

## **Bringing Back Memories: an interview with Harry Oldfield**

By Margaret Park

*We were all born at home, and grandmother used to come and see that we all had the necessary toes and fingers to struggle along with...*

Harry Oldfield was born on 28 June 1912 at Athllon Homestead, Tuggeranong Valley (now the suburb of Gowrie). In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the area featured open scrub paddocks, dotted with homesteads, grasslands, and the occasional yellow box tree. It was a time when going to the hospital almost certainly meant you were deathly ill and a place to be avoided. Home births, such as Harry describes above, were commonplace.

Harry is one of six children . 5 boys and a girl. The homestead, destroyed in the bushfire which swept through the area in January 1952, is named after them. *Athllon* is an acronym for the Oldfield children. So the next time you drive along Athllon Drive, spare a thought for an important aspect of Canberra's history . its rural legacy and that of a struggling pioneer family . and see if you can remember that:

A = Alf, T = Ted, H = Harry, L = Les, L = Lyle, O = Oldfield and N = Nancy.

Harry's father, Henry Thomas Oldfield, worked several jobs for the government as a boundary fencer and ranger and subsequently farmed his property on the Isabella Plains. It was tough, but this was a typical life on the land for a family at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century working from sunrise to sundown, attending local schools by either riding your horse or walking for miles (often without shoes) and getting on with life in a pre-Canberra/national capital landscape.

Henry Oldfield married Martha Harmon, another local family from Majura. Henry and Martha worked for the Cunninghams of Tuggeranong Station until they secured a lease from the Commonwealth Government and took over the property then known as the Wanniasa Bull Paddock which the Oldfields later named *Athllon*. This property is today cited as Gowrie, Block 228, Section 12 and is located behind the Gowrie Scout Hall, but was most likely situated on the adjacent oval. The Oldfields increased their original holding to approximately 680 hectares covering the suburbs of Wanniasa, Monash and Fadden.

A visit to the site opened up a flood of memories for Harry. I recorded two interviews with Harry equalling over three hours of recording time. The first interview took place on 8 November 2006 at his home of over 60 years in Turner. The second interview was conducted on 24 November 2006 on the site of his former home (Athllon Homestead) and primary school . the Tuggeranong Schoolhouse . now in the suburb of Chisholm. During these interviews Harry talked about the old homestead, working on the property, growing up in a rural setting, going to school, the people and places he knew well, settling into a government house in Turner with his family, and the passing of time from the early 20<sup>th</sup> into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These interviews were recorded for the ACT National Trust as part of the ACT Heritage Grant

program. Apart from their intrinsic cultural heritage value . that of capturing a Canberran voice of the 20<sup>th</sup> century . the interviews will help form the basis of an interpretive signage to be erected on the site of the old homestead.

### **Growing up at Athllon**

At the time of the interview in November 2006, Harry was 94. While some of his later memories were clouded with age, his early long-term memory provided descriptive images of his early years living at Athllon Homestead and doing the chores around the property. Water, then as now, was a precious commodity. Carting water was one of his chores and Harry explains how they managed to transport their water supply from a nearby creek to the homestead so his family had fresh water to drink and use for washing and cooking.

*And one of the things that fascinated me was the means we had for carting water. There was this creek running quite close to home, and outdoor, quarter of a mile up, the creek was about... fifteen to sixteen feet deep, the wall of the creek. And about four feet from the floor of the creek there was an opening, about ... oh, it would be twelve [feet]... and out of this opening came a trickle of water. It was actually a little bit more than a trickle, it was sort of consistent, and it was a little bit bluey to look at, but it was cold, very cold, and it was delicious to drink... we built what you call a 'slide'. Now, this was made from two parallel limbs of a tree, and where the limbs run into a butt, the butt was cut off, then the limbs were trimmed underneath, flat – that was so it helped to glide across through the sand... Well, we fixed a forty-gallon cask on top of these two limbs, and just wired that down, and we hooked a horse onto the front portion... Well, then the horse would be up and away and we used to slide along. We used to stand on the back of these two legs, and we'd get up. And we had another forty-gallon cask, and we had a piece of tin shoved under where this water was coming out. We'd cut a hole in and shove the tin under, and then we'd put this barrel underneath it, and then we'd leave it there overnight, and we'd go up and this drum would be filled, and we'd take the old horse down. We had to cut a bit of the bank in to get him down – take him down. We'd bucket out of this cask into the other cask. And we had a hessian bag over the top of the cask, with a ring on top of it to stop the water from splashing out... It was a difficult to harness because that was the only way we could... the whole time I was there, it never, ever run out of water – never...*

### **The Tuggeranong Schoolhouse**

Harry, like many children of his era, walked a long distance to school and more often than not, walked barefoot. Harry spoke fondly of his school years, although he was sceptical about how much he learned at the time. However, his schooling did have an effect on Harry and it was his teacher, Mr Francis McGee who left him with many lasting memories and words of wisdom. Mr McGee was the longest serving teacher at Tuggeranong from 1898 to 1927. Apart from being a skilled teacher, it appears he was also a creative writer and poet. During the interview Harry related stories about Mr McGee and his recollections revealed this piece composed by Mr McGee about Bob the Postman. Harry's rendition didn't miss a beat!

*Six days a week on Tharwa Road,  
Our mailman you may see,  
His name? you ask; just call him 'Bob',  
It's Bob for brevity.*

*He drives along his old blue horse,  
And takes things leisurely,  
A trot, but just as good a trot,  
As much as you can see.*

*He's seldom late, yet spares his horse,  
Knows just what he can do,  
Knows that the time, the old horse does,  
Is done by very few.*

*His sulky is loaded up on high,  
With mail and bread and meat,  
And you would wonder how at all,  
The old chap finds a seat.  
But still he sticks them somewhere in,  
Like sardines in a tin.*

*Well, here's long life to Bob,  
The best mailman we ever knew,  
And may times hum and prosper,  
For himself and tough old Blue.*

When I asked Harry to describe Mr McGee, he responded as if he saw him only yesterday .

*Well, the main thing, he used to smoke a pipe, and if you did something bad and was kept in after school, well, you always knew where to find him. You'd go around and sniff a bit and you could smell the smoke, and there Mr McGee would be. He was a very lovely man... He was very thin – very thin – and grey haired... and not very tall... very scholastic looking; and that's how he was. He was very quiet; everybody loved him except the time when he kept you in occasionally, just to show you he was boss.*

Harry's stories of attending the Tuggeranong Schoolhouse were lively and shed light on education in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This was a time when children either walked, rode their bicycles or their horses to school and the talk of seeing such things as an airplane caused great amazement and delight, such as this recollection:

*[Mr McGee] said to us one day, 'Boys and girls, if it's a nice day tomorrow you might have the opportunity to see the first aeroplane that flies from Sydney to Melbourne.' ... Here we are almost in a direct line between Sydney and Melbourne.' So when the next day come we all come out, and we are all there, a few crows flew over and, 'Ah,' we said, 'no plane'. Anyway, a little*

*after someone said, 'Did you hear that?' Sure enough, over it came and we seen it, and we couldn't believe it. And Mr McGee said to us, 'When you children grow up you'll be travelling in one of those', and we all said, 'No, never'. And he said to one of the girls, 'Myrtle,' he said, 'how would you like to be up there with him?' She said, 'Please, sir, Mr McGee, I would rather be up there with him than up there without him.'*

*(Myrtle Edlington was the girl; she was one of Harry's neighbours, along with the Sullivans)*

### **People and Places**

The Oldfield family have extended roots in the ACT area stretching back over 160 years. Joseph Matthew Oldfield arrived in 1834 and worked as an assigned convict to James Wright of Lanyon. A bootmaker and station hand, he received his ticket of leave in 1842 and settled in the district raising a large family and beginning the Oldfield connection to the Canberra region. As a rural pioneering family it is no wonder that Harry's memories included many and varied stories about some prominent local residents and others less prominent but equally important in the local landscape.

### **Harry relates his memory of Andrew Cunningham of Tuggeranong Homestead:**

*Well, I would have been no more than five or six. The one thing I can always remember – one of the first things – was when Andrew Cunningham came home from the war, they gave him a reception at the Tuggeranong Homestead, and I can distinctly remember him dancing with mum, and I thought, how lovely. He was a very ... he was too, he was a very, very special man, and he was dancing with my mum... I thought that was something beautiful. And when we went to school - he had a Minerva Car, it was, more or less, a sporting car, it was the only one around that I'd ever seen. And we used to hear him coming when we were at school (and) we'd all race down the road, and we'd wave to him, and he'd 'toot' the horn, and go 'brrr-ing' away... It was exciting. And then later on – much later on in life – he had an aeroplane and he used to come down and land just across the paddock from home, he'd come and have a chat with us. He was a very, very beautiful person.*

Harry worked as a labourer around and about doing a variety of odd jobs from his early teens. He worked for a few weeks at **Hill Station for Henry Gullett** who resided there while he was writing Volume 7 of the Official History of World War I.

*Well, Sir Henry Gullett had a chappie there doing all the farm work – the two kids both had a horse each, looking after the horse and the cows and that. And he was going on holidays and he come and asked me if I'd go down and look after the show for him, and I said yeah, okay... I went overnight and I go down in the morning – they used to lock the calves in so they couldn't get at the cow to milk. I go over to milk them, so I am running all the cows up into the yard, and I thought, now, I don't know which calf belongs to which cow, but, I said, there's one way of finding out; I'll let one calf out, well, it's sure to know*

*which one is its mum. Fair enough, I'll let the calf out and it will race to the cow. I sent the cow up, put it in the bail, and I'm milking away, and Sir Henry arrived; and he said, 'How did you know which calf belonged to which cow?' Well I said, 'I didn't know. I knew the calf would know which was her mum.' 'Well,' he said, 'I never thought of that.' (laughs)... But I loved [that station] because they had these two horses, the girl had one and the boy had one, and I used to ride them round, they were beautiful animals... He was a very nice gentleman, very nice; and he got killed in a plane out here at Fairbairn.*

**Dr Blackall** was well known in the district and occasionally Harry had to visit the doctor in Queanbeyan. During one of these visits he demonstrates the inquisitive nature of the child:

*... at that particular time there was, to my knowledge, only two doctors in Queanbeyan, and one was our doctor – he was an Irish doctor; Dr Blackall was his name... I had a stomach ache or something, one day and my mum took me to Dr Blackall, and he said, (Harry uses an Irish accent) 'And poke out your tongue'. So I poked out my tongue... they had a little mixture ... used to mix stuff up in a bottle – there were no pills or anything – so he gave us this bottle of stuff. And when we come out I said to my mum, 'Why did the doctor look at my tongue?' I said, 'My tongue wasn't achin', it was me tummy.' And she just patted me on the head. (laughs)... The doctor had a horse and sulky, and if somebody needed him to come out – four o'clock in the morning – he'd have to go down and find his old horse and bring him up, and saddle him up, and away he'd go.*

While Harry didn't see the opening of Parliament House in May 1927, he did play his part. As a local lad with a father employed as a government ranger, he was often asked to fill in here and there and provide a variety of jobs to earn some pocket money. One such job brought him into contact with **Colonel Ryrie** and perhaps made the plains in front of Parliament House pest free for a day:

*... the rabbits were in plague proportions, and they were trying to keep them inside one area. And when the Parliament was to be opened they knew there would be a lot of people travelling on that route, and they assumed that a lot would get out and open the gate and wouldn't bother closing it. So they asked some people connected with the Lands Department – asked Dad if a couple of his boys could go up there and sleep up there, and look after the gates. And that's what we did. And this night, it was – I don't know, about half past eight or nine o'clock – and I heard this car coming and I got up and opened the gate. And the car pulled up, and this bloke came over, and I found out after it was Colonel Ryrie. And he handed me a ten shilling note, and he said, 'His Majesty asked me to present you with this', and he smiled, and I nodded to him. (laughs) That was worth a lot of money.*

The above quotes from the interview are only a snapshot of the life and work of Harry Oldfield. The words I have chosen provide a glimpse into Harry's gift

for storytelling. It is one of those interviews that begs to be listened to, as it not only captures memories of a distant past, which lives on in the Canberra we see today, but it also evokes a voice of that past which is a key to understanding the significance of recording someone who has journeyed through the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

To complete the picture, Harry recites another of Mr McGee's poems and finishes with his thoughts on it:

*Whenever the sea breeze blows over,  
To greet me this side (of) the Divide,  
I believe I see fields of white clover,  
And sniff old Pacific's salt tide.*

*I'll never forget that, I thought it was something outstanding...*

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