

THE EUREKA HOTEL - THE BEST COUNTRY STAND IN NORTH QUEENSLAND

DOROTHY GIBSON-WILDE

In North Queensland, slab buildings were not common, even in the earliest days of settlement. It is rare to find a building which dates from 1865 still in existence in the North. It is even rarer to find a slab building of that date. To find such a building with major historical links is an even greater rarity. The former "Eureka Hotel" at the top of Thornton's Gap on the old Georgetown Road from Townsville is such a rarity.

Few travellers who recorded their reminiscences of early North Queensland fail to mention the hotel at the top of the Range. On August 22nd, 1866, William Hann stayed at what he called the "Range Hotel"¹. In early October, 1868, Lucy Gray noted "near the top is an inn, craftily placed at the end of the difficult ascent to catch travellers, especially dray men generally well disposed just when they get there to refresh themselves."² George Carrington referred to "The public house at the top of the range"³. Only Mark's hotel at Dalrymple is referred to as often in early diaries and accounts of the area.

It comes as a surprise to many, visitors and locals alike, to find that this historic old hotel still exists. No longer licensed, it is a private home, lovingly preserved by its present tenants.

The first road over what was then called Dalrymple Range⁴ from the newly-established port of Townsville was surveyed by John Melton Black in 1865. It was built by employees of Black and Co. (later Towns and Co.) under the supervision of Andrew Ball. There was only one steep pinch on this road - the pull up to Thornton's Gap. Despite the steepness of this part of the route, it was by far the easiest road from the North Kennedy to the sea then discovered. Later, a road was surveyed by A.C. Macmillan, and the Government constructed another road, but this followed Black's first route closely and did nothing to improve the steepness of the ascent to Thornton's Gap.

Apparently, the first public house built at the top of the range was erected while Black's workers were building the first road in 1865. It is said to have been erected by A.C. Bailey, who later became well known as the publican at Dalrymple⁵. An 1887 newspaper gave the following account of the building of Bailey's Hotel -

"In those days, the squatters were monarchs of all they surveyed. An instance of the authority which they wielded may be given. It was acknowledged that they were entitled to dispose of rights for the erection of wayside 'shanties' or inns for the accommodation of travellers. For a fee ranging from £100 to £150 according to the possibility of getting the sum, a squatter would sell the privilege of erecting a shanty, and would give a guarantee that none other would be allowed to exist within a prescribed radius. There was one man, however, who outdid the squatters. From Government, Mr. Black had obtained a grant of £500 to form a track over Thornton's Gap, Dalrymple Range and Mr. Ball took the first team to the road party engaged on the work.

When the track was made Mr. Arthur Cole Bailey wished to build a house for the accommodation of travellers, and being disinclined to pay the fee usually charged by the squatters, he adopted the unique plan of building his house on the top of the range on the boundary line between Woodstock and Dotswood runs, so that he was responsible to neither manager. So accurately was his house situated, that the rain water from the front found its way down the range into Speed Creek thence into Keelbottom Creek, thence into the Burdekin River and eventually into the sea at Upstart Bay, while the drippings from the eaves at the rear ran down the range into the Black River, which takes a direct course into Halifax Bay ..."⁶

Bailey's house appears to have been, as was often the case, an unlicensed shanty pub. No record of its ever having been licensed has been found. The first license application for a house "to be built about 25 miles from Cleveland Bay" to be known as the "Eureka Hotel" appeared in September, 1865⁷. It was to contain what seems to have been standard for bush pubs of those days, 2 sitting-rooms and 4 bedrooms. A license for "The Eureka Hotel on the Range between Cleveland Bay and the Upper Burdekin" was granted to Charles Saville Rowe in November, 1865⁸. According to Rowe's obituary⁹ the "Eureka Hotel" was erected by Rowe and Hume. Little has been discovered about Hume, although he was probably the Joseph Hume whose marriage to Catherine Core was one of the earliest celebrated in Townsville. C.S. Rowe had come North with J.M. Black, W.A. Ross and William Longshaw in the "Bonaparte" in 1861¹⁰. They were some of the first selectors to arrive in the new town of Bowen. Black and partners took up Fanning River Station in the same year. In November, 1864, when J.M. Black founded what has become the city of Townsville, C.S. Rowe drove the first teams to the site and played a part in the foundation of the new port. Rowe's Bay at Townsville is named for him. After he left the "Eureka", he started the Commercial Hotel in Townsville¹¹. Still later he kept stores and hotels on the Gilbert, Cape and other goldfields. In the late 1880s he returned to Townsville and started the Alexandra Hotel^{12,13}. He was very well-known in the city until his death in 1900.

In March, 1867, a cyclone struck Cleveland Bay and the Eureka Hotel lost its roof. It was about this time that Rowe left. However, the hotel occupied too important a position on a road which was becoming increasingly busy with the traffic to the newly-discovered Cape River Gold Field to remain unrepaired. In May, 1867, William Randall applied for a license for the Eureka Hotel¹⁴. Randall was recalled in the reminiscences of both Andrew Carroll¹⁵ and A.J. Boyd¹⁶. Boyd remembered Randall as "a very active old man... who could race any younger man for 100 yards"¹⁷.

On April 10th, 1869¹⁸ the hotel was advertised for auction by the firm of Ball and Grimaldi of Townsville. It was described as being built of hardwood slabs placed horizontally and covered with iron. It is not known if the sale ever took place, but Randall continued as the licensee into the 1870s.

The road over Harvey's Range remained the main road, not only to the Cape Goldfield, but also to the Gilbert and Etheridge fields - much to the annoyance of the merchants of Bowen! For a time also, the traffic to the Ravenswood Goldfield used this route. However, a shorter route to Ravenswood and later Charters Towers was quickly discovered, via Ross River and Five Head Creek. The road over Harvey's Range remained the main road from Townsville to Georgetown into the Twentieth Century.

By May of 1875, the license for the hotel at the top of the range was held by William Rolfe. The Rolfes held the license, with but few gaps, for nearly 30 years, and had their own burial ground on the property. This little cemetery still exists. In 1878¹⁹ "The Eureka Hotel" was offered for private sale. "with 45 acres of freehold land giving a large frontage to the main road on the summit of Harvey's Range ... the best country stand in North Queensland". However, the Rolfes appear to have remained in charge, and it is they who feature in later reminiscences of the hotel. "Tramp"²⁰ recollected "in those days the carriers usually travelled with several teams in company and many a jovial evening was spent at Rolfe's old hotel by the teamsters celebrating the successful negotiation of the worst portion of the track in the long inland trek"²¹.

About 1880, the name of the hotel was officially changed to "The Range Hotel" This change of name gave rise to much confusion at a later date, for there was already an hotel of that name at the foot of the ascent to Thornton's Gap. Built by James Mead at about the same time as Rowe and Hume built the "Eureka", it was first known as "The Royal Oak" but was renamed "The Range Hotel" in 1866. Both hotels are clearly marked on early maps of the area. Failure to realise that there were for a time two different hotels bearing the same name has led to confusion over the history of the surviving building, but careful reading of reminiscences usually makes it possible to work out which "Range Hotel" is being referred to.

For a time, there was a second hotel at the foot of the range, "the Gate Inn", taking its name from the tollgate which was erected for a time at that point on the road. Nothing is known of the subsequent fate of these two buildings, but the site of one has been located recently along with a fairly well-preserved cemetery.

After the death of Mrs. Johanna Rolfe in 1901, the license for the hotel at the top of the range passed to a Mr. Andrews who reported that the building was undamaged when Cyclone Leonta struck Townsville in 1903²².

After the license was surrendered, the Moodys ran the property for some time. Mr. Moody was one of the farmers involved in the 1930s tobacco-growing experiment in the Harvey Range area. Mrs. Moody ran refreshment rooms in the old hotel and local dances were held there. The property was acquired by the Fryer family. F.A. Fryer was another North Queensland pioneer. One of the first settlers in Bowen, he moved on to become one of Townsville's first citizens. With T.R. Carter, he started the firm of Carter and Fryer in premises leased from Black and Co. where the Queensland Insurance Building now stands in Flinders Street East. His house occupied the site on Melton Hill where "Rockton" now stands, and he married a daughter of James Evans, builder of what was to become one of Australia's leading hotels, the Queen's Hotel on the Strand, Townsville. It was his son, B.J.G. Fryer who moved out to the Harvey's Range area in 1915.

The new road over Harvey's Range would delight and astonish the first settlers. It no longer passes the front of the hotel, but the building is clearly visible from the road. The main slab building of the old hotel still stands. The horizontal slab walls which were once surrounded by open verandahs are not so easily discernible from a distance, as the verandahs have now been partially enclosed.

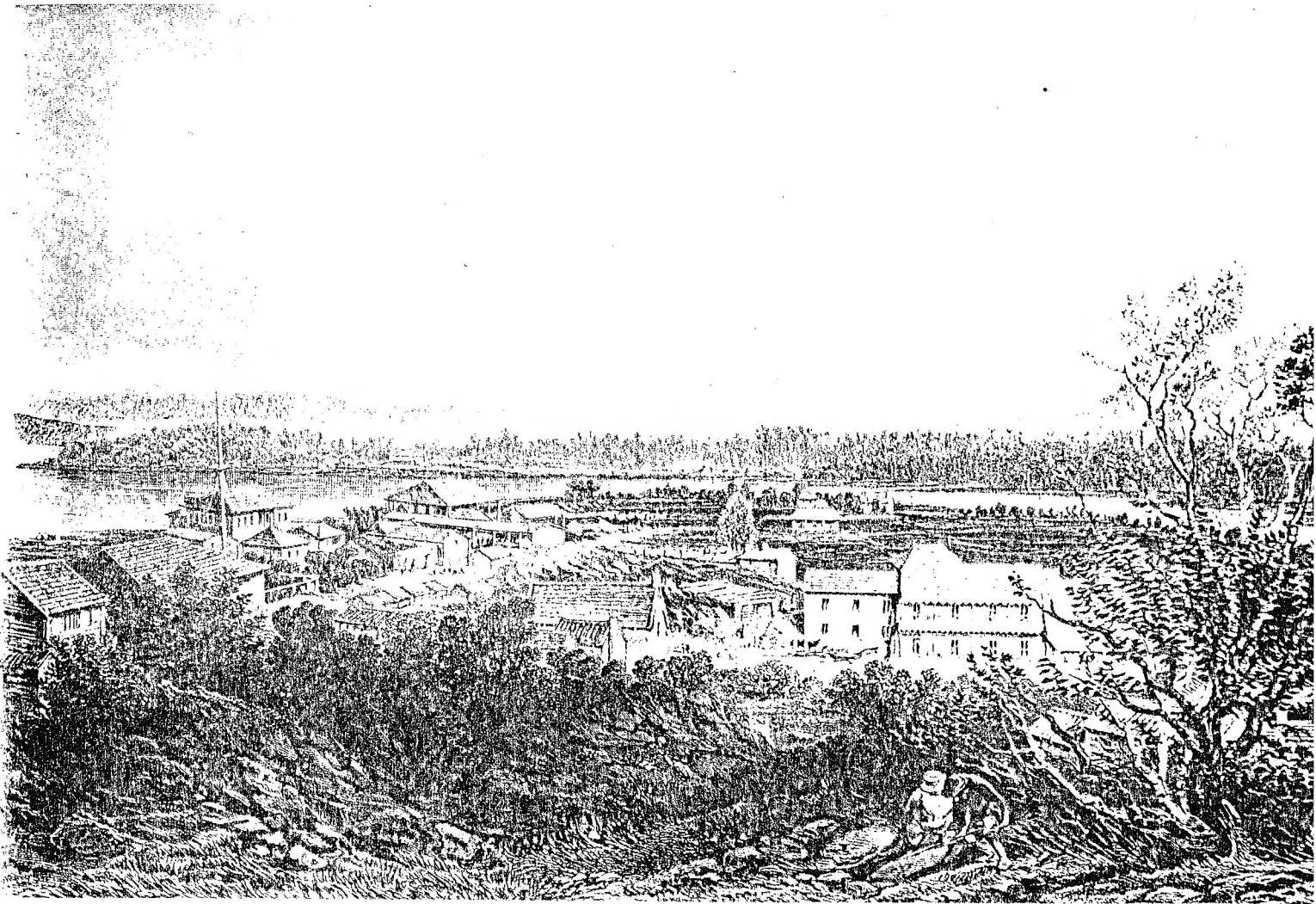
However, at close quarters, it is clearly evident that these are the same walls "of hardwood slabs placed horizontally" which were described in the sale notice of 1869²³. Today, the massive stumps show signs of age, but the marks of saw and adze are clearly visible on the fine old timber. In a world where technology has replaced so many of the skills of the past, it is to be hoped that such an historic building can be preserved, not only as a memorial to the early settlers of the district but also to the building skills of the pioneers of the North.

End Notes

1. *Joseph Hann & Family - Settlement in North Queensland, 1861 - 1871*. Manuscript p. 102, J.C.U. Library.
2. *Diary of Lucy Gray* - John Oxley Library.
3. Carrington, G. *Colonial Adventures & Experiences of a University Man* - London, 1871, p. 210.
4. Later renamed Harvey's Range (sometimes spelled Hervey's).
5. Bailey took over the hotel at Dalrymple after the tragic death of Genge the first hotel keeper there. He was well-known in early North Queensland, eventually returning to London where he died on 27th December, 1876. His death was recorded in *The Townsville Herald* of 7.4.1877.
6. Christmas Supplement *Townsville Herald* 24.12.1887, p. 30.
7. *Port Denison Times*, 23.9.1865.
8. *Port Denison Times*, 15.11.1865.
9. *North Queensland Herald*, 18.6.1900.
10. Rowe's Diary. Part of this was published in *Cummins and Campbell's Monthly Magazine*, April, 1931, p. 19.
11. Licensing information *Queensland Government Gazette*, 1867, confirms this. The Commercial Hotel built by Rowe in 1867 was demolished in the late 1870s. A new hotel building was erected on the site about 1879. This is now Lang's Hotel, Townsville.
12. Morrison, W. Frederic, *The Aldine History of Queensland*, Volume II.
13. The Alexandra Hotel was destroyed by fire some years ago.
14. *Port Denison Times*, 18.5.1867.
15. Reminiscences of Andrew Carroll published *Cummins and Campbell's Monthly Magazine*, October 1934, p. 35.
16. Boyd, A.J. *Souvenir Programme of the Jubilee Carnival*, p.6
17. Ibid.
18. *Port Denison Times*, 10.4.1869.
19. *Townsville Herald*, 9.1.1878.
20. Pen name of C.S. Jenkinson.

21. In article "Hervey's Range Road" *Cummins and Campbell's Monthly Magazine*, March, 1933, p. 25.
22. *North Queensland Herald*, 14.3.1903.
23. *Port Denison Times*, 10.4.1869.

I also acknowledge the assistance of Professor Brian Dalton and Mr. Peter Bell of History Department, James Cook University, Townsville in compiling this article.



TOWNSVILLE, ca. 1870. This engraving was probably based on a photograph taken from Melton Hill looking east. Cape Pallarenda appears in the distance. The engraving, by J.C. Armytage, is from Edwin Booth's *Australia*, Vol. 2 (London 1873-76) J.O.L. Negative No. 3968