

Introduction

While browsing through the various local histories of the Central Coast it struck me how much richer the early record would be if modern recording technology had been around then. We know little in detail of how ordinary people lived in earlier times, and we're still not doing much to preserve the recollections of those who are still around to remember. So I decided to try to capture some of the flavour of what everyday life was like a couple of generations ago in the Yarramalong Valley and its environs by tape recording the reminiscences of some of the Valley's older inhabitants.

Yarramalong was settled by a handful of pioneer families in the latter part of the nineteenth century, soon after the cedar-getters had exhausted the area of its precious red wood and moved on further north, and the people I spoke with are some of the surviving older members of these original families.

I haven't tried to do a rigorous social history. I have just tried to preserve these accounts of everyday life as they were told to me - though some of the material may well serve as data for social historians in the future.

The interviews were conducted towards the end of 1993, and by and large they speak for themselves. They have been only lightly edited to remove any obviously irrelevant digressions. I've stuck with conventional spellings most of the time because to write the words exactly as they sound would make for unnecessarily difficult reading, but I've also transcribed literally wherever I thought it was needed to keep the flow, or the vernacular rhythm, or to preserve some of the more colourful colloquialisms. I had hoped to be able to include more reminiscences from some of the valley women, because to concentrate on men's lives is to tell only half the story, but in most cases the wives (who were sometimes present at the interviews) preferred to take a back seat and leave the husbands to make the going. A female interviewer might have more success in this regard.

The topics covered reflect the unorganised nature of everyday conversation, and I've made no attempt to tidy things up. Consequently some of the interviews appear to begin or end a bit abruptly. I preferred to write it down the way it happened and let the reader make the connections.

Some events and aspects of daily life crop up in more than one account. For instance nearly everyone praised the service provided by the now defunct store of Chapman and Sons in Wyong, and Fred Carson's adventures with his Kingtree chute are mentioned several times. That was the way it happened as we talked, so I've left it like that - each mention rounds out the picture a bit more.

The more technical topics will interest some readers more than others, but I've left them all in, because to do otherwise would be merely a restriction imposed by my own interests. There are some contradictions here and there, and some memories that differ - but that's the way memories are.

Before publication I asked each of the people I spoke with to read over what they'd said, both to correct any transcription errors, and also to take out any bits that they thought on reflection might cause embarrassment. Deletions were remarkably few. Nonetheless I hope that nothing I've made public here leads inadvertently to any controversy or social discord. That's the last thing I'd want.

Edward Stinson, in the last pages of the last volume of his Pictorial History of Wyong Shire, writes:

'... There are no longer any people bearing the old Stinson surname left in the Yarramalong Valley after more than 130 years... And the same sort of thing is happening to the other old pioneer families out there who were all permanently settled there before 1860. So very few are left. They are dying out or moving out and the strangers are moving in, most of them seemingly very wealthy, buying up those historic old

pioneer properties which they use mostly as fun farms, deer farms, goat farms, and donkey farms, with a few cattle and horse studs. It is all a very different world there now, from the one I knew when I was a little boy. The bullock teams that were once so common have disappeared for ever, never to be seen there again; and the dairy farms and the citrus orchards and the cornfields have mostly gone out of production”.

Too true, Edward. There is only one fully functioning timber mill left, and the last dairy in the upper valley died with its owner in 1992. There are no orchards of any size, and virtually no traces of the close-knit community spirit that features so prominently in the memories of the men and women who provided these accounts.

Of course change had to come to the valley with time. Everything changes, and all change is not necessarily bad. You could even argue, before nostalgia suffuses the past in its distorting rosy glow, that it has been A Good Thing to see the end of the backbreaking hard yakka and rotten working conditions that were so stoically endured Back Then, and accepted as an inescapable part of life. And surely it's a change for the better that kids living in the valley these days have a high school to go on to, and don't have to stand in cow piss to keep their bare feet warm on frosty mornings. But when the kids of today are in their anecdotal and reminiscing about the way things were for them, I wonder will their stories be as rich in their evocation of the human spirit as these ones are?

These interviews were collected and transcribed by one of the “strangers” that Ed Stinson refers to. Not one of the wealthy strangers, but one who is nonetheless a Johnny-come-lately in the eyes of the people interviewed. I had no idea when I started compiling these interviews how much my feelings for the area would be changed and deepened by talking to these people. I found myself personally enriched by the experience. I hope that perhaps some of the heightened appreciation that I feel will come across to other newcomers as they read these accounts.

There is one aspect to the valley people that isn't evident from these interviews. When I came to the area in 1977, I half-expected to be met with a certain amount of hostility and resentment from the “valley originals”. After all, I was a representative of the new ways, one of the wave of newcomers that was changing the face of their valley. But from the moment I arrived, I met only with helpfulness, friendliness, and neighbourliness. Oh sure, they've got their private view of us blow-ins, and I imagine they laugh amongst themselves at some of our exploits, (like the time I put the chain on my chainsaw the wrong way round) but they've never been aloof. This can be seen in the way both groups mingle so easily socially and, of course, in their willingness to so readily share with me their recollections of their past.

While putting these interviews together I came across a passage by the historian Russell Ward, from his book *The Australian Legend*, that might have been written with the Valley people in mind:

The ‘typical Australian’ is a practical man - rough and ready in his manners and quick to decry any appearance of affectation in others. He is a great improviser, ever willing to ‘have a go’ at anything, but willing, too, to be content with a task done in a way that is ‘near enough’. Though capable of great exertion in an emergency, he normally feels no impulse to work hard without good cause...

He is a hard case, sceptical about the value of religion and intellectual and cultural pursuits generally. He believes that Jack is not only as good as his master, but, at least in principle, probably a good deal better - and so he is a great knocker of eminent people... He is a fiercely independent person who hates officiousness and authority ...and, above all, he will stick to his mates through thick and thin, even if he thinks they may be in the wrong. “

I'll drink to that.

Bill Bottomley.

December 1993.
