RECOLLECTIONS OF NORTHERN ILLAWARRA DURING WORLD WAR 1
BY AN OCTOGENARIAN WHO WAS A BOY THERE THEN
(continued from November Bulletin)

THIRROUL PRIMARY SCHOOL
There were seven teachers on the staff including the headmaster, three men and four women. There was one teacher for each class from kindergarten (the "babies") right through to 6th class. There were no composite classes. One of the men was Mr. Walsh, who came from Grafton, and who in later years (about 1930) was headmaster at Lismore. One of the women teachers was Miss Ruby McCauley (spelling?), who was a member of a pioneer Thirroul family. She was called Biddy by the children, more I think out of familiarity than disrespect. I never discovered whether the name Biddy was a family pet name or a nickname applied by someone in the past and passed down the line.

Another woman teacher was Miss Aileen Burrow, who wrote articles on nature topics for the School Magazine, illustrating them with her own drawings. She used the pseudonym Neelia, which was her name Aileen spelt in reverse. Other teachers at the time were Mr. Wright, Miss Byrne and Miss Irvine. Mr Wright taught the senior classes in nature study, the human body and first aid, manual work and physical training, besides teaching his own class. Music, including partsinging, was taught by Mr. Willard and Mr. Walsh. We received a good, well rounded education.

Arithmetic included much more involved mechanical examples than in later years. English included more advanced grammar than today - parsing and analysis of complex sentences. History and geography were taught as separate subjects, not combined as social studies.

The cane was used, but not particularly freely. The well behaved had nothing to fear, but the big, troublesome, defiant boys were justifiably punished, perhaps six strokes on alternate hands, inflicted by either Mr. Willard or Mr. Walsh.

The year 1916 was noteworthy for the first issue of the School Magazine. Before that there used to be the Commonwealth School Paper, which I think had to be paid for, a nominal charge and voluntary, but I was too young to remember.

Organised games, probably the last half-hour on Friday afternoons, included at least one I remember clearly, Prisoners' Base. This game is simple and is probably still played. Playground games during lunch hour were, like most children's games, in and out of fashion. The perennial marbles was played, big ring and little ring, and bags of marbles were general. The boys played for keeps and the best boys mucked the weaker ones, that is won all their marbles. The marbles were of different kinds: connies, connie agates, bottle-ohs, clay dabs and glassies. The clay dabs were the cheapest and least valued, and the glassies had pretty coloured spiral patterns built into the glass. The boys put different values on the different marbles, and most boys had their favourite taw. Other informal games were tops, leap frog, saddle the nag (a variation of leap frog) and tipney, which may have been a local name for tipcat listed in the Macquarie Dictionary as "a game in which a short piece of wood, tapering at both ends, is struck lightly at one end with a stick so as to make it spring up, and while in the air is struck again
for the purpose of driving it as far as possible". This strikes me as a rather dangerous game, when a piece of double-pointed wood is driven through the air with force. However I do not remember any accidents. Fly was a game involving the long jump (then called the broad jump) and pushing a flat object of wood, stone, etc. through the legs with the arm from behind as far as can be reached; fly is the leader and a challenger can "see fly do it". Cock-fighting was a wrestling game between two pairs of boys pick-a-back (piggy back). I can remember a game in which cigarette cards were flicked through the air from a taw-line, but I have forgotten the rules.

School banking existed but it was with the NSW State Savings Bank, which ceased to exist as such during the depression of the 1930s, when, after the dismissal or Premier J.T. Lang, by Governor Sir Philip Game, the Commonwealth Savings took over school banking business. The main difference between then and now was the amount banked by children then, a penny or threepence or sixpence a week seldom a shilling. As part of the war effort children contributed to War Savings Certificates, so much a week till you had saved one pound (£1) which bought you a certificate.

PRIMARY SCHOOL EXAMINATIONS

Internal examinations were held quarterly, eased a few years later to half yearly examinations.

However, an external examination was held at the end of 6th class. It was called the Q.C., which stood for Qualifying Certificate, meaning that the pupil could proceed to high school. The subjects of the exam were, if I remember correctly, English, Dictation, arithmetic, history and geography. Children whose parents were on low incomes could apply to sit for a bursary at the same examination. Successful bursary candidates received a small allowance and a free grant of text-books.

The Q.C. examination was replaced soon after the War by the Permit-to-Enrol (that is, enrol at a high school). This did not last long and was soon superseded by the Primary Final examination, which was introduced somewhere about 1930 and remained for many years. In the Primary Final the papers were to be marked by the local teaching staff, using marking scales supplied by Head Office, the results then being recorded and sent to the District Inspector. In later years the P.F. was discontinued, except for candidates for selective high schools including agricultural highs. For the others, instead of the P.F. assessments were made based on school results in English, Maths, Social Studies and Spelling, taken in conjunction with two general intelligence tests conducted by school counsellors in 4th and 6th grades. All 6th class pupils, except those too young, went on to secondary, but placed in streams according to ability. This digression really does not apply to the years 1915-1920, but it is interesting to know the successors to the Q.C.

WOLLONGONG HIGH SCHOOL

When I enrolled at Wollongong High in 1919 it was a new school, clean and fresh. It was, of course, the original high school, not the present one. There was only the one two-storeyed brick building. There was ample playground space.
I can remember a staff of thirteen, six men and seven women. The headmaster was J. A. Hedberg, B.A. (I think Jim to his acquaintances). He taught maths, but he said he had done Latin all through university. He had married a Miss Page, member of an illustrious family, sister of Dr. Earle (later Sir Earle) Page, a Grafton surgeon, who entered Federal parliament for the then Country Party, and eventually became Federal Treasurer. He was co-partner in the Bruce-Page coalition of the twenties, along with Stanley Melbourne Bruce, Prime Minister and later High Commissioner in London. Mr. and Mrs. Hedberg (nee Page) had one son a doctor, another son a dentist, and a daughter, Jean Hedberg, who married a doctor, Dr. Gillies. They had two sons, Douglas and David, both of whom graduated in medicine. Dr. Gillies died early. Mrs. Gillies took her M.A. and taught in high schools and became a secondary inspector. After his term at Wollongong J.A. Hedberg became head of Parramatta High. After his retirement he lived at Bowral.

I remember the names of all the staff at Wollongong high in my time. They were:- Mr. Hedberg (maths), Mr. Hallett (maths), Mr. Fairbairn (maths), Mr. Lundie (Latin), Mr. Moyes (science), Mr. McKenzie (commercial subjects), Miss Hooper (English-history), Miss Saunders (English-history), Miss Orr (maths), Miss Connolly (Latin), Miss Taylor (French), Miss Spencer (French), Miss Perry (science). Miss Orr was a Uni. maths medallist. Mr. Lundie had come from Fort Street and in later years taught Latin at Bowral. Mr. R. R. Fairbairn later went to Fort Street and finally became a primary inspector, one at least of his inspectorates being Bowral. After his retirement he lived at Glenbrook and taught maths as a casual teacher at Penrith High into his eighties. Miss E. S. Connolly taught Latin so well at Wollongong that one of her pupils had to transfer to Fort Street and was ahead of the boys there.

Nicknames, whether we agree with them or not, are a fact of life and we have to live with them. They may be apt, witty, humorous, hurtful, offensive, or downright degrading. So Wollongong was no exception. Mr. Moyes was "Fuzzy" Moyes probably in reference to his hair and whiskers. Mr. Fairbairn was either "Fairy" or "Fairy Feet", probably being in the first instance the first syllable of his surname, and also because of his springy step as he walked. Mr. McKenzie was "Whistling Rufus" because of his habit of whistling softly to himself, a habit which accorded well with his cheerful countenance. I do not remember hearing any nicknames for female members of the staff.

Mr. Hedberg smoked cigars and their aroma filled his office, penetrated his clothes, and followed him around, to the secret enjoyment of those who, like myself, liked the smell, and the open disapproval of those who didn’t. In later years Mr. Hedberg smoked a pipe.

Wollongong high was, of course, co-educational and drew boys and girls from Scarborough in the north to Nowra in the south, perhaps even further south. The Nowra students must have boarded in Wollongong, I don’t know. In those days only 4 - 5% of pupils went on to high school. The leaving age then was 14, though it was later raised. Most boys and girls left school to go to work, most of it unskilled. In my class at Wollongong there was a very brainy girl, who always came top of the class. She was a good all-rounder, as good in maths and English as languages. Her name was Sarah Heard (spelling?), from Bulli. I used to come
fairly well up in the class, but, along with all the other boys, was no match for her. Thus I had any future delusions of male superiority thoroughly aborted. I have often wondered what became of Sarah.

At Wollongong high in 1919 there were two alternative courses, the classical and the commercial. Subjects in the classical course were English, history, maths I, maths II, elementary science, Latin and French, with provision for one geography period per week. The commercial subjects were English, history, maths I, maths II, science, I think a full geography course, and bookkeeping and business principles. There were no home science or manual arts courses or the others options available today.

The full secondary course in those days was five years. During this course there were two external examinations, the intermediate (after 3 years) and the leaving (after 5 years). The leaving certificate was accepted as equivalent to the university matriculation examination. The years then were called:- 1st year, remove (year), 2nd year, 3rd year and 4th year. I understand that formerly the secondary course was for four years, and when it was increased to five years the extra year was inserted between years 1 and 2 so that the intermediate certificate could be taken after 3 years, but I cannot vouch for this explanation. Sufficient to say that this bizarre nomenclature was confusing; 2nd year so called was in reality 3rd year, and so on with 3rd and 4th years. This was changed into the more rational 1st years, 2nd year, 3rd year, 4th year and 5th year, the inter. being taken at the end of 3rd year and the leaving at the end of 5th year. Later for a time they were named Forms 1 to 5, or 1st form, 2nd form, 3rd form and on to 5th form. It sounds as if this system of naming was in imitation of the British method, much as Remove seems to be transported. It is interesting to notice in passing that primary classes were called grades at one stage, probably trying to bring some sort of uniformity between the states. Now the continuous numbering by years from 1 to 12 is sensible.

As for the text-books we used, I can remember most of them. For instance in high school history we used Warner & Marten: Groundwork of British History (ending about 1910); Prof. Ernest Scott’s Australian History; Robinson’s History of Western Europe. In primary we used the O.C. History; Watt’s Australian History; A Story of the English People by Cramp and others. These plus a fair amount of supplementary reading. But I will not give a complete list in all subjects, as they would probably be of little interest to today’s students.

A contemporary of mine at Thirroul and Wollongong was a boy of about eleven who had both arms cut off, one just below and the other just above the elbow. His name was Clyde Redshaw. He was supposed to have been run over by a train in New Zealand when he was little. But what made us all marvel was how neat and fast his writing was, done with a pencil held between his stumps and partly guided by his mouth. It was large, round handwriting, but better than that of most of the rest of us. Despite this handicap, he was cheerful and philosophical, and joined in whatever games he could. He could not punch other boys with fists, but could give them a mighty whack with his hardened stumps. Just like children, we did not stop to think how hard his private life must have been doing the hundreds of little everyday tasks, like doing up buttons, without fingers and thumbs. I understood at the time that his parents had sought advice and were to
have artificial attachments made for their son’s arms when he grew older. Soon after this Clyde’s story was featured in a Sydney newspaper, but I lost track of him after that.

A HAPPY BOYHOOD

I consider myself fortunate to have spent five vital formative years at Thirroul. We were indeed a lucky family. It could have been in the city slums or the dead interior. Despite the War, they were happy years.

We came to experience the sea in all its moods, from flat calm to violent storm, from brilliant, sparkling blue to dull, sullen grey; from the flat surf in a westerly wind to the dancing white horses in a southerly blow. We saw the beach change overnight from almost level sand, the nearest breakers two hundred yards out, to a steep drop into rough, churning surf only a few yards from the shore. We saw the water choked with seaweed that hobbled us, or the sand replaced by water-worn pebbles and stones. Sometimes the beach itself would be strewn with masses of decaying seaweed that stank to high heaven as it rotted. Sometimes the surf would invite with long, gentle, curving green-and-white breakers; at other times, turbulent with dangerous, frothing, sand-filled dumpers.

We swam in the lagoon behind the beach or dived into the deep swimming hole in the creek round the bend. We raced along the firm, wet sand till we were exhausted; we built sand castles or sand towns; or we just lay on the beach gazing up wool-packed clouds drifting lazily across a blue sky, with the gentle, soothing, languid boom of the surf in our ears. We could stare across the bight of south Thirroul beach where a collier was loading coal at Bulli jetty, while behind us could be heard the muffled clatter of a bunch of coal-laden skips coming down from the Excelsior mine up on the mountainside to the loading chutes on the railway line. We would explore at low tide the salt-water pools on the flat rock platforms, so typical at the foot of Illawarra headlands. (We were later to learn that these ledges were the result of what Professor Griffith Taylor of Sydney University geography school called a slight “upward joggle” of 8 or 10 feet, a slow, gradual uplift in past geological times following an earlier bigger subsidence.) In the pools we learnt to recognise limpets and periwinkles; cunjevois, or cunjies; octopuses; sea-urchins and sea-anemones; and may different kinds of seaweeds.

At other times a group of boys would climb to the Bulli look-out behind the town, going straight up the escarpment by a track called “the short cut”. It was a very steep climb, especially the last piece. On the way we passed through a belt of rain forest, dense scrub of coachwood, lilly-pilly and Illawarra flame trees; ferns, staghorns and mosses; tree ferns; lianas drooping from the trees, which were huge wines as thick as your arm, and which we called monkey ropes. Here, too, I saw my first ring-tail possum at its leafy tree-nest. Once at the top, we would go to the lookout platform and gaze out at the vast expanse of ocean, then at our feet the towns, road, railway, streets, houses, and other landmarks. We could follow the then dusty road north to Sublime Point overlooking Austinmer and...
follow the coastline south with our eyes as far as Port Kembla, the Five Islands and Lake Illawarra. Or we could turn west from Bulli lookout along the Appin road, and in the flats, sandy and rather marshy soil alongside the road pick bunches of Christmas bells, flannel flowers, waratahs and native roses which grew there in great profusion and were not protected then.

In retrospect, I don’t think I could have picked a better place to live for those five years.

MISCELLANEOUS MEMORIES

Influenza Epidemic, 1919 - My generation will never forget the outbreak of pneumatic flu which broke out at the end of the war. It was world-wide and struck Australia too. When I began high school we wore face masks, a double-thickness piece of white gauze fitting over nose and mouth, below the eyes and under the chin, gathered at the sides of the cheeks and with loops of tape fitting round the ears to hold it in place. It would probably have a few drops of strong antiseptic sprinkled on the gauze. The purpose was as much to prevent yourself from spreading germs by droplets when sneezing or coughing as to save yourself from the germs of others. Our family did not suffer, but the danger was brought home to us when a Mrs. Robson who lived close by died. The masks did not last long; it was not many weeks before they were discontinued.

Mourning - Funerals in those days differed from today. There was no cremation, only burial. The glass-sided, four-wheeled hearse was drawn by horses probably by two abreast. The other vehicles were carriages, buggies or sulkies, all horse-drawn. There might be some mounted on horses, even on foot. I cannot say when motor vehicles were introduced. The horses were kept to a walking pace all the way to the cemetery, hence the expression, still sometimes heard, at a “funeral pace”, meaning very slowly. The hearse had a rack on top on which floral tributes could be carried, and the coffin was fully visible through the glass sides. The undertaker probably wore a top hat. Women and the big girls had to change into full black, including hats, and the need to have to suddenly buy new mourning outfits often caused financial embarrassment. The men did not have to wear black suits, but wore a black crepe armband on the upper left arm. Strict etiquette demanded that women wore the black for so many months, and even then there was supposed to be an intermediate period when she wore a neutral colour, such as mauve, then called heliotrope. Letters to and from the bereaved were edged in black, wide or narrow borders, both envelopes and notepaper within. Fortunately most of these customs have gone. Today when funerals are held they consist of motor vehicles, and because of the demands of modern traffic move at a brisk pace.

Machines Then and Now - Two generations ago most of the work now done by machines was done by hand. Manual labour did much of the heavy work. Pick and shovel, crowbar and sledgehammer, wheelbarrow and hand trolley, horse drawn tip-dray, horse scoop, horse teams for farm work, and so on and son on; they have been replaced by machinery, power, and labour-saving devices. They had explosives for blasting rock, but had to use hand-held drills and sledgehammers; no jackhammers then. They fell trees by hand using axe and saw, and cut through the log with the two-man crosscut saw; no power saws then. They dug post-holes,
thousand and thousands, with bar and shovel; no post-hole diggers then. Railway cuttings and embankments required hundreds of men and dozens of horses.

What a difference today! Huge bulldozers, front-end loaders, road rollers and similar machines are common place. Monsters used in mining operations, earth moving, bulk loading, and the like grow bigger every year. Gigantic tractors pulling multiple-disc ploughs or heavy combine harvesters have revolutionised farm work. Specialised machines for harvesting crops like cotton, sugar-cane and rice, have been invented. Colossal semi-trailers for bulk wheat, coal, and other stuff, have been invented. Stock is moved by long road trains powered by massive diesel engines. Individual separators on dairy farms have given way to bulk collection of milk and and completely changed dairying.

Home welding outfits, chain saws, nail guns, rotary lawn mowers, robot factories computers - what will the next two generations bring?

Overseas Travel - This was available to a privileged few in 1920, only the wealthy could afford it. They had to go by sea, and to go to the United Kingdom they had the choice of the Suez route, the Cape route, the All-Red route, which was via Canada, and referred to the days when the countries of the British Empire were coloured red on the map of the world. Or they could go via the United States or Panama. The voyage took five or six weeks. Now, in this jet age, they fly to London in a little over 24 hours, and thousands of ordinary people can afford it. The standard of living has definitely improved.

Empire Day - Empire Day, or British Empire Day, was celebrated every year on May 24 in both primary and secondary schools. This was Queen Victoria's birthday, and when she died in 1901 after the longest reign in British history, almost 64 years, it had been decided to continue the practice of so many years of celebrating the Queen's Birthday on May 24th, but to change the name to Empire Day. In revering the memory of the then recently deceased Queen Victoria, we were not informed that there were other long reigns, too: Poor old George III, the "old, mad, blind, despised, and dying king", reigned for 60 years, but had to have a Regent towards the end; Henry III 56 years, Edward III 50 years, even Elizabeth I 45 years.

Well, we celebrated Empire Day, each school in its own way. Some had marches, others Maypoles in red, white and blue, others pageants or tableaux. In the morning prominent citizens addressed us and parents visited the school; some of the children gave speeches. We learnt about the Empire on which the sun never set and we looked at the lands coloured red on our map of the world, the greatest Empire the world had seen. (But we were not told that those maps were printed in British countries, not in other countries.)

We sang all the old patriotic songs of the day: Rule Britannia, Sons of the Sea, Empress of thw Wave, Three Cheers for the Red White and Blue, and the like. We sang the National Anthem (then God Save the King, George V), Advance Australia Fair (then a patriotic song, not the national anthem), Kipling's Recessional, and Before all Lands in East or West (I love my native land the best). Other traditional songs we sang were a valuable part of our musical education: The British Grenadier Hearts of Oak, Land of My Fathers (Wales), Bonnie Banks o' Loch Lomond (or some other traditional Scottish song), Dear Little Shamrock (or other Irish song, despite the Easter 1916 uprising), The Maple Leaf Forever (now no longer extant).
As it was wartime, we sang, in honour of our allies, The Marseillaise and Star Spangled Banner, both forming a valuable part of our musical knowledge. (There was also at the time a specially written hymn sung in some churches, Remember, Lord, Australia’s sons tonight, sung to the tune of Lead Kindly Light.) Looking back, the group of patriotic songs in the Rule Britannia lot were intolerably jingoistic and effusive with arrogant national pride. Pride goeth before a fall!

I think we had a picnic and sports in the afternoon, or a half holiday. I am not sorry to see the end of Empire Day.

*The Blacksmith* - No description of social change in this country would be complete without mentioning the blacksmith. He has almost disappeared from our society today, but in the early days he was indispensable. One of the most cheerful sounds one could hear then was the sound of the blacksmith’s hammer and anvil. Children on the way home from school would stand in front of the blacksmith’s shed to look at the blacksmith at work, see the red hot iron, watch the scattering sparks, gaze at the charcoal fire in the forge being brought to life by the huge bellows. We would be enthralled by the musical sound of the anvil.

The children never called the blacksmith’s work-shed a smithy, though we might have read about Longfellow’s village smithy and were confused by the difference between smith and smithy. His building was either the blacksmith’s, or the blacksmith’s shop. It always had an earth floor because a wooden floor would soon catch fire. We often saw the blacksmith drop red hot steel onto the ground. The blacksmith made horseshoes and usually also acted as the farrier, that is the man who puts the shoes on horses. The blacksmith sharpened blunted picks, crowbars, and parts of machinery, fashioned new parts. He tempered steel by heating it to the right red or white heat, then after plunging it into cold water, watching it as it gradually changed to a bluish colour. He could case-harden metal, that is make the outside extra hard. He was a very valuable member of society - strong, rough and ready, uneducated - but he was able to make, mend and change things of which an educated man had not the slightest inkling.

The town blacksmith was a tradesman, but there were lots of private people who did the same work for themselves, and that applied more to our pioneers. Farmers and other countrymen in their little forges had to make parts, repair broken things, improvise for themselves - if they did not they had to do without.

**ABOUT MYSELF**

At the time of writing this I am aged 80. I am Australian born, as were both my parents, but their parents came respectively from Ireland and Scotland. I lived at Thirroul for the 5 years to 1920 when father died, forcing us to move. This explains why I left Wollongong high school half way through my second year.

I trained as a primary teacher and served with the N.S.W. Education Department for nearly 40 years, retiring at age 60 because of advancing deafness. I spent the next 15 years with my brother as a survey searcher, till 1980 since when I have been completely retired.

*John Britton*