



BRUNSWICK VALLEY HISTORICAL SOCIETY INC

MUSEUM

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Early Richmond River History

The Mullumbimby Star July 18th, 1929

The reminiscences of Mr J.T. Johnson, who passed away a few weeks ago, at Byron Bay, furnish some interesting incidents in the early history of the Richmond River district. The late Mr Johnson lived for a number of years on the Brunswick, where he was well-known. Members of his family in the persons of Mesdames Borrowdale and Lattimer and Mr Sam Johnson still reside in the district, but were unaware that their father was engaged in anything so important as writing the history of his life. The only member of the family who was aware of the fact was Mr F.G. Borrowdale, in whom the old gentleman confided one day, and who, in going through his papers after his death, came across the following interesting sidelights of the early days of the Richmond.

The story is written in his own words:-

"I was born on September 21, 1849 at Morpeth on the Hunter River. Schooling was very primitive in those days, but I went until 12 years of age. Two years later I drove a team of bullocks for a neighbour, getting 2/- a week and a plug of tobacco every Saturday. As I was strong I later got a rise to 15s a week and put in six months at this job. I then learned to mow and press hay and worked about the district until I was 19 years of age and then I was advised by a neighbour to go north, where "specs" were good. His brother was up there and I was to introduce myself to him but in all my future travels in the North, I never once came across that neighbour's brother.

I started for the Richmond in August 1869 in company with three others, George Bryant and Harry and Robert Priddle, and we came in a schooner, as they called her, but she was more like a barque with her long masts and bulk of canvas. I think the name was the Wyreema. We reached Ballina after five days from Newcastle and I was not sorrow to get on to land. I used to sip coffee, when I could raise my head on board, so that on going round Ballina (which was not much of a place then) I looked for a good meal and found it – the first for five days.

I went back to my mates and reported that Ballina was not much of a place, but there seemed to be plenty of money about. I told them that I went into a yard there and a chap named Joe was 'laying £100 he could head them.'

There was plenty of money and plenty of rum. We did not stay long at Ballina as two of my mates were going to work a farm for their father and the other fellow and myself intended to get a station each if we could. My chum got one and asked me to give him a hand to clear a bit of it and put up a humpy – that was on Dungarubba station. We worked for three weeks and then we became dissatisfied. One day I came in with three or four boars' tusks and said, "Look here George, this doesn't look too good for us without a gun." "O, have those pigs teeth like that?" he asked. I asked him had he not seen a boar with tusks and he replied, "Not like them." That was enough for him and he went to the boss and told him. The boss explained to him that he could not have held that land anyway for it was a reserve. My mate got his money back, and we carried the goods back to our old friends who had a great laugh at our expense. We stayed a few days there felling scrub and I got to know something about this work.

I started off then looking for another job, and got one in company with a great number of others at the elbow, afterwards known as Swan Bay. I spent four months there scrub whacking and doing a little fencing, and sometimes in the evening we would go with guns after wild fowls for the meat was very salty, though cheap. We could buy a bullock of 800 or 900 lbs for about £3/10/-.

I worked on there until Christmas of that year and then, as I thought, I said good-bye to the Richmond forever. I caught the same old craft back to Sydney where we arrived in three days with a good north-easter behind us. I thought it was good to see so many women of our own color, as the backs were plentiful then on the north. I soon went onto the Hunter and go back to the old work, but I grew dissatisfied again and when an old friend asked me to go to the Richmond I was with him. We left on March 2, 1870, to go overland with teams of cattle. We made good headway for the first few days, but thereafter we were sometimes two or three weeks flood-bound in the one spot. We kept heading along, however, but finally had to put into Armidale for rations. Black sugar was 3d per lb and coarse salt 8d per lb, so we just got sufficient rations to carry us on to Grafton. We met three families going north from the Williams River so we put all the cattle together and came on to Grafton. The river there was in flood but after some days we go the cattle over and then we again separated.

We made a bee line for the Rock mouth, now Woodburn, and arrived there on June 13, 1870, four months on a six week trip, if decent weather had been our lot. I toured the river in search of work, but not even a day's work was offering. Finally, Henry and John Baker and myself got on to the sawing, and got a crust from that, and then on to pine cutting. We go between 200,000 and 300,000 feet and then our money gave out, and rations were stopped. We tried to sell some of the pine. We sold about £10's worth and that gave us a start and we chartered the "Schoolboy" and got 120,000 feet away in her and waited four months for our money. We got another load away and did not have to wait so long this time for payment. This was 1871, and I was "going strong". We looked for something better then and got a job hauling cedar on Jiggi Jiggi Creek, and made £100 on that little job. That led us on to cedar getting and we got a "darkie" to go with us, but he turned us down after a couple of trips. We got hold of another one then and he took us to Hanging Rock Creek, and we got a fair amount of cedar from there. We sold it to Antone Cotalove.

We went over the range to Nerang Creek – the white men called it Fossett Creek – and from there to Horseshoe Creek and the Bald Hill Creek, and finally round to Collings Creek. The blackfellow we had was King of Wyangerie or "Wyangerie King Charley," as he liked to call himself. His old Queen Polly, "she belong Lismore side." We used to get rations from Lismore then, but a long time later found that Casino was easier for it was a better track and only a little farther away. Cedar was popular then and the price went up.

Weather conditions were very wet. Farming was not worth while, we could buy corn for 2/- per bag, and if we found our own bags, cheaper than that. Everyone was getting away from the farms after cedar. We got about 300,000 feet and then one of our mates broke the link – he got married. We met the Robins brothers just before this and they had put us wise to getting our rations from Casino. Cedar went slack again and we went back to drawing with our teams. That was in '73 but there wasn't much in that. We gave our bullocks a spell for a few months and Dawson and I did a bit of shipwrighting, and I made a few pounds. Sugar became popular after this period, so we mustered the bullocks and I sold mine to Gray Bros Ballina. I worked about, building and scrub cutting, and then I decided to go back to my father who was ill, that being the year 1875. When I reached the Clarence I met my brother who told me that my father was not dangerously ill, so I proceeded back to the Richmond.

On January 14, 1875, I became a married man, and my first job was that of corn chipping for 3/- a day, but that did not last long, as I was successful in tendering for wood cutting. Bingman, a blackfellow, assisted me and when we had cut the required quantity, we drew it with a team and then punted it. Billy Harry was another assistant on the job and we were successful in getting the wood to the mill at the required time. When the blacks were paid they said, "Plenty more cut in 'nother time." I replied, "Right."

I worked at the sugar mill for a while then and by chance I met George McLean, and he informed me that the boss of a station up the river was looking for a man like me to work on the station. I got the few things we had into a boat and my wife rode 55 miles on horseback to get the boat, and then we carted them thirty miles out to the station. The old blackfellow we had when we were cedar-getting, King Charley, was there and was king of the station (Wyangerie). Billy, the yellow fellow was my guide in my work there and he knew all the tracks from Casino to the border. I was farming and bullock driving and had to mend fences. I got on well with Billy, and he informed me of the names of the places and various trees. I got fed up with this life after 3 ½ years of it, and in 1878 I took a farm from

my brother-in-law, Henry Baker, who was leaving on account of his wife's ill health, and I straight away pulled about 5000 bushels of corn and sent it to Sydney. We got 4/6 and 4/9 a bushel and I shared the proceeds with my brother-in-law.

I thought my fortune was made. I got more for that corn, than my 3 ½ years' work on the station brought me. We put in 35 acres next year but only got 1/5 and 1/9 a bushel for it. A mate, George Baker, then joined me on the halves and we put in corn and cane and for that year we got £600. It was wonderful. Twenty-five acres of cane went in the next year, but the frost got it and the following year's crop also.

My mate then left me, but I kept on that farm until the big rush for land commenced in 1882 and thinking to be in on the rush I selected some land on Byron Creek, land that we wouldn't look at before, thought it was useless. Sugar was the reason for this rush. The other three who came with us were George Johnson (now of Lismore), William Baker (now of Myocum) and George Baker (now of Tweed Heads). The four of us went down together and I set to and fell about 25 acres and put up a humpy. A surveyor came along and I found I had to make a present of this to the other fellow above me. My mates were pushed farther along the creek. My place was not surveyed for another two years as the Government surveyors were not plentiful.

Trouble only commenced when we got those farms. No roads, no grass. We had to let our pack horses go back to the grass and we humped our stuff along ourselves. We – my wife and I – had to get food for our six children besides ourselves and carry it along ourselves.

People began to talk about cows now, and I got hold of a few for our own use, and I kept breeding them on until butter production was thought of there. I did not know anything of cows or dairying, so I went to Lismore and on meeting with Mr Robt Johnston and telling me of his experience with butter production, I went back home with fresh heart, for my money had gone and I had just about decided to leave the farm for someone else. We got busy with our 15 cows and it was not long before we had a keg of 40 lbs of butter ready for Sydney.

More scrub had to come down then and more grass in. I had always been taught to kill grass, and the seed now that I would treasure, I found hard to get. I kept on though, and we planted first buffalo and couch, then rye grass, the first I packed for 30 miles. We got burnt out and then the cattle had nothing but paspalum came along and we were on a better footing.

The railway later followed and we all got a few pounds out of that construction. In 1889 I secured the first mail contract from Clunes to Byron Bay (through what is now known as Bangalow). In the same year I also did some contracting with my brother George. That was a record year for floods, and it was during one flood, that young Taylor, son of a railway contractor on the Lismore-Tweed line then under construction, was drowned while taking the pay to employees. He was drowned between Spring Vale and Binna Burra.

I have my entry for the first can of cream sent to the North Coast Fresh Food and Cold Storage Co-op company (now Norco Ltd) dated February 7, 1898.

From 1893, big improvements came about, the factory went up and then followed a creamery, and later a separator at the creamery.

In 1899 I purchased property on the old Brunswick Road known as Mills and went to live there with the family in 1902. In 1907 I went to live with my son, Jack on McLeod's Shoot, Bangalow, and resided there till 1909, when I bought a small property on Cooper's Shoot, 2 miles out of Byron Bay. In 1911 I went to live in Byron Bay."

John Thomas Johnson

(21Sep1849 Morpeth - 25Jun1929 Byron Bay)



'Cudgery Jack' Johnson and family at the Reddacliff's Christmas Party 1908

Gents Standing: Jack Butcher, Harry Pillidge (nephew of 'Cudgery Jack', married Ruth Reddacliff), John Eric Johnson, Harry Howes

Ladies Standing: Jane Johnson (Howes), Kate Johnson (Borrowdale), Mary Johnson (Latimer), Lucy Johnson (Bath), Lucy Gollan (daughter of Eliza Gollan, nee Baker)

Sitting: Alice Reddacliff (nee Johnson), Mary Emma Johnson (nee Baker), John Thomas Johnson, Henry Baker and wife Jane (nee Tiddles), Bill Reddacliff (brother of Mary who married Sam Johnson, Cudgery Jack's eldest son.)

Squatting: Rex Reddacliff, Olive Johnson, Len Reddacliff

Whilst he makes no reference to cedar-getting on the Brunswick in his memoir, 'Cudgery Jack' Johnson, as he was known, is believed to be the same John Johnson listed at 'Targara' (assumed to be Tyagarah) in the 1871 Electoral Roll, and is probably the same John Johnson identified as 'Tyagarah Jack' Johnson on historian Norm Hewitt's list of early Brunswick cedar getters. (And more certainly, the same John Johnson listed at Wyangarie in the 1878 electoral roll.) If this be he of Tyagarah, presumably he decided his short duration stay on the Brunswick wasn't worth recording in his reminiscences.

At Lismore in 1875 he married Mary Emma Baker, the sister of his partner Henry Baker, the brother of prominent William of Myocum. The Binna Burra/Byron Creek selections were registered in the names of George Johnson (350 acres) and George Baker (50 acres and 400 acres), and presumably they came to some arrangement with their respective brothers. George Johnson, who married Jane Baker in 1888, was a foundation member of the Byron Creek Progress Association in Jun1890, and seems to have moved to Billinudgel around 1900.

Perhaps taking a break from farming at Binna Burra, Cudgery Jack could be the same timber-getting John Johnson of the Brunswick Valley from 1890 who leased one of Robert Marshall's 40 acre blocks in early 1891 and was a foundation member of John Macgregor's Central Mullumbimby Association later that year. He was definitely in the

area in 1899 when he bought James Mills' property (the original selection of Robert Marshall in 1872) on the Saddle Road in partnership with his brother-in-law James Lonsdale, next door to brother-in-law William Baker who had purchased Sir John See's 80 acres, the original 1881 selection of Robert Webber. Cudgery Jack sold one of his blocks to Alfred Bashforth in 1903 and in 1905 became a foundation committeemen with the Mullumbimby Agricultural Society. He still owned the place in 1910, probably worked by one of his sons.

In 1904 William Baker sold one of his blocks to Archibald Henson and moved to Myocum, where he paid a record price of £16/2/- per acre for Alex J. Torrens' 60 acre property. In 1911 he and neighbour John Macgregor paid a record price of £27/acre for the late Cornelius O'Brien's 100 acre property, the original selection of Thomas Torrens Snr, adjacent to what was to become the golf course.