

‘Over the Creekers’

Merv Baldwin

I was born in 1943, the youngest of six children born to Lucinda and Clarrie Baldwin. I never got to know my mother as she died during my birth and I was reared in Windsor by her sister Lilly Davis until I was three years old. I then returned to Riverstone to live with my father when he had married for the second time. Other children in the Baldwin family were Gloria, Thelma, Teddy, Ray (Whop), and Dawn. Our house was situated right on the creek bank, at the end of Clyde Street.

Now aged 63 I am a grandfather and would like to share some of my memories with the old and new generations, of how we lived and survived in the 50's and 60's.

Although my real name was Mervyn, at times I was also known as Alwyn, 'Podge', or 'Little Whop'. One of my earliest memories is of sitting on a sugar bag on the ground watching the men, including my father, playing 'two-up'. My father was a good fisherman and caught plenty of mullet and perch in South and Eastern Creeks. Sometimes of a weekend he would travel by train to Brooklyn and take the ferry to Spencer. Often, I would accompany him on these fishing trips, I can still picture him walking across the paddocks with his cane fishing basket slung across his shoulder.

As a child I loved roaming through the meatwork's paddocks, exploring around the old piggery and scrounging in their rubbish dumps. There were few fences between the meatworks boundary and Garfield Road and there were tracks running everywhere through the bush. I would often stop and talk with Mr. Jackson who lived in a house right on the creek, he had also built a flood house on four tall poles where he could stay when the area was flooded.

We were the true 'over the creekers', we lived on the creek, got mussels from the creek, swam in the creek, fished in the creek, made tin boats to use in the creek and played 'Two-up' on the banks of the creek. The old creek was very much a part of our life, sadly today it is only a shadow of its once pristine beauty. In spring the yellow wattle trees growing along the banks always looked great with their reflections on the water.

A lot of children from the early days would have enjoyed the old creek, the current swimming pool wasn't even thought of. Rubber car tubes were the order of the day and swinging from ropes tied to overhanging branches was popular. Tommy Smith, a local identity, would often demonstrate his diving skills with a mad dash along the creek bank and fly out across the water in spectacular fashion. One part of the creek was known as 'Smithies', as the generation that swam in the creek in the 50's would no doubt remember.

Besides the Baldwins, names of others who swam regularly in the creek included Justice, Delarue, Aberley, Donohue, Loveday, Latimer, Britton, Woods, Lam, Sercombe, Clark, Denis Rosa, Peter Riley, Alan Watton and Billy Mitchell (my apologies to all those boys I have overlooked).

Apart from the creek we played cricket with a bat made from a board and used a kerosene tin for the wicket. We built a bonfire each year to celebrate Empire Day, and we picked mushrooms after periods of rain. We picked blackberries in the summer, using sheets of old iron to climb across the blackberry bushes.



Dawn, Gloria and Thelma Baldwin, Linda Aberley on 'Little Bridge'.

Photo courtesy of Mervyn Baldwin

Like most of the kids in the 50's I attended the Riverstone Public School in Garfield Road, always barefoot, which was par for the course in those days. I remember getting the small bags of broken biscuits from Cook's store and asking for the bruised fruit from Staceys. In later years I attended Richmond High School travelling by the old steam train.

My stepmother died in 1953 when I was 10 years old. I was very fortunate when growing up to have two wonderful and caring aunties - Mary and Kit Attwood. They lived in a house on the corner of Farm and Park Roads and would often take Dawn and myself for a walk up to the Marsden Park shop to buy us an ice cream and lollies, on the way back we would look for the ruins of the 'mud house' and look for the little purple chocolate flowers that grew wild in the area.

They took me and my sister Dawn on countless trips all over the place; I still remember the great bus trips to Manly, Thirroul, Mitchell Park, and Bungool. In those days it was a bit surprising to have a lady driver - Mrs Murray; the buses departing from in front of the old 'Wattle' milk bar. For the record, Mrs Murray was a confident and top driver, keeping in mind they weren't the luxury coaches of today.

Mary and Kit Attwood are remembered for walking from their home to the Catholic Church in Riverstone every Sunday. From Marsden Park it was a fair hike, they never complained; even when offered a lift, they politely refused and continued on, feeling more independent and comfortable just to stroll along on their marathon walk.

Another marathon walker of those days was Mick Sullivan; I would see Mick walk for untold miles, a sugar bag strapped over his shoulder, walking through the bush and the meatwork's paddocks. A very focused and dedicated worker, he would carry out numerous jobs related to general maintenance, and would set up traps to catch the crows to protect the baby lambs.



Mary Attwood



Kit Attwood

Photos courtesy of Mervyn Baldwin

Mary Attwood would sometimes venture into the meatwork's paddocks to release the unfortunate birds caught in Mick's traps. Mick was not too happy the evening he caught Mary releasing his trapped birds. Mary had a strong fondness for all birds, animals and even insects, I have seen her placing sugar on the ant beds for the ants. She would often bring home stray dogs and cats and care for them, or at the very least, feed them. I well remember at my aunt Mary's funeral, standing next to Les Harris who remarked "Merv, if Mary doesn't go to heaven, no one will ever go there."

All my sisters and brothers were married by the end of the 50's, so I became a little isolated and lived a little like a gypsy in my teenage years, but it was fun. For two years I lived in a room at the side of Mary and Kit's place and they provided my meals.

I knocked around with the Aberleys and the Lovedays, we ruled the bush in those days. The Loveday family loved their horses, Sam and Tony shared their natural attributes with the horses, while Ron trained trotters and made his own roads through the bush with his baker's cart and draught horse. Mrs. Loveday was always very kind to me, and often advised me to buy a block of land (I wish I had listened).

Karl Heinrich, nicknamed 'Flea', was another good friend of mine and Sam's, from over the creek; he was a promising footballer and all round sportsman. It was really tragic for Flea to die so young in a motorbike accident, he had so much natural talent, he could have been anything.

For a time I lived at Cow Flat and was friends with the Whiteheads and Sammy Taber, I think Sam was the mechanic who got the old 'A' model Ford going that we drove around Whitehead's paddocks. Bobby Sercombe was another 'over the creeker' and I had a lot of wild nights with him. I

probably regret a few, but it's a part of growing up. Bobby's mum always made me feel welcome, even though she had ten or twelve children she could always give me something to eat, amazing stuff.

I would have liked to see the old Rivo hotel remain near the railway gates. 'The Riverstone Royal' as we knew it, I don't think there was much royalty there, but it had character and to me a thousand memories, it was my hangout on weekends, a few beers, a few bets, and a few coins in the old jukebox on Saturday night. If you didn't see a good fight there it was a quiet weekend.

There were guys I was told to have respect for ---- George Cafe, Jim Woods, Les Luland and a host of others, I can't remember all the names now. But I do remember Bruce 'Poppy' Cameron. When the beers kicked in he took on the world and feared no man, a likeable rogue. I don't remember how many times I drove him home, but do know it was a nightmare trying to get him out of the car. Sometimes he would become a little disorientated and I would get smashed for my troubles, but he would be your best mate next day. That was the trend of the old Rivo pub.

I think a lot of the boys those days had been through the local boxer and trainer Aub Gillespie's coaching school, while some had a natural ability. I guess some just liked to let off steam after a hard day at the old meatworks, maybe it was a sort of release valve.

I remember helping myself to a little Government property, not really being a criminal, I was just adventurous -----had an all expenses paid holiday in the Parramatta maximum security guest house. Two inmates took an acute dislike to me and singled me out; I couldn't believe my luck when an aboriginal guy said in an abusive voice --- "Leave him alone, he's a Rivo boy." It is a new generation now, but the Rivo of old did have a reputation.

My thirst for adventure increased, so several of us had a meeting in Roger Latimer's shack over the creek and decided to head to the bush to make our fortune. Our team consisted of Mickey Aberley, Brian 'Toot' Johnston, Joe Maher, myself and a few others. The final day had come for departure --- 'Toot' had become intoxicated and lost the plot completely, Mrs Aberley, a devoted mother of eight children pleaded with me not to take her son Mickey. So in the final wash up with the late scratchings, it was just Joe and myself, with a bag of groceries and a 1948 FX Holden sedan.

Joe and I scored jobs with the Snowy Mountains Authority. Joe couldn't handle the bush and lasted just one week. I stuck it out for six years as a plant operator, working all over the Snowy scheme and had adventures I could write books on, maybe I will one day. One of these adventures was when six of us hired a Piper Cherokee for two weeks and flew to Cairns, quite an experience in the 1960's. I have no regrets, only this year I flew to New Zealand and had a reunion with a former Snowy worker and his family.

Well, this is my contribution to my growing up in Rivo and to the small clan who lived 'over the creek' in those early years. I will end with my favourite philosophy that I read in an antique shop -- Yesterday is history. Tomorrow is a mystery. Today is a gift, that's why we call it the present.

This article was written by Merv Baldwin in 2006.