

**Leongatha and District Historical Society
P O Box 431 Leongatha 3953**



Newsletter

Volume 1 Number 2 August 2004

President : Lola Bailey

Secretary : Lyn Skillern Tel 56686304

Award for Kath Murphy

In the June edition of the RHSV news it was announced that our Kath Murphy was awarded a Royal Historical Society of Victoria Order of Merit. Kath has made a major contribution to the society over the years and we are very proud of her. Kath will be presented with her certificate by Professor Weston Bate at the Mechanics' Institute on Thursday September 2nd at 11 am. This will be the first day of the Daffodil Festival

21 Years at the Mechanics'

In August 1983 the Leongatha and District Historical Society then called the Woorayl Shire Historical Society finally acquired a permanent home. The Shire of Woorayl decided to allow the Historical Society, which was formed in 1964, the use of the Leongatha Mechanics' Institute. The building had been used as a library and billiard saloon and as the Shire had built a new library it was decided to close the billiard saloon and hand the building over to the historical society. The Mechanics' Institute was used as a post office while the post office was being renovated. The Shire President Cr Ted Fisher presented the Society's President Don Clark and Secretary Lyn Skillern the key to the door in early August 1983.

A Dual Celebration of a 21st Birthday

On Sunday August 4th we celebrated the 21st Birthday of member Olivia Skillern, daughter of members Lyn and Rob Skillern. Lyn came out of the hospital a few days after Olivia was born to receive the Mechanics' Institute door key with then President Don Clark. The 21st cake was cut by Olivia with the help of John Fletcher grandson of a society founder, the late Daisy Bacon and Stephen and Michael Clark sons of the late Don Clark.

Feature Articles

Early Pioneer Building Methods used in South Gippsland

by Ian Lester

When European settlers arrived in South Gippsland during the period 1870 to 1890 they faced many difficulties before they became established. The greatest priority was somewhere to live; the South Gippsland climate can be cold and wet for much of the year so some form of shelter was essential. Transport in the early years was very difficult too due to the dense nature of the forest, the hilly terrain and the wet climate, which made the tracks a sea of mud in the wetter months. These conditions limited wheeled transport and made the packhorse or what a person could carry the only means of moving their basic needs. This made the transport of building materials almost impossible. Only small items like nails, screws and hinges could be transported. The tools needed for building also needed to be light and easily transported. Axes, cross-cut saws, mauls, wedges and froes for splitting, broad axes and adzes for shaping were all necessary. Many general purpose tools such as handsaws, hammers, augers, chisels and draw knives were also essential. Many settlers brought tents (See photo 1) with them and used them for a long time after arrival. Even a tent needed a space to be cleared before it could be erected. Clearing, however, continued and produced building materials for a simple dwelling and so these pioneers started building huts. Sawn timber was rare, as there were no saw mills so timber was cut with a pit saw which was a very slow process. Most buildings were constructed of round logs, spars or split timber from larger trees.

Most settlers were novice builders so building methods varied enormously as did the materials used. These materials were determined by what was available near the site. Some built log cabins in the North American style, where suitable trees were available. This method used straight tree trunks about 6 to 8 inches in diameter, laid parallel above the previous layer. The logs were notched at the corners to reduce the gap between them, which was then packed with clay or mud mixed with fibre to reduce draughts. (See photo 2)

Another method used a frame of round poles set into the ground with the space between being filled with split slabs or bark depending on what was available. (See photo 3)

On the coastal plains country where there were fewer suitable trees, many wattle and daub structures were built. These were constructed using round poles fairly close together and between these small flexible branches were woven similar to a cane basket. This was then packed with mud or clay, plastered with cow manure if available and then whitewashed. (See Photo 4)

Floors in early buildings were mostly bare earth packed as firmly as possible. The earth may have been treated with oil or animal blood if available to reduce dust. Mats were placed in appropriate places for example next to beds.

Roofs were often constructed using bark from the stringy bark eucalypt. A large tree could easily provide sheets of bark 10-12 feet long and 6 feet wide. This bark covered large areas quite quickly but had to be quite steep to be effective. Once on the roof bark was held down with wire, raw hide thongs and a frame of round poles. The main problem with bark was that it was not durable in the South

Gippsland climate and may have only lasted a few years. (See Photo 2 and 3) Shingles were probably the most popular long term roofing material although much preparation work was required. They were made from straight grained, free splitting timber such as mountain ash, were about 2 to 3 feet long and 4 to 5 inches wide, tapered at one end and then nailed to the roof frame. Well-made shingle roofs were very weather resistant and durable, possibly lasting several decades. (See Photo either split or sawn with shingle or corrugated iron roofs. Corrugated iron was available from the early days of settlement but it was rarely used because it was too difficult to transport. Later as availability improved corrugated iron was often used over a shingle roof as it began to deteriorate giving an excellent result as the shingles acted as insulation. Chimneys and fireplaces would have used the same construction as the dwellings. Timber constructions would have been lined with a sheet steel of some sort such as discarded kerosene tins or galvanised iron. Lighting in early dwellings would have come from the fireplace or a slush lamp, an open container of animal fat with a floating wick. The light was poor and the smell rather offensive particularly if the fat was rancid. Later the kerosene lamps of the

5) Another roofing material was thatch with sword grass being the most likely material used. This method was still used many years later to protect bagged onions stacked in the open. (See Photo 6) Many of the second generation buildings, including additions to the originals used a stud wall construction with timber weatherboard walls and wooden floors. The timber for the studs, top and bottom plates, bearers, joists and rafters could be wick and pressure variety would have been used until electricity was connected. Candles, either home made or commercially made were another lighting source. Cooking was done outside in the open on an open fire, inside the building in the fireplace or in a separate kitchen building. This provided protection for the family's possessions in case the cooking fire burnt down the building. All of the building methods mentioned in this article are represented at he Coal Creek Heritage Village Korumburra.

Unsung Heroes

**From a talk given by John Murphy
at the Pioneer Church Mardan on
May 30th 2004**

Earnest Egginton Music Teacher

Earnest Egginton migrated from England to Australia at the turn of the century but finding his musical skills in little demand in the Melbourne Metropolitan area he decide to branch out into the country. For forty years from 1905 until 1945 Egginton left his wife and family in Murrumbena and boarded the Monday morning train at Flinders Street bound for South Gippsland

in search of pupils. Spending a day in Korumburra he proceeded by train to Ruby where he walked 3 miles to Fairbank. Here junior members of the McLennan, Calder, Black, Beard and Bawden families would be awaiting the weekly visit from the music teacher. These families eventually provided Egginton with a pony for the long up hill climb to Fairbank - a mode of conveyance strange to the city born musician, but who, after several mishaps mastered the equestrian art. Competent in the classics, he was also proficient as a dance musician and was able to coach the young Bill Bawden of Wild Dog Valley in the latest dance hits. Bill Bawden incidentally mastered the art of bagpipe playing under his guidance - a skill that was to give great enjoyment to Leongatha citizens in subsequent decades. Travelling into Leongatha the following day he would teach morning, afternoon and evening in a small room attached to the Mechanics' Institute at Leongatha.

As word of his talents spread around the district he later extended his journey to Stony Creek in 1913 where he gave lessons in the tearooms to the Benn family (Ivan, Vera, Dorrie and Connie). To cater for families in the Dumbalk North district he would leave the train at Meeniyan and then proceed by the mail coach to the Dodd family home where he stayed overnight teaching both piano and violin to the younger family members. In the 1920's and 1930's his pupils included members of the Trease, Standsfield, Barton, Ashenden, Webb and Furphy families. In the 1930's and 1940's he taught from a room in St Peter's parish hall in Church St Leongatha and each year his pupils would perform before an admiring audience of parents and grandparents at a concert usually held in the Memorial Hall. His forty years of music teaching in this district left us with a legacy of trained musicians who have likewise been able to share their talents with their friends and communities.

Now Egginton never claimed that he was the only music teacher in the area - there were certainly others. For example the Sisters of St Joseph at the Leongatha convent taught piano and violin for many decades after the opening of their school in 1915. But for long time dedication, persistence and service to the community Egginton must be reckoned among the greatest of the unsung heroes of the district

The McKinnons of Mardan

James McKinnon married Ethel Milner in 1901 and their home which was situated close to the present road became the site of the post office and telephone exchange that was to serve the district for the next half century. Initially it began as a loose bag service where mail could be deposited and collected after being sent to and from Leongatha three times a week. In 1907 it became a Receiving Office for which a small sum was paid depending on the number of letters inward and outward.

Publications in the pipeline

Then in 1915 a manual telephone exchange was installed at the McKinnon homestead and by 1917 there were eight party lines connected on which there were 23 subscribers. James McKinnon was dedicated to the extension of the telephone service as he was convinced of its value in the case of emergency and also as a means of alleviating the sense of isolation experienced by women in the long Gippsland winters. Most of us here today can recall the familiar words of the operator on these manual exchanges viz "*Three minutes! Are you extending?*" I often think Telstra could double its profits by the use of these five words, especially when I see teenagers chatting away on the phone by the half hour.

Party lines faults were the responsibility of those on the line but James McKinnon would often travel out along the line to fix the fault himself while his family attended to the calls at the manual exchange. The official hours of opening of the exchange were from 8 am to 1 pm Monday to Saturday but unofficially it was open 24 hours a day 7 days a week. Officially there was an after hours opening fee of one shilling and sixpence (which in today's currency would be the equivalent of \$3) but the McKinnon family never charged the caller for opening as they considered it to be a public service to their neighbours. So this family could well be considered unsung members of the community for their continued operation of the exchange and post office up until 1958 when it was replaced by an automatic exchange located near the Mardan South hall. The cairn commemorating the McKinnon family was unveiled after the service in the grounds of the Pioneer Church

Lyn Skillern is preparing a kit on pioneers in South Gippsland for secondary schools

Pat Spinks is writing a history of the Mt Eccles area for the centenary of the Mt Eccles Hall

School groups studying local history or the use of historic evidence material are most welcome to visit our society. Guest speakers are also available. Contact Lyn Skillern 56686304

School Groups Welcome

Note. The Annual General Meeting of the Leongatha and District Historical Society will be held on Wednesday August 18^h at 8 pm

Simom Longstaff from the Wonthaggi Historical Society will be attending our September meeting to show us his award winning DVD on the State Coal Mine. Simon will also be explaining how he organised the making of the DVD.

A wattle and daub house

A thatched roof on onions 1930's

Mr E Egginton

Cutting the 21st birthday cake are John Fletcher, Stephen Clark, Michael Clark and Olivia Skillern.

A house of split timber, palings and shingles at Buffalo in the 1880's

A primitive bark hut

A group of members at the celebration. Back John Murphy, Lola Bailey, Audrey Hall, Kath Murphy. Front Lyn Skillern, Olivia Skillern, Lorna Dowel and Margaret Stokes.