



Early Days at Merricks

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*A Talk given by Mrs. T. C. Cole at her home, "Laroo,"
Merricks, to members of St. Mark's Guild in 1968, and
to members of the Peninsula Historical Society.*

I have been asked, many times, to talk about the old days. I will tell you about those days as I found them, and also as I heard of them from people who were living here before I knew the district. I will give you a very short account of how the family started here.

In about 1852, Captain Francis Stuart arrived in Melbourne, Captain of the sailing ship "Success." He used to trade with the East, bringing down many mementoes from different ports. (See the Chinese vases etc. in this room.) As was usual in those days, the Captain's wife was also on board. She woke during the night to hear the crew going overboard - deserting to go to the goldfields. She did not wake her husband - as she knew he would shoot them - Captain Stuart being a rather hasty tempered man! In the morning, the only people left on the ship were the Captain, his wife, and the Chinese cook! (This was mentioned in the papers about two years ago.)

He decided to take up some land; and they lived at Williamstown, until they finally took up land at Tyabb, in the meantime the Captain riding as armed escort to gold coaches coming down from the goldfields to Melbourne through the Black Forest, where many bushrangers used to hide. They bred horses at Tyabb, and the Captain evidently entered into the life of the district - he was one of the first Presidents of the Mornington Shire, and a member of the first Country Roads Board. In those days there were no roads, and every landholder had to build his own roads; he made the road from Tyabb to Hastings with out-of-work seamen he brought from the wharves.

The stone seat at our gate (erected to the memory of Francis Stuart) is built from stones taken from the old culverts on that road; they are hand cut sandstone, and are mentioned in the Geological Survey of Victoria, for their beautiful workmanship.

Francis Stuart's wife was an Irish girl - Elizabeth Grogan .. very musical .. we have books of her songs .. her own beautifully fine manuscript.

Their only daughter married George Cole of "Minto." George Cole met Elma Stuart while driving a mob of cattle past Hastings. She was also riding, and as he galloped past after the cattle, her habit was splashed with mud; he rode back to her to apologize - and so started the friendship.

George Cole was a jackeroo on the station "Moomalong" in New South Wales, where the town Jerilderie stands now. Mr. James Sproule (father of Judge Sproule) was overseer and later owner of this station, and it was here that their lifelong friendship began. After a while George Cole's father, T. C. Cole, bought "Minto" property (about 600 acres then), and later gave it as a wedding present to George Cole and his wife Elma. His name, T. C. Cole, was the first on the Title - dated October 17th, 1874.

There was no house on the property, just a small hut, of which we have a picture - down on the cliff where our present shearing shed stands. The house, "Minto," was built before George Cole married Elma Stuart. The bricks were made on the property, the old cottage on the cliff being kept for men working on the place. "Minto" was not cleared in those days, just the natural bushland; in fact it has always been said that one of George Cole's brothers visiting him got lost in the bush between "Minto" and the sea. It was also said that the reflection from the large fires of the trees that were pulled down and rolled together in heaps could be seen from his father's house in Hawthorn.

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Mr. George Cole was comparatively a young man when he died. His place was taken by his young son (15 years old) - a second T. C. Cole - my husband. He took on the responsibility of running the property, and as the years went on, added several more properties to the original "Minto."

In the early days there were still Aborigines roaming about; my mother-in-law used to say in the early days at Tyabb they used to come around visiting the properties. She used to specially mention Eliza, the last black princess. She always used to say that Mount Eliza was called after this black princess, but of course history says otherwise. We have four stone axes all dug or ploughed up on this property. They used to find them under shady trees where the Aborigines had camped.

My family were from England (my father was an architect in London), and my life before I married was very different to the "life on the land." I spent quite a few years in Dresden (Germany), and at school in England, and after returning to Australia spent a few years going about teaching - on sheep stations in N.S.W. and the Western District, and at school in Melbourne, until I married, and then settled down completely. I have often felt very glad that I saw that early Australian life on sheep stations, which has mostly gone now. A big household always - each day 16 in the dining room and another 16 in the kitchen.

In my very early childhood we used to spend delightful holidays at Sorrento, going down by boat always - and then there was the intriguing train that ran down the main street to the back beach; and in much later days I spent lovely holidays at Flinders. My brother was training at the Cable Station; no wireless in those days, and cables were all important - they trained young men and sent them to posts away in the East. My brother was stationed at Singapore, and for some time at Cocos Island in the Indian Ocean; only a few white men there. During the holidays at Flinders, we would go for lovely picnics - usually in a big red Cobb & Co. coach with about four horses, and seats high up on the outside of the coach.

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A favourite picnic place was down to Barker's Homestead, now called "Clondrisse," and to the coast in front of the property. We were always interested in the old cemetery among the trees between the road gate and the house; and at the house always a long stop whilst we picked mulberries .. the most magnificent old trees. We stayed at a big boarding house in Flinders, and at the Golf House.

It was a long, tedious journey from Bittern Railway Station to Flinders - big lumbering coaches with two horses. At Bittern Railway Station there would be a lovely fire (if cold) in the room, and a specially nice morning tea. Roads so bad it would take a couple of hours to get to Flinders - deep watercourses in the road. The coach tipped over one day, and poor old Mrs. Grayden, with all the luggage on top of her, and a broken arm, was hardly polite to the coach driver when he appeared at the coach door to say "Mrs. Grayden, I have tipped the coach over." She replied, "You blasted fool! do you think I don't know that!"

When Tom Cole and I decided to marry, of course we had to build. First of all the land from the main road to the beach had to be cleared; "forest devils" and horses dragging trees into heaps to burn, then all roughly ploughed, and our house built on top of the hill - not a tree or shelter of any kind. We chose this spot because of the lovely views. The materials for the house were all brought here by bullock wagon, and I believe one load of bricks bogged on the road from Bittern, and had to be unloaded.

My husband and I were intensely interested in getting trees and shelter to grow. We found the only thing was to get a good hedge of tree lucerne all round, and that allowed young trees to grow; but it took many years to get the long drive of trees and all our present trees growing. And then all the time more clearing, and getting the paddocks sown down to pasture land, and of course dams put down and fences built, as more land came into production; but of course what revolutionized the land here was when topdressing of superphosphate came in - how different everything looked.

Of course, in those days there was no Somers; Balnarring Beach (Tulum as it was called then), Merricks Beach or Point Leo, each with their cluster of houses; looking along the coast from here towards Balnarring there was "Western Park," "Coolart," "Minto," and our house on the cliff - from here to Point Leo, very heavy bush. One day, my husband and I spent all the morning riding, looking for cattle in the paddocks near Point Leo, and did not find them.

Old Scott from Shoreham helped in clearing the paddocks near Point Leo. He used to come every Saturday evening for his cheque. When he had rates or bills to pay, he would walk all the way to Dromana to pay them. "You can't trust Post Offices," he said.

The little Union Church at Merricks was built by a group of pioneers - Mr. George Cole, Captain Tonkin, etc. Church of England and Presbyterian services were held on alternate Sundays. In 1922 the little church was leased to the Education Department - the first State School in Merricks. Services were carried on there for a while under great difficulties - moving all seats and books etc. for the weekend. But we soon tired of that, and the church was closed till 1924, when they built their own State School. The Church of England then re-opened its services, till in 1934 the church was finally closed when, after a very strong gale, it was considered unsafe. In its heyday, people came from many miles for its services in buggies and jinkers, while others rode or walked. Coolart, in the days of the Grimwades, came regularly in a huge waggonette. All horses had to be taken out of their vehicles and tied around the fences. I played the little organ for about twelve years.

When Merricks Church was demolished, we went to St. Mark's, Balnarring; the Guild used to hold its meetings in the church porch, and make afternoon tea with a tin kettle and kerosine lamp!

The roads were shocking - deep ruts and watercourses. People used to drive along tracks close to the fences to avoid the

ruts. There were no telephones, except one at the little post office - no electricity - no fire brigades - very bad bushfires; there was so much bushland everywhere. On summer days with a hot north wind everyone watched for the first sign of smoke, and it was marvellous the way everyone went to help at the first sign of fire - all on horseback. No telephones to summon help, so at the first sign of smoke everyone from many miles would ride off to help. Old Mr. Buchanan used to come riding up from Flinders. I remember one day there were dreadful fires in the bush opposite our front gate (in those days all the hills opposite were Government Reserve). A great many men were here to help. There were also bad fires at Point Leo, and when the wind suddenly changed to the south, a huge mob of men on horseback turned and galloped back across the paddocks towards Point Leo to cope with the fire now coming in that way. We ran to open the gates at the back of the house as about sixty horsemen swept thro'.

Another day I watched from the verandah as the fire crossed the road into our paddocks and swept up the hill towards "Minto." It travelled faster than my husband's horse could gallop; however, fortunately someone was there and lit the breaks in time to stop the fire getting into the big haystacks at the back of "Minto."

It was a wonderful relief when the first Balnarring Bush Fire Brigade was started. T. C. Cole helped to promote and form the Brigade, and was its Captain until his death in 1938. I don't remember what year it was started, but Mr. Eric Stanton told me that he came to live in Myers Road, Merricks North, in 1921-22, and joined the Brigade then. Membership was 2/6d. a year, all spent on beaters and rakes. Up till then they used boughs of trees and wet bags to fight the fires. Later on they had knapsacks to carry water. There was no Fire Authority in those days, and it was not against the law to light fires in the summer, so unfortunately many people burnt the bush in the summer to get early green feed in the autumn to graze their cattle on. Some of the lieutenants were: Mr. Sheeran, Mr. Crow, Mr. Boadle, Mr. Bill

Edwards, Mr. Forbes, and Mr. Eric Stanton - Mr. Stanton succeeded my husband as Captain. All these men are now dead.

This was before the time of motor cars, and they all went to the fires on horseback, riding long distances to give help to people whose properties were threatened by fire. There were many bad times when men were surrounded by fires.

In those days we used to grow oat crops, and cut chaff for the horses. We kept several teams of lovely draught horses - we bred our own working horses. I remember a beautiful crop of oats that my husband was very proud of; suddenly caterpillars appeared in it; there were three reapers and binders on it at once .. to cut it was the only thing to do .. but it was really spoilt. When the caterpillars had finished with the crop, they moved in a thick mass across the road and up towards Red Hill. Crossing the railway line they stopped the train! Going up the hill was always a steep pull, and the caterpillars made the line too slippery!

Riding was the easiest way of going about in the early days. My husband would ride to Dandenong to the Market, or to Mornington to catch a train to Melbourne. We would ride across to Dromana occasionally, thro' bush tracks and fern gullies. Roads in Red Hill were impassable in winter. Mrs. George Cole (my mother-in-law) was a wonderful horsewoman and pioneer housewife .. there were no shopping days! Everything grown on the property - our own meat - our own bacon (we had a smoke house for curing it) - and of course our own poultry, eggs, milk, butter, fruit and vegetables. Groceries were ordered from Melbourne and came in packing cases to Bittern, to be brought out by waggon - perhaps taking wool in. We used to get a quarter of a ton of sugar (eight bags) between us, soap by the hundred weight, for washing and kitchen use. We often made soap ourselves - a lot of work, but quite good. A large sack of flour

(150 lbs, I think) - tea in large tins, 12 or 20 lbs. We have a large store room in which all these supplies were kept. If anything was forgotten on the order, then you did without!

Many old swagmen used to visit us quite regularly - corks hanging round the brims of their hats (to keep the flies off), with billy and swag - always gave them food and a billy of tea. One old chap regularly walked the beaches between Sydney and Melbourne. "Picked up a lot of valuables on the beaches," he used to say. All very eccentric .. one quite sure a murder had been committed at Merricks Railway Station, he could "see the blood." One man frightened me very much .. quite violent .. we heard afterwards that he was going around frightening women. A girl who helped me in the house rushed out to my assistance with the broom she was using - and he went off, but to our horror camped outside our front gate for the night. My husband was away, so the "Minto" folk came up and slept the night with us - no telephone to call for assistance!

The coming of the railway line from Bittern to Red Hill was a tremendous event. It seemed to bring us so much closer to Melbourne. A passenger train going up in the morning and back again in the evening. It was a tremendous "gala" day when the train came thro' for the first time. Streams of buggies, jinkers and riders, and a very few cars, all met at Red Hill Station to welcome the train. Many parliamentary folk, amongst them, Mr. Downward, Mr. Barnes, Mr. Everard, and Mr. Calder.

The excitement was intense as the train slowly pulled up the hill, the engine bedecked with flags and garlanded with pink roses. The train was absolutely packed with people, standing on the footboard, hanging out of the windows, everyone waving and cheering.

After some long speeches, everyone settled down to a

picnic lunch, and later in the day the train took children for joy rides to Merricks and back.

The driver of that train was Mr. Carter, who recently died at Merricks Beach, where he had retired.

There was a good train service, with stations at Balnarring and Merricks, a house for station mistress at Merricks - everyone was thrilled with it. Up to this time all cattle and sheep sent to market had to be driven to Bittern for trucking, or mobs of cattle driven over to Dandenong, rested for the night half way.

There was also a big cool store built near the station at Red Hill. The railway line was built in 1921, but not many years after the train service was cut down, as the motor truck was being used to take fruit and stock to market. In time it was reduced to one goods train a week, and was finally closed - soon after the last war.

Balnarring was a very scattered district .. Church of England here at Merricks, Methodist Church half way to Merricks North (it was moved to Balnarring and attached to the new Methodist Church), blacksmith shop on corner of our land, near "Warrawee."

The old hall was quite new when I first came here, and everyone just settling down after all the arguments about where it should be built. The post office was near the hall, also the school. The shop, owned by Mr. and Mrs. Stone, was at its present site.

There was one doctor at Mornington, and he was only sent for when very urgent. He would drive over in his buggy with a pair of horses, stay for lunch and most of the day.

My husband and his brother kept a boat in the creek at Point Leo, for netting in the shallow bay. My husband had to have a fisherman's licence to do this.

They used to go out about 10.30 p.m. and return about 2 a.m., with masses of fish - I think the fish were more plentiful then.

Looking back in an old diary of my husband's - in February, 1918 - 76 fish, whiting. One day in March - 120 garfish. In May - 22 baskets of whiting, 1 basket of garfish; and in December, 1919, they caught 330 fish.

Most of the very early clearing was done by bullock team. We still call the paddock where the bullocks were kept "the Bullock Paddock." We also have the bell that was used for tying on the neck of one bullock. When turned out and wandering in the bush you could hear the bell.

Of course, there was no ice, or any way to keep food cool .. you just used your brains and did the best you could. A milk jug standing in a dish of water with muslin over it; or - milk the cow three times a day to get fresh milk for the baby. A chimney had a lovely cool draught, and always was very useful to keep butter firm and cool. Much later the ice-chest appeared, preceded by the Coolgardie. And at last, what joy!, when we had electricity and our first refrigerator!

When the 1914 war came, we had a very active Red Cross, everyone working hard to provide warm clothes for the soldiers in the trenches. We used to bring the sewing home each week - flannel shirts, sox, balaclavas, etc.

I well remember one Sunday afternoon at the little Union church at Merricks - everyone stood around after the service discussing in hushed voices the rumours which were rapidly spreading of frightful losses sustained by our troops at a place called Gallipoli.

Then the 1939 war; it was very difficult to carry on our properties - all the able men being taken for war service.

Once more the Red Cross did wonderful work, holding classes and training us all for work we would have to do in an emergency. Much time was spent packing food parcels for England.

The Army almost entirely occupied the district - trenches and gun emplacements everywhere on the property. We still have our air raid shelter in the garden - built for us by the military - they said it was necessary for us to have one.

There was severe rationing of food and clothing, and it was many years before life settled down again.

Life on the land in the early days was very isolated, the menfolk going out early in the morning, taking their lunches, and returning late in the evening .. mostly clearing the land.

They were up very early in the morning, grooming and feeding the horses, soon after 5 a.m. Breakfast at 7 a.m., and then off to work.

We had an arrangement of signals in case we needed help. I had a white flag to put up if I needed help, and my mother-in-law could blow a bullock horn most expertly, if she wanted to call the men.

When telephones and motor cars came into general use, they completely revolutionized country life, taking away the feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Life on the land in those days was simple and hard working, but we enjoyed our pleasures and were very happy. Home, Garden and Family were the principal interests.