THE DENNIS FAMILY OF MARSHALL MOUNT:

Member Bill McDonald’s very commendable effort in production of a book dealing with the early days and district families in the Dapto N.S.W. area brought back many memories of people and events known to me personally, however it is to be hoped that this does not stamp me as a senile relic of unbelievable antiquity, contemporary with King Tutankhamen. However it qualifies me to add some flesh to a few bones—oops—and I refer to one family in particular, that of Adam Denniss of Marshall Mount, part of the Dapto district.

Mr. McDonald in his book deals with the arrival of Richard Denniss and his wife Sarah in the colony of New South Wales together with several of the first born of their eventual large family, their journey to Wollongong in the small sailing ship "William the Fourth" and their subsequent trek with their worldly possessions in a dray to Dapto and thence along the track leading to Marshall Mount where at a point opposite to the entrance to the road to Yallah railway platform, about fifty years in the future, he decided that he had gone far enough and exercised squatter’s rights—if any—on a parcel of land where he built a house, cleared and farmed the land and fathered a gaggle of children.

Eventually one of the older sons, Adam 1833-1923, born in Kent, married and with his wife Sarah 1833-1909, born in County Clare, left the parental nest and moved about one mile away where he took up a clearing lease of about eighty acres on the "Macquarie Gift" property of E. H. Weston. Over the ensuing years he progressively cleared, fenced, ploughed and cropped the land, built a home in the settler’s style of that era and paid his annual dues to the Estate. As recorded by local historians Adam also became a self taught ploughing champion and a consistent winner at organised matches in that rural activity.

As a sideline he raised a family of four or five; known to me personally was Henry, 1856-1930, who left home, married, and was the father of well known David L. Denniss; Annie, 1857-1950, Nesbit (Nessie) 1868-1941, and Rachael, 1870-1941. In much later years he more or less adopted his grandson David, 1890-1971, who took over the heavy work on the farm as Adam grew older and also, as a practically self-taught scribe, became known for his journalistic efforts and reporting of district events.

The farm was run in a manner similar to that of a small-holding in England, probably one of the last examples of such in Illawarra. I remember the house which was of slab construction with a bark roof, shuttered window openings and originally had an earthen floor. It was surrounded by an English style of cottage garden, all herbs, roses and hollyhocks. Its picture in the Wollongong museum shows it as it was long before I was born and with Mrs. Denniss and young daughters facing the camera in front of the house. As I remember it the building seemed to have shrunk down under the weight of successive additions of roofing bark.
The girls did not marry and for most of their lives helped their father in performance of the various chores of dairying, crop cultivation, gardening, harvesting, pig and poultry keeping, bee keeping and fruit growing while he attended to the ploughing and fencing.

A frequent sight for travellers along the Marshall Mt. Road which ran through the property was that of two of the Misses Denniss, in sun bonnets and ankle length skirts, cultivating the rows of a crop of maize, one at the handles of a scarifier and the other leading the horse; or otherwise all three of them stooped over endless rows of beans or peas, garnering the crop.

They were never idle, hives of bees produced honey for sale and use, an orchard produced the wherewithal for all kinds of jams and preserves. A cauldron of jam was forever suspended over the open kitchen fire and watched over by their mother who attended to most of the cooking while her daughters worked outside. Visitors invariably came away with a gift of melon and lemon jam, heavily flavoured with wood smoke.

Frugality was the watchword and one source of income lay in the winning of the small prize money offering in the schedules of the Dapto and Albion Park Shows; preparation of exhibits was a year long activity, bean and pea seeds were hand matched for uniformity and shape, fruit, vegetables and pot plants were nursed to perfection, and in the case of maize stalks these were grown in a sheltered corner of the garden from treasured seed, hand-tended, watered and manured to produce a height which would have shamed Jack in his beanstalk effort. In fact, the resultant bundle of stalks-in-cob had to be stiffened with a central pole for transport to the Show pavilion.

Their output of fine needlework for sale and exhibition was prodigious and sewing and embroidery in course of completion lay about the house ready to be picked up and worked on by toil roughened hands whenever the women came inside. Mrs. Denniss endlessly stitched away on patchwork quilts and I can remember one of her seasonal jobs being the cutting up of seed potatoes and dipping the cut surfaces into a bucket of wood ashes.

(To be continued)

—Bert Weston.
THE DENNISS FAMILY OF MARSHALL MOUNT:
(Continued from September Bulletin)

My most vivid recollection of the Denniss household, as a small boy, is that of accompanying my father by horse and sulky around the various Estate farms to collect the rents, paid annually in most cases. By this time the old house had been replaced by a new weatherboard cottage and here the yearly ritual took place.

With father, mother, daughters and ourselves assembled at a table there was usually a wait until Dave, a gangling teenager in those days, joined us. A large fruit cake and a bottle of homemade blackberry wine would be set out and a generous helping of each handed around together with a glass of "Razzberry serrup for the young master" and a huge slice of carraway seed cake, which I loathed.

Then followed a discussion on weather, crops and family, after which Mrs. Denniss produced a specially made calico bag complete with draw string containing the rent money which she handed to my father saying "Count it." He would empty the contents on the table, a pile of golden sovereigns polished with ashes until they glittered. Counting then proceeded with each member of the family contributing a whispered participation in the ceremony.

In passing it might be mentioned that the adjoining Weston farm was tenanted by Joe Purdie who had spent years as a shipwright in Dent's shipyard at Huskisson at Jervis Bay until a decline in the trade decided him to betake himself and family on to the land.

During World War I the old farmhouse had been replaced by a new Hudson home and the small erection team sent from Sydney was headed by carpenter Charlie Hando who won the hand of Purdie's daughter Ivy and was in later years to become managing director of George Hudson Ltd.

Adam Denniss, generally known as "Tettie," that being his Kentish version of the word potato, had an older sister, another Sarah, 1832-1925, who spent all her adult life at Albion Park after marrying Lionel Hurry, 1841-1928, and living in their small "Vine Cottage" near the local Church of England. With a few acres of land and a few cows he eked out a modest living as a casual farm labourer available with his black draught horse "Victor" to do light cultivation as well as digging out tussocks and thistles, hoeing crops, dairy work and the occasional butchering of a farmer's pig for salting
Mrs. Hurry, as mentioned in another article, was the local midwife, untrained but full of rural know-how and ready with bag packed to be picked up at any hour by gig or buggy and raced off to the scene of action. At two dollars a pop she launched dozens of Parkites on to the sea of life including the writer and his six brothers and sisters.

When not thus occupied, Sarah Hurry, who resembled and dressed like Queen Victoria, sat at her living room table placidly plaiting bleached strands of cabbage palm fronds into long lengths which she then fashioned and stitched into the famous colonial cabbage tree hats for which there was a ready sale among old-timers in the district.

The ceiling a few feet above her head consisted of opened-up corn sacks tacked to the sapling joists and whitewashed. Each Winter a large bulge appeared in the ceiling above her chair and the whitewash developed a brown stain. This denoted the presence of a hibernating six foot long black snake and his body oils caused the stain. Early in Spring he would leave his warm abode and for a couple of days would sunbake on the front verandah before moving off to whatever interested him in the Summer ahead. On one occasion I made myself very unpopular by saying I would give the bulge in the ceiling a hearty belt with a stick.

When Mrs. Hurry died in 1925 no hearse was needed. I was one of the party of six whom she had seen into the world who took the handles of her casket and carried her the few hundred yards to the Anglican cemetery, a cost saving which would have delighted her immensely.

Her husband died three years later and for almost forty years thence their only daughter Albertina, 1873-1966—"Teeny"—lived on in the cottage; her death at age 93 gained the Museum some interesting articles from her belongings.

Her memory of local events was amazing and was based on her own peculiar system of memory pegs. When asked, for example, when a certain bridge had been built she would say "Well, on the day it was opened mother attended the birth of Joe Blow; he will be forty-six on the tenth of May, so work that out!"

It would be news to most people that the former Australian Olympic swimming champion of the 1920's, the late Andrew "Boy" Charlton was a direct descendant of the Dennisses of Marshall Mt.

(Concluded) —Bert Weston.