Rabbit-O!

About 1910 the rabbit plague extended from inland areas to the south coast and soon the paddocks around the mountain farms were swarming with the pest, so much so that crop cultivation was impossible unless the ploughed land was wire-netted and other methods such as fumigation, ferreting, and poisoning were used to reduce the furry population.

Eventually the combined effects of blackberry spread and rabbits forced a number of farmers in the foothills to give up. Some turned to rabbit trapping as a more sure and lucrative way of living off the land; there was a big demand and a good price for skins for the manufacture of fur felt hats—the no-hat cult was unheard of, and in addition the army wanted thousands of Digger hats.

Later came a booming demand for rabbit meat as a popular food item and a number of characters combined rabbit buying with trapping for despatch to Sydney for eventual export to England. Fitting an old sulky or buggy with slats underneath from which the paired carcases were hung they would partly load up with their night's catch and then set out for the railway, buying rabbits en route from farm children waiting at the roadside with their contribution caught after school the previous night. At 10 cents a pair this was regarded as wonderful pocket money and capable of expanding into quite big business during school holidays; many a boy's first bike started as a rabbit.

Eventually the Illawarra Central Dairy Co. entered the trade by installing a freezing chamber from which the crated underground mutton was railed by the ton to the wharves in Sydney. This was the golden era of the rabbit dealers among whom were numbered Sam Charlesworth, "Pegleg," Charlie Ransome, Paddy O'Neill, and "The Yank." Some of them operated also as agents for the delivery of mountain dew from the illicit stills around Macquarie Pass and many a swaying cluster of rabbit carcases hid a demijohn of firewater as it was driven innocently past the police station.

The Troopers:

During the first twenty-five years of this century the law between Wollongong and Kiama was represented by one mounted trooper—in most cases a sergeant—at Figtree, Dapto, Albion Park, Jamberoo and a foot policeman at Shellharbour.

Albion Park had in turn Sgts. Whitfield, Archer, Newland and Taper and it is difficult to understand how they carried out their widespread and multifarious duties on horseback; for instance, they were expected to inspect for registration the dairies on all farms in the district, also to visit all homes in order to keep electoral rolls up to date. Certainly there were no traffic problems, few summonses to serve and offences against the law were generally to do with drink, though Sgt. Newland achieved fame by unearthing a counterfeiting gang which operated under cover of a plumbing business in sleepy Jamberoo. Then there was the odd foray into the mountain slopes to smoke out illicit mountain dew distilleries.

These country police never seemed to be off duty or out of uniform in public and were in attendance at every ball, bazaar, concert and picture
show until finishing time, plus the nightly attendance to see that the hotels closed at 11 p.m. until World War I brought in 6 p.m. closing. Peacekeeping would generally consist of a few thumps under the ear for the too boisterous younger fry, and for the older offenders—mostly with a few too many drinks under the belt—there would be a swift kick in the pants and an order to get back home and stay out of town for a few weeks.

In the best mounted police tradition, these officers always turned out spick and span and rode a well fed and well groomed horse.

—B. E. WESTON.

APRIL MEETING:

The speaker at the April meeting of the Society was Mr. Robert Irving, A.R.M.T.C., F.R.A.I.A., his subject being “The Architecture of Pre-Macquarie Sydney.”

Mr. Irving traced the beginnings of Australian building techniques and architecture, and the manner in which the pioneers adapted the techniques and architecture of Georgian England to primitive conditions in a country so different from their homeland, where there was no indigenous building and nothing to guide them in the use of local materials. (Even the timber did not behave like English timber). Interesting points brought out by Mr. Irving included various methods of construction, illustrated by slides reproducing contemporary plans and diagrams, the surprising man-made changes in the conformation of Sydney Cove and its immediate neighbourhood, and a comparison with the architecture of colonial Virginia, which had earlier developed under very similar conditions.

One matter of special interest is the re-creation of early Sydney, a project to which Mr. Irving is consulting architect. At Somersby, near Gosford, a fortunate chance has provided a valley where the damming of a creek reproduces almost exactly the original shape of Sydney Cove, and the hills at each side conform to the pattern. Here—it is hoped about next September—we will be able to see what Macquarie saw on his arrival, though, as Mr. Irving explained, some concessions have had to be made to the difficulties of obtaining certain materials and the craftsmen to work them. (If Somersby comes along according to schedule, perhaps it could be included in our next two-day excursion).

We were particularly pleased to welcome a strong contingent from Smith’s Hill Girls’ High, brought along by our member Miss Margaret Smith. We hope to see them again.

NEW MEMBERS:

In addition to those listed in the April Bulletin we take pleasure in the following:

Mr. A. Cameron Armstrong (Wollongong), Mrs. I. J. Burrell (Mount Ousley), Mrs. H. Drevell (Lake Heights), Miss P. Jones (Mount Kembla), Mrs. R. Makula (Fairy Meadow), Miss J. Nyland (Wollongong), Mr. and Mrs. D. A. Troth (Unanderra) and Mrs. G. S. Wardell (Wollongong).

The only requisite for membership is an interest in history; so, if you know a friend or associate who may be interested, tell a councillor and some trial Bulletins will be sent.