

Riverstone Meatworks Paddocks Re-Visited

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After 46 years, I decided that I would like to re-visit the areas where I once went fishing with my father, Frank Strachan, and other members of the family, at both the Eastern and South Creeks, the weir over Eastern Creek and also to possibly visit the Blood Hill where my father worked for just on twenty-years. All of the sites were located within the confines of the old Riverstone Meatworks paddocks. After talking it over with my cousin, Len Strachan, he made arrangements with our cousin, Reg “Googa” Anderson, to take us out to the old “works” paddocks. Without the two of them, my visit would not have been possible. I considered it a privilege to get onto the paddocks, let alone being driven and shown around. (I had been prepared to walk in to the property.)

On Saturday 27 May 2006, we left Riverstone at 9.00am, and travelled along Garfield Road-West to the Richmond-Blacktown Road, then west to a gateway at one of the old dairies. Here, we borrowed an old four-wheel drive utility from “Smithy”. With the three of us in the cabin, we set off through the paddocks. Reg remembered that someone had hung a mannequin of a fully dressed woman from a large old dead tree. Arriving at the location on the south-eastern side of the large paddock, we found that the wig and dress were missing, just the white body of the mannequin remaining.

Leaving this location, Reg drove out to the main paddock, following a bush and fence line. Numerous kangaroos were disturbed and went bounding away off into the distance. With the windows on the vehicle down, we started to freeze up in the chilly winds on that cold morning.

In no time at all, we had arrived at the Large Paddock and onto the Blood Hill, where an old round steel shed, with an opening for a doorway and a steel chimney was standing near a fence. Reg informed me that this was where my father [Frank Strachan] worked hard in keeping the numerous trenches clean. These drains were about two feet deep and about the same in width when they were in use. When the killing floors of the beef house, mutton board and the pig house were hosed down etc. all the blood, fat and other rubbish was flushed out onto the Blood Hill and into the trenches.

This particular shed was known as Frank Strachan’s “Hut”. I was later informed by Max Strachan, that he and my father rolled this round tank up the hill to its present location, and they chiselled a doorway on one side. This opening was positioned facing the east so that the cold westerly winds would not blow into it during winter. This “hut” was only large enough to accommodate two or three men at the most. My father was responsible for the trenches in his area. Max Strachan also informed me that in the winter months, he would join up with my father, and together they would fell suitable trees in the Sullivan Paddock and cut them up into logs for fence posts.

I recall that my father rode his bicycle two miles from Vineyard, and then rode another mile out from the meatworks, over the old wooden bridge spanning the Eastern Creek. When it rained, time was spent huddled in the cramped “hut” keeping warm and dry in front of the fire. Reg Anderson further explained that the Blood Hill was about one mile in circumference and had hundreds of trenches stretching out in all directions which eventually flowed into South or Eastern Creeks. The off-drains were also used to water the grass for the cattle to feed on.

There were two areas which made up the Blood Paddock or Blood Hill. Half was called the Blood Hill and the other half was known as the Sand Hill. The workers would shovel the rubbish and place

it onto the ground, the main aim was to keep the drains clean and clear so the water was kept running. No rubbish was allowed to flow out into the creeks.

There were three “huts”, the first being Frank Strachan’s. Another square shaped corrugated tin shed a bit further on down the paddock towards the South Creek, was known as “hut” No. 2 and was Max Strachan’s “hut”. Max was Dad’s cousin. Here in his spare time, he worked on a small vegetable garden that he had established over the years. Max grew pumpkins and other vegetables. He also had fish-traps in the nearby South Creek, where a constant supply of fresh fish was guaranteed. Max shared his vegetables and fish with my father.

At times, the trenches were dammed so that the water banked up and was then released in another direction for a better flow over the ground into the paddocks. Those who worked at the “huts” and others who worked on the main part of the Blood Hill came under the “Yard” and Mr Norman “Norm” Brown was the boss, but he never ventured out into the paddocks from the meatworks.

Leaving Frank Strachan’s “hut”, we travelled through another gate and ventured across the large paddock, crossing over the “Flood Road” which had been raised and built up over the years from using the ashes from the “Boiler House”. This road could be used during low flooding and went across the paddocks, towards the Dairy. Here I asked Reg how he came to be called “Googa”. Reg told me that when he was a small boy he would climb trees of all heights, and climbing out onto the limbs, he would place his hands into hollows or into bird nests and collect the eggs. Hence the name “Googa” after “Googy-Egg”. He only took one egg from the nests, and during many years he went all over the meatworks paddocks to collect them. His collection was large, and he had them safely packed in match boxes and other small boxes. He never broke an egg that he had collected from the nests, as he would place them into his mouth when climbing down out of the trees. In later years, Reg’s extensive collection of bird eggs simply disappeared.

The next stop was Crouch’s old dairy. Here, there was the first old house, and the second house, all of which were in a state of ruin, along with the milking bales, although the brick milk room was still standing intact. A short distance away was the old feed shed that was falling down. It appeared as though vandals had used an iron bar or similar to break holes in the fibro of the houses. We were fortunate in seeing these old buildings, as the next weekend, they were all flattened to ground level by a bulldozer, with the exception of the brick milk room which was left standing.

Travelling from Crouch’s Dairy, we followed along a fenced in laneway, and arrived at another gate, and passing several large roan coloured bulls that were, luckily for us, standing on the other side of the fence, we arrived at the concrete Weir which was only a short distance from the dairy.

At the Weir, on Eastern Creek, the water was banked up towards Riverstone and had green algae covering the top. The concrete road going across the top of the Weir itself was in ruins, although the water was still flowing over the concrete boulders at a fast rate as it flowed west along the creek. This particular spot brought back memories from 1954 when I ventured there in boyhood days [11 years old] from my Vineyard home with my friends, Trevor Brazil, John Robbins, Charlie Warbick, my cousin Ross Burden and young “Chubba” Humpherbay. I recall when we were walking across the paddock from the railway line [Riverstone Parade], a storm broke out overhead with bolts of lightning. We all ran into a dense forest consisting of tea-trees [paperbarks] and were saved from getting wet and the lightning. We were confronted with swarms of “Mosies” [mosquitoes]. I did not know it then, but this was called the “Park” paddock.

Arriving at Eastern Creek and the Weir on the eastern side, we decided to build a raft from two 44 gallon drums, and wooden planks that were found nearby. We tied the planks to the drums with some rope we had brought from home and some fencing wire we found. After the raft was assembled, we dragged it up-stream [towards the Meatworks] and placed it into the creek. The raft successfully floated and young John Robbins volunteered to have the first go of testing it out and floating down the creek, with the current, to the Weir. Unfortunately, the raft struck a dead tree and due to the fast flowing current, the raft broke up on impact. Young John Robbins clung onto the tree as the two drums and timber planks went sailing down to the Weir. The tree which the raft had struck was some 12 feet out from the creek bank, and with the rushing water passed, young John Robbins explained to us that he could not swim. At that location, the water was very deep, and the current was strong. We were not strong enough to swim out to rescue him, so we came up with the idea of having young John tie a rope around his body, and the three of us would drag him in to the creek bank very fast before he sank or the current carried him off. Eventually, after several attempts, we did succeed in throwing a spare rope out to him. John tied the rope around his waist, he let go of the tree, and we pulled him to safety on the bank.

Not long after this incident, Mr. Tom McNamara came riding his horse across the top of the Weir and told us in no uncertain terms that we should not be on the Meatworks property, and that we were trespassing. We all got the message loud and clear, and headed off home. By that time we had enough excitement for one day anyway. Tom McNamara must have been checking the stock, when he heard us calling out to each other. Anyway, all these memories came flooding back. Reg pointed out across the creek and told me that it was the "Park Paddock" and was full of "Tea-Trees". I knew that it was the place that we had walked through all those years ago, but I imagined it to be further away from the creek. When you are young, you imagine things differently. Near the Weir I found two blue-cups that the wire had been cut off. The cups had been taken from the poles and discarded, and were either telephone or electricity cups. These cups are on display at the Riverstone Museum.

Leaving the Weir, we went to the old Pumping Station at South Creek. Reg explained that it had fallen down some three years ago [2003] and was in a big wooden pile. The steel supports to hold the timber together were still in place. The two deep concrete square wells which held the water were intact and dangerous. Nearby, the wooden frame of a previous water-pump was still standing. Alongside this structure was an electricity power pole with all the wiring cut and disconnected.

Further along, we followed the South Creek on our left, and to our right was the Eastern Creek. Reg showed us where he would go with his father [Malcolm Anderson] and feed the fish, then camp under the willow-trees overnight. The next day they would go fishing using their Kelly Rod's which were made of bamboo. They caught mullet and perch, and sometimes they went fishing at night.

Although the water in South Creek appeared to be clear, Reg assured Len and I, that it was not and that the fish were not good for eating anymore. The water was a refreshing light blue/green colour and not the usual brown muddy colour. Water bird life was abundant in this area.

Reg then set off again, this time heading for the Junction, and we had the South Creek on our left and the Eastern Creek on our right, and we travelled through the paddock between them. Reg pointed out the location on Eastern Creek where our Uncle Stan "Dick" Fennell died in 1963. He was fishing and had made arrangements for his son Freddie to meet up with him at that location. Fred found him lying on the creek bank and thinking that he was asleep attempted to wake him up, but he had passed away. Fred then had to run all the way home to Hamilton Street to break the sad

news, and to get help. Len Strachan remembered that Dr. Tynan of Riverstone went out, but it was too late. There was nothing that they could do.

Arriving at the Junction, I looked across to the northern bank and could visualise my cousin Ross Burden sliding down the steep bank to the water's edge of Eastern Creek. Memories came back of that weekend in 1953, when I went fishing with my father at South Creek. We had walked through the Meatworks paddock from home, across the railway line, then walked for about two miles and crossed over the Weir near Crouch's Dairy and went to the Junction where we met up with Uncle Stan Fennell and his sons, Ron and Fred. I recall that Uncle Stan had a glass jar with a screw-on lid, which contained live grass-hoppers, crickets, potato diggers, dragonflies, and worms.

It was at this Junction where my Uncle Fred Burden and his young son, Ross were on the northern side. I could still see Ross Burden as he stood up and then slid down the creek bank, right up to the waters edge of Eastern Creek. They then walked around and, crossing over the Weir, joined up with us for a day of fishing in South Creek. The location was just south of the Junction. We all had bamboo rods, and the fish we caught were placed into a sugar bag and anchored in the water by a piece of rope that was tied around a stick stuck firmly on the edge of the creek bank. This kept the fish alive and fresh until we were ready to go home. I caught a couple of small mullet, and in those days, you ate your catch of the day. I recall that they were good eating, very sweet and succulent.

On our trip back from the Junction, we drove along the same track in the thick brown almost dead grass alongside the South Creek. It was not long before we arrived back at old Crouch's Dairy, and from here we had a fine view of Bald Hill, and the flying model aeroplanes nearby. Driving back over the raised Flood Road we arrived back at the Blood Hill paddock. Reg explained that there used to be three "huts" on the Blood Hill, but one had vanished.

Following a track, we saw more drains that went in every direction, and arrived at Max Strachan's "hut". Following the track for a short distance, we arrived at South Creek and Reg pointed out the old wooden bridge spanning the creek that was once used to move the cows from the paddocks to the dairy. Windsor Downs now backs onto South Creek and the high mansion homes are built right up on the creek bank. A bit of concern should South Creek flood again and break its banks.

At the location of the wooden bridge over South Creek, Reg also pointed out a large box tree with a large hollow at the base, which was large enough for people to sit in. In the old days, the drovers would use this hollow as a shelter from the bad weather. Up to three people could huddle together in this hollow. A bit further along South Creek, Reg pointed out to us where Jones' Hole was. Mr. Jones had the dairy on the other side of the creek, where the bridge was.

To complete the trip around the Jericho Bush Paddock area, Reg took us to a small graveyard, just in from the Richmond-Blacktown Road. Here, there were up to five grave sites. Headstones reading as early as 1837 were lying on the ground where they had broken off and fallen.

Returning the four-wheel drive utility to Mr Smith, we departed the old Meatworks property, and proceeded to Riverstone, via a tour of the roads at Marsden Park near the Meatworks paddocks. We arrived back at Riverstone just in time for lunch. I was glad that we had not walked into the old "works" paddocks, as the area covered would have been too great to visit on foot. It was a venture which I will treasure for the remainder of my life-time, as I probably will never visit the old "works" paddocks again.