



Bill and Valda Crump

The Crump name has cropped up a few times in earlier talks I've had, but I'm a bit confused. Were there two lots of Crumps in the area?

Bill: There were. They were still related, though. My father and the other Crump boys - Cleve, Hilton and all those - they were first cousins. They then lived across from where Ernie Chapman now resides. Their father was Bill, and my Dad's father was Isaac - they were the two brothers.

The first Crumps in this area were the Crumps across from Ernie. This property here belonged to the Mannixes - which was my grandmother. I believe they lived up this valley above our house - there were orange trees and other evidence of a house there, and there are things carved in the rocks here that I've heard my father mention, like Bernie Mannix, or Mick Mannix, or their initials and a year -1866.

The first I can recollect of dairying here was an old dairy down there on the lower part. Where the dairy is now wasn't built then. I was ten year old when that was built - so that's 58 years ago. They then dairied down lower, and in those times they always carried the milk in kerosene tins from where they milked the cows up to the dairy site, where it was separated.

They didn't bring the cows to the dairy to milk them?

No. They milked them in a separate area. Of course it's different now - it's all combined. It was quite common then.

There must have been a reason for doing it that way, though.

I never ever worked out why. But it wasn't just here - Lynch's were the same. Anyway, the first thing I can remember about that dairy was when a cow knocked me head over heels. I was only quite little at the time. I was a very little bloke when I was a kid - they called me The Weedling. At any rate, Dad put the cow in the bail and locked her in, and told me I had to hit her, and even though I was too little to hit very hard he wanted me to know that I had to show that I was boss.

My father excavated into the hill when they built the bails where they are now. How he ever did it I don't know, with no 'dozers, no tractors... He'd have a horse and scoop, and ploughs - that's how he would have levelled it off. That was in 1935.

He was working the place on his own?

Oh no, he always had chaps working for him. At the time he had a chap by the name of Leo Sweetman - he's still alive and lives in Paxton now. He was a tremendous worker, Leo, and he helped build those bails. They were built by Sid Jurd. He built a lot of bails in this area.

People seemed to get things built rather than build them themselves. I would have thought that more people would have done their own building.

Well, I don't quite agree with you that they didn't, especially in earlier times. There was a building up the hill that was built by my father and his brothers, and it was a joy to look at. Unfortunately the white ants got into it eventually. But I tell you what: they put them up to stay up! There were quite a lot of handy people about then who could do mortices, and dovetails... We had some wonderful old buildings around here, but they've all gone today.

When these bails were built we were still on the cream. It wasn't till about 1952 or 1953 that we went into whole milk. We had to meet certain conditions and change things around a bit, and it wasn't long after we started that they brought in the quota system. In those days you qualified by what you produced in the two months of May and June, and your quota was based on that. Well, if you were a little bit thrifty at all, you worked towards that. The first year we got a good quota, but the second year we got a big quota. We produced something in excess of two hundred gallons a day, which was a lot of milk at that time. But that wasn't your quota - you were given around 70% of that. So if you put a lot into it at the right time, you could end up with a very good quota.

Valda: But when we were on the cream we also had the pigs, and you had to work pretty hard with them.

Bill: Yes, I was the main one with the pigs. My brother Ray and Dad and I worked the farm as a team, and we each looked after different parts. We grew a lot of corn - all these fields here were under corn. We'd harvest it, bring it in and put it in the barn for storage, and then at night we'd go and husk it. When I was a young fellow I hated husking.

We went in for pigs in a big way - not big by today's standards, but we had seven or eight sows and in excess of a hundred pigs. We kept them up the head of this valley, and we'd cart the feed up to them by use of horses and dray. I used the skim milk to feed them. Dad and my brother Ray looked after the milking. I also helped them with milking of course, but the pigs were my responsibility.

We marketed the pigs at Maitland, but the prices there went bad and we decided to take them to Sydney. I'll never forget the first trip we had down there - it was a trip and a half. I'd never been to Sydney before in my life. This was about 1951, and we bought a brand new truck to transport them. We got them loaded up, and how we ever got out of the place I don't know because it was that wet. Valda's father was with us - he was the one that was to do all the directing - and it took us nine hours to get to Sydney from here! You've never seen anything like it - going out through Bucketty was something unbelievable.

That was unsealed then, wasn't it?

Unsealed! It was a dog track! But it all ended well because we got a price that was unreal compared to what we'd been getting at Maitland. And that started it off - everyone used to send their pigs with me and I would go either weekly or fortnightly with pigs and calves.

What did you think about your first visit to Sydney?

I didn't find it that traumatic. It was night-time when we got there, and we didn't have much trouble

finding the saleyards once we got down there - in fact, once we got onto the bitumen we were alright. It was unsealed then right through to where the Calga interchange is now. We gathered up the stock on the Monday afternoon and left about three o'clock Tuesday morning for the sale.

Did you get to improve on the nine hours?

Oh yes. Eventually I got it down to three hours. The roads weren't maintained regularly, and just that stretch we called The Missing Link was not maintained at all. It was heaven when they tarred it many years later.

So I carted pigs to Sydney like that for quite some time - then we branched out to buy more land. We had bought small parcels before, but then we bought the 1200 acre property that belonged to the other Crumps that we were talking about earlier. My brother's wife was very ill - she had a big heart operation - and I was left to carry the burden of things here on my own, with the help of Valda and Dad.

I put on young fellows, and I had one young chap - Michael Reilly - who worked with us for quite a long time. He was a hard worker, and I wasn't able to pay him much money, and eventually he spread his wings and went. But in the end he came back and, thankfully, we were able to compensate him a bit by helping him buy his own little farm, which he's still got today, between Laguna and Wollombi. So I got by with the help of young fellers like him.

Valda: When we went onto the milk Ray played the biggest part in the dairy and Bill played the biggest part in all the pastures and the silage, and all that sort of thing.

Bill: When I was a boy, after I left Laguna school I went to Marist Brothers in Maitland, and I had to board away from home. That was heartbreaking for me. Imagine going from a little school with about sixteen or twenty kids to a big school of three hundred with seventy in one class. When the first exams came round I came 45th in the class, and felt like a dunce. But I ended up coming in the first ten in later exams, so I felt then that I wasn't doing too badly. I tell you what, they were hard teachers though.

A bit strict?

Oh, too strict. It was ridiculous. They'd get murdered today if they did what they did then. I've always said that. They were severe on you, very severe, but if a boy can't learn he can't learn. If he's giving his best, that's all he can do. You had to toe the line.

And you had to board there ?

No. I boarded in Maitland for the first year with a lady by the name of Hafferty. Other cousins of mine had boarded there a few years previous, and though they didn't particularly want to take me on I had nowhere else to go, and they were close to the school. The next year I moved back to Cessnock and boarded there and travelled to school by train. There was a bad drought in 1942, and it got so bad that I had to leave school because Dad couldn't afford to pay anyone. It was a terrible drought. We went into the bush to dig for water and cut trees for the cattle to survive - they were running all through the hills here then. Snakes were also in large numbers looking for water also.

Have you had one as bad since?

I don't think so, though 1963/65 was pretty bad, and there was another one in the '70s.

Anyway, when I left school and came home I started to plough all the fields. We had Clydesdale horses, and we harnessed three to the disc plough, or we ploughed the single furrow and Dad would have two and I'd have two. It was quite a challenge, put it that way. But we grew beautiful corn on the paddocks here.

Then we started into the silage - that was another issue. It was all chaffed in those days. You loaded it either onto slides, drays or the truck I mentioned and it was brought to the pits. We had underground pits -

we didn't have any overhead silos. We dug those out. Again, that was done virtually manually because it was that damned hard because it was dry. But we eventually got them dug out. All the neighbours gathered round and helped one another then. There was none of this: "I don't do anything unless I get paid", they'd turn up and all they needed was a few scones and a cup of tea and they'd work with you.

Valda: We had a lot of men helping here sometimes. I would be flat out with morning teas and lunches.

And then you'd do it for them?

Yes. That's the way it worked. It was hard work though, don't worry about that. It was all cut with a canecutter. We had a cousin that came down from Queensland - he was a canecutter up there. He was a very strong bloke and a tremendous cutter. He was worth five or six men, he was so good at it. And not only that - could he load! He'd walk up the ladder at the back of the truck with large bundles on his shoulders.

Then we upgraded a bit and bought a binder. It was pulled by two horses, and we eventually converted it for the tractor when we they came out, but at the moment we're still in the horse era. It cut it and bound it into sheaves, very much like the hay sheaves, and that made things much easier. It was fine as long as it stood up, but sometimes the wind would come and blow it over and there'd be a problem.

From that we went on to forage harvesters. We had a share dairyman put on by that time and the brother and I went around the various farms contracting with the harvester. There was a chap called Ronnie O'Hearn who brought his truck from Bellbird, and we worked all sorts of hours. We would have done hundreds of tons of it - all over the place.

So this would have been the first stages of the introduction of mechanisation, would it?

Yes. That was my way of farming - to always keep up with mechanisation. It was no good working with a horse and plough when a tractor could do it. The forage harvester caused us a few problems when we first got it, but we overcame them. After a while we gave that away and went into further mechanisation with a one man operated machine - it's still over at Lynch's - it would cut crops in the field, carry it back, and put it in the pit where another tractor tramped on it. It was all hydraulic, and chains.

So you didn't need all that manpower then? You could do it all pretty well on your own, could you?

Yes. It cut it right down. Eventually we went right out of the silage, but I can tell you, in that '63 drought it was our saviour. We had heaps and heaps under the ground. I joined the Board of Directors of the Hunter Valley Dairy Company in 1962. There were 25 directors on the board, and they came from a wide area of the valley and they were all talking about what a hard time they were having, but I was the lucky one because we had so much ensilage underground. I suppose if you use foresight it'll pay off eventually.

But going back to when we got our first tractor: Being young, I suppose, I just could not wait for it to arrive, I was so excited. There might have been one or two around, but it was one of the first ones - a little Ferguson, of course. I had the horses all harnessed up and ready to work, and then the tractor came. The horses were let go and I don't think they were ever caught again, except for minor jobs. I started to plough all the fields then. I ploughed almost every farm in this district with that little Ferguson. From here up to Watagan - even down as far as Payne's Crossing. I travelled everywhere with it.

It must have kept you busy, with your other farm chores and all.

Bill: I suppose I burdened my brother and my father a bit with all that. I did all the paddocks around here - Lynch's, Woodbury's, Clarke's... It wasn't till later when we went into share farming that we were relieved of a lot and then were able to go out and do other things.

Then we went into melon growing, but we didn't go into them till we purchased *Oakleigh*, a property at Laguna in 1969. The reason for buying it at the time was due to inspectors getting onto us a bit about this

dairy here not being quite up to standard, and we knew we would have to build new bails. Also, access in and out of here wasn't the best for bulk tankers which transported the milk. When *Oakleigh* came up for sale I wrote to the Milk Board to see if they'd grant us permission to shift our licence from here to there. We had everything else ready to go, but I could not get an answer regarding the licence. On the day of the auction we had to stand there and couldn't make a bid. We couldn't buy it unless we could move the dairy there. One week later we got this nice letter to say that it had been approved!

An American developer had bought it - he was going to cut it up and sell it off - but with the aid of Harold Sternbeck we did a deal with him and ended up buying it. So that became the focus of the dairy.

Did that mean you had to take all the cows that were up here all the way down there?

Yes! That was a story and a half, that one! We had to do a lot of work at *Oakleigh* before we could shift, so we put in about 100 acres of melons. Harry Brown was the main man behind that - we went shares with him. For one mile along the creek front we grew melons, and we got sufficient money out of that to do the work we had to do there and buy irrigation and such. We didn't get big money for the melons, but we had such a volume. And we created a lot of employment - a lot of men came to work for us. There were at least two big truckloads a day, sometimes more, and there were semi-trailers as well sometimes. But you never saw anything like these melons. When they'd run their course we put in feed for cows.

Finally the Big Shift came. It was on the 16th of July 1970. There hadn't been a day without frost for the previous thirty days. And on the morning of the 16th we had the greatest frost we'd ever known. We had everything teed up - we had men coming from Maitland and all over the place. First we had to milk the cows that morning, and they were milked well and truly before daylight. The chap was here at five o'clock in the morning to pull the machines out and take them down and put them in the new dairy. The 500 gallon vat had to be dismantled, loaded, and taken down there, then set up again - the whole lot had to be done in the one day ready for milking that night. And this frost! You never saw anything like it! Everything was frozen! The vehicles were frozen up, it was difficult do anything, and we felt like just throwing our hands in the air and letting it all go. That was the coldest winter known in the district. The large waterholes between Laguna and Wollombi froze solid.

Anyway, we battled on, and we got it all done and finally everything was sweet. It was a terrific long day, and it was after dark before we went to milk the cows. But it turned out that the chap who had set it up had put the wrong phase on and the milking machine would only turn slowly and wouldn't milk. By this time he's back home at Maitland, so we telephoned him and got him back. He got back about half past ten that night and fixed it up and we were finally able to milk the cows. That was the Day of Days, that one - I never want to have another one of them!

My father took the cows the minute they were milked - a distance of five miles. The feed was waiting down there for them when they got there, and they had their feed and that part of it all was spot on. But with all the rest we had people going left right and centre!

Anyway, it all panned out, and we got around to getting a dairy going in a big way down there. We increased our quota and ended up with a very good dairy there for quite a few years.

And what was going on up here then, after you moved the dairy down there?

Well, we still owned all the properties then - and we'd bought Valda's brother Emie's dairy which we'd combined with here before the move and which also went down to the new place. Then we converted here to beef cattle. But we also went back into the melons again, and vegetables as well. We went in with Arnold Woodbury, who lived across from *Oakleigh* as it was called down there. We grew melons for quite a few years, and then when Michael came along we grew the melons here and also on his property. We grew the most beautiful melons you've ever seen! They were terrific - and pumpkins. We sold them by the side of the road at Hexham. Michael and I would load two trucks up and we'd take one each and be

on opposite sides of the road.

Occasionally Valda and I would take a load up on a Friday night and the people coming home from BHP would buy, but mainly it was Saturday and Sunday. We still had loads and loads going to Sydney, but we got big money selling them at the roadside.

And you kept on with melons then?

We grew them for quite a while - shifting them around. You never grow melons in the same place twice - you want about five years between crops - you need virgin land in other words. Sometimes we'd rent other people's paddocks and use them. You've got to have fresh ground.

Valda: My father was the first to ever grow melons commercially in this area. He taught everyone what they know about melons - growing them in a big way, that is.

Bill: Yes, he was the first - and he was an expert at them, too. He taught me how to pull a ripe melon, and there's a lot who didn't know how to pull ripe melons.

Valda: He never pulled green ones like a lot of them do today.

There was a lot of physical yakka to melons though, wasn't there?

Bill: Well, it gets back to what we were saying earlier about using machinery. When we did the first hundred acres with Harry Brown - that was all done by manual labour. One would pick it up off the ground and hand it to this feller who'd hand it to that feller and so on. It took about five men to get it into the truck, like a chain. But when we started growing them with Michael we put forklifts on the tractors and we loaded them that way... We ended up pretty diversified in our farming interests.

Valda: And they were all things that you got a break from - not like the dairy, where you had to be there seven days a week, even Christmas Day. These were more or less seasonal things, you know.

Did you ever get sick of the dairy routine? Did it ever get you down?

Bill: Oh... you'd get a bit frustrated at times, but then you'd come up fighting again. It's like a good horse, Bill. If he's any good he'll stick in there, and if he's no good he'll have to go. I think it's the same with a dairyman on a farm. It doesn't matter what you go in for, you've got to have your heart in it and be motivated.

Valda: Bill's father was a man who enjoyed everything. He enjoyed working hard and he enjoyed everyday life. You never heard him whinge about anything. He was a great man.

Bill: He lived till he was nearly 97.

Valda: He was still riding his horse at 90. He was a very active man.

Bill: And he was a very brainy man, too - in terms of farming. He had no education, but in terms of farming... He loved to spread his wings - he loved it when we'd buy new things, for instance more land or new equipment - he loved that.

He was a great hand at breaking young horses in, but that isn't to say he didn't have a few mishaps. One that comes readily to mind is when he took a young horse up the valley here to snig some posts down. He couldn't wait for the rest of us to arrive - we were all going up to help - and he hooked onto a post to snig it down. It must have hooked another tree, because it knocked him head over heels, badly damaging his legs. Somehow or other he still hung onto the horse, and when we arrived he was down on the ground and couldn't move. He was about two hundred yards up a very steep hill, and he was a heavy man, and it was a problem to know how to get him down. So we got a sheet of bark and put him in that. We brought him down the two hundred yards to where we had the trailer waiting. We put him in the trailer - still in the

bark - brought him back to the house here, put him to bed, and rang the doctor. When he came out he said he was quite certain Dad didn't have any breaks, but that he was very very badly bruised and should be taken in for X-rays as soon as possible. He was so badly bruised it was a couple of weeks before we could even get him in. As I said earlier, it was tough in those days.

There was another incident with a tractor. When tractors came along, my father used to like to help me with them, and one time he was putting some potatoes in, and he backed into the dam to clean some dirt off the back of the carry-all. Of course the brakes didn't hold and back he went into the dam - right up to his neck! He'd disappeared, and I thought he must have turned it over or something, but somehow or other he got it into the right gear and drove it back out. By that time I'd arrived on the scene. He was sopping wet, as you could imagine, and he jumped on his horse and rode the two miles or so back home to change. When he got there he just said he'd had a mishap and slipped into the creek. It wasn't until I got back that the story was unveiled!

It must have been enjoyable to work as a team with your father and brother ...you had a sort of division of labour between the three of you did you?

Yes. Oh it was enjoyable. We always got on well together. My brother Ray cut timber too. I had very little to do with that other than to occasionally help them to snig a few logs now and then. One time when Ray was away I had to go and help load the truck, and I was as weak as water. But luckily the other chap was so strong we got it loaded. But I didn't like that end of it much.

There was a lot of timber taken from this valley over the years. Our neighbours the Lynch's had the bullock teams. That was a magnificent team of bullocks. It was one of the most picturesque sights to watch them come along the road. He got them from the other side of Singleton, and he drove them from Singleton, yoked, back to here. He had these two leaders - roans with big horns. He was a very very good teamster, Steve Lynch - he was the best I've seen. His brother Johnny was alright, but nothing compared to Steve. There were others that had teams here, like the Harris' and the Woodburys. He was a good teamster too, Arnold Woodbury.

How big was Steve's team? About a dozen?

A dozen? More like sixteen - it was a sight for sore eyes. When he got to Broke he stayed overnight with my auntie who lived there and took off the next day for home. He might've made one or two other stops along the way, I don't know, but I can always remember them coming up the road here. They were a beautiful lot of bullocks.

And they worked logging this forest. The pits were going full strength then, and there was a great demand for pit timber. There was load after load went out of here. But I didn't have very much to do with timber.

Valda: Bill's glory was pasture - when we were on the milk.

Bill: Yes. That was the thing. I'd read books about it, and go on field days and all that sort of thing, and study it up. I wasn't frightened to experiment. Eventually we bought a sod seeder, and that was a tremendous success.

I don't understand about seeders. What's a sod seeder?

It's a machine that drops the seed and your fertiliser, and you don't have to plough your field. It punches it straight in. The first one I bought was only small, but I still think it was better than any of the others I bought later on. It took a little while to get used to, but once you got used to it it was tremendous what you could do.

Valda: Especially compared to when we had to broadcast it by hand.

You were hand broadcasting as a kid, were you?

Bill: Oh yes. And then to sow the little fine pasture seeds we had a little fiddle, and you got into a routine - every four steps. Plenty of fertiliser and good preparation was what did it.

You said you weren't afraid to experiment with new ways of doing things. That's not usual, is it? Don't people tend to do things the same way they did them last year?

Bill: That's a bit of a tendency. And a lot of people will stand back till someone else does it, then if it's a success, they'll do it too. I could name one or two that's been that way, but I think that's pretty negative, myself - I think you've got to be positive. Take when mulchers first came out, for argument's sake. No-one would have a mulcher - I bought the first one around here, but they've all got mulchers now, rather than the slasher. Do you know the difference?

No.

The mulcher cuts it up fine and leaves it spread out wherever it cuts it, where the slasher tends to throw it into windrows and it lays there and that's no good. But with the mulcher you keep building and building your soil. They're a wonderful machine.

And once they've come along you wonder why someone didn't think of them earlier.

Yes. They need a bit of power to drive them, though, I'll say that.

So tractors really made all the difference?

Oh yes. Tremendous... I only ever had one mishap with a tractor, and I drove them for a long time. I was working a bit of new land that my nephew owns now - we were clearing it. There was an old building there which is where my father was actually born. It had a dirt floor, so that's going back a day or two. There were a few sheets of iron left in my way where I was ploughing it with the rotary hoe, and I got off to throw this sheet of iron out of the way. When I turned around, the tractor was going off down the hill, heading towards a huge waterhole. I ran after it to try to catch up with it, but I tripped, and that was the best thing that could have happened to me because I'd have never got on it - and even if I had I'd never have stopped it. I'd have rolled it. Anyway it went over about three times and did a couple of hundred pounds worth of damage. It didn't go into the water - it ended up on its wheels. We got it fixed and went on using it for years afterwards. That's the only thing I've had with a tractor. I've done some dangerous things but I didn't tell anyone what I did.

And you presumably met Valda because she lived in the area?

Oh yes. She was the next door neighbour - the girl next door.

Valda: I was nine when my family moved to Watagan. My family originated at St Alban's. They were Chapmans. My mother was a Jurd. When we moved out here my brother was six and I was nine, and the little Watagan school had closed down. But because we were two more children in the area they opened it again as a subsidised school. We went to school there for some time, but then eventually it closed and we went to Laguna.

My parents did it the hard way when they came here. My father only had a horse and a plough - and their hands. I've seen them waiting for the moon to come up so they'd have enough light to go and chip things in the fields. I get sad when I think how hard they had to work.

Bill: They even cleared the paddocks bare-handed, with just mattocks and a horse.

Valda: But in those days, even when I got married and came here to live, the men didn't sit around. If there was a spare five or ten minutes they got a mattock or an axe and they'd be out ringbarking and clearing. You don't see any of that done today - everything's just closing in. I mean, it's nice to have trees and all that, but you can have too many, you know. Billy would be able to say how he used to fatten

bullocks out on the mountain, but a bullock or a horse couldn't get through the rubbish that's built up there these days.

Bill: It was very well looked after then. My old father would light it, and it'd be only a light fire. And we'd go back out later after the rains had come and it would be an absolute joy to ride through! The cattle'd be there, and the 'roos. You'd never see 'roos out on the flats like you see now - they'd be up in the hills where all the green pick was. But now all you've got is blackberries and bladey grass. Then it was possible to grow good bullocks on land that doesn't produce one thing today. It saddens us to see how things have changed so dramatically that way. But... the newcomers have been the lifesavers of this valley in many ways, I suppose.

The way I understand it, as the properties got cut up they became too small to be a viable proposition to farm, but they were worth something to sell to people who were looking for a place in the country.

Yes, they got cut up for money, because you worked hard and you didn't have much to show for it. I know we didn't have very much. And buying properties is a tremendous strain on you - even though the prices were small compared to today. But that was always my vision - to sell off what I'd bought at a higher price. That was the sort of vision I had, and I think it's turned out that way. We've got two properties at Nelson Bay that we could never have afforded if we'd just hung on to everything. The rates today would cripple us. Particularly now it's become nonproductive.

But even if the properties had never been cut up, they couldn't have remained competitive with what agribusiness is doing with cattle further west, say, could they?

No, that's true. Dead right. See, we experimented here with lot feeding, with about 60 to 80 head. We fattened them alright, but the return was so poor that all we got out of it was pleasure at looking at them so fat. Perhaps if I'd been a bit younger when I started and had other machinery and brought in grain instead of the prepared food it might have been a different proposition.

And when you look back, is there any time that you think was the pick of it all?

(Pause)... I'd say when we shifted the dairy down there to Laguna. We had the beef going too, and were selling a hell of a lot of cattle off at the time. That would have been the climax of it, I'd say - the best times.

That was a good dairy at Oakleigh. We had plenty of water - we didn't have the sand problem that's developed since. When we bought that property there was no sand in the creek at Oakleigh. There were huge waterholes. We had two irrigations going, but it's completely silted up now. I don't know whether it was our luck or not, but it stayed stable for a long time after we bought it, but then it started, and the sand just took one waterhole after the other.

Which theory do you subscribe to? The rabbits and wombats?

Oh, there's not a doubt in my mind about that. Not the slightest doubt - it had to be them. You've only got to look. They look so lovely and cuddly and that when you see them on TV, these wombats, but to see them out in the field - some of them would make you sick! The poor things, scratching around...

And the wombats have taken over from the rabbits?

The rabbits start it, then the wombats come in, but instead of it being a little burrow it'd be a big hole. When it floods the water gets in it and swirls around, and that starts it off. See, the Watagan valley is pretty stable, but I think it's better tree-lined than most other places. We don't have any sand - it's a different structure altogether to over the other way.

And you don't think that might be connected in any way with there being more trees?

Well I think that trees around the creeks are essential in a lot of places, but I don't believe they should be allowed to just clog up the system. Those old water gums are a tremendous retainer of creek banks. But wattles are a dangerous tree because their lifespan is so limited. They just tumble into the creek and clog them up. But we get very little erosion here. Any floods we get here only adds to this property. After a big flood you end up with several inches of silt.

And that's good soil?

Oh yes. I've seen good lucerne grown on these flats here as a result of what's built up over the years. It's good, deep soil.

When the '49 flood came we were in bed. We got eleven and a half inches of rain that night. My old father had a carbuncle on his arm at the time, and he was up all night bathing it. I'd come out to him occasionally and he'd say: "This is going to be the greatest flood ever known. I've never heard rain like it." I was young, and I'd sleep through anything in those days, but the next morning the evidence was there alright. It had dropped about four feet by the time we got up next morning. It left a water lily sitting fair on top of a strainer post well above normal flood reach. It had to be well over the post to drop it onto it. I've been here all my life and I've never seen a flood go within cooee of that.

You mentioned that it snowed here at one time. Can you tell me a bit more about that?

Well, it was in the mid-sixties - I think 1966. We'd been to a dance at Wollombi that night, and it was so cold that everyone left to go home about eleven (we usually didn't leave to go home till twelve). All the way home it absolutely poured with rain. We went to bed, and when we looked out in the morning it was just one blanket of snow - the whole valley was covered in snow. It was quite a coverage, and was very widespread - not just around here.

I remember saying to my old father at the time: "Come out here, there's something you don't see very often." He came out and had a look and said: "Don't be stupid, boy, that's only a heavy frost." But he kept walking up and down the hall to have a look at it. It was quite a novelty. My daughter was about seven or eight at the time, and we built her a snowman - there was plenty of it. Snow had fallen on the higher mountains around here before, but it had never been heard of in the valleys.

I suppose we must be just about due for another flood are we?

Well, they go in cycles, these things, Bill - floods and droughts. They're part and parcel of farming - you've got to live through them. Sometimes it's hard, and sometimes you wish you never were there, but that's it. As Derryn Hinch says, that's life.

Valda: We worked hard, but we did have time for entertainment, didn't we? We had lovely dances down at Wollombi. Our eldest daughter was taken to the dances from when she was a tiny little thing - there's ten years between our two daughters and Linda didn't have the opportunity as much as Sheryl did. They'd started going into the modern stuff by then, and the old-time was dying off.

We had some wonderful times. We'd be up at four

o'clock in the morning and then go to the dance and get home at one o'clock in the morning, then we'd be back up at four o'clock the next morning.

Bill: They were great dances. Everyone would congregate.

Have you seen a bit of a resurgence of this sort of thing as the new people have moved in?

Oh, I'd say so, but it's never got back to what it was. Everyone worked together as a community, it didn't matter what it was. If you had to do something for the school everyone'd turn up... I don't say they don't do that now, but it doesn't seem to have the same spirit.

Valda: They don't have things like... well, when our girls were young, we had Christmas trees, and such. They were wonderful. The children of today haven't seen any of that. They'd all be trained at school to do their parts. They were lovely concerts and plays...

Bill: They'd bring the children and babies along, and there'd be nearly as many of them on the stage as there were people. They'd be there in their little sleeping gear on the stage or under the seats. They were the days - they were really good days. Of course the old hall then wasn't what it is today. We've spent a lot of money on that. Then there was the P&C. They'd have picnics. Every year there'd be a picnic.

Did you do things at the picnic like have horse races or anything ?

Bill: Not horse races. Foot races... or catch the rooster. Nail driving... all that sort of thing.

Catch the rooster?

Yes. That'd be the last item on the programme - they'd let the rooster go, and everyone chased it to see who'd catch the rooster. I tell you what, there was some excitement to that! But they were tremendous days. The men would gather the day before to set up the canvases...

It must have been hard, with so many chores and obligations to do on the farm...

Yes, but we still managed, somehow.

Who would have built the hall in the first place?

That's been there over a hundred years, that hall. The community owned it, but then they handed it over to the council to control. The local Progress Association has poured a lot of money into it - people don't realise how much. It was just a barn, nothing more.

Where does the Progress Association get its funds from?

Market days - it's amazing what you can raise. The hall's only one thing. The tennis courts wouldn't be there if it hadn't been for the Progress Association.

Valda: I don't know whether Bill's told you, but he's been a great community man in this area.

Well he hasn't - probably because people don't like to say much about themselves. You tend to hear that from other people a bit.

Valda: Yes. Well he has given a lot of himself to the district, but he's enjoyed every minute of it, I'm sure.

Bill: I wouldn't do it if I didn't enjoy it. But I've always believed that if you live in an area you should give so much of your time to it. But the only thing I'm still in is the Progress Association and Hall Committee - I was 28 years President or VicePresident of that, and then I was President of the P&C at Laguna for seventeen years.

They were difficult times because we had no numbers at the school. The new people were starting to move in, and I can remember making a speech one night at the school where I said that the new people were going to be the salvation of the school. I was proved right, and I think they've got three or four demountables there now. The school was on the brink of going, many times.

Kitchen teas - they were another thing. Young couples'd get married and they'd give them a kitchen tea and people'd bring presents. But that's all gone now. If you put one on today people wouldn't know what you were talking about. It's sad, because they were good things. It gave the young couple a good start. I suppose I made as many presentations in that hall as anyone will ever make.

As a result of all this, Valda, did you have to do lots of cooking and things like that?

Valda: Yes I did. I did lots of cooking for all the functions. We always had a beautiful spread. It brought everyone together - it was kind of a family atmosphere. Everyone was really close in those days, but I don't know half the people in the valley now.

Bill: Valda's modest, too. She's a very good cook - one of the best, and her mother was a colossal cook.

Loyal to the fuel stove?

Bill: Yes, she can't cook on the electric. They were really good days, though. Going back to that cattle truck I've mentioned - I cleaned it out and everyone would pile into the back of it to go to the dances. There'd be twenty five or thirty in the back - how they'd all get in I wouldn't know.

Valda: Poor old Ernie Willis' shop was on the corner at Wollombi, and by the time we got there we'd have to go in there to fix our hair up. He had an old mirror in there where you could put a smear of lippy on, and away we'd go.

Bill: Sometimes we'd all arrive in the truck and there'd be young blokes from Cessnock or somewhere going "Baaa, baaaa!" at us.

Bet it was cold coming home in winter.

Valda: It was freezing!

Bill: Sometimes we'd go to a ball. You wouldn't go to a ball in the cattle truck, though. We might go to a ball at Millfield, or Broke maybe, and we'd get up and play tennis the next day, then go to a dance at Wollombi the next night, then get up and play tennis again the next day! I don't know how we did it.

Valda: Our daughters experienced family life like that, but our grandchildren never will unless things change. It's sad when you think about it. And it's not only here that things have changed - it's everywhere.

Would that be the biggest thing that's been lost - the fact that that community spirit has been diluted?

Bill: Well in our view it has, but whether that's the view of the people coming in I don't know. Well, for the people coming up here from the city there's probably heaps more community feeling here than they ever got down there.

Valda: Yes, they probably wouldn't have experienced those things where the whole family went together.

Bill: There's another thing that's changed, too. We didn't frequent wine shops or pubs. We might go and have just one drink but that was it - you were back in the hall to dance. But now they all congregate around the tavern. I'll have a drink as well as the next one, but that's another way it's changed. I was MC at the hall for quite a while and I had to be very strict about anyone bringing drink into the hall, because that was the law in those days. I was on the Hall Committee for thirty years or something, so I knew what it was all about.

Thinking about transporting the children, I notice that at the school there's almost one car for each child these days. When our kids were young we'd have our day to take them, and someone else would have their day to take them...

Valda: That was when our kids went to school. But when we went we had either two legs or a pushbike. Or maybe we'd be picked up in a horse and sulky.

Bill: When I first started school we only had one horse, and my brother and I rode piggyback - there were quite a few in the valley who rode horses to school of course. This particular day - I was only a tiny feller and I'd only just started school - the brother was getting sore from riding behind, because I was the one in the saddle. Anyway, we got half way up Watagan and all the others had gone on, and he lifts me up onto the back. To do this he let the bridle go, and the pony swung round and took off. I was left on there to

hang on. It went up the road a hundred yards or so and I fell off and landed on my head. I was knocked out - cold as a cucumber.

I was brought home here and put into bed. I remained unconscious for approximately forty hours. No doctors. We were reared tough in those days! When I came to, I walked straight outside - I can remember it now as plain as if it were yesterday. My father was ploughing and he was just about thinking of coming up to take me somewhere to be seen to, and when I got up and ran outside my mother told me to go down and tell him that I was up. I was alright. As far as I know it never affected me.

Valda: He's still got what he calls a Bump of Knowledge on the back of his head.

What a worry it must have been for your parents!

Bill: But they didn't seem to worry. They didn't panic in those days. It was different. Today there'd be a helicopter in to pick you up.

That's another thing with floods. The '51 flood was the only flood I can remember that stayed up. For three weeks we were locked in here and could not get out. No way in the world could you get out of this valley! There was always plenty to eat - there were pigs and cattle and this and that, you know - you didn't starve. But when we get a bit of a flood at all now all we hear about is getting the helicopter in to bring them some food.

Didn't you walk into Wollombi over the mountain in that flood to bring back some food ?

That was my brother Ray. They didn't walk, they rode horses, but how they ever rode horses I don't know. Three of them went - there was Ray, Lindsay Woodbury and Charlie Marsh.

Valda: We lived on the next door property, and my grandfather was a diabetic and they went mainly to try and get something for him.

I've never thought about that - people on medication being hemmed in by floods. And what did you do for three weeks, flooded in like that? Were all the chores suspended?. How did you get on milking the cows?

Bill: Oh we still milked a few cows. See in those days it was mainly summertime milking - we hadn't gone into whole milk at that stage, so you only milked more or less for your own benefit.

But once cows are in milk, don't you have to milk them regularly?

Bill: Yes, you do, but it was organised in such a way that most of them came into milk in the spring when you were on cream, and this was wintertime. It's a different thing altogether to when you've got a quota. If you missed the quota they chopped it down. (*Digression*).

... I was a Director on the Pastures Protection Board too, for a few years - about six, I think. And I would go to Sydney representing the Maitland area on the Dingo Board for three years. They were all experiences.

I would have thought you'd have enough to keep you occupied without all that. But also, I suppose, it would have made you feel an even greater connectedness with the place.

Oh it did. The thing is, you'd replace someone who'd been on it before you. When Charlie McKay died, I took his place, and at the Factory I replaced Greg Andrews, the then owner of *Mulla Villa*. They were the sort of men that you felt pretty honoured to be replacing. I had seventeen years on the Dairy Company Directorship - from '62 to '79.

But I suppose the pinnacle of it all was when Valda and I were invited to meet Prince Charles and Princess Di in Maitland. This was at a State Reception in 1983. There were six couples invited from the Cessnock area and we were privileged to be one of those. I spoke to him personally. Things were different

then to today. It was all go then, and whether you were a royalist or a republican didn't come into it. But it was a great honour to be invited.

I was very keen on cricket. I wasn't any expert, but I always loved it. I played for Laguna and Wollombi, and represented Cessnock. The Lynches were great cricketers. The two boys that are dead now, Frank and Johnny, they were almost state representatives. Steve was a handy cricketer, but not in the same class as them. But he was a very good captain, Steve, and he played well with the younger ones. There were some great cricketers about here.

But football never took off?

No. It never took off. We'd go to school and play cricket all summer, but when winter came we'd probably play marbles or something. We never played football. But we played tennis. Again, I wasn't brilliant at it but I loved it. I don't know now how I fitted it all in. It was a full life, though.
