

## THE CRESWICK I REMEMBER

In the late 40s I had the joy of being taken three years in a row to Creswick for the September holidays. This, for a city girl who had a way of 'speaking with animals,' was pure wonderment.

My aunt, Elsie Williams, and I travelled by train, and it was an adventure. From Melbourne to Ballarat the train actually stopped about half-way for passengers to hop off and buy a cup of tea; at one section it went through a tunnel and everyone was asked to close the windows as the smoke and soot blew back into the compartments and everything went dark. We then took the bus from Ballarat to Creswick, and I remember asking my aunt if the little farm was on 'top of that big mountain?' She said, 'Yes.' But it wasn't. Perhaps that was Sulky Hill - of this I am not sure.

The weatherboard farm house had two front bedrooms; behind which two other rooms nestled, then there was the kitchen with the wood oven, the small bathroom and undercover back area and a milk-cream separating room. Beside the house was a thriving vegetable patch, at the end of which was the trek to the 'Out House.' The little house was a free walk-through for any locals so long as they remembered to shut the gates. The roads were all unmade and the pine forests whispered in the surrounds.

A fence then separated garden and living spaces into my magic world. Chickens ran free in a huge yard, along with a rooster (who was a tyrant), ducks, and sometimes, in the adjoining paddock there roamed a Jersey bull. At the end of the yard a magnificent Clydesdale, named Lofty, was stabled. Next to his stable were the milking sheds squeezed between another stable where Bonny, the gig pony was brought back into at night-time. The Jersey cows (usually about four cows) roamed the streets all day and it was a disaster if they ever ate onion weed.

The mornings were crisp. I was up with the sun to watch Mr Clifton, Jack, milk the cows. He would let me have a go and put an ointment on their teats after milking, I think for warts. After the cows were set free out the back gate, we would then let Lofty out of his stable. The huge horse had to break the ice, which formed over the drinking tub during the night, with his big nose. Meanwhile Bessie, Mrs Clifton, would busy herself lighting the wood stove to prepare breakfast. She also made a gruel for the ducks who were so amusing waddling after her to be fed. They, too, clattered out of the yard for the day and always came home at night-time. The poddy calves had to be fed and that was fun; they were so strong and trusting. In those years I was not aware of their destiny. The gig pony had to be

led to a neighbour's paddock, a job with which I was rarely trusted, particularly as one night Bonny dropped her head and her hoof caught up in the leading rope, and with a lightening move it reared and ran off. I didn't know how I was going to tell the Cliftons, but they eventually caught her and said nothing. It was Bessie's job to separate the milk after breakfast and the cream would sit in bowls in a very dark room. Some milk was given to the neighbours and it was my job to deliver it.

I remember the neighbours well. The Williams family opposite that had so many children, and the lady who lived by herself in a large double-storied home who had an incredible collection of lace petticoats and bodices in a large cedar chest, and the young bride who was soon to have a baby. Snowy, a girl from the large Williams' family, taught me to recognise different wild flowers.

Life was so different. One day Jack Clifton had heart problems and I witnessed his son, Stan, hurriedly saddle up Bonny and ride furiously down the dirt road to fetch the doctor. Every day I would walk to the shops and buy a large piece of pumpkin, or apples. En route I walked around the lake, which in hindsight was a dangerous undertaking. I remember one side was more overgrown than the other, but I didn't know to fear anything, even as a city girl. On Sundays, I walked by myself to attend the Catholic Mass which was into the town, and up the main street to the top of the hill, where the church stood.

My favourite days were the days that Jack Clifton harnessed up Lofty to the dray and we plodded into the bush where he had the job of sawing gum trees and bringing the wood back. I loved being in the dray and watching the horse's mane flicking with every step. Lofty was kept at a trot going out, but with a load on board he ambled home. Lofty really got into trouble if, while trotting, he lifted his tail and let manure fly back at us. I thought the horse thought it a bit of a joke. While the group of men who met in the bush did their job, I just sat with Lofty and we shared secrets and I gathered the harsh, sparse grass for him to nibble. I never considered that there might be snakes about. Lofty and I became good friends and every time I walked into that big farmyard, Lofty would neigh. I did steal young carrots from the vegetable garden for him, but only when I felt I wouldn't be caught.

One of the Clifton boys, Stan, was courting the prettiest of girls who lived near Sulky Hill. They met on the bus to Ballarat so Stan made sure he looked dashing going off to work. Every Sunday Stan would harness up Bonny to the gig and drive to his sweetheart's farm. One Sunday he let me come and every minute of that ride was a dream I will never forget. Some Sundays Mavis Redman, that was Stan's sweetheart's name, would travel to Creswick on the bus and walk up the hill to the Clifton's home. I used to wait for her at the corner. Stan and Mavis did marry.

At night we would all sit around the kitchen stove fire and listen to serials on the radio. At that time (1951) Johnnie Ray bought out a song called 'Cry.' Aunty Bessie thought it was a ridiculous song. On special occasions we would sit huddled between a large dresser and the dining table in front of an open fire. The dresser was full of neatly packed toys. I was never to mix them up, but did have fun playing with these new, to me, toys. Two boys lived at home, Stan and Lionel. They seemed to me to be so tall and they were always kind.

In September, the paddocks were ablaze with the colour of daffodils. There were thousands of them everywhere growing wild. I picked so many to bring home to my mum, but once I picked some wattle and was severely told it was bad luck to bring wattle into the home.

Bessie made the best apple sponge dessert. I can't remember any of the other meals, just that apple sponge. I remember the country smell of it all to this day: the smell of the cream in bowls, and the fresh milk in buckets, and the yeasty smell of the gruel for the ducks, and the ever-present scent of the pine forests that filled the air.

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Having so often spoken to my husband of these memorable holidays he decided to surprise me and take me back to Creswick. I had no bother locating the area where the little farm stood, and to my delight, the weatherboard cottage still stands. It looks loved all over again. I stood there and recalled all these happy memories and knelt to pick up the soil to hold in my hand. Sadly, the new owners were not at home but goodness prevails in that home, and I am sure it will overflow to the new owners' lives. Its address is 15 Burke Street, and it backs on to Fitzgerald Street. Streets were unnamed in the years I visited there.

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