

■ PLOD ESSAY: Frog Hollow, Part 1

As part of my research for my current project, the life and work of Celia Rosser, I sought out Terri Allen for some advice on how to write up the way botanists feel about the work they do. While she calls herself a naturalist and historian rather than a botanist, the divergence of Terri's knowledge is huge and we are lucky to have one such as her in our community. The first thing she said to me was, "Botanists share; when they go out on field trips together they compare, discuss, argue, and share with each other. And they love to teach and inspire."

Somehow, as we sat talking about the naturalist's world, she began talking about Frog Hollow, where three generations of her family have lived. And where Terri lives now. She gave me an article she had written several years ago for the Gippsland Heritage Journal about her house, its surrounds, and the people who have lived there since 1915. It is a wonderful description of the evolution of a way of life over a century. Terri is happy to share it with you. Here is the first half of "Frog Hollow; A Miner's Cottage in Wonthaggi" by Terri Allen, edited as little as possible to accommodate the limits of space:

In 1909 and 1910 men flocked to the Powlett Field built on an area called The Clump to work at the new State Coal Mine. Many of them re-located from the goldmining areas of Ballarat, Creswick and Allendale. One was my grandfather, Cliff Gitsham.

To accommodate this influx of men the government supplied and erected tents on two acres cleared of swamp paperbark opposite the site of today's hospital in Wonthaggi. Four hundred tents and a few wooden buildings knew only the tramp of male feet... As women arrived, a separate section was established for the married men's quarters. Cliff, previously waited on hand and foot by his doting mother and sisters, must have had a hard time batching, but when his sister arrived things would have been easier.

In September 1910 the model town of Wonthaggi was proclaimed after having been laid out on land bought by the state government from the grazing leases of Hollis, Scott and Heslop. By July 1910, tent town was deserted and those miners without recourse to a house in the newly established town upped tents and moved away from the swampy Tent Town to the drier, sandier environment of Flea Hill (today's Easton Street). By then the town's population was 4000 and rising. It had roads, footpaths, and Lance Creek

Reservoir, which would supply water to the town, was being made. In 1915, when this story of Frog Hollow really begins, the town consisted of a post office, state school, six churches, two banks, police station, two newspapers, several coffee palaces, and boarding houses, public hall, picture theatre and skating rink.

Miner WJG (Jack) Brown built a house at the bush end of the newly extended Broom Crescent and soon thereafter moved his family – most importantly for this story his daughter, Eva – to town. Cliff Gitsham soon began courting Eva Brown and then bought a block adjoining the Browns' block for £8. It was a flat quarter acre block of virgin bush with nearby sand ridges and a string of froggy pools. Messmate stringybark, scrub sheoak, swamp paperbark, spreading roperush, common reed, long purple flag and dagger hakea covered the block. Eva's father, Jack, helped Cliff to clear the house site by hand. And Cliff set about building a house.

Set on the outskirts of town, the house had a view of distant dunes and was serenaded by the thunder of pounding surf. All the streets were unlit and surfaces were rough, so any evening social occasion involved wearing boots and carrying good shoes and taking a lantern.

By the time Cliff made the final payment for his block of land in 1921, he had built a two-roomed dwelling running east and west, its inner walls packing cases, floors wooden and with a chimney on the west side. Bag mats, curtains, jam jars of wild flowers and family photos were the only things to relieve its stark utilitarianism. Essential conveniences were buckets (all water had to be carted from the spring at Tank Hull a half mile away), a metal tub (for washing in front of the fire), a post and prop clothes line strung across the backyard, the coal heap (essential fuel), the woodshed (for dry kindling), the lavatory on the western side of the backyard and gradually established ash paths.

At first the eastern room was the bedroom while western one was the living room. Here the family ate, relaxed and bathed. All cooking had to be done over the open fire in black cast iron cooking pots: frying pan, kettle, saucepans, camp oven. Lighting was provided by kerosene lamps and a pit lamp for night excursions through the backyard. The powerhouse had been established in 1912, but it took a long time for power to reach the outskirts of town.

As Cliff and Eva became more established, they added lino and cut-out paper doyleys for mantel edges to the living room which was dominated by a huge scrubbed wooden table and wooden chairs. Against one wall was a homemade wooden dresser. Outside was the meat safe hanging from a branch and a

wooden bench. There were two cut V-shaped kerosene tins used for dishes, washing and bathing babies.

While the bedroom was finished with a double bed, chest of drawers, dressing table and crib, the growing family over-flowed into the living room where they were housed in a curtained nook.

Soon extensions were needed and the two-roomed house expanded to four rooms. The back western room became the girls' bedroom. (Today its polished Baltic pine floorboards are marred by a deep char mark bearing witness to the fire started by one child to warm another.) Its eastern counterpart was the kitchen. This room boasted a coal stove with oven and was reached by a porch way, which had a tap from the newly installed tank. A Coolgardie Safe kept food cool and fresh. Opposite the kitchen window was the washhouse, a wooden construction used to store carbide, supplies, garden tools, and stone wash troughs that complemented the copper, which remained outside. In this coal-fired convenience oodles of hot water for bathing and washing clothes, especially filthy pit clothes was boiled. It was also in this kettle where crayfish, which were plentiful back then, were boiled.

Gradually the yard took shape, its fences a barrier to wandering stock and animals, while keeping little girls inside. The western side was wire netting festooned with dolichos, the other fences were picket with three sturdy wooden gates, front, middle and back. Between Browns' and Gitshams' was a walkway used weekly by the night man.

Huge trees shaded the backyard: gums either side of the back gate, two at the present clothesline site, and three more; often these trees provided food for itinerant koalas and flocks of honeyeaters, not to mention Christmas beetles in summer and bull ants. Where the chook pen ran at the top end of the yard, there was teatree, while scrub sheoak and native cherries grew along the side fence. As soon as the yard was cleared it became infested with bracken and high grass, which necessitated the wearing of boots in the winter...

An effort was made to establish two gardens: a small vegetable plot not far from the sheltering cypress some one at sometime planted in the south-

west corner of the front yard in an attempt to hinder the prevailing westerlies in their onslaught of the flimsy dwelling; and a flowerbed either side of the front gate. Often Eva's flower garden was a blaze of colour, a mass of waving poppies.

Beyond the side fence, despite its impressive title of Chambers Street, lay thick scrub, an enchanted



Cliff & Eva Gitsham at rear of house c. 1935

realm of teatree, wiry-grass tunnels, bracken, gums and shrubs. Almost opposite the back gate was a sandpit, just right for digging in and creating shelves and hidey-holes however dangerous in hindsight. Tantalisingly beckoning lay "The Hill" with its scrub, winding tracks and sand pockets, playground to scores of children. (And onwards for decades to come!) At its base was a chain of ponds, home of tadpoles, insects, frogs, yabbies, and, of course, leeches. For some strange reason snakes were never sighted. Next to the ponds was 'The Flat'.

Without material possessions, the children entertained themselves weaving intricate fantasies using the environment. Some of the games they played were Charlie-over-the-water, kick-the-tin, and hide-an-peek most of

which were played in Broome Crescent. 'The Flat' was used for games of cricket and the annual bonfire on Guy Fawkes Night. Gutter clay was collected and moulded into primitive pots, which were dried in the oven for use in the cubbies dotting the scrub. Toys were simple and home-made: jam-tin stilts, stick stilts, swords, bows and arrows, jacks from the shanks, brown paper kites with rag tails, skipping ropes, allies (often the glass marble from lemonade bottles), blackboard, chalk and pencils. Dolls were, in the main, celluloid baby dolls or tiny china dolls for which the girls made clothes. Perhaps the greatest gift each Christmas was a book.

These early days in Wonthaggi were tough with bracing climate rules by westerlies off Bass Strait, a regimen of back-breaking work in primitive conditions, the ever-present fear of the mine whistle heralding disaster and a time of intermittent strikes when miners fought for safe working conditions and security. The Gitsham family territory was hemmed in by relatives. As a neighbourhood it was tight-knit, succouring the young family.

The street was a tangle of teatree and a swamp, fittingly dubbed 'Frog Hollow'. To cross the street, the pedestrian had to negotiate a narrow bridge over a main drain and stepping stones across Frog Hollow.

- edited by c.r. landon