THE FIRST LATVIANS IN THE ILLAWARRA

Thanks largely to a photograph included in the book Growing Up In The Illawarra, co-authored by IHS President, Dr. Winifred Mitchell, Mr. E.R. Ewers has been in contact with Society and provided many fascinating details of his ancestors connection with the Illawarra. What follows is an edited version of some of the information Mr. Ewers has so kindly provided.

The Sarin-Anderson Family

The family hailed from Southern Latvia where they worked on the estates of Count Pahlin and, later, Prince Lievens.

Ansis and Lisa Sarin-Anderson had five children: Janis (John), Lena Emilie, Karlis (Charlie), Mariane (Mary) and Alfred. Tragically, Ansis died in a farm accident, leaving Lisa to raise the children on her own. Despite the struggle, education appears to have always been one of Lisa’s priorities for her children.

John’s attendance at night school made him something of a linguist and left him with a lifelong interest in history and astronomy. Charlie was apprenticed as a silversmith which served as a foundation for his later occupation as a blacksmith.

Through Lena, the family became friendly with the 18 year old Louise Grissler. John and Louise became attracted to one another, but the revolution of 1905 intervened and John, Charlie and Mary set out for the U.S.A.

John, however, had to travel via Moscow, Vladivostock and Japan and, by a few unexpected events, arrived in Sydney on the "Kumono Maru" in May 1906. He first went lumbering at Copmanhurst and then copper-mining at Cangai before taking up storekeeping at Grafton.

Charlie had joined John at Cangai after arriving from America in 1908. John began a correspondence with Louise Grissler which ultimately led to her migrating to Australia in January 1911. They were married in Sydney at Newtown’s Congregational Church. Louise is believed to be the first Latvian woman to arrive in Australia. The rest of the Sarin-Anderson Family, including friends and more distant relatives, but excluding Lena and Mary, arrived in Australia in June 1911.

Lena arrived in 1913 and married a Latvian named Martin Plavin.

It was a hard life at Cangai, but the family struggled on and many Latvian-Australian children were born. One child, Wanda, was reputedly delivered by an Aboriginal midwife according to family legend. After moving to Grafton, the family became acquainted with Dr. Earle Page, the future Australian PM.

Meanwhile, Alfred moved to Port Kembla, beginning a long career in metal manufacturing. Martin and Lena Plavin and Charlie also made the move. John followed in 1918 and built a brick shop with residence at the rear “at the top of the hill on the southern end of Wentworth Street”. Twin sons were born but both succumbed to the worldwide post-war influenza pandemic, dying of pneumonia in December 1920.

Other shops were giving the Sarin-Anderson General Store stiff competition, so John closed his shop and looked for another livelihood to support his wife and 5 children. Meanwhile, in 1922, Charlie married a local woman, Ethel Sylvia Fitzpatrick and they moved into a residence at the rear of Charlie’s blacksmith's shop at 1 Allen Street, Port Kembla, which was to be Charlie’s home for the next 55 years.
All his life John maintained an interest in astronomy and in 1921 purchased an Orrery from London. This device illustrated the relationship of the planets and sun and how they revolved. On delivery, a showing was made at Port Kembla Primary School.

The Headmaster, Mr. Matthews, was so impressed he contacted the Minister of Education (local politician W. Davies) who gave permission for John to visit schools and charge a fee for viewing the demonstration. This provided a good interim living until a more permanent one was found.

To this end, a Garford bus was bought in 1923 and John then began the first regular service between Port Kembla and Wollongong. Charlie provided the mechanical know-how for repairs and eventually they had 3 buses doing the run. Later, the Arblaster family ran buses in competition.

John and Louis's children attended Port Primary and Wollongong High. Daughter Wanda did particularly well and received encouragement from the Wollongong High headmaster, Mr. Hedberg, a brother-in-law of Sir Earle Page whom the family had known at Grafton. Wanda went on to gain a B.A. from Sydney University in 1932 - the first person of Latvian parentage to gain an Australian degree.

Many of the family eventually gravitated towards Sydney, but a number of descendants still live locally. Martin Plavin worked on the Port Kembla wharves and was well-known for his swimming and fishing abilities. Family legend has it that Martin actually walked out to the closest of the Five Islands at extremely low tide on a very calm day! Lena, whilst living in a house built by Martin near Surf Beach (now the site of some of the Steelworks), operated a small shop of beach needs from the front room. About 1931, the house was destroyed by fire. Charlie's blacksmith business prospered, however, and his skills were used in making specialized parts for the Steelworks where for many years he was kept on as a consultant.

After the fire, the Plavins rented various houses whilst their children continued their schooling. As the children left school, however, they too gravitated to Sydney where most of the family eventually became based.

Ever since coming to Australia, all the Sarin-Anderson took a keen interest in others of Latvian birth and John eventually became Secretary of the Sydney Latvian Club. Because of the family's efforts, Lisa was awarded, on behalf of the entire family, the Latvian Cross of Merit, First Class.

The ties with Latvia resulted in much two-way correspondence. The letters to Australia reveal much about everyday life in Latvia. As Mr. Ewers remarks, "It is a pity that we cannot read those from Louise to (Latvia) as they would shed much light on the family happenings of those years." As one IHS member, Inga Lazzarotto, has remarked, they would also reveal a great deal about immigrant's attitudes to Australia.

As our area is one of the most important centres of migrant experience in Australia, the IHS must attempt to enrol more migrant members and seriously and systematically start to document the migrant experience in the Illawarra. If the IHS is to prosper, we would do well to pay more than lip service to this idea.

Bill Ewers has done the society a great service by graciously providing Wollongong City Library with many photos, documents and memorabilia. Without Mr. Ewers generosity, records of the early migrant experience in the Illawarra would be all the poorer. On behalf of the society, I offer our sincere thanks.

Joseph Davis