

FRANK O'ROURKE

J. Frank O'Rourke was born in 1900 and grew up in Melbourne. Over the course of his life, he did much for amateur sport yet it was only by the merest chance that he became interested in athletics. In 1915, his college representative sprained an ankle and could not take his place in its inter-collegiate walking race and Frank was substituted. Although he had never competed before in any race and had not been interested in any sport, he placed third. This caused him to take up athletics and he joined the Carlton Harriers. After that, he won the event from the scratch mark and in between times competed with fair success in cadet boxing competitions.

He moved to Sydney in 1917, where he joined Botany Harriers and the N.S.W. Walkers Club. He was soon appointed secretary of the latter body and retained that post until his return to Melbourne in 1921. While in Sydney, he competed in 73 walking races over distances varying from 1 to 25 miles, and was placed in nearly 50. His best performances were third in the 1920 State seven mile championship to W. Pitt and A.C. Kitchen and second in the 1921 State 25 mile event.

He was also active on other fronts. He formed the Federal Taxation Swimming Club in October 1920 and won its diving championships. He also helped to start the Public Service Football Club which went on to be quite successful.

Returning to Melbourne in 1921, he joined Hawthorn Harriers and threw himself into the local athletics scene. One of his tasks was in assisting his father in the organization of the St Patrick's Day celebrations and the St Patrick's Athletic meet, held on a 6 lap athletic and 5 lap cycling track in Melbourne's Exhibition grounds. The only walking races available then were through Interclub and in special meetings such as this one. At that time, the walkers walked during the summer and ran during the winter.

Not long after the 1921 St Patrick's Athletic meet, Frank asked Bill Murray (a former classmate), Rex Merrick, Fred O'Grady and Bert Gardiner to meet him on a seat outside Flinders Street Station on a cool night, and they booked a room on the first floor of Hooker's Café, in Swanston Street, 3 doors up from the Flinders Street corner.

The group decided to reform the walking club that had disbanded in 1915, the Victorian Amateur Walkers and Field Games Club, and to adopt rules similar to the NSW club. A committee was soon established with Frank being unanimously appointed honorary secretary, and Mr R. H. Croll appointed as president. A. O. Barrett, W. Murray, J. Power, W. E. Briggs, A. C. Ryan, T. N. Vines, F. J. Ferguson, E. Herbert, H. Shovelton, F. L. Morgan and Captain J. Mackay were elected vice presidents. J. Power, R.H. Croll, W. Murray and F. Ferguson were nominated as judges.

Thus was born the Victorian Amateur Walking Club. The first club race was held in April 1922 at Brighton Beach over 3 miles with handicap – 18 walkers competed.



VAWC walkers in the early 1920's - Rex Merrick, Fred O'Grady and Frank O'Rourke

By 1923, the club membership had increased to 63 and Frank, along with Bert Gardiner, approached NSW with an invitation to race in Melbourne in an Interstate 7 mile event. NSW secretary Lawrence Drake responded positively and thus interstate walking began. This led to regular Australian championships that have continued over varying distances ever since.

Frank was heavily involved in club administration during these first few years until he was transferred to Canberra in 1927 with the Attorney-General's Department, when the first national Parliament House opened. Thus his associations with the Victorian Amateur Walking Club were severed. He stayed in Canberra until the 1940s before returning to Sydney where he continued competing until the 1950/1951 interclub season. The injuries he sustained when struck by a car outside St. Mary's Cathedral finished his athletic career. He eventually recovered and was able to spend many more years as an official of the NSW athletic association.

Frank later became chairman of the NSW Interclub Board and officiated at the 1956 Olympics in Melbourne. After this wonderful experience, he officiated at all subsequent Commonwealth /Empire Games until his death. He also officiated at two further Olympic Games - Mexico in 1968 and Montreal in 1976.

After officiating in the Montreal Olympics, he competed in the first World Veterans Athletics Carnival in 1977 in Gothenburg in Sweden and won a bronze medal in the walk.

With the Moscow 1980 Olympics in the offing, he told his family in no uncertain terms that he would never go to Russia! Nevertheless, I am sure he would have watched it avidly on television but for his untimely death in January 1980 at 79 years of age. Although still a very fit man, he suffered a fall in his home at Sydney and hit his head. He never recovered from the fall.

Because of his great contributions to walking in Victoria and NSW, Frank was awarded Life Membership of both the Victorian and NSW Walkers Clubs. In fact, he was the very first life member of the VAWC, being awarded this honour in 1928. He was also awarded one of the early life memberships of Athletics NSW.