

Things My Father Told Me

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My Dad, Alfred Thomas Gladstone Wallace (Tom), was born in the small town of Perthville, near Bathurst in New South Wales, Australia, in 1901. These are some of the stories he told me about the old days in Perthville.

When my Dad was a small boy, Halley's Comet was due to appear. The scientists knew that the Bathurst district was the best place in the world to see it, so there was much excitement in Perthville. Dad's parents had gone out for the evening and friends were baby-sitting Dad. His father came to get him and carried him into the back garden. He showed him Halley's Comet and said, 'When it comes back again, I will be gone and you will be a real old man.' Dad said it looked the size of a football with a long tail after it. When it did return, Dad and I looked for it but could not see it.

Dad's grandfather used to take up the collection at church, and every few months take it to the bank at Bathurst. Dad was in his grandfather's bedroom (he lived with them). Dad dropped his bag of marbles and some rolled under the bed. While getting them he found the church money and was too young to realize that he should not take it. He put it in his marbles bag and got his mates. They went to the only shop in Perthville and bought lollies, ginger beer, and condensed milk. Condensed milk was a novelty and they called it 'dancing milk' because when put in a cup of tea it danced around. They banged a hole in the tin with a stone and sucked it out. After a while they got sick of it. The road at Perthville was being laid, and on the side of the road was a heap of blue metal. So for something to do they started pouring the milk on the blue metal.

By this time Dad was aware of the shopkeeper watching him. They went to a friend's home and his friend's mother asked him to take the billy-cart and get her a bag of flour. (Country ladies bought big bags of flour, and had an account at the shop.) Dad said, 'I will pay for the flour,' and the shopkeeper said, 'That's it, I am taking you to your father.' His father looked in the marbles bag and said 'Gosh gosh gosh Tommie, where did you get all this money?' He took him by the hand and walked over the bridge towards their home. Dad remembered no more about it.

On a Monday, Dad's mother would look across the hills and say, 'Oh dear! Mrs. Smith has got her washing on the line already.' Dad realized that there was a competition among the ladies to see who could get their washing on the line first. None of the ladies ever mentioned it.

There were no newspapers in Perthville, so the folk used to stand on the railway station platform and call out 'papers', and the people coming from Sydney would throw their papers onto the platform as the train went past. (The train only stopped if you made arrangements the previous day.) Of course this was before radio. So the folk in the small isolated community knew all the world news. Where there's a will there's a way!

On the day my grandparents were married it was raining. During the ceremony the rain stopped, and a beam of sunlight shone through the window of the small church onto the ring my grandfather had just placed onto his bride's finger. The minister stopped the ceremony for a moment and said 'Happy is the bride that the sun shines on.'

It was Christmas and my Dad saw a cartoon of Santa with his foot caught in a rabbit trap. He thought the scenery in the cartoon looked like the bald hill at Perthville, so he went there looking for Santa, to help him. He said that when he was a boy you never saw Santa, it was very mysterious. He thought that when men started dressing as Santa it lost some of its magic.

There was a convent at Perthville, and Dad and his mates used to steal some of their eggs and boil them in the bush. It was very dry weather and the children didn't realize the danger! Suddenly a nearby gum tree burst into flames! The children rushed back to the hamlet screaming for help. They helped to put out the fire, but did not tell how it started!

My Dad's small sister, Vera, saw a man busking outside a hotel. So she took off her bonnet and started singing. Her family were very religious which made it very funny.

This story may upset sensitive people, so I will start by saying that it has a happy ending. My grandfather was the blacksmith in Perthville. A horse kicked him right out of his shop. His leg was badly cut and his wife boiled white cotton and a needle and poured antiseptic into the cut.

My father watched my grandfather sew up his own leg. My grandmother tore up a sheet and bound up his leg. He continued working. When the bandage was removed, he took out the stitches and it was completely healed. When I was about twelve he showed me his leg. There was a fine white scar on the inside from the ankle to the knee. His leg never gave him any trouble.

When there was a dance in the church hall, boys used to remove the horses from the buggies and walk the horses to the other side of the fence then put them into the buggies again. So the horse was on one side of the fence and the buggy was on the other.

The church hall was next to the graveyard, and one of the boys would stand on a post with a sheet over him and pretend to be a ghost, to frighten the young ladies coming out of the dance.

One farmer owned a valuable horse. One New Year's Eve, it disappeared from its stall and a goat was standing there instead. Another New Year's Eve, someone painted '1908' on a big white draught horse in black paint. It stayed there until the horse was trimmed.

When my grandmother was a small child, an Indian hawker used to camp in her father's paddock, while he visited the surrounding farms. Her father would give him a chicken and he would cook curried chicken. He asked whether the little girl would like to join him for a meal. She was thrilled. While they were having dinner he said, 'I wash and wash my hands, but I can't get them as white as yours.' She looked at her hands and then at his and tried to work it out.

When my grandparents were married, it was the custom to put the decoration from the top of the wedding cake under a glass dome, and display it permanently on the mantelpiece in the lounge room. My grandparents' decoration was a white dove with its wings outstretched. My Dad thought that it looked like icing, so he broke a little off the back, and sure enough it was sweet. Then he broke off a bit more and a bit more. Soon the dove tipped over sideways, His mother said, 'Whatever happened to that bird?' After that the whole thing just disappeared.

Every year the circus came to Bathurst. For weeks before, there were posters all around the district advertising the star of the show, 'The Great Blondin,' a tightrope walker. At the end of the circus the ringmaster would announce, 'Blondin will not walk tonight.' Dad said the same thing happened every year. I said, 'Didn't people complain?' 'No, they just went along with it.'

Dad's sister Wilga was born during a drought. While playing in the garden, she suddenly ran screaming into the house. Her mother realized that it was the first time Wilga had seen rain.

My grandfather had the blacksmithing contract for a nearby silver mine. During busy times he would start work before breakfast and go back after dinner. Dad said it was very hard work in the Western heat with the fire burning. He said the hardest work was putting the metal rim around the wooden wheel. It took three men to do it.

Because the Clydesdale mares were so big, it was hard to tell when they were in foal. If a mare was in foal, she needed to be rested. Because my grandfather had such a good knowledge of horses, the farmers would bring them to him to examine. My Dad would watch all this.

Dad and his mother were on the train to Bathurst. A big lady had recently moved into Perthville. Dad's mother was discussing her with other ladies on the train. Dad said, 'I wonder whether she is in foal?' He said there was just silence. In those days no-one mentioned it when a lady was expecting, unless it was just whispered. You did not see the lady for a while, and then she rejoined the community with a new baby.

My father saw the first electric light switched on in Bathurst. It was outside a store. Everyone gathered for the important occasion. When it came on they all cheered! So modern life was coming to Bathurst.

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