REMINISCENCES OF JACK DEVITT

(continued from December Bulletin)

The Chinese Gardens.

There were three Chinese gardens in the town in the twenties. "Reanicl Bay" Lee ran a small garden in William Street Old Bulli, doing all the work and delivering by horse and cart himself.

In the area where Vicars factory now stands running back to the creek was another garden run by Tommy King plus a few other Chinese. I don't think they delivered but they seemed to have a regular clientele of customers.

However the big gardens were in Hospital Road running from the rear fences of the Main Road residences to behind where the present Hospital Nurses' Recreational Hall now stands. In the north they were bounded by the creek that runs behind Organ Road residences and in the South right up to the old Hospital Road. Between the Hospital Road and the gardens ran a strip about 20' wide where they ran their horses with a stable opposite Neil Robinson's present residence.

Just a little east was a huge wooden floored shed, open at each end running north - south there were displayed their vegetables etc. At weekends especially, people came on foot, bikes or horse & trap to purchase the most delicious vegetables that only a Chinese could grow.

My mum got a week's supply for the six of us for under 10/- and at Christmas all regular customers were presented with a big jar of Chinese ginger, tied up with bamboo strips.

There were at one time 13 Chinese working in the garden. They were great believers in the hoe and were pretty to watch as they shuffled backwards along the rows chipping the soil with razor sharp hoes. They never staked tomatoes and still produced beautiful fruit.

Melons were another specialty - water & sugar melons, that we kids of just 8 or 9 we could just stagger away with cost 6/-. Rock melons as big as your head cost 6/-. They leased the top half from the Hospital and paid the lease in vegetables. I can still see George Wong padding up to the Hospital with two huge baskets of vege's swinging from a yoke he had across his shoulders.

They used these same yokes to carry two great watering cans to water the plants.

They slept in a four roomed cottage near the vege shed but cooked and ate in a smoke blackened kitchen that had a couple of great cast iron kettles and a huge wok suspended from chains in the open fire place. There was no oven.

There was a huge meal table, the top of which was scrubbed with a bar of sand soap and a scrubbing brush, as white as the winter snow.

Two big cutting boards were kept in the same condition.

Many a meal we kids had in that kitchen, with the Chinese in fits, watching us trying to manipulate chopsticks.

Mrs. Walsh, who raised ducks, had a standing order for two ducks each weekend. The Chinese would crack their necks in a jiffy then slit their throats. After plucking they would cut off all the flesh with knives like razors then with a chopper just as sharp dice up the flesh into tiny bits. These were then tossed into the wok and when cooked were delectable.
There would be bowls of all sorts of vege’s plus rice on the table with the cooked duck.

Everyone helped himself with chopsticks from each of the bowls, restocking when necessary.

George Wong, a tall northern chinamen who was as brown as a berry, almost black, took a great liking to Greg who was only a toddler. He would cart him about the place on his shoulders, could never get his tongue around the name calling him “Gleggly”.

They had a great time at new year. There was a chinese cook at Bulli pub called Abil, who who would get the grog, maybe at a discount, and they would party on till early hours, really enjoying themselves.

They had a big high-sided cart which old Sam usually took about the town selling their wares.

They were good hard working citizens, honest as the day and much liked by all who came in contact with them.

Outside the kitchen was a huge apricot tree on which hung a stone wicker-covered demijohn and a brass cup on a chain. Each morning this demijohn was filled with very sweet tea. As they came by during the day they would have a cup of this tea which after an hour or so would be cold. I never saw them take a drink of water, always tea. Again, many a time I asked George or one of the others for a drink of tea. It was very sweet, just what kids loved and would quench your thirst.

During the heavy rains and in those days it could rain, generally all May for certain, the creek would come up and flood the cottage but it never got into the kitchen or shed. They would dress down in the kitchen on the floor until the flood dropped.

They had two horses that were well cared for, one used for the cart, the other for the plough, an old single furrow for that was used to plough over all the beds in turn during the year.

After a stint at the gardens most went back to China with another bunch coming to take their place but old Sam and George Wong never went back until the gardens closed operations. They might have been the elders for all I know and they did seem to hold a bit of authority as far as I can remember. They both spoke very good English while many of the others spoke none at all.

There were never any chinese women brought out. They stayed in China whilst their menfolk earned a quid out here to go back home when their turn came.

The Old Bulli Mine.

The mine was situated about half the way up the mountain. The engine house boilers drew water from dams on the level above. Small skips drawn about underground by horses were brought to the surface by means of a haulage rope. They were then put through a tumbler arrangement which turned them upside down spilling the coal into a bin under which stood about ten ton hoppers to be filled from same.
Strings of these hoppers were then pulled to the top of the incline where they were let down to the flat below by an endless rope, to be hooked up into a train to be taken by a small loco down to the jetty.

There was a level crossing on the Main Road, a man came out with a red flag to hold up traffic while the train passed over, then on to the crossing over the Coast Line where there were gates operated by a signal box. Just over the crossing on the Thirroul side was the Bulli Coke Works which ceased operations in the mid 30's. The line continued on to the jetty on the northern side of Sandon Point. Some of the remains of the old piles are still visible.

The hoppers were shunted over the loading shutes, the hinged bottomes were unlatched, the coal tumbling into the hold of small steam boats tied up underneath.

In good weather these boats sometimes made two trips per day. A fair amount of coal was often lost into the sea, with the result that the beach in the vicinity was covered in black pebbles.

At one stage the mine was owned by the Adams family who built a home on the Point. All that remains are the eight Norfolk Pines that were part of the grounds. There was an asphalt path, with a brick retaining wall, leading from the grounds down to the beach near the jetty but it appears to have been covered over with fill. The Adams sold the mine, went to Tasmania and started the Golden Casket Sweepstake with the proceeds.

Various types of small locos were used to draw the hoppers to the jetty. At one time they used a steam motor from the old steam trams. There were many accidents in the coal mining industry in the twenties. No bath rooms, the men walked down through the bush as black as the ace of spades to wash at home in a big galvanised iron tub in the laundry. Very few places had a separate bathroom, besides, the water had to be heated in the fuel copper so it was at least handy to the hot water.

Miners had a tin crib box and water bottle. There was no lunch room, they all ate on the job. Most of the mines on the Coast had big seams but Scarborough had a 4 foot seam and wasn't a popular pit with most miners.

I remember one old chap who lived near us who was a Deputy at Old Bulli. He must have rolled in the dust, he would be so black.

Coming home, he would wash the front of his face both his hands then sit down at a table on the back verandah to eat his hot meal. After finishing, he would smoke a pipe of tobacco on the back steps then go into the laundry to have a long soak in the tub. His wife always had to be on hand to scrub his back.

The miners demanded a fresh set of working clothes every day so you can imagine the work the woman had to keep, sox, trousers, flannel and shirt up to them day after day. In hot weather the fuel stove did the job of drying the clobber. No miner used a cotton singlet. Flannel singlets were a must plus thick woollen sox.

As things got tough the pits often only worked a few shifts per week, depending on orders.

To save men tramping up to the pit to find no work available they devised a means of letting them know by blowing the no work whistle. This would blow at about 4pm and as most miners lived in the vicinity of the pit the system worked well.
Things were tough, the miner paid for his own explosives and the sharpening of his picks by the mine blacksmith. The only concession they seemed to get was to get short ends of props which they sawed into about foot lengths, tied two together and brought home over their shoulder to cut up with a tomahawk into small bits to fuel the copper for a bath.

Each miner was allowed a load of coal every six weeks. It cost 6/- to have it delivered. This kept the fuel stove going. In winter there would often be an open grate fire in the parlor and the fuel copper took a certain amount of coal so there wouldn’t be much left after six weeks. The slack (dust) wasn’t wasted but dampened and wrapped up in damp newspaper was placed on the remains of the fuel stove fire before bed time. This would smoulder away over night, needing only a poke with the poker in the morning to cause it to burst into flame to cook breakfast and start the day’s fire.

Ashes were a bit of a problem but mixed with a bit of cement made good concrete for paths, walls etc about the yard.

Many a house, some still standing, were built on piers made from kerosene tins filled with ash concrete. The tin eventually rusted away but the concrete remained to hold up the building.

Nothing was wasted, we couldn’t afford to waste.

**South Bulli Mine.**

South Bulli had an electric power generating plant which supplied power to the Bulli Shire Council. Like Old Bulli, the mine was half way up the escarpment. For years the mine manager was A. E. O. Sellsars who lived in a two storey mansion on the site of the present Chesalon Home. He was a hard but very fair man and one of our earliest conservationalists. The chap who cut trees over the back of the mountain for pit props had to plant another tree for every one he cut down. Mr Sellsars paid for the seedlings out of his own pocket.

South Bulli was always a big and efficient mine which worked almost full time right through Depression.

They had a coke works at Bellambi next to a big marshalling siding. This works made coke for Port Pirie Smelters, the coke being shipped from Bellambi jetty. A Mr Fleming who drove a 1924 green Oakland tourer with a grey hood was Works Manager. His wife was decapitated by a sheet of flying galvanised iron in a westerly blow in the late twenties.

South Bulli had three smart small loco’s to drag the wagons to the Railway siding, the jetty and up to Pandlebury’s Brickworks where Clark Brick now stands. One of the locos is in the Park Street Corrimal. Some of the drivers were Aaron Morgan, Weary Riordan, Albert Christiansen.

The line from the Colliery crossed the Main road at Russell Vale where a set of gates operated from a signal box held up road traffic. It proceeded to the Govt line at Bellambi where a loop took it to the marshalling siding to the north and the other across the Govt line on to the jetty, but before the jetty another loop branched off to the north across the paddocks to cross the Govt line again at the Illawarra Brickworks then up past present Chesalon and Woonona Bowling Club to the top end of Albert Street across the main road via a level crossing to Pandlebury’s Brickworks who fired their Kilns with South Bulli coal. The line continued further up the hill to the base of the Old Model Mine incline. This mine had closed in the early twenties but the track still remained when I was a boy of about 10.
The Bellambi jetty was a much better unit than Old Bulli, being kept in first class condition by Bob Cram who was still diving to inspect the piles when he was an old man. In fact when the Munmorah ran on to the reef in the 40’s he bought the wreck, reclaiming much of the gear by his ingenuity and hard work. The remains of the jetty were finally destroyed by the Army in an demolition exercise.

The original Bulli soil came from Bellambi Point where the Housing settlement now stands. Soil from the Point was bagged and shipped to Cricket grounds around the world including Lords in England. The supply naturally has dried up although some soil has been taken from Sandon Point in recent times.

The Illawarra Brickworks.

These works were situated beside the Govt railway line directly east of the present Council tip. The tip was originally the clay pit for the works. It was a huge pit, serviced by a 2ft. tramway where the small side tipping hoppers were drawn by clydesdale horses.

A tunnel under the main road took the track to a bin that in turn filled larger trucks that were drawn down to the works by an endless rope.

At the works the clay was unloaded and processed for brickmaking.

It was quite a large works - most of the bricks were used in industry, the Steelworks being one of the biggest customers, as they made many odd-shaped bricks for Open Hearth Furnaces.

There was a siding from the South Bulli loop line which crossed the Govt line at the works. Hoppers of South Bulli coal were shunted into the siding to feed the kilns.

However the company folded and the works ceased to operate when the clay supply ran out.

Ivo Bunker.

Ivo had a garage opposite the Bulli Pub with a hand operated petrol bowser on the kerbside. These old bowsers had a graduated glass cylinder, maximum amount at any one time = 4 gallons. The attendant set a lever for the required amount ordered then pumped the pump handle to and fro which in turn operated a lift pump from the underground tank. It was quite hard work to bring up 4 gallons. Luckily most ordered less as petrol was quite costly at about 1/10 (30 cents) per gallon. The popular brands were Shell, Plume, Texaco, Atlantic, Union and two cheaper brands Vaco and D.P.L.(Dunlop Petroleum Ltd.) which sold at about 1/7 per gallon. From memory I think Ivo sold Plume.

There were no hoists in those days, either pits or where the floor plan suited a couple of planks or steel tracks on to which the vehicle was driven, the mechanic working from a lower level underneath; Ivo had the better set up. He was a magnificent motor engineer - there wasn’t a problem that could beat him; He had a lathe on which he turned all sorts of parts, a low pressure accetylene plant fed by carbide bike lamps, and with bottled oxygen did all classes of welding and brazing. He had two service cars, a Chandler and Cleveland, both made by the same American Company. Fitted with Continental Red ‘Seal side valve engines they were both powerful cars. Ivo ran special trips in holiday time to Bulli Pass Lookout and the cars had no trouble pulling a load over the mountain. Naturally they were kept in tip top condition.
Later on Ivo bought a lump of land at the foot of the pass on the right hand side. He dug out the hillside and employed Bill Dalton’s father to make and burn bricks from the clay. The kiln was set up down where the bus stop is now situate. In no time the bricks were made then Dalton laid them to form the building that still stands as a garage today.

During the war Ivo bought a lathe that had been damaged in unloading for more or less scrap - the authorities wrote it off. He soon had it repaired and installed in the new garage. When it was impossible to buy pistons Ivo would melt down old aluminium pots, pans etc. cast them into pistons or whatever and finish them off on the lathe. Many a car was kept on the road by Ivo’s ingenuity.

At one stage he decided to run a miners’ bus service to South Bulli so set about making the bus.

He extended the chasis of the Chandler, built a wooden floor over this then made a framework of ¾” water pipe which he bolted to the floor. Over the frame he put green tarpaulin material. The wooden seats ran around the sides and back with no windows except a tiny oval one at the back. The only light that came in was through the windshield. He reckoned the miners got their pit eyesight on the way to the job, don’t know how he explained the return trip although they all generally adjourned to Woonona pub so it didn’t matter much I suppose.

He had a cackley siren rigged up to the exhaust and by means of pulling a wire would kick up a hell of a din as he raced along. It was a wonder to behold. Ivo enjoyed it immensely and the miners had no complaints.

He had a couple of sons who followed him into the trade. Good and all as they both turned out to bethey couldn’t match the old man.

Finally retiring to Tahmoor, he and his wife were beginning a caravan trip around Australia when involved in a collision almost at their front gate, he was very seriously injured, spending the rest of his life in a home, a sad way for such a man to end his days. There’s no doubt about it, Ivo was a genius.

Father Peter Power.

One of the most lovable personalities I have ever met was Father Peter Power an Irishman who was 50 years ahead of his time in the ecumenical sense. He was most broadminded, a really rough diamond but to serve his Mass as an alter boy was an experience one never forgot. His sermons were short and to the point with that odd bit of Irish wit now and then. Howling kids never worried him, as the poor mother would get up to take a crying baby out he would tell her to stay. ‘If you can put up with it, I can’.

My Dad was his secretary for years and they became like brothers.

He was often homesick for his native land. He saved up for years to go home to see his dear old mum. Finally able to make the trip, she died as he was crossing the Irish Sea. He got home in time to bury her.

Sometimes he would ring mum asking if Dad was home yet, often as not he would be still on the road.

“Do you think you could spare him for a few hours after tea, I’m as lonely as a bandicoot’’ he would say.

Dad generally went up to the Presbytery to keep him company on these occasions.
One particular cold night when Dad got up there, Fr Power looking at the fire set in the open grate said, "I don't think we will light the fire tonight, Tom. If we do we'll have to stoke the bloody thing so we'll wrap ourselves in a rug each like aborigines and keep ourselves warm from the inside with an odd nip of the doins". Which they did, Dad told me, getting through half a bottle of whisky in the meantime.

Originally Bulli parish included Clifton, Coledale, Thirroul and Corrimal. Naturally a curate was necessary even then Masses had to be rationed out over the month. In about 1922 Thirroul became a parish leaving only Corrimal with Bulli. Then they left us, with Fr. Ted Downey one of Fr. Power's curates being made P.P.

Each afternoon, Fr. Power went for his "constitutional" as he called it. With his dog Felix in tow and swinging his walking stick he would walk down Park Road, have a chat to the Church of England minister over the front fence then down to the Post Office, along the main road, down Farrell Rd. and along the beach back home to the old Presbytery. Along the way he would yarn to all and sundry. Keeping poor Felix in tow by tapping him on the backside with his stick saying "get behind me, Sir." The dog knew what he meant and would dutifully take up his position in the rear. It was a poor mongrel of a thing but Peter P. thought the world of it.

Originally Fr. P. got around in a hooded sulky, quite a flash rig. The stable and sulky shed were down the back of the presbytery. Often Dad, who was an excellent horseman, would keep an eye on the horse's condition for him.

Then in about 1928 he bought a Morris Oxford Roadster from Jim Hill at Thirroul. It was brand new. Jim had to teach him to drive in a fashion.

I can still remember the rigmarole he went through starting the Morris to go to say Mass at Corrimal. It had to be started on the crank so as to save the battery — the antics he would get up to in reversing out of the shed and the gear changes as we got into motion.

Dad was pretty green himself as he had only had the Chev a short while. He would let us off at Hospital Road corner then chug off to Corrimal.

However he would not drive out at night if he could avoid it so Dad would take him to Corrimal in the Chev for Benediction when it was their turn. *See end tale re Morris.

For anyone in trouble he was kindness itself and was a touch for blokes on the track down on their luck. He always saw that they had a good feed and often I suspect a bob or two to help them on their way. Miss McMullen was his first housekeeper I can remember then came Miss Carroll a lovely old soul who was a real fuss pot but looked after him well.

He was always very kind to the nuns appreciating the good work they did at the school and visiting the parish.

He was a contemporary of the Archbishop, Michael "the builder" Kelly getting on very well with him. They went through the Seminary together.

One Confirmation, Michael informed Peter P. that he would stay overnight with him. This was O.K. but he didn't have a spare bed so he rang Dad in a hurry to go up to Davidsons to buy a bed "not too dear for he's only sleeping in it once". The bed was duly delivered and he and Dad began to assemble it. They would get one end right but the other would come adrift. Finally they got it together and
Peter looking at the finished job said "not wishing his grace any harm, but I hope the bloody thing falls apart when he gets into it". It didn't and the visit turned out a great success by all accounts.

In 1932 he decided the people of Bulli could do with a change so he took a transfer to St. Peters in Surry Hills. Why he thought so had most people stumped as he was such a well liked priest. It was the greatest mistake of his life as he told Dad later. City life was not for him, he missed his Bulli people and had a heart attack that put him on the sick list for years.

For about 6 months he rented a house in The Grove, Austinmer while recuperating and to be near Dr. Crossle his doctor.

Every Sunday Dad would take him into the Convent at Bulli where he said Mass then back to Austinmer for breakfast and a swim and sunbake till dinner after which he went for his siesta while Dad came home.

In the night after Benediction we would all adjourn to Austinmer where he would be waiting with the cards to play Coon can or Poker. He taught Greg to play Coon can. We had great fun going to about 11 p.m. when Mum and Miss Carol would make tea then home to bed.

During the week for something to do he would collect bottles, much to Miss Carol's disgust. They would be jammed in all his pockets. He loved to regale us with tales of how he would spy a bottle in some bushes then making sure nobody was looking whip it into his pocket. It's amazing how many he would gather in a week. When he had a load Dad would bag them and take them into the bottle merchant in Wollongong. The proceeds went to buy 5/- lottery tickets - "all running numbers" as he would insist. They never won a cracker but he had a lot of fun just the same.

When Dad took ill F. Power visited him every day in Sydney Hospital. In the last week of his life he craved for his pipe. Fr. Power begged the Ward Sister to let him have a smoke. However, all his entreaties were in vain, she wouldn't relent so in disgust he said to her 'you are nothing but a bloody old harridan, the man's dying why can't you give him his wish?". But rules were rules and he never got his smoke.

Mum's family had a plot in Rockwood and she decided to bury him in her spot. Fr. Power said his Requiem Mass at Surry but couldn't bury him. He told me he couldn't bear to hear the sods fall on his coffin.

He lived on some years after Dad but never regained his health.

When Fr. Power left Bulli he was replaced by another Irishman, Fr. Barney O'Farrell, an irascible old character, totally the opposite to Peter Power of happy memory.

*He was too nervous to drive in the city so he sold the Morris to a curate for 50 pounds, a bargain if ever there was one for the young chap. Monsignor Fahey was one of his curates at Surry being christened "midnight" by Peter Power, but that's another story.

Sonno Newman

Sonno started off buying blackberries to send to the jam factory in Sydney. He had a horse-drawn sled to carry the four gallon tins which he supplied to the pickers on the flats between Popes Lane and Bulli Pass. Pickers were paid about three farthings per pound, to get a penny a pound was a bit exceptional.

Blackberries grew in abundance along the two flats on the side of the escarpment, especially near the dams which fed the boilers at the Old Bulli Mine.
In the berry season pickers, young and old, male and female, would walk up to the area with a billy can or the like plus a bit of tucker to sustain them during the day.

Sonno would come along with his sled piled high with 4 gal. tins fitted with a round close fitting lid. He would drop off whatever tins were required by the various pickers as he wended his way from Popes Lane at Boland’s Bush to a spot almost to the road up the Pass just below the elbow.

The pickers would fill the billies which were emptied into Sonno’s tins.

In the afternoon on the return trip these tins would be weighed, money passed over and the tins loaded on to the sled and taken back to be loaded on to the old Chev’4 truck at Popes Lane. The load would be taken to the Railway Goods Shed where it was consigned by rail to the jam factory in Sydney.

Picking berries was hard work — leeches and black snakes abounded but at Spion Cop, behind the big dam, the berries were as big as plums, you just raked them into the billy. Good pickers could fill 10 to 12 tins a day with ease and at top price of a penny each tin was worth about 2/6–3/- so a dozen tins would net up to 36/- a day — good money when the basic wage was under 4 pounds. In Depression years it was a lifesaver.

As always happens, the smart arses would sometimes add a few billies of water to the tins. Sonno most likely was notified by the factory of this so would check with an hydrometer — any water and the tin would be rejected, which was fair enough.

He did quite well from berries then branched out into potatoes, taking the old trucks over to Robertson to pick up spuds direct from the cockies. The potatoes were sold to retailers along the coast — he became known as the Potato King.

He acquired about 3 Chev 4 trucks which were kept in immaculate condition. When ice vending was profitable he bought an ice run using one of the Chevs. They pulled out of Corrimal Ice Works the turn before my brother Peter, about 4.30am but had a much better run in the Woonona area than Pete who had the notorious northern run.

The Newman’s were great workers and fair and honest traders. Sonno lived to a ripe old age, somewhere into his eighties. Hard work certainly did him no harm.

The Misses Bartletts’ Private School

A small private primary school was conducted in a hall adjoining St Augustine’s Church of England by the Bartlett sisters, one taught music as part of the curriculum.

St Joseph’s Convent School

The original school, run by the Sisters of St Joseph was on the Main Road just below the present Post Office on the western side of the highway.

Around about 1922 a new brick school was commenced on a block next to the Convent under an architect Austin McKay.

It was designed so that it could easily be converted to a concert hall. The top room, 6th class, was raised from the body of the hall to form the stage. All rooms were divided by huge concertina doors which when opened gave a full blown hall. To pay off the debt Euchre parties and dances were held but it soon became evident that the nuns couldn’t put up with the racket and they were abandoned, to be held in the Friendly Societies Hall still in existence as a Smash Repair Shop in Woonona.
There was no kindergarten as such but the bottom room housed babies and 1st class, next 2nd and 3rd then 4th and 5th which the top room took 6th, Bursary class and Dioscean Exam pupils. One nun was in charge of each room and in retrospect what a wonderful job they did. One nun also took the Commercial class - bookkeeping and typing. The graduates from this class had no trouble obtaining good office jobs in the district.

I commenced at St Josephs in 1924 aged 7 and went straight into 1st class as I could already read and write, my mum saw to that. In my day there were some mighty teachers. Little sister Clare, a postulant, with rosy cheeks and a lovely soft Irish brogue taught 1st class and babies. She was different in dress from the other nuns having a black dress with white starched cuffs and a little tasselled cap. She was kindness personified having the lot of us in the hollow of her hand.

Next door Sister Romana had 2nd and 3rd class plus the Commercial Class. A bit of a disciplinarian, she kept law and order with a touch of the stick where necessary. She was quite a wit in her own quiet way.

Once when one of the nuns was in Bulli Hospital Sr John sent some washing up to her by my brother Peter and his mate Vince Food. The ward sister asked them if they would like to see Sister — they went down into the room where Sister was sitting up in bed in her nightie and cap to cover her cropped hair. She was glad to see the two lads and they were tickled pink to see Sister in bed. We didn’t think Sisters were like us mortals, they appeared to have just a face, arms and feet. Next day they couldn’t wait to tell Romana that they had seen Sister — in bed. With a straight face she replied “Now you have done it since you saw Sister in bed you will now both have to become nuns”! They died a thousand deaths waiting the call to enter the Convent until she took pity on them a few days later and let them into the joke.

Sister John, of happy memory, all 5ft of her was pure gold. She had 4th and 5th plus the girls for sewing every Friday afternoon. The boys on one side of the room were set sums to do from the sum book while the girls on the other side were introduced to drafting on the blackboard. Some of them were so dumb that often in sheer desperation Sister would ask one of us to tell them the next move. Often we were able to oblige — must have got into our subconscious through sheer repetition. Another job she did was train the altar boys to serve Mass and learn the Latin.

Ad Deam que lactificat juventutam mean etc, etc.

Sometimes at lunch we would go over to the jetty to watch the colliers being loaded. Time would slip by unnoticed with the result that we would front up at about 2pm. She would just line us all up and dole out six of the best being just as fresh at the end as when she started. The tall boys would hold their hands over her head but she soon got them down to striking range with a cut around the bum. We never held any grudges towards her, we deserved what we got.

The work she did in Depression was magnificent. People always saw that the nuns had enough to eat but she often took from their table to help people really down on their luck. She was boss of the Convent although Sr Blandina was head of the school, a combination that worked quite well. Blandina was a legend in her own time. A B.A., something very rare for a nun then, and a marvellous teacher.

She got numerous Bursaries both State and Dioscean. In fact Joyce Buckman and I got the first of many Bursaries from Blandina in 1930. She was a great
believer in the cane, miss an answer you put out your hand automatically, took a whack then went on with the lesson. She was an expert on notes which she dictated to us in History, Geography, English, etc. You learned your notes or took the consequences but she got it into our skulls. The board would be full of work and exercises each morning. She must have spent hours preparing the board.

She told mum that she could never remember not having a headache, no wonder she was a bit crotchety now and again. I remember one afternoon a wisp of her hair got out from the starched band across her forehead and it was red. Couldn’t get home soon enough to tell mum that Sister Blandina had red hair. “Well, what of it”, she said “if she is a redhead make sure you don’t try her patience or you will certainly get what for”.

It’s a funny thing how mysterious those nuns were to us kids, we really thought that they were not mortals, especially with all that gear that must have been their purgatory on earth.

Blandina finally left Bulli for Byron Bay but returned later to teach my kids, still not having lost an ounce of her punch. At this time she was boss of Convent and School. If the Convent wanted repairs or painting she just had to send a note by the kids and a gang of her old pupils would turn up on the next Saturdays until the job was finished.

The nuns were part and parcel of the parish and we all saw to it that they never wanted. Sadly Bulli now has no joey nuns and the place is the poorer for their going.

To be continued........