

The Shields Family

Clarrie Neal

The history of the Shields family in Riverstone began when Albert Ernest, better known as 'Steve' Shields, married Elsie Florence Davis on the 7th October 1901. Steve (1877-1948), had lived with his parents on a farm on the Lowlands at Richmond, and Elsie (1883-1982) had lived with her parents, Fred and Elizabeth Davis on the corner of George Street and Bell Street in Windsor.

They first lived on the farm on the Richmond Road opposite the entrance to Clydesdale; St. Phillips church and its cemetery were located nearby. Elsie was employed at Clydesdale to do the washing and ironing and continued to do so when George Kiss took over in 1904. Records show that she travelled out from Riverstone to continue these duties even after moving into their own property on Garfield Road West.

In 1903 Steve and Elsie purchased an 8 acre farm at a mortgagee sale from August Long, better known as 'Gus'. The property was located on Garfield Road West, opposite the Corcoran Street junction and comprised a brick home at the front with another timber slab home behind it and several farm sheds.

Both homes are still standing today, including the old slab home. Family history believes that 'Gus' was an undertaker as one of the sheds contained a horse drawn hearse and some coffins. When dances were to be held in the shed, to clear the floor, the hearse was taken out and the coffins stored in the attic of the shed.

It is not known exactly when the brick home and the well were built but the design suggests between 1880 and 1900. The farm has been in the name of the Shields family for 100 years and the Garfield Road corner became known by the locals as 'Shields Corner'.

Steve and Elsie only had one child, Albert John Frederick Shields, born 1904. They then adopted and reared Esma Stubbs, the daughter of Elsie's sister. In later years Esma married Claude Field and they continued to live with the Shields family.

Over the years the Shields family also adopted several State wards, rearing some to adulthood, including Roy Foster, David Walsh and Marge (surname unknown). David and Marge enlisted in the armed services in the 2nd World War and both lost their lives.

The family worked their farm to become virtually self sufficient. They ran a poultry farm, reared cattle, turkeys and pigs, had a large orchard and a vegetable garden. They grew all their own stock feed - oats, corn, saccaline, lucerne, etc. - all hand cut with the scythe.

When required Steve operated two tip drays for the Council, sometimes working the horses together, one behind the other. He worked the drays on the construction of the Richmond Road bridge over South Creek in the early 1900s. At times he worked at the meatworks.

In a taped interview with her granddaughter Debbie in the 1970s, Elsie recalled the following memories –

- the few stores in Riverstone, including Darling's general store, Schoffel's smallgoods store, Joseph's Riverstone Hotel, the bootmaker Tom Griffen.
- always wearing long dresses with a hat and a veil.

- travelling to other towns (Windsor) to get medicines, etc.
- buying the house from the undertaker who lived there with his daughter.
- the coffins stored in the back shed.
- the meatworks working at night.
- going into the meatworks to buy offals to use as fowl feed.
- George Kiss (Clydesdale) owning one of the first cars in the district.
- in dry times, using the horse and sled to carry drinking water from their dam for other families.
- Cassidy's house being the oldest house in the area. It is believed to have been Marsden Park's first post office.
- being told the old Shields house was the only one in the area not affected by the 1867 flood
- the problems of the clay roads in wet weather, forever getting bogged.
- most families using a horse and dray or a spring cart for their transport.
- 'wealthier' families could afford a sulky.
- husband Steve working seven days a week at Clydesdale for 1 pound a week. He was allowed every second Sunday off, after he had fed the horses.
He worked there for seven years.
- working his two drays for the Council for 5 shillings per day, often commencing at 4 am.
- using a single furrow plough to form the roadside gutters, the family still have the plough.
- the bushfires that frequently ravaged the area.
- seeing nearby homes burnt down in minutes.
- families with their possessions stacked out on the road, along with the mothers and children, seeking the safety of a cleared space.
- the menfolk fighting the fires, the loss of several homes in the 1940s.

'Steve' died on the 28th June 1948 aged 71 and his wife Elsie died on the 8th August 1982 aged 99. They are both buried at St. Matthews C. of E. at Windsor.

Their only son Albert attended Marsden Park Public School. He owned a motor bike in his younger days before buying a 1926 Essex tourer, then traded up to a 1928 Essex hard top. He worked all his life at the meatworks and for many years he was the foreman of the skinshed.

He married Laurel Ina Scanlon in c.1932 and they moved into the Scanlon family home at 23 Church Street, Riverstone. The home was actually sited on a 3 acre block bounded by Church Street, George Street and King Street and it was here they reared their five children.

Following the death of grandfather 'Steve' in 1948, the eldest son Ron left this Church Street family home at the age of 12 to live with his grandmother to assist with the running of the farm. Ron recalled though still attending school he had to work hard - ploughing paddocks, sowing seed, reaping, using the chaffcutter, etc. The family ran a large poultry farm and there were cows to be milked. The money gained from selling the eggs and milk and other produce was used to help support the family.

Ron also recalled the disastrous bushfires that swept through the Marsden Park area in 1945. He recalled filling a 44 gallon drum with water from the well and pushing it around in a four wheel billy cart. They saved both houses and fought the spot fires that had started in the barn and sheds with buckets of water and wet bags. He remembered his grandmother in the poultry sheds splashing water over the fowls to save them.

Their only losses were confined to crops and fencing. Not so fortunate were some of their neighbours - the Armstrongs, Ryans, Woodland and Chatham families who lost all their possessions and their homes in the fires. The five children of Albert and Laurel were –

1. Ronald b.12/2/1935
2. Norman b.26/8/1936
3. Eric b.6/2/1939
4. Florence b.6/10/1942
5. Arthur (Mick) b.6/4/1948.

All the children attended Riverstone Public School and Richmond Rural for their secondary education.

Albert J. F. died on the 2nd March 1962, aged 59. His wife Laurel died 10th August 1992, aged 82. Both were buried at St. Matthews C. of E. at Windsor.

Ron as stated previously had moved out to Marsden Park to help his grandmother. When he left school his first outside job was in the fellmongery at 4 pounds per week. He then worked several years in the beefhouse before getting his truck drivers licence, then drove a Riverstone meat delivery van till 1978. During this period he also drove buses on a casual basis for Noel Lakeman-Fiddler, Laurie Bowers, John Coles and also drove the Sunday School bus for many years.

From 1978 to 1988 he was a full time bus driver, first with John Coles then with Busways; he then left to become a bus driver/handyman at Our Lady of Consolation Home at Rooty Hill.

After his marriage to Denise Budden in 1960 they built their first home at 12 Hunter Street where they spent 24 years, and then moved into their new home near the old Shields home in 1984.

Ron has always maintained a strong involvement in community affairs with a role as Santa Claus for 46 years, a role he had the perfect physique for. Not only has he played this role in Riverstone, he has played it for many years for such organisations as the Spastic centre at Allambie Heights, the Far West Children's Home at Manly, and The Little Sisters of the Poor at Drummoyne.

In the 1970s - 80s he also drove the bus that transported Brian Weaver's Music School band when they played at concerts at various retirement villages and other institutions throughout Sydney. Performances were regularly given at the Spastic Centre at Allambie Heights, the Far West Children's Home at Manly, the McCall Garden Colony at Box Hill, the Concord Repatriation Hospital, the RSL Homes at Narrabeen, the Little Sisters of the Poor at Drummoyne, the Masonic Homes at Glenfield, and also at the various Retirement homes in the district. A star performer at these concerts was Siddie Heather and his dancing partner, always a very popular act.

Regular members of the band were Ron and Denise's three eldest children - Debbie and Garth on their piano accordions and Steve on his guitar. Along with their youngest daughter Lisa, the family have continued their community work with their involvement in the 'Learn To Swim' campaigns at the Riverstone pool for more than 20 years.

In 2002 Ron was awarded a Life Membership plaque by Fire Chief Phil Koperburg for his 33 years of voluntary service to the Marsden Park Bush Fire Brigade. Ron was also made an Honorary Member of the Riverstone Swimming Club for driving the group to their various carnivals and functions, Ron driving the bus in an honorary capacity.

In the early 1940s the Neals lived in Crown Road near the Shield's Church Street home and we often walked to the Riverstone school together – Ron and Norm Shields, Clarrie and Ron Neal. Although we had had our breakfast, Ron and myself always headed for the Shields kitchen where we could get an extra slice of toast, made over the open fire, spread with dripping and pepper and salt, and we loved it. Butter was rationed in those days and margarine was unheard of.

Also scarce was sports gear and you had to make your own from whatever materials were available. After school we would play cricket or football in their paddock, a piece of board cut to shape was our bat, and the ball was either made of cork or a tennis ball. The real six-stitch cricket ball was a rare and treasured item in those days.

The football we used was a dried pigs bladder from the meatworks. It was often that Ron would play us three littlies; and what a struggle it was for us to get him down. Ron may well have had the perfect build for the Xmas outfit, but our locally 'made in Riverstone' footballs did not like him at all. The game often ended when Ron fell on the 'ball' and it would burst - it was then a case of -"Mr. Shields, can you get us another ball from the meatworks".

The new bladder was brought home, blown up and hung in the cedar tree near their garage. We had to wait for several days for it to dry before it was ready to use.



The Shields family home, Garfield Road West and their family of Morris cars.

Photo courtesy of Ron Shields.

Compiled by Clarrie Neal from information provided by Ron Shields and his family in 2003.