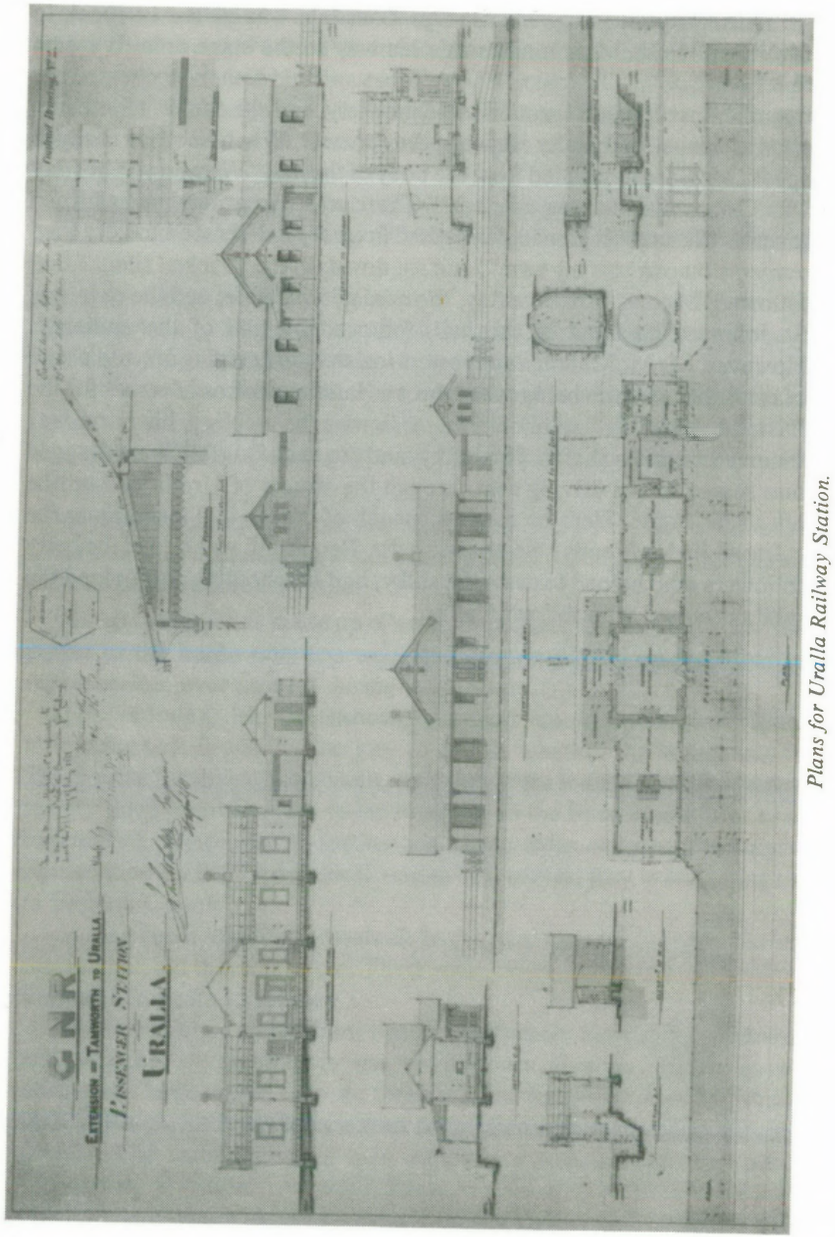


Plans for Uralla Railway Station.

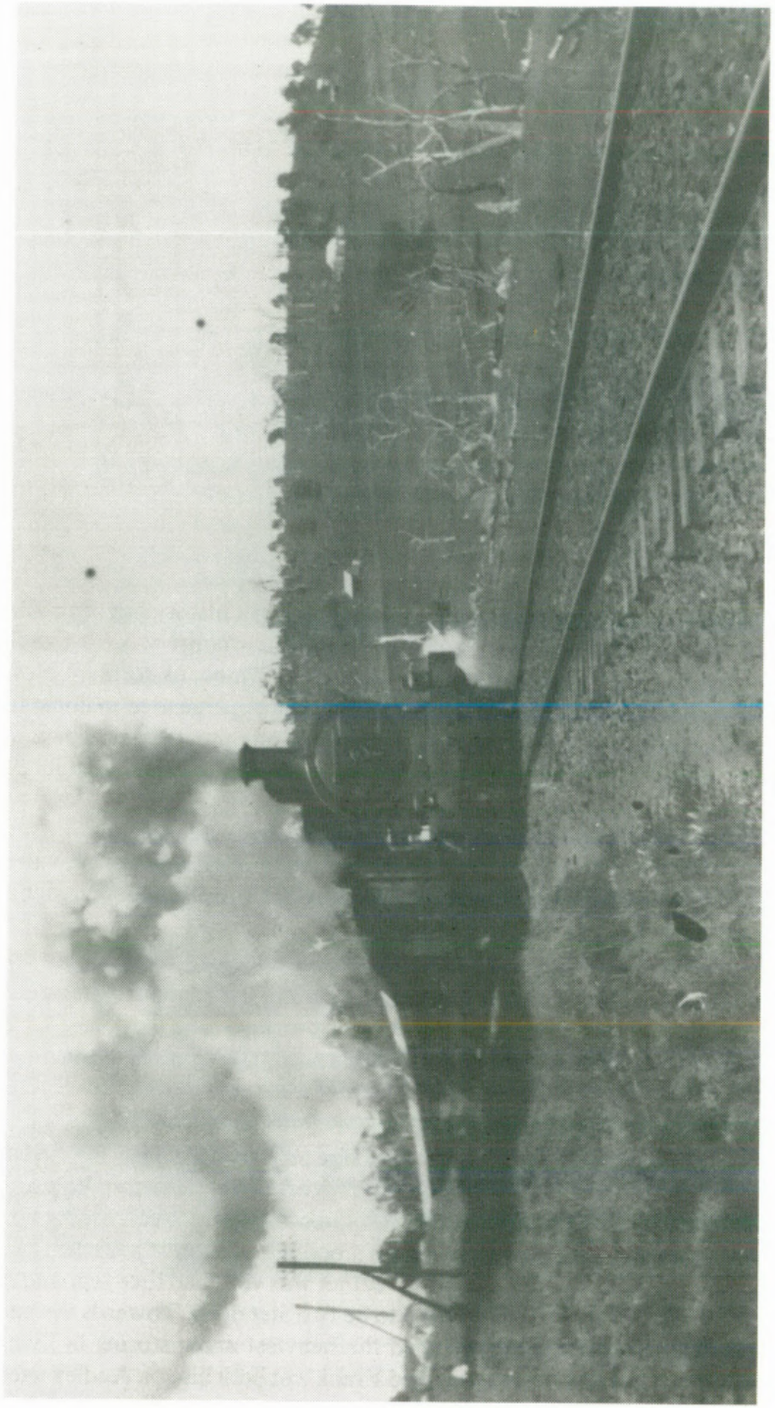
12

Grand Openings

The most called upon source of Uralla and District history has been *The Uralla and Walcha Times,* and the historian/journalist was Mr Frank Vincent, a member of the family responsible for most of northern New South Wales' local newspapers. Mr Vincent was persuaded to come to Uralla by Mr John McCrossin in 1876 and lived there until his death in 1903. Mr Vincent was an all-round pressman, and he firmly believed that Uralla would become 'the' city of the Tablelands. He was disappointed to see Armidale forge ahead, but remained true to the town in which he lived. There was a time soon after he arrived, however, when he was ready to leave, and two months after he had founded his newspaper, he wrote:

> "Uralla just now appears to be excessively dull — there is no news of any kind to report. During the past week we have had neither public meetings, pictures, amusements, nor auction sales, and the people seem to have gone into winter quarters in earnest. If there is anyone in other parts on the lookout for a quiet retreat, it can be found in Uralla, where the quietness of the tomb reigns over the land. . ."[18]

Then the railway saved the day: a large protest meeting was called to discuss the proposed route through Surveyors Creek, Terrible Vale and Gostwyck to Armidale, by-passing Uralla completely. Such a thing was unthinkable, and Uralla turned out in a body. The protest held. In 1881 the railway neared Uralla, but the weather was very bad that year and in some areas the snow was reported to be two feet deep. Towards the end of August the district experienced the heaviest snow storms in living memory. Before the railway arrived Frank lost both his son Audley aged



First train to Uralla, 1882.

ten, who died of pneumonia, and his friend and patron, John McCrossin. The man Frank Vincent called 'the founder of the town', after fighting so hard to bring the railway to Uralla, died without seeing the completion of his endeavours.

The Grand Event of the year, the coming of the railway to Uralla in August 1882, was reported with all the excitement it engendered. A signboard announced that Uralla was 3337 feet above sea level, and a peg was driven into the ground near the shunting yards stating that Sydney was 345 miles behind. The population went wild. There was a feast with five bullocks turning on spits, loaves of bread, pounds of butter, cakes, pastries, sandwiches. . . and many speeches. . . It was also reported that "waiting to be shipped by the Railway to Sydney were boxes and boxes of beautiful red apples."[19]

It was a time noted for heavy drinking, and a man was often judged by the amount he could consume and still stay on his feet. Ben Smith was never noted for sobriety, and as time went on he drank more and more. The new hotel his mother-in-law opened in Armidale did little to help change his ways. The former Mrs McKay had been remarried to a widower named Platz and together they went into the hotel business. The hotel they bought did not come up to standard, so before opening night a brick wall had to be constructed. The wall formed the front of the bar and faced onto the footpath of Beardy Street.

On opening night Mrs Platz offered free beer and expected a big crowd. At this time the Sandon County workforce consisted of many itinerant workers, among whom were a number of Irishmen commonly known as 'The Donegal Reapers'. Ben, of course, being married to Frances, Mrs Platz's daughter, felt it his duty to attend the opening of the hotel and took along a friend, Luke Tierney, also an Irishman. Both Ben and Luke were known as fighting devils and heavy drinkers. So it was not surprising that during the evening a fight should develop between the Donegal men and Ben's friend. In the 'free-for-all' that followed, chairs and tables were torn apart for weapons and stone grog bottles flew through the air. One man was felled and, with the whole crowd pushing and writhing, they rolled against the new brick wall and the whole lot fell onto the pavement in front of the pub. As the dust cleared, those who could picked themselves out of the rubble and assisted those who were hurt. By a miracle no-one was killed, but there were many men sore and sorry for themselves that night. However, nothing daunted, the drinking continued in the newly 'opened' pub all through the night. In spite of the violent beginning, Mrs Platz's hotel was a great success, and over the years she became a very wealthy woman.

13

The Women

Quite a few of the Sandon County pubs were run by women. Blanch's public-house of Thunderbolt fame on Kentucky Creek was run by Mr and Mrs Blanch and their two daughters. Although there is no longer any sign of the building, Mrs Blanch achieved fame because of her hotel's association with the bushranger. It has been said that, if Thunderbolt had not been showing off his horsemanship for the benefit of the two girls, he would not have been riding the wrong mount and might have outridden Constable Walker.[20] If he had not robbed the hawker Giovanni Cappasotti of his junk jewellery to present to the girls, he would not have been caught in Kentucky Creek and shot down. An elderly lady, now living in Brisbane, Mrs Wiltshire, tells of a small window at the back of the bar in Blanch's pub which, she says, was sometimes used by the bushranger for a quick get-away. Her mother, as a child, once wandered into his path and was knocked down by Thunderbolt making a quick exit when someone yelled "Police!" This would, by all reports, have been an accident on the part of the bushranger. We have been told that he was always polite and kind to little girls and women. The family of Mrs Murielle Carter of Uralla tells the story of Jane Wheatly, their great grandmother, who at the age of 12 was taking her father's afternoon tea to a sawmill near Dorrigo. She was stopped by a horseman who asked her about the presence of police in the area. He dismounted and walked a short way with the girl, asking about her father's work, her home and family, then rode off. When Jane described this "nice man" to her father, he realised that it must have been Thunderbolt. The outlaw had been performing his trade in the area, and the police were indeed looking for

him. That time he outwitted them, but it seems that the bushranger lingered just a little too long that last time at Blanch's hotel.

One of the first wine shanties on the Rocky River goldfields was run by a woman known in her later years as 'Granny' Austin. Born Mary Ann Shaw, in Littlewood, Leicester, England on 25th August 1828, she had four husbands before she died at the age of 92 years. Her first husband was Isaac Faulkner whom she married in 1847. The young people moved to Sutterworth in Leicester, where Mary had one child before leaving for Australia in the sailing vessel *Tory*. On 9th April 1849, aged 19, she arrived in Sydney with a little boy called Thomas. Her husband obtained a job as a shepherd in Muswellbrook, and they travelled to the station on foot. He was only there for a few months when Captain Dumaresq offered him a position as shepherd on his New England property. The Captain must have been well pleased with Isaac, for the young couple settled down there and proceeded to raise a large family. Their third child, a daughter named Elizabeth, was believed to be the first white girl-child to be born on the Rocky River goldfields.

It has also been claimed that Isaac Faulkner was the first man to discover gold in Rocky River. He later met a tragic end by falling down a mine shaft, leaving his wife with nine children. Mrs Faulkner was believed to be one of the first white women to come to Uralla. She was a contemporary of the McCrossin family. Granny's second husband was Charles Grant, who died suddenly of apoplexy, after adding two sons to her brood. James McGregor, her third husband, also died suddenly of a paralytic stroke. John Austin, her fourth husband, survived her. In 1919 *The Uralla Times* wrote her obituary, pointing out that Granny had retained great vitality almost to the end. The article stated that the young couple came out on the old *Lory,*[21] but the actual name of the ship was the *Tory,* a bounty ship which arrived in Port Jackson on 9th April 1849. The passenger lists show Isaac Faulkner, labourer, Mary Ann, wife, and Thomas, son. The list also stated that both Mary Ann and her husband could read and write.

Granny Austin's life on the goldfield was long and colourful. It was said that Thunderbolt often stopped at her wine shanty for a drink, hitching his horse to the post in front of her establishment. She made lots of money, but never used a till. All the notes were placed immediately into her bodice and shaken out of her dress at night. She was a very tough lady, and once beat a recalcitrant youth all the way up the main street of Uralla. Her way of life had no doubt made her tough. Presumed to have Gypsy blood, she arrived in Australia hardly more than a bride. Carrying her first babe in her arms she walked behind, and rode on, bullock wagons from Sydney to Muswellbrook, a journey of more than two hundred miles on today's surface, and it must have been really rugged in 1849.

Whilst trudging through the bush, they encountered a tribe of Aborigines, who were, to the young woman's consternation, completely

naked. The natives asked them for a 'fire stick' from their camp fire and settled down nearby for the night. Later a young gin warned them not to sleep that night as the tribe was planning to kill them. When the young men of the tribe found that the girl had betrayed them, they beat her to death with sticks as the family escaped. In spite of this experience, the young immigrants were forced to continue on foot to their new home. It is presumed that they travelled by bullock dray, along with the stores, to Capt. Dumaresq's New England property. While he was working in the area of Rocky River Isaac discovered gold. His good fortune later led to his tragic death and Mrs Faulkner's entry into the wine shanty business.

Mrs Sarah Trim of Armidale was a well known and respected hotelier at the turn of the century. Born Sarah Ann McKeon, daughter of a dairy farmer, she married George Andrew Trim in 1887, son of John Trim, ex-convict/police trooper, and a very successful Armidale merchant.

John Trim arrived in Armidale about 1846, with the then Commissioner for Lands, George James McDonald, who gave him permission to build a store and a bridge across the Dumaresq Creek. Trim became well known to early travellers on the Great Northern Road. A member of the early Armidale Council, he remained an alderman for almost 30 years and was noted for his civic service and fair dealing.[22] Married three times, George Andrew was the son of his second wife, Elizabeth Maguire.

Sarah Ann McKeon, daughter of a local family and a most attractive young woman, was also self willed and strong minded. When her only child Jack was a small boy, in spite of her Catholic faith, she divorced her husband and moved to Uralla to run the unlicenced Bellevue Inn in Hill Street as a private boarding house, but later moved to Tamworth taking over the licence of the very fashionable Caledonian Hotel in Peel Street. Here she was hostess and friend to many important people. Her guests included prominent politicians and wealthy graziers and once she entertained the then Prince of Wales. She eventually moved to Newcastle's Great Northern Hotel, where she remained until she retired at a ripe old age. During the first world war (1914-18), Mrs Trim was awarded the O.B.E. for her efforts to raise money to buy war planes for the newly formed Australian Flying Corps in which she had a very vital interest, as her only son was a captain in the Corps.[23]

Women shared the hardships as well as the rewards, and often carried on their husbands' businesses after the men died. They came to Sandon County in many different ways, and for lots of reasons. The McCrossin women were a case in point. Samuel and Martha McCrossin brought their family of seven children to Uralla when it was just a bundle of bark huts and tents and the gold rush was at its height. In 1853 with the help of their daughters, Margaret, aged 21, Ellen (also known as Eleanor) aged 26, and the youngest girl Martha, who was just 15 years

old, they set up an accommodation house with a licence,[24] believed to have been financed by Mr Dumaresq, on the corner of what is now Hill and Queen Streets. This establishment was of great benefit to the growing township and travellers on the Great Northern Road. After a short time, several small shopkeepers built rude huts around the inn to tempt the miners en route to Rocky River. Married miners appreciated the safety of closer settlement for their women and children and preferred the relative security of the small village of Uralla, to the roystering crowded encampments of the Rocky River mining area. They in turn also built their bark huts and tent dwellings. It was because of this that Uralla began to grow.

The McCrossin girls and their mother were in fact the first white women to settle in Uralla, and they and their brother's descendants remained in the accommodation business for many years. Miss Alma McCrossin's boarding house has been mentioned with nostalgia into the early 20th century by local people who remembered her clearly.

McCrossin's youngest child John was a boy of ten years of age when he arrived in the country, but in the annals of Uralla he has been honoured for many different reasons. He was a member of the expedition which, headed by Capt. John MacKay in 1859-60, opened up more grazing land in Queensland and discovered the port of Mackay. John McCrossin was also an influential pioneer businessman. He died in Uralla at the relatively early age of 50 years in 1881. His death was followed by that of his son John in 1888, and his wife Helen in 1898. The citizens of the township of Uralla erected a monument in honour of their pioneer, explorer and businessman. It stands to his memory in the old Uralla Cemetery.

The MacKay expedition would probably not have eventuated but for the financial help of John McCrossin. It was he who put up most of the money. The ship's captain John MacKay, who was not in fact a master at that point (he did not gain his master's certificate until 1865), had been mining for gold at Rocky River until his claim petered out, and he was searching around for some other means of making a fortune. With the help of Hamilton Robinson, a Bendemeer grazier, McCrossin managed to finance the group of six white men and one Aboriginal known only as 'Duke' (the only casualty of the expedition), with a ship's carpenter named Giovanni Barberi, J. Muldoon and D. Cameron making up the party. The last two became bored and returned home to Uralla when the expedition was only half way through. The group departed from Armidale in January 1860.[25] They never did receive the recognition they deserved, nor were they paid for their discoveries by any government of the time.

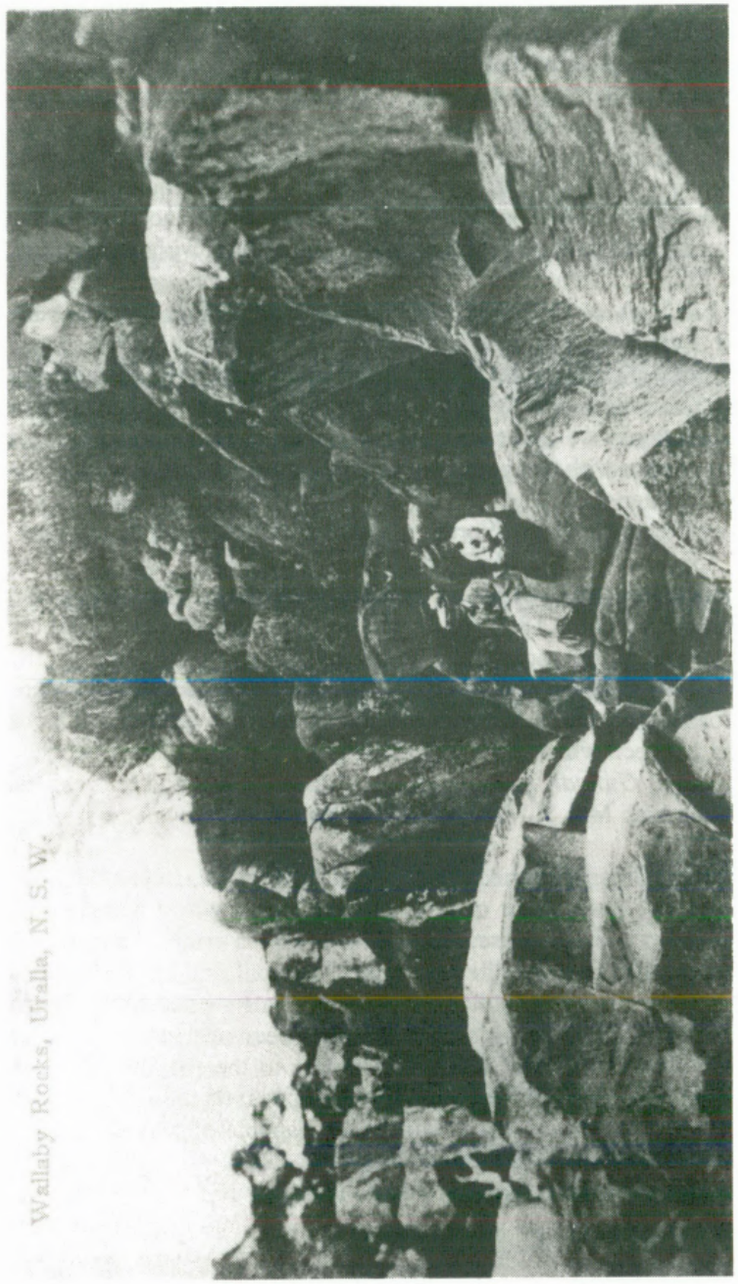
Samuel McCrossin Junior was also a leading merchant in the settlement, but he died in 1861, having lived in the colony for only 20 years. Nothing much is known about Mrs McCrossin, except that she

had been Miss Charlotte Allingham, the daughter of the first Mayor of Armidale, and that she was born in 1824 and died in 1904, outliving her husband by 41 years. She was a long standing identity and under the name of 'Fanny' McCrossin was a contemporary of 'Granny' Austin mentioned earlier. Nor has much been told of the other men and women of the family McCrossin which came to Australia on the bounty ship *Cadet,* a vessel of only 475 tons. With a number of other families and young single people they emigrated from Northern Ireland, leaving their home town, Newton Stewart in County Tyrone, in 1841. At the time of their departure from Ireland, Samuel (snr.) was 40 years old, and his wife Martha 41. During the journey out, one of the sons, William, aged 18 years, struck up a friendship with a young girl named Martha Jane Steel, who was migrating with her parents, two sisters and one brother.

The families were travelling to Australia on a scheme under which the New South Wales Government paid the fare, and a bounty of from 10 to 19 pounds sterling for each person on arrival, providing that person was able to work. Originally the Government hoped that the landed gentry and settlers would bring in labourers and mechanics under a sponsored scheme, and they were to be paid the bounty to assume the responsibility for the suitability of the emigrants, but it later became the business of the agents of the merchant ships, with the captain of each ship receiving the bounty, as well as the fare of 16 pounds per passenger, from the New South Wales government, providing the emigrant proved to be acceptable. There were several reasons why the government agent could refuse to pay the bounty, if he did not approve of the person in question — a record of bad behaviour on the ship, not sufficient protection, as in the case of a young girl travelling alone, or as in the case of Martha McCrossin, when the migrant was over 40 years of age. However, between 1837 and 1841, the year of the McCrossins' arrival, 43,922 bounty emigrants arrived in New South Wales.[26]

Samuel senior had registered for farm work, and most of the family were hopeful of obtaining work of that type. There is little recorded of the senior McCrossins in Sandon County, except their accommodation house venture, McCrossins' Inn. When they died, or the exact location of where they were buried is uncertain except for the belief that they were laid to rest in the old cemetery. Records were lost because of a fire which destroyed the files of the undertaker. However, most of their children left their mark in the district.

In 1853 William found himself sufficiently settled to be able to take a wife. So he set out to ride to Sydney where Martha Steel was in service, leading a pony for his expected bride to ride back. At Maitland, at the Angel Inn, the small, docile pony was stolen, and he was forced to purchase another. After their wedding in Sydney, William and Martha set out to ride back to the diggings at Rocky River where William had



Miss Alma McCrossin (r.) and Miss Alice Lowe at Wallaby Rocks, a popular picnic spot.

established a wine shanty and general store. The pony on which Martha was forced to make the journey was not an easy mount and she had never ridden before. The journey took the newly-weds a week of constant hard riding. When she arrived at the store the poor girl was in a sorry state. Her clothes were stained with blood, and she found it impossible to sit down for quite some time.

The store at Rocky River was primitive in the extreme. The walls were made of rough slabs, and the roof of bark. The living quarters were a long room divided into a bedroom and living room at the back of the store, separated from the shop area by hessian pasted over with newspapers. Six of Martha's children were born there, and Martha told her grand daughters later of the difficulty of bearing the children under such cramped conditions and of her additional fear of being incinerated. When lying in labour, she would hear the miners getting drunk and lighting their pipes, as they sat on the barrels of gunpowder on the other side of the flimsy wall. She also told how the drunken miners sometimes lit their smokes with five pound notes. William and Martha McCrossin moved to Wandsworth in 1866, but they returned later to build a hotel on what was then the Great Northern Road on the outskirts of Uralla.

It appears that the McCrossin family must have liked the New England district and Uralla in particular. A list of the houses and buildings in Uralla in 1882 shows, among the tents and wood and bark huts, several brick and shingle stores owned by S. McCrossin and occupied by tenants. The wood and shingle hotel occupied by W.S. McCrossin was built by William McCrossin on a heavily wooded block of land between where the Uralla Bowling Club and a small wooden house called *Gunyah* now stands. Also listed is a wood and shingle house in which Mrs S. McCrossin lived and another owned by James McCrossin.

John McCrossin married Miss Helen Cleghorn, daughter of William Cleghorn, the first mayor of Uralla.[27] She was a young woman with ambition and commonsense. Among the business establishments with which John has been credited were the flour mill and the Post Office Stores, but on the list of buildings and their owners or occupiers in the village in 1882,[28] the mill is shown as having been owned and occupied by his widow Helen McCrossin. According to the list this lady also owned three houses and one store. It would appear on this evidence that John's wife was a business woman quite capable of carrying on her husband's commercial interests.

There were several Chinese women in Rocky River who worked in their husband's trading concerns, but they have been forgotten, except perhaps for Mrs Sam Bow whose husband kept the general store there early in this century. She has been remembered not because of her business acumen, but because of her tiny bound feet.

Although they could not be called residents in Sandon County, other

women were a familiar sight there at one time. These were Assyrian female hawkers and Bruce Smith remembered them well. They always dressed in black, with their heads covered by a large scarf. Their skirts were many and very full. They carried a sack as big as a chaff bag and sold mostly women's underwear, pretty colourful petticoats and other female 'gee gaws'. The women travelled in pairs, but were never molested because of the stiletto they were known to carry in a pouch on the left arm. Their skin was white, and they were usually very large and strong, with attractive smiles and very white teeth. They were always mature women who spoke very little English except 'hello', and the price of their goods.

As a little boy Brucie was fascinated by the two women who called at the homes in Uralla, and followed them as they left town until they sat down to rest under a tree. He watched as they plodded off towards Kentucky and disappeared from his sight. The last of these hawkers, Bruce remembered, were two who called at the New England Girl's School when he was working there casually, as a kitchen boy, at the age of 14, and he gave them a drink of water as they sat to rest on the School's kitchen steps.

14

The Teamsters

As the boys grew older Ben took them into his blacksmith shop and taught them the trade. Their help enabled him to travel further afield with his wagon and team. When Bruce left school at the age of 14, his father took him along as 'billy boy' and off-sider. The lad was still very small and slight, terribly afraid of the dark, and although his father despised his weakness, with the other boys otherwise engaged, he was forced to take Bruce along. There were many teamsters on the roads of Sandon County, and most of them made a good living, carrying their loads to and from the railhead at Uralla and the siding at Walcha Road. On certain days there were as many as ten wagons loaded with bales of wool waiting their turn at the railway goods yards.

Driving a team of up to twelve horses was not an easy task, and an inexperienced driver could find himself in grave trouble if his lead horses were to slip and fall. Bruce told of just such an accident which he witnessed at the gates of Balala Station.

Ben and his team were waiting their turn to pass through the gates, as a Mr William Hogman and his young son were attempting to drive their wagon through heavily loaded with wool. Hitched to a team of twelve horses, the wagon was very heavy, and the horses were pulling with all their strength when the lead horses fell. As they went down the rest of the team took fright, and the driver, still seated on the seat of the wagon, struggled to whip the horses to their feet. This only made matters worse. With all twelve horses kicking, screaming and struggling, there was a dreadful mess. The driver panicked. He kept cracking his whip until his small son became terrified and tried to prevent him, pulling on his arm

Carriers waiting to unload wool at Kentucky rail head.

Deargee wool-shed, unique for its circular shape, and still in use today.

and screaming for him to stop. The father became exasperated and with one wild shove he threw the little boy into the melee.

There is no doubt the boy would have been killed but for the quick action of Ben Smith who, leaping from his own wagon, dived into the struggling mass of horses and rescued the child. Placing him on the ground he sorted out the lead horses, and quieted the team. Then lifting the boy up beside the trembling father, he said very quietly "There are some things we do **not** do!" and walked away, leaving the man and his son in tears.

Bruce became a regular 'billy boy' for Ben and rapidly learned about the teamsters and their ways. They liked to make camp with other teams and Bruce and the boys were expected to fetch water, make fires, and unpack the tuckerboxes. Ben's box was an old, Holland Gin quart bottle box, and when they were eating their meal, the tuckerbox doubled as a seat. Each man produced his own tucker, and it was the custom to cut meat and bread into bite-size pieces with a pocket knife and dip them in the salt. Each had his own billy can and quart pot. After the meal, out came cakes of tobacco and pipes. The small blocks of tobacco were usually very black and very strong. Such brands as *Yankee Doodle* and *Derby* were pared with the same pocket knife that had cut up the meat. Rolled and rubbed in their horny hands, the men would push the tobacco into the bowl. Placing a piece of charcoal from the campfire on top, they puffed until the pipe was drawing well. Then they would yarn until bedtime. The average distance travelled during the day was about 15 miles, and with ten or twelve horses in a team, the teamsters seldom travelled alone. The wagons usually stopped beside a waterhole at night, for the convenience of both driver and horses, the latter being then fed in a type of long hessian trough filled with corn bran and chaff. The horses would help themselves to the food, sometimes jostling each other to get a little more. When the men retired, they slept on a type of improvised stretcher rigged under the wagon, with a couple of blue blankets and a tarpaulin.

Once Ben and his wagon were engaged to transport a load of furniture to Boggy Camp (later called Hopetown) for a Mr Robson who owned the store there. The load consisted of a large sideboard, a bedroom suite, some kitchen ware and a deal table. Tom Lonsdale, a local man who was 'carrying his swag', begged a ride and took along his blue cattle dog as well. Bruce, who was always fond of animals, was delighted to share his seat and his meat with the dog. On the fourth day they camped at Sandy Creek, and they were just settling down to their evening meal when into the camp walked a big black Sudanese man. Known as 'Black Alex', the visitor had been a storekeeper in Uralla and had gone broke. His face was covered with tribal marks, and Bruce felt uneasy, until Black Alex explained that he had walked from Uralla by way of Bundarra and Tingha looking for work. Ben invited him to join them for tea, and pitch his camp

beside theirs. Bruce was sent to the water hole to fetch more water for the billy. Then for a joke, appreciated only by the men, Ben called to the boy's retreating back to "mind the ghost at the water hole". Poor frightened Brucie ran all the way to the water and back in the dark.

The next day the furniture was unloaded at Robson's store, and with Lonsdale and Black Alex still with them, Ben drove four miles towards Bundarra, unhitched the horses and made camp. With money in his pocket, Ben invited his two friends to walk back to Boggy Camp to the hotel, leaving Brucie to mind the camp and watch the horses. Before they left, Lonsdale offered to leave the dog with Brucie for company, telling the boy he would be safe with him.

Brucie piled on the wood, sitting in the circle of light with his arms around the dog who seemed to sense that the child was afraid. When the horses strayed off into the scrub, the dog stayed beside him as he stumbled through the dark to bring them back to camp. When the men returned about midnight they found both the boy and the dog asleep under the dray on a pile of chaff bags. Next day as the two strangers left, Brucie hated to see his doggy protector go. He knew that Ben would never allow him to have a dog of his own. Although his horses were better fed and cared for than the animals of any other teamster in the district, Ben did not believe in feeding useless 'pets', so unless an animal could earn its keep, it would not be tolerated.

Bruce had been lucky that, stumbling about in the dark after the horses, he had not encountered a 'billy bog'. These strange phenomena were features of the district in which they camped. A boggy spring, it was hidden by a dome-like covering of mud and grass, and would shake like jelly if a foot were placed on the edge, but when the weight of an animal or human was placed in the centre, the crust broke, and the unfortunate intruder would disappear into a waterhole sometimes 14 to 15 feet deep. Farmers in the district can still point to places where these treacherous springs were dug out. They were not useful as wells or water holes, because once they were tapped, the water slowly drained away.

There is a tale about a young boy who lived near Linden Station, at the far end of Balala, who wandered off and was never found. Years later when the bogs were being drained, a pitiful little skeleton was discovered at the bottom of one of the holes. Another peril the early farmers encountered were called 'sinks'. These stretches of boggy ground were believed by the locals to be almost 'bottomless', and like the classical quicksands of literature, it has been said that a 'sink' could swallow up a big wagon, horses, and if he were not agile enough to jump clear, the driver as well, leaving no trace. Even today there are some of these 'boggy' traps on properties between Uralla and Bendemeer, where stock have been known to disappear in wet seasons. There is one farmer who swears that his tractor disappeared in a 'sink' while he was having lunch, and all that he could find was the top of his exhaust pipe above the bog. Luckily

closer settlement and modern methods have drained most of the swamps and bogs, and such phenomena are now rare.

Bruce's trips with Ben and the wagon were not always adventurous. Some were routine, but there was one other trip that stayed in his memory. It was a cold and frosty June night, when Ben announced that he had to take the wagon to Bell's Swamp to pick up a load of skins. The name of the customer was Hutchen, and the father of the family was a Cuban negro. The sons were shearers and kangaroo shooters but it was rumoured that they were not averse to a bit of cattle and sheep duffing on the side. Like most of Ben's friends the Hutchen brothers were big fighting men but, unlike the others, they never drank, and when they came into Uralla about every three months they did their shopping in the small business houses, walking down the streets with dark dignity, but they did not tarry in the town.

The father was known as 'Caribbean Dan', and wore a gold ring in his ear. He spoke very little English, and it was rumoured that he was a runaway slave. On the way to their camp, Ben warned Bruce that he had better be on his best behaviour, as they were said to be "wild enough to kill for a stick of tobacco". As the wagon drew near a grove of big pinetrees hiding the camp, Bruce was terrified by a steady booming noise, but Ben told him it was only the old man playing on a drum. Carried clearly on the frosty night air, the deep throbbing beat could be heard for miles. It served to keep unwanted visitors away, and the rumours of the family's doings did not encourage the locals to investigate. Ben and the two big men went off to negotiate their skin buying and selling, leaving young Bruce sitting by the fire in the main hut. The camp consisted of three huts, one of them belonging to a family named Meredith. Built close to a stream, they were made of bark and poles, with shiny dirt floors. The cooking was done on a big open fire which took up most of the space at one end of the building. A table, which was a fixture in the middle of the floor, was flanked by two big planks for sitting, and the only chair in the room was that on which the big Cuban was seated, still beating on the small but resonant drum. Built of saplings and covered with hessian, the chair sagged as it yielded to the weight of the big man.

Bruce was afraid to move. He sat on the other side of the fire huddled in a small heap, until the old man spoke to him in a strange soft accent, which Bruce found hard to understand; but he recognized that the old man was being kind and his terror began to abate. By the time the men came back, he was feeling much better. The Hutchens invited Ben and his boy to "sit up to supper", which the girls of the family served on the plank table. The meal consisted of salted mutton ribs and potatoes boiled in their jackets, served with home made yeast bread, without butter. Washed down with enamel mugs of steaming black tea, Bruce though it a jolly good meal. With his stomach full, the night didn't seem so cold as he rode home beside his father on the open wagon.

On another occasion, Ben was delivering goods to Armidale and, after being paid, he met some of his other driver friends and set off, leaving Bruce to take care of the wagon. As a generous gesture he gave the boy a half sovereign to find himself something to eat. With several of the other billy boys, Bruce went on a spree, buying lollies, cakes and lemonade until the money ran out and the other boys went their respective ways, leaving Bruce to find his way back to the wagon. As the hours passed and Ben did not come back, the boy felt very cold and lonely. So he set out to find his father. He had heard the drivers talking about the house of a woman who called herself Mrs Redmond, so he asked several of them where he could find it. Brucie wondered why the men laughed at him, but they directed him to a big house with lots of lights and he went up and knocked on the door. A lady in a pretty red satin dress asked him his business, and he said he was looking for his father. The lady smiled and asked him inside. He was led into a big room where a warm fire was blazing, and there in a big chair was Ben in his shirt sleeves. When he saw his son he burst out laughing. Bruce didn't expect this: he was afraid that his father would be angry. When the pretty lady brought him hot cocoa and cake and set him down by the fire, Bruce realised that his father must be a good friend of this house.

It was much later that Bruce found out that the ladies of that house were notorious. And indeed his father was a good friend and a regular visitor. When he was quite grown up, Bruce learned that Ben had fathered three sons there.

Ben's business during the Maritime Strike of the 90's was not always done in daylight, and often there were long meetings of men in the kitchen of the home in Leece Road, when the younger children and women were dismissed. Although there was violence in some parts of the country at that time, there was very little reported in Sandon County. There was, however, in 1894 one incident in Uralla concerning John Turnbull, a small property owner, who made his living shearing for others. A member of the Machine Shearers' Union, a breakaway union from the A.W.U., Turnbull went with a team of other men to shear on Ohio Station. These men were called 'scabs' and were very unpopular with the local Australian Workers' Union members. To add to his unpoplarity John Turnbull's brother was a policeman, said to be the biggest man in the N.S.W. Force.

As the shearers left Ohio Station after the job was done, men lay in wait for any stragglers, swearing to "do them in". There were four such would-be assassins waiting on the bridge near Uralla for Turnbull, with the avowed intention of killing him and throwing his body into the creek. They managed to drag him off his horse, but John was a very powerful man. He fought off his attackers and escaped into the darkness. The four frustrated killers removed his saddle and a parcel containing a new skirt that was meant to be a present for Mrs Turnbull. Then, with the knives

they carried, they cut both to shreds and scattered the pieces across the bridge. John Turnbull finally made his way home to Yarrowitch and the horse found his way there later. There was a general search for the attackers, but such was the veil of silence among the workers in the Union that, although one man named Thorley was arrested, no one was charged. Turnbull was lucky. Feeling was running very high, and it would have been easy to kill a weaker man.

No doubt there are many stories to be told about the Maritime Strike and the great depression of the 1890s. Sandon County had its share of misery, but the people survived, and with their usual stoic character went on to build their towns — and populate them!

15

Mother Love

Children were a commodity not lacking in the community, and many families numbered more than a dozen. With the primitive ministrations of midwives and country medical facilities, it is surprising that so many of the women and their children survived. From the Governor's lady to Susan O'Grady, women died in childbirth, and the mortality rate was so much higher then than now. There are hundreds of stories to tear the heartstrings, but some are worth retelling. It was not an easy time for women and, although there were lying-in houses in Uralla, Armidale and other centres, many of the expectant mothers didn't make use of them. Women like a farmer's wife from Dangarsleigh, when expecting her fourteenth child, considered that she would be safe by hiring a midwife to live in, well before the expected birth. However, when difficulties arose the midwife ran down to the paddock, where the husband was ploughing with a team of four horses, and begged the farmer to take his wife to Armidale for help. The fellow told her that he was too busy to leave his work and after all she (his wife) should know what she was doing. She'd had thirteen before. Both mother and child died before the ploughing was finished that night..

The first two brides of Maurice Walsh, convict and assigned servant in this county, were no more fortunate. When John Walsh and his son Maurice were convicted of 'coining' in Ireland, they were sent to the Hunter region of the colony of New South Wales and around 1839 were assigned to Mr Dangar, eventually arriving at Gostwyck in Sandon County. John became a shepherd and remained a bachelor for his allotted term, but Maurice because of his youth and vigour was allowed

to take a wife, despite the fact that he had left a young bride and baby son in Ireland. His bliss was short lived, however, for his young Australian wife died giving birth to their first child.

Mr Dangar took pity on the young man and sent for the legal wife in Ireland, paying her passage himself. She also died in childbirth not very long after settling in this colony. So once again Maurice was alone. He worked well and eventually acquired a few acres of land near Salisbury. At the age of 55 years, he met and married his third wife, Eliza Brown, a governess at Salisbury Court, who not only survived, but presented him with 13 children. The youngest of these would certainly have surprised his grandfather. John Joseph Walsh became the N.S.W. Commissioner of Police, thus removing the 'convict stain' from the name of Walsh. Like so many of his neighbours, Maurice went mining at Rocky River, but didn't make his fortune, so went into the carrying business instead. He died in 1902 and was buried near his father, John, in the Catholic part of the Armidale Cemetery. Many of their descendants still reside in Sandon County, but others are spread much further afield. They come back only for family reunions, which get bigger every year.

Late in the 90's, a young trained nurse named Kate Daly began to practise midwifery in New England, and many well known families have to thank her for her ministrations. Small and dainty she did her training at the Old Rum Hospital, now Royal Sydney Hospital, under conditions that a modern nurse would consider a nightmare. An orphan because of an accident to her parents when their buggy overturned whilst driving home from the Tamworth picnic races, Kate and her brothers and sisters were placed under the guardianship of a council of four. Their large Currabubula property was administered by the guardians, who also decided the future of the children. When she was 18, Kate wanted to train as a nurse, but her guardians decided that she was much too small and frail for such a profession. Determined, the young girl begged at least to have an interview with the matron of the Royal Sydney Hospital. In spite of the discouragement of the matron, Kate still wanted the chance to try. At last the guardians agreed to give her the 60 pounds to pay for the first year's training, on the condition that she would give up should it prove too much for her. So at 20 years of age, Katie began her life's work.

It was not an easy profession, but although the work was hard, the girls were treated with the greatest respect, and their long nurses' uniforms protected then even in the worst parts of Sydney. Katie rode a bicycle around the slums of Darlinghurst, raced with young trainee doctors to births, and sometimes found the mother lying only on a bundle of rags on the floor of a dingy room, with several little urchins dirty and unfed crying for their mother, and the next door neighbours peering in at the open door.

It was Katie's job to tidy up before the doctor did his work, and many times to wash and feed the crying children. Often it was she who

delivered the child as well. It was a hard training for a gently bred young lady, but Katie learned her lessons well. She never lost her compassion, nor her kindness to her patients, and there is nobody who knew her who does not speak of her with love. Whilst she was working in a private maternity hospital in Tamworth, Nurse Daly told a story that she swore to be true, and is well worth repeating. It seems that the hospital was full, and the weather was hot and unbearable, during a day on which two mothers had died in childbirth. One of the ladies was the wife of a very important citizen, and this had caused a great deal of activity in and around the establishment. The other mother was a young farmer's wife from far out and it was her first child. The father had not been able to come to town that day, and the woman's body was covered with a sheet and left as it lay, the surviving child placed in a crib in a corner of the nursery.

Off duty and exhausted, young Nurse Daly crawled into her hard cot in the small upstairs room, lit only by the moonlight from one small window. As she was dropping off to a well earned sleep, she was disturbed by the sound of weeping and, opening her eyes, she saw the figure of a young woman standing in the light of the moon by the window. The figure was begging in great distress and appeared to want the nurse to follow her as she glided out of the room. Kate drew her dressing gown about her and followed the weeping figure down stairs to the nursery, where the orphan baby was crying piteously. Lifting the baby from the cot, Kate discovered that it had not been washed or changed, and the poor little thing was 'flyblown'. In the excitement of the other tragedy, the little bush baby had been forgotten.

Katie truly believed the mother-love of the dead woman to be so strong that it brought her back from the 'other side' to save the life of her baby son.

It was not only orphan children who were badly treated or abandoned in the early days of Sandon County. There is a story of a family who came out from England to work on Abington Station, a property north west of the village of Uralla. Under the bounty system, the family were being 'imported' by the then owners of the station. The Beards, William and Mary, from Cambridge, with six children, the youngest girl Hannah (Annie) not quite four years old, were waiting in Southampton to take ship for New South Wales, when Mary died giving birth to her seventh child.

William, realising that he would need a woman to care for the children on board ship, went to a nearby 'poor house' and found a young woman name Mary, who by chance was also from his home town of Cambridge, and married her there and then. The new born girl was given away to a couple in England, and on 8th June 1854 the Beards took passage on the immigrant ship *Tantivy,* a three masted fully rigged ship of 1041 tons, for their new home in New South Wales, arriving in Australia on 3rd September 1854.[29] They travelled to Abington by

bullock wagon and moved into a small house already built for them. It has been recorded that Mary, the stepmother, was considered "not very kind" by one of the sons, Ridgewell, who sought a home with a kinder family living nearby and never went back. Another son, James, was horse whipped by Mr Morse, owner of the property, for killing one of the rabbits which he, Morse, had brought out from England as pets, and believed to be the first of their kind in the district. So James also ran away from home.

When Annie was six years old, a frail and extremely small child, she was sent to live with a family on a small selection near Bundarra where she was taught to take care of the cows. Her duties included doing the milking and taking care of the cattle through the day, to prevent the dingoes killing the young calves. It was a responsible job for such a small child, as she was not as tall as the calves herself. She was not treated kindly by her foster parents. As they gave her no shoes, she was forced to wrap her little legs and feet in rags to keep them warm and protect them from prickles and scratches. She spread the rags out in the sun to dry during the day as she watched her charges.

What would have become of her is hard to imagine if her brother James had not found her and taken her back to her father. Even then she was not to enjoy the comfort of the family hearth. Her parents again gave her away. This time it was to a kindly old lady named Granny Robinson, who gave her some of the affection of which she had been deprived. Annie returned home to Abington in her late teens, but as a fully grown woman she was only four feet tall and never grew any taller. She remained there until her marriage to John George Little, son of one of the shepherds on Abington. John was a man almost six feet in height. However, he offered the love and affection which the little girl's family had denied her and the ill assorted couple ran away to be married in Yetman in the late 1860s.

John took a job on Winscombe Station and later settled on a small farm at Tingha. They were believed to have raised a large family of 15 children, descendants of whom spread all over Sandon County and are well respected in the district to this day. William and Mary Beard, although the manner of their marriage would not be considered very romantic by present day standards, remained married, had several children of their own, and lived on Abington for the rest of their lives.

Ben Smith was not the only cruel father in the district, and many of them took a stockwhip to their offspring. The man Elizabeth Faulkner (first girl child to be born at Rocky River) married was no exception. A widower with six children already, William Alexander Jones, a wealthy man with property at the Lagoon which he farmed, and several houses at Woodville which he rented, was a man who could turn his hand to anything. He was a blacksmith and a working carpenter. It is known that he had apprentices at this trade, because his wife told her grandchildren how sorry she was for those boys. It seems that when he was displeased

"Boys will be boys" — Leonard George Jones, son of William and Elizabeth Jones.

with their work he would slap them across the face with a paint brush. But it was his own family who suffered most. When they stepped out of line, they were forced to strip. He would then tie them to a stump in his back yard, stand off and beat them with a buggy whip. Male or female, it made no difference. Elizabeth tried to intervene, but he would not allow it. Her own children were sometimes spared because of her pleading, but not the other family. He once threatened the 18 year old girl with a stockwhip, for 'answering-back' to Elizabeth, and only an abject apology saved her.

He was, however, kind to Elizabeth and took pride in her appearance. The family tell the story of him patiently driving his team around the block three times while waiting for Elizabeth to put on her hat. He built her a solid brick residence in Woodville that is still standing and in very good condition. He once made a merry-go-round for a travelling show and carved and painted all the horses himself. William Alexander Jones was a person that now we could call a 'workaholic'. He died from a massive haemorrhage while doing heavy farm work. Several of his decendants are still living in Uralla, although most of them are his great or great great grandchildren.

It was then the custom for youngsters reaching the age of 14 to leave school and set about the much more serious business of earning a living, if in fact they had not already started. When Bruce was 15 years old his mother persuaded him to write to Wilson Bros. of Longarm Station and apply for a job as tarboy for the shearing. He got the job, and small, delicate and alone, farewelled by his mother's tears and kisses, he set off to walk to Kingstown. His father had arranged for Mr Greenland to row him across the creek. The job lasted for six weeks. His fellow workers were hard drinking men with rough humour. As an initiation, Bruce was forced to stand in a mock court, and was sentenced to 12 strokes of the surcingle for having been 'caught with his pants down'. He had to submit to this punishment, which the shearers believed to be all in good fun. The food was good, and Bruce received 30 shillings a week and keep. The shearing team were paid at the rate of one pound per hundred sheep shorn, and the cook was paid six shillings a head for each member of the team.

After the shed closed, Bruce moved on to be general 'roustabout' on Plumthorp Station, and his mother packed a few belongings in a sugar bag which he carried over his shoulder. Tied with rope at the top and on one corner, the bag was easy to carry and left his hands free. It is interesting to note the contents of the bag. Apart from a few articles of clothing, he took with him a *Dictionary of Difficult Words* and a copy of *The Bible.* With a few pieces of damper and some cold mutton in his tucker bag and a billy can, the youngster set off to walk across country to his new job. He left home on 3rd September 1903, and seven days later he met with his brother, Ben, and Steve Mulvaine at a camp at Wood's Reef, where Steve pulled a piece of material like silk from the rocks. Later this proved to be the asbestos for which that area was to become famous.

His position as roustabout on Plumthorp was hard work, and there were many nights when he tumbled into his hard bed exhausted, but he stuck to his contract. He was to grow to manhood on this station. Going on strike with the rest of the workers, he was present when the itinerant singer Hetty Green was showered with coins by the shearers on St Patrick's Day. She was a very large lady with a beautiful voice and was accompanied by her small husband playing on a portable organ. The shearers loved their performance, and Hetty sang on well into the night.

Bruce was delighted to find that his school friend, Mabel, was working on Plumthorp as a nursemaid. Just the sight of a familiar face made him feel more at home, and they remained friends until Mabel's marriage several years later. When his time at the station expired, Bruce moved on, and he was a married man before he returned to Uralla.

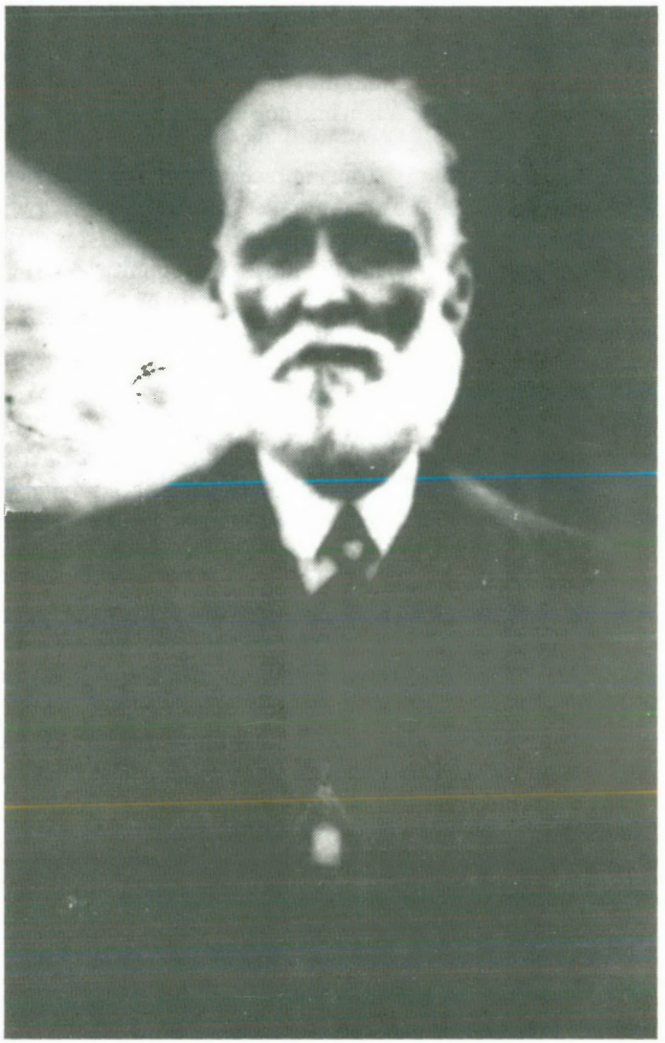
His life led him into many strange places. From the back streets of Sydney, working as a runner for a journalist on a Sydney newspaper, he saw the seamy side of the city, in laneways, opium dens, brothels, and cheap greasy eating houses where the dregs of humanity would gather. Then on to the cane fields of Queensland, where he worked for sustenance only, until with the help of his young wife, working as a couple, general hand and housemaid, they saved enough to buy their own small patch of sugar cane. The young couple were lucky. With hard work and careful planning, their farm prospered and they made a small fortune when sugar was in demand. They had three children, two daughters and one son. Later as a widower, living with his son whom he had named Sholto, Bruce made it a habit to return to his home town every Christmas, and continued this practice to a very great age, still driving his own little car from Bundaberg each year.

Ben Smith, his family long gone their own ways, lived out his old age in a small cottage in the back garden of one of his grandchildren. He was known to be a very difficult old man, his bearing still very upright, even in old age, when he wore a bushy white beard. In his eighties, Ben drove a horse and cart to Sydney and back. It took him three weeks. No one knows the reason for the drive, though some think it was because of a wager. Ben never could resist a bet. For a time, he wrote a column for the local newspaper, under the name of 'Old Grizzly'.

The family ties were strong and there were many stories told of him that are too numerous to be mentioned in this book. However, his grandson and his wife, Mr and Mrs 'Bill' Welbourne, continued to care for him until he died at 91 years of age, when he was buried in the Uralla Cemetery. He lies in the grave he shares with his wife Frances Ann Smith. On the large tombstone which he had erected for his wife who predeceased him, some one has carved in rather rough letters. 'The gate is ajar Ben. Your race is run'.

Ben Smith was not the first of the pioneers of Sandon County. Nor was he the most notable, but he was a 'character' in an age that produced

'characters', and like his contemporaries, he was a trail blazer. He and others like him left us a clear and broad trail to follow, with a history of flamboyant deeds to look back upon. Good, bad, small or strong they all have a place in living memory. Love them or hate them, no matter which way you look upon their exploits, they are well worth recording.



Ben Smith aged 80.

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