



Brunswick Valley Historical Society Inc.

# MUSEUM

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OPEN: TUESDAYS & FRIDAYS 10 AM – 12 PM

MARKET DAYS (3RD SATURDAY OF THE MONTH) 9 AM-1 PM

NEWSLETTER

November 2021

## REMEMBERING FRANK MILLS OAM

BVHS members were saddened to hear of the passing of our patron, Frank Mills. Following is a brief account of some of Frank's many activities with the Society and the Museum.

Frank first joined the society in the 1985 and became actively engaged in research of his own while working with the society. He was a tireless speaker on local history, helping other societies and individuals in the pursuit of family and historical knowledge.

In 1998 he became Chairman of the society overseeing its activities for the next 6 years. In 2000 Chris Gray launched Frank's book "From Forest to Farm" at the museum. He was delighted with the accompanying display and the positive reaction to his book.

He was on the Society's committee during the years 2004-2007 and regularly represented the Society at various events, e.g., being on the community liaison committee negotiating to have story boards installed at appropriate places along the new highway (2005).

In 2006 Frank was awarded a Certificate of Achievement by RAHS for his long contribution to the history of the Brunswick Valley, receiving the certificate whilst attending an RAHS conference in Sydney.

In November 2007 the executive and members invited Frank to become the Society's patron, as he was a *great ambassador for the Society...*, remaining so up to his death.

At several Old & Gold events in Brunswick Heads he did short walks around the town leading local tours. Ian Fox and Harvey Gardiner joined him on several of these.

In conjunction with Ian he set up displays at the Ocean Shores Art Shows which initially were combined art & history events; and at which his book *Where the Curlew Called* was launched (2004).



Discussing timber felling with Year 4 students, Shearwater Steiner School 2014

Frank was available to go to schools and to help with school visits at the museum. He thoroughly enjoyed sharing his memories, such as how to separate milk and churn butter.

He also loved giving power-point presentations, which he did at every opportunity, such as at Main Arm on the Chinese, Finns and South Sea Islanders, at the Mullumbimby Show for its 100<sup>th</sup> celebration, and on

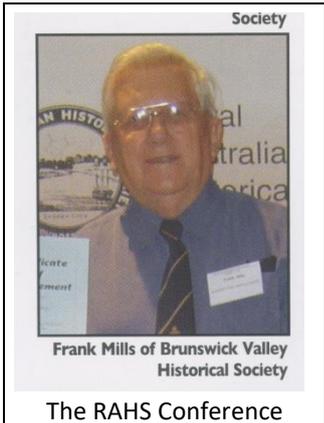
Australia Day at Ocean Shores (twice).

Frank was never happier than sharing his knowledge of the history of the Brunswick Valley in which he lived, worked and played. His story is covered in his eulogy, as is his family's history at <https://www.echo.net.au/2021/10/vale-frank-mills-oam-26-5-1928-3-10-2021/>. The Mills story of arriving in the area is covered in Neta MacKinnon's book *What They Did families of the Brunswick 1880-1950*.

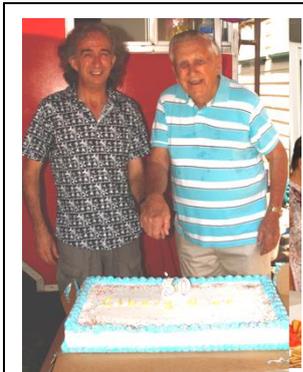
Thank you Frank for so generously giving of your time and interest to our society. R.I.P.



At the Big Picture Show Mullumbimby, Frank with Malcolm Price hosting a group discussion. 2019



The RAHS Conference



Our patrons, Cr Basil Cameron and Frank, cutting the cake for the Museum's 30<sup>th</sup> Celebration, 2014.

*“History – we have a duty to pass it on”, Frank Mills*

by Juanita Kwok, Bathurst, 21 October 2021

Frank and I became friends through our shared interest in the Chinese banana growers in the Brunswick district in the 1920s. I heard about Frank through Theresa Gilroy’s research on Chinese archaeological sites in far northeast NSW and tracked Frank down in 2018. Each year after that when I visited family at Tweed I would also visit Frank and learn more of the history from him.

Frank told me he was descended from some of the earliest settlers in the district. His grandfather, John Mills selected 640 acres at Burringbar in 1884. Frank’s father, Bill Mills, born in his father’s hotel in Upper Burringbar in 1895, selected land at Main Arm on which he ran a dairy and grew bananas. By the time Frank was born in 1928, the Chinese banana growers had already left the north coast, but Frank developed an early interest in the Chinese growers after hearing stories of them at his bush school at Toolond, where kids would take shortcuts to walk to school along the old Chinese-built tramway tracks on Palmwoods.

Frank, like his father, went into banana growing. In his early days on Main Arm, Frank had a 414 acre property and a lease of another 250 acre property. Frank had subsequent careers in real estate, Council and as Fire Control Officer in charge of the Tweed and Byron Shires. Consequently, he knew the area intimately and this knowledge served him well when he returned in later years to his early interest in the history of the district.

Frank’s knowledge of the history of the district also came from stories passed down by his grandfather, father, aunts and uncles. Frank’s father Bill told him of how Jim Nouta, a South Sea Islander his grandfather employed on his selection, had escaped across the border from Queensland with Jack Corowa, swimming across creeks and eating raw fish to avoid being found. They found freedom when they crossed the NSW border. Jim Nouta’s daughter Doris Ambertel, who was born on the Mill’s property at Mullumbimby, confirmed the story. Frank researched the histories of the traditional owners of the land and early immigrant communities, particularly the Finns, the Sikhs and Indians, but it was the Chinese banana growers who Frank had a special admiration for.

From early local histories, the accounts of old residents and from his own knowledge of banana growing, Frank reconstructed a history, which he published in July 2010 as a booklet, *“Early Chinese Involvement in the Banana Industry and Business Enterprises of the Tweed and Brunswick Valleys on the Far North Coast of New South Wales”*. Frank wrote about how Chinese firms such as Wing On and Co. and the Yock Sui brothers established banana plantations on land they purchased or leased at Chinaman’s Hill (Giningong), Yelgun, Palmwoods, Coopers Lane, Wilsons Creek, Crabbes Creek, Burringbar and elsewhere in the Brunswick, Tweed and Clarence in the early 1920s. The land was cleared by Chinese growers and by South Sea Islanders, such as the Brownings. At Palmwoods, the Chinese growers constructed a three kilometre tramway system to transport bananas to the packing shed. Frank related George Williams’ story of four Clydesdale horses hauling wagons laden with banana cases from the packing sheds to the railway station at Mullumbimby. From there the banana cases were taken by rail to Byron where they were offloaded onto the jetty for transportation by ship to the Sydney or Melbourne markets.

While Frank attributed the withdrawal of the Chinese growers in the mid-1920s to the banana disease bunchy top, he was also aware of the prejudice against Chinese growers. He regarded the Chinese growers as the pioneers of the industry and as far as Frank was concerned, the opposition to the Chinese growers was “jealousy as far as I can see”. Although Chinese withdrew from growing bananas on the north coast around 1926, Chinese firms such as Wing On in the Haymarket continued to buy bananas from local growers such as Frank and his father.

Frank talked to the old families in the area and located photographs of the two-storey, 27 room house and the packing shed on Chinaman’s Hill. He visited the sites of the old Chinese plantations which the bush had reclaimed and photographed the tram pathway and the rock terraces which stabilised the hillsides. The Chinese, he said, “could go through immensely rough country and cut through the rock which stands today in these old ruins of properties, and it’s there where you’ll see the engineering skill of the first Chinese banana growers”.



Photo taken by Juanita in 2000. Frank holding his booklet “Tracking the Dragon”

The communal house at Chinaman's Hill had been demolished by the time Frank went there, but he located and photographed a similar large Chinese communal building at Coopers Lane. Frank's son, Bill Mills took aerial photos of Chinaman's Hill and Palmwoods which are in his booklet.

Frank also wrote about the Chinese market gardeners, herbalists and storekeepers who remained and settled in the district. Thomas and Mary Tong opened a large general store at Tong's Corner at Murwillumbah in 1935 and employed 80 local staff. The Tong family had another store at Mullumbimby which they later sold to Trevor and Russell Jack. Frank was aware of the restrictions that White Australia legislations placed in the way of Chinese Australians and respected their hard work and business acumen in prospering in spite of the obstacles.

In his booklet Frank wrote, "It's important that a study of the Chinese contribution to the banana and other industries of this district be carried out as soon as possible". He shared his information and the photographs he had located with Joanna Boileau, whose excellent book on Chinese people in the Tweed, "*Families of Fortune*" can be purchased from the Tweed Regional Museum. I hope there will be sufficient demand to warrant the Brunswick Valley Historical Museum to do a new print run of Frank's booklet, so that the history that Frank wrote about can continue to be read and remembered.

## AT THE MUSEUM MOVING THE PIANO

It was such a relief when the old very heavy Tyagarah Hall piano was moved out of the museum and into the shed to its new home.



Moved by Mullumbimby Removals under Susan's supervision. Photos by Stephen.

## THE MONTHLY MARKET

From 11<sup>th</sup> October 2021 NSW Government's COVID-19 regulations required full vaccination status of all stall holders, volunteers/members of BVHS and the general public at our monthly market. Due to the onerous imposition on our members to ensure compliance, the Oct & Nov markets was/are cancelled.

Between Covid-19 & the weather we have not had much success with our markets over the last 18 months. Hopefully with the new regulations for December we may be able to hold regular markets again. Byron Shire Council has approved our contract for managing the Mullumbimby Community Market for the next 5 years, starting Nov 1.

## OBJECT OF THE MONTH

Even though there was no market the Object of the month was the Brunswick Notebook which was compiled by Christopher Gray 1991-97. Chris & Robyn have contributed towards this booklet. Available at the museum for \$2 a copy. Great work Fred.



## Brunswick Valley Historical Society Inc. Newsletter

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

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President: Stephen Hall  
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Dr Mark Edwards

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Lindy McCollum  
Cor. Secretary: Susan Tsicalas  
Treasurer: Susan Tsicalas

### Committee Members:

Ann Burnett  
Dr Frederick Theiss  
Roland Sjoberg

### Shed Manager:

Roland Sjoberg

### Market Manager:

Jacqueline Smith

### Heritage Panel Representative

Chris Cooney

### Newsletter: Members

### WFD Supervisor:

Dr Frederick Theiss

### Public Officer: S. Tsicalas.

## All members are invited to contribute to this newsletter

Please email contributions for the newsletter to  
[admin@mullumbimbymuseum.org.au](mailto:admin@mullumbimbymuseum.org.au)

\*Deadline for newsletter items  
Friday 30<sup>th</sup> Oct 2021

## NEXT MEETING

**Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> Nov 2021  
@10.30am**

**MUSEUM HOURS – Tuesdays  
and Fridays 10.00-12.00  
Market Saturdays 9.00 - 1.00**

## MULLUMBIMBY COMMUNITY MARKET

Next Market- Saturday Nov 20  
[mullumbimbycommunitymarket.com.au](http://mullumbimbycommunitymarket.com.au)



## MULLUMBIMBY LACE

Thanks to Clelia Adams for passing this story onto us. It is from Robyne Clarke.

*I don't know if you are aware of what Bobbin Lace is, are you? ... there are many many styles, and a style isn't just a pattern, it is a style of lace which started up in different countries or provinces. There are quite a lot of beautiful European styles but few, if any Western ones.*

*Well, these laces are all worked on a heavy cushion (pillow) filled tightly with straw mainly. There is a cardboard design that sits on the pillow and pin holes are pricked into it at every place where a pin is to go. Hundreds of pins are used, and in some cases hundreds of bobbins too.*

*Well about 30 years ago I started to learn at a lace makers group in Coffs Harbour. I found it came easy but was very hard on the eyes and I began to lose my eyesight, so in the end had to give it up. However, as normally happens with me - things come into my head and the next thing I know I've invented something that I didn't even think was needed. Lol. Holding these bobbins to make some of the leaves which are made in Bucks or Buckingham Lace, is so difficult and they fall out of shape so often and people nearly go off their heads trying to do it. So I made a little tool to make it easy peasy to do that, but also easy to make other shapes that have never been made in lace. Bob used to drive me to Sydney or Brisbane to get the silk or linen threads needed, and one time on the way to Brisbane we passed a sign to Mullumbimby – curious we drove in there to have a look around and found a lovely little craft shop packed with stuff – AND – the threads we needed. It saved us hours of travelling.*

*Back home I worked out that I would call the lace I had created – Mullumbimby Lace, because of the lovely little place that saved us so much time, and the tool would be the 'bimby bobbin clamp. This then would be Australia's own lace – this was the very first lace named after this country. So I told the ladies in the group I was with, but they hated me for it because it wasn't traditional. I told the people in Queensland Lace Guild and they ignored me. I told the council at Mullumbimby and they ignored me too – or I think I had a letter of acknowledgement - something like "that's nice, thank you for sharing that story with us" and they had no idea what it meant. Anyway I was so fed up with Australians (and I'd lost my eyesight) so I gave it up and just forgot all about it. I had made all these tools (with Bob's help) and they took hours to make each one, but had only ever sold two, and one of them was to a person in England and her cheque bounced. No computer then or online buying.*

*I am into Art groups and others, but a few weeks ago I stumbled upon an Australian lace group, and thought it would be nice to join so I did. It wasn't until just a few days ago that I REMEMBERED my 'bimby bobbin clamp, and the lace I'd done. I'd left the pins in the lace for years and they had rusted so I had to drag them out with pliers (rusted below the lace threads and above them) so that pulled it all out of shape and almost destroyed it. I got some rust remover for material and almost wrecked the threads with that too, but here is a photo of the remains. This is what I call Australian Lace.*

*If you look closely it starts in the centre and works out without any joins (unheard of in bobbin lace), with berries and holly leaves because this is a Christmas scene. There are other leaves and bells and reindeers and a spider web to tell the age old story of Christmas – there are three candles and they represent the three wise men, and a dove of peace. There is also a cross and around the edge is many bows to represent the tying of gifts. It is the same on the other side with a few differences only.*

*So, I told this group of my frustrations back then and that I had stuck everything in boxes and forgotten about it. To my great surprise they wanted to know more. I went searching for the 'bimby bobbin clamps in our back room where they have been taped in boxes for 25 years since we moved here. I showed a picture of the clamp which I'd had for sale at \$28 back then, so I said I'd sell for \$25.95 now. And today I SOLD 3. I can't believe that suddenly people want to know – and they can see the significance of having a lace named after Australia and Mullumbimby.*

