OLD ALBION PARK 1900-1925—Funerals, Phones and Schools:

Until about 1914 travelling from place to place, apart from walking, was a matter of horseflesh or bicycle for local journeys such as farm to township or town to town up to ten miles, and railway for any greater distance.

All stores, hotels and business premises had hitching rails or posts out in front and Saturday morning saw sulkies, gigs and buggies, usually with sunbonneted women handling the reins, converging on the main street for shopping and gossip.

The funeral of a well known district identity—most of which started from the home of the departed, perhaps half a dozen miles from the cemetery—would develop into a half-mile cortege of horse-drawn vehicles culminating in a tail of about twenty horsemen, all moving at a walking pace.

Arrival at the churchyard afforded an opportunity to bring along or exchange some long-promised item ranging from calves, piglets, roosters, melons and bags of corn or potatoes—a case of "long time no see and here's our chance."

Telephones did not become part of daily life until after the 1914-18 war. The Post Office was equipped with an Ericsson wall set powered by two Leclanche wet cells, and a call to Sydney entailed a wait of up to four hours, and much shouting and swearing by the postmaster before a crackly connection was achieved and the handpiece was passed out through a window to the caller waiting on the verandah.

The educational needs of the district were served by five State Primary Schools and one Convent School. The Public School at Albion Park itself had an average enrolment of 65 under the headmaster and one female assistant, and the outlying schools at Croome, Tullimbar Tongarra and Marshall Mount were one-man schools with much smaller attendances.

Children came long distances, often by-passing a smaller school in order to attend the larger one in town; some drove a sulky, others rode in, and each school had an attached horse paddock which was a valuable source of manure for the teacher's garden. Some pupils walked a fair step across country, and often arrived with excited accounts of being chased across a paddock by a bull, attacked by a nesting magpie or having dealt with an angry snake.

An early foreshadowing of the present day buses which sweep children in to central schools was the one-horse coach run under contract by a farmer, Mark Prior of Yellow Rock. He picked up about ten children from that locality every morning. After delivering them at the Park school, he would change the harness over to a saddle and bridle, ride six miles home to work on the farm until mid-afternoon, then ride back again to reverse the process and bring the children home.

Of the schools enumerated, Tongarra, Croome and Tullimbar closed down successively as bus transport became more general and large farm families dwindled.
From 1912 onwards a growing number of boys and girls began secondary education at Wollongong, which entailed long travel by some to catch the train and upwards of twelve hours a day away from home; bicycles and horses again figured—the longest journey to the railway station being that of Muriel Condon who rode a pony eight miles from Stony Creek.

As the evening train from Wollongong did not reach Albion Park until 6 p.m.—pitch dark in winter—the final stage of the trip home, often in rain or howling westerlies, called for determination and stamina to a degree not so necessary nowadays with High Schools within easy travel for most students.

—B. E. WESTON.

ON HODDLE'S TRACK:

“The Smoke Signal” for March 1975 reports that the South Coast Conservation Society is to join Kiama Council in a feasibility study for an eight-mile walking track between Saddleback Mountain Reserve and the Minnamurra Falls Reserve (a splendid idea, and one which could be developed much further, as “The Smoke Signal” points out, in a district which could have some of the finest walking tracks in Australia).

Anyway, we can assure them that part of the proposed route is a practicable walking track. Robert Hoddle walked it in 1830, when he was sent with a gang of twenty axemen to find a route from Bong Bong to Illawarra. “Having surveyed the Wingecaribbee Swamp,” he reported, “and ascertained the most southern part of it, I commenced to encounter the most formidable brush I have ever met with, for so great a distance since I have been in the Colony. It abounded with every species of prickly brush, brambles and nettles. The Native Vines were so thickly entwined about the trees, as to render the Sun obscure; at the time it shone with great brilliancy . . . I followed the Range until I was stopped by Cliffs, and proceeded then to endeavour to descend towards Illawarra, or to make for Kiama. I was unable to descend, except by the Range bending 15 degrees southward of East, from the southern Point of the Wingecaribbee Swamp. I discovered the leading Range to Kiama, and after employing the Gang for two days I was enabled to descend the Cliffs to that Range. The Road I have made is sufficiently good to enable Pack Horses to descend. I think a Cart road might be made without much difficulty. The great obstacle I had to contend with was the Brush.”

He was not enthusiastic about his twenty axemen: “With the exception of Six Men and the Overseer I have never met with a more idle and useless set of men. I have never had more than Ten at Work. The first day they commenced four or five shammed Sick.” (Government stroke even then?).

Next year Assistant Surveyor William Jaques reported: “Mr. Hoddle (sic) with great pains and personal risk has traced out a Road from Bong Bong to the Boat Harbour at Kiama. He ascended from the former place up a long Range of almost impervious Brush . . . Having joined the Summit of the Mountain, the Road is marked chiefly along its brink the Mountain being chiefly a plain open Moor, swelling in Knowls and Mounds, the bare Rock frequently presenting itself, and the soil lose and tender pro-