

**Small School teaching at The Mullion, out of Yass, 1960-1961**  
Keith Amos\* - for Yass & District Historical Society, March 2012

For almost a century small one-teacher bush schools existed in nearly every country district of New South Wales, wherever sufficient children justified their establishment by the Education Department. Beginning in the 1960's, however, small schools began to be closed down, primarily due to economies of scale and improved transport. Instead, children were bussed in to the nearest town, to be educated in larger schools with continuity into secondary education. This talk reminisces over my choice of career, teacher training at Bathurst Teachers College 1958-59, and experiences of two years' teaching in a small bush school midway between Yass and Canberra.

**Choosing Primary Teaching -**

In the 1950's, primary teaching was a popular career choice for any lad who had reasonable academic ability but not enough family money to self-fund university education - say to be a high school teacher, or to get a degree for some other profession. My father was a bootmaker, mother a cleaner, and we'd never owned a house or car. I had one brother six years older, and we both wanted to improve our prospects through tertiary education and white-collar careers.

Teachers College Scholarships were awarded to applicants who gained a minimum pass of five 'B' grades out of six Leaving Certificate subjects. This funded two years full-time study and guaranteed appointment on graduating. You began teaching on probation for three years, which required yearly inspection approval before gaining permanent status.

In return for a scholarship, you agreed to serve the NSW Education Department anywhere in the state for up to three years – usually called 'country service'. If you resigned before completing this service you were liable to pay a sizeable bond – about a year's salary from memory. Unlike today, the number of students accepted into teachers colleges matched the estimated number of new teachers required by the State – hence the guaranteed appointment.

You could nominate whatever college you wanted to attend: these being at Sydney University, Balmain, Armidale, Newcastle, Bathurst, Wollongong and Wagga. I chose Bathurst, mainly because my older brother had blazed the same trail six years earlier. He'd enjoyed the campus life at Bathurst, then went on to have three adventurous years at a one-teacher school called 'Green Swamp'- out of Berrigan, near the Murray River. He bought himself a new car, and had secured a transfer back to Sydney.

When I sat for the Leaving Certificate as a 16 year old in 1957, my brother Jim was married and paying off a block of land on Sydney's northern beaches. It looked like pretty good progress to me. I matriculated OK - with an A and five B's - and was awarded a primary teaching scholarship, as applied for at Bathurst Teachers College.

## **Teachers College Training -**

Bathurst Teachers College first opened in 1951, in an attractive rural setting about a mile out of town. Its oldest buildings were of quaint red brick Federation architecture - inherited from an agricultural farm & training college founded in the 1890's. The newer College buildings included a block of aluminium pre-fab classrooms, some weatherboard dorms (separate male and female buildings) and a big dining room. There were also a couple of large shed-like buildings the army had built during World War 2 – one of which had been converted in a male dorm.

There was a choice of four courses: General Primary; Infants; Small-school; and Lower Division - which prepared women for teaching K-Year 3 in a two-teacher school. I chose General Primary. You attended lectures 9 - 4.00 Mon to Fri, and twice a year had four-week breaks for practice teaching – which required train travel, say to Lithgow, Blayney, Orange etc, or to various one and two-teacher schools in the region.

There was a pleasant, relaxed campus atmosphere - lots of sport, dances etc, pairing off of girlfriends and boyfriends, cycling into town for the pictures, coffee or the pub. Once a month we lined up for our scholarship payment: about 16 pounds per month – today's equivalent of about \$400. This was used for clothing and incidental spending, as board and meals were provided. Nearly everyone hitch-hiked any big distances to save on transport costs.

The courses were very practical – usually taught by distinguished ex-demonstration schoolteachers. I duly graduated, ending College besotted with a lovely fellow student girlfriend - now my wife, Judy. Our appointments arrived by telegram: Judy's to Parramatta West, mine to a central school at Captain's Flat – a small mining town SE of Queanbeyan.

## **First weeks at Captain's Flat -**

I didn't like this first appointment much. Single teachers shared the miners' quarters - tiny twin rooms with a steel locker for belongings. Pretty rough, hard-drinking all male company. And worse, in a medium-sized school I was placed on Kindergarten without any prior training. My first day was as traumatic for the children as it was for me – some were constantly crying and 3 or 4 tried to make a bolt for home.

I survived about 3 weeks, then had an unexpected reprieve from the Department: a married teacher from New Guinea needed placing and his wife was given my Kindergarten. A telegram told me that I was transferred to a 4th Class (one-teacher) school called 'The Mullion'. A problem arose in that the Principal couldn't tell me where it was, as there seemed to be no town or school of that name.

The only school with a similar name was Mullion Creek, near Orange, but no vacancy was listed there. I was also short of money, as no salary had arrived. So I phoned Head Office in Bridge St. Sydney, and was told to return there for a salary payment and directions on the school's whereabouts.

The Department's search found that the school had only just begun with a temporary teacher appointed in June 1959, having previously been a 'Provisional School' staffed by a parent – supervising lessons posted from the Correspondence School in Sydney. It was said to be somewhere out of Yass towards another small school at Wee Jasper. The arrangement was for me to ring the P&C president who would see that someone was there to meet me at Yass railway station.

All this worked to plan. A tall shearer named Alec Scorgie who had four children at school met me at the Station. We headed off along the unsealed Wee Jasper road to Taemas Bridge, then took a left fork into Mountain Creek Road and climbed through pretty hilly country, arriving eventually at 'The Mullion' property, owned by David Ledger. This was about half way between Yass and Canberra.

### **Teacher-in-charge: The Mullion Public school -**

It was arranged for me to board in a worker's cottage at the 'The Mullion' property, with Bert Wilson and his wife Margaret who had two daughters in the school. The arrangement was that I would pay 5 pounds board per week supplemented by 5/- per week from each of the other families who had children at the school. This totalled about 10 pounds per week –approx. \$300 today. In return, Mrs Wilson prepared all meals and did my washing and room cleaning. The room was a garage attached to the house; not too flash, but a big improvement on the miners' quarters at Captain's Flat. More importantly, at 18 years old, I was solely in charge of my own school - about one km up the road.

The first step was getting to and from school. It suited the Wilsons for me to drive their two girls to & from school in their Austin sedan, as they had a ute for their use and my driving saved them time and petrol. Bert Wilson gave me a crash-driving course and an understanding Yass policeman gave me a licence - without leaving his desk from memory. I could then take over the driving from Margaret.

The school building was a neat little turn-out, about the size of a single garage with a small closed in verandah. It had been built by some of the parents adjacent to the local tennis courts and a community sportsground. It had a school fence, garden and flagpole. The classroom had space for only two rows of double desks – about ten desks all up. There were about two children in every grade from Kinder to Y6, and one Year 8 boy doing high school lessons by correspondence; a total enrolment of 17.

The pupils were the children of local property owners and their farm workers. The two Wilson girls were Elizabeth and Annette. Alec and Barbara Scorgie, who owned a heavily timbered block beyond the Mullion Hill had four children at school - from eldest down, Peter, Terry, Garry and Paul. Mervyn Apps, the secondary boy, was the son of a couple who managed Hyles's property, 'Horseshoe'; Gavin Walker was the son of Harold and Vera, the owners of 'Ledgerton'; Gavin's cousin, David Walker, the son of Fred and Marj, owners of 'Glenrock'; Cameron Archer, the son of Earle and Muriel, owners of 'Brooklyn'; Julie Buckmaster, the daughter of Leo and Margaret, owners of 'Roseville'; David and Rosemary Pate, the children of an Alf and Iris, owners of 'The Brook'; Cheryl Davis, the daughter of Harry and Phyllis,

owners of 'Wombat'; Barry and Brian Smith, the sons of a couple who managed a property for Gordon Ledger; and Bronwen Faulder, the daughter of Ben and Shirley, who owned 'The Ranch'.

### **A Day's Teaching -**

Luckily Bob Denham, the temporary teacher one term before me, had started rolls and organised books and equipment etc. But even so I was mainly using instinct and imagination - having had no specialised training for infants or small school teaching. Like many others, I relied partly on memories about how I'd been taught in junior grades.

I prepared grade level worksheets for number, handwriting, language etc; taught at upper and lower division levels in lessons such social studies, natural science and music; and had shared whole school lessons where possible – say in art or sport. The children were easy to manage and waited patiently for me to help them individually. Also, I used the older children often to pair up and help the juniors: eg, guiding their reading.

Syllabus guidelines were simpler and much more practical than today's – every teacher owning a single volume NSW Curriculum we called a 'Blue Bible'. I made a lot of flash cards, charts etc, and Judy gave support from Sydney: eg the educational store, 'Dominie', sold every imaginable resource, including canes. Also the school's P&C purchased extra resources I'd found and recommended. Writing up a term's program for all the grades was an arduous task; also upkeeping all the returns, such as daily travel allowances – 6d per pupil each day by car, 1/- per day by horse, etc.

The only contact with other schools was annually at the Yass District Athletics Carnival. And once we had an excursion, to an Education Week matinee put on by Yass Picture Theatre. I've never forgotten what a disaster that excursion was. Unknown to me, the theatre had chosen 'A Tale of Two Cities' – more suited to adults than children, and containing a guillotine scene. Also we arrived just after it had started, and collecting the smallest children from wandering off in all directions in the dark was like herding cats.

In summer we sweltered in such a small building without fans and a fairly low ceiling compared with most schools. My standard dress code at that time didn't help – a long-sleeved white shirt, long trousers and a tie. One of the Kindies asked me one day: *'Are you feeling cranky today Mr Amos?'* - 'Not especially, why?' – *'Because whenever you're cranky, you wear a black tie, and you've got one on today'*.

Winter went to the other extreme. In the coldest conditions my new VW Beetle - left outside - had an iced-up windscreen and was slow to start. I sometimes drove to school, looking through the bottom corner of the driver's windscreen, where the ice was thawed by a heater outlet. The first job at school was to stoke up a cylindrical stove at one end of the room. The closest children were the Kindies who tended to doze off in its warmth - which freed me of attending to them for a while! And if it was too cold for outside lunch, some children liked toasting their sandwiches on the stove.

One bleak winter's day in my first year, I've never forgotten. There was a so-called 'black frost' and biting wind all day. The Wilsons had dropped me off that morning, and in the afternoon rush I hadn't signalled wanting a lift home. Faced with having to walk home, I fashioned a hood out of some thick Department-provided hand-towels, then headed off leaning into the wind. After a half-hour's walk home my face was numb with the cold.

### **The Mullion District and Community -**

Local properties ranged in size from about 1000 to 3000 or so acres. Smaller properties were owned and run by one family, the larger ones usually employed and separately housed a worker. The country was very suitable for fine wool growing because of its hilly terrain, reasonably good rainfall and better native grasses. The more rugged hills were usually uncleared with scattered timber, boulders and bracken.

Other local property owners were Tony and Pam Walker at 'Fairbank'; the Newman's at 'Springvale'; the Webb's at 'Fairlight' (towards Uriarra); Kath and Bob Walker at 'Kirawin' (closer to Yass); and the Roche's at 'Cavan'. I was told the Roche's had a castle-like homestead built of bluestone – now owned by Rupert Murdoch. Bill Roche and his wife drove twin Bentleys, and Bill used a VW Beetle as a paddock runabout – the rear seat stripped out for his dogs. Most farm vehicles were Land Rovers.

Typically, the properties ran about one or two sheep to the acre and kept a small herd of beef cattle – mostly Herefords or Shorthorns. On some creek flats there might a paddock of lucerne and a smallish vegetable plot. David Ledger, I remember had a paddock of potatoes in good soil well up The Mullion Hill. Quite a bit was spent on superphosphate dropped by small planes about once a year for pasture improvement.

Wool prices boomed in 1951 and maintained a good level throughout the 50's. So most properties were doing fairly well when I arrived. On Saturday mornings most of the locals took a shopping trip to Yass. Men wore a straight-brimmed hat, elastic-sided R. M. Williams boots, a tweedy sportscoat in winter, and sometimes light-coloured jeans called 'moleskins'. The women dressed up in pretty frocks, highish heels and summery hats.

Particular hotels and cafes seemed to cater for certain social groups: The graziers tended to mix with a managerial class of bank managers, accountants and stock and station agents. Another group were bank clerks, teachers, nurses and police –regarded somewhat as outsiders because, like me, they often came and went after a few years. And a third group were town workers, truckies and rural labourers.

I remember being told that about a year before I arrived, gossip had thrived on a party telephone line that linked The Mullion to the Yass exchange. On a party line, sticky beaks could gently lift their receiver and listen into someone else's conversation. But if there were too many secret listeners at one time, the volume would start to fade, so the caller would say something like: '*Would any listeners please hang up so I can continue this call!*' Sadly for gossipers, the upgraded telephone line put an end to this caper.

## **Social Life –**

At The Mullion everyone seemed to mix fairly easily, with the school one focus that brought many together. I'm sure that before TV, the greater use of cars, and the policy of closing small schools, communities like The Mullion were much more closely knit. Every weekend most families played tennis next to the school, and about once a month there was a cricket match of locals versus outsiders. Non-cricketers, including me, spent the day relaxing or collected in the small tennis shed for cards. There was a little open fireplace with a glowing log in winter, billy tea on the fire and enthusiastic shouts as cards were thumped down in 'Blackjack', 'Poker', or whatever.

One night I was invited to join a spotlight shooting trip - having never fired a rifle in my life. It was basically a young men's event; a couple next to the driver, and about four of us standing in the open back of a Rover. Turns were taken at scanning the bush with the spotlight. I was given a quick lesson on loading and firing, and clear instructions about not shooting sheep or cattle. Rabbits and kangaroos were the targets, and also foxes, picked out from their red eyes. We stopped now and then to swig whisky in enamel mugs, then blazed away at something or other, but ended up bagging nothing the whole night.

I struck up a close friendship with Barry Walker - Harold and Vera Walker's elder son at 'Ledgerton' near the school. Barry was about my age and had just finished boarding school in Canberra. I was made very welcome at 'Ledgerton' and have very fond memories of our wonderful evenings: elegantly served scrumptious meals followed by conversation, supper and card-playing till late at night. Barry's family was fond of pranks. I remember being woken up one night by an icy wind sweeping into my bedroom at Wilson's: on his way home from Yass, Barry had opened up the two garage doors of my room to the elements.

One memorable adventure we shared was a swim across the Murrumbidgee River just below Taemas Bridge. It was at least 1 km wide, a backed-up stretch from Burrinjuck Dam after a rainy season. Our aim was to explore an unusual stone arch on the other side and Barry suggested that we take a tractor's inner tube to rest on now and then. We eventually succeeded, after a terrible struggle with the tube – the wind tending to blow it off course down the river. As some of you may know, Barry went on to become Mayor of Yass for a couple of terms and has since been active on various boards related to the wool industry.

One thing I learned at The Mullion is that horses have a mind of their own. I had my first riding lessons at Pate's property without incident, then one weekend Bert Wilson suggested that I might like to have a ride on one of their horses. The horse he picked was a fairly docile old one called Rusty. Bert warned that he could still get a bit frisky, especially on a spring morning. If that happened, and he wanted to bolt, I was told point him up a hill to knock the wind out of him.

Sure enough, sensing I was a novice, Rusty broke into a trot, then a gallop. As instructed, I pointed him up a little hill, and managed to stay in the saddle. At the top,

I hauled him up and patted his heaving side reassuringly. Then disastrously, regaining his wind, he took off at high speed down the hill. Half way down I began slipping off the saddle and when he lunged into a sandy ditch, I pitched off onto the ground. Very embarrassingly, Rusty was back home long before me!

When I related this later to the Walkers, Harold told me it could have been worse: a well known Banjo Paterson poem had the famous line: '*He would ride that reckless filly*' – about a young man thrown to his death from a bad-tempered horse. Anyway, I did no more riding after my experience with Rusty.

A big horse-riding event each year was the Wee Jasper Rodeo. Wild brumbies were trucked in from somewhere and a large woolshed decked out for the dance on Saturday night. The dance was really something. It started in a rather subdued way, the women around the walls vastly outnumbering the men - who were mostly outside in the dark, working up courage with a few rounds of drinks. The band was folkish: a fiddle, concertina squeeze-box and so on.

As things heated up, rustic characters came in from outside, and the dancing became more and more abandoned – a kind of galloping romp rather than dancing; mixed with more sedate, progressive barn dances and so on. Outside, there was the occasional brawl, and all kinds of frolics until the night eventually wound down.

Another big social event for the year was The Mullion Picnic that had been held annually for 30 years. There were athletics, sprints and sack races, 3-legged races, catching the greasy piglet, tossing a hay sheaf over a high bar, etc. The school received some of the proceeds and in return put on an item. I remember one year we had the children dressed up as a train and carriages to do a 'The Little Steam Engine' play, chuffing round and round the school as a reader narrated the story. Another big event, specifically for the school, was an annual woolshed dance in fancy dress.

Once I had my own car, I could make more contact with other small-school teachers. One was Greg Doherty at Wee Jasper. It was interesting that Wee Jasper had a strong Catholic element, including Greg, and was visited by a Catholic priest – whereas all my pupils were Protestant. Greg and his wife lived in a large old residence that had once been a police station. I also drove over to Boorowa to visit Col Russell, another beginning teacher who'd been with me at Bathurst. Comparing accommodation, he said that his was a caravan provided by the parents. They moved it each term from one property to another – which I didn't envy at all.

Once Judy and I were engaged, I was driving back and forth to Sydney, and Judy came down a couple of times. On one of her visits the previous flight was hit by lightning on take-off. It pitched into Botany Bay killing all on board. Nor did it help that I ran very late that night trying to pick her up at Canberra – I missed the airport turn-in, and ended up doing a full circle around Canberra!

In 1961 we informed the Department of our engagement and impending marriage in December. We applied for nearby Sydney appointments, and they duly arrived in the

Xmas holidays: Judy's to Collaroy and mine to Harbord Primary, where I'd been a pupil. Another full circle!

The old Mullion School building was replaced in about 1964 when the Education Department moved another disused small school onto a site nearby. It continued as a one-teacher school until permanently closed in 1972 - the building being then taken over for community use.

Looking back, my 'country service' was a great life experience. Though young and inexperienced at teaching, I was made warmly welcome in a beautiful rural setting. We've kept up friendships over the years and always feel a fond familiarity going back to 'The Mullion'.

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**Map** - courtesy of Cameron Archer, formerly of 'Booklyn', Yass

**Photos -**

1. Keith (left) with fellow students at BTC
2. Graduating, Dec 1959
3. The Mullion School – & Wilsons' car, Feb.1960
4. Same – The Mullion Hill in the background
5. The pupils:- (Julie Buckmaster & Rosie Pate, absent).  
Back from left: Mervyn Apps, Gavin Walker, Barry Smith, Brian Smith, David Walker.  
Middle: David Pate, Cameron Archer, Peter Scorgie, Terry Scorgie  
Front – Elizabeth Wilson, Bronwyn Faulder, Annette Wilson, Cheryl Davis, Paul Scorgie, Garry Scorgie (obscured)
6. In the playground – Front: Eliz. Wilson, Julie Buckmaster, Cameron Archer
7. From Left: Rosemary Pate, Garry Scorgie, Cheryl Davis, Annette Wilson, Paul Scorgie, Bronwyn Faulder
8. Sports Day in Yass :-  
Back: David Walker, Mervyn Apps, Gavin walker, Barry Smith, Brian Smith  
Middle: Bronwyn Faulder, Peter & Terry Scorgie, Cameron Archer, Julie Buckmaster, David Pate  
Front: Eliz. Wilson, Cheryl Davis, Garry Scorgie, Annette Wilson, Rosemary Pate, Paul Scorgie
9. Wilsons' cottage (my room is the former garage, right)
10. & 11 Inside my room
- 12 Mullion ladies on tennis day, from left: Barbara Scorgie, Phyllis Davis, Mrs Apps, Pat Hunter (Iris Pate's elder daughter, looking down), Iris Pate
13. My 'surprise' costume made by Vera & Marj Walker for a school Woolshed Dance, 1961
14. Taemas Bridge
15. Murrumbidgee River (Burrinjuck Dam backwater), below Taemas Bridge
16. My new VW, near Ledgers' dam (Mullion Homestead in the background)
17. Our marriage reception, Sydney, Dec. 1961



