

RACHEL HENNING IN ILLAWARRA:

It was on 11th June 1873 that Rachel Henning (Mrs. Taylor) first wrote from Springfield at Figtree to her sister in England. After a previous visit to Australia in 1854-56, she had returned to settle permanently in Australia in 1861, living with her brother Edmund Biddulph Henning (called Biddulph in her letters) until five years later she was married, rather late in life by Victorian standards, but apparently very happily, to Deighton Taylor. (Pronounced Dye-ton, but in the tradition of Jane Austen's Mrs. Bennet and Dickens's Mrs. Micaber, she almost invariably refers to him as "Mr. Taylor", even when writing to members of the family).

In the previous year she had written from Sydney, relating how she and Mr. Taylor had "made an excursion to Wollongong" to look at farms. "We went down by the steamer, which only takes about five hours going from Sydney, (and) took up our residence at the Queen's Hotel (a very comfortable place.)" (Afterwards the Queen's Hall Flats, it stood in Market Square, and was demolished only within the last few years).

They rejected two farms on Lake Illawarra, but were delighted with one on American Creek: "The land is very good. There is a tolerable house which we can inhabit while we build another, a creek (as they call a brook here) running right through the farm, and a site for a new house where there is a most lovely view of the whole Bulli Range." Then, they returned by coach to Campbelltown ("a very good road . . . Of course, it is steep in parts, and passengers with any humanity in them generally walk to the top, but you can hardly imagine anything more beautiful than the scenery" — though "the beauty ceases at the top of the mountain"); then caught the train to Sydney.

In December she wrote that "the new house ought to be up in about three months", but evidently builders were the same a hundred years ago, for in the following June "the timber for the house is nearly all come and lying in piles upon the site. The garden has been fenced around, and now we are only waiting for fine weather to begin the house and to plant the garden." In anticipation, they had, on a recent visit to Sydney driven out to Baptist's nursery and ordered a quantity of pines and cypresses and other shelter trees.

Those pines — perhaps — are still there. The sketch map in the first edition of the "Letter of Rachel Henning" indicates the site of Springfield as about where the Figtree High School now stands; and there was, until the school was built, a fenced enclosure there which clearly had been someone's garden. The late Mr. Lindsay Maynes, however, said that Springfield was further to the south-west, where on a small rise above the creek there are some sheds and two or three old pine-trees; and investigation on the spot a few years ago showed definite traces of a garden there also. Mrs. Robertson, who as a child was taken to visit the Taylors, confirms that this was the site, and adds that the garden on the High School site belonged to the Gibson's, whose name was given to Gibson's Road.

Rachel explained that while they were about it they thought it best to build a comfortably large house, for they hoped to spend the rest of their lives there; and by April 1874 it was more or less furnished: "We have just had the sitting-room papered and the ceiling whitewashed . . . It is a large, pleasant room with three French windows, and a lovely view therefrom . . . The bedrooms are rather rough, yet, being unpapered . . . Just yet we cannot afford a great deal in the way of furniture; the cottage has cost so much." (Nearly £300!)

They "hoped to make the garden very pretty by-and-by"; and apparently succeeded. Five years later Rachel was writing, "The trees and shrubs are growing up, the veranda pillars are covered with flowering creepers, and the beds are always full of flowers;" and four years later again, "It is wonderful how the trees have grown in nine years. The house was built on a bare paddock, and now, at a little distance, it looks as if it stood in a grove of trees: pines, cypresses, mimosas, etc., although there are none very near the building.* A photograph, taken about 1890, in the first edition of the "Letters" shows a house with shingled roof and wide verandahs, creepers growing up the verandah-posts, what looks like a big bougainvillea at one corner, a rose garden to one side, spreading lawns and trees behind. There is no background to settle the question of its location, and the house itself is too much shaded by the verandahs for details to be visible.

* Mrs. Robertson remembers the garden as "lovely — wide paths winding amid trees, shrubs and flowers. The banks of American Creek, near which the house was built, were cool and ferny and shaded by sassafras trees."