

# ***A Story of Early Canberra***

**by Freda Mary Henry (nee Cox),**

**Recorded on tape cassette, c1990s—in the possession of Eugene Henry (grandson).  
Transferred from tape cassette to digital compact disk (.wav & .mp3 files) by Trish Frei.  
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MEMORIES OF CANBERRA - FREDA HENRY [nee Cox].

*Much of the information is similar but the story begins with: I was born in Annadale Sydney on 25 August 1913, and my family moved to Canberra in March 1915 when my father was appointed Inspector of Lands and Stock. Because of shortage of accommodation at that time, Public Service wives were not*

Welcome and for six months while my father lived in a tent in the Bachelors Quarters Mother and I boarded in Queanbeyan. The Quarters, later named Lennox House,<sup>i</sup> remained accommodation for Bachelors for many years. Seventeen years later when I met my future husband he was living there. There was still a pathway between Lennox House and the nearest cottage which until recently bore the signpost, *Bachelors' Lane*.<sup>ii</sup>

After the selection of Canberra to be the National Capital, farming properties in the area were purchased by the Government, but the former owners were permitted to remain on their properties as lessees until the land was required by the Commonwealth.

*Springbank*, the home of the Sullivan family, was taken over six months after our arrival. There were four houses on the property occupied by members of the Sullivan family. Two were demolished shortly after. We moved into one and a fortnight later Mr and Mrs Ted Bates moved into the other. This area is now located in the West Basin of Lake Burley Griffin and retains the name of *Springbank Island*.

The Sullivan family moved to another property called *Sulwood* now the suburb of Kambah. The name is perpetuated in Sulwood Drive and there is also Sullivan Crescent in Wanniasa.

The nearest school was Narrabundah Primary School at the crossroads mid-way between the present Forrest Fire Brigade<sup>iii</sup> and Telopea Park. There were no such things as buses in the early days and no transport to the school from Acton, consequently I did not start school until I was seven and the first school was opened at Acton. It commenced in the portion of Acton offices, but because of complaints about the noise we made we were move to the old Acton Hall, a small galvanised iron building. The hall was also used for social functions and by Catholics and Presbyterians for church services on Sundays.

Most Saturdays, we made the trip of ten miles by horse and sulky to the Queanbeyan shops. As our family increased to four daughters there was probably not a great deal of space for groceries. We did have a baker call, Jimmy Murray, whose family had a bakery placed [close] to Blundell's Cottage. There were also weekly deliveries, all by horse drawn vans from JB Young and Hayes & Russell in Queanbeyan, and Tommy Dudley was the greengrocer, also from Queanbeyan.

He also brought a collection of lollies, and it took some time to decide how we would spend the penny or halfpenny we had been given. An all day sucker cost a penny and so did a small block of chocolate.<sup>iv</sup> Aniseed balls were six for a penny. Each six months, my Mother placed an order to Lasseters in Sydney for bulk supplies and from these tins of biscuits, Griffiths [or Griffin's?] tea, coffee, jams and so on.

I had taught myself to read before commencing school. The Acton School opened in 1920 and continued until 1923 when Telopea Park opened, and in this time we had four different teachers. Our first teacher

left at the end of three weeks, since the NSW Education Department required a minimum of twelve students and we had only eleven.<sup>y</sup> Our second teacher was a Miss Kilgour, whose brother-in-law was on exchange at the Royal Military College, and he brought his wife and three children with him. Miss Kilgour obtained permission to open a subsidized school. Unfortunately at the end of six months he had to return to England. It was during this period, I remember the first snowfall in Canberra and we were so excited. Our third teacher was Irish, a Miss Fitzgerald who assured us that the most perfect English was spoken in Dublin and her students were noted for their beautiful English.

Unfortunately the only accommodation she could obtain was at the Bachelors Quarters and she protested to the Education Department. An inspector was sent to investigate and agreed it was no place for an Irish gentlewoman. She left. The fourth and last teacher remained until the end of 1922. In 1923, Telopea Park opened as a regional school and for the first time we had a school bus. And a bus, or may be buses, were provided to take people to and home from Acton offices. The brand of bus was 'Bean' and they were painted red. So I guess it was only natural that they should be called 'The Scarlet Runners'.

Telopea Park opened with four classrooms, one being used for a time as a library. There were two staff rooms, one for males and the other females, an office for the headmaster and two lunch rooms, partly open air which also were segregated. Miss Forsyth taught infants, Mr Newman, primary, and Mr CL Henry - no relation - commenced the first secondary class in Canberra. Prior to this anyone wishing to continue to secondary education had to go and board in Goulburn. I was placed by age in third class but needed much remedial teaching. I remember not long before visiting my grandmother in Sydney, I attended the local convent school for a short time and was placed by age in third class. Sister Walsh seemed to be very fond of money sums and was appalled at my lack of knowledge. My sole knowledge of money was the odd pennies I was given to spend. I remember her asking where I came from, and when I told her 'Canberra' she wanted to know where that was. Most Sydney people did ask that question at that time. When I told her it was about 200 miles from Sydney, her reply was, 'My poor child I do feel sorry for you.'

Our numbers at Telopea Park were small to begin with but our teachers were enthusiastic and apparently did wonders with others, and by completing fourth and fifth classes in one year we were successful in passing the QC [Qualifying Certificate Exam] at the end of 1925, which admitted us to High School. In six months Mr Len Kaye, a member of the Kaye family of Canberra, was our teacher and volunteered to give after hours coaching each afternoon to any pupils who cared to remain behind. Most were unable to take advantage of this because there was only one bus home. However, with a friend, Jean Francis, I stayed behind each afternoon and I think for the first time really studied seriously.

That year Billy Hughes had donated two prizes to the school, and one book for the secondary area was presented to Lorna Francis, now Mrs Keith Marriott. I was given the other, a very expensive copy of *Vanity Fair* for Industry and Progress. Both books were autographed *WM Hughes*. He promised to provide similar prizes each year however no further books eventuated.

In 1923 Kaye's Dairy Farm behind the Albert Hall was requisitioned by the Commonwealth to become the Royal Canberra Golf Links. They were moved to our home at *Springbank* and we moved to Dominion Circuit then in Blandfordia, the name being changed later to Forrest. The original intention for Canberra - for the suburbs - was that they should be given botanical names, but politicians later decided to name them after members of the first Commonwealth Public Parliament. Blandfordia is the Christmas Bush; Manuka a New Zealand shrub and Telopea is the Waratah.

Shortly before this and before our Acton School closed we went for a bush walk to Capitol Hill to celebrate Gould League of Bird Lovers' Day. On the way, after crossing the ford at Acton, we stopped

at Kaye's Dairy to inspect an old stone building with iron bars in the windows [Klensendorlffe's stone villa used as a barn by Kaye family from 1890s], which we were told, had been used to lock up the convicts at night. Later Gordon Kaye told me that no convicts were ever locked in it - it was a safe refuge for women and children when bushrangers were on the prowl. Soon after the building was demolished as the mortar was failing and stones falling. The street beside the Albert Hall is named 'Kaye Street' in memory of the family.

Life was pleasant but uneventful, so I guess anything outstanding remains in memory. My first memory, which must have been when I was very young, was the sound of the volley of guns at the funeral on Mt Pleasant of General Bridges, the first commandant at Duntroon. His body was returned from Gallipoli for burial.

A major excitement was the visit of the Prince of Wales in 1920. Since there not many children in Canberra at that time, we marched past him and he shook hands with each one of us. Not long after Canberra, or Acton, was visited by Ross and Keith Smith, who had just completed their flight from England. They landed their plane on the old Acton Sports ground and offered joy rides for, I think about £2.

Other famous airmen to visit Canberra included Bert Hinckler, who landed in York Park just across from the Hotel Wellington, and Kingsford Smith and [Charles] Ulm, who landed at what is now Fairbairn, and were presented with a substantial cheque by the Commonwealth Government for the first successful flight across the Pacific.

My father made regular visits to the head of the Cotter near Adaminaby. This was to ensure the destruction of feral animals in the Cotter Catchment area and so avoid possible pollution of the water. Farm animals in the catchment area had been removed some time earlier. For these trips it was necessary to travel by horse, and he would be accompanied by Mr Phil Flint, from Tidbinbilla.

Another way of exploring the territory was by bush walking, and my future husband and others from the Bachelors Quarters spent many weekends doing this. On one occasion in the Brindabellas they met up with a ranger with the usual pack of dogs. They commented he must find it very cold here in winter and asked what he did. His reply was, 'Oh, I just pull up another dog or two'.

Before the construction of Lake Burley Griffin floods were always a hazard. In particular I remember the 1922 flood. *Springbank* homestead was completely surrounded, though as usual the two houses were not flooded. In the early days, people living beside Sullivan's Creek at the foot of Black Mountain would take refuge there during the floods.

The 1922 flood was the biggest we had experienced and my father, who was on an inspection trip, made all speed for home. When he reached the junction of the Cotter with the Murrumbidgee, the bridge near the Cotter pumping station was under water and was expected to collapse, and he was prevented from using it, so he put his horse into the flooded Murrumbidgee and swam behind it holding its tail.

Since we were at the Acton side of the Molonglo River and the only bridge was a rather shaky forerunner of the Commonwealth Avenue Bridge, and he knew it would be under water, he had to return via Queanbeyan and the Yass Road. Fortunately we were safe. A further flood in 1925 after we had left *Springbank* did cause the Bates and Kaye families to evacuate their homes through the floodwaters. On this occasion the water reached the doorways of the houses, but did not actually enter them.

On the other side of the Molonglo River, Corkhill's farmhouse was flooded. The original Corkhill home was demolished and the site is under the lake.<sup>vi</sup> The home belonging to one of the sons, Paddy Corkhill, is now the Water Police Headquarters.

While most of our entertainment as teenager and the unmarried took place in the home, gradually there were other forms of entertainment. The Capitol Theatre, the first in Canberra, opened in 1928 [sic - 8 December 1927]. As well as showing films it was used on occasions for other functions. Richard Tauber sang in the theatre when he visited Canberra [19 July 1938], and I remember a symphony concert there.

In the early days Queanbeyan was town, and anyone wanting to go to the pictures had to go there. There were also pictures at Duntroon, but I was never there. The story is told on one occasion, the silent film snapped. The pianist, who had not been not paying much attention, suddenly realized that the film had stopped and immediately struck up 'God Save', as was normal, especially in a Military establishment. All sprang to their feet and then there was some embarrassment in when in the middle of the anthem, the film recommenced.

With the building, by voluntary labour, of the Causeway Hall some entertainment took [place] there and I remember seeing the Charlie Chaplin film, *The Gold Rush*. There was also a production of *Faust* by I think, the Canberra Philharmonic Society. My main recollection of this is being impressed by the simulated flames, which accompanied the arrival, through a trap door in the stage, of Mephistopheles.

I was married in 1934 and only too soon war came. My third and last child was born a fortnight before Dunkirk. My husband enlisted first in the airforce, but as he happened to be secretary of the advisory committee on defence works, was requisitioned by the Works Department. With the coming of the Japanese into the war he enlisted again, this time in the army and this time he stayed.

Officialdom in Canberra took the war very seriously. In other towns and cities there was brown-out which had to be observed at night. In Canberra a complete blackout was enforced. Before lights could be turned on in the evening, heavy curtains had to be drawn. If your curtains were not of sufficient weight, they had to be supplemented with brown paper. In those days there was no bottled milk in Canberra. You put out your billycan and the milkman came and filled it. One evening, when putting out my 'billy', I absentmindedly switched on our front light. About ten minutes later, I was visited by a warden, who lectured me, pointing out that my light would have been visible to a Japanese pilot twenty miles away. He then removed the globe, and so it remained until the end of the war.

At that time we lived in Flinders Way, Griffith, near the Boys Grammar School, then one of the most southerly areas in Canberra. Many times during our blackout, I had desperate motorists calling at night begging me to tell them how to get out of Canberra - either to Goulburn or to Cooma. Not an easy thing to do on a dark night. There was not a single light anywhere.

During the 1950s the development of Canberra, which had slowed in the late 1920s due to the depression followed by war, recommenced. With the construction of Lake Burley Griffin the whole character of Canberra, virtually two country towns separated by a flood plain, changed and North and South Canberra began to develop as one infant city.

Commonwealth Departments, one of which had actually returned to Melbourne during the war, were transferred to Canberra. There was much unhappiness caused by compulsory transfers and in some cases, broken marriages. Wives refused to come to Canberra, most making the excuse of lack of educational facilities for their children.

However, I believe, all who did come, grew to love Canberra and would not now think of leaving it.

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<sup>i</sup> The Bachelors Quarters were occupied from around September 1912. In the Post WW 2 period they became the Acton Guest House and following the takeover by the Australian National University, were renamed 'Lennox House' and used for student accommodation.

<sup>ii</sup> The lane led to Gorman House - known as Hotel Ainslie between 1925-1927. It was used to accommodate mainly single ladies of the 'typiste' class.

<sup>iii</sup> The site of the school is opposite the Forrest Fire Station, and up until a few years ago when redevelopment took place, there was a row of pines planted there by the children on Arbor Day.

<sup>iv</sup> These were small blocks of chocolate - Nestles - with red wrapping over the foil covering the chocolate - about 4 inches by 2 inches in size. In the late 1930s and 1950s had a coloured picture card, collected by children, which could be placed in a book with information about the card.

<sup>v</sup> Draft Revised edition, *Builders of Canberra 1909-1929*, by Ann Gugler. The Nerrabundah [Bert Sheedy's spelling] School was the closest of the schools to Acton, but too far for small children to walk. It was a good walk of two miles through paddocks and across the Molonglo River to attend the school. In 1919, the following parents wrote to the Person in Charge of Education NSW, to apply for a teacher at Acton:

S Vautin	2 children aged 5 & 7
WO Russell	1 child aged 7
E Ryan	1 child aged 5 (Norman died 24 December 1919 as result of a snake bite in his bed)
F Cox	2 children aged 4 & 6
F Gordon	3 children aged 5, 7, & 10

As a result of this request, Mr Caldwell was appointed and commenced duty on 10 February 1920 with an attendance of eight pupils. The school was equipped with old furniture and a terrestrial globe from the old tent Cotter River School, which closed in 1917.

The numbers did not improve, with the result that the school was closed on 30 April 1920, and Mr Caldwell was transferred to another country school. Male teachers were in short supply during the post-First World War period. Priority was given to men for country positions and many taught at part time schools. Lady teachers had to rely on families to board them, and unfortunately Canberra, at that time, did not have a family willing to board a teacher. The one exception was Miss Kilgour from Victoria, who was able to stay with her married brother. She commenced duty on 20 May 1920.

Unfortunately Miss Kilgour's stay was short. Miss Fitzgerald replaced her and she was accommodated in the Bachelors Quarters, which was a male only boarding house. This presented some problems because the young lady was one female amongst forty men. This situation was quite unsuitable and Miss Fitzgerald was quite untenable. The education refused to supply a male teacher and the school closed..

Ruth Robinson wrote the following about the Acton school in her book, *Yabbies at Acton*:

"The first school for the children of the early civil servants was on the flat at Acton near Mr Weston's experimental nursery. It was held in the hall, which also doubled for meetings and social occasions. Later the hall was moved to the road and eventually became the Trades and Labour Hall. The school was known as a Provisional School, a term used to describe a school of not less than ten pupils. The school had four teachers in its short life of 1920-1923 - namely Mr Caldwell, Miss Kilgour, Miss Fitzgerald and Mr Mervyn Nash. Miss Kilgour, a South Australian teacher, was the sister of Mr Kilgour who lived in one of the Acton Cottages and had three children at the school. Mr Nash was a teacher I knew and I remember being frightened of him. He ruled by the cane - it reposed on his desk at all times."<sup>v</sup>

Ruth Robinson listed the children who attended the school:

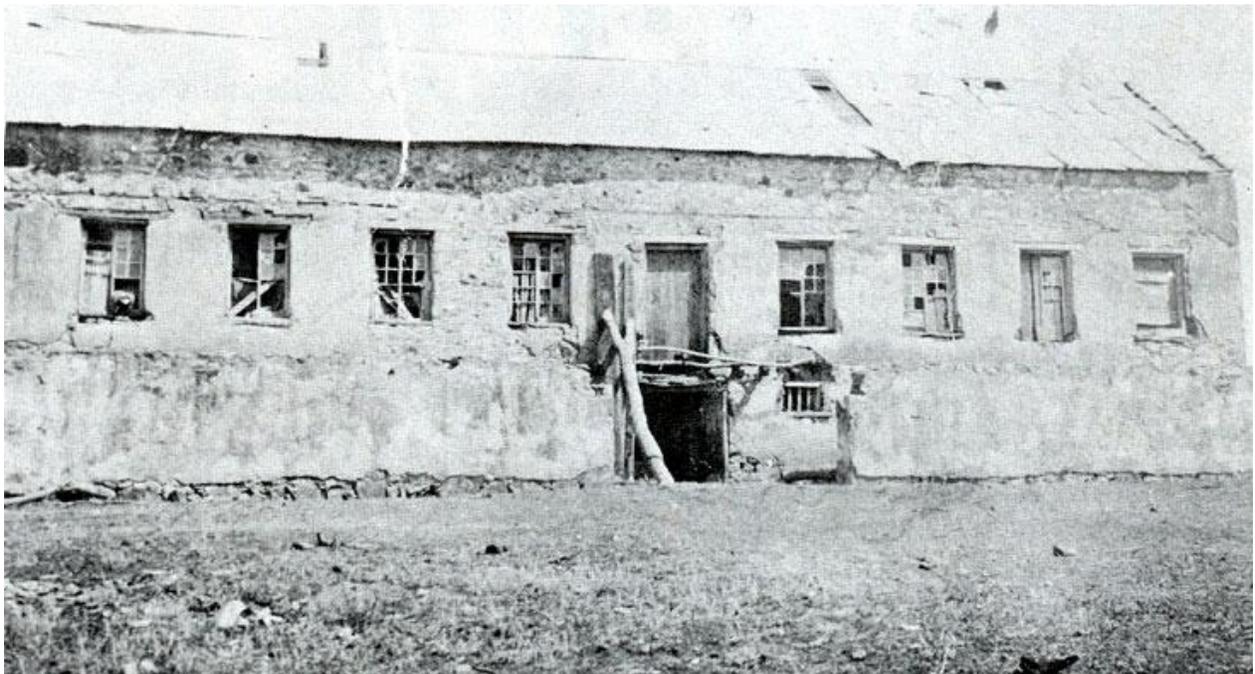
JR (Dick) Brackenreg, Andrew O'Brien, May Dorman, Leo O'Brien, Hector Horsburgh, Joan Horsburgh, John Kilgour, Walter Kilgour, Jean Kilgour, Jack Rolland, Margaret Rolland, Maitland Rolland, Bob Vautin, Betty Vautin, Sybil Edwards, Alice Avery, Harold O'Brien, Grace Curley, Fred Curley, Mavis Curley, Freda Cox, Fay Cox, Kitty Bates, Edith Gordon, Phyllis Corkhill, Pat Corkhill, Clara Kaye, Gordon Kaye, Don Smith.

The following children were too young for school but went occasionally: Jack Dorman, Percy Thurbon, Eric Dunshea, Ruth Brackenreg. <sup>v</sup>

<sup>vi</sup> The Corkhill's property on Klensendorlffe's grant was in the vicinity of the Australian National Gallery, and the cottage there is the one that was pulled down and is now under the lake. The second house, mentioned at Riverside, was built by Young in the 1890s for Fred Campbell. This two storey stone house was pulled down in the 1960s before the filling of the lake in 1963.



Above: Gordon Kaye photograph of Klensendorffe's Elizabeth House and below fuller view of the old house which was Canberra's first villa. It was used as a barn by the Kaye family from the late 1800s.





Painting Corkhill's farmhouse. Below Capitol Theatre at Manuka circa early 1930s (Sheila Wise photograph)

