

“Cockroach Alley” My Birth Place

Ernie Byrnes

This was the name that referred to a group of houses near the corner of Market Street and Railway Parade, Riverstone [what is now a car park], I am not sure where the name originated from. There were three buildings on the front row, facing Railway Parade (now Riverstone Parade). Behind the front row of houses there was a lane way, then another row of four dwellings, the front and back rows of dwellings being joined together. On the western end was the Oddfellows Hall, and at the other end of the dwellings was a mixed business shop that was owned by a Mr Vaughan, and later a Mr McCutcheon joined Mr Vaughan and both gentlemen ran the business.

During the 1870s there was a timber saw mill situated near the railway line, close to the present station. It was here that all the timber for the construction of “Cockroach Alley” was milled.

I was born in 1927, in the house on the front row nearest to the Oddfellows Hall. It was common practice in those days for women to have their babies delivered at home. The local Doctor would usually deliver the baby, then it was up to a mid-wife who would visit the mother for the rest of the convalescing time (which normally was not very long due to the amount of work thrust upon the woman).

The houses had a front verandah with wooden lattice, each consisted of four rooms. There was no electricity in the town, lighting was by way of candles or if you were lucky kerosene lamps or lanterns. My parents could not afford to buy ice for the ice chest, when perishable goods ran out Mum would go to the corner shop to get them. If no money was available we would have to go without.

We had an old windup gramophone that we would listen to at night time. A wood fuel stove in one room, the kitchen, was used for cooking and this also provided us with plenty of warmth during the cold winter nights. When the fire was alight, (which was most of the time) Mum would put what was called a ‘Mrs Potts’ iron on the top of the stove to warm up, then she would iron our clothes. This iron was a heavy contraption made of cast iron and the handle had a wooden grip, made to be removed when the iron was on the stove. This was to keep the handle cool, then when the iron was hot enough the handle was slipped into place.

The water for our bath was warmed up on the stove, this was achieved by filling the big kettle, once had to do, and when the water was hot enough it was poured into a large round galvanized iron tub that was placed on the floor. This bath only occurred once a week. To conserve the water the rest of the time we would get a sponge over before going to bed, during the cold winter months the tub was always placed close to the stove.

To wash the clothes, Mum would have to light a fire out in the back yard, over this would be placed an open kerosene tin filled with water and the clothes were boiled in this. The kerosene tins were given away at the corner store. Dad would cut out the top and hammer down any sharp edges then attach a wire handle. When ready, the clothes were then transferred into the large galvanised tub, (same one we bathed in) with fresh water, then the clothes would be hand scrubbed clean on a timber scrubbing board, then placed into fresh water which had a knob of Reckitts blue bag added. The clothes were left to soak for a short time then wrung out by hand then hung out on the clothes line. This line consisted of stretching a rope between two poles, the branch of a tree with a fork at the end would support the centre of the line, this was called a prop.

In the back yard we had a water well. This was covered with a domed brick structure and had a hole in the top big enough to drop in a bucket attached to a rope to get water. A wooden cover went over the hole in the top. Also there was an old fashioned hand pump on the top, to get this started you had to prime it, to do this it was necessary to pour some water down it and pump like mad to get the water to come out. Sometimes it was quicker to drop down the bucket! This is the only water we had.

This well was situated on the boundary of two houses so that the residents of both could use the well. (As with the Electricity and Water, both of these did not come to Riverstone until 1934.) The houses were separated by a fence which ran from the house to the well, and continued to the back fence, where there were two pan toilets built together, one for each house, with the fence separating each door. The pans were changed once a week, this was done from the back lane, each toilet having a small door at the rear of the building allowing easy access for the person on the night cart [as it was called]. This cart was drawn by a horse. To keep down the smell Mum would pour some 'Phenyl' into the pan. No fancy toilet paper for us, Mum would cut any paper available into small squares, these usually hung on a nail until wanted.

Dad, like the majority of men living in the town, worked at the meat works. At the time he was not on permanent employment. He would go down to what was called the 'Gate', this was the entry into the meat works from the road. The foreman of the beef house and other foremen who wanted labour for that day would come down to the gate each morning and select those that they wanted, the rest would have to either go home or go looking for other work elsewhere. Before leaving home each day Dad always said to Mum, "If I'm not home by a certain time send one of the kids down with some lunch", if this happened Mum would know that he was working for that day. In those days if you did not work with your head down and bum up you were considered not to be a good worker and you got nowhere, as well you would never get picked up, the foremen always seemed to have their favourites.

The road along the front of the houses was dirt, as were all the roads in Riverstone at the time, this road separated the houses from the railway line.

The Oddfellows Hall was a large building, constructed of corrugated iron with a verandah on the front. The building was a favourite place for the residents of Riverstone and surrounding districts, as it was used for a great number of events, mostly meetings, dances and balls. Mum said that it was used to show pictures, no doubt it would have been what they called 'Silent Movies'. We being so close to the hall would often lay in bed and listen to the music.

Next door to us lived a woman by the name of Beadie Mary, Mum said she was very quiet and a very nice person, she shared the well with us. Next to the shop lived people by the name of Johnston.

Getting back to the corner shop, when Mum went up to pay our bill, usually at the end of the week or when she could, she would be given from the owner a bag of boiled lollies and a bag of broken biscuits to bring home. The corner shop was owned by two gentlemen, Mr Vaughan and Mr McCutcheon. From a photo that I have seen I believe this shop had a gas street light near it. The shop was closed in April 1933. Mum's mother was living in the house before us. I'm not sure when the terrace houses were built.

As you the reader of this article will be aware, I was too young to remember much about my early days living at "Cockroach Alley". To obtain this story as accurately as possible, I spoke at length with my mother Linda Byrnes who related most of this story to me. She being then aged 91 (1999). Today it is sad for me to have to say that no evidence remains of any of the buildings I have referred to, to show where "Cockroach Alley" once existed.