

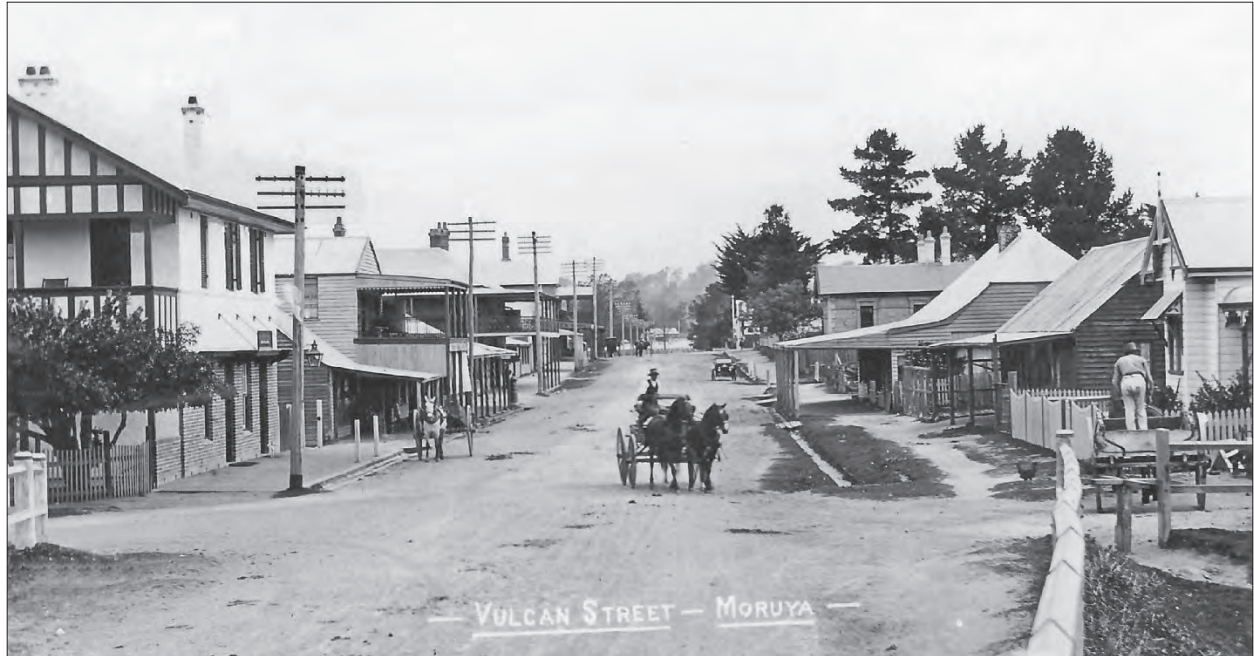
South Coast History Society Inc.

RecollectionS

April–May 2020

Issue 19

The World's Best Value Magazine! It's FREE!



Vulcan Street, Moruya in the 1800s. Photos courtesy Moruya and District Historical Society

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Bendethera is historically significant because it is one of the earliest inland farming properties on the South Coast, it provides a superb example of early European settlement of an isolated pastoral station, and it is 'an outstanding example of a selector's holding established under NSW Land Acts after 1861'. Yet few people have ever visited it – probably for a good reason!

BENDEThERA – Ruggedly Isolated ... Extraordinarily Productive

The track from Moruya to Bendethera (west-south-west of Moruya) is rough today – suitable only for Four Wheel Drives and accessible in dry weather only (it's a 1½ hour drive which ends with a long, very steep descent into the Bendethera Valley and several not-insignificant creek crossings).

One can only imagine the journey that faced those travelling to the area 150 years ago – a two or three day walk over some of the most heavily-wooded, rugged country imaginable, with climbs and descents of ridges up to 1,000 metres in height. Pack horses were required to transport any stores or equipment.

For the families who then settled in the Bendethera area, life would have remained a challenge. There is a stark reminder of this on one information board placed by the National Parks and Wildlife Service in the Bendethera

camping area:

'On one occasion here, one of the George family broke his leg some distance away from here down the Deua River.

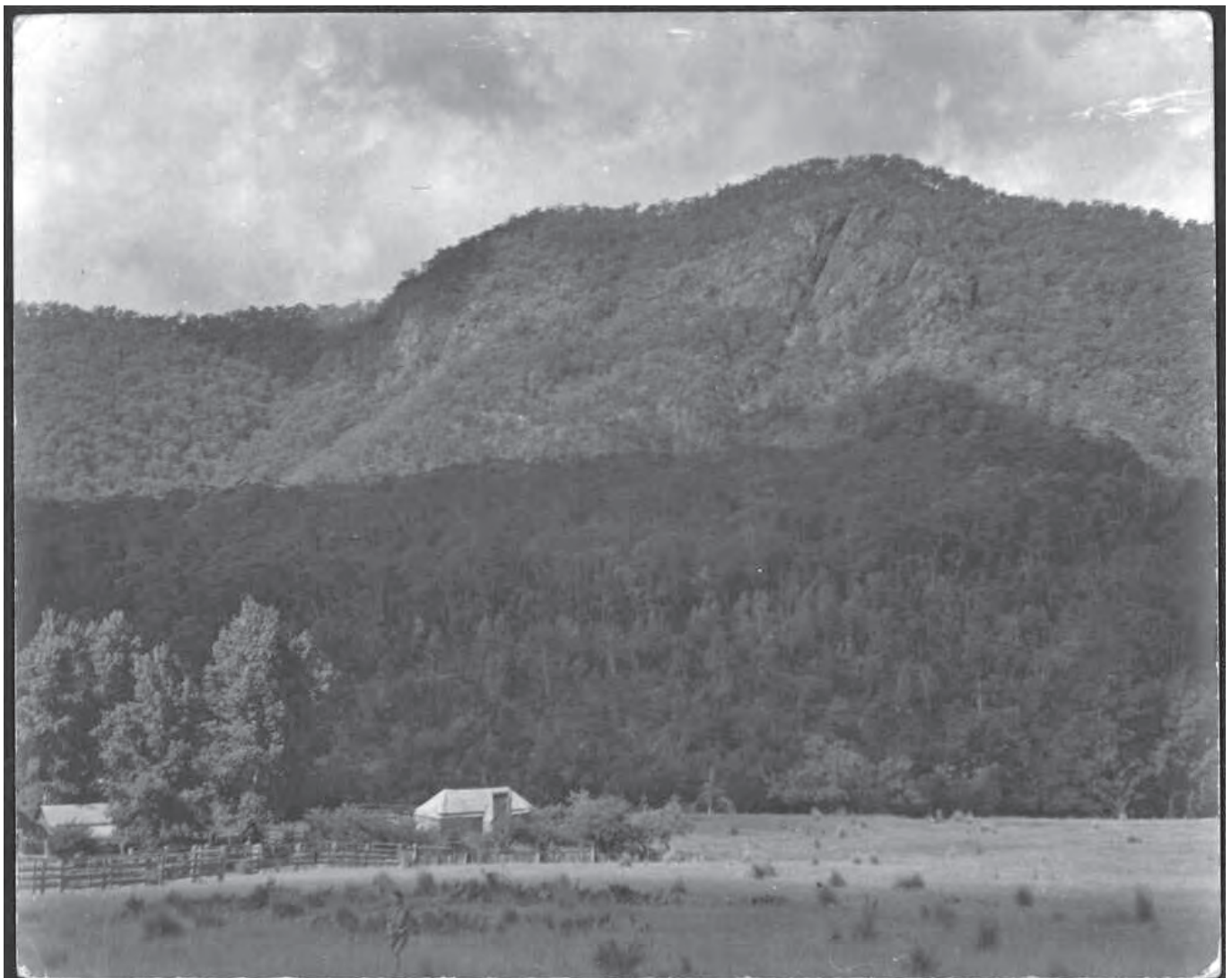
Faced with the problem of not being able to safely transport his son home, Joseph George set the leg and built a lean-to shelter around the boy.

The family carted food and water to him while his leg healed.

He was there for over two weeks before he was able to be moved.'

Remarkably, that George family successfully worked the valley and (again – because there was no alternative – using pack horses) transported their produce considerable distances to sell in settlements including Moruya, Merricumbene, Araluen, Nerrigundah and even further south to Cooma.

It seems that the area was used from 1838, when a David



Bendethera Homestead, c 1941. Image: Reg Alder, nla.obj - 137118547

Drummond obtained a Depasturing Licence from the NSW Government, enabling him to graze cattle on Crown land.

In 1863 Joseph George, who was a butcher by trade and who had run a business in Merricumbene (downstream along the Deua River from Bendethera, towards Araluen), purchased land and leased a further 840 acres of land at Bendethera. The story goes that he had first visited the area some time earlier when he tracked 40 miles along the Deua River in search of a horse – which he eventually found at Bendethera – that had been stolen from him by several Aboriginals.

Joseph and his wife Mary brought eight employees with them in 1863, including a carpenter who is believed to have been paid £2 per week and who helped build a house for the family, a separate kitchen and a number of sheds (a payment for 100 roofing rafters is noted among surviving records). A substantial family dwelling was certainly a necessity because Mary was to give birth to 14 children between 1861 and 1884, and all excepting the first were to survive and were raised at Bendethera. (James Richard, the first baby, is believed to have been buried in a grave that is still located and visible on their Bendethera property.)

Despite its relative isolation, the property was actually ideal for the use that Joseph and Mary had intended it. There were extensive river flats, they were fertile, and there were four main bridle tracks (at least one of which

was also a postal track, and one was to become known as George's Pack Track) leading in different directions out of the valley, along which George could transport his produce to significant-size markets, including Araluen which, in the 1860s and 1870s, had a population of up to 30,000.

Wheat, corn, oats and vegetables were cropped at Bendethera, and cattle, pigs, turkeys and horses were raised. Cheese was also manufactured, bacon was produced. And wattle bark was stripped from trees in the area and pack-horsed out to Moruya.

This was not a small-scale enterprise and the Georges operated a very efficient, productive farm. Joseph noted at various times in his diary that he had 300 pigs, 200 bullocks and cows and calves ... as well as 40 packhorses; that he transported (presumably using these packhorses!) 1,064 lbs of bacon, 2,000 lbs of flour and 21 bags of corn on one occasion to miners at Araluen; and that he had 17 acres of land under crop with wheat and 60 acres cropped with corn.

The method used by the George family to get their turkeys to market was ingenious: a sack of corn would be attached to the lead packhorse, it would have a small hole drilled into it, and the turkeys would simply follow the trail of corn that would be dropped along the track over the ranges.

A mile-long gravity flow irrigation channel (which can still be clearly seen) was dug along contours of the land from nearby Little Con Creek to provide water for crops



Join us as we go

Back to the Swinging 1960s



The music of the 1960s is unusually engaging, the history of the 1960s is absolutely astounding.

The '60s is (deservedly) a truly unforgettable decade!

**Now you can enjoy some of that fabulous 1960s music
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– an essential resource in an area that could become very dry at times. It is believed ex-miners from nearby goldfields were employed by the George family to help construct this and its associated holding reservoir.

As his sons grew old enough, Joseph gave each a paddock to cultivate and maintain.

Despite its physical isolation and the challenges travelling there, the property received a substantial number of visitors:

Several large, spectacular limestone caves are located about a 4 kilometre walk upstream along Con Creek from the main Bendethera homestead and farming area which were of attraction and still attract groups of speleologists (see *Recollections* issue 10, available at bit.ly/Recollections10, for a 1930 description of a visit to Bendethera Caves, which necessitated a 3-day walk into the caves).

In 1889, 1,180 acres around the caves were dedicated for public recreation. Then, for a time in the 1890s (when the NSW Government was actively promoting caves throughout the state as tourist attractions), one of Joseph's sons, Benjamin, was employed as 'caretaker of the caves' and was paid £50 per year by the government. He improved access to the caves by, for example, installing ladders – but that financial arrangement was soon stopped because visitors to the cave rarely exceeded 100 in any year (access to cave systems in places such as Jenolan and Yarrangobilly was infinitely easier, their cave systems were more extensive and more attractive to visitors, and there was absolutely no tourist infrastructure provided at Bendethera although the George family were welcoming).

In the 1880s a racecourse was constructed just across adjacent Con Creek from the George family homestead. Reportedly, significant numbers of people travelled to these race meetings.

And, whilst the George and later Rankin families lived at Bendethera, they received quarterly visits from the Catholic Parish Priest in Moruya (both families were active members of the Catholic Church in Moruya).

As gold mining in surrounding areas tapered off, the George family encouraged the development of silver mining close to Bendethera. Several mine shafts were sunk but were rapidly abandoned; the logistics of getting equipment into the area and of transporting material out of the area simply made the prospects unviable.

It seems that the George family experienced significant financial difficulties during the 1930s (the ready markets that were initially available at gold mining towns such as Araluen and Nerrigundah had long disappeared) and their bank may


have tried to, unsuccessfully, auction off the property. At the time, another of the Georges' sons, Randolph, is recorded to have been paid £10 per year by the local Council to keep the original trail to Bendethera (which followed the Deua River for a substantial distance) open.

However, the Bendethera property remained in the George family until 1949 when it was ultimately sold to the neighbouring (seven miles downstream) Rankin family for £500. For 30 years from about 1939 none of the George family, or later the Rankin family, had lived in the property as it was no longer considered to be highly productive – which is perhaps unsurprising, as local major markets for their produce had, by then, completely disappeared. By the mid-1960s the property was not even being used for agistment of horses or cattle.

After 1965 the Bendethera landholding passed to the McKinnon and then to Robinson families, before it was finally incorporated into the newly-formed Deua National Park in 1979.

Until as recently as 1964 access to the Deua area was available only by horse or foot. The construction of a network of fire trails in the 1970s then provided four-wheel drive access and the area became a popular destination for groups and individuals. For a time, the Robinsons charged for access across their property to the caves with, reputedly, about 1,000 visitors paying a \$2 entry fee during the first six months of 1979.

Sources: National Parks & Wildlife Service; Journal of the Moruya & District Historical Society Inc., September 2018; Bendethera Conservation Heritage Plan by ngheritage, 2009;

The George family water race, an old bread and meat-roasting oven, stock yards (partially reconstructed), stands of exotic mature trees and fruit trees, extensive cleared grass paddocks/river flats, and a George family member's grave remain as evidence of the former Bendethera farm site. Bridle tracks, the caves, mining shafts, Aboriginal sites and old cuttings are other historic features still to be found in the valley. The Moruya Museum holds a copy of an 1863 to 1883 Diary compiled by Joseph George and the Bendethera Caves Visitors Book from 1962 to 1970. Joseph and Mary George are buried in the Moruya Cemetery. 

South Coast History Society is considering organising a Four Wheel Drive day trip from Moruya to Bendethera in Spring. Cost is likely to be around \$50 per person. If you might be interested in joining us, please let us know by emailing southcoasthistory@yahoo.com



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Moruya's 'Jack of All Trades'

The history of any town really comes to life in the stories of its most colourful characters.

And Arthur Halley Preddey (1876–1952) is, unquestionably, one of Moruya's more 'colourful characters'.

He was a builder, sawmill owner and operator, coffin maker, undertaker, garage owner and operator, hire car operator, cinema and dance hall owner-operator, President of the Moruya Chamber of Commerce, Secretary of the Moruya Mechanics Institute, the town's Deputy Chief Air Raid Precautions Warden in World War II (*'he was constantly seen with a set of binoculars at his 'look-out' at the Air Raid Pub' in Moruya*), Secretary of the Moruya Hospital, local Coroner ... perhaps the most practical man in town ... and the scourge of eleven Matrons at Moruya Hospital.

Arthur's grandfather, George Preddey Snr., arrived in Sydney in 1827



Arthur Halley Preddey on his wedding day

as a convict. He had been a 'tallow chandler' (candle maker) who had been sentenced to transportation for housebreaking and stealing. He was assigned to work for a farmer at Pitt Town (near Richmond). In 1836, having served his sentence, he married a free settler, Margaret Carey, and then worked as a mineral surveyor, dairyman, dray proprietor (cart driver) and sail maker until finally becoming a timber merchant, buying a Summer Hill sawmill and acquiring the business of John Booth and Company (wholesale fuel, timber and produce merchants) in Kent Street, Sydney.

In 1876 he established a sawmill, timber yard and wharf in Darling Harbour, and took his two sons, George & William, into partnership. The two boys became owners of the business when he died in 1879.

William settled in Narooma after the Sydney business closed in 1900 and he built Narooma's first steam-driven sawmill. This mill was subsequently sold to George Mitchell on the condition that George's son, Arthur, was kept on as foreman...but Arthur had greater ambitions, and erected his own mill on the Wagonga Inlet, at Bryce's Bay.

Arthur then married Nora Tucker. Nora had her own teaching business in a room above Palings Music store in George St, Sydney and she refused to move to Narooma unless Arthur could first find her six music pupils. Arthur rapidly did so. While at Wagonga the couple had three

children – one, a daughter, dying at nine years of age.

In August 1918 Arthur Preddey used his building skills and ingenuity to shift and enlarge Narooma's private hospital. Assisted by a teenager (Bertie Martin) and others, he lifted the existing 13-room building onto sleds and then moved it to the centre of 'a magnificent site' next to the Narooma Hotel, before adding extensions to the building.

In 1919, a bushfire burnt out Arthur's Wagonga mill, so he set up another at Potato Point near Bodalla.

But bushfires were the nemesis of all sawmillers, and Arthur was also to lose his mill at 'the Point'. So, about 1920, he finally found a permanent home in Moruya – where he

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was soon to become something of a force to be reckoned with.

Arthur built his first Moruya home on the headland above the mill and named it 'Tuffwood', presumably after the 'toughness' of Moruya hardwood. The house was later sold to Moruya Quarry Master, John Gilmore, about the time the Moruya quarry started operation in 1924 to supply granite for the Sydney Harbour Bridge Pylons.

It is said that 'Skew Nail' Preddey (as he was known by the trade) once built a weatherboard house in a week. That may well have been his first home in town, believed to be in Evans Street. The Moruya cheese factory was another legacy of his career as a builder.

Stories of one of Preddey's other careers, as an undertaker, abound.

He, himself, used to tell of an occasion in his early undertaking days when he arrived at Nerrigundah with a standard coffin, only to discover he had to bury an overlong corpse. He solved the problem with a spot of amputation, using his carpenters saw!

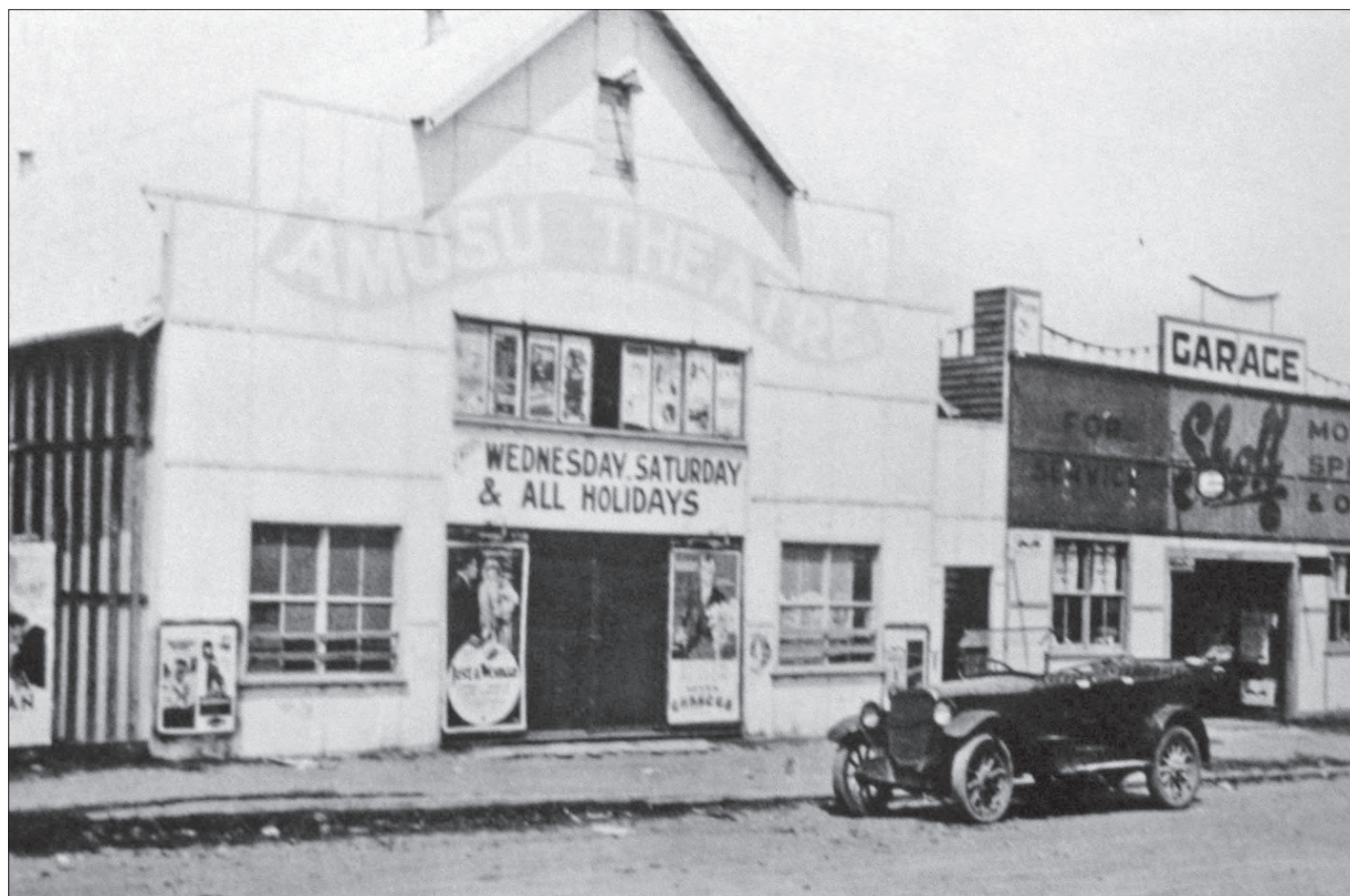
On another occasion an engineer at Moruya's Donkey Hill Mine was travelling on a gravel road at Bergalia when his car overturned on a bend, killing him, and rendering his wife unconscious. Preddey – short of time and a useful coffin – 'put him straight down'. On her recovery, his wife demanded 'where's our money? ... it was in his pocket'. This was a time when one's life savings may have been kept on one's person, so the local police constable was called upon to stand guard on the grave overnight. On exhumation

next day, sure enough, a wallet containing the money was recovered from a trouser hip pocket on the corpse.

And then there is the story about how detectives from Sydney's C.I.D. needed the use of a 'suspects' hand' in a murder investigation and asked that the corpse, which was still 'residing' locally, be sent to Sydney. Preddey, however, decided it was cheaper to pack just the hand. The trouble was he dispatched the wrong hand!

In January 1937, by which time Arthur Preddey had also become Secretary of the Moruya Hospital, he visited the hospital to take charge of funeral arrangements for a body in the mortuary, so he wrapped the body in a hospital bed sheet and took it away. Later that month another body left the mortuary but, on this occasion, the yard boy was instructed not to permit Mr Preddey to take the sheet. *'If every body from the mortuary was taken in a hospital sheet, there would soon be none left'*, Matron Bohan reasoned. *'Mr Preddey visited the hospital the morning following the removal of the body and was very insulting – told me the sheets were hospital property and none of your b.... business: not to be so b.... smart.'*

Preddey's dealings with the Hospital Matrons seem to have been tempestuous. The Hospital Day Book for the decade from 1931 is now in Moruya Museum's collection. For the most part, entries are laconic and statistical – staff on duty and number of patients. Matron Bohan, however, used the Day Book almost as a private diary. She did not find life easy. By August 1936, the cook, described as incompetent, was sacked, and the Matron took over the kitchen until a



Moruya's Amusu Theatre. Photo courtesy Moruya and District Historical Society

replacement was found. By July of the following year two nurses who had 'caused trouble' had gone, leaving Matron and the night sister to carry the nursing load for the next three days. The nurses 'gave incorrect impressions to the Secretary' (Arthur Preddey) with whom Matron Bohan was, by this time, in continuous combat: 'Secretary constantly interfering in Hospital duties' (September 1936); 'Secretary tormenting with petty complaints. ... Matron becoming tired of this petty vindictiveness and constant interference with reference toward duties and method' (November 1936).

The next battle, which lasted three months, was over Matron's holiday pay, which Secretary Preddey refused to accept she was entitled to. Finally, Matron gave notice: 'Matron tired of Secretary's grumbles and imaginary complaints'. On the day she left, she noted that she had received her salary, uniform allowance and the disputed holiday pay, but in a footnote she records that Secretary Preddey had stopped the cheque! The Hospital President, Charles Moffitt, cashed the cheque himself. 'Matron completed duty and left the hospital.'

Matron Hayes had preceded Matron Bohan. Secretary Preddey wrote to her to remind her of the fact 'she is a servant of the Board and must take and obey instructions given her by the President and the House Committee'. Her reaction was to resign. When she cooled down, she wrote an apology and retracted her resignation ... but did not, in fact, return to duty.

Matron Murray succeeded Matron Bohan. In September 1938, she was written to and reminded it was her responsibility to rid the hospital of rats. In March the following year, she was asked to resign after she had expressed (in writing) dissatisfaction with the job. Matron Mitchell followed and lasted six months. Matron Gannon, who had been Matron of Cobar Hospital for ten years, was chosen from five applicants. Within weeks she had written her resignation in tones so offensive to the Board that they decided to terminate her employment forthwith. Matron Rita Dovey lasted from April to 20th May 1940. Matron Noland followed, resigned in the December but was persuaded to stay on until Matron O'Connell arrived. Matron O'Connell, having been congratulated by the Hospital Commissioner in March 1941, on her running of the hospital, resigned two months later.

In the seven years from 1935 and 1942, whilst Arthur Preddey was Hospital Secretary, 11 different Matrons were employed at Moruya Hospital.

Arthur Preddey, though, is perhaps best remembered as owner and operator of Moruya's Amusu Theatre and Dance Hall which was the 'hub' of the town's entertainment and social life. (This is now 'Silly Willys' shop, but the stage for the orchestra & movie screen, at the rear of the original theatre and dance hall, can still be seen. The movie projectors were mounted above the front door.)

The Amusu Theatre, at the time the biggest public building in town, opened to a packed house on 21st December 1921. It was the first local cinema to install two projectors – allowing uninterrupted projection of films and eliminating the opportunity for larrikins to make a nuisance

of themselves when just a single projector was used and the film had to be paused while reels were changed. These Saturday night film screenings in Moruya were followed by a dance – which led Preddey to add a supper room to the building in 1927.

To maximise profits from screening films, Preddey intermittently ran a circuit of screenings up and down the coast – for example, screening films in Cobargo on Friday evenings. These were not always without incident with one notable occurrence being at Tilba in March 1927 when a fire broke out in the hall, creating a stampede without any injury to patrons, but which resulted in destruction of most of the film.

On one occasion Preddey's competitors complained to the Council that the ceiling of this theatre/dance hall was too low and against public health regulations, so Council closed the building down.

But Preddey was not one to suffer a loss of income. After erecting a substantial pole at the side of the building, he continued to earn revenue by running a series of slide shows. The images were projected from a machine mounted on the pole onto the wall of the building. When the 'show' finished, he seated the orchestra on chairs and the crowd 'danced the night away' on the bare ground.

Then, with the help of an apprentice, he jacked up the roof using a system of ropes & pulleys, thereby fixing the height problem, closed in the gaps, and regained his licence before his competitors completed their new building!

This was typical of Preddey's effective 'adopt a simple

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A Ball at Moruya's Amusu Theatre in the 1930s. Photo courtesy Moruya and District Historical Society

approach' to engineering challenges. He is also remembered by locals for having shifted a farmhouse over a half mile without disturbing the furniture or crockery ... he shifted the boiler from the old Moruya cheese factory, when it was rebuilt, to the new factory in half a day (the nearest other quote from Wollongong engineering firms was four days) using crab winches, resulting in barely a hiccup in production (he had, years earlier, salvaged this boiler from the steamer 'Benanderah') ... and he re-floated the supply ship 'Kianga' from the Moruya breakwater, after two Sydney tugboats had failed to do so, simply by using 6 house jacks, a few long timbers, six locals with cars roped to the jacks and a wait for high tide. When the jacks had done their work, the locals pulled them away with their cars, and the ship slid down the timbers into the river.

(Arthur's son, Jack, worked as a motor mechanic and auto electrician in Preddey's garage, next to the Moruya theatre and then in Cobargo, before managing the Monarch Hotel in Moruya for two years.) 

Sources: Information from Norm Moore of Moryua, including articles contributed to *'The Beagle'*; *'Narooma's Past: Steamers, Sawmills and Salmon'* by Laurelle Pacey; *'Picture Shows of the Far South Coast of New South Wales'* by Robert Parkinson; *'Why So Many Matrons?'* by Peter Preddey.

We thank Norm Moore for suggesting we include this topic in 'Recollections'. If you have a South Coast history topic you would like us to feature and can provide some basic information, please contact us: southcoasthistory@yahoo.com

Our Heritage Torched

The figures are sobering: in the Bega Valley Shire 429 houses were destroyed, 24 facilities (businesses, halls, etc.) were destroyed, 1033 outbuildings were lost, and in the Eurobodalla Shire 439 homes were destroyed, 78 facilities (businesses, halls, etc.) were destroyed and 891 outbuildings were lost in the recent 2019/20 bushfires.

Whilst these figures illustrate the enormity of losses, they clearly do not reflect many of the other real losses that have occurred. And they certainly do not reflect the irreplaceable losses to our local history and heritage.

Many of the losses that have occurred are 'hidden' and will never be reported in official assessments on the impact of the fires.

Significantly, local government is responsible for managing local heritage (this responsibility was ceded to them by Bob Carr, when Planning Minister in 1977), but recent enquiries by South Coast History Society to both Bega Valley and Eurobodalla Councils resulted in responses

that seem to indicate that they either have no real idea what impact the bushfires had on our local history and heritage and/or they have minimal interest in actually trying to assess that impact in the foreseeable future.

To their credit, the Clyde River & Batemans Bay and Narooma Historical Societies (and undoubtedly other local volunteer-based organisations) are attempting to document some of the impact of the recent bushfires on our local history and heritage – starting, perhaps predictably, by identifying which local officially heritage-listed buildings/objects (a tiny proportion of all the heritage/historically-significant buildings and objects in the area) have been affected.

Feedback from our members and supporters, and enquiries we have made, seem to indicate:

- Numerous old and often in some way historically-significant buildings and other objects, have been lost. In some cases (Cobargo and Quaama, for example)

whole streetscapes of heritage importance have been, irreplaceably, destroyed. In places like Nerrigundah, almost all of the historic fabric of the area has now been lost. And this has not just happened in one or two small areas – it has happened over an extraordinarily wide area.

- Priceless collections – many previously not widely known - have been destroyed. For example, in the destruction of The Original Gold Rush Colony at Mogo a significant collection of around 400 costumes has been lost. Some of these were original Australian period clothes dating back 150 years, others (for example) were costumes originally made for early ABC Television productions – so, not just has a significant local collection of costumes been lost, but a significant part of Australia's television history and heritage has also been destroyed. And at Runnyford (on the Clyde River), as another example, eighty years of nationally- and even internationally-important Chiswell Furniture archival material was lost in the New Year's



Curranulla, Ed Tarlinton's home

Eve fire. Every company brochure up to the late 1990s, thousands of photos, including some glass plates from the 1920s are gone, along with an extensive library of furniture books covering style, design, history, trade techniques such as cabinet making, and marketing. Much of this irreplaceable material was destined to be donated to the Historic Houses of Australia Trust.

- Important links with the past have now disappeared. Many buildings at the Mogo Gold Rush Colony, constructed of materials (such as timber slabs) rescued from historically-significant old buildings in surrounding areas, have been destroyed – so it is not just these buildings that have now disappeared, but so too have the fascinating stories and local histories associated with them. (Almost all of the Gold Rush Colony was completely destroyed. It was surrounded by Mogo State Forest, so was potentially vulnerable to fire...but, incredibly, a 'buffer zone' extending out for 10 metres, which could not be cleared or logged, was maintained right up to the immediate boundaries to the Town [certainly not to the delight of management of the Colony!!] which simply exacerbated the risk of any fire affecting the Colony.)
- The loss of the Gold Rush Colony also meant the loss of a valuable local educational resource, visited by thousands of schoolkids each year (many from Sydney and interstate) because study of Australia's gold mining history is significant part of the primary school syllabus.
- Not to mention valuable collections displayed on site belonging to the Moruya Antique Machinery and



The remains of '*Curranulla*' on the Princes Highway, Verona, built around 1894 and once home to Ed Tarlinton from the pioneering Tarlinton family of the Cobargo area. Another significant Tarlinton-related house, '*Murrambrine*' in the Wandella Valley, once the home of Francis William Tarlinton (who died in 1928) and his wife Nell, was also lost in the bushfires along with valuable records of the house's history and its significance to the Cobargo region.

Tractor Association (including the recently-restored c.1904 heritage-listed 'The York', the first internal combustion engine in Moruya) and The Eurobodalla Woodies.

- Other 'showcase' examples of local history and heritage have, unfortunately, become inaccessible – at least for an extended period. For example, south of Eden the access roads and paths and the visitor facilities at Ben Boyd's Tower and at the Davidson Whaling Station have been damaged or destroyed, resulting in closure to these areas to visitors for about the next six months – so, for example, the thousands of visitors now arriving at Eden on cruise ships do not have the opportunity to visit these historic sites. (Incidentally, the historic gardens at the Davidson Whaling Station were destroyed by the fire.)
- The impact on our local Aboriginal heritage is particularly interesting. Many objects (scarred trees and Aboriginal art sites, as examples) were particularly fragile and have now been lost. A number of these were 'teaching sites' or 'teaching objects' which are no longer available to local Aboriginal communities for passing down their traditions and cultures to future generations. And, currently, the full extent of damage and losses cannot be properly assessed because access is not available to many areas. And, then, laws relating to protection of Aboriginal areas and artefacts will make restoration of some objects (such as art sites) a

virtually impossibility – effectively destroying forever those culturally significant areas.

- On a positive note, the fires have exposed some 'forgotten' objects, such as the foundations of old houses or worksites...and, at Cobargo, a boomerang was discovered along what was once an Aboriginal walking track.

Major, destructive fires on the South Coast occur regularly. Presumably, the area will again be impacted by them, and it is likely that even more of our heritage will be destroyed or damaged. One lesson we should immediately take from these recent fires is that we must use as much modern technology as possible (digital photography, video, etc.) to assemble extensive 'back-up' records of as much of our local history and heritage as possible, so that when originals are destroyed or severely damaged we still have at least some detailed, usable record of them. We should now be finding funding to do so, and we should be initiating the enormous task of comprehensively 'backing up' all remaining records of our history and heritage as a matter of urgency.

Peter Lacey

Sources: ABC South-East; Georgina Jackson & Corey Pearson of The Original Gold Rush Colony, Mogo; Margaret Chiswell; Graham Moore; National Parks & Wildlife Service, Merimbula; and numerous South Coast History Society supporters who have provided us with extensive and valuable information on the impact locally of the devastating 2019/2020 bushfires.



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This is the winning entry in South Coast History Society's Summer Holiday Competition for local students who were in Years 10, 11 or 12 last year. It's very topical:

The Flaming Wheel of History

Some recollections of the South Coast's fire history

by Stephanie Lunn, Year 12, Moruya High School

"History has a habit of repeating itself..." said the captain of the Batemans Bay Rural Fire Service (RFS), Ian Aitken, in the article "What can the 1994 bushfire teach us?" This was published by the Bay Post/Moruya Examiner on the 22nd November, 2019, less than one week before the devastating Currowan fire was ignited by a lightning strike near Nelligen.

The South Coast of Australia has a long and damaging history of bushfires, with at least 11 devastating fires occurring in the area over the past 70 years. Records prior to the 1930s are imprecise, but more recent fires carry stories of the gatherings of locals who defended property in '52, the equipment and field days of the local bush fire brigades, the extraordinarily dry '68 fire season, the unexpected rain in '72, the volunteers in the 80s fighting fires in singlets and shorts, and the '94 fires and tales of the bulldozers used to help contain them... Each blaze is different, and by looking at old records and talking to the people who lived through the fires of yesteryear, one can piece together a history of this area, but not only a history of its fires; a history of its people as well.



STORIES OF SMOKE AND SURVIVAL

The details of bushfires preceding the 1930s are vague, making it hard to ascertain the duration, size and severity of any fires, but some stories survive. In 1883, W. A. Bayley reports that fires "dropped" onto hot, dry paddocks to the West of Moruya as the agricultural region was ravaged by fire. In 1905, the smoke from fires surrounding Batemans Bay released enough smoke to obscure the sun, and "lamps had to be lit in town cottages." (A rather relatable experience this Summer too!) In the same year, people in localities such as Nelligen and Buckenbowra were saved only by sheltering in creeks. In 1929, fires originating near Braidwood burnt through the Araluen valley to Moruya and the coast, and the small village of Bodalla was also threatened. The lack of precise details from this time is apparent, but they are enough to appreciate our fire-riddled past over the last century and beyond.

The map to the left is from J.A. Duggin's 1976 "Bushfire History of the South Coast Study Area." The shaded area was their definition of the "South Coast" and the (my) handwritten labels are approximations only.

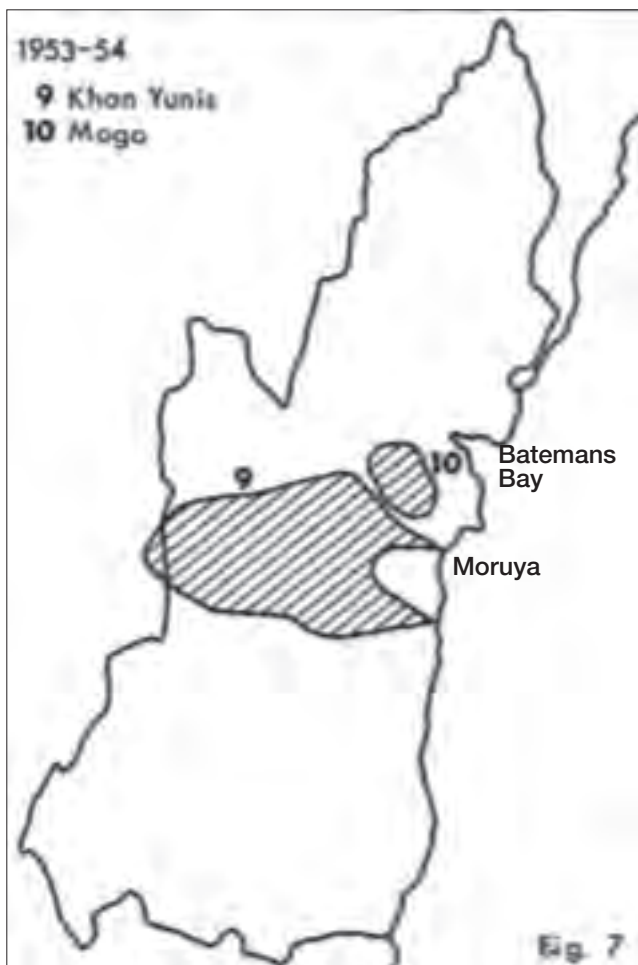
BAD NEWS FOR THE SOUTH COAST IN 1951-52

The fires in January 1952 are among the worst on record for this area, especially for the Bega region, where lives and numerous homes were lost. The Bega fire was started by graziers burning-off near the junction of the Turoos and Back Rivers to the North West of Bega. The fire burnt unchecked for weeks, until an intense depression generated strong, dry North-Westerly winds that pushed the fire towards the coast, and it travelled as far as 35 kilometres in one hour to the coast south of Tathra. It wasn't brought under control until conditions eased days later.

At the same time the Mount Dromedary Fire spread across the Northern side of the mountain, threatening Tilba Tilba and Central Tilba. It was brought under control around the Princes Highway.

THE POWER OF COMMUNITY IN 1952

Mossy Point resident Richard Fisher remembers being in the area in 1952 when a bushfire approached the small community, and how they, "a gathering of locals," fended the fire off until conditions eased. Richard and his mother first saw one of the community members running across the footbridge, to which his Mother exclaimed "My gosh, he's running, we'd better run too!" – she'd never see him run before! Three or four others joined him, as did Richard and his father. Richard crossed the footbridge and, being very young, was sent home when they encountered the bushfire. His father, on the other hand, was tasked with the job of filling up buckets from the creek, then soaking hessian bags



with water and putting them on the fire. To prevent fanning the fire, his father had to count to ten slowly, or say the alphabet as quickly as possible, before taking off the bag and repeating the process. His father also recounted the banksia nuts, which would explode and send flaming pieces about three feet in multiple directions. Just as the fire was burning towards people's back fences, a "Southerly Buster" arrived, and brought fire-quenching rain five minutes later.

AND AGAIN IN 1953-54!

In December 1953 the Khan Yunis fire started and crossed the Deua River catchment to the West of Moruya. When it reached cleared land, the front split into two and burnt to the coast just North and South of Moruya over a short period of time. The fire and winds were so ferocious that an ember from this blaze was carried 35 kilometres to Montague Island off the coast of Narooma, which burnt most of the island and destroyed many old wooden structures. Around the same time a fire started near Mogo, possibly due to spotting from the Khan Yunis fire, and both fires eventually merged.

The map to the left shows the spread of these fires by the shaded areas. The outline represents the "South Coast" shaded area in the previous diagram.

EQUIPMENT OF OLD

It is also interesting to note the equipment available around this time. Local man Arthur Hurrell first became involved



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One of Mr. Hurrell's photos. The firefighter shown at Narooma in 1995 is using a McLeod tool

in firefighting around 1950 and was the captain of the Mossy Point Fire Brigade between 1989 and 1995. Throughout his long involvement with volunteer firefighting, he saw many changes to the equipment and resources available. Around the 1950s, he had to purchase his own gloves, boots and hat as a volunteer firefighter, as well as a pair of white mechanics overalls, which had to have press-studs, not buttons, so that they could be ripped off in the event that they caught fire.

Without fire hydrants and an abundance of water, many other tools were used alongside hoses. "Flappers", tools with pieces of leather attached to a long handle, were used to "flap" out smaller fires as shown below, and McLeod fire tools, essentially hybrids between rakes and hoes, also pictured, were used to rake the fire in on itself. As Richard's father did, buckets of water and hessian bags were also used to dampen fires.



A field day at Moruya in the 1980s. Note the white overalls. From the Malua Bay RFS



An example of a "flapper". Photo by Joe Fulgham, accessed online

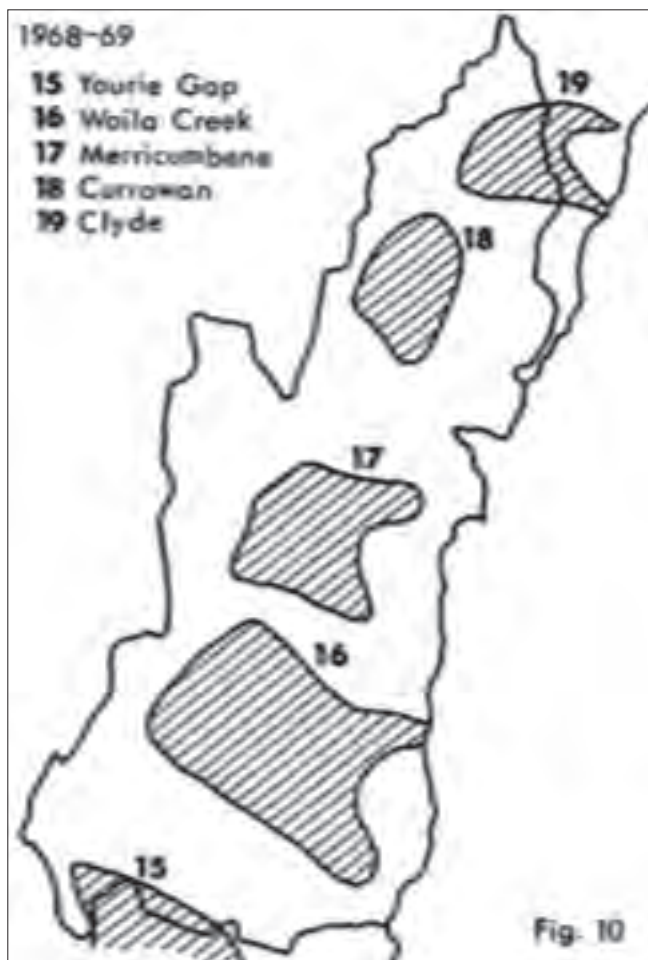
Field days gave the fire brigades the opportunity to show off their skills and attract donations, such as gloves or chainsaws, from large companies. Mr. Hurrell remembers fondly how one of the small, old trucks his brigade used outperformed the newer trucks at field days, giving it the nickname "the Mouse that Roared." Field days were also an opportunity to attract and try out new recruits, although as a friend of Richard's said, who was a third-generation fire fighter and farmer, "you didn't enlist in those days, you were born into it." Unfortunately, field days are not common anymore.

ABLAZE AGAIN: THE 1968–69 FIRE SEASON

In 1968, the South Coast was again devastated by an extremely bad fire season stretching from early September in 1968 until late March in 1969. This season was exacerbated by three years of below-average rainfall leading to dry terrain; so dry that even rainforest gullies normally too damp to burn had dried out, adding significantly to the fuel load. At one point, five major fires were burning concurrently.

The Yourie Gap fire started from burning-off in the tablelands in the same region as the '52 Bega fire. Upon reaching an area control-burnt around five months prior, its progress was slowed enough for it to be brought under control.

The Woila Creek fire burned into the rugged and inaccessible terrain of Woila Mountain, before strong winds



moved it towards the coast. By September 30 conditions had worsened and the fire jumped towards Bombo Creek, moving almost 25 km in 2 hours, prompting all resources to be withdrawn to protect Bodalla from spot fires. Over the next few days it burnt all the way to the coast north of Dalmeny.

The Merricumbene fire was intentionally lit along 16km of a fire trail and burnt through inaccessible country that hadn't burnt since the Khan Yunis fire in '53. Upon reaching the cleared country West of Moruya it split into two main fronts, similar to the Khan Yunis fire, burning north into burnt ground near Wanban Creek, and south through the Tuross and Deua River catchments until it merged with the Woila fire.

The Currowan fire (a name we've known well this Summer) is suspected to have been started by illegal graziers on vacant crown land, but was stopped on the western side of the Clyde River, and the Clyde Fire, possibly started by lightning strikes, burnt from Pigeon House Creek to the coast at two points near Milton and Ulladulla.

These five fires are depicted in the map labelled Fig. 10, at left which shows the same region as earlier maps.

RAIN AT THE OPPORTUNE MOMENT IN 1972

While with his family in 1972, Mr. Hurrell was directed to Oaks Ranch with the expectation of fighting the fire that had started there. However, despite no prior indication of rain, it suddenly poured down, enough to put out the fire.

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Mr. Hurrell remembers the then fire captain of the brigade saying “I don’t know who sent it down but it was welcome.”

PERCY DAVIS ABLAZE IN 1988

Eurobodalla residents were again called to alert in the late 1980s when a fire started near Mount Pollywambara, between Moruya and Mogo. This fire “went ballistic” and crossed the highway, threatening properties on Percy Davis Drive. “Every able person worked together to defend life and properties from these fires. Some unprepared volunteers struggled to defend properties wearing shorts and work boots.” (Malua Bay Rural Fire Brigade, *Our Local History*). Mr. Hurrell experienced this fire first hand, and defended properties alongside the Captain of the Mossy Point Fire Brigade who was garbed in a hat, singlets and shorts.

BULLDOZERS AND BUSHFIRES IN 1994

In 1994, a fire in the Eurobodalla Shire burnt areas from the north of Moruya to the communities to the south of Batemans Bay like Catalina Heights, Surf Beach and Lilli Pilli. According to the aforementioned Bay Post article, Moruya RFS group officer Bruce Smith was preparing his strike team to depart to Sydney to assist in fires further North in 1994 when he “saw a column of smoke up Runnyford way. That was it. That was the start of the 1994 fires.” (Makes me grateful for the emergency text messages and ‘Fires Near Me’ app, giving us a much better idea of where fires are, and the weather conditions!)

In many fires, including those of 1994, bulldozers were used to push over trees and clear debris, even while they were alight, into a heap to reduce the spread of the fires. In many instances Mr. Hurrell was responsible for bulldozer protection, or protecting the driver of bulldozers in a fire situation. While doing this in 1994, he was in a small, lighter truck because the rugged Deua River area and mountains couldn’t take heavy vehicles. He had to frequently refill his water tank in the river, and was circling fires to do so. This involved navigating many steep tracks, where, at times, if you looked out the windscreen “you couldn’t see the ground in front of you, you could only see the sky”, and if you looked out of the windows, you could see right down the steep gullies below.



THE MOSSY POINT FIRE BRIGADE AND ARTHUR HURRELL

Before Broulee, Mossy Point and Tomakin were connected by road bridges, each area had their own fire brigade because trips between the three involved heading to Batemans Bay or the highway, as there were no bridges or George Bass Drive. In 1987, the Mossy Point brigade was threatened with closure because, despite being heavily involved in the protection of life and property, they didn’t keep thorough records and were believed to be inactive, but Mr. Hurrell made sure that this was known to be untrue, and the Brigade stayed open with Mr. Hurrell as the Captain. In 1997, the three aforementioned Brigades amalgamated, to form the Candalagan Fire Brigade, but when asked when he hung up his gloves, Mr Hurrell answered “when my knees gave up”, which was only five years ago!

Devastating bushfires are a part of life on the South Coast, as evidenced by the records and stories kept over the past century. Despite the damage they inflict and the tragic losses incurred, they show the strength and resilience of communities on the South Coast, who banded together once again this Summer.

On a final note, we can’t ignore one other essential service still provided by our local fire brigades – escorting Santa around before Christmas! **R**

References

- Personal interviews in February 2020 with local residents Richard Fisher and Arthur Hurrell, who generously provided numerous photographs.
- Some images and information from J.A.Duggins’ “Bushfire History of the South Coast” 1976, <https://publications.csiro.au/rpr/download?pid=procite:96d88e42-6798-4f25-9e9a-b3b306fe4736&dsid=DS1>
- An image and some information from the Malua Bay Rural Fire Brigade website, http://www.maluabay.rfsa.org.au/Fire_History.htm
- Image of the flapper posted by Joe Fulghum on the website <https://causticsodapodcast.com/fire-swatter/>
- Article “What can the 1994 Bushfire teach us?”, or “Ian Aitken describes Eurobodalla Shire 1994 Bushfire” accessed online through the Bay Post/Moruya Examiner website from 22nd November, 2019.



Santa and the Fire Brigades. Left: A local newspaper shows Captain Hurrell alongside children, mothers and Santa in 1991. Right: Santa in 1991 on a Bedford fire truck. Photo Courtesy Mr. Hurrell

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HISTORIES

Anzac & Aviator

by Michael Molkentini

This is a story that would have (in an abbreviated form) been right at home in 'Boys Own' magazine.

It's the remarkable story of aviator Sir Ross Smith who became an Australia hero because he (together with his navigator brother, Keith, and two mechanics) won a £10,000 prize offered by the Australian government to the first Australians to fly from England to Australia in under 30 days. It includes all the features that would have qualified it as a 'Boys Own' story: Ross Smith embarked on an adventure that had unexpected twists and turns; he faced danger and successfully overcame it; he took part in a race (including against a non-British crew!!) and won; he was courageous, a risk-taker, ambitious, skilled, visionary, ruthless; he had the noblest ideals – including heroically fighting for King and Country; he was young (and handsome!) and he came from 'the right side of the tracks'.

The year is 1919. Aviation was still very much in its infancy, although it had developed remarkably during and as a result of World War I. There were a small number of airstrips between England and India, virtually none between there and Australia...and that ultimate £10,000 prize! Those seeking to win the prize needed to supply their own competing aircraft and be responsible for making 'all other necessary arrangements' for fuel and supplies along the route.

The story of the flight is engrossing. And Molkentini includes heaps of quirky insights into the planning and undertaking of the journey. This is one:

'Ross has originally planned to use the aircraft's maximum range to reach Singapore from Bangkok (a distance of nearly 1500 kilometers). While at Don Muang [Bangkok], however, officers from the Siamese air service informed him of a suitable aerodrome about halfway along the route at Singora, close to the Malay border. It was stocked, Ross learned, with 500 gallons of aviation fuel...Considering that a non-stop flight to Singapore represented the greater risk, Ross decided that he would fly to Singora...

After starting from Bangkok in good weather, the Vimy ran

into a storm over the Gulf of Siam. Unable to see anything, Ross descended to 500 feet so he could follow the coastline... Water sprayed in over the windscreen, drenching the two brothers; soon even their goggles filled with water...For three hours, Ross and Keith followed the gulf coastline south through violent tropical thunderstorms...When they finally spotted the aerodrome at Singora, six hours after leaving Bangkok, Ross was utterly dismayed. The ground was saturated; large pools had collected on its surface and tree stumps remained, scattered across the airfield. Unable to see any alternative, Ross picked out a relatively dry strip running perpendicular to the wind.

Easing the Vimy onto the sodden ground, he braced himself. Remarkably G-EAOU rolled to a stop with just one jolt as a stump tore off its tail skid...

Ross's mood darkened further when he learned that the 500 gallons of aviation fuel said to be at Singora was in fact 500 litres – nowhere near enough to sustain the Vimy's flight to Singapore – or, indeed, a return to Bangkok. If at any moment in the journey to Australia Ross came close to despair, it must have been this: stranded on a remote, waterlogged and stump-strewn aerodrome with a damaged aeroplane and no fuel. It was also raining heavily...

Fortunately, Singora was situated on a railway line. From the local cable office, Ross sent a telegram to the Asiatic Petroleum Company in Penang, requesting the urgent delivery of an additional 750 litres of aviation spirit. Aware of all sorts of restrictions about carrying petrol on the Siamese Railways, he also prudently sent cables to the Railways Commissioner in Bangkok and the Governor of Penang asking for their assistance. Ross then visited the Governor of Singora and requested help in clearing the tree stumps from the aerodrome's surface. Yet again, Ross's confident and personal approach worked; the governor agreed to put 200 convicts from a nearby prison to work clearing the airfield the following morning. The Viceroy of Southern Siam, Prince Yugala Dighambara, provided the Australian with a bungalow for the night...

Bennett [one of the mechanics] found a pile of scrap metal in the back yard of a local Chinese man, from which he

obtained a suitably sized piece of steel. At a nearby rice mill, he then located a lathe on which to turn it. The machinery was antiquated; hand-powered by four workers – ‘coolies’, as Ross and Keith described them. The Australians paid the mill’s foreman to hire the lathe and four labourers. They cooperated at first, but when they went on strike late in the afternoon Ross had to produce more cash. Stopping work again just fifteen minutes later, Ross called on the mill’s foreman, who beat the workers to get them back on task. Bennett emerged from the mill that night with a new tail skid bracket.’

Six of Ross Smith’s seven competitors for the prize did not make the distance to Australia, with one crew travelling just six miles before they crashed and were killed! So why did Smith succeed where others failed?

It seems he had the best airplane – a F.B.27 Vickers Vimy bomber (a twin engine biplane with two open cockpits) which was given the registration number G-EAOU, which the crew suggested stood for “God ‘Elp All Of Us”; a good deal of luck was on his side (one team in the race, who departed from London 22 days before Smith, was delayed by snow for a month after having only travelled from London to Frankfurt in Germany); he was able to organize support at the highest levels from both the British and Australian authorities (including having several rudimentary airstrips rapidly constructed at places he nominated); he took two very skilled and committed mechanics with him (Ross and Keith Smith both received knighthoods almost as soon they arrived in Australia, the two mechanics did not; perhaps reflecting attitudes of the time, one Australian parliamentarian subsequently suggesting ‘They would probably not know what to do with a title!’); and because he was the only competitor who had any first-hand knowledge of route that he was to follow.

And, how he gained that first-hand knowledge is, itself, an absolutely amazing story.

Having become the most experienced multi-engine aircraft pilot in the Middle East, immediately after the war he was selected to fly a couple of his British superiors from Cairo in Egypt to Calcutta in India to survey the first section of a possible aerial route to Australia and to promote the interests of the Royal Air Force in that region. Once that flight was complete, the Indian government (at the behest of the British government) made a ship available for Smith to reconnoitre and report on possible aerodrome locations between Calcutta and Darwin and to establish fuel depots for a possible future RAF flight to Australia. Not that this endeavour went exactly to plan:

Three days into the voyage ‘Ross heard ‘a hell of an explosion’ in the ship’s rear cargo hold. Within moments, flames had engulfed the stern, including Ross’s cabin, which by remarkable fortune he had only just vacated... With the

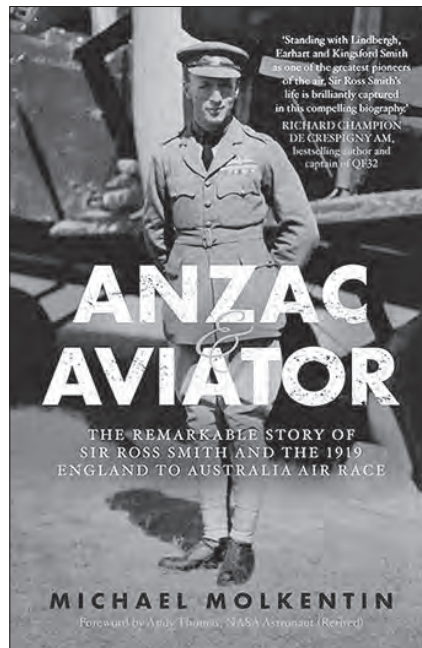
onboard fire-fighting equipment incapable of battling such a blaze, the Sphinx’s captain decided to beach the vessel, flood the holds and order the crew to abandon ship...It took until late afternoon to bring the blaze under control. The ship had been gutted. Ross lost almost everything except the clothes on his back. His flying gear, £100 worth of uniforms and kit, and the photos he had taken on his personal vest-pocket camera throughout the war had been incinerated. But it was the loss of his flying log book that stung the most. After half an hour of exertion, Ross managed to pry open his charred suitcase; all that survived were fourteen gold sovereigns ‘none the worse for their experience’...the destruction [of his wartime records] represented a profound loss of both personal and historical proportions...Ross returned to Calcutta dejected about the prospect of waiting for months to find a replacement ship. Within a matter of days, however, the Indian naval authorities offered the use of RIMS Minto, a 1000-tonne vessel armed with four guns – ‘a much better ship this time’, in Ross’s assessment.’

As ‘Anzac & Aviator’ is a straightforward, chronological biography, it starts with Ross Smith’s early life, his education, his employment before he enlisted to serve in World War I (initially as an Australian Light Horseman, then serving as an infantryman at Gallipoli, then as a machine gunner in the Sinai, before wheedling his way into the Australian Flying Corps as an aerial observer [that’s an absolutely amazing story in itself!] to ultimately become a [very successful, highly decorated] pilot and later Flight Commander in the AFC which, by that time, was operating as part of the Royal Air Force).

The story of what happened after the London to Darwin journey is equally engaging. Having taken 28 days to reach Darwin, it then took Ross Smith and his crew 77 absolutely-challenging days to reach Melbourne (utilising some air strips the Australian government had built and provisioned for the race) and then a further 26 days to reach his home town of Adelaide.

The biography, naturally, concludes with details of his death – in an air crash that occurred the first time he was piloting a new Vickers Viking IV amphibious aeroplane that he had been loaned to him so that he could attempt to become the first man to fly around the world.

Molcentin is a historian with a special interest in Australian aviation (a previous book, ‘Fire in the Sky: The Australian Flying Corps in the First World War’ is, in my opinion, also well-worth reading). He became interested in Ross Smith’s story, and eventually wrote this engrossing biography, after a colleague at the Australian Defence Force Academy in Canberra alerted him to an extensive collection (seemingly, largely overlooked) of Ross Smith’s letters to his Mother, dating from the time he left Australia in World War I, that were in storage in the State Library of South Australia.



These letters proved to be the major primary source for this new biography.

But Michael Molquentin, to my great delight, also included five pages of comments at the end of the book about other sources that were available to him and, in these, noted that information about Ross Smith's schooling was almost non-existent (*'the two schools he attended are now closed and records for the period during which he attended them do not survive'*). However, he did discover *'The State Library of South Australia hold the papers of a teacher from Queen's [School] in the decade before Ross attended, providing some clues to the type of education he had'* – again demonstrating the value to historians of documents detailing 'everyday life', and reinforcing that more of us today should make the effort to document aspects of our lives (even those which, seemingly, are very 'everyday') that could provide necessary

and valuable resource material to future generations of historians.

'Anzac & Aviator' is available in paperback from around \$24.

Incidentally, G-EAOU is now on display in a purpose-built museum in the long-term carpark at Adelaide airport but will be moved to a new facility inside the terminal when that is completed (currently scheduled to be in 2021).

If you read 'Anzac & Aviator', or indeed any other book reviewed at any time in 'Recollections', we'd be very interested in your assessment of them. Reviews, after all, represent just one person's opinion.

On a Wing and a Prayer: The Race that Stopped the World

by Di Websdale-Morrissey

While reading this book – the story of the 1934 London to Melbourne Air Race that had been organized to celebrate Melbourne's centenary – I wondered at what point a 'non-fiction' story (as this book is described by its publisher) deserves to be considered a history.

Very early in the work, several pages detail the story of the 1919 London to Australia air race. This is fine, except that I detected SIX major factual errors in just three pages. I am no expert on the 1919 London to Australia Air Race, but became aware of these errors simply because I had recently

read Michael Molquentin's superb *'Anzac & Aviator; The Remarkable Story of Sir Ross Smith and the 1919 England to Australia Air Race'*.

Some of these errors may have simply been careless, but others appear to have been examples of 'slightly bending the facts to suit the story being told': in one case, for example, claiming *'the winners, the Smith brothers Ross and Keith, completed the journey in twenty-seven days and twenty hours, arriving on the evening of New Year's Eve – with just four hours to spare.'* In truth, they arrived at 4.12 pm on



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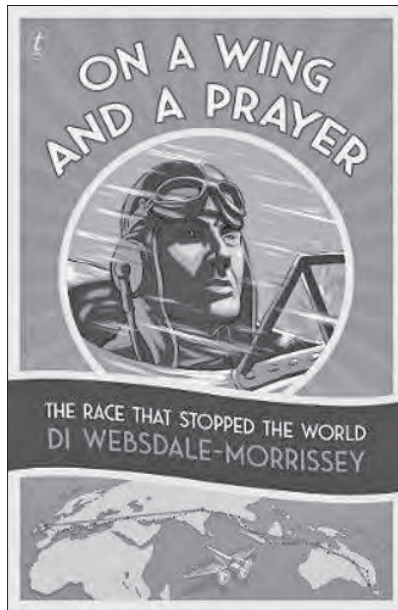
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December 10th, 1919...and the deadline for a winner to claim the race prize was more than a year later, at midnight on December 31st, 1920!

So, I immediately became wary about the entire historical reliability of this 'non-fiction'.

There are also many (well written, I will admit) passages in the book when I also wondered whether they simply reflected the author's imagination or whether they do, in fact, express historical fact. In this case, there are no notes indicating any of the sources used to construct this narrative:

'If they [those who ventured to Allahabad aerodrome to witness the competitors who landed there] were lucky enough to have a pass to the grounds of the aerodrome...they emerged into a further happy crush. It must have been an extraordinary experience – a place filled with tents, from which music emanated: musicians strummed sitars and harmoniums in some tents, while, in others, gramophones played a range of music from opera to jazz, the music wafting on the breeze and coalescing into an exotic soundscape background to the general shouting and excited chatter of the massive crowd. Card games sprang to life, their animated players shrieking loudly in triumph or anguish at the results. Stunt planes overhead were a marvel that drew exclamations of their own. Some of the more daring types took advantage of local monoplane joy rides offered at six rupees a time; and between, or in preference to such activities, everyone entertained themselves with the lively sport of Maharajah spotting. Across and around it all wafted the aromatic scents of food served, perhaps from silver salvers



in the private tents and in paper by public vendors.'

Back in 1934 this air race attracted enormous interest and support. It initially attracted 71 entrants but, for numerous reasons, only 20 made it to the start line. An amazing array of aircraft was involved, ranging from a KLM DC2 which had a crew of four and took three passengers along for the ride and, because the company was more interested in demonstrating their commercial potential than actually winning the race prize, touched down unnecessarily at numerous airstrips along (and, often, not directly on!) the route [this KLM entry, as it turned out, came remarkably close to actually winning the race] to small single engine, single pilot craft. The winning entry completed the London to Melbourne journey in just under three days. 8 entrants did not make it to Melbourne. Two airmen were killed when their plane crashed in Italy.

85 years later, the details of what occurred back in 1934 are of much less interest – and, to me, of significantly less interest than the details of the 1919 England to Australia air race, a race which at least has an additional real aerial pioneering appeal associated with it. So, overall, 'On a Wing and a Prayer' was interesting but it was not a book that I became particularly enthusiastic about.

'On a Wing and a Prayer' is available in paperback from around \$25.

Reviews by Peter Lacey

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Who Are We?

We're just a bunch of locals committed to sharing the fascinating history of the NSW South Coast with anyone and everyone who is interested — putting many of the dramatic old photographs of the area out on public display — learning what we can about region's history — helping uncover things from our past that we didn't previously know — and, along the way, hoping to enthuse others who have similar interests.

Currently we are doing this through *Recollections*, our free magazine that's published every second month, through our fortnightly newsletter at bit.ly/SCHSNews, on our Facebook page, at our informal

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The Australian Landscape - Observations of Explorers and Early Settlers

by DG Ryan, JE Ryan and BJ Starr

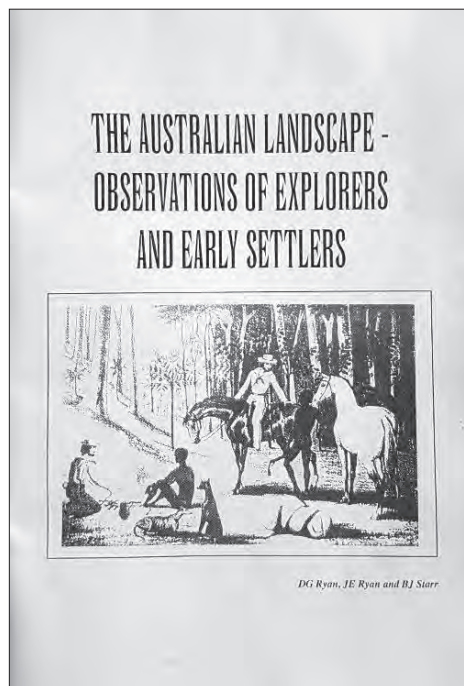
This fascinating booklet, published in 1996, was loaned to me by a local. It is a collection of descriptions by early European explorers and settlers of Australian landscapes – landscapes that, as the authors point out, are vastly different to the landscapes of today's Australia.

The country that early European settlers inhabited was typically open grassland. Trees were thinly scattered, so it was easy for them to ride through the area ... and it was invitingly suitable for grazing cattle and sheep.

It was open grassland because the Aborigines regularly burnt the country. *'To Aborigines fire was seen as necessary to clean up the country. They regarded unburnt forest or grassland as being neglected. Apparently for most, if not all groups, every part of grassland, savanna and eucalypt woodland of their territory would be burnt regularly, annually, or at last once every three or four years. It was seen as doing duty by their land.'*

Once regular burning ceased *'whole tracks [tracts] of country became covered with forests of young saplings ... and at a present time these have so much increased, and grown so much, that it is difficult to ride over parts which one can see by the few scattered old giants were at one time open grassy country.'* (AW Howitt, 1890). *'The widespread ringbarking that was carried out around the turn of the [19th/20th] century was mostly of this regrowth. The landowners were attempting to re-establish the original grazing capacity.'*

The earliest Australian navigators (such as Abel Janz Tasman in 1642, William de Vlamingh in 1697, Captain James Cook and Joseph Banks in 1770; their observations are reproduced in this booklet) commonly observed and recorded significant areas of smoke on the land; early explorers (including Captain John Hunter in 1788, George Evans in 1813, Allan Cunningham in 1817, Charles Sturt in 1828, and Thomas Mitchell in 1831/32) provide remarkably consistent descriptions of the early landscape: *'there is a very considerable extent of tolerable land, and which may be cultivated for its being cleared of wood; for the trees stand very wide of each other, and have no underwood; in short, the woods on the spot I am speaking of resemble a deer park, as much as if they had been intended for such a purpose ... The grass upon it is about three feet high, very close and thick'* being Captain John Hunter's description of land, and very similar to Sir Joseph Banks' earlier description: *'very barren place without wood ... very few tree species, but every place was covered with vast quantities of grass ... the trees were not very large and stood separate from each other without the least underwood'*. The authors also point out that *'a tendency to*



believe that early landscape painters did not render scenes accurately, but tended to paint them as English landscapes' (to quote Tim Flannery) could be totally misguided, and that those early paintings may, in fact, be remarkably accurate.

This booklet provides a thought-provoking insight into benefits resulting from large-scale, regular burning of country. It is available in a handful of Australian libraries and presumably could be borrowed from South Coast public libraries via their inter-library loan system. (It is also a superb example of a very relevant booklet that should now be digitized and made available 24/7 on the internet.)

A remnant area of Lowland Grassy Woodland, the original landscape that early European South Coast settlers occupied, survives in the Bemboka River Reserve. Detailed information is available at bit.ly/begahh19. See also painting by Lycett on next page.

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Bega's Poet

Hilda and Charles Spindler's gravesite in the Anglican section of Bega Cemetery is one of the least remarkable in that cemetery. The deteriorating, simple wooden cross does not even record the couple's dates of birth and death (it simply reads 'Rest In Peace Hilda & Charles Spindler'), and certainly does not acknowledge the achievement for which Hilda is (and certainly deserves to be!) remembered.



Hilda used the pen-name Kate O'Connor and wrote numerous, wonderfully descriptive poems about the Bega Valley that were published in the *Bega District News* by its editor (from 1902 to 1946), Walter A Smith.

Hilda is believed to have been born in Sydney in 1885. Her father, William, was accidentally killed at Pambula soon after her birth and her mother moved back to live in Sydney, leaving Hilda to be raised by her grandparents, David (a horticulturalist sent by Kew Gardens in London to plant exotic English trees on the Kameruka Estate) and Susan James, on the Kameruka Estate.

In 1905 Hilda married Charles Spindler, an employee of the Kameruka Estate, and the couple had seven children – the eldest being named Leonard after Major Sir Archibald Leonard Lucas-Tooth (the son of Sir Robert Lucas-Tooth, the owner of the Kameruka Estate. Archibald was killed during World War I in France). In later life, the Spindlers were to work for the Taylor family at Jellat Jellat (Mrs Taylor's maiden name was Kate O'Connor) and for John D'Arcy at the nearby, historic 'Warragaburra' property. Later again they moved to Bega and finally to Tathra.

The identity of 'Kate O'Connor' was, at the time she was writing her poetry, something of a local mystery. Most supposed she was the sister or wife of Captain O'Connor, the master of the coastal steamer 'Cobargo'.

In 1927 a book of her poems was produced, titled '*Bega the Beautiful*'. All the money raised from its sales was donated to the local World War I Soldiers Fund.

Hilda Spindler died in September 1935 at the relatively young age of 49. She had suffered badly from asthma since she was 9 years old. Her husband, Charles, lived until 1963.

Kameruka

by Kate O'Connor

The sunlight that blazons the earth and the ocean,
The call of the morning, so blithesome and free,
The echoes that ring down the hills and the valley
All bring back the past in a memory to me.

For how could I banish the scenes of remembrance
The outline of hills that are emerald green?
The soft-sighing wind in the dawn that arises
Brings sweet tender thoughts of a dearly-loved scene.

The scent of rich lilies, the flame of the wattle,
The narrow creek winding away to the west;
The green of the lucerne, the gums in blossom,
Of all things on earth these are the fairest and best.

The high-loaded wagons, the call of the drover,
The jingling bells of the wandering herds,
Clinging incense from the rambling roses,
The voice of a friend and the song of the birds.

Down by the river the willows are drooping,
Trailing their leaves in the bubbling stream,
Visions and fairy-like fancies together
Are mingled as one in a pleasant day-dream.

(Sources: '*They Made This Valley Home*' by Sandra Florance and Diane Pryor; *Bega District News*, 6.8.2018; Pat Raymond of Pambula; Peter Rogers of Bega.)

Your suggestions about gravestones in local cemeteries that have interesting stories attached to them will be VERY welcome – particularly if you can also provide any information relating to them. Send your suggestions to southcoasthistory@yahoo.com or call 0448 160 852.

Footnote on Aborigines and Fire



'Aborigines using fire to hunt kangaroos' by Joseph Lycett, c. 1820. NLA nla.pc-an2962715-s20

A Question about *The Merimbula Float*

Evidently it is an established Australia Day event – when, as it was described to us, ‘anything that would or could float, and some that couldn’t, drift with the outgoing tide from Merimbula boat ramp to Spencer Park...and it is a bit funny seeing grown men and women running into cheap outlet stores asking for anything that floats, then running out all excited to blow it up and get in the water...I did see one fella just floating on the tide, cuddling his esky to his chest, who might have had trouble getting the lid off for a refill without sinking it’.

We’ve been asked ‘what is the history of this event?’ Can you help?



Photo courtesy David Lee



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