WILLIAM EDWARDS OF WOLLONGONG, BLACKSMITH

Miss Mcaral Porter’s talk to the Society on 2nd June, on “The Life and Times of William Edwards, Blacksmith, of Wollongong” (her grandfather) showed how much material could be collected on the history of one family, not particularly famous, rich or powerful, and how interesting that material could be. It was a talk that could not be summarised. The parts which dealt more specifically with Wollongong will therefore be printed at length.

William Edwards, son of Hezekiah Edwards and his wife Janet Walker Edwards (nee Patrick) was born at Dapto in 1859, but the family moved to Taree before he was six. He became a blacksmith, living and working in Sydney, where he met Caroline Mary Williams, daughter of “Cap’n” Peter Williams of Moruya, blacksmith, who had come from Cornwall to work as a mining engineer on the Araluen goldfield. Having obtained her father’s permission to take her walking, William eventually married her, and in 1885 came with his wife and their eldest child Rowland to Wollongong. At this point we take up Miss Porter’s narrative.

(“Grance” was the name by which Mrs. Edwards was later known to her grandchildren).

Grance was a reserved Cornish woman, rosy cheeks, dark brown eyes, full of domestic virtues and yet a mind of her own which she would speak out when she felt it necessary. She was very short, and it was her husband’s regret she could not hold his arm with comfort as he was so much taller.

The firstborn, Rowland, was a hefty baby and over the years his birth weight has steadily increased—I think at the last story it was 14 lbs. As his mother struggled up from the Wollongong Harbour to Young Street, a lady living in the corner house diagonally opposite the Museum, knocked on a window and came down the path to call the young mother in to rest awhile. This kind action was never forgotten and to me is part of the tradition of Wollongong.

At first Grandfather rented a shop near the old hospital on the main Sydney road, and they lived on the high side of Young Street, where the first two daughters were born (in 1886 and in 1888 my mother).

In early 1889 they moved to Keira Street, on the land where Mad Barry’s now stands. Mr. McKenzie, the butcher, lent Mr. Edwards five hundred pounds to purchase those blocks of land and the latter often told his family, “I hammered out on this anvil all that money.”

The house was named “Roseneath” for it was 'neath the roses at Paddy’s Markets they had met!

The first dwelling was simply two rooms and a lean-to. Here the family which already numbered five (the third daughter arrived in April 1889) lived, plus three apprentices. The apprentices were all relatives: George Edwards, William’s younger brother; their cousin Bob Symes; and Grance’s little brother, Tom Williams from Moruya.

I dip my lid to Grance, who scorned to set her table without a
laundered white damask table cloth and a vase of flowers atop, even for breakfast, kept her family immaculately clean in well-ironed starched garments, made jam, preserved and baked (and kept sane).

Of the apprentices, George became a minister but always enjoyed a chance to use his old skill. In country charges he repaired his own sulkies and shod his own horses. In the 1930s he was visiting a nephew on the North Coast and amazed him when he offered to make him a cold chisel in the bakehouse forge.

Bob Symes, with his brother Fred, was responsible for the lace ironwork on the doors of the Queen Victoria building in George Street, Sydney. I don't know if Uncle Tom ever used his trade in later years.

The family and the business grew, and several additions were made to the house. By 1910 it had a verandah with lacework panels, the front room, 2 large bedrooms, 2 annexes, dining room, a long kitchen and a bathroom with a copper bath.

The smithy was next door, at the corner of the street, and father came over for his meals. As he walked across the yard his wise wife would call to her daughters, "Girls, quickly, put the cloth on. Your father is coming." There is one saying of hers I often recall, "A hungry man is an angry man" and no doubt the sight of the cloth made him feel food was not far off.

The home was never without books or the daily paper, which was read assiduously and discussed with his family.

Grandfather could not help mimicking, and often told the meal table, "Today a man came into the smithy and . . ."—there was no need to name the man, his powers of mimicry were so true. He just could not help it. My uncle tells how he was visiting Tilba Tilba, and a person came up to the buggy and began to yarn with the driver. As soon as he left Uncle said, "That is so-and-so, isn't it?" "Yes, but how did you know?" I have heard my father mimic him too often to miss him."

At the back of the house was an asphalt area, wired in, where stood the pump, known in the family as "Mt Nebo." Over the wire grew hoya comosa, which flowered prolifically. Beyond that were the chooks and a large fig tree and the taste of those figs lingers in my mother's mouth yet, though she is 93½.

The back fence was part of Budgen's coach yard, a source of great interest to the young fry at times. Nearly opposite Mr. McDowell had a draper's shop and we are still in touch with some of his children.

Trips to Sydney were not infrequent, usually by coach to Campbelltown, thence the train. Occasionally it was a boat trip, such as when the cousins, Rowley and Gertie, went to Taree for a wedding in 1901.

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(A talk to the Society by his grand-daughter, Miss Mearal Porter)
Continued from September Bulletin

The five children who grew up attended Wollongong Superior Public School. The lunch break was 1 1/2 hours, so most came home to eat. The large Moreton Bay fig tree outside the grounds was a favourite place to sit and yarn, and I doubt if the entrance gates have changed since Mother first entered there.

Because the first little girl died at the age of 7, the family was Rowley, 4 years later Gertie and Jessie, the girls, and finally, Stella and Edie, 6 1/2 and 8 years after Gertie, known as "the children." Rowley was considered by his fond mother to be perfect—his sisters can tell a few stories about him.

Rowley was always a bookworm and if Father was called upon to shoe a horse at night and called Rowley to hold the lamp, the girls would soon hear, "Hold the lamp down there, son," then "Oh, run away and back to your books. Gertie, Jessie, someone come and hold this lamp for me."

Rowley became a pupil teacher and taught at Dapto. Later he went to Sydney Teachers' College and gained his B.Sc., and during the Great War did a medical course and practised for many years at Dulwich Hill. Some of his schoolmates were the Grieve boys, Cam and Ronald, and Dick Lyons, whose father was Governor of the Gaol and a Charge of the Light Brigade veteran. The Lyons lived in the white house near the harbour.

What about lessons? In 5th class the first lesson each day was from a big book of sums and the drill was to open your book where you had left off the previous day. Gertie loved mathematics and by the time she was 13 she could do every sum in this big book. Her sister Jessie, just 18 months younger, did not share this love and when Jessie and her mate, Daisy Whitford, studied together and looked up the answers and tried to reach the same conclusions this annoyed Gertie very much indeed. They did their homework on the swing, the front verandah or perhaps the kitchen table and in the season, in the fig tree, devouring figs.

A sampler Gertie made at Wollongong School when she was 8 was the envy of her classmates, for her uncle Tom was a traveller in haberdashery and she had a wonderful swatch of coloured silks. She spent 12 months making a pillowcase, for she read under the desk whenever she could, and her handwork had to be undone so often it was a very slow progress.

My aunt's best mates were Bessie Chopping and Alice McDowell and they played frequently with the young Parsons from next door. As they were so close to the Salvation Army Chapel a favourite game was "Open Airs." One had to be Mrs. Soo, a Chinese lady who frequented the Salvation Army meetings and always sat in the gutter to listen. Of course normally to sit in the gutter was just not allowed, but when you were Mrs. Soo you HAD to do this.
During 1950 my mother was abroad, and so not of this party, but my cousin drove his mother and two aunts back to Wollongong for a funeral. His description of this trip was killing. As they came down the Pass the aunts did hope his brakes were holding and his engine not boiling. At the service Mr. Harry Parsons was the undertaker and stood at the entrance to the parlours with due decorum. As they filed past my youngest aunt said (out of the corner of her mouth), "Ullo, young 'Arry." The middle-aged gentleman looked up with a start, recognised the group and a beam spread from ear to ear. Leaving the others he greeted his friends with delight, then remembered his duties and took up his position once more, trying to keep his smile back for a later opportunity.

When they did have time to reminisce I heard poor Mr. Parsons was literally bombarded with questions about old identities.

One of Mother's school friends was Victoria or Ria Campbell, daughter of the local member. Ria had a Girls' Own Annual which contained a wonderful story about three pearls and 3 Ps. Mother used to often tell us about this story and how the book was passed around time and time again. A few years ago I was in a second-hand bookshop browsing and found this book — "Miss Pringle's Pearls." As I dipped into it I felt sure I had found it and sure enough there it was.

School processions began from Jubilee Bridge, and the children were on one occasion told to buy a flag and bring it along. Edie Edwards was always a bit of a rebel and she did not want to have a flag like everyone else so she purchased a nice red flag with a hammer and sickle on it. She was made to walk last in the procession, not that she cared, she was very proud of her different flag. On another occasion the youngsters were to submit a drawing for an ANA exhibition and were told to go to the stationers for some cartridge paper. Two little girls toddled down to the stationmaster and made their request. How embarrassed they were at his hoot of laughter!

(To be continued)
WILLIAM EDWARDS OF WOLLONGONG, BLACKSMITH
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Continued from October Bulletin

My mother won a scholarship to Sydney Girls' High at the age of 13 and boarded in Sydney during the week and came home only at week-ends. She caught a very early train on Monday morning and returned to school. Opposite their Keira Street home was a paddock where a goat was often tethered. Early one Monday morning as the party left "Roseneath" the goat joined the group and trotted along-side down to the railway station, he would not be turned back. The shy schoolgirl scurried along the platform and into the carriage of the train, where several folk were already composed for slumbers. The jolly goat walked along the platform till he found his friend, put his head in the window and called. You can imagine the rest! How her heartless family laughed at her embarrassment.

The year Gertie turned 17, she came home to wait a few months to sit for the examination for Probationary students. Her friend Ria was too old for that examination and missed out.

That year the hope of Wollongong Convent was one Leo Keller. To his amazement he was beaten by this dark horse Gertie Edwards and he never forgot this fact. He rose to become a School Inspector and died only a few years ago. Each time he has met a member of our family he tells us, "Your mother beat me in an examination."

What did they do for pleasures? As little children a walk with father on Sunday was a regular thing. Father put apples in the pockets of his coat tails and swung the tails to encourage the lagging children.

On Sunday afternoons the Salvation Army held concerts on the lawn. Mother speaks of seeing Blondin walk his tightrope across Wollongong Harbour but as he died in 1897, I now wonder if it was an imitation Blondin. I cannot trace any visit from the real Charles Blondin in reading available to me. Can anyone help?

In 1901 the Duke and Duchess of York, later King George V and Queen Mary, came to open the first Federal Parliament. The Australian Natives Association held a cooking competition and young Gertrude Edwards from Wollongong, aged 12½, won this competition for scones and teacake. She tells how her mother came through the house holding the newspaper and calling out, "Gertie, Gertie, you have won the cooking!" The prize was one guinea with which she purchased a writing desk. Of course, according to her husband, "Your mother's scones have not been beaten yet."

All four girls learnt to play the piano from Miss Herd, who was a Sunday School teacher at St. Michael's. Miss Herd had a sewing class on Saturday afternoons for 6d. a lesson. They commenced by making a pom-pom and progressed to fine embroidery stitches. The Edwards girls were part of this class and Mother made the clothes for her children and grandchildren, her speciality being
boys’ trousers. The next sister was a teacher of sewing in the Tech, prior to her marriage, and the last two girls were dressmakers.

Other simple pleasures they enjoyed would be a walk to the Lighthouse, to Lighthouse beach for a swim—and a long hot walk back home—a bike ride up one of the mountains and to visit with friends.

(To be continued)
Meanwhile father kept busy at his smithy. He shod horses for bread and butter, and much preferred to use his skill and brains on more intricate jobs. He made skips for the mines, panels of lace-work for various buildings and showed his ploughs up and down the coast. His ploughs he always painted blue, a nice Reckitts Blue colour. When my brother was in Taree in 1934 he was greeted as the “grandson of Ploughie Edwards.” (I know there were two Edwards blacksmith in Wollongong and feel grandfather would not very easily use a Christian name and guess that is why it was always “Ploughie” rather than “Will”)

In 1900 an iron bridge was to be built over the Tom Thumb Lagoon and Mr. William Edwards, blacksmith, was asked to do the iron work. This was quite a plum so he came to Sydney to choose good materials. Naturally he took advantage of this trip to see his mother and alighting from a tram at North Sydney, he missed his footing and broke his leg. He was in the Mater Hospital for some time and the Civic Fathers simply delayed building the bridge till Mr. Edwards had fully recovered!

It was an impacted fracture of the right femur he sustained. How do I know? In about 1926 grandfather had a cataract operation and he told us, with a twinkle in his eye, as he was coming out of the anaesthetic some remark was passed, “this man must have been anaethetised before.” To the amazement of the theatre staff this country bumpkin announced, “Yes, in 1900 I had an impacted fracture of the right femur.” They asked him to repeat it and the words rolled out in sonorous tones from the semi-conscious patient.

I cannot recall grandfather working at his anvil but my big brother told me in 1921 there was still a forge in the backyard at Hurstville. On a Saturday morning he loved to walk up and watch grandfather shoe the baker’s horse.

In 1915 the family moved from Wollongong to Sydney. Grandfather worked for a short time at a woollen mills at Botany but by 1921 he was virtually retired and enjoyed himself pottering in his shed with wood and sometimes iron. He was never idle but always had some article in the making, many of which are still in our home. When he was 86 he made for me a revolving bookcase. I being his youngest grandchild and he had already provided the other 12 with their bookcases during the last 5 years.

My father first came to Wollongong in July 1903 to stay with his friend Dick Lyons. Dick Lyons took him to visit his friend Rowley Edwards in Keira Street, my mother was then 15 years old, with a black plait down her back, and most annoyed when her big brother asked her to stop reading a book and make Mr. Porter a cup of tea one Saturday afternoon . . . I am a result of that meeting . . . which finished in a wedding on 29th June 1910 and continued to my father’s death in 1975.

Mother was a teacher prior to her marriage and her senior at
Wollongong School was Beatrice Simpson, who later married Cam Grieve and whose daughter is now Lady Wyndham.

Mr. Walker, the dentist, charged 2/6 for a filling. One of the aunts was his nurse for a short time but she hated being present when extractions were made and always tried to find a job to do elsewhere rather than hold the poor patient’s head.

Miss Mary Reid was the Infants’ Mistress. The names Armour, Stone, Stumbles, Jarman, Collings are all so familiar to me. Eva Collings became Mrs. Jarman and lived near us at Hurstville. In more recent years I have met her in my grandparents’ home and even when 90 years of age she was upright and always immaculately dressed. Mrs. Jarman and my mother loved exchanging “do you remembers.”

Perhaps some one can verify this story for me—My father told me how there was a wedding at St. Michael’s which was interrupted by the news that there was a school of whales in the Harbour. The bridegroom left his bride at the altar and when remonstrated with said, “I can marry her any day but not see whales in our Harbour always.”

(Concluded)