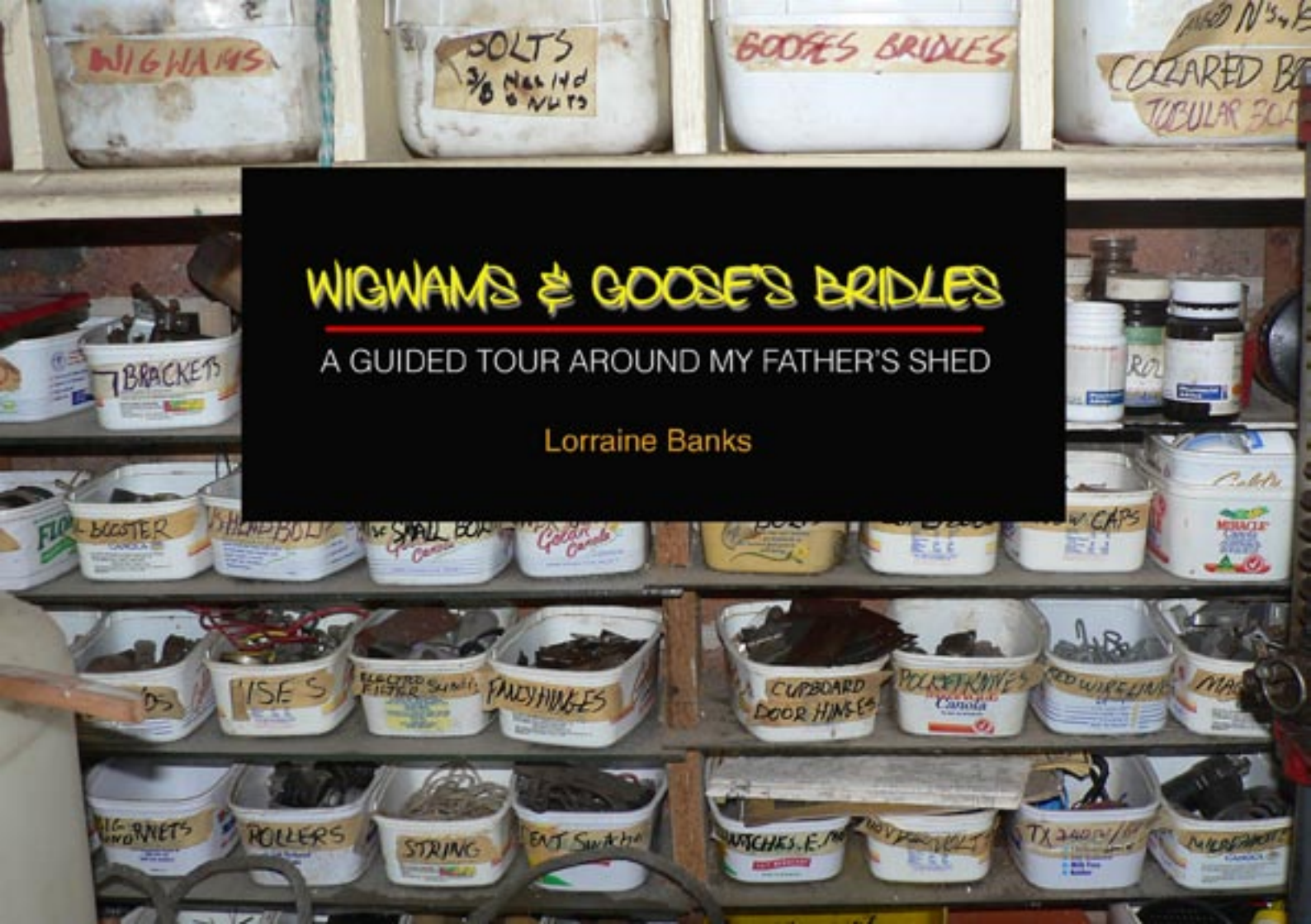
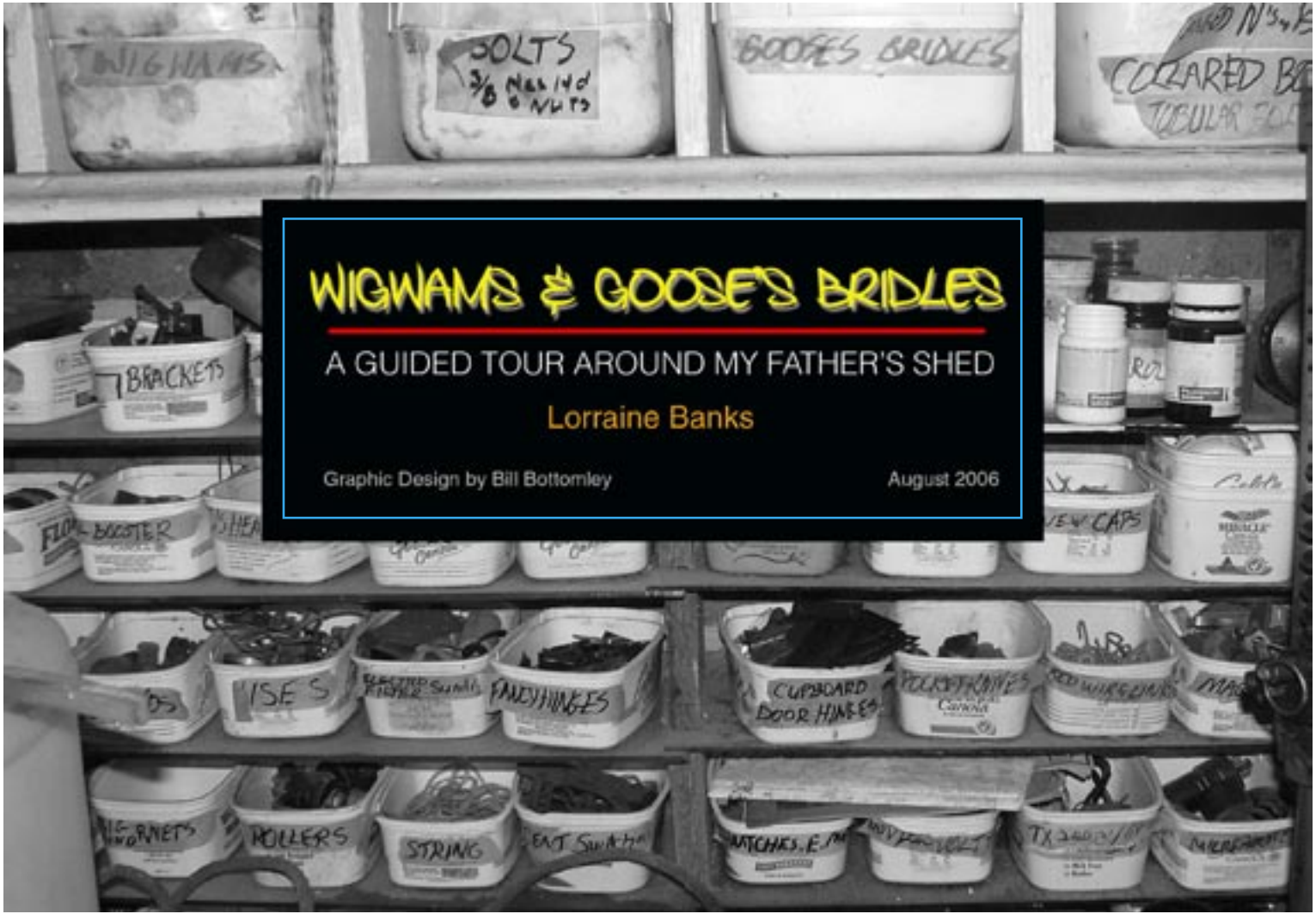
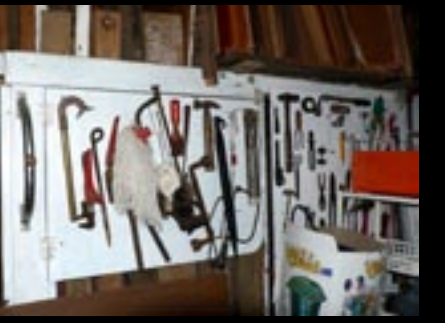

WIGWAMS & GOOSE'S BRIDLES
A GUIDED TOUR AROUND MY FATHER'S SHED
Lorraine Banks


WIGWAMS & GOOSE'S BRIDLES
A GUIDED TOUR AROUND MY FATHER'S SHED
Lorraine Banks
Graphic Design by Bill Bottomley
August 2006
BOLTS
GOOSES BRIDLES
BRACKETS
FANCY HINGES
CUPBOARD DOOR HINGES
ROLLERS
STRING











When visiting Dad recently, I happened to mention that the tap on the water tank at Bill's place had begun to leak. Dad asked a couple of questions about the tap and how it operated, then disappeared out to his shed, returning with a tap (obviously well used, but which he assured me was in good working order), and a piece of hempen string. He explained to me how to remove the old tap and replace it with this one, without losing much of the water in the tank, and where the piece of string fitted into the process – it was to be wound round the end of the thread as the tap was screwed in, and it would form a seal as the tap was screwed tighter, but still allow the tap to be rotated enough to be turned the right way up. Then Dad told me the story of that particular piece of string. I mean, how many people know the history of a piece of string!

It got me thinking about all the treasures Dad has in his shed. Approaching 92, he doesn't spend quite as much time working there as he used to, but he still maintains a work shed the size of a double garage, crammed full with his eclectic array of handy items, treasures and general blokey bits and pieces, all neatly stashed away in boxes, jars, drawers, cupboards and containers, or on shelves, racks, hooks, nails and knobs. Whatever you might want, Dad has one – no not one, but several to choose from. This collection waxes and wanes over time, as he trawls the local garage sales and picks up a few treasures, then in turn has another garage sale himself and gets rid of a few surplus items. Everything is organised in a neat and orderly fashion, albeit one that none but he can understand. The contents of each jar, ice cream container, or drawer is labelled with masking tape. Old treasures are mixed with new treasures, modern electronic equipment is alongside vintage radio valves, transformers and condensers. Late model car accessories are stored with parts from a T-Model Ford, bullock wagon, or horse-drawn sulky.

Born in 1914, Denis Banks grew up in an era when you had to be able to improvise, adapt and make do. The consumer society we now live in had not arrived, and when something was bought it was assumed it would last a life time. Paying money to repair or replace things was frowned upon. You fixed them. A bloke had to be able to turn his hand to anything, to repair things when they broke down,

and to improvise when something was needed. No screw, bolt, wire, or length of string was discarded, because one day it might come in handy. Of course some men were handier than others, and Dad, like his father before him, has always been very handy, able to quickly and logically get to the nub of a problem, and (often ingeniously) come up with a way to solve it, or get around it.

As a small child I remember Dad building his shed at the house we lived in at Bobs Farm, when Dad had returned to his teaching career after being away at the war. Materials and cash were in short supply, but Dad was able to obtain bags of cement. So periodically he would hitch the trailer on to the car, and drive out into the sandhills behind the house to collect a load of sand. He had a couple of moulds, and each afternoon would mix a batch of concrete, and pour it into the moulds, and make a couple of concrete blocks. As the number of bricks grew, he began to assemble them, and the shed took shape. Mind you, this was the outdoor shed – he also had a room at the back of the house, where he did his radio and electronic work.

Dad enlisted in the Air Force during World War 2, as he was by then a qualified pilot, having learned to fly in the 1930s, in the days of Tiger Moths, and other early aircraft. But the military, in its bureaucratic wisdom, trained him in the new, top secret field of radar, and he was sent to run radar stations in remote parts of the Northern Territory. Again, ingenuity and resourcefulness were required, as there was no-one to call on if something broke down, and it was up to him to keep the equipment running. This gave him a detailed knowledge of all things electronic (such as they were in those days, with battery operated equipment, valves, condensers and the like, long before the invention of transistors and microchips). So after the war, when he went back to teaching, Dad became the local handyman who knew how to repair everyone's radio, record player, and electrical appliances as they became more common in local households. (When we first moved to Bobs Farm there was no mains electricity, but that came through a few years later.)

By the time we moved to Williamtown to live, in the mid 1950s, Dad's radio repair sideline had increased to a profitable part-time occupation, so the new house had to have a new shed. This time he built the equivalent of a 4 car garage. One bay for the car, one for the caravan, and two for his workshop. It was always a mess to the outsider, with the entrails of various radios, TVs (after 1956), and other household appliances spread across the numerous tables and work benches. Dad always knew where everything was, and what went with what, but to the outsider, it was a chaotic jumble.

At one stage I remember he instituted a system of storing small bits and pieces in jars, along a beam above the work bench, and these gradually spread around all the beams and rafters in the shed. Dad's

uncle Charlie worked over at the RAAF base, collecting rubbish, and they used to get through a lot of Vegemite. Uncle Charlie collected the Vegemite jars for Dad, and after cleaning them, the lids would be nailed to the beam or rafter, and the jar filled with nuts, bolts, nails, or whatever, and screwed to the lid. Thus the items were easily visible, and quickly accessible. Many of these vegemite jars migrated to Alstonville when they went up there to live, and moved back again about ten years ago and are now installed in his current shed, along with extra jars he has picked up from time to time.

Moving to Alstonville involved a big clearing out of the sheds (by then Dad had built several other sheds at Williamtown, as lean-tos on to the back of the main one, or in the side paddock), and rationalising a lot of his treasures. Years later, after expanding the collection again, having trawled garage sales in Alstonville and Lismore they had to be rationalised again to move back to where he now lives at Valentine.

Dad still mends things in his shed, or makes creative new adaptations to things he has, or to solve problems. The other day when I called in he had set up a small grinding wheel on the edge of the work bench, but rather than have to turn it with the attached handle, he was making a foot pedal for it so he could turn the wheel with his foot, and have both hands free to hold the item he was grinding. He never stops coming up with new ideas to make things work better, easier, or more efficiently.

As computers became more commonplace, Dad acquired a computer, and he keeps up to date, checking his share prices daily on broadband, surfing the net, and emailing friends and family. He has not ventured into the insides of his computer, but it is set up on his office with a range of shelves, dividers, and other structures he has contrived so there is a place for everything and everything has a place. The shelves and dividers might be panels from an old radio, wardrobe, you name it. Nothing would have been bought brand new, as there would always have been something out in the shed which he could use.

Adapt, re-use and recycle are slogan words of modern environmentalists. Dad would not regard himself as an environmentalist, but he is certainly an advocate of those values. If you keep something long enough you will find a use for it. I am sure Dad's father would be pleased to know that the hemp string he saved from the top of one of the bags of pollard he got to feed the chooks 60 or 70 years ago is now in use around a tap on Bill's tank, and working just as it should.

Lorraine Banks
August 2006

ABOUT WIGWAMS AND GOOSE'S BRIDLES

When I was a small child, if I asked my grandmother what something was, or what she was making, the response would often be "a wigwam for a goose's bridle." I never did understand why geese needed bridles, let alone why the bridles needed to be kept in wigwams. But I soon learned that this was a definitive answer, and no further explanation or elaboration was likely to be forthcoming. So wigwams for goose's bridles remained the name for a variety of things whose purpose or function was not immediately obvious.

However if wigwams were needed for goose's bridles I am sure Dad would have one, or at least have fathomed out how to make one. Dad was never one to fob off a genuine interested question, so when I asked him recently to show me some of the unusual treasures he had in his shed, he was only too happy to explain what they were and where they came from.

And so, armed with camera, a tape recorder, and Bill to help, we went over to Dad's and got him to give us a guided tour of his shed. As he selected and talked about each item, explaining where it came from, what it was used for, or why he made it, I photographed the item while Bill tape recorded Dad's commentary. Then Bill transcribed the tapes and laid out the book.

Dad's description of some of the treasures in his shed follows. The tour starts, fittingly, with the pieces of string that had set me thinking about putting this book together.


THE TOUR

Denis: When I was growing up Mum and Dad kept a few chooks and sold the eggs, which meant that we had to buy bags of pollard for the afternoon meal and wheat for the morning meal. These bags were sewn up by people whose sole job was to fill the bags and sew them up. They used a bagging needle and a piece of string about two metres long that they would thread through the eye of the needle then tie the other two ends together in a knot. You'd stitch the top of the bag up with stitches less than an inch apart, which left two ears on the corners of the bag – one where you started and one where you finished. You used these to drag the bag around or to lift up onto your shoulders. A bag of wheat weighed about 160 – 180 lbs, and even as a young fellow I could carry a bag of wheat on my back from the truck where it was brought up to the gate up to the shed. There's a sort of knack to how to be able to carry that much weight. I wish I had it now! Anyway, Dad always kept these pieces of string. He had a whole lot of them hanging from a rafter in the shed. And when we moved from Williamtown up to Alstonville I bundled up all the string and took it with me. I still use it pretty regularly, and this is what I have left of it. It was a bit of this string that I gave to Bill to wrap around the tank tap thread before screwing it into the tank. By using this string to stop the tap leaking from around the thread you could screw it in place so that the turn-on part of the tap ended up at the top where it ought to be. The pieces of string have all still got the knot in the middle because when you'd finished sewing a bag you'd just snip the piece of string at the needle and thread up another bit of string for the next bag. The string in those days was actually hempen string – that is, made of hemp. I've often wondered what it would be like to smoke but I've never got around to trying it!

This gadget was designed to use the compression in the cylinder of a motor car to build up pressure in a drum -- a reservoir of air. You'll notice that on the right hand side of the picture there are three different sized screw threads, corresponding to the different sized screw holes in the cylinder heads of different model cars at that time. On the left hand side there is a hose fitting for the pressure hose. In the larger circle at the left hand end of the gadget there is a valve which, when the air is being sucked in, moves away from the hole and lets the air go down into the cylinder. As soon as the air starts to pump up, a disc moves towards the right and closes over all the holes in the right hand disc just behind where the hose fits on.

To adapt that to our purpose, we had a Bedford utility – about 1939 I think it was – and we put a 44gallon drum on the back of the utility and screwed out one of the spark plugs on the Bedford's engine and screwed this gadget in. The hose came along and into the 44-gallon drum. We put a suitable fitting onto the drum so that the hose would fit onto it, and in the big plughole in the drum I adapted a pipe that went down to the bottom of the drum, deep down into the Agent Orange (24D) which we wanted to spray onto the blackberries. Agent Orange (24D) was a common defoliant in those days. It was very effective. I think we put in less than 100 to 1 (water to 24D). When the air pressure, (with the engine running,) built up in the drum sufficiently, the fluid in the drum was forced downwards and up the outlet pipe and into the spray that Dad was using to kill the blackberries while I drove the truck around the paddock. In that? way we cleaned up a 30-acre paddock of blackberries in a couple of days. It was a very efficient way of doing it. The ute ran quite efficiently on the three cylinders while the other one was used as a pressure pump to build up pressure in the 44-gallon drum.

I use this scriber when I'm turning wood to mark where I want to put the next raised part or hollow part in the rod that I'm turning down. It's a marker with a heavy base that sits on the bench and lets you know exactly where to put the next cut in without having to scrawl all over the job.

This is called a *Megga* meter. It was used in the early days for measuring the resistance between the active wire in a house-wiring system, and the earth. So it was able to measure the resistance, which had to be sufficiently high that we didn't have leakage through the wiring system in the house. Remember that at that time the wires in the house were usually encased in a steel tube called conduit, and if they were frayed or in bad repair there could be a leakage there that could result in blowing the fuses. Since it didn't require batteries, it had a handle on it like the old telephones used to have. You wound the handle around and that worked a little generator which gave you the power supply to operate the meter.

This is a spark plug cleaner. It works off a 12 volt battery. There's a little switch there to switch it on and off. You put the plug into a sort of rubber grommet. There's a little fan inside that activates a shower of small particles of carborundum type of thing and they blow around inside and in a couple of seconds the spark plug comes out shiny bright and clean.

The anvil part of this belonged to Dad, and when I took it with us up to Alstonville I thought it would be a good idea if I made it mobile. So, I had this piece of plastic pipe about 18" in diameter, and I turned up a circular piece of wood to go in the bottom. Then I put the cross-pieces and the castors on the bottom and anchored the anvil to the top, and now I have a mobile anvil which is very handy if I want to go over near the front door of the shed – wherever I want to use it. It means I take the anvil to the job rather than the job to the anvil. And there are a couple of hammers stored on the side of it.

In the foreground is a tine out of a grader which was used to rip the road up. It's well worn down, but I anchored it to my bench there and it's very handy if I want to shape a piece of metal or something around the curved surface that it was worn down to from digging up the road. It came off one of the graders that Dad drove for the council.

Vibrator units. The one second from the left is a non-synchronous vibrator – it has only four plugs on the bottom. The one next to it has five, and the last one has six or seven. The last one is a synchronous vibrator, which is a bit more advanced than the others. These had two thick pins that took the six or twelve volts in from the battery and that caused a reed to vibrate backwards and forwards like the clanger on an electric bell. When they were vibrating these other two were connected to the primary of a transformer. When the vibrator was vibrating, the current was stopping and starting fifty or so times a second, which gave an intermittent direct current being fed from the battery into the transformer. The transformer then translated the six or twelve volts up to around 120volts AC, which is what was required for a household radio at that time. This would be an early type of inverter like they use today to transform the 12 volts DC from solar panels into 240 volts AC. These were in use from about 1936 onwards. There was an interval during the war when they weren't so popular but when the first car radios came out these were the only means you had of powering it apart from carrying a big pile of cells to run your valves.

The home-made vibrator unit (below, left) was constructed from a WW2 mess tin. The mound on the left is the 6v/12v transformer. The mound behind the vibrator unit is a “choke” to filter out the ripples (that cause hum) in the 120v DC circuit. This was a synchronous unit. It worked by having the vibrating reed fitted with two extra sets of contacts, each connected to the 120v winding of the transformer so that when the voltage on that contact point was positive the vibrating reed closed the contact points and transferred to the required DC supply. Thus, the pulsating (AC) current from the secondary winding of the power transformer was mechanically switched so that only when the pulses were positive were they added to the positive circuit. Hence no rectifier valve was required.

A saw-set. I’ve got three or four of those. You put it over the tooth of the saw and held it horizontal and when you squeezed it a little piece of metal bent the tooth over to set it so that it wouldn’t bind in the cut. It pushed the tooth away from you, so you did every second tooth on one side, then turned the saw around to set every second tooth on the other.

This is just a little simple speaker and box that I made as an extension speaker, just using an ice-cream container with a little speaker in behind those holes drilled in there.