

PLOD ESSAY: Great Grandfather's Letter

John Bordignon acquired the following letter from Penny Jones, whose great grandfather had written it to his family in Wales from the Powlett River Coal Fields on Christmas Day 1909. John Price Jones had been at the coalfields only a couple of days when he wrote this letter, which has been a treasure amongst family papers for more than 100 years.

John Bordignon said, "I found it fascinating reading and thought it would be an interesting article for the PLOD."

State Coal Mine
Powlett River,
Victoria, Australia

December 25, 1909

Dear Parents and brother;

It is with pleasure that I send word to you. As you can see, I have landed safely after a very comfortable journey on the sea. We reached Melbourne on Thursday night the 25th of November and there I left the ship. I called to look up Mr G. Perry on Saturday afternoon the 27th and he was very glad to see me. We had a cup of tea and a chat in Welsh.

With regard to the country and employment:- it is a magnificent country and there is an abundance of work. I have been pretty busy during the past four weeks, in enquiring and searching. I started work on Monday morning 29th November with a man called J. Cowey, Werribee, Victoria, and things were working out well. I came across him in Melbourne when I was leaving the ship. He wanted two men to pitch corn and there happened to be two of us together at the time. After a bit of question and answer, we agreed to go there. He wanted us for 3 months, but we did not bind ourselves to that arrangement. He was paying 5/- a day and we were having good meals at the same time as he himself. We started work at 7 in the morning and finished at 6. We had an hour for dinner and 20 minutes' lunch break in the morning and afternoon. So you see, he was a good man to work for.

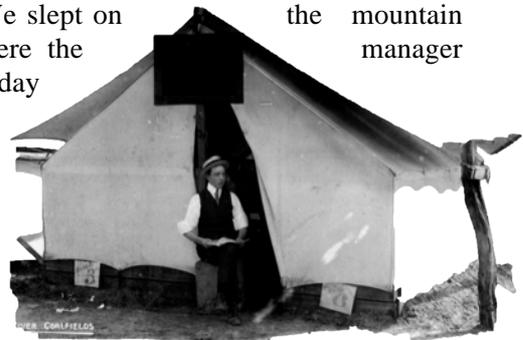
However, we understood that the government intended opening a mine in the above place and we decided that it would be wise to work for the government if it were possible. We gave Mr Cowey 4 days to find 2 other men and left him on Saturday, the 18th of December. His house was about 30 miles out of Melbourne. The fields we were working were between 6 and 7 hundred acres, and very flat country. We went back at night on horse back, and came the next morning the same way, 27 of us, each with his own horse.

But, to get back to the point, we went back to Melbourne on the Saturday night and bought blankets, etc., to prepare for the journey on Monday morning. We were leaving the city at 7 am in the morning and reached Powlett about 6:30 in the evening.

It is a mountainous region, as you would expect. We slept on Monday night, about 50 yards from the tent where the manager was seeping, and we woke with the lark on Tuesday morning.

I presented myself to the manager a little before 7 and we – both of us – started work at 8 o'clock on Tuesday, the 21 of December, the longest day in this part of the world. There were only about 20 tents erected when we arrived on Monday night, but by today there are over 70 – two sleeping in each one. So, you see, the population is increasing.

The Prime Minister of Australia was here on Wednesday, and he gave us a very handsome organ as a present for the chapel – the very first service will be held there tomorrow morning, Sunday the 26th.



I am pretty sure I have done the right thing in coming out here. I only work 7 and ½ hours and the work is light. I receive 1/- to begin with, and I am free to work a further hour or two if I so wish. The nearest place is 5 miles away, but they are very busy at it preparing to build a railway up here and are building a town. The coal wagons are pulled by bullock, until we get the railway. There are 24 to 28 of them for each wagon and they take 6 tons away at a time. The work that my friend and I do is filling a wagon and we have good fun. As you know, people who work for the government don't, as a rule, believe in working too hard, and I am perfectly sure this place is no exception. However, as you see, I have not wasted much time since I arrived in Australia, and the sunshine, the fresh air and the work have hardened me and made me stronger to a large degree.



We pay 13/6 each week for our food, but when the railway is laid, the price of food and other things will drop. It is much cheaper to live in Melbourne than London. Here, the way of it is, the price of a meal is sixpence whether you can eat a lot or a little, and you get plenty of food for your sixpence.

Looking at the people (inhabitants) as you know, all of the time, or their fathers and grandfathers have come from Britain at some time or another, i.e., white people, as George Thomas said some time ago. There are Chinese people here, but they, to a large extent, work with the fruit. The native of this country is a black man, but they have nearly all gone to live in the northern and western parts, though we have 3 or 4 of them in the direction of Melbourne.

I had great fun today, Christmas! We went down to the beach, some miles from the mine, and we bathed in the sea, morning and afternoon. We took our Christmas dinner down with us and lit a fire on the beach – 4 of us – and we saw no one, neither man nor woman on our way or coming back over the mountain.

We are having glorious weather and I feel great. I will end hoping you are all as well as I am. Best wishes to all, relations and friends.

Your son,
John

PS. Forgive this writing. We have no table in the tent as yet. The tent measures 10 yards by 12, and have put the name 'Hampstead Heath' above it – the name of the part of London where Laura Evans lives.

The kangaroo and monkey bear run wild all around us on the mountain.

Healthy country.
Free country.



Day Shift, Pioneer Mine. Powlett 1909