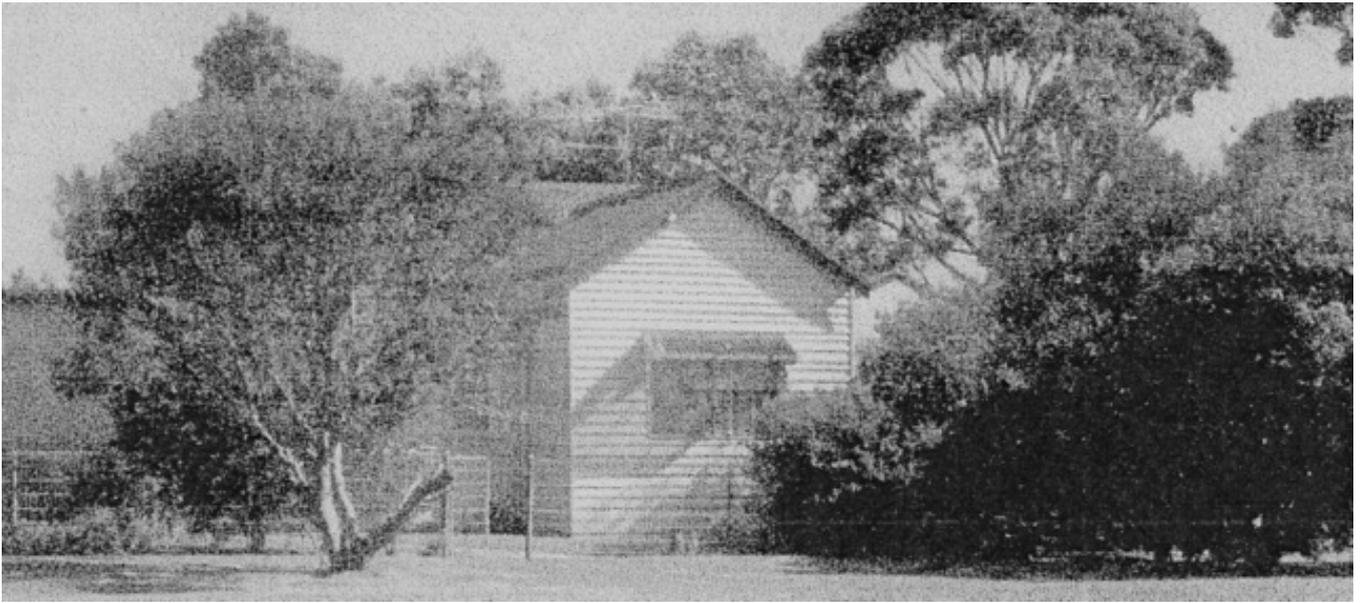


PLOD ESSAY: Frog Hollow, Part 2



As promised last month, the story of Frog Hollow written by Terri Allen continues. Four generations of Terri's family have lived in the same miner's cottage at the end of Broome Crescent in Wonthaggi.

The story begins in 1915 when Terri's grandfather, Cliff Gitsham, bought land next door to Jack Brown, who was the father of Eva, the love of Cliff's life. The house Cliff built with the help of Jack, his soon-to-be father-in-law, was a two-roomed dwelling that had wooden floors and a chimney

Back then the end of Broome Crescent 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.

Now we will continue with this description of the evolution of a way of life over a century. Here is the second half of "Frog Hollow; A Miner's Cottage in Wonthaggi" by Terri Allen:

The early days in Wonthaggi were tough with bracing climate rolling in 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.

Cliff Gitsham needed to maintain a thriving vegetable garden and fowl yard, as well as become a fisherman and rabbitier to provide for his family in strike times in the 1920s and especially 1930s. Cupboards were always well provisioned to tide the family over in such events. Add to this the need to repair and extend the house, shedding and

fences, and to keep up fuel supplies and it left little time for relaxation. However, reading, woodturning local blackwood on a homemade bicycle lathe, and radio after 1930, filled in the gaps. Eva, too, had a heavy workload with washing nappies and pit clothes, preserving, baking, making clothes and rearing children, yet she enjoyed dancing, films, reading and crafts such as embroidery, crocheting, knitting and tatting. The crafts were done over morning tea as the neighbourhood women chatted, swapping recipes, cures and advice – their hands were never idle. It was here they traded produce and pickles, collecting milk from the local cow.

This neighbourhood was close-knit, with people helping each other with jobs and ready to share at all times, a feature of Wonthaggi's staunch unionism. Workmates rallied in times of need and the tightly bound union town established the co-operative store Butcher, baker, grocer, haberdasher, ironmonger – family account number: Gitsham G9), which provided help in times of strike and strife.

Although the Gitshams had no car before the war, the whole extended family enjoyed outings walking to the Back Beach a few miles away through the scrub. They joined the train-loads picnicking at Kilcunda, followed the local sports, tramped the muddy streets to visit friends to play cards or go to the pictures or attend the Girls' Scottish Dancing contests.

The 1940s saw the start of a new era with Cliff widowed, his daughter housekeeping and a new generation introduced to Frog Hollow. Another bedroom and verandah were added to the front of the house after the war. The builder was Keith Kidd. Concrete paths and garden borders delineated areas and the advent of a car in the late 40s meant a

garage/workshop was needed. The vegetable plots multiplied and a shower was installed in the washhouse for hot weather to wash off beach sand. A rotary clothesline sprang up in the back yard, the 'lawn' was rank grass and a worthy foe for the hand mower.

The 50s heralded a time of plenty: a refrigerator, the Namco washing machine in 1950, television in 1958, Sunday drives around the coast in the FJ Holden, organised sports on Saturday, Friday night pictures and Saturday matinees (the Flicks). Fishing trips at night yielded gar and flounder, rock-pool forays crayfish, the rock platforms sweep, leather-jackets and parroties.

Now the cottage was painted cream with maroon trim, the backyard roughly grassed with gravel ruts leading to the garage. A huge boobyalla sheltered the back section where the netted fowl-run, fowl shed and pigeon loft filled the western corner.

Despite growing affluence, children's pastimes in this era differed little from their parents', depending on imagination and ingenuity: cubbies in the bush, 'gangs', home-made kites, bows and arrows, stilts, billycarts, treks to the Back Beach, mushrooming, black-berrying, jacks, skipping ropes, marbles, swap cards, pets. More bicycles extended the range of activities. Perhaps a pogo-stick, a scooter, a game of Monopoly or shuttlecock added a touch of sophistication. However, no matter how far they ranged, these kids of the 50s always returned home as it grew dark.

Now, in retirement, Cliff sought refuge from noisy grandchildren in the boiler shed, a warm, dark appendage to the house. Here he tended the donkey boiler, source of hot water. Soon, he had a separate bungalow built west of the house, a large light room where he had an open fireplace (later an oil heater), wash basin, beloved radio and books. He retired at night with a flask of tea to enjoy ABC radio in peace and comfort.

Swamp paperbark still pervaded the area in the 1960s, drains open and deep, roads roughly re-metalled from the mine stone dumps. Now the old wooden kitchen table and chairs gave way to tubular steel chairs with red leather upholstery and red laminex table, laminex bench tops, a cream painted kitchen with an aluminium hit-rail for chair backs. There were a large south-facing window, red-and-white patterned curtains, wall brackets to hold flowers and the red-and-white radio. The lounge, too, had undergone change. Out with the table, half-moon lead lighted crystal cabinet, the

original suite of two armchairs, three chairs and chaise longue (Blackwood and black old cloth), and the blackwood mantelpiece. All this was replaced by an oil heater, vinyl lounge suit and veneer buffet.

The yard was transformed. Lawns were developed, unfortunately with the new miracle grass, kikuyu, which certainly necessitated a motor mower (and which I am painstakingly rooting out by hand now). Native plants were established to complement the row of treeferns planted in 1950 and the boobyalla. There were paling fences, rockeries, tubs of plants, shrubbery and bright flowerbeds. A septic system meant a relocation of the lavatory from the back fence.

Thus the cottage had undergone great change from its 1915 inception: open fire to oil heaters, meat safe to refrigerator, copper to washing machine, coal stove to gas, copper heated water to donkey boiler, shank's ponies and hand tools to car and power tools. Frog Hollow moved with the times.

Another watershed occurred in 1970 when Cliff died. From a three-generation household, it quickly became a one-generation home. Kitchen and bathroom were renovated when Wonthaggi was sewerred, a hot-water system and freezer became modern necessities. Aluminium window frames, the lowering of the original lounge room ceiling, more concreting, a refurbished roof and new fencing followed. On Saturday 5 June 1993, Wonthaggi was hit by a freak storm at 5am. The wind attacked from the west, reached 145kph. The barometer dropped to 974 millibars and temperature plummeted from 9.4°C to 4°C in five minutes. The middle front hit Frog Hollow, but the little cottage stood firm.

Today Frog Hollow huddles bravely against the bracing westerlies, facing its rutted redmetal road on the town's outskirts. Freshly painted, reroofed, all electric, it sits amid manicured lawns, pebble-mulched native garden beds and a large vegetable garden. Five generations have known this house; four have resided in it.

Its guardian gum, mature when Wonthaggi began, still protects with shelter and shade. It no longer houses koalas, but still harbours insects, an old possum and is visited by a multitude of birds including crested shrike tits, spotted and striated thornbills, golden and rufous whistlers, silvereyes, brown thornbills, grey butcherbirds, magpies, black-faced cuckoo-shrikes...

Frog Hollow, a family home with history, weathers on.

- edited by c.r. landon