Illustrated Sydney News of January 18th 1873 has a dramatic description of the refining process.” Part of this description was as follows:

“... The furnaces are four in number, kept continually ablaze, and each heating a nest of five retorts, built into the wall in pyramidal form. The workmen are divided into two gangs, one for day and one for night, the hours being from six to six; and it is the business of each gang to see that the whole twenty retorts are filled and drawn twice during their twelve hours. . . .

The sight of drawing the retorts is one not easily forgotten, the fierce roar of the flames making us shudder as they dart their fiery tongues at the men raking out the refuse with tools resembling iron garden-hoes six times magnified. The blazing matter falls into an iron wagon running on a tramway, directly under the openings of the retorts; and so intense is the heat that it is one man’s business to dash buckets of water on the burning mass.”

I have been told that after the closure of the mine [in 1878] and the disposal of the sheds and machinery the twenty retorts were placed outside the miners cottages at Kembla Heights and used as water tanks. When the town water supply was connected to the homes the retorts were discarded and rolled down their backyards or into the bush, where they lay for many years.

When the Steelworks became the owners of the Kembla mining property the retorts were gathered up, taken to the Steelworks, and I am told melted down. Only one escaped this fate, and for many years lay hidden in the bush behind one of the miner’s cottages. Fred Kirkwood knew of its hiding place, and during our Bicentennial year of 1988 he approached the management of the Steelworks and gained permission to retrieve the retort, aided by a donation from the Coal Board.

With the help of my son with his truck and crane it was lifted for its last journey and placed on a cement slab laid down by Fred and his sons. It now stands beside Cordeaux Road a short distance from where it started work, and appears to be in good condition considering its fiery beginning. If it could only speak, what stories it would tell! It is no oil painting, but it now stands as a permanent monument to the memory of those men who worked in that early kerosene shale mine - the first in Australia.

Ivy Murray
July 1991

OLD HELENSBURGH

Part transcript of an oral history interview of MRS. URSULA BOYD (nee Monro) born in Helensburgh in 1912, conducted and transcribed by PAM THOMAS in March 1989.

FAMILY CAME TO HELENSBURGH: As near as I can gather, 1890 or so. How did you hear about that? Well, I’d have to go down to the mine. They have the records down there and they told me I can come and have a look at them to find out when my grandfather started work in the mine.

So he was working in the mine too? Apparently. Then his eldest son later on became . . . my father became a Deputy in the mine and my Grandfather’s eldest son became an Undermanager . . . Dave Monro. So we’ve been associated with it right through.

Why did they come to Helensburgh? I don’t know. They came from Scotland
to Maria Island in Tasmania and then they moved over to the mainland of Tasmania and then they came over to Helensburgh here. But I'm trying to fathom why people that they lived next door to on the mainland of Tasmania came and lived next door to them here. Who came first?

Where did the family live? The house where you were born? No! They started off in the company's houses in Fletcher Street and then Grandma bought a house in The Ridge . . . which is now The Ridge. And when my father was getting married that property was divided into two and Dad built his house on half the block. We were the first house in The Ridge going south. Then, years later, many years later, people by the name of Todd bought the house and moved it holus bolus to Auburn Street in Sutherland and the last time I looked it was still there.

Do you remember that house? Oh yes, yes, of course I do.

What sort of lighting did it have in it?

We had kerosene lamps in all the houses. We never went in for candles very much. I don't much remember my grandmother living in the house - her house, because when my uncle became Undermanager she moved with him over into McMillan Street where the Catholic Church is. The Undermanager's house was there at that time.

So they got a Company house which went with the job.

Then my father was the Deputy. In his work he had to go down - the mine was eleven hundred feet deep, which was approached by these lovely steps which are not there now. All cut out of stone. I get up on my high horse about this one, because up on the top of the steps there is a little trough dug out of the solid rock and that is always filled with water and there is a little spillway over it. And the men going down to the mine used to fill their water bottles at that trough with water for work. Because the original people for the mine were in tents. Mum had photos of them in Camp Creek down here at the foot of the hill. That's how they used to get down to the mine.

Is that trough still there?

That trough is still there.

And nobody knows about it.

Oh, everybody knows about it because I've told them. But nobody . . . "Oh, it's covered over with undergrowth . . ." It is the only historical thing in the Burgh! Definitely. In my opinion. There was no running water in those days, so they'd have to fill their water bottles there.

You didn't have running water in the house?

Oh, no, no, everybody had tanks. And when the drought came we went up the hill to a spring that was all in clay. We used to get our water from the spring and bring it down.

How did you carry it?

Kerosene tins. (Laughter)

What about cooking? How did your Mum cook?

Fuel stove. 

Where did she get the wood?

Well, we used to get coal from the mine.
Was that part of the job?
I don’t know whether they were allowed - I think they had to pay cartage on the coal and just got it, you know. Then we used to have to go down the bush for wood.

The children?
Yes, the children.

It was one of your jobs, was it?
The children, and Mum and this other old lady. This other lady was a northern English lady and it was a sort of a social function “I’m going down the bush for wood. Are you coming?” There might be three ladies go down the bush for wood and bring it back. But this old North of England lady used to take her apron and make it into a pad and put it on her head and she’d carry her big bundle of wood on her head, all the time. Up and down, you know. Well, when the pneumonic ‘flu was on well Dad used to have to go and get wood too. My sister and myself used to go down and get all the kindling because there was nobody else to do it.

They were all sick.
They were all sick.

What was the laundry like?
The laundry was unattached to the house. It was up in the yard. Mum was quite modern. She had a copper and tubs on the bench. The round zinc tubs on the bench. She also had a wringer, which people didn’t have.

Did she have a mangle as well?
No, Mum never had a mangle. But this old English lady she had a mangle.

Was that for the sheets?
Yes, she used to put her linen through it. Mum used to just fold hers up.

Was it hard work for women in those days?
Well, I suppose it was, but it was done in a more leisurely fashion. Mum said she used to get a bit jack of carrying water from the tank up to the laundry, but then she used to have to carry a kerosene tin full of water and put it on the stove every day because Father would be coming home from the mine to have his bath. So when he got home from work there would be hot water for his bath. Ready for his bath.

And he’d have a bath every day?
Oh, yes.

Because people in those days didn’t bath every day quite often, if they weren’t miners.
Yes, but if you’re pitch black you’d have to bath, wouldn’t you. (Laughter)

Do you remember what he looked like?
Oh, yes.

Very, very dirty?
Very dirty, because this - you must remember I’m going back seventy years. I can remember my father coming from the mine. It was the day before all the special fans and all those sort of things were put in the mine. They used to put up what they called ‘brattice’, which was a type of hessian, with these big tacks and tack it to the props. They had big props in the mine that used to hold the roofs up. Well then they put this brattice along so that they’d get a draught down one way and back another way.
So that was their ventilation?
That was more or less their ventilation within the mine.
Did you ever go underground?
Yes, I was underground twice. My father as I’ve said being a Deputy, he took me down. I had to ask the Manager’s permission myself could I go down.
How old were you then?
About twelve or thirteen perhaps.
Pretty brave to ask the Manager’s permission.
Well he was a great friend. (Laughter)
What did your father wear when he was mining?
He might have actually mined in the beginning but I don’t ever remember him as a miner. He just wore pants and shirt.
Safety boots?
Work boots, you know. Heavy leather work boots, with metal heels. For a cap - now this will sound funny - he used to cut the outside brim off a bowler hat and turn - make it into a hat shape because it was hard - a protective hat. There was no such thing as safety hats or safety helmets or anything like that. Dad always wore the bowler hat cut down for his work hat.
And did he carry a lamp?
Yes, he carried a kerosene lamp which is out there. Gay has that now. A brass one. Because he used to have to go in the mine being a Deputy before the men came in all the workings or his district of workings with the lamp to see if there was any gas at all. If there was any gas the lamp would go out.
Was he safety-conscious, your father? Was he concerned about the men’s safety?
Well, he had to be, because he was in charge of their safety. And he has told me that if he thought he could hear cracks in the props and things like that he would have to go in and pull out the railway lines for the skips so they could bring the coal out and that sort of thing.
How did they get the skips through the mine?
On rails.
But what was the power? Was it a locomotive? Or horses?
Horses. Horses. That’s how I came to go down the mine. Because Dad was - when the grooms would go in on Saturday and Sunday mornings when the mine didn’t normally work a Deputy had to take it in their turn as to which one went down and when it was Dad’s turn I went down with him to the stables where the horses and that were and then he took me for a walk around the workings as to where the two men were actually killed in the mine. Men by the name of Green and West. He went to show me where the blowout had occurred.
Was that in his time?
Oh, yes.
Was he worried about that?
Oh, I suppose you’re always conscious that it could happen. The day I went there I said ‘I feel a bit funny with that smell.’ So he said ‘Come on out of it. That’s gas! So we came back out of it. Then I went down another time and came up the main lift - the main cage - it took sixteen men in those days. And later
it was made into a double cage with thirty-two men. There used to be this little cage in the airshaft which being a Deputy he had to go of a Wednesday afternoon with a pick and stand in this cage and if he saw any loose rock on the edge of the wall he used to have to chip that out, so that it wouldn’t fall down if anybody was working underneath. But it was a wire cage that held about I suppose eight people could stand in it standing up. It would be about four feet wide by about six feet long with just wire sides and top. 

Did your father take his crib to work? 
Yes. They had their crib thing - crib tin and their water bottle. Yes he always took that.

And then when he came home from work he had a bath and then he had his tea ready, I suppose? 
No, because he came home at - he’d get home at a quarter to one. He started at five o’clock. I suppose he’d have his lunch. I don’t know. I was at school most of the time. Then he might have had tea later in the evening.

And he worked five days a week, did he? 
Yes, the whole mine worked five days a week, but then the Deputies had to each in their turn had to do Saturday shift and Sundays. A four-hour shift. Half-shifts on those days.

What did he do in his spare time? 
He didn’t have any spare time, my father. He was the choirmaster of the Male Voice Choir. He was the bandmaster of the town band. He was interested in the church. He also belonged to the Rifle Range. Then he had a Picture Show.

He ran a Picture Show? Was that a travelling one, or was it set up in a . . . .

No, set up here in the Centennial Hall opposite where the Centennial Hotel is now. He and a friend took it along and Dad did the projection and Mr. Gray did the dynamo which was in another building outside. Mum sold the tickets and Mrs. Gray collected them at the door. So I saw twelve episodes of ‘Pearl White and the Lightning Grader.’

Was that a silent movie? 
Oh, yes, and then we used to have a man play, a Mr. Alf Weekes and he’d follow the picture and play appropriately and then when the picture ‘The Ten Commandments’ came out he came over to Dad to try to find out what would be the appropriate music for that.

Because down in the Paragon Hall they also had pictures. Tom Mix was a great one there. There used to be this lady pianist and I believe it was peculiarly funny. There was a statesman’s funeral going along the street and she was playing ‘How’re You Gonna Keep them Down on the Farm’. (Laughter)

So that was the competition. There were two picture shows? Two picture shows in Helensburgh. Yes.

And now there’s none. Nothing.

Did your father ever have trouble with the people in the picture show throwing things at the screen or making noises or anything like that? 
No. Everybody paid their money and was glad to go and have a look at it. And
then he used to organise concerts. Sacred concerts and he was interested in the
lodge and all that sort of thing. In his own way he was quite a prominent citizen.
And very musical.
Extremely.
How did that start out?
Just a gift, I think. Because I don’t ever remember him taking lessons, or anything
like that.
The band was very popular in Helensburgh, wasn’t it?
A very strong band. And then they used to enter into the different Eisteddfods.
When my sister was born I think they were out at Bathurst in 1914. And I’ve
got some real old photos of the band. Dad would have been thrilled to know now
that his grandson is the bandmaster for the NSW Ambulance Band. He just went
into music at fifteen at the army school of music.
And the band would go on the train to various places to play.
Yes. In the city.
Did you ever go with them?
One time I can remember, I must have been very small, we went to Cronulla for
the day. The band went on the old tram from Sutherland, and I can remember
standing beside the double bass and I was only as high as what is was. That’s my
memory of that trip. Because my mother was a Sydney-orientated woman. She’d
lived in Sydney. Some of the kids that I went to school with, even at fourteen
had never been on the train even. We used to go to Sydney quite a lot. We’d
go in and have holidays at the People’s Palace where Mum used to work when she
was young.
How did your parents meet?
Well, I think Mum was a waitress in the People’s Palace and Dad must have gone
there for lunch, from what I can gather. The band was playing in Sydney at the
time. At those times. When they came back here in 1952 I met an old chap and
another friend said ‘You know who this is.’ And he said ‘Yes, that’s Ursula.
I remember when her mother and father were married in 1911.’
Your mother had all the children at home, did she? Born in the house?
No hospital?
No, there weren’t hospitals in those days. We had Mrs. Gadd was the District
Nurse. There were two District Nurses. Midwives I suppose they’d be called in
those days. Mrs. Gadd and Mrs. Freedland (?). Mum had Mrs. Gadd.
You’d have to have a lot of confidence in . . .
Dr. Cox . . . It was all so different. You can’t really compare it with what goes
on now at all because it was the way it was done. It was just accepted that that
was the way it was done and that was it. And then years later Mrs. Chadwick
started up with a hospital in Walker Street.
What was she like?
Oh, she was a dear old thing. And then another lady, Mrs. Beaumont started
another private hospital. They were there for years, but they didn’t come for
years, do you see what I mean? They weren’t here . . . Mrs Chadwick I suppose
was here in the nineteen twenties. Mrs. Beaumont started up in the nineteen
thirties.
What did people do if they had an accident? Say if there was an accident in the mine or a child broke his arm or something like that?

Well I know what happened when a child broke his arm because I did that. It was at school when I jumped over a rope, and what made me mad, I tripped on a tussock. So I had a greenstick break in my arm. Somebody went over and got Mum. We lived near the school. I had to go up to Dr. Cox, and he grabbed my arm and he said 'This might hurt' and he grabbed my shoulder and he grabbed my wrist and pulled my arm and slapped the splints on it and that was my broken arm. But when anybody had an accident in the mine they would of course bring them up to the surface. A Mr. Simpson was the ambulance man and of course they’d have all the stretchers and that sort of thing. Well then they had a two-wheeled ambulance that they used to put the stretcher on this carrier and the stretcher had a canvas cover over it. And there was a celluloid window for where the person was, and if they were well enough they used to be rolled back and they would be able to breathe the fresh air and that sort of thing. And they would trundle that down to the railway and old Mr. Banks used to be in charge of all that. They’d take that down to the railway and then they’d ship the passenger into the train to take them mostly to Prince Alfred Hospital because the mine here... the miners paid out of their wages a few pence each a week that supported Prince Alfred Hospital. And then the doctors were each paid... it could have been about three pence a week, something like that. One was three-pence and one was a penny and I don’t know which... to support the doctor in the town. That’s how they used to do it. Down beside the band hall they had a little ambulance shed where they used to keep it.

Did you ever see anyone taken down on the stretcher down to the train?
I suppose I did, because I know all about it.

What happened when somebody died in the mine?
Well, I suppose they’d be brought to the surface and probably the...

Did they have big funerals for the miners?
Yes. Big funerals.

Do you remember those?
One I remember particularly was an old chap who died down in... who lived in The Crescent... what was The Crescent in those days. The funeral was coming and it was a foggy day and the band was playing The Dead March in Saul coming up through the fog. Dad wouldn’t play it in its proper time because he said it was much too slow for men to have to march a mile up to the cemetery to the slow beat. So he beat it up one so they could get there.

Did you ever go to the cemetery as a little girl?
Yes. It was funny. I used to say to my father “Where’s my grandfather buried?” “Over there.” Then I’d go up to the cemetery again for some reason. “Where’s my grandfather buried?” “Over there.” so when I got older I decided that I’d ask. So I got into Wollongong Council who have the records. “Could you tell me where John Monro is buried?” A very old... member you know of the town... person I was looking for not the young person. It would be either Methodist or Presbyterian.” When they went through the records “No, there’s no Monro buried in the Methodist or Presbyterian except a baby Monro died in 1916.”
I said, "yes, that's my brother." Right. So I thought, "I won't be beaten." So I sent and got my grandfather's death certificate. He was buried in the Church of England section. "Over there" And I've come to the conclusion that the Church of England section was the first inside the cemetery gates — that in 1898 that was all the cemetery that was operating, because that's where all the real old headstones are. But I haven't really found out which numbers over there yet at all.

**How did your family get around Helensburgh. When you were little? Did they have a car?**

We walked. Nobody had cars until about ... Dr. Cox was one of the first cars. I think Mr. Connell was one of the first cars.

**Who was Mr. Connell?**

Father of George Connell who lives in Parkes St, Helensburgh.

**Was he Well-to-do?**

No, not particularly. He had a car.

**What were the roads like?**

Bush tracks. Then my father got ... in about 1922 - 3, 24, 25 up to thirty the cars started to boom. 1923 my father had a car.

**Did he take you out in the car? Family outings?**

Oh, yes, we went all over the state in it. Travelled ... my sister and myself used to get sick of it. We'd say "When are we going to get there, Dad? What's the next place we're going to. We went all out west and down south and everywhere in it.

**That was pretty adventurous in those days, wasn't it?**

Oh, I suppose to a certain degree. We used to go over to Moss Vale quite a bit. Sometimes we'd go via Picton. Sometimes Macquarie Pass sometimes Cambewarra Mountain just to make things different. Round trip.

**Did you ever go to the beach?**

Oh, yes.

**Where did you go?**

Stanwell Park. My father was one of the foundation members of the Stanwell Park Surf Club. We had this big cane picnic basket that used to be loaded up. Away we'd walk to the train and go down to Stanwell Park. Stanwell Park station in those days was down on the South Coast Road, where the road is now. Then years later they put it up on the hill up there. We used to walk down to the beach and one time stands out, because Dad had his panama hat and his white pants and blazer. There was a hive of bees decided to go on the beach. So father went and robbed them and collected them all up in a bathing costume and brought the whole hive of bees home and put them in a box. I don't know how he would have got on if he'd been found out on the train. But that was Dad. He did that sort of thing.

(to be continued)

**LATE NOTE - ALNE BANK**

Alne Bank is a late Georgian House of stuccoed rubble stone. An open day is on Sunday, 6th October situated on Princes Highway Gerringong. Admission will be Adult $3.00 and Children $1.00.