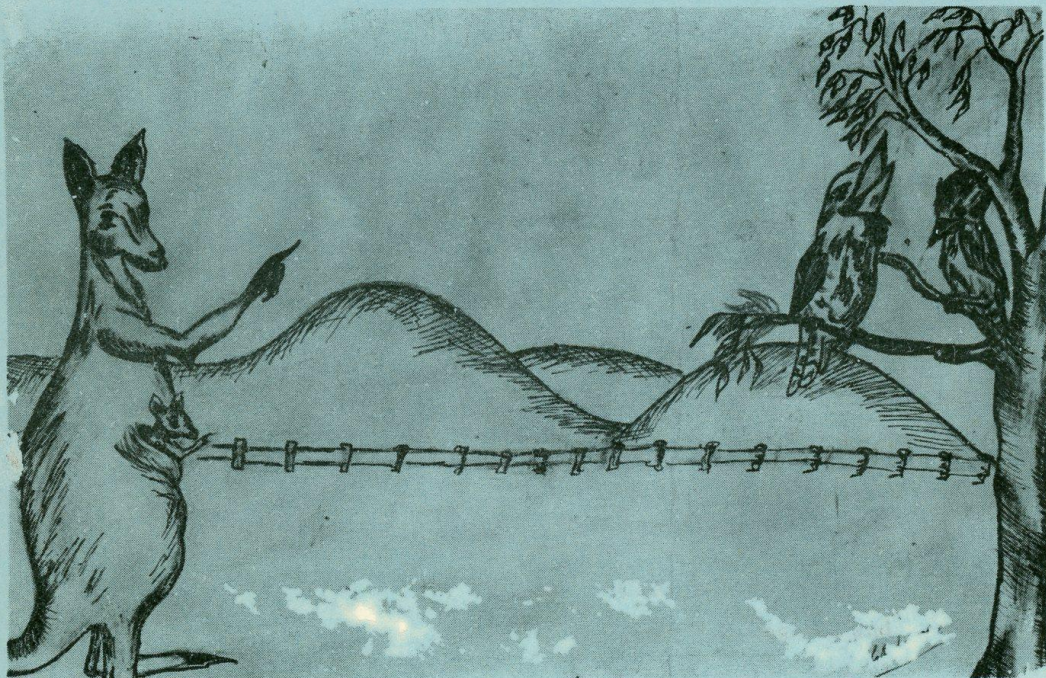


CHRISTMAS HILLS CENTENARY

1865 - 1965

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SOUVENIR - PRICE 2/6

CHRISTMAS HILLS



EARLY SETTLERS, CHRISTMAS HILLS.

CHRISTMAS HILLS CENTENARY 1965

FOREWORD

This booklet does not pretend to be a complete history of the district, but rather a collection from records of the activities of the people of Christmas Hills during the past one hundred years. These facts have been gathered by present day citizens and are presented in the hope that the younger generation living in the district will understand the struggles and hardships of the pioneers and realise the great heritage which is theirs as a result.

To the older folk, this book will recall past friendships and events, even the hardships which have gone to make Christmas Hills the prosperous place it is today.

Christmas Hills has been fortunate throughout its history in having citizens who are willing and ready to work and plan for the betterment of their district. Those returning after many years will see the fruits of their work.

Information regarding dates and names received sometimes vary slightly, but have been reproduced in good faith.

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The history of Christmas Hills begins 124 years ago in 1841. It was in that year that Joseph Stevenson, an accomplished carpenter and builder came, with his wife, to settle in Christmas Hills near the junction of Five Mile Creek and Watson's Creek.

Mr. Stevenson, a native of Scotland, emigrated to Sydney, and in 1839 came to Melbourne to build the first punt across the Yarra, where Princes Bridge now stands. In 1840, he built Kirk's Horse Bazaar and soon afterwards settled on a cattle station at Diamond Creek. Later he moved to Christmas Hills where he ran sheep and oxen. As there were no fences to prevent his stock straying, they had to be watched continually... so, in 1842, Mr. Stevenson hired a shepherd in Melbourne named David Christmas to take over this duty.

The shepherd proceeded to find his way to Stevenson's on foot and became hopelessly lost in the trackless bush. He wandered around aimlessly for a week. He had no food and was near exhaustion. He wandered on for some time before sitting down to rest and fell asleep. He awakened to hear faintly the sound of bells, which at first he thought were the bells of St. Paul's, London. He soon realised his mistake, however, and with great effort made towards the sound. To his delight, he came upon bullocks grazing in the gully below. He stayed with the cattle until Mr. Stevenson came to collect them, when his ordeal was over. The hill where he was found was afterwards known as "Christmas Hill". Later the name of the district became known as Christmas Hills.

In 1845, Robert Stevenson was born, the first white child born in the district. Later, in 1849, the Stevenson family left Christmas Hills to take up land at Kangaroo Ground.

The next recorded settler was another native of Scotland - a shoemaker named James McPherson - who had rented a farm at Morang and later came to settle on the Yarra at Christmas Hills. He arrived on Black Thursday, having travelled over 20 miles of fire devastated country in search of green pasture for his stock. He took up 640 acres of river flats. Mr. McPherson had 3 Sons and 5 Daughters. He remained on this property until his death. Some of his descendants still live in the district.

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Soon after this the Christmas Hills area was surveyed and the land was thrown open for selection. This caused a great influx of settlers to come from far and wide. They came on horse back, in drays, bullock wagons and even on foot, .

One of the first to arrive was Mr. Robert Lorimer and his wife. He built the hotel known as "The Flying Squirrel" and operated the first unofficial Post Office. Cobb & Co. coaches called here several times a day on the Woods Point run. The gold escort from Woods Point was also a familiar sight as it passed through the district.

In 1865, Robert Lorimer obtained the first land title and it is from this date that we base our Centenary.

Other settlers obtained their titles soon afterwards and settled in the district. Mr. Thomas Young, came from Kangaroo Ground with his family and settled near the present Tennis Court site. Later on, when the lower road was put through, he moved and built a new house adjoining the road. He opened the Post Office in 1874 and was paid a salary of £10 a year. Another settler, Mr. T. Shaw, still has descendants living in the district. The Conolly's took over Robert Lorimer's property, following the latter's death. His widow then went to live with her sister, nearby, Mrs. Cleaves. These ladies were Aunts to William Calwell, (Uncle of the Hon. Arthur Calwell, M. H. R.) who took up a large portion of land, which is still held by the Calwell's family. David Wilson was another pioneer whose descendants still live in the district. Hamilton Sloan named his property, "Holly Bank" and built a large house. He was a very successful miner at One Tree Hill. Mr. Love took over the property previously owned by the Stevensons. He was a Councillor in the Eltham Council. Mr. Wilmot, who had a place at Healesville, selected the land now known as "Bruceedale" and built a large home which he called "The Echo". Mr. David Wilson and his wife had adjoining blocks which is still owned by that family. Mr. B. Smith came from Kangaroo Ground with his family. His only daughter married David Muir, a settler from the Orkney Islands. The property is still owned by that family.

Mr. Charlton was another successful miner and took over the property selected by Mr. Jacobs. He later built a large boarding house. The Lowmans, who were related to the Sloan's, mentioned above, selected land on the road now known as Osborne's Road. They built a hotel which they called "The Folly", which still stands. Cobb & Co. coaches used to call there, but when the lower road went through, the hotel was by-passed and Mr. Lowman sold the licence to Mr. Farrell who had built the "Grand Hotel" in Yarra Glen. Mr. McKinnon, part owner of "The Argus" newspaper, took up a sizeable portion of land and built a large home overlooking the Yarra Valley, which he called "Blaaven". The Ashmore family was well-known and some of their descendants still live in the district.

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Mr. John Sayle , who had been a buffalo shooter in the Northern Territory, was a popular resident of the early days. The Petty family, who for many years ran the Yarra Glen Post Office, were first known residents of Christmas Hills.

These pioneers toiled from daylight to dark. Their only tools were Axes and Cross-Cut Saws with which they felled the trees then dragged them together with teams of bullocks or horses to be burnt. The stumps then had to be grubbed out before the ground was ready to be ploughed. Wheat was one of the main crops grown and when reaped was taken to Dendy's Flour Mill at Eltham for gristing. Barley and oats were also grown. Others planted vineyards and for a time these flourished until they were ravaged by the disease known as "blue mould". The land was later used for grazing and dairying purposes.

There were many Koalas in the area at this time and before they were protected by law, the settlers used to shoot them and other wild animals, as they wished

Watson's Creek was named after "Sandy" Watson, who reared fat cattle on the abundant grass there and received top prices at the Melbourne sales.

The farmers sold their meat and butter to the miners on One Tree Hill, Happy Valley and Queenstown diggings, which were at their peak at this time. The whole area was alive with diggers seeking to make their fortune quickly. The Chinese population alone at the diggings was estimated to be in the vicinity of 1,000. Many fortunes were made and lost. Some of the diggers who were successful in finding gold later selected land and settled in the district. Farm Produce was readily sold. Home-made butter and other products was carried on pack horses and sometimes even on foot.

One resident remembers hearing how her Irish grand-mother carried her supplies balanced in a basket on her head. They went along what was known, and still is, as Buttermen's Track. One farmer, Mr. McPherson, when taking supplies to the diggers was attacked by bushrangers, but managed to fend them off.

In 1874, the present School was opened, the teacher being Mr. Robert J. Harris, who taught half time at Christmas Hills and half at Watson's Creek. His family later printed the "Evelyn Observer" at Kangaroo Ground. A full time teacher was appointed in 1876.

In 1887, the Maroondah Aqueduct No. 2 section was commenced. This was the section which passes through the southern side of Christmas Hills. It took nearly four years to construct. The work force engaged on this project was considerable as, of course, all the digging had to be done without the modern equipment we are accustomed to to-day. No. 5 tunnel is over one mile long and had to be taken through solid rock most of the way. The Open Channel was no easy task to construct as it skirted the side of very steep hills and also had to be literally blasted out of solid rock.

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The men working on this project lived in bark huts and humpies which they constructed themselves. There were hundreds of these scattered through the bush near the "Brick Kilns". The site of each can still be distinguished today by the shadow drainage trench which was dug around each one. A great deal of the food required by these men was supplied by the local farmers. An Abattoir was constructed and run by W. and J. Smith to provide meat. The General Store and Bakery owned by the Smith family, was their main source of supply, not only for food, but also clothing, etc.

Tanning of skins was Mr. Schofield's occupation. He lived at the top of Mt. Wise. Local boys were encouraged to bring him Koala Bears, Platypus and other native fauna which were plentiful throughout the district.

Kangaroos were very numerous and at times, dangerous. Mr. Cleaves met an untimely death through an encounter with a kangaroo in 1866. He was aged 46 years and is buried in the Kangaroo Ground Cemetery. Deer were released in Christmas Hills in the early days and later became so plentiful that they were a nuisance, as they raided gardens and orchards at night.

The Mechanics Institute was first built on the present Tennis Court site but was later destroyed by fire and rebuilt in 1894. A short time after this it was moved to its present site. The same building still stands but it has since been enlarged and additions have been made. It is still the centre for all social activities.

The Church of England was opened by the Venerable Archdeacon Stretch on October 23rd 1892. Attendances for the afternoon and evening services were 150 and 130 respectively. The first guardians were Messrs: H. Ashmore, M. Conolly, T. Shaw, M. Wilmot, W. Calwell, A. Hall, C. Jenkins and W. Harris.

The Rifle Club was formed in 1908 with an initial membership of one hundred, including many from Kangaroo Ground and Yarra Glen as well as Christmas Hills. The local School Teacher at that time, Mr. C. Irwin, was elected Captain and William McCallum, Secretary. The range was built on Mr. Love's property on the Five Mile Creek. One of the leading marksmen, Mr. David Wilson, won the Werribee aggregate at the V. R. A. Matches at Williamstown in 1912. His son, Robert, is still an active member of the Club. When Mr. Love sold his property, the Club had to find a new range and it was moved to Holly Bank, the property of Mrs. Muir. In 1924 the new range was opened and shooting was carried on there for many years but in 1962 the range, shed and all equipment was destroyed in the bush fire. For a time things were at a standstill, but eventually a new range was built on Mr. Ashmore's paddock. Unfortunately, many members left the Club after the fire and it has been a hard task working it up to its former standard, but things are now looking brighter for the future. The Club has always been affiliated with No. 19 Union.

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Tennis has always been a popular sport in the district and, for a number of years, two courts were regularly in use. In recent years Christmas Hills has often been represented by two teams in the Diamond Valley and Arthur's Creek Tennis Association, invariably reaching the finals.

At one time Christmas Hills was a very popular holiday resort and there were numerous guest houses to cater for holiday makers. "Hazel Dell" "Niagaroon", "The Roost", "Waratah", and "Windermere" were the most popular ones. Unfortunately, however, they have been destroyed by fire, one by one, until to-day there is only one left and it is in use as a private house as many of the original rooms have been demolished.

The district has been ravaged twice by bush fires in recent years. In 1939 and again in 1962 residents were forced to fight to try to save their possessions, but many homes were lost as well as sheds and many miles of fencing, also a large number of livestock. The spirit of these people is not easily broken and practically all the houses have been rebuilt and a fresh start made.

Until 1958 the district was part of the Shire of Eltham, but a severance poll was taken, and Christmas Hills was transferred to the Healesville Shire.

The telephone was connected to a large number of homes late in the 1940s. It remained connected to the Yarra Glen exchange until 1964 when a fully automatic service to Melbourne was installed.

Another milestone in the progress of the district was the installation of electric power throughout the district in 1960. The scheme, costing £38,000, encountered many difficulties both financially and technically, but these were overcome.

Some comparison of prices may be of interest. In the early 1900's salt butter cost 2/-, fresh butter 2/10d, mutton 3d to 4d. per pound, beef 5d. to 6d. Eggs were approximately 1/- a dozen, 4 Lb. loaf of bread, 5d.

What scenes of hardship, struggle, and even violence have been known in the Hills, as well as times of great happiness, jollity, and successful endeavour.

Latterly, modern machinery, bulldozers, etc., have revolutionized land clearing techniques. These days farms can be literally carved out of the bush almost overnight and the land transformed into lush pastures, but we must always remember the back-breaking work which the pioneers performed in first opening up the country.

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LOCAL LADIES ASSISTING



THE DIGGER'S HUT - CHRISTMAS HILLS

CHR