

NEWSLETTER  
February 2020

Brunswick Valley Historical Society Inc.

# MUSEUM

17 Myokum Street MULLUMBIMBY 2482  
OPEN: TUESDAYS & FRIDAYS 10 AM – 12 PM  
MARKET DAYS (3RD SATURDAY OF THE MONTH) 9 AM-1 PM

## Welcome Members and Friends to the new year and decade - 2020!

Another year to look forward to with plenty of challenges, the first being that Nortec, which runs Work For the Dole Scheme, leaving us without their assistance for the first time in 15 years. So a volunteer drive is necessary. If you are interested in helping at the museum or know of someone who is, please come and see us. We can accommodate all sorts of skills. You will be most welcome.

## CONGRATULATIONS TO LIFE MEMBER ROBYN GRAY OAM



In the 2020 Australia Day Awards, Robyn Gray was awarded a Medal (OAM) of the Order of Australia in the General Division for her services to community history.

Robyn was a key person in the establishment of the Brunswick Valley Historical Society Inc and the setting up and management of the Museum. A well deserved acknowledgement of Robyn who was ably supported by her husband, Chris, and the members of the society and museum.

Robyn also wrote and edited several local history books. She was secretary of the Ex-Students Association of Mullumbimby High School and wrote their newsletter and has compiled the Eureka Hall Newsletter for their committee. Congratulations!

## Robert Morrison Crabbe

Of all the early selectors who rolled up to the Brunswick district in 1881/82, **Robert Morrison Crabbe** is the only one to be immortalised by the map makers. We were never blessed with such locations as MacGregordale, Kellyville, Lawleigh, Millsmere, Torrenstown, Frenchvale, Woodrowvia, *et al*, to honour those who had arguably achieved a higher place on the totem, and without such sign posting have faded into obscurity, while Crabbes Creek grows in prominence.

His story begins in Kirriemuir, County of Angus, Scotland, where he turned up in 1841, the eldest of eight children of **Alexander** and **Margaret**, nee **Thompson**. In 1868 he married local girl **Margaret Rattray** and begat **Margaret Thompson Crabbe** in 1869 and **James Simpson Crabbe** in 1870 before shifting to Dundee where **Isabella Hardy Crabbe** was welcomed to the world in 1872. Their mother died 23Nov1876 shortly after giving birth to fourth child **Alexander Crabbe**.

At Dundee on 23Jul1877 widower **Robert Crabbe** married his housekeeper, widow **Jane Black** (nee **Birrell**), and begat **George Gow Crabbe** in 1878 and **Mary Jane Crabbe** in 1882, at which time Robert was on his way to Australia, leaving Jane with a household of eight children, inclusive of those from her previous marriage, **John Black** born 1867 and **Jessie Black** born 1869.

Robert's untimely trip to Australia was probably at the instigation of his brother James, who sold him a vision of a land of milk and honey in the rich pastures of the Northern Rivers. **Dr James Brown Crabbe**, Esq, MBCM, Uni Edn, born 1850 Kirriemuir, landed in 1875 and after stints in Cootamundra and Singleton (and marrying **Kate Mary Gill** of Dubbo in Feb1878) was appointed *Government Medical Officer and Vaccinator for the District of the Lower Clarence* in Dec1879, taking up residence at Maclean.

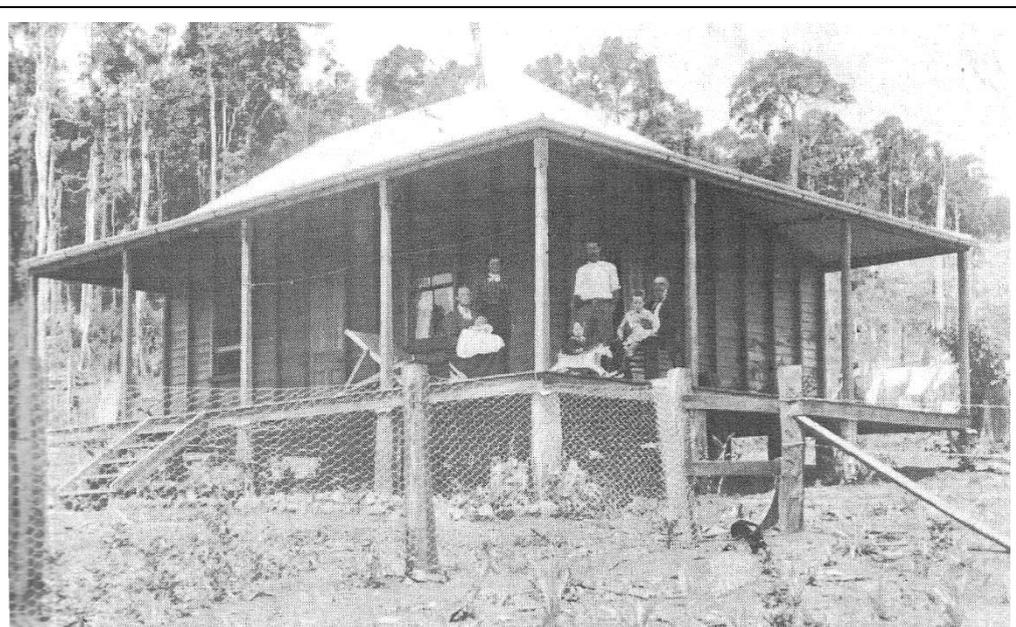
Robert arrived in Sydney on 17Apr1882 and was likely accompanied by James when he headed north to select 616 acres on Pimble Creek, when the only way into the relatively untouched jungle was via old cedar-getters' tracks. The family understanding is that Robert was 'dummying' for James when he applied for the second selection in the Parish of

Mooball on 19Aug1882. The first selector was his northern neighbour, Murbah-based auctioneer **Robert Campbell Ewing** in Feb1882, and for the next couple of years they had the place to themselves.

Robert had followed in his father's footsteps and become a cobbler, but now he was confronted with the daunting task of having to wield an axe for the next few years. To earn a quid in the meantime however, he tried his hand as a salesman, advertising in the *Northern Star* of 19Dec1883 that *The undersigned has Imported, Direct from the manufactures in England, a Large and Choice Assortment of FANCY and USEFUL ARTICLES...*, including jewellery and shot guns amongst the assorted 'stuff', for sale at the Albert Hall in Lismore. **R.M. Crabbe** begs to intimate to the inhabitants of the Northern Rivers, that it is his intention to carry on the business of Importer....

Earlier that year he had stepped up to the crease as a local organising force prepared to go to bat for his new neighbours when he placed an advert *To the Selectors and settlers of the Brunswick River District: A meeting will be held at Brunswick Heads on SATURDAY, the 8<sup>th</sup> of April, at 13 o'clock, for the purpose of forming an Association to advance the interests of the Brunswick...*, signed **R.M. Crabbe**, Brunswick. Fifty people duly congregated in the dining room of **Robert Marshall's** boarding house to form the *'The Selectors and Settlers Association of the Brunswick River'*.

His family was amongst the 582 Government immigrants from Plymouth who arrived Sydney 25Mar1885 per the *Gulf of Mexico*. (The following day it was advertised that *Married Couples and Single Men per steamer Gulf of Mexico will be for hire at Fort Macquarie on 30Mar85 and The Single Women... at the Hyde Park on 28Mar85*).



*The original Crabbe family home about 1900. Robert Morrison Crabbe is seated and George Crabbe is standing, said the Crabbes Creek School Centenary book.*

The Crabbes presumably bypassed this parade and left the metropolis to somehow make their own way to the boondocks of Brunswick where *there is one hotel, two stores, the ferryman's residence, and the post and telegraph office... said the Sydney Mail on 26Sep1885*. Family folklore has it that whilst awaiting completion of their new home at Crabbes Creek they boarded with **Delancy** and **Maria Haines**, who at this time appear to be living in their store on the North Head. (The *Sydney Mail* journalist noted that

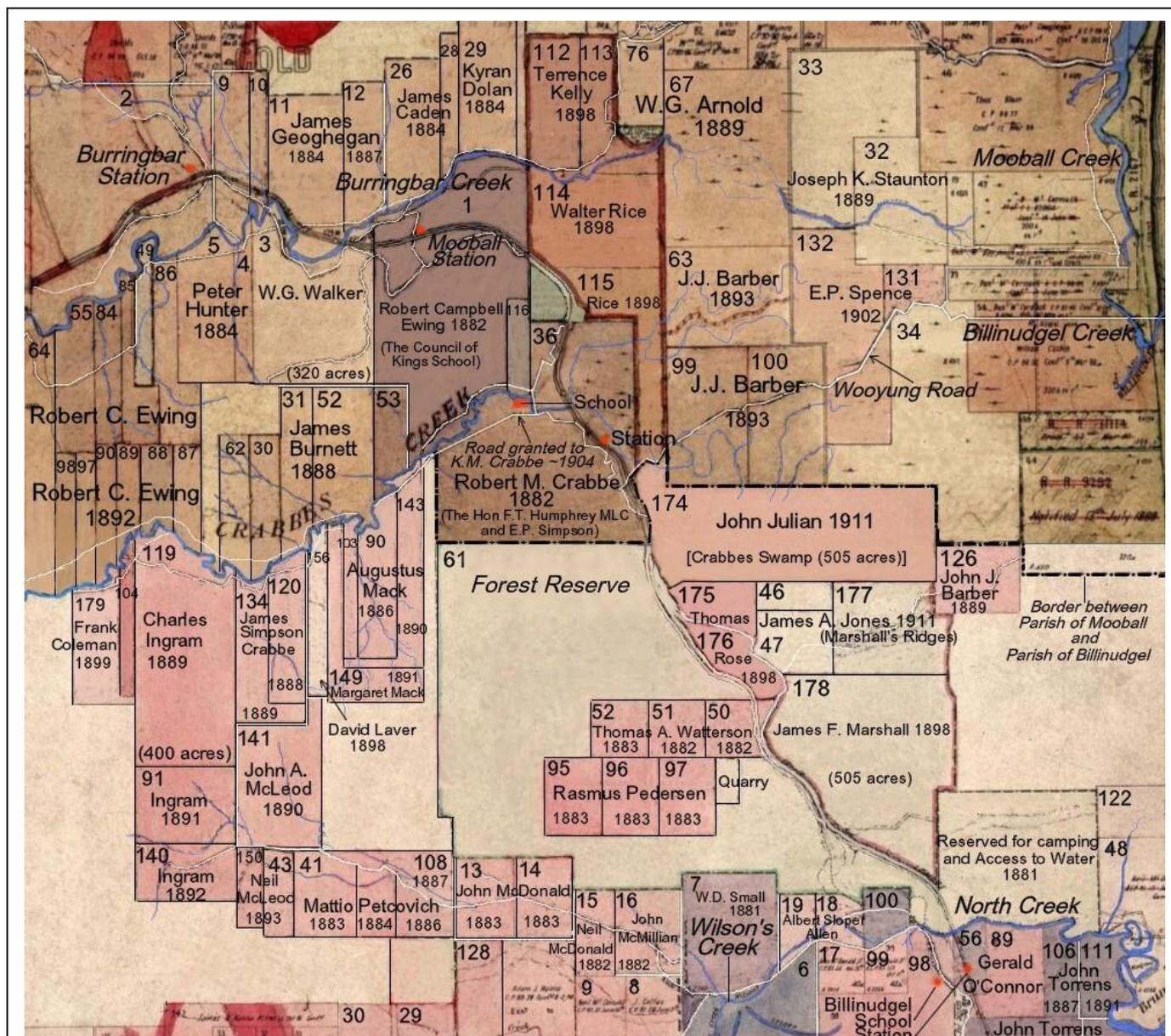
most of the surrounding selectors were struggling, as *farming does not pay...*, while in the edition of 10Oct1885 the same bloke commented that **R.M. Crabbe** had the largest holding in the district and that *This gentlemen has held 640 acres for three and a-half years, and is gradually clearing the land. He is also erecting a very good house, and talks of cultivating sugar cane so soon as prospects brighten....*)

Then in Mar1888 **Dr James Crabbe**, President of the Maclean Progress Association, topped the poll as one of the foundation aldermen for the newly formed Municipality of Maclean, the poll conducted by **William Robert Baker** of the *Lower Clarence Advocate*. Crabbe had been nominated by **David See**, brother-in-law of **William Grant Law** of Wilson's Creek and son of the future Premier **John See**, who acquired **Richard Webber's** 80 acre Brunswick farm, strategically sited on the original railway route. (The Hon **F.T. Humphrey** MLC, temporary owner of Crabbe's Portion 36, was probably another politician with insider knowledge of the railway route.)

In Oct1888 both **W.R. Baker** and **Dr J.B. Crabbe** were farewelled to the Tweed, Baker to establish *The Tweed and Brunswick Advocate* in Nov1888 and Crabbe to take up sugar-cane growing. (Crabbe's farewell function was chaired by Donald Shearer JP, the brother of **William Geddes Shearer** of Myocum, and attended by Mayor **David See** and newspaper tycoon Baker along with most of Maclean's VIPs. He burnt his bridges by selling his 7 prime blocks in town and said *Thanks to the people of the Clarence, he had been able to secure for himself a position of independence....*)

Then it gets vague and tricky. He acquired 100 acres 'on the Tweed', portion of which was along the route of the future railway, and likely to be on Robert's property. On 20Nov1888 the *Clarence and Richmond Examiner* announced that **Dr Crabbe** is recruiting his health (sic) on his brother's selection on the Brunswick. And then on 18Dec1888 reported that **Mr**

**Crabbe** of Tweed Road has introduced an extensive dairy plant..., but on 11Jul1889 that **Dr J.B. Crabbe** is practising at North Willoughby, a Sydney suburb..., and on 4Mar1890 that **Dr Crabbe**, late of Maclean, intends settling in Murwillumbah, on the Tweed. It seems that through to 1895 he was firmly entrenched in his day job at Willoughby while regularly visiting the Tweed to check on management of his properties, which were probably held/mortgaged in his wife's name. Edition 6 of the map of the Parish of Mooball, in use 15Mar1904 to 17Sep1908, has an annotation 'Closed Rd to be granted in lieu to K.M. Crabbe' on that portion of the road that ran through Robert's property to the railway station. **Kate Mary Crabbe** also features in the nearby acquisition by Robert's eldest son, **James Simpson Crabbe**, of a 100 acre block in the Parish of Billinudgel on 15Nov1888. The deeds were transferred to her on 30Jan1895 and she in turn sold the place to **J.R.H. Gaggin** on 31Aug1903. (But adding to the confusion, in Apr1894 a *Certificate of Conformity* was issued to **J.B. Crabbe** for 100 acres in the Parish of Billinudgel). James' adjacent 100 acres, acquired on 5Sep1889, was sold to **Isabelle Dorcas Jane Gaggin, Arabella Annie Elizabeth Gaggin and Jane Ann Gaggin** on 9May1906 after passing through the hands of a few mortgage holders.)



Composite of Edition 3 of map of Parish of Mooball, in use Aug1892-Mar1904, and Edition 4 of Parish of Billinudgel, in use Aug1893-Nov1902. (All of Crabbe's Creek, inclusive of Portions 90, 103, 119, 143, 149, 120, 134, 156 and 179 ended up in the Parish of Mooball, Tweed Shire, in the 1940s.) It's hard to pinpoint when 'Pimble Creek' became colloquially known as 'Crabbes Creek'.

[Richard and John Crichton, grandsons of **John Torrens** and **Margaret Thompson Crabbe**, informants for the Crabbes Creek School Centenary Book, 1898-1998, note that *By 1902 the area had been renamed Crabbes Creek. At that time the Crabbes owned over 700 acres. George and his father owned 250 acres and Doctor Crabbe owned the balance. George Crabbe built a house on the opposite side of the current highway to the original Crabbe home.... And Joan Gocher, granddaughter of Harry Court and Isabella Hardie Crabbe, the Crabbe family informant for What They Did; Families of the Brunswick 1880-1950 by Neta MacKinnon, says On 16Nov1902 Robert and his sons Alexander and George finally*

owned 250 acres of the land originally taken up, and his brother **Dr James Brown Crabbe** was the purchaser of the residue.]

## Social Harmony

Meanwhile the 1890s Depression was generating some unhappiness. On 21Jan1891 **W.R. Baker's Tweed and Brunswick Advocate** reported the case of *Jane Crabbe v. R.M. Crabbe*. Defendant was charged with neglecting to support his wife.... **Jane Crabbe** deposed: *I am the wife of the defendant, Robert Morrison Crabbe;... on the 25<sup>th</sup> December last, when my children went to the Brunswick, and I was all alone, I took a little money out of the box and the defendant came in and took me by the throat with both hands and said he would choke the life out of me; after he let go I went along the road as far as the old hut, to see if I could get help, as I was frightened; when I went back defendant said he would get a rope and tie my hands and take the money from me; he then went to the barn, and I got on my clothes and went to the Brunswick (an 8-mile walk); I stopped at the Brunswick a week, and then I went back; when I got home he neither spoke to me nor took any notice of me whatever, which made me feel that I was not wanted; I could not stay any longer, and I left him the following Thursday, after having stopped at home a week; then I laid the information.*

Case dismissed ruled Police Magistrate **Joshua Bray** Esq, without hearing any other witnesses. (Nor is there any detail recorded in the *Police Charge and Summons Register* kept by Constable **William Caleb Andrews**. This Register also records that on the 14Oct1890 Bray was scheduled to hear the case **Jane Crabbe v. R.M. Crabbe** for assault, but there was *No appearance of either party*. Ditto for the earlier case of **James M. Crabbe v. Jane Crabbe** for assault scheduled on 15Feb1887, when Joshua Bray noted *no appearance of the parties who are man and wife*, suggesting 'James M.' is a misprint/alias for 'Robert M.', and the complainant/defendant order is a likely mix-up). On 26Feb1890 **Robert M. Crabbe** was charged with drunkenness, but *cautioned and discharged* by **Henry French** JP.)

[The census of 13Apr1891 found 70 people (43m and 27f) living in 11 dwellings in the Village of Brunswick, the jail and 2 pubs housing 63% of them. (**Delaney/Delancy Hains** was 'Head of Household' No 8, housing himself and 6 females, at 40 Mullumbimbi Street.) In May1891 the School Inspector said *At present there are a post and telegraph office, two or three stores, two hotels, a police station, and other houses erected upon portion of the village reserve....* The school at this time was an annex to the Haines store on the corner of Tweed and Mullumbimbi streets, near which the school teacher, **John Burgess**, camped in a tent at Household No 9.]

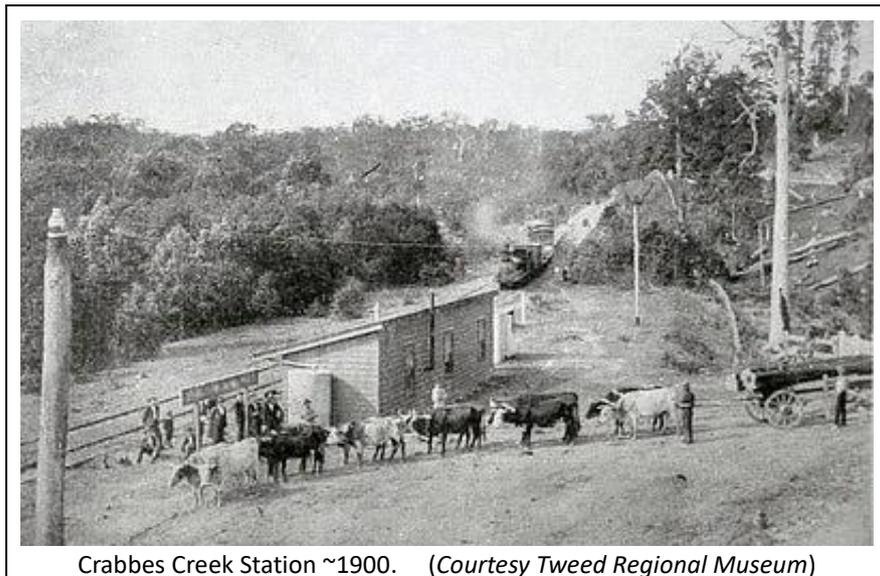
Seventy five people attended the opening of the Mullumbimby School of Arts on 11Dec1891 and *Dancing was kept up until sunrise, when the happy company dispersed, all being delighted with the evening's recreation. The honor of belle was conferred upon Miss Crabbe who wore cream nun's veiling, trimmed with flowers and spangles.... The brothers Devney, of Byron bay, discoursed excellent music – two violins....*

After a long fund-raising effort the Brunswickers celebrated the opening of their *School of Arts* on Anniversary Day 1892. *The entertainment was given by the Black Diamond Minstrels from the Tweed River.... There was a large gathering of the general public, over 150 being present.... The hall was then cleared for the ball, and dancing was sustained till daylight...,* males outnumbering females 3 to 1. The Crabbes were not amongst the listed attendees, but at the Easter Ball on 18Apr1892 **Miss Crabbe** made an appearance in *ruby and cream*, along with **Miss Langley** wearing a *veritable milliner's shop*. A week later an anonymous letter writer, signing off as '*One Who Was There*', took exception to the description of Miss Langley's attire, *and the majority of those present were of the same opinion as myself, viz., that she and Miss Crabbe divided the honor of "belle"....*, while letter writer '*J.M.*' (probably **John Macgregor**) described the recent all-male farewell to Postmaster **Stan Francis**, *which was merely a sociable evening with plenty of wine. I regret to say that at 11 o'clock, when all the toasts, &c., were over, the revellers had the bad taste to rouse up all the young ladies in the township to take part in a dance at the School of Arts....*

Thereafter the lack of mentions in the local press perhaps indicates the Crabbes kept a low profile. The only notable references occurred in Mar1895 when it was recorded that **Mr R. Crabbe** *has several acres of cane on the flat adjoining the railway line, but it does not look as well as could be described.... Some of Mr Crabbe's tenants up the creek, however, have patches of cane... which look okay.* And on 9May1896 20 locals attended a public meeting at the Tramway Hotel at Billinudgel to form a branch of *The North Coast Anti-Alien Society*, at which the reporter *was surprised and delighted by the excellent speeches on the question delivered by Messrs Hough, Munro and Crabbe...,* the society formed on the motion of **R.M. Crabbe** and seconded by his southern neighbor **Allan Watterson**. *Saturday's meeting was another instance of perfectly united action... against the black chaps.*

A giant sign at the railway station in 1894 placed "Crabbe's Creek" firmly on the map. Then came Oxenford's Sawmill in

1895, a Post Office in 1896 and a school in 1898. A store was operating by at least 1905 in the hands of long-serving **William H. Wilson**, who also operated the Post Office in an annex to his house. A community hall was opened in 1906 on land donated by **John Torrens**, one of the trustees being **George Gow Crabbe**.



Crabbes Creek Station ~1900. (Courtesy Tweed Regional Museum)

By the late 1890s dairying was making rapid strides in the district and in May 1899 it was noted that **Mr R. Crabbe**, who has been dairying for some time, is busy clearing scrubland... to create more grass for the sacred cow. And it was still ongoing 2mths later with the report that *More scrub is being felled in this district than has been in any previous year since '81.... Dairying is rapidly progressing in this Centre....* But he was still into cane, things having come good by Sep 1899 when he was averaging 50 tons per acre, with the cane crop of **Mr Crabbe** being about the best.... However, in Feb 1900 it was conceded that *Cane is practically a thing of the past on the creek, and a number of acres have been ploughed out this season....*

**Mrs Jane Crabbe** died of cancer 15 Dec 1902 in a private hospital in Lismore, to where she'd gone to receive treatment a week earlier. She was buried in North Lismore. **Dr James Crabbe**, ex-Willoughby Alderman and ex-President of the Chatswood Bowling Club, died 4 Mar 1905 Chatswood, Sydney, aged 55. *The procession from the house to the cemetery was led by a detachment of Chatswood cadets, followed by representatives of the Masonic body..., thence the Mayor and aldermen of Willoughby, and nearly a hundred members of the Chatswood Bowling Club. Altogether, there were about 400 people present....* A month later came the creation of *Crabbes Avenue* at Willoughby.

Heralding movement at the station, in Jul 1905 **Mr C. Smith**, from Bega is at present dairying (sharefarming or tenant unstated) on **Messrs Crabbe and Son's** place (the son is probably George, while Alexander seems to have been a road contractor at this time), but has rented **Mr James Crabbe's** farm and intends moving there shortly. In Sep 1905 developer **Tom Torrens** of Mullum opened a store at Crabbes Creek and celebrated the occasion by throwing a party for 60 locals, one of whom was a **Mrs Crabbe**. In Oct 1905 Tom's cousin **John Torrens**, long-serving secretary of the Billinudgel Progress Association and husband of **Margaret Crabbe**, purchased **R.M. Crabbe's** farm.

On 29 Nov 1905 **R.M. Crabbe** celebrated his 65<sup>th</sup> birthday, but was only 3mths into retirement when he was nominated as the newly formed Crabbes Creek Progress Association's delegate to the momentous meeting at Bangalow to nominate 10 representatives to contest the ballot for the provisional Byron Shire Council. He and **Tom Torrens** won preselection, but in a controversial decision the Minister for Local Government overrode their recommendation and nominated his own team of five, giving Tom a guernsey and excluding R.M.

## The Aftermath

Thereafter **Robert Morrison Crabbe** lived locally with one of his daughters, while his sons disappeared in the general exodus to Queensland in 1909. He died 18 Apr 1914 Brisbane, to where he had gone 2mths earlier to seek medical treatment, and was buried in Dutton Park cemetery, South Brisbane.

His eldest daughter, **Margaret Thompson Crabbe** (1869 - 1956), married farmer **John Torrens** of The Pocket 1892. In 1920 they retired to Ballina, where John's brother Tom was an alderman and where John served as Mayor 1922-28. The next daughter, **Isabella Hardy Crabbe** (1872 - 1965), married baker **Harry Court**, a 25yr old Englishman, at the home of her aunt (probably her father's sister **Mrs Helen Beattie**) at 63 Erskineville Rd., Sydney, 1894. (This address was a bakery/café, probably run by Mrs Beattie who lived upstairs?) Harry and Isabella are believed to have established their bakery at Billinudgel in 1898, thence Mullum when they acquired **Clarence Brazill's** bakery and refreshment room business in 1908. Last daughter **Mary Jane Crabbe** (1876 - 1946) married **Stanley Eric Read** 1908 Lismore. Stan was of the well-known photographic family of Lismore, but seems to have given the game away by the late 1920s to become a farmer at Shannonbrook near Casino. (His younger brother Reg opened a branch of *Read Studios* opposite the Presbyterian Church in Stuart Street in late 1917 and sold the business to G.S. McClelland in mid 1921).

Eldest son **James Simpson Crabbe** (1870 – 1959) went dairy farming on the Blackall Estate, between Eumundi and Cooroy, possibly acquiring a block when the subdivided place came on the market in Sep1907. He was certainly there by 1909, and possibly part of *Crabbe Bros* trading locally by 1910. In mid 1925 he moved to nearby Brooloo to grow bananas, but at some stage retired to Brisbane where he died a bachelor 1959. Around 1909 **Alexander J. Crabbe** (1875 – 1959) also moved onto a block in the Blackall Estate, where he was dairy farming when he enlisted in 1916, aged 41. He was wounded in France, discharged in Brisbane Mar1919 and married **Jessie Rattray High/Heigh** at South Brisbane Feb1921. They lived at Cooroy until moving to a dairy farm at Finch Hatton in 1932, thence Mirani and Mackay, and during WW2 retired to Marrickville, Sydney, where Alex died at the Concord Repatriation Hospital in 1959. Their half-brother **George Gow Crabbe** (1876 – 1955) married the England-born **Emily Jane Smalley** at Murbah in 1902 and moved to Cooroy 1909, becoming a committeeman with the *Cooroy Progress and Farmers Association* in 1910. He went banana growing near Kandanda in 1917, remaining for many years except for a moment of madness as licensee of the Phoenix Hotel at Gympie 1918/20. Emily died 1933 Gympie and George subsequently moved to Brisbane where he died 1955. Peter Tsicalas

## Brunswick Valley Historical Society Inc. Newsletter

This newsletter is written by and for the members of the BVHS Inc

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### All members are invited to contribute to this newsletter

\*Please leave contributions for the newsletter with John, Tues or Fri 9am to 12 noon.  
Alternatively email to:  
[bvhs84@yahoo.com.au](mailto:bvhs84@yahoo.com.au)

### NEXT MEETING Tuesday 11 Feb 2020 10.30am

\*Deadline for agenda items  
Friday 7 Feb 2020

### MUSEUM HOURS Tuesdays & Fridays 10am - 12pm Market Saturdays 9am - 1pm

BVHS Newsletter is produced by BVHS Inc



## IMPORTANT NOTICES

Meeting time – 2nd Tuesdays of each month at 10.30am  
2020 Membership Subscription is due now!

### BRUNSWICK VALLEY HISTORICAL SOCIETY INC. MUSEUM RENEWAL OF MEMBERSHIP 2020

Membership Fees	Payment Options	
Adults \$15 Concession \$10 Students \$5 Printed mailed copy of newsletter \$5 p.a.	<i>Cheque/postal order payable</i> Brunswick Valley Historical Society Inc PO Box 378 Mullumbimby 2482	Direct deposit Bank: Westpac BSB:032 583 A/c No: 201192 Reference: Your name

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### Richmond-Tweed Family History Society Inc.

### ANCESTRY.COM SPECIAL PRESENTATION

Sunday 16th February 2020  
10.00 am to 1.00 pm

Venue:  
Players Theatre  
24 Swift Street, Ballina

Cost: \$5.00  
Pay at the door  
Doors open 9.30 am

Enquiries: Don Howell  
phone: 02 6687 4279  
email: [howell.donald@ozemail.com](mailto:howell.donald@ozemail.com).



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