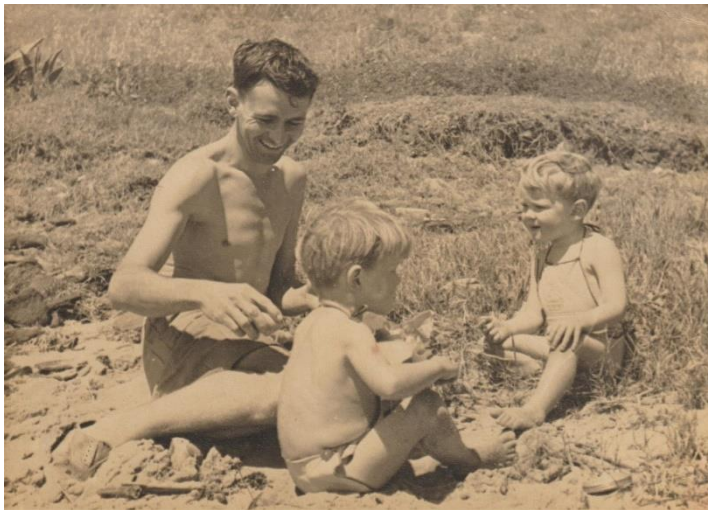
This chapter was created after an interview with Norm's son Ron Byrnes and his partner Wendy McTaggart and a little desktop research to find extra details and check dates.



This small pocket of accessible rainforest, with many of its trees labelled, is located alongside the C4 Environmental Centre in Porters Promenade. It was named after Norman Brice Byrnes, the botanist who created it.

Norm and Joan Byrnes came to Bingil Bay in 1988, joining their son, Ron who lived there with his partner, Wendy McTaggart. Norm married Joan Rosman in 1945 at Rockdale, Sydney. Norm and Joan had three children, Alison, Alan, and Ron.

He served in WWII in PNG seeing action in the Army at Milne Bay. He was discharged in 1943 with malaria after being in active service with the 110 Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment for a year and a half.



Norm Byrnes with sons Alan (left) and Ron.



Norm enlists 1941.

He graduated BSc at the University of Sydney in 1946, then Dip Ed and was a lab worker and science teacher until 1961. He then joined the Department of Agriculture to conduct research into cattle dip insecticides for the Border Tick Control program in Lismore, NSW.

In 1965, Norm moved to Darwin as a research botanist at the NT Herbarium and did his MSc thesis there. Just before Cyclone Tracey in 1974, he left Darwin to join the Queensland Herbarium in Brisbane. Norm was a collector of Australian plant species all his life and his collections include 567

species stored in herbaria. He named several plant species including *Dansiea elliptica* (and the *Dansiea* genus) and *Terminalia arenicola*, the Brown Damson tree, which is the favourite fruit of the black cockatoos in Mission Beach. He had two plant species named in his honour (*Grevillea byrnesii* and *Goodenia byrnesii*) as well as a plant genus (*Neobyrneseia*.)



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Brown Damson fruit, from *Fruits of the Rainforest* by Wendy Cooper, illustrations by W. T. Cooper.

Norm published several scientific papers and a book for the Queensland Herbarium in 1977 and was regarded as a taxonomy expert and a formidable collector.

When Norm retired, he became quite unhappy, and his family relationships were strained. That turned around when he was asked to join C4 and was soon to start up their nursery. This was to be life-changing for Norm and an incredible boost for C4. Norm was happiest when he was involved in his lifelong passion for Australian native plants. Plants were everything to him - his vocation and his hobby.

Soon after setting up the nursery, C4 was permitted to re-forest the land adjacent to their building. When the primary school announced their relocation from Boyett Road to Wongaling Beach in 1992, Norm was let loose to create an arboretum. The park is co-named after the Johnstone Shire Council mayor at the time, Ross Overton, who helped make Norm's mission possible. Norm was also the leader of a C4 community program of reforestation that was highly successful and continues today.

Diane Bull recalls the area from a time just before the arboretum was built:

*When my son was in pre-school in 1988, we used to walk over the often squelchy 'paddock' to cross Porter Promenade and get up to the school. Banana Festivals used the area for parking and a big marquee and they achieved a world record for the longest Banana Split there. The school used it for sports and there was a cricket pitch at one stage (the concrete pitch remains there among the trees.)*





Trees were renamed after the destruction of cyclones.

Norm's Arboretum 2022.

Unfortunately for Norm, a drought was upon him after planting a mass of different tree species in the new arboretum. In 1992, rainfall was merely 1,923 mm compared to an average year of 3,070 mm and the trees were to endure a period of low rainfall that lasted for five years. Norm was seen, usually alone, day after day in the hot sun, bucketing water onto his fragile trees.

There was anger in parts of the community that the Council had allowed Norm to plant the arboretum. There was a concrete practice cricket pitch in the park, and some believed it should have been retained (a new pitch was built at MARCS Park.) On two occasions early in the venture, Norm's hopes were dashed when the trees were ripped out mercilessly by disaffected residents. On the second occasion, the trees were dozed, and their trunks snapped in the hope that Norm and his band of energetic C4 volunteers would abandon the project.

Norm was merely strengthened by these threats and setbacks and, undeterred, he gathered his team together each time and replanted the forest. His resilience paid off handsomely for the district when we look at the stunning outcomes just 30 years later.

Nature was kinder to this emerging forest during the years from 1998 to 2000 which were super wet with a record rainfall year in 2000 giving Norm's much-loved trees a huge boost. However, Norm did not live to see the booming growth that was to occur in those years.

In 1993, Thelma and Ken Gray joined Norm's community tree-planting events and were drawn in by his enthusiasm for the forests. Norm came to their 17-acre Brookes Beach rainforest often and helped them identify many of the trees. He was particularly interested in the masses of *Arenga australasica* palms growing profusely on this land and collected the seeds for his C4 nursery. When they were clearing a small area for the home site and transplanting some mature palms successfully, Norm asked for a couple of well-advanced palms for the arboretum. Those are now to be seen as fully grown *Arenga* palms alongside the Syd Harris gravestone at the entrance to the Arboretum.

Norm often wrote articles for the C4 newsletter (named MRCD Newsletter at that time) and these were often about local plants or history. In time, we will perhaps research the stories he wrote and uncover more useful snippets of history.

Dr Bob Jones of Bingil Bay has been the curator of the Norm Byrnes Arboretum since Norm died, working on it tirelessly for the last 24 years, planting trees, sweeping the paths, renaming trees, and removing invasive species – the spirit of Norm lives on in yet another super-committed volunteer.

Bob and C4 have plans to take the Arboretum further and these include more tree name plates and the addition of plant species that are not represented yet grow naturally in beachside forests in the district. There are a few glades in the Arboretum where trees can be added, and they are considering the option of having an interactive environmental experience area for children to play in.

Something the author would like to see added is QR codes on the tree name plates that link the viewer to interesting short excerpts on the species, thus making the Arboretum a more interesting and interactive experience. There was once a list of the 80 species named in the Arboretum, but that had no stories about the species attached – some species have very interesting stories that could be told by a skilled environmental writer. The Arboretum adds an important destination activity for visitors to Mission Beach and having short tree stories available instantly to visitors would be something unique to Mission Beach. There are many rainforest walks available across North Queensland but few if any have ways for tourists to see and know more than the beauty of the trees.

## RON BYRNES

It would be remiss of us not to write a few words about Norm's son, Ron Byrnes when recording this history for Ron is a unique character with many extraordinary talents and has lived at Bingil Bay for 35 years.

Ron qualified as an electrician and as an air-conditioning technician and worked in these roles for the Tully Sugar Mill for many years. Wendy was at the mill as well for a long period, first in the laboratories as a technician and later as a fugals technician. Both were hard-working, widely respected, and valued employees who did their utmost to master their jobs and contribute significantly to their workplaces.

Ron has very different interests from his father and became an avid veteran car restorer early in life. However, Norm's intense interest in nature influenced Ron who can now identify all of Australia's butterflies – he has identified around 200 species in this district. He has gradually learnt their primary food sources and plants some specific vines to attract important local species to his rainforest.

Dilettante is not a term we could ever apply to Ron Byrnes. While he has no university degrees like his learned father, Ron would easily have completed a PhD at a university if a subject took his interest. He never does things in half measures: Ron becomes an expert in the topics that interest him and has a strong ability to understand and remember complex technical subjects and absorb a mountain of information about them.

Over the years, he developed a strong affinity for and knowledge of local tree species and does much to restore and protect the rainforest land he owns.

So, Ron's mind stores vast information about electrician matters and air cons for his work life as well as data on trees and butterflies, but the biggest bank of information in that highly active brain of his is saved for his jalopy work. That is his passion in life – apart from Wendy of course!

When only 12 years old, Ron purchased his first car. It was a 1929 Austin 7. It was not in working order, he could not afford that, but after many years of working on this car, it was restored to life much to the amazement of the residents who witnessed its transformation daily on Ron's front verandah in northern NSW.

Ron has restored countless old cars over his lifetime from relatively modern vehicles like his blue and white MG 1100 and his baby blue E-Type Jaguar to his favourite veteran cars built before 1919. He specialises though in a car most of us have never heard of, the *Fabrique Nationale*, a brand of car that was built in Belgium in the early 1900s.

Ron has restored two FNs including a green 1908 model and has tracked down every one of these cars that were sold to Australia. He knows their ID details and where they were sent and their owners. He has the design drawings for many FN models and will go to the end of the Earth to find a part for one of these unusual vehicles.





Ron's 1908 *Fabrique Nationale*.

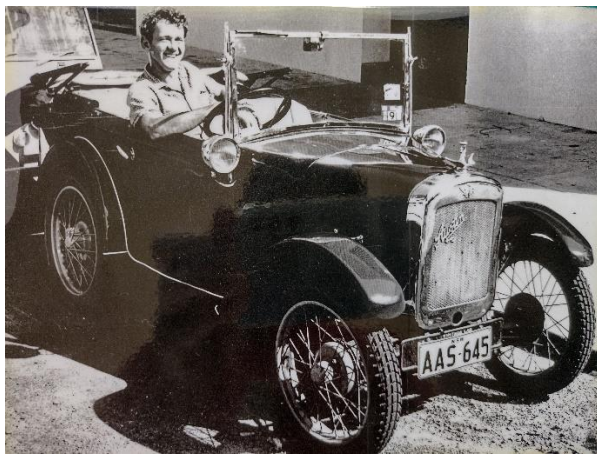


Ron and Wendy's lounge room – often another workshop.

The lounge image above shows that for much of the time, Ron has one of his jalopies joining them in the house. Few partners would tolerate this intrusion, but Wendy takes it in her stride and shares Ron's love of veteran and vintage cars, attending many rallies with him across Australia.

They always take a large canopy-covered trailer with them on their treks to attend rallies, often with one of their jalopies in it, yet mostly it is used to capture old treasures found far and wide: an old gearbox or engine block or a rusted-out chassis with parts Ron intends to scavenge and restore. Some rusty old cars and parts are found on a farm out west and little can be retrieved, yet Ron has something he sees that is worth saving. If he is unable to find an original part for a vintage car, no matter what, he finds the original car maker's design drawings and makes the part from scratch.

The wooden car frame shown in the image above was a work in progress on a replica of a 1926 MG 1428 Boat Tail.



The restored 1929 Austin 7 with Ron proudly driving in 1968 and again, 50 years later, in 2018.

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