

**RONALD T. PARSONS**

**BEEN THERE  
DONE THAT**

**GROWING UP IN SYDNEY AND THE BUSH  
1935 - 1956**

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*In Memory of Mum, Dad and Bob.*



# Contents

PROLOGUE	7
1 WHERE THE CROWS FLY BACKWARDS	9
2 THE DEPRESSION AND WAR YEARS	17
3 FAMILY TIES	27
4 ALRIGHT PLEASE	37
5 FISH ON FRIDAY	47
6 WHEN A GIRL MARRIES	51
7 SHELL OIL ACQUAINTANCE	57
8 JUST FOR FUN	63
9 GONE BUSH	85
10 ON THE ROAD AGAIN	95
11 THE TOP END	103
12 NATIONAL SERVICE	111
13 HAPPY DAYS	121
14 EXECUTIVE TRAINEE	131
EPILOGUE	137
BIBLIOGRAPHY	139

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Before decimal currency was introduced in Australia on 14 February 1966 we had pounds (£), shillings (s) and pence (d), from having been part of the British Empire. Twelve pence or pennies made one shilling and twenty shillings made one pound. With the new system one dollar equalled ten shillings, or to put it another way, one pound equalled two dollars. Prices and values are quoted here in the currency of the day.



## PROLOGUE

Until recently I considered autobiographies and memoirs written by people who'd not achieved anything remarkable in their lifetime to be ego trips. However, as the transplant patient said, 'I've had a change of heart'. I can now see value in an individual's story if written from an historical, cultural, or impressionistic point of view, as well as being a personal account.

Such a story may then be of interest to researchers, history buffs and others in addition to relatives, descendants and friends. It may even be read for amusement or as a diversion. With that in mind here's hoping you will find the ensuing words to be both enlightening and entertaining.

Ronald T. Parsons  
Toowoomba, QLD.  
2009



# 1

## WHERE THE CROWS FLY BACKWARDS

‘Up where the crows fly backwards to keep the dust out of their eyes.’ That was the smart-alec answer to the question, ‘Where do you live?’ when I was a youngster growing up in Crows Nest, New South Wales.

Situated approximately three kilometres up the Pacific Highway from the northern end of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, the suburb of Crows Nest derives its name from *Crows Nest Farm Cottage* built in 1820 by Edward Wollstonecraft. A cousin of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley who in 1818 had written the novel *Frankenstein*, he was a wealthy bachelor when he died in 1832 aged forty-nine. Edward’s sister Elizabeth inherited the property and after she died in 1845 it passed to her husband Alexander Berry. On his death what was by then known as *The Crows Nest Estate* was left to his cousin Sir John Hay.

Sir John and Lady Hay took up residence in *Crows Nest House* which had been built earlier for the Berrys and after Lady Hay died in 1929 it was demolished to make way for what was popularly known as Lady Hay School, later to become North Sydney Demonstration School. Fortunately the entrance gates to *Crows Nest House* were left standing and still front the Pacific Highway today.

In the 1880's there was an urban land boom and Crows Nest had great potential for development, especially by 1893 when it became possible to either catch a train from St. Leonards, or cable tram from Crows Nest, to Milsons Point. It was then only a short ferry trip to the city. Much of the eastern side of Crows Nest was owned by Bernard Otto Holtermann who had migrated to New South Wales from Germany in 1858 when he was twenty years-old.

Shortly after he arrived in Sydney he set out for the goldfields at Hill End to join his brother. In 1868 he married Harriet Emmett in Bathurst and four years later on 19th October 1872 he struck it rich. As the major shareholder in a mining company that discovered what became known as *Holtermann's Nugget*, Bernard's fortunes changed dramatically. The firm's miners had uncovered a 290 Kg block of reef gold which was the largest known in the world at that time.

Moving to the North Shore in 1874 he built a large house with a tower that is now part of Shore Grammar School. A dedicated photographer he travelled to America two years later with an impressive photographic exhibition which included the world's largest negative. It was while in Burlington, New Jersey that Harriet gave birth on 24 July 1876 to a son whom

they named after that city. Later when Holtermann's land at Crows Nest was subdivided, most of the newly-created streets were given family names. Further, because it was the custom for the rear lanes to take the same name, there is a Burlington Lane as well as Burlington Street. Other streets and lanes were named Holtermann, Ernest, Alexander, Sophia, Bernard, David, Emmett and Myrtle.

It is likely that Holtermann would have known Alexander Berry and Sir John Hay and possibly Hayberry Street is a combination of their surnames. Falcon Street is the exception as it was already in existence prior to Holtermann's subdivision.

Crows Nest Junction where Willoughby Road, Falcon Street and Shirley Road meet the Pacific Highway is the heart of Crowy, or The Nest, as some oldtimers used to call it. The hub of all the main northern routes before the Warringah Expressway opened in the early 1960's, the Junction is situated on a crest and the shops and businesses all radiate downhill. Hence the local saying, 'Going up the Crowy,' meaning walking up to the shopping centre.

In 1934 Mum and Dad married and moved into 106 Burlington Street. Located between Willoughby Road and West Street, Burlington Street is handy to both shops and public transport and is one of the most sought-after streets in the district nowadays. No doubt having one of the highest concentrations of restaurants in Sydney so close is an added attraction. However, it wasn't exactly trendy when I was growing up in 'Burlo'.

With nearly all of the one hundred and thirty or so houses in the street rented by low-paid workers and their families, most

residents lived from one pay-day to the next. It was especially hard during the Depression, the War years and the years immediately following.

The fact that there were rent restrictions during those years resulted in landlords spending as little as possible on their rental properties. Consequently, the majority of the houses on the eastern side were rundown. By contrast, Wollstonecraft on the western side of Crows Nest was fairly affluent. Indeed, in the late 1940's I used to deliver newspapers before school and on weekends to that area and Sir Earle Page, an ex-Prime Minister of Australia, lived on my paper route.

As far as I know all of the people in our street were Australian – born of English, Scottish, Welsh or Irish ancestry. Otherwise they had come from those countries. There were other nationalities in the district. Some of the shopkeepers in Crows Nest were southern European and we bought our fish and chips from 'Old Joe', a Chinese whose shop was in Willoughby Road. A census taken two years before I was born in 1935 showed that in the North Sydney area 55% of the population were Church of England (Anglican), 20% were other Protestant and 20% were Catholic. I was never aware of any animosity between Protestants and Catholics but perhaps I was naive. The population of Australia was 6,629,839.

106 is one of a single-storey terrace of four. It had four rooms and what was called the lavatory up the backyard. The land on which the house stands (it is still there but upgraded) measures approximately 5.5 metres x 45.5 metres. In our street there were two double-fronted sandstone cottages, half a dozen two-storey

terraces, a few single and double-fronted weatherboard homes, numerous semi-detached brick cottages, a row of single-fronted Federation houses, groups of similar terraces to ours and a corner shop with a bakery opposite where Sophia Street crosses over. At the Willoughby Road end of Burlington Street there were a few shops including a chemist, ladies hair salon and sporting goods store.

The front room of 106 was meant to be the parlour, or lounge room, but Mum and Dad made it their bedroom. Down the hall was the lounge room then the kitchen and what was called the wash-house was at the rear. I slept in a cot then on a settee in the front room with my parents until my brother Bob was born in January 1943, after which the settee and I were moved into the lounge room. When brother John was born in September 1949 he got the cot and Bob who by that time had a single bed joined me in the lounge room. We used to say Dad had the seven-year itch after fathering three sons at those intervals.

Other families, especially those with both boys and girls had more difficulty accommodating them. Opposite us one family had a daughter and five sons. Judy the daughter was fortunate to have her own bedroom whereas the boys shared one between them. I have known Russell since we were in class 1A at Lady Hay School in 1942. His family lived behind us in Ernest Street. With his parents and five sisters taking up the bedrooms, he and his older brother Gordon slept in a double bunk in the tiny pantry.

Many other playmates (not the girlie magazine ones) had to share covered-in verandahs as bedrooms and in some instances a

bedroom would be divided in half with sheets of masonite and/or curtains in order to accommodate both sons and daughters. No one seemed to mind though. What you haven't had you don't miss as the old adage goes.

Before a family of four moved into the terrace two doors up from us during the war it was rented by a Salvation Army couple and their six children. It amused my parents and even me at age seven to hear them chatting while they were lined up waiting to use the backyard lavatory each morning.

The lavatories were about a third of the way up the narrow backyards and were built back-to-back with only a single wall of brick separating them. If someone was in the neighbouring one at the same time you could hear everything. The structures had a curved corrugated iron roof and the seat was a plank with a round hole. The water closet sat up above on two pipes and you pulled a chain to flush the bowl. Thankfully our street was sewered. Our lavatory as with many had a choko vine growing over it.

106 and 108 shared a dual chimney in their front rooms and there was another dual chimney serving the fuel stove in the kitchen plus the copper in the wash-house. Later on we got a gas stove in the kitchen and Dad installed a woodchip heater over the bath. Up until then we had to boil water in the wood-fuelled copper and carry it over to the bath in a bucket.

In 1947 I climbed up on the roof and took a couple of photos with my Box Brownie camera. The front two rooms had a gable roof of corrugated iron and the rear rooms had a skillion roof.

When the photos are looked at today a skyline dotted with chimneys is a notable feature of the landscape.

After rent restrictions were eased many of the houses in Crows Nest and other suburbs came up for sale in the 1950's and were purchased by the tenants if they could afford it. The properties being tenanted were less valuable than if they had been Vacant Possession. Many tenants were able to purchase their home for approximately £100 deposit and a £900 mortgage. Some tenants were offered around £300 to move out by their landlord. Dad purchased 106 in 1957 and they occupied it until Dad died in 1994 and Mum moved into a nursing home in 2003.

Once people owned their homes most started doing them up, especially as Australia became more prosperous in the 1950's and 60's. For some reason Dad never bothered to renovate 106 after he owned it. I'm sorry to admit my brothers and I were reluctant to invite friends home as we were ashamed of our place when others were done up. We nicknamed it 'The Cave'. At least Mum kept it clean and when we did bring someone home Mum's bubbly personality made up for the squalid surroundings.