



BRUNSWICK VALLEY HISTORICAL SOCIETY INC

MUSEUM

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Pioneering Brunswick

(From *The Tweed Daily*, Saturday, March 19, 1932)

Few strangers to the North Coast who might happen to see the smiling, fertile farms of the Mullumbimby district, would realise that 50 years ago the place consisted of dense, standing scrub; that Mullumbimby itself did not exist then. Yet such is the case, and some of the men who pioneered the Mullumbimby district are still alive.

Fifty years ago practically the only settlement in the Brunswick district was at Brunswick Heads, from where small vessels loaded the timber that formed the principal wealth of the district in those days. The town of Mullumbimby did not come into existence until the advent of the railway line in the 'Nineties.

*Some idea of the difficulties of the pioneers of the district may be gathered from the following story, told to the "Tweed Daily" by **Robert Bridger**, of Murwillumbah. It was 50 years ago last month that Mr. Bridger selected in the Mullumbimby Creek district, towards the foot of what is now known as Laverty's Gap. Portion of the property is still in the hands of his brother, Mr. **James Bridger**.*

*It was the night of February 1, 1882, that my father and I left Maclean, Clarence River, by the s.s. Florence McKenzie, for Chatsworth, on the North Arm, to meet a company that was setting out in search of land on the Richmond, Brunswick, or Tweed Rivers. It was on the morning of the 2nd that we started with the line of Murray coaches, the driver of the three horses being the late Mr. **Dave Butters**, who passed away at Murwillumbah only recently. The horses were changed at the half-way house, where refreshments, or a good old rum, could be obtained, but our company was off the rum.*

After we left the half way the going was still through bog until we came within eight miles of Woodburn, and it was a matter of getting out to lighten the load for the horses to pull the coach out of some of the holes. It was an awful track, but the driver got us to Woodburn in time to catch the Sarah Hickson, which was due at 1 p.m. My father said to Dave: "You can have the credit of beating the drivers of Cobb and Co., for I used to shoe their horses when I lived at Bathurst in the 60's."

*After dinner we boarded the boat for Ballina and reached there by 6 p.m. We obtained a camp for the night at Gray's Hotel, a very fine place built of timber from Emigrant Creek, pit-sawn by the Gray brothers. The next day, Saturday, we met **Joe Gray**, a brother of our host, who lived at Emigrant Creek. He offered to show us land at 10/- per man, so we obtained a supply of bread, butter and tinned beat (sic), and off we went, to camp in the bush or scrub for the first time in my life. The creek was very boggy, having been cut up by the bullock teams.*

Early Risers

We arrived next morning (Sunday) at the old hut, which was built of slabs and shingles, but it was something like 9 o'clock before we saw the sun owing to the dense scrub by which we were surrounded. I awoke about 5 a.m., got up without noise, made a fire and put on the billy cans for coffee. By 6.30 I had things going well. One of the company said, "You are an early riser, Bob." "Yes," I said, "when at home I am out at 3 a.m. with my brother, we wake others to go swimming till sunrise, and then get to work in the blacksmith's shop by 7 a.m." The rest had now begun to move and by 7 o'clock we were all down at breakfast, which was anything but a table cloth spread.

*Our company was composed of religious men in the person of **Angus McInnes**, a very devout man, **Tom Bassett** and his two sons **William** and **Edward, George Gray**, my Sunday-school teacher, and my father and myself. The grace was said by Angus McInnes and I think it must have been in Gaelic, in which he was very fluent, for the only word I recognised was "Amen." After breakfast Angus took Holy Writ out of his pocket, a psalm was sung, and the older ones prayed.*

After all the preliminaries we young fellows had a look around. We came across a lot of hoops and staves of casks and wondered how they came there. We each took an armful to boil the billy for lunch, and it was not until the next day that we found what they were doing there. The casks had contained old Jamaica rum. The head of the cask was knocked in and a jam tin left for all hands to take a draught; it did not matter whether they were black or white, male or female, they helped themselves.

The next day (Monday) we found Joe Gray, made arrangements with him, and off we went. The country we went through is now known as Teven, and without a doubt it was good, so, quite satisfied, we got back by dinner time and all stayed for the meal. There were seven of us and it was a good dinner, the first of a kind I had ever eaten. It was like rabbit, but turned out to be paddy-melon. The only fault was that there were no carrots.

After dinner we returned to Ballina and I told my father that before I would bury myself there I would see the Brunswick, so off my father and I set. That night we camped at a place at North Creek, seven miles away, with a Mr. Hickey. The next morning we had breakfast at 5 a.m. and then walked along the beach through the three-mile scrub, along Tallow Beach, and camped in another hut, built of cedar. So we put the night in at Byron Bay.

With the morning, to our surprise came a man, Tom McGuire, looking for bullocks that had strayed, but we had not seen them. The billy was boiled and we had our humble breakfast. A friend was there the evening before in the person of **Tom Allen**, who was well-known to us on the Clarence.

Dangerous Crossing

Setting out from Byron Bay we came to the Belongil, which we had been told was a dangerous place to cross owing to the quick sands. We carefully sounded it and after a delay of two hours we got over and trudged then 10 miles to Brunswick Heads. There we saw a ship named *The Drover* kedged out. The ships that traded to the Brunswick then were the *James*, *Brilliant*, and *White Cloud*, the last mentioned coming in over the bar.

We crossed to the South Arm in time for dinner, and after making ourselves known to the host and hostess, Mr. and Mrs. **Robert Marshall**, we soon had our requirements for land satisfied. About 2 p.m. we started for Mullumbimby Creek and Yankie Creek as we were told there were hundreds of acres there adjoining the selections of **William Grant Law**, in the gorge of Montecollum, Peter's Grass, and Buderim Mountains, or Hell hole, now under the name Mooyabil. We got in touch with old **Tom Doran**, who used to pull a boat for the butchers, McAulay and McLeod, on the Clarence. He was a fine old man. Short set of build, one could not see his eyes, mouth, and part of his nose for the hair that was growing on his face.

Quite satisfied with the district we got back to Brunswick Heads and then walked north along the beach and camped at Billinudgel, at another cedar hut. We then crossed McLeod's Plain and eventually arrived at Murwillumbah. We lodged at Dockety's Hotel, somewhere about where the new Norco factory now is, but which at that time a sugar cane farm. The next day I signed my "death warrant" in the presence of Magistrate Joshua Bray, planked down on the table £75 as 5 p.c. deposit on 300 acres, undertaking to live in the wilds of the scrub with the green flock and wonga pigeons and the scrub turkey for five years.

Crossing the Tweed

That over we crossed the old ferry on the Tweed at a spot about where Mr. W.A. Proudfoot's home now stands and where ferry punts are docked and went down the river bank to our old and respected friends, Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Edward Pratt.

We lodged there that night and then made our way back towards the Clarence. Father and I lodged with old Tom Doran for the night and then set out for Lismore over Montecollum through Eureka and Clunes. There we met **Mr. Jarvis**, whose son, **James**, who still resides in the Tweed District, ran the mail. A very fine, honest boy he was, and as a mail carrier people could trust him with anything. The track then was in an awful state. The only good portion of the road between Lismore and Murwillumbah was from Bexhill to Lismore, which was well macadamised, and from the old brick hill into where Murwillumbah railway station now is, but which in those days was under sugar cane.

We returned to the Clarence and I prepared myself for my new life on the land. I equipped myself with wedges, maul rings, shingle throw, running out axe, mortising axe, and a socket chisel for a bar to sink post holes. In the meantime, hearing that Mr. W.G. Law was shifting by team to the Brunswick, I managed to get my belongings on his wagon at North Creek, at the foot of the three-mile scrub. A **Mr. Coleman** took the case I packed from North Creek to the **W.G. Law** camp. There was Mr. Law and his family, **John**, **Lizzie** and **Emily**, also **W.** and **E. Bassett**, **Tom Allen**, **Bill McKay**, and

myself - nine all told. It was a very steep climb. We camped half-way in the scrub that night and the next night at Byron bay. Then Allen, McKay and myself went on to Brunswick Heads and then to Mullumbimby Creek. I camped with Tom Doran next day and went up to where I had selected, and measured out five acres to fell.

It was the second summer, however, before we got a fire, owing to wet weather. In the meantime I did a lot of lopping, packing and burning, clearing a place on which to build, and managed to erect a small place.

The Honeymoon

By June 1883 I had returned to the Clarence to get married; and talk about wet times and rough! After the wedding we left by the s.s. Mackenzie for Chatsworth, and the next morning went by coach with Dave Butters and his three-in-hand. The coach had a double stream of white ribbons to let folks know a newly-married couple were passengers. When we got to the half-way house I gave Dave "the possible" to treat the other passengers, and I must say it was a lively half-way to Woodburn. There we obtained dinner and then boarded the s.s. Sarah Hickson for Ballina, where we arrived at 6 p.m.

We obtained lodgings at Mrs. McKirby's boarding house and waited for my brother James, now at Mullumbimby. My brother had left home early on the morning we were married, crossed on the South Arm punt and then The Elbow, which is now named Lawrence, went through the bush to the Flying Horse, then to Lismore and on to Ballina. He arrived about 7 p.m. Next day we set out for the selection and stayed at Mr. Coleman's place along the beach. Next morning Jim started very early and my wife took to the saddle, which we had fixed as a side saddle, and we arrived that night at Brunswick Heads and stayed at Marshall's Hotel.

My brother and I went up to the selection and had a straightening up. Then we returned to catch the mail boy, **James Jarvis**, who showed my brother the country to Lismore.

My wife and I left after dinner for our new home, which was built of cherry wood and iron wood - two of the most quickly decaying woods in the scrub, but which would last about five years when used for slabs, nailed top and bottom. Our next woman neighbour was Mrs **James Jarrett**. The Jarretts had a family of three - **Alex, James and Ernest**. Mr Jarrett was a timber getter (cedar and rosewood). The family lived about two miles from us and the nearest family to Mrs Jarrett was Mr. and Mrs. **W. Reilly**. Mr. Reilly built a boat for me to bring goods from The Heads to Mullumbimby, as it was my practice to get six months' supply at a time.

The Nearest Neighbours

Other settlers not far from the Reilly family were Mr. and Mrs. **John Forde** (sic), Mr. and Mrs. **Robert Reddacliff**, and Mr. and Mrs. **Thomas Torrens**. These were the only women folk who lived within four miles of us. The roads then were very bad owing to the heavy rainfall and heavy traffic of bullock teams. We would let one another know we were alive by blowing bullock horns. I still have mine to-day

After a while a progress association was formed, the chairman of which was Mr. **John Macgregor** and his brother **Alick** was secretary and treasurer. We started out to obtain a breakwater at Brunswick Heads and roads in the district. The breakwater never came, but the road work went along well.

One of the sights at Brunswick Heads in those days was the great surf work getting the logs out to the ships, which were owned by Hagen and Kessell (probably means Hogan and Kethel.)

After Christmas 1887, my father James Bridger Senr, came to us quite unexpectedly, with a spare horse and my mother's side-saddle for my wife to journey to the Clarence. By that time the scrub was being felled for roads and 20ft. cleared for traffic with horse tracks at the end of the fallen portion of roads, felled and cleared.

I did many a walk from Brunswick Heads to the Richmond Heads and then took the boat to Woodburn and coach to the North Arm, Chatsworth, thence to Maclean, as rations would run out. There might be a ship out to sea with plenty on board, but the surf boat could not get out. The men for the surf boat were **James, John, and Jacob Fisher, and Guss Cooper**. Sometimes **Robert and James Smith**, brothers to Charlie Smith, of the tick gate at Burringbar, would take their turn in the boat, and none of the men were under 5ft. 10ins. to 6ft. in height. The coxswain was **Robert Marshall**, the publican, and his height was 5ft. 8ins. and he could outweigh any of them.

Huge Trees

I may say I saw a cedar tree of an enormous size that grew on the bank of Wilson's Creek. It contained about 40,000ft. It was 9ft through. There were 12 logs and the trunk was cut into 7ft lengths. The butt log was sent to Melbourne for exhibition. The top was a fork and the two limbs were cut for about 600ft each. Mr. Robert Marshall was the owner, and

this tree grew on the late **Sam Laverly's** (Senr.) property. A pine tree that grew on my property was felled by Mr. **Robert Webber** (now a dairy farmer living at Crabbe's Creek). It was 100 feet to the first limb and the thickness was 7 feet where it was cut off at the stump. There was also a teak tree growing where I built my house and from it hung a vine which when cut, was eleven inches thick. I burnt the tree down not knowing its value. The butt was 9ft. across and the length of the tree to the first limb was 78 feet. The timber to build my house was taken off my property by the late **John Godding** (aka Goding, who also built the Catholic Church in 1900).

Sugar Cane Growing

After I put my time in - five years and four months - I left for the Clarence to work on my father's farm at the North Arm, Bolorobo. This property was held by **Mr. M'Aulay** and his sons. At one time they had a sugar mill, but owing to its failure had to sell up, the sons (**John, Sandy, and Frank**) coming to Tyagarah. They had 640 acres and a person by the name **Atkins** erected a sugar mill on the property. When I selected it was to grow sugar cane, for which, at that time, the little mills on the Clarence were getting £40 per ton. It was a good inducement to grown cane. However, it was nearly three years before I got a fire through my falling owing to the wet seasons and by then cane was out of the question owing to the low price. To put in my time for five years I had to turn my efforts to something else, so I grew grass with the idea of dairying at a later date. The Macgregor brothers had just made a start with dairying, sending their butter in kegs to Sydney by the boats from Brunswick Heads.

In 1900 I returned to my selection and went in for dairying. In the meantime the place was allowed to look after itself.

(On the 6Feb1897 the *Brunswick River Report* in the *Northern Star* recorded that Mr **Robert Bridger** has returned to his selection at Mullumbimby Creek after an absence of some years at cane growing on the Clarence. He says he would have been much better off had he remained on the Brunswick. A month later he ...had the misfortune to cut his right leg very severely with an adze... and sewed-up the cut himself.)

[Methodist **Robert Bridger** was born on the Hawkesbury in 1861, the eldest son of James and Sarah, nee Moore. His oft mentioned wife was Susan, nee Rowles, married 1883 Maclean. They had 5 children, the first 4 births registered at Maclean 1884-95 and the last at Murbah in 1898. He was used as cannon fodder in the entertaining Macgregor/Woodrow 'war-of-words', **John Macgregor** of Myocum reporting via the *Northern Star* in Feb1896 that *Mr R. Bridger from Chatsworth, Clarence, owns property near Mullumbimby and is up inspecting. He may transfer his business here...*, contradicted a week later by **Stan Woodrow** of Mullumbimby Creek in the *Tweed and Brunswick Advocate: The report that R. Bridger is on the way to take up dairying is false. He has not been within 50 miles of Mullumbimby in the last 6 years.* Prior to this he didn't rate a mention in any of the local newspapers, implying he wasn't active in Bruns/Mullum affairs and was too busy working on his farm, and presumably off-farm to generate an income. In 1900 he became active in the Mullum Prog Assoc, becoming vice president in 1902, and at a meeting in Feb1906 at the height of the Byron/Mullum conflict, moved "*That the name of the new Shire be changed to Mullumbimby*". His son Herbert died 1918 France, by which time the Bridgers were living at Burringbar, where he died 2yrs after this article.

His Presbyterian friends **William** and **Edwin Bassett** followed a similar route. In May1881 William, with **James Mills, Robert Webber, John Ford** and **William House** staked a claim as the pioneer Brunswick selectors, William choosing the saddle Road area and hanging-in for the compulsory 5yrs before returning to the Clarence, but attracted back at the start of the dairy boom in 1895. In 1882 his younger brother **Edwin Bassett** selected next to Bridger, on the northern side of Mullum Creek, and died in Mullum 1905, his wife Bertha (nee Jones, married 1888 Ulmarra) carrying on the farm.

Tom Allen became Bridger's western neighbour at Mullum Creek, directly across which was **Bill McKay**, both 1882 selectors along with Bridger. **Neil** and **Allan McInnes**, the sons of Presbyterian Angus, selected at Tyagarah 1881 and 1882 respt., Allan outlasting Neil.

Most of the other people mentioned went on to become prominent Brunswick Valley personalities and played a large part in shaping what was to become Mullumbimby:

- The oldest, Catholic Irishman **Thomas Doran**, came from the Clarence to be the first selector in the vicinity of the original cedar-getter's camp, adjacent to the golf course, in June 1881, apparently with **John Macleod/McLeod** as an initial silent partner. He died at the home of his carer, James Gollan of Main Arm, in 1911, aged 84, the funeral attracting many pioneers, amongst whom were Pall-bearers T. Torrens, W. Law, J. Ford, J. Sherry, J. Kirk, W.J. Reilly;
- His neighbour, Presbyterian Irishman **Thomas Torrens** Snr, landed with brothers William, Alex and John in the 1860s, moved to the Clarence sometime after marriage to Catholic Ellen O'Brien and selected at Myocum in Jul81. Ellen died in 1883 and became the first person buried in the newly proclaimed Brunswick Heads cemetery. Thomas subsequently lived with his son William in Queensland, thence son Tom at Billinudgel before moving to Ballina,

where he was given an Orangeman's funeral upon his death in 1921, aged 93. (Son Tom became a Ballina Alderman, while son John, who married Margaret Crabbe of Crabbes Creek, was Ballina Mayor 1922-28);

- Thomas Torrens' neighbour was Anglican Englishman **Robert Walter Reddacliff** who landed in 1866 with his brothers John and James, married Susannah McAulay of the Clarence in 1872 and selected at Myocum in Dec1881. His selection became the community focus upon the establishment of the post office and blacksmithery. Both Robert and Susannah were buried at Brunswick Heads, 1934 and 1936 respectively. Robert's brother John selected next to Tom Doran in 1885 and sold to Tom Torrens' nephew, the very prominent Thomas W. Torrens, in ~1891, eventually settling at Bruns where he died in 1903. Brother James ran the boarding house at Brunswick Heads, where he died in 1915, aged 78;
- Sandwiched between Bridger and Doran was legendary **William Grant Law**, a bullocky of some renown, who came from the Clarence to select in Aug1881. He sold his farm, 'Longfield', to Charles Belson in 1900, but remained as a sharefarmer for 3yrs before moving to Main Arm, where his place became the centre of Presbyterian activities. He died in 1936, aged 89;
- Anglican Englishman **John Ford** arrived on the Clarence in 1877 to become the nephew-in-law of William Grant Law and one of the first selectors on the northern outskirts of Mullum, and amongst the first to champion the cause of the Salvation Army. He joined the Mullum colony at Kingaroy in 1912, but subsequently retired back to the Tweed where he died in 1941, aged 84;
- John Ford's neighbour was Catholic Irishman **William John Reilly** who first started visiting the Brunswick in 1872 as a seaman on the cedar ships. He selected on the northern border of what was to become Mullumbimby in 1881 and went on to become prominent in the Progress Association and a foundation alderman of the Mullumbimby Municipal Council. He died in 1923, aged 78, and is memorialized with 'Reilly's Hill' overlooking Mullum;
- On the southern border of Mullum was Reilly's great friend and 1881 selector, Ballina-born **James Jarrett**, whose son Ernest wears the distinction as the first white child born on the Brunswick. James died at Hasting's Point in 1912, aged 58, and William Reilly, the region's leading anti-sectarian, travelled up to deliver the eulogy.

At Brunswick Heads James Jarrett's uncle, **Charles Jarrett**, played a large part in the cedar trade, along with Englishman **Robert Marshall**, credited with the leading role in establishing the place as the district's first permanent white settlement. In ~1867 'Uncle Bob's' wife, **Elizabeth Malone**, became the first permanent whitewoman, her niece **Janet Malone** marrying **Robert Smith**, the first Bruns storekeeper who, in partnership with **Robert Webber**, opened a branch shop at 'Molebunbie' in 1882. Keeping the lines of communication open was **James Jarvis**, alternating with his father George and brothers William and Charles, of the Clunes-based 'Royal Mail Line of Coaches', various members of the family becoming Mullum residents, James himself a star of the Brunswick Cricket team of 1891.]

Update wef 6Dec2016

Robert Bridger became a favourite of the Tweed Daily, which again highlighted his adventures in articles on 29Mar33 and 19Jul33, and a comprehensive obituary on 20 and 22Sep33.

Tweed Daily Wed 29Mar1933: *Pioneer's Retrospect. Early Days on Tweed and Brunswick.... It was 51 years ago on February 2 that my father and I came to the North Coast, where I was to take up 300 acres on Mullumbimby Creek joining Mr **William Grant Law's** 300 acres on his west boundary....*

*I have seen some severe droughts and big floods in my time, and I used to walk knee-deep in water to see **John McLeod** and **William House**. W. House sold his property as town allotments, whilst a part of McLeod's property also has been included in the municipality. I was down that way recently and the district looked well. A good deal of the scrub has given way to grasslands and dairy herds.*

*In the early days, about 1883 or '84, **Angus Gillies** came to where I lived to go shooting turkeys. He had a Scotch terrier to hunt them. We went out one day and Angus got 20, while I got 17. We brought them homes and salted them down into a butter keg. Not one was wasted. Angus said he had 80 salted down.*

*As I gazed over the district under Montecollum and Peters' Grass, on my recent visit, I remembered the time when it was covered with lawyer vine and stinging trees, besides the numerous fig, teak, iron-bark and rosewood trees growing there. It is truly wonderful what changes time impels, for I watched the survey of the railway being put through and the creation of the Byron Bay jetty. The roads at that time were quagmires, but now they are well-surfaced. Instead of the cedar-getters' jinkers, we have modern motor transport. It is all quite different from horseback and walking, which was how my father and I left old **Tom Doran's** hut for Lismore.*

*We passed over Montecollum and crossed Wilson's Creek, which was partly in flood. We finally reached Bexhill, where we stayed at **Dan Withers'** hotel for the night. My father's left ankle was injured and he nursed it along with a piece of lawyer vine placed under the foot and then looped through his hand.*

*We rose early next morning to catch the boat, "Sarah Hickson," down to Woodburn. Next we went over to the North Arm at Chatswood with **Dave Butters**, who drove the Murray Coach. That night we stayed with the hotelkeeper, **John***

Cosgrove, and the following day set off for Maclean by the boat, "Florence McKenzie." At Maclean I had three months' grace prior to taking up my selection....

It was in 1884 when I managed to get a horse to ride for my supplies and mail. At that time it took from 4 o'clock in the morning until 3 in the afternoon to get back from Brunswick Heads and cross Pipe Clay Crossing down by **Robert Reddacliff's** blacksmith shop, then up the Grass where the Mullumbimby racecourse now is.

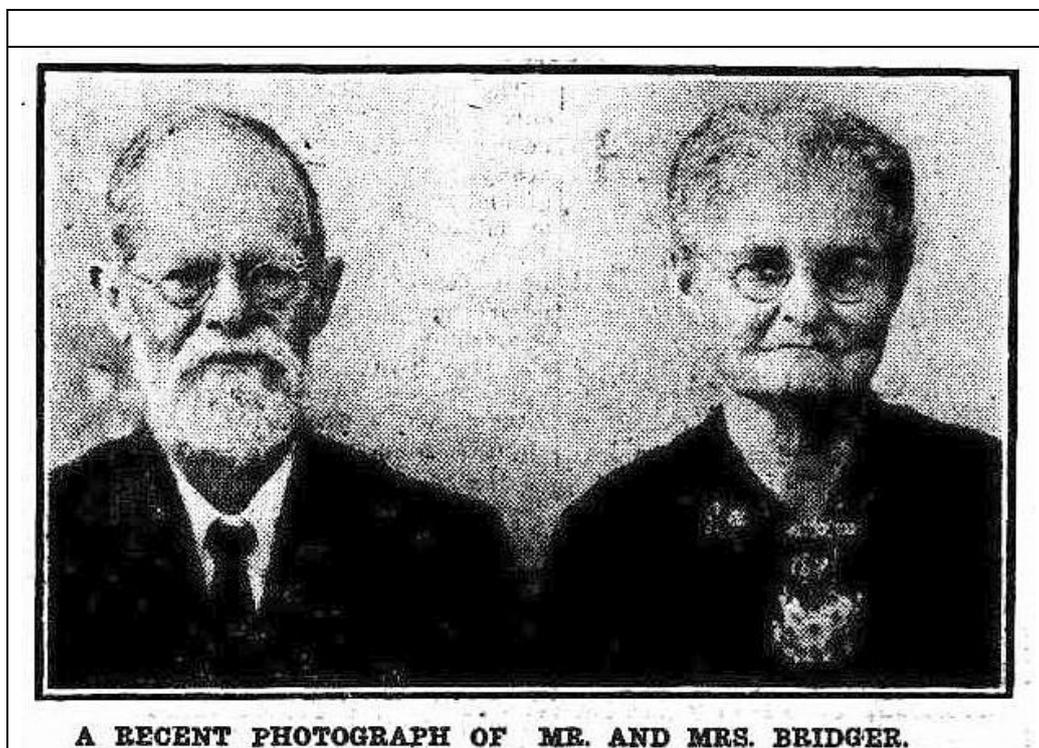
Tweed Daily Wed 19Jul1933: *Pioneers of the Brunswick. Golden Wedding. Mr and Mrs **Robert Bridger**.*

Married by the Rev Thomas Hood at the home of the bridegroom's parents at Maclean, Clarence River, 50 years ago on July 17, 1883, Mr and Mrs R. Bridger celebrated their Golden Wedding at their residence, East Murwillumbah, on Saturday night last.

*Mr Bridger is now 72 and Mrs Bridger, who was Miss **Susan Rowles**, is 68. Mr Bridger is the eldest of the family of seven of the late Mr and Mrs James Bridger, and was born at Yarramundie, Hawkesbury River. Mrs Bridger also is the eldest of the family of seven of the late Mr and Mrs W. Rowles, Palmer's Creek, Clarence River....*

His father was blacksmith at Maclean but the business was later taken over by a brother, Benjamin. Mr Bridger senr then went to Bolorobo, North Arm, Chatsworth Island, Clarence River, to a farm of his own. He died there at the age of 76 years.

There were five children of the marriage. One son Herbert, was killed in the Great War. The others are: Edward (Queensland) and William James (Upper Burringbar); Mrs E. Brown (Murwillumbah) and Mrs H.W. Beamish (Melbourne)....



Tweed Daily Sat 22Sep1934: '*Late **Robert Bridger**. Early Eighties On Brunswick.*'

*When the late Mr Robert Bridger... first made contact with the Brunswick the town of Mullumbimby was non-existent, the commercial centre of the small Brunswick community of the early eighties being Brunswick Heads. It was not until the railway came through a decade later that Mullumbimby commenced to grow..., and goes on for half a page repeating much of the above, with the addition that *The late Mr Bridger 24 years ago removed to Burringbar, where he had acquired a farm, and there he and Mrs Bridger lived until their removal to East Murwillumbah eight years ago. Over the last three months, however, the couple had lived with their son, William, at Upper Burringbar, owing to the failing health of the late Mr Bridger. At this time brother James was still a resident of Mullumbimby.**