

The Kangaroo Valley Historical Society

“The History of the Kangaroo Valley Historical Society”

Talk given by Mrs. Edith Vance-Chittick at the KVHS Meeting 11th Nov. 1986

Origin

You may well ask why I was asked to give this talk. I can only answer because I was married to the two men - Wes Vance and Archie Chittick - who were responsible for starting the Society. Perhaps this was quintessential on Wes's part - but quite intentional on Archie's.

Both men were born and died in Kangaroo Valley. They loved it and gave of their utmost for the advancement and improvement of this area.

Association with the K.V. and A & H Association

Wes was the Honorary Secretary of the K.V. A & H Association for some 43 years. Over that period he had gathered quite a lot of history of this small but rich farming district.

It was at the 1951 Annual Meeting of the Association that he “let his head” go with his Secretary's report. In it he touched on events and history of the Association that few, if any, of the Committee at that time were aware. You know it's when someone gets up and congratulates the secretary on the “very comprehensive and informative report” etc. But Wes's report in 1951 was just that. He certainly had the interest of the A & H in his mind and heart. In fact he and I couldn't get married until he had finished up the business following the 50th Jubilee Show.

Archie Chittick

Archie, always interested in history of any kind, asked that the report be published in its entirety. Wes was a modest man. He objected to this idea on the grounds that his report was not exactly purely an A & H report. He thought that others might not be interested.

Eventually, however, he was persuaded and with a little “pruning” the report was published in the “name not given”.

The article caused a great amount of interest. This gave Archie the chance to move at a subsequent A & H Meeting "That an Historical Society be formed to preserve our local history".

Interest Grows

Archie's motion was accepted. Interest continued to grow to the point when it was decided to have a "History Book".

It was also agreed that this should be launched at a special gathering such as a "Back to the Valley Week".

A sub-committee was formed to look for an author. First of all Mr. Reuben King of Nowra was contacted. A & H Meetings were the most representative of interests in the Valley. So Mr. King attended a meeting hoping to get more information to enable him to get on with the job.

Most unfortunately Reuben King died suddenly on the following day.

William Bayley

After this loss of a prospective author Mr. Bill Bayley was asked to prepare the book.

Bill, a retired schoolteacher and Fellow of the Royal Australian Historical Society, was well known for his many "local" histories.

His book, entitled "Kangaroo Valley" was based largely on material derived from newspapers in the State Library and information previously gathered by Mr King. These sources were supplemented by scripts submitted to Bill by local organisations, clubs, churches etc.

The book was ready for the Back to the Valley week. On 10th October, 1953, 1000 copies were delivered from the printer (Halstead Press, Sydney) at a cost of £257.15.7. They sold originally at 5/- each. each.

A second enlarged edition came out in 1966 and retailed from then up until 1973 at \$1.00 per copy.

Back to Kangaroo Valley

The famous Back to Kangaroo Valley week could, in itself, form the subject of yet another talk. It was a huge success.

How the local folk got behind the effort was absolutely amazing. They worked really hard to make the whole week of festivities a time to remember. There were entertainments .very day and night. These provided meeting places and enjoyment for the visitors who came in numbers as well as locals.

There were old-time dances, concerts - with local and visiting artists - and one night just for people to meet together and talk, and, my goodness, how some of the old-timers talked.

In addition there were football and cricket matches, tours to various parts of the district. In each area residents would supply refreshments and, in most cases, a speaker. On these occasions, thanks would be expressed by one of the visitors who had previously lived in the place concerned. Through the medium of these tours and the speakers we greatly supplemented our knowledge of local history.

Culmination of the Week

The culminating day of this memorable week was the Sunday. A combined churches' service was held in the K.V. Hall.

It was great to see so many ex-residents and to renew many acquaintanceships and friendships. When it was all over a lot of exhausted Valley people heaved a sigh of relief that everything had gone so well.

The Kangaroo Valley Book

At the Back to the Valley week, Bill Bayley's book sold like hot cakes. Don't ask me about books and money --Wesley took charge of that. As now, books were placed in the shops and in Nowra.

What I do remember was the only time Wesley spoke harshly to me. I had decided to tidy up his office. Amongst a lot of discarded papers I found and burnt a "tatty old notebook" and Gosh! it was the note book in which Wes had all the "who had what"! Well you can't get a book back from ashes and I learnt a lesson "Let men clean up their own messy offices".

After the Big Bang

I guess things were a little quiet after the big bang of the BTKV Week and we were a body of our own.

For two years we had been under the wing of the A & H Association but now. We were established in our own right. The book was selling fairly well; people who had lent money to assist its production had been repaid but we kept an interest by having a "picnic-type" of gathering annually at various localities.

I think the first was at Bendeela at the junction of Meryla Creek and Kangaroo River. Tom Rendall spoke of the farms and one-time owners. M Wood-Davies from Wingello talked about Mr Charles Throsby and his work and explorations. Another was held at the Upper River. I was not present that time, tragedy had come into my life with the loss of Wesley and my daughter Dorothy. Thus, I have no personal memory of that occasion only that it was well attended.

Further "Picnic-Type" Meetings 1954 to 1972

Barrengarry had their turn. Mr. Bayley and Harry Cox addressed the gathering. We went to Budgong. Speakers - Mitch Abernethy for the locals and Mr Edgar Beale, a Wollongong/Solicitor/Historian gave addresses.

The Beaumont venue was Jack Swanson's property at a time owned by the Mortons. Mark Morton spoke of its history and Mrs. McMahon gave her memories of the local life there in her time.

At Wattamolla we had a lovely day down on a grassy patch by Broger's Creek. Mr. Stuart Hearne (recently deceased) of Goulburn addressed us charmingly but I can't remember who the local speaker was on that day.

Central K.V. also had its turn. It was an extremely wet day and we had to retire to the Hall for most of the day.

The picnic near Glenmurray Crossing was the last of these enjoyable outings. The two speakers were Mr. Wal Thompson (history teacher from Bomaderry High School) and Mr. Bill Frost of Nowra.

Nugent House

By this time we had established Nugent House. A building that had been part of the "Nugent Store" became available to us.

The Nugent family's residence had been destroyed by fire. The red tin building we acquired with a room which was the second Post Office in Kangaroo Valley (the slot for posting letters is still there) was prepared for a Museum.

It was "manned" voluntarily at week-ends by the six Nugent House ladies. These ladies (some here tonight) gave wonderful service to the Society.

The Nugent House Museum opened in January 1969 by Mr and Mrs Aisworth Harrison - the people who gave us the sun-dial. The opening was on one of the hottest days ever. The old Museum was very popular but far too small for all the exhibits we had. Eventually was bursting at the seams.

Present Site of the Pioneer Farm

Meanwhile thought was being given to acquiring a piece of land adjacent to the Hampden Bridge. For years the acquisition of this site had been a "dream" of both Wes and Archie.

The area had originally the local Pound Yard. At the time the Society was casting eyes on it it was occupied by the DMR.

About this time (or soon after) the Water Board and Hydro Electricity Commission had commenced work on the Tallowa Dam and Bendeela Pumping Station. This was 1970. In those days Kangaroo Valley was a very busy and populous place.

Interview with Tom Lewis

So that was the scene when a few members of the Society, under Archie Chittick's chairmanship, had an interview with Mr Tom Lewis.

Tom Lewis, at the time, was out state MP. The object of the interview with him was to try and get the DMR site. Tom Lewis in those days was the Minister for Lands. Later he was State Premier.

Ultimately, after a long wait, the Department of Lands allocated the site. But to get the DMR to come to the party was a different matter.

Finally, however, they did move to a much better equipped site on Bendeela Road. We were then free to go full steam ahead with the project (or so we thought. Man proposes but God disposes).

Resumption of Land at Bendeela

The Water Board was resuming farms down in the Bendeela area. Buildings were being sold. We heard that the old Rendall home was to be bulldozed or allowed to collapse with age and the elements.

So there were still more discussions. This time between our representatives and the Metropolitan Water Board. The outcome of this was that we were given the buildings to pull down and re-erect on the existing Park site.

The Renadll homestead was the only building available of an era suitable for a museum piece.

I couldn't begin to tell you of all the comings and goings and all the letters, forms and meetings that went into getting the project under way.

The Museum Park Trust

In May 1971 the Historical Society was requested to nominate seven of its Members to form a Trust to administer the site and the buildings to be erected on it. At this time the Trust was named "The Hampden Bridge Museum Park Trust".

Additional to its responsibility for the upkeep and control of all buildings and grounds, the Trust was empowered to employ a person or persons to be answerable for the day-to-day management of the Reserve and accountable for the receipt of admission fees and custody of all exhibits.

The Trust was to be a totally separate body from the Historical Society which owns all the artefacts on display. But from the outset it was clearly understood that the interests of the two bodies were the same there would have to be close collaboration between them. In the early days this was secured by the fact that all members of the Trust were also members of the Society.

January 1973

Just as the Society was about to embark on the project there was yet another snag At the time of their occupation of the site the D.M.R. had a high fence and a padlocked gate at the entry.

The Society's President (Archie) was not himself a member of the Trust because he was over the age limit of 70 but it was to him that the key to the site was to be handed over. He was very keen to get access to the site to assess possibilities but was halted in his tracks. The key to the gate was lost.

For several days there was a minor panic. Tony Williams the young son of the Principal of the School had been given the key to take to me in my capacity as both Secretary of the Trust and the Society but he somehow got diverted or changed his trousers. It was nearly a week before it was discovered that he had the key in the trousers of another suit.

The First Day

A site meeting was held on the day that the key turned up. This was the 8th January 1973. John Graham and John Griffith met with Archie on the site and also present was Bill Frost from Nowra. He had offered to give voluntary help in dismantling and re-erecting the homestead.

Then on the 1st February the same team started the work of numbering the slabs and taking them apart down on the farm at Bendeela.

That same afternoon after having completed the first day of the project in which he was so interested, Archie collapsed and died.

However life goes on and the work proceeded.

Immense amount of Voluntary work

I can't begin to tell you of the hard work and immense of voluntary work that went into the preparation of the site. Then there was the conveying of the timber from Bendeela and the reconstruction of the homestead and other buildings on the Hampden Bridge site.

We have an Album which contains a record of all the men and women and children who gave as much of their time so willingly and without payment. It was practically a year's work – ten month anyway – and still lots to do and all sorts of obstacles to

overcome. It was almost a nightmare, then came the cleaning up and transferring of the contents of Nugent House to the Park. There are many thousands of exhibits. Installing them in an appropriate fashion in the new setting was just another job.

During the period March to November 1973 we had a considerable amount of publicity for what was going on. As a result of this we were offered a very large number of additional items of machinery and all kinds of things. Most we were able to accept.

There was one object however, which the Society felt was hardly compatible with the picture of a nineteenth century dairy farm which we were trying to portray. One night, without reference to us, someone came and dumped an enormous field gun (First World War vintage) just under the Throsby tree and pointing ominously at the Hampden Bridge! A quick conference the next morning decided to pass it on to another voluntary body so we quietly transferred it to Apex Park just over the road. It stayed there for many years and provided much fun for children of visitor's barbequing there.

Opening day

The official Opening Ceremony was on the 10th November 1973. That, too, was a day to remember.

In January a "Museum Park Appeal Fund" had been opened under the chairmanship of John Griffiths with Mrs Margaret Noakes as Honorary Secretary and the Mayor (as is now) Alderman Sawkins as a Committee Member. The fund raised \$12,146 in about 12 months.

The money raised was used to pay many of the debts incurred mainly to establish the Park as it is today.

The opening ceremony on that sunny day was performed by the Honourable Tom Lewis, MLA. At that time Tom, our local State Member for Wollondilly, was Minister for Lands.

Several prominent "greats" were present on that day including His Honour Mr Justice Else-Mitchell in his capacity as President of the Royal Australian Historical Society.

An Unexpected extension to the Park

From the platform that day, Mr Tom Lewis announced that the Lands Department was in the process of acquiring land over Tanner's Creek at the cost of \$14,000. He said this (an area of 21½ acres) was to be offered to the Trust as an extension to the Park.

He also announced a further grant of \$2,000 to previous grants of \$2,400 and \$500 and a loan of \$2,500. Particularly helpful in obtaining this invaluable assistance was Mr Kevin Hopkins. Kevin was the District surveyor at that time. With the return of Mr Kevin Frappell to Sydney, Mr Hopkins is now the Regional Director of the Lands Office in Nowra.

Other indispensable help in the foundation and development of the Park was received from Messrs Citra Constructions, Messrs Leighton Contractors and the Snowy Mountains Authority.

The contractors not only contributed handsome donations but lent us heavy equipment (particularly the time we bought the 25ton Fossil Rock to the Park) and at a time when work staff were on strike encouraged some of the men to come and assist us in carpentry and other work on the site.

Historic Site Established

So with great help from these sources together with the tremendous effort from our local community the Historic Settlement was established. It has been open every day of the week since it began and must have admitted nearly a million visitors in the past thirteen years. Tourism, whether you like it or not, is now the Valley's largest "industry". Our Pioneer Farm has done a very great deal to assist it.

The History Book

As I have already mentioned, a second edition of Bill Bayley's "*Kangaroo Valley*" was published in 1966. My husband Wesley, was working on a final or extra chapter, doing necessary research work for Mr Bayley, when he suddenly passed away on 4th July 1966. The work he had started was, nevertheless, completed and passed on to the author before the end of that year.

The 1966 edition was selling out in 1972. The Society approached John Griffiths to write the book we now have. We called it "A History of Kangaroo Valley" but at the author's request added the word "Australia" to the title so that no one would think it related to Earl's Court in London which is also he (so he told us was) well known in Great Britain as "Kangaroo Valley".

John's book, which has been a huge success, was written from a different approach to Mr Bayley's. The first edition launched by Senator Baume in June 1977 sold out (2000 copies) in two years. A second edition (3000) copies is now in hand and will sell soon.

Caretakers and Custodians of the Park

The task of selecting a person or persons to look after the Park is, as I said before), in the hands of the Trust members, but we as Historical Society Members work with them.

Over thirteen years since 1973 we have had very good people from the first "tent dweller" to the present day.

As time passed some moved on and some have retired. The members of our Society have always rallied round when required and recently when there were problems they came "good" again.

A volunteer roster of 13 have been in daily charge of the Park to welcome visitors seven days a week for the 13 weeks right up to the day Shirley and Len took over last month. This saved the Trust a lot of money and during the time volunteers took over \$5,000 in admission fees.

These helpers were delighted when recently they were treated to a delectable lunch by way of thanks from the Trust. This was a much appreciated surprise. Thank you, Trust members, for the thought and the lunch and the opportunity you gave us to meet the new "caretakers – Mr and Mrs Watson – whom we welcome to the Settlement in our beautiful Valley.