

Recollections of a Soldier Settler's Son

By Tony Ostler Oct.14, 2010

My father, Ernest Ostler, ex 30th Battalion was one of those who took up the option of a block of land gazetted for settlement in an area known as the Cedar Scrub on Pappinbarra Creek some 30 miles in the old scale, from Wauchope on the Hastings River – Pappinbarra Creek being a large tributary to that river.

Firstly I will give you a brief history of my father, Ernest Ostler and the type of man he was. He was a quiet man, some 6 feet tall, dark complexioned, able to put problems into perspective as they arose. All his life he was a person who seemed to me a father figure and people would come to him for advice and guidance. He just went about his business in a quiet orderly way. Dad was born in India, in 1887, at Sitapur, the son of a British Quarter Master Sergeant serving on the North West Frontier. Unfortunately his mother died when he was a very small boy and subsequently his father remarried, I think back in England where most of the 9 children of that marriage were born. In the early 1900's, the family migrated to Australia eventually settling in the Hastings area, where Dad worked at various positions. Following the outbreak of World War I, Dad with 2 of his brothers enlisted in the A.I.F., eventually ending up in France and action on the Western Front. As we all know this was not a picnic in the park, he took quite a battering, wounded in the legs as well as being severely gassed and ending back in a military hospital in Blighty (England). His wounds and especially the gassing were to severely affect his health for the rest of his life. It was while recuperating in hospital that he met my mother, Nellie Reeson, a member of the nursing staff. She was a reasonably well educated young lady and from what she told me and the photos I have seen, back it up, came from quite a well to do Lincolnshire family. Her father owned a substantial amount of property as well as a flour mill. Young ladies of that standing just didn't work in military hospitals, her mother and father didn't approve, especially her mother.

Following the cessation of hostilities with Germany, Dad was repatriated back to Australia and finally honourably discharged at Wauchope. Mum, feisty young lady that she was, against all family wishes, packed up her bags, and followed Dad out to Australia marrying him in Wauchope – I think on May 21st 1921. That will give you an idea of what my parents were like, one quiet and steady, the other more volatile – someone who hated injustice, but who was intensely loyal.

They settled down to married life, Dad working around the area and where three little boys, Keith, myself (Tony) and Bruce were born. It was then he secured the afore mentioned block of land, at what was finally to be known as Upper Pappinbarra. His brother Alfred, also in the ballot secured the adjoining property.

Pappinbarra Creek, headwaters in the now Mount Boss National Park, the largest and longest tributary feeding the Hastings, junctions into two arms some four miles down the creek from Dad's block of land, with both arms gazetted for Soldier Settlement. Now all this land was virgin scrub clothed in some of the heaviest forest, both rain forest and eucalypt on the North Coast, never been touched by the blade of a sharp axe, making the task of clearing the land for settlement truly a daunting one. A fair proportion was never even occupied by those who won them in the ballot and I'm led to believe one man even committed suicide. I think there would have been sixteen or seventeen blocks all told and to my knowledge only six were

Appendix Four



finally settled by ex-servicemen, including my father's and two, one on either side of his, occupied. That included my Uncle Alf's.

Dad set about having his land cleared, either felling the trees or ring-barking the extra large ones which were huge; burning it after it had dried off and then sowing down pasture. Most of the timber for the building of the homes and farm sheds were pit-sawn on the properties or into rough split slabs from suitable logs.

Our old home was built of some pit-sawn timber and slabs and lined to keep the cold out. A veranda out the back and one in the front, with a timber shingled roof. It was built butter-box style (no Jørn Utzon's around then) durable and serviceable. I have no recollection of moving to Pappinbarra, I was still too small, but have a vivid picture in my mind of my mother arriving home in the horse and sulky with baby number four, my little brother David. Dad was on the reins and Bruce in the middle with his leg all bandaged up.

We obviously had been living at Pappinbarra for some time, and while Mum was in hospital producing David, Dad was caring for us older three. Unfortunately accidents can happen in the best of family circles and I was the cause of a rather nasty one, leaving the lid of an opened 4 gallon kerosene tin laying in the backyard, Bruce tripped over it gashing his little leg very badly, which resulted a trip to hospital, hence the bandages and arriving home with baby David.

Ethel Ostler a sister of Ernest and Alfred, with four of the Ostler children and Malcolm Howe in front of land cleared for Soldier Settlement. Image donated by Tony Ostler.

Another time Mum was doing the family wash in a copper over an open fire in the back yard, Bruce with his little hatchet, splitting up kindling. Toddler David placed a stick of kindling on the block and Bruce accidentally severed David's middle finger and badly gashing the other. This meant another trip to Wauchope, 30 miles away in Uncle's car to see the doctor. I can still picture the scene in my mind.

I also remember the February 1929 flood: massive, still talked about in the Hastings by those of my vintage. We were really cut off from the world.

Drought and fires spring to mind and the struggle to keep weakened cattle alive – very trying times for everyone indeed. There wouldn't be many children in Australia who would have heard the eerie call of a dingo which was a frequent event in those days at Pappinbarra especially on a cold winter's night. Their howling would send shivers up the backs of little boys, as we cuddled together in their bed, the animals only a few hundred yards away.

Appendix Four

In the mid twenties with the phone now on and Dad working in the postal exchange, in a one room office erected on the end of the front of our veranda. This was a wonderful boon and gave a little extra cash for the finances. In the early days, Dad also had the mail run using a horse and sulky, where he had to pick up the mail from the next post office. I think this was at least twice a week to some 10 miles away. Finally we had a mail-man who arrived in a car three times a week.

Like most children in those days, slackness wasn't encouraged and we all had our farm chores, feeding chooks, pigs, and poddy calves and many other jobs. By the end of the twenties a good set of bails and a dairy had been built and set-up and a herd of cows to use them. Our cows were very quiet and it was not unusual for Bruce and me, one on either side with stools and bucket to milk one of the cows standing in the yard. We had become quite adept at hand-milking. I wouldn't do it now, no way. I guess it would be around this time I developed a great love of cattle, both dairy and beef to this very day. It gladdens my eye to see a good herd of cattle and always will.

The dairying industry at that time was totally different to what it is today, and the keeping of pigs was essential to supplement farm income. Subsequently corn or maize as it is known, was grown to feed the pigs to add to the separated milk as their diet. The combination produced very good pigs for sale. Corn paddocks had to be ploughed up with draught horses and prepared for planting, not too many tractors around then, they arrived on the scene post World War II. Then the young corn had to be scuffled and again with horses with an implement known as a scarifier to keep down the weeds and hill the young corn. This was all hard work and very time consuming. At the end of this and with the onset of winter, the corn and the cobs that developed dried off and had to be pulled (that is the cobs) and put in the barn. Again, with one horse and cart, and now with all hands on deck: Mum, Dad and the kids and anybody else who showed up. The weather was a big factor, the corn had to be dry for pulling. Corn pulling didn't always go down too well with the kids, but it had to be done. As an aside, the young corn cobs, colloquially known as mutti was a delicious supplement to add to the dinner table as well, for the family. Still to this day, I love it.

Chooks were another essential for their eggs and the table, and of course they had to be cared for and housed every night. We didn't want any of them falling prey to a marauding fox or quoll, even a goanna pinching the eggs. I still like chooks.

Fruit and vegetables are a must on any farm, there were no supermarkets then and it was too far away anyway, so we always had plenty of vegies and fruit. Mum did a lot of fruit preserving, especially peaches, pears and plums, and it was all hands on deck again peeling the fruit. There was much grizzling and moaning from the younger generation. Any large containers were used for preserving even an odd kerosene tin was brought into use. Dad would cut the lid off, thoroughly cleanse the tin ready for the fruit and then solder the lid back on with the fruit cooked and inside.

I might add some history here on the value of the four gallon kerosene tin. With no electricity, all lighting had to be from lamps run on kerosene, and being so far from town it was much more expedient to buy it in bulk. The empty four gallon drums (square in shape), were made excellent use of in a multiple of ways. Vessels for carrying water around the house and garden, having the lid cut off, and a handle put in for carrying. Also in the dairy, especially for washing down purposes and carrying separated milk for calves and pigs. They also found a use in outside dunnies, very important, as there were no inside toilets those

Appendix Four

days. Also while I'm on the subject of bulk, the same went for sugar and flour. All in bags, you never knew when you might be cut off from town by floods or even bushfires. My mother always made good use of the bags in many ways especially the flour bags. She was a very practical woman. We made our own butter from the cream produced on the farm. All hands to the wheel turning the churn for the finished product. Homemade bread was always on the menu, Dad was a dab-hand at baking bread and with a growing family it was a never ending job. A great combination: fresh bread or scones, fresh cream and homemade jam. The elixir of life!

Transport was always a problem, Dad never held a licence, so no car. For the very early years of the children's lives there was the pony and sulky, until Dad came very close to losing his life trying to cross a flooded creek. No pony, no sulky. From then on it was either the mail car or the cream lorry for a necessary trip to Wauchope. The kids and men on the back of the cream lorry with the cans: shame if it was raining!

Dad always kept a vealer or two, plus the same with the pigs for farm slaughter and meat for the table. I hated having to help skin a beast which was not the most pleasant job in the world. No fridges or freezers in those days and because of the lack of electricity, much of the meat had to be salted down and preserved in a specially made brine. Also the old time meat safe came in handy and hung up in cool air, and kept away from those icons of the Australian bush, blow flies.

Education: My mother especially was very strong on this aspect of life and as there was no school closely situated, she elected to teach us through the old Blackfriars Correspondence School. She was well equipped to do this and laid down basics until a subsidised school was built on the property and a teacher was engaged to put a bit of polish on us kids and the neighbours children. At most there would have been up to a dozen children attending. The teachers and there were three all told over a period of time, always boarded with our family, one teacher Bill Lake in particular, had a profound effect on my life as a person which has benefitted me greatly. Unfortunately he was to lose his life, while serving in the R.A.A.F. during World War II.

There is so much I could recall, but there is a limit to everything. Life was hard for parents, their sacrifices monumental, but the children knew no other life and by and large were happy and contented. Education being the main factor in my family's case, change had to take place. At this time 1936, when I was 12 years of age, Dad made the big move. Share farmed the property out and moved to Port Macquarie for six months, until relocating to Harrington on the Manning River and taking over the Post Office there. I finished my primary schooling at Harrington Public and then on to Taree High for the rest of my school days.

By that time World War II was in full swing and Japan was causing a bit of angst in the Pacific Zone I was now 18 years of age and joined the Army. I had a bit of a problem persuading my parents, especially Mum, giving permission so that I could join the A.I.F. but she finally gave in. I served in various places in Australia including Darwin when it certainly wasn't a tourist attraction, finally being posted to Bougainville and active service. I was in Rabaul at the end of the war before returning to Australia and was discharged in Sydney after nearly 4 ½ years Army service, and still only 22 years of age.

I returned to the old farm at Pappinbarra exactly 10 years to the month since I left in 1936. A lot of water had flowed down that old creek in those years, I had well and truly grown up,

Appendix Four

seen quite a lot, met and associated with a lot of wonderful men, some who never made it back home.

I joined my brother David, now grown up on the old farm. We had dairy cattle together until I bought my own farm next door, having met and married the lady of my life, Pat a city girl. I ran a successful farm, raised three wonderful children and seven grandchildren, now at 86 well and truly "retired". Unfortunately I'm now on my own, but still very active and enjoying life, with a great family and many friends.

This sums up my recollections as a soldier settler's son and I feel so honoured to be the son of that man, Ernest Ostler and his redoubtable English war bride.

Source:

[A Land Fit for Heroes?](#) A History of Soldier Settlement in New South Wales, 1916-1939

<http://soldiersettlement.records.nsw.gov.au/index.php/about/>