GRAPEVINE CUTTINGS (April 2008)

By Rob Upson

JOHN BOYD WATSON

He was the richest man in Australia at the time. The time was the 1870s and John Boyd Watson had made his money on the Bendigo goldfields, even surpassing the wealth of George Lansell. This mining magnate and investor came from very humble beginnings.

John Boyd Watson was born in 1828 at Paisley, Scotland, son of James Watson, a cabinet-maker, and his wife, Margaret Boyd. At the age of 12 he accompanied his parents and four siblings[1] on a voyage to Australia on board the *Orestes*. They arrived at Sydney in March 1841 and settled at Windsor where J.B. worked as a currier, (someone who treats leather in a tannery).

In 1850 he left for the California diggings but soon returned and set off for the Bendigo diggings arriving there in 1852. He took up a very profitable claim at White Hills and then, with a partner, bought a claim in Paddy's Gully. Eventually, when this claim provided a good return he acquired, on his own, a claim on New Chum Hill. This then led to him gaining an interest in the Cornish United Mine on the Garden Gully Line. By 1870 he had interests in the Golden Fleece, Kent and Central Garden Gully mines. Eventually, Watson was to buy out all the shareholders in these three mines and combine them under the one lease as the Kentish Mine. The three mines were to yield him over 20 tons of gold.

When he married Mary Ann Covell in 1861 at All Saints Anglican Church, Sandhurst they started off living in a tent and then a miner's cottage. As his wealth increased he built Kent House, a spacious dwelling, on the corner of Wattle and Rowan Streets. They had eight children, three sons and five daughters.

As well as his mining investments, John Boyd Watson accumulated property in Bendigo and Melbourne and also financed many schemes and enterprises. He financed Angus Mackay in starting up the Sydney Daily Telegraph, floated the Moama-Deniliquin railway and helped support the McIlwraith/McEacharn shipping Company. He also bought the Commercial Hotel in Deniliquin in 1884 in order to help keep the Deniliquin Hospital in funds for many years until it was sold in 1937.

In 1873 John Boyd Watson was a major contributor to a fund, organised by Baron von Mueller, to assist Ernest Giles on his second expedition to Central Australia. It was on this expedition that Giles discovered the Olgas and was the first white man to journey into the Musgrave Ranges.[2] 'Glen Watson' at the N.E. end of the ranges was named, by Giles, in honour of his benefactor, although, I believe, 'Glen Watson' is rarely shown on a map.

When his health began to fail he went to California with his eldest daughter in the hope that a restful holiday might be beneficial. On his return to Sydney, news of discovery of a rich new reef in his Kentish Mine was of little consequence. He died two days later, on 4th June 1889, at his brother's (James) house at Waverley, NSW.

His body was brought back to Bendigo (then Sandhurst) and the men from his mine marched before the hearse from Kent House to the Back Creek Cemetery. Under the terms of his will the bulk of his fortune was left to his children and grandchildren. His Victorian estate alone was valued for probate at £1 million.

The following is an extract from the Australian Dictionary of Biography on John Boyd Watson. "Retiring in manner, he was described by his obituarist in the Bendigo Advertiser as 'a close and plodding sort of man.' None, however, could deny his business astuteness. Generous when occasion demanded, he did not parade his affluence and sought no public role in the community".

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[1] His elder brother, Robert, married a Flora McInnis of Shoalhaven, NSW. She was born at Inverness, Scotland and was reputedly a descendant of Flora McDonald, the lass who helped Bonnie Prince Charlie escape to the Isle of Skye after his defeat by the English at Culloden.

[2] W.C.Gosse first sighted the Musgrave Ranges in 1873 from the top of Ayers Rock. They were named by him after Sir Anthony Musgrave who was Colonial Administrator of Sth. Aust. at the time and later to become Governor. (Place Names of Australia by A.W.Reed)