“AVONDALE” SIXTY YEARS AGO

[In the October 1987 Bulletin we printed an extract from Marianne North’s “Recollection of a Happy Life”, describing her visit to Illawarra in the early 1880’s. A fortunate guess that an unidentified place named “Doondale” was in fact “Avondale” came to the notice of Mrs. H. Vellacott, the editor of the reprint of Marianne North’s book, who wrote asking for further information about “Avondale”. In seeking this our Research Officer was referred to Mrs. Bessie Fackender (nee Webb) of Dapto, who lived in the 1920’s and 1930’s at “Avondale”, then owned by her family. In addition to making several photographs for copying, Mrs. Fackender kindly contributed detailed notes on the garden and surroundings of the house as she remembered them. Although these notes refer to a much later period, the general design of the garden, and many of the trees and shrubs, must have dated from Henry Hill Osborne’s day and would have been there at the time of Marianne North’s visit.]

NOTE: References to “Avondale” are to the property owned by the Webb family, not to the whole of the locality now known as Avondale.]

“Avondale was surrounded by a beautiful park land of trees. The entrance to the driveway was through a very attractive set of gates, with a pedestrian gate on each side. They were falling apart when we went to live at “Avondale”, but my father restored them to their original splendour.

The driveway passed around an oval. It was lined on both sides with huge pine trees, with a hedge of red-flowering tecoma and blue-flowering plumbago in front of them. At the end was a huge Moreton Bay fig and by its side was a very unusual fire-wheel tree (Stenocarpus sinuatus). Other plants growing along the drive were several large oleanders - single white and double dark pink - and huge May bushes, some with single and others double flowers. In the middle of the oval was a flagpole, and at each end a large oval garden could be seen; but the only flowers remaining were jonquils and freesia bulbs, which made a blaze of colour in their season. All round the house was a slightly raised bed, but here too the only original flowers were the bulbs which came up each year. On the eastern side of the house was a large pinetree, with wistaria growing to the top. The wistaria also grew along the front of the house and in spring was a lovely sight.

There were beautiful blue jacarandas, and silky oaks with their yellow flowers. There was another lovely tree whose smell when in flower was so overpowering that it always gave me a headache. I always called it the headache tree. Between the house and the dairy there was a hedgerow of Osage oranges. The fruit - large and green and resembling oranges - was inedible for humans but I think the cows sometimes ate them. The wood was very hard and elastic and was formerly used by American Indians of the Osage Mountains in making bows; hence its popular name of bow-wood. These trees were also the home of ring-tail and brush-tail possums and flying squirrels.

Nearby was a large Moreton Bay fig with a big cream-flowered cactus climbing to the top. Under it many repairs were done to the farm machines, and when a pig was slaughtered it was hung under this tree till it was dressed. Part of the pig was eaten fresh and the rest was either salted or smoked or bacon cured for future use.
A large peppercorn tree shaded our old-fashioned two-seat loo.

In front of the house was a large orchard of Seville oranges, looking beautiful and juicy, but very bitter and only suitable for making marmalade. Many a joke was played on unsuspecting visitors by offering them a sweet juicy orange.

There were many coral trees with their bright red flowers, and the native eucalyptus and tea-trees.

When we went to "Avondale" there was another building, consisting of a large ballroom, with two small rooms on the side. It was made, I think, of weatherboard and has long since been demolished.

There were two large wells with water pumps. Originally there had been three, but one had been filled in before we went there. They were a hazard to cattle, which could wander onto them and fall in. The last well was enclosed in the house yard and was used for washing and the garden. It has been filled in by the present owner.

THE COLONIAL GOURMET: CHEESE, DAMPER AND JOHNNY CAKES

It is of interest to our Society that the following recipes were handed down in the family of Henry Angel, pioneer of Illawarra. They are quoted by courtesy of Wagga Wagga and District Historical Society from its Journal, 1986, p.30:

"The recipe for making cheese was: A young calf about six weeks old would be killed, the carcass used for meat, the hide for leather. Intestines were dried to keep. When required, a small portion would be cut off and soaked in a little water for about seven days until matured, this would be the rennet. Fresh milk was placed in a large tub and kept at about blood heat. A dessertspoonful of the rennet was added for each gallon of milk. After about an hour the milk would curdle, then the curd was sliced with a long knife, first one way, then the other.

"In about an hour the whey would have risen to the top and was taken out with a dipper. The curd was then wrung through cheese cloth, to get out the last of the whey. The curd was then well rubbed up with the hands, salted, and colouring was added if needed or available. Then a piece of cheese cloth was placed neatly in a large wooden vat, the curd placed in and the cheese cloth folded over. A round wooden lid was then placed on top and pressure applied with a log lever with a weight on one end. The cheese would be taken out and turned every three days, then taken out and placed on a bench and rubbed all over with butter, then turned every day for a week. The cheese was then ready.

"To keep the cheese for long periods, it was stored in a Bushman’s Cellar, which is a deep hole in the ground, lined with bark or hessian if available, with a cover over the top to make it water-tight. The hole was always dug in sandy or porous soil so that if any water entered, it would quickly drain away. The cheese would be left for six months or more before maturing. This type of cheese was always sought after in those days.

"Following is the recipe they used for camp-oven bread and Johnny cakes. Some flour, sugar, a little salt and watery potato mash left to stand would supply the ferment, or butter milk which was favoured. It was kneaded and let rise, then placed in a camp oven on coals with a shovelful of coals on top of the lid. In about an hour it would be cooked."