

# PIONEER LIFE IN THE FASSIFERN: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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*Read to a Meeting of the Society  
on 23 February 1984*

My topic is the problems and prospects of pioneering life in the Fassifern, but perhaps the sub-title should be **The Evolution of a Rural Community**, with special emphasis on “community”. I have concentrated on selector settlement for two reasons. Firstly, in an effort to highlight the difficulties encountered by the thousands of newcomers who settled in agricultural districts; and, moving from the general to the particular, because I believe that Boonah, as a typical example of Waterson’s “pure selector” town had, and perhaps still has, a separate and distinct identity - one with its own intrinsic interest. However, instead of a conventional historical narrative, what follows will be an attempt to present pioneer history from a slightly different perspective, by raising issues and discussing areas of special relevance.

Captain Logan described the Fassifern Valley as “an excellently well-watered . . . . and desirable district”<sup>1</sup>, so that from the very earliest days its value lay in its potential as grazing and farming land.

Despite the emphasis on selector settlement, brief reference should be made to the original pioneers, the pastoralists. The experiences of the early graziers foreshadowed the future pattern of rural life. They too battled distance, poor seasons and depressed prices. With the possible exception of the Wienholts, the Bells and the Murray-Priors, all of whom bought or leased established runs, they never prospered like their counterparts in the Logan or on the

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Darling Downs. For example, Coochin forfeited 320 acres in 1874 for unspecified reasons (some years before the Bells purchased the property). In 1875 the leased half of Dugandan was forfeited for non-payment of rent and after more than 35 years of continuous occupation, the station buildings were valued at only £25 by Goolman Divisional Board.<sup>2</sup>

When the colonial government embarked on an ambitious scheme aimed at more efficient utilization of land by encouraging closer settlement, lessees of pastoral holdings in the Fassifern seem to have accepted the subsequent resumptions with a fair degree of equanimity. Perhaps it was because they had less to lose in terms of prestige and income than the forceful gentlemen on the Downs, who fought so hard to maintain the status quo.

A desire to own land, especially land offered on easy terms, was a powerful motivating force, one recognized by colonial governments. The policy of large-scale alienation and small-scale selection, aided by a programme of assisted migration, introduced the idea of land as a resource controlled by the state and led to a rural revolution - a revolution characterized by owner-occupation of small agricultural holdings.

Details of acreage resumed from both Dugandan and Coochin runs were gazetted in 1872<sup>3</sup>, but it was not until 1877 that the resumptions were declared open for selection as homestead areas.<sup>4</sup> Thousands of acres were offered in 80 acre lots or multiples of 80 acres, at 2/6 per acre, payable over five years. While 6d per acre per year seems now to be only a nominal rent, it represented a considerable sum to new settlers struggling to carve a farm out of inhospitable scrub while coping as best they could with a capricious climate, fluctuating prices, almost non-existent transport facilities, an uncertain market for their produce and the complete absence of the sort of amenities offered by an old and established civilization.

### THE ETHNIC MIXTURE

But while the quality of life was largely the result of economic and environmental circumstances, one other important factor influenced the way in which this particular area developed - the English/Scottish/Irish/German ethnic mixture. The notion of Australia as a multi-cultural society is not peculiar to the second half of the 20th century, but has its roots deep in our colonial past. The only difference is that few seem to have considered the 19th century peopling of the colony in those terms.

Unlike the Chinese and the Polynesians who were regarded, fairly or unfairly, as a threat to the thousands of working class migrants who were encouraged to come to Queensland, the Germans were welcomed and accepted. Their visibility in the agricultural sector,

heightened by regional concentration and their reputation as efficient farmers, ensured that the Fassifern, like the Logan, the Lockyer and parts of the Darling Downs, is still thought of as a centre of German settlement.

Boonah's distinctive ethnic distribution began with the arrival of the first selectors in late 1877, followed by a veritable flood in 1878. The English tended to settle on creek flats around where the town is now situated. The Scots and Irish were attracted to the undulating and lightly timbered country slightly further south, part of the Coochin resumption. The Germans chose the rich soil of Dugandan Scrub, heavily wooded and to the north of the other groups.

The new arrivals were greeted by severe drought. Not an auspicious beginning. Surviving records show that not one of those first settlers abandoned his selection despite what must have appeared to be almost insurmountable problems. Their tenacity as a group has been attributed to Irish perversity, Scottish unwillingness to part with what they regarded as theirs, English reluctance to admit defeat and sheer dogged persistence on the part of the Germans. But perhaps it might be more tactful to point out that, for the first time, the majority of the pioneers were working their own land, as opposed to life as a tenant farmer or an agricultural labourer in their country of origin. The goal of freehold tenure was not to be surrendered lightly.

Boonah as a selector settlement grew out of government policy. Boonah's development as a community was a social experiment which had little to do with bureaucracy and a great deal to do with human responses.

At the beginning of 1878 Dugandan/Blumbergville/Boonah did not exist as a geographical location. Settlement consisted of scattered homesteads (actually slab or bark huts or even tents), spread over several square miles of uncleared bush. The realities of distance, a dispersed population and the urgent need "to obtain a little schooling"<sup>5</sup> for their children, provided a focal point for the first experiment in neighbourly co-operation. An experiment which excluded the Germans simply because the language problem created a breakdown in communications.

The demand for education was perhaps surprising in view of the humble origins of the parents. But it could be argued that they were merely responding to their own experience in looking to the government to supply basic educational requirements. By the early 1870s English primary schooling was free, secular and compulsory. Scotland boasted a well established education system and in most German states, primary level schooling had been a fact of life since the Reformation.

The pioneers saw education as an investment by which their children's future would be assured. In order to achieve their objective, considerable sacrifices were made. The secretary of the school committee not only donated his newly erected barn as a temporary schoolhouse, but also secured the services of a teacher and offered free board and lodging as added inducement.

Unfortunately the first school was of limited duration. The secretary's choice was not a happy one. All bush teachers had to cope with irregular attendance and inadequate facilities, but this particular teacher was obviously unable, or unwilling, to adjust to life in a pioneer community. After publicly airing his dissatisfaction with school, pupils and the district in general, followed by a "drunk and disorderly" charge in Brisbane, parents withdrew their children in protest.

A public meeting at the end of May 1878 requested use of part of the 80 acre reserve near Teviot Brook for school purposes. Apparently problems of communication had been overcome. Representatives from outlying areas agreed on a site approximately midway between Dugandan Flat and Dugandan Scrub. A slab and shingle school was erected by the settlers themselves, a new teacher was appointed and Dugandan Provisional School, first building in what was later Boonah township, opened in July with an enrolment of 18 pupils.

However, parental respect for learning fought a continual battle with the harsh realities of subsistence farming and the need for extra labour. Absenteeism in agricultural districts was the subject of much agonized discussion in District Inspectors' reports. But despite a generally poor attendance record, the fact that a school was established less than a year after the arrival of the first selectors was not only an indication of faith in Boonah's potential, but also a tangible expression of communal activity which promised well for the future.

### INFLUENCE OF RELIGION

Education was certainly an effective means of assimilation and could be regarded as the initial step towards an integrated society. But religion was a very personal commitment which exercised a significant influence on daily life. And the two were not always compatible.

Assimilation, or at least adaption, was a process which inevitably created an ever-widening gap between the old ways and life in a developing colony. Perhaps strict adherence to a particular religion was an attempt to find some degree of emotional security in an unfamiliar environment.

This was especially true of the Germans, both Lutherans and Baptists. They had brought very little personal property, they had abandoned age-old farming methods, learnt new building techniques and a new language. Apart from kinship ties, the church provided their only link with the past. German customs and the German language represented the comfortable familiarity of “home”.

By 1880, 40 families lived in Dugandan Scrub and both denominations held cottage meetings in various homes. Freedom of religion acquired new meaning when the congregations were faced with the responsibility of financing the construction of churches and paying pastors' stipends. Despite their poverty, the Germans built the first place of worship in the Boonah district — St. Matthew's Lutheran — following custom by choosing a site in the middle of the farming community. The already established tradition of self-help and mutual co-operation ensured that the new church opened free of debt in January 1882.

The relatively untroubled birth of the Lutheran church gave no indication of the problems ahead. Later, two factions differed over doctrinal matters and a second church was established just to the south of the emerging town. A similar dispute raged at Englesburg, where there were actually three Lutheran churches in the 1890s. Contrary to the evidence, the Germans were not waging their own private war. The transplanted church could not survive without their support, contributions and active involvement, so they tried to make it conform to their image of the ideal.

The Baptists attracted many members who were disillusioned by the conflict within the Lutheran church. In addition, Baptists enjoyed local autonomy, which seems to have appealed to the Germans' independent spirit. The Baptist religion had flourished in Fassifern Scrub since 1875, the Englesburg church (established in 1877) eventually boasting the largest membership in Queensland. The Boonah Baptists remained a smaller and less forceful group, with far less impact on the life of the community. Their first church, built on the edge of Dugandan Scrub in 1888, functioned effectively for over fifty years without the benefit of an ordained minister.

Ironically, the Baptist laymen in both districts embraced traditional theology even more vigorously than their Lutheran brethren. Although the Germans shared similar backgrounds the Lutherans in general, despite internal dissension and the sorry story of internments during World War 1, adapted more quickly to colonial life. The Baptists chose to remain an exclusive group, with traditionally rigid standards of behaviour. Research has shown that it was not unusual for the children of Lutheran parents to marry outside their religion. Baptists preferred to choose partners from



High-street, Boonah.

*High Street, Boonah ( looking north ) 1899.*



*Same view, 1918.*

other Baptist families - a pattern which persisted well into the 20th century.<sup>6</sup>

Primitive Methodists formed the only other sizeable group. Anglican and Roman Catholic adherents were relatively few in number and although the lessees of Dugandan Station (the McDonalds) were Scottish Presbyterians, no Presbyterian church was erected until 1915. Given the Primitive Methodist doctrine, which stressed agrarian values and a return to the stability of community life, it is not surprising that Boonah farmers who had been tradesmen and agricultural workers in their country of origin joined the church in increasing numbers.

It is more than possible that the reverend gentleman who complained "Never before did I see, in so small a place, the drink curse so firmly entrenched"<sup>7</sup>, might have been guilty of exaggeration since the majority of the Fassifern population were practising Methodists or Baptists.

All the evidence suggests that the innate conservatism of a rural community and the 19th century legacy of religious adherence have been maintained to the present day. However, in the interests of survival, those same cautious, conservative farming families were required to adapt to a changing technological environment.

There was a paradox here. One of the reasons for both British and German emigration was a desire to escape the adverse effects of the technical revolution. English farm workers had been forced to the cities after mechanization and new farming methods had destroyed their livelihood. Germans, especially Prussians, had suffered similar loss of land and employment. It has been suggested that most immigrants, particularly those who preferred to settle in agricultural districts, changed in order to remain the same, failing to realize that the old ways and with them the old values, had gone forever. Yet it was technology that allowed them to attain their dream of economic independence and a level of prosperity not possible in their homeland.

### ARRIVAL OF THE RAILWAY

The railway and the separator were the two products of 19th technology that revolutionized pioneer life. Different cultural backgrounds did not engender very different responses to modernization. Perhaps the Germans, accustomed to labour intensive farming and suspicious of innovation, were slower to accept the separator. But, regardless of nationality, Fassifern settlers were agreed on the advantages to be gained from a rail link with Ipswich.

Here I return to the paradox mentioned previously. The new arrivals saw the future in somewhat contradictory terms of social conservatism and material progress. However, their dream of a new life in a new country surely did not include the grim reality of subsistence farming on a remote selection.

The construction of the first branch line in Queensland, from Ipswich to Harrisville in 1882 and on to Dugandan in 1887, was the catalyst in the growth and development of the Boonah district. This is not the time or the place to decide whether development equals progress. But having experienced the hardships of pioneer life, farmers and pastoralists were no longer primarily concerned with the desirability of a close and mutually supportive community. And it is extremely doubtful if they ever considered the natural beauty of the bush or the delicate balance of the environment. Their very survival depended on the creation of successful farms and grazing properties.

There is absolutely no doubt that Fassifern residents saw rail transport as the answer to economic and social difficulties — a means of providing speedy and reliable access to city markets. In addition, travel promised to be more comfortable, putting an end to isolation and attendant problems of loneliness, lack of medical attention and the uncertainty of obtaining supplies for household and farm.

A petition presented to parliament in 1879, signed by 325 electors of Bundamba and Fassifern, was deliberately phrased to allay the fears of those who doubted the viability of branch railways. The application argued that a line from Ipswich via Peak Crossing, Harrisville and Normanby Gully to Coochin (which was not quite the route eventually taken) would give added impetus to settlement of land well suited to agricultural purposes; that timber would provide a large and lucrative traffic; and finally, if construction of the line was delayed, many selectors would be forced to abandon their homesteads.<sup>8</sup>

The last point read like a not-too-subtle threat. It certainly seems to have carried the most weight. However, it would be naive to imagine that rural interests and government commitment coincided. The truth is that the drought of 1878 had not broken and the government, about to face yet another election, was anxious to placate angry and disillusioned voters.

Approval for Section 1, Ipswich to Harrisville, was granted in September 1880 and the line was officially opened in July 1882. Contrary to all expectations, Section 1 earned a small profit in its first year of operation. But unlike America, where settlement followed transport routes, railways in south-east Queensland lagged



behind the pace of homestead selection. Boonah residents waited another five years for their extension, completed in a year of disastrous floods. It was decided that the line would terminate at Dugandan, one stop past Blumbergville as Boonah was then known. Coochin was never connected by rail and Englesburg's secondary position in the Fassifern was determined by the government's decision to by pass the rapidly growing settlement in favour of a more direct route from Harrisville to Dugandan. It is perhaps worth mentioning that the Harrisville/Dugandan survey followed a track cut through the scrub forty years earlier by Campbell McDonald and a team of aboriginal workers.

The branch line might well have been a form of political bribery, or perhaps it could be described as an official response to electoral pressure. But the advent of rail transport saw pioneering efforts rewarded by an expanding rural economy, which in turn justified the view that the railway provided the essential link between primary production and city markets.

By the late 1880s, subsistence farming had given way to cash crops. However, when the 1887 flood was followed by the worst drought in thirty years, all areas devoted solely to agriculture incurred severe losses. So political expediency demanded that the government of the day should initiate policies to promote the dairy industry either as an alternative, or an adjunct, to the cultivation of commercial crops. In addition rail transport, climatic conditions and a growing domestic market all helped to contribute to widespread acceptance of dairying — or at the very least a willingness to experiment.

The measures adopted included a travelling dairy plant, first exhibited at the 1888 Centennial Exhibition in Melbourne and designed to demonstrate the latest methods of manufacturing butter and cheese.

In response to the Divisional Board chairman's invitation, the dairy arrived in the Boonah district early in 1893 and spent three months instructing local farmers. No doubt interest was enhanced by the aftermath of the February flood. Entire properties had been covered by water for up to six days and subsequent crop losses served to emphasize the advantages of a regular income, which in turn could be expected to offset further crop failures.

Economic and social factors played an influential role in the acceptance of mixed farming. But, at the risk of restressing the obvious, it was the railway that ensured rapid carriage of cream from small local creameries to butter factories in Brisbane.

Town and district grew and prospered. However, one more technical innovation influenced the course of Boonah's economic

history - the new hand separators. Their introduction promised economies in labour and processing costs. Previously, farmers had delivered whole milk to be separated at the nearest creamery. After 1898 the dairyman separated his own milk and delivered it directly to the butter factory which a Lowood company had opened in the township.

A monopoly situation guaranteed low prices and cavalier treatment of suppliers. Dissatisfaction grew to crisis proportions. By the late 1890s the struggling selectors of the 1870s had adopted a more materialistic approach to economic life. But despite a change in attitudes they remained the product of a social environment that had evolved via the challenges and opportunities created by years of rural settlement. Their response was completely in character. In 1900 they formed a co-operative butter factory - the culmination of a quarter of a century of community activity.

Boonah had confronted and largely overcome the problems imposed by isolation, language difficulties, differing cultural values and limited capital. As the 19th century drew to a close prospects seemed bright. The pioneer phase was over.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Patrick Logan - Letter to the Colonial Secretary, 25 July 1827.
2. Goolman Divisional Board - Rate books, 1880.
3. *Queensland Government Gazette*, 30 November 1872, p.1981.
4. *Ibid*, 1 March 1877, p.488.
5. Qld State Archives - District Inspector's report, EDU/Z817.
6. John Cole, *The Life Course of Families in a Q'land Rural Community since 1850* (unpublished Ph.D. thesis).
7. *Fassifern Old and New: A Circuit Souvenir*, (Boonah: *Fassifern Guardian*, 1911), p.11.
8. Qld. Votes and Proceedings, Vol. 2, 1879, p.691.