ROUND THE ROUND MOUNTAIN*:

From time to time the history of the pioneers who settled on the flats and in the foothills has been told, but little is known of those who settled in the mountains. One of the mountain areas, South Kembla, I knew particularly well. It had consisted of many small grants. My father, the late John Benjamin, in 1905, bought 33 acres on the east side of Mount Kembla, being part of Portion 155, Parish of Kembla, a 67-acre grant to David James. In 1908 he built a home and lived there for forty-five years.

My father had been born at Mount Kembla in 1879, being the third youngest of eleven children (five boys and six girls) born to Robert and Susannah Benjamin. He owned 13 acres near the foot of the Mount Kembla incline, and Benjamins Road, Mount Kembla, was called after his family.

His grandparents Thomas and Susannah Benjamin had come to Australia from Kent in 1857 and settled at Kentish Creek behind Mount Keira. In his early days he had spent much time walking or riding to visit his grandparents, developing a great love for the bush.

He was a survivor of the Mount Kembla mine disaster, and had helped to dig graves for his mate, his brother-in-law and other victims of that dreadful accident.

As children my brother, my sister and I knew every inch of Mount Kembla—it was our playground. Though the view from our home was magnificent and expansive, we often wondered why our father had chosen that spot to live, as we had a long walk to school and he was still employed at Mount Kembla mine.

Well-worn tracks through the bush and down the mountain side indicated many people had lived there long before our time. There were two abandoned small slab homes with frames of old iron beds and bush furniture still in them, and dotted around the bush was evidence of other former dwellings, with broken china and old cooking pots strewn around. One old boiler we took home and used as the fowls' drinking dish. We often wondered who had lived there and what they did.

One of the early grants was to the Rev. Cunningham Acheson. Old hands told a story of a difference he had with a neighbouring owner. One day as he was walking back from Wollongong past the old Figtree Hotel, his unfriendly neighbour rushed out from the pub, pulled the minister's top-hat off, threw it to the ground and jumped on it. We were never told how their differences finished up.

A short distance north and about 200 yards below our home were the two tunnels of the old South Kembla mine, opened, old hands said, in the 1860’s. Its life was very short and a good deal of money was lost in it, for an immense amount of elaborate work was done before it went into production. The faces of the tunnels for about a hundred yards inside were lined with bricks made on the property, and the two tunnels were separated by a stone wall about twelve feet high and thirty feet long. The incline extended down the mountain, wound through several properties, crossed the Highway near the old Kembla (now A.I.S.) line at Unanderra, and continued to the old cokeworks near Five Islands Road. Till recently the route of the line through the paddocks was quite visible.

Heaps of unused bricks left over from this project were used in the chimneys of our home. The deep hole the clay came from was used by us
as a well and was our main standby in dry weather. For us children the tunnels made a fine cubby-house and a retreat in hot weather. Several times, when bushfires were raging all around, we took our personal belongings there for safety.

Living at Crown Street, West Wollongong, is Mrs. W. Holbrow, now 84 years of age, a daughter of the late John Waples, who worked at the mine in the 1870's and lived nearby on a property which had been a grant to his grandfather. She recalls her father telling of two workmen who were killed when a trolley got away down the incline.

211 acres, including the summit of the mountain, were owned by John Beatson. The parish map shows the land as owned by Amelia Cecilia Georgina Beatson, who I assume was his mother. According to early stories—I don't know how true they were—no one wanted the mountain grant and it was raffled.

In 1912 William Wiley bought many of the early grants for mine prospecting. After becoming the owner he disclosed to my father the price he had paid. When told the cedar trees were worth much more, he asked to be shown the cedars, and gave my father one sovereign.

Mr. John Hurt of Unanderra managed the prospecting side for Wiley, and many small tunnels were opened up. My father's knowledge of the mountain, both above and below ground, was extensive, and his services were often sought to find a boundary or corner peg. In the early 1920's the Illawarra Coke Co. Ltd. leased the Wiley and Beatson properties, also for prospecting. My father then left his job at Mount Kembla Colliery to join this company.

—IVY MURRAY.

(To be continued)

* The name by which local people called Mount Kembla, Captain Cook's "round hill the top of which look'd like the Crown of a hatt."

KIAMA HISTORICAL SOCIETY EXCURSION:

The Kiama and District Historical Society will run its first excursion on Sunday, 20th July, visiting Minnamurra House, the home of Mr. and Mrs. Ross Stewart, and the Church of the Resurrection at Jamberoo.

The bus will leave the Post Office, corner of Terralong and Manning Streets, Kiama, at 12.30 p.m., returning about 4 p.m. Fare will be $1.00 for adults and 50c. for schoolchildren. Bookings may be made with the Hon. Secretary, Mr. N. R. McKay, 10' Henley Avenue, Kiama (Phone Kiama 670).

If any of our members have not seen either of the places to be visited, we can recommend them from experience. Minnamurra House (1839) is one of the two oldest existing houses in the district, and the church (one of Blacket's) is of great interest both architecturally and historically.

ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTIONS:

Would any members who have not yet renewed their annual subscriptions please forward them to the Treasurer, Box 1030, P.O., Wollongong, 2500, as soon as possible?

This must be a final notice. We will be obliged to treat those who have not renewed their subscription by the next Council meeting as having allowed their membership to lapse.
ROUND THE ROUND MOUNTAIN:  
(Continued from July Bulletin)  

Prospecting went on for some years, testing different seams. In the late 1920's a tunnel was opened on the south side of the mountain by my father, who acted as manager for many years. While the cross-country railway was being built the mining company reached agreement with the Railway Commissioners for sidings, with the mine hiring government trucks to transport the coal. Before the railway was officially opened and the sidings completed a temporary chute was used to fill the coal trucks.  

In the mornings an engine taking two carriages with workmen up the line would pull the required number of trucks to the mine, drop them off for filling and on the way home in the evening would couple up and push them back to Unanderra.  

One incident during this period could have been disastrous. Three trucks had been left at the mine. One was almost full when a miner shovelling the coal on top of the load felt it give a jerk. He jumped off. Next moment the three trucks were moving. Before anything could be done they had gathered speed and were racing for Unanderra. Fearing the worst, my father ran to the phone to alert the station; but about two miles down, the trucks jumped the line. The crash was heard for miles around. The full truck at the back finished in front. Pieces of track and coal were scattered everywhere. There was very little damage to the line, but it took a few days to clear up the mess. The workmen's train could not get back to base, and the men were not very happy at having to walk home.  

While the cross-country line was being built (1927-32) the mountain came alive. Five tent towns were built between Unanderra and the gap, and hundreds of men, women and children were housed in them. It was an exciting time for our family, watching the progress of that great project and meeting many of the people. Some of the women enjoyed the tent life; others were very unhappy. Very few had any form of transport, so they seldom got out. The bush was full of game (rabbits, hares and pigeons) which was eagerly sought after. Adults and children hiked around the mountain, some getting to the summit, others getting lost. Once again my father's knowledge of the bush was a great help in the early stages of the railway, and on its completion he received a letter of thanks from the Commissioner for the help he had given in finding boundaries and in other ways.  

During the second World War a tank trap was made from Lake Illawarra to the mountain face, cutting through our land. A bridge was built for our use, and after the war was taken down, only that portion of the trap being filled in again. After many letters the Army came back and filled in the part of the trap running through our main cultivation paddock. The barbed wire and steel pegs along the bank of the trap were never removed.  

In the 1940's a new mine tunnel higher up and in a different seam was opened by my father. After some operation a new company, called Port Kembla No. 2 Colliery, was formed, and bought the Witey and Beaton properties, which previously had been leased. It became a prosperous concern employing many men.  

On my father's retirement in 1947 at the age of 68 he received a letter of appreciation for his faithful and loyal service to the company. Mr. P. Ellis became the manager. Four brick homes were built nearby for the staff. On Mr. Ellis's retirement Mr. J. Hayes took his place. In 1964 this property was sold to Australian Iron and Steel Ltd., which closed
the Port Kembla No. 2 Colliery, the men being placed at different mines along the coast. The tunnel mouth was sealed, this being the rule for all unused mines. I am told that the coal will be taken out through one of the other A.I.S. mines.

A.I.S. now owns a large area which includes the mountain and my father's little settlement. On that settlement, though it was hilly with only a few flats that could be cultivated, we had a small orchard, and ran, for our own use, a few cows which roamed the bush and kept the tracks clear. Now the landslides have claimed some of the mountain side, and it is so grown over that I feel sure it is almost back to what Captain Cook saw—from the cedar trees.

—IVY MURRAY

ERRATUM:

In the third paragraph of the first instalment of this article (Page 35, July Bulletin) the name of Mr. John Benjamin’s grandparents is given as “Benjamin.” This should have been “Stanbridge.”

The error was the editor’s, not the author’s. My apologies, particularly to Mrs. Murray and Miss Stanbridge.

—W.G.M.

JULY MEETING:

Our July meeting must go on record as one of the most unfortunate as far as the weather was concerned. Rain which had fallen heavily all day became particularly severe during late afternoon and early evening, cutting roads and causing general havoc with traffic. However those thirteen brave members who did conquer the elements were fully compensated by the talk entitled “Country Towns of New South Wales” given by Dr. Dennis Jeans from Sydney University.

Using slides to illustrate each point, Dr. Jeans led us over a wide area of the state, explaining how our towns developed where they did, why some grew yet others stagnated, how development tended to come in bursts, or how those towns where development ceased are now the mirrors of the past. Maps of settlement in the 1820’s showed how early population grouped on areas of flat land in four main regions: Sydney/Parramatta, Windsor; Campbelltown/Camden/Picton; the Hunter River; and Bathurst.

Town plans of Maitland and Mudgee were contrasted. Conflicts between surveyors and governors were exposed: Mitchell surveyed the main South road through Wilton, but Darling insisted on building the road over Razorback; again Mitchell planned Berrima as a major centre, but the Governor located all the government offices at Goulburn. The effects of transport development (shipping, roads, railways) on population movement were illustrated, and reference was continually made to the architectural styles which tell the story of waves of development which usually coincided with periods of economic prosperity. Examples were chosen from a wide area of the state; with pictures of buildings from Woluraia, Bega, Willamia, Hill End, Bathurst, Gulgong, Windsor, Campbelltown, Maitland, Morpeth, Boydtown, Goulburn, Taraiga, Bungendore, Queanbeyan, Braidwood, Berrima, Crookwell, West Wyalong, Milton, Kiama, Wollongong and Bulli.

So enthusiastic have been the reports from those members who could swim well enough to be present that the Society’s Council is approaching Dr. Jeans for a repeat some time next year for the benefit of those who couldn’t attend. And those who did get there all want to hear it again.

—F.W.O.