

“NEVER ‘EARD OF ‘IM”

An Autobiography
by
Ron Holmes

“NEVER ‘EARD OF ‘IM”

An Autobiography
by Ron Holmes

PART ONE 1924 – 1945 Pages 6- 56

PART TWO..... 1945 – 1959 Pages 57 – 108

PART THREE.. 1959 – 1984 Pages 108 – 156

PART FOUR.... 1984 – 2005 Pages 157 – 189



Ronald Victor Holmes

"NEVER 'EARD OF 'IM"

An Autobiography by Ron Holmes

INTRODUCTION

I use the above title because most autobiographies are written by famous people. Take a look at the biographical shelves in your local library. You will recognise the names of most of the people written about. Famous film and television stars, famous sports people, famous explorers, famous military men, famous writers, famous politicians, and so on. Because of who they are and what they have done people want to know more about them. If by any chance there was one there by yours truly the average person would simply say, "Never 'eard of 'im" and pass on.

Talking about that word 'biography' reminds me of the rhyme I saw in a magazine 60 years ago and have never forgotten. "Biography is different from geography. Geography is about maps, biography is about chaps." Of course this has nothing to do with the story but one of my idiosyncrasies is that all kinds of things remind me of jokes. I just can't help it. So I might as well put them in. They are part of me and may turn out to be the most interesting part!

So why write this exercise? For two reasons. One is that I once read that the person whose story is not worth recording has never lived. The older I get, and the more people I have come to know over the years, the more I believe that to be true.

The other reason is that I would love to know more than I do about my grandparents, great-grandparents and beyond, and much of that information has gone for ever because it was never written down in a form which could be easily passed on. Probably because these people thought they were so ordinary that their lives were not worth recording.

I am writing this mainly for my grandchildren and great-grandchildren, but if anyone else finds it of interest to read they are welcome. No doubt the basic facts of the family tree will be available to succeeding generations, particularly with the current interest in "roots" and the usefulness of the computer for finding and recording of same, but I have in mind a more personal approach. I too am a very ordinary person, but my life, and what life was like during my little spell on earth, is, I believe, worth recording for those who follow. If, by any chance, it may fall into the hands of the public I will not be surprised if they pass it by with the comment - "Never 'eard of 'im".

CHAPTER ONE

"The mother will be alright but I don't know if we can save the baby." Those were the first words my mother heard as she regained consciousness after I entered the world. It was the doctor speaking to the nurse. Apparently I was refusing to take my first breath.

They held me up by the heels and slapped me and tried all the usual methods to make a new born babe get his lungs working, but to no avail. Then the nurse had an idea. Picking up the bottle of methylated spirits being used for disinfection purposes she poured it all over me and began to blow on my tender skin. Ow! that was cold after where I had been! I had never experienced cold before, so I took a deep breath and yelled. And that did the trick! My lungs started working and haven't stopped since. Admittedly they had a bad time at a later stage of my life but that's another story.

It has always seemed ironic to me that it was alcohol which saved me, because, like my father before me, I have been a teetotaller all my life. Of course the Holmes's were a big family and, like most big families, its members covered a wide range of lifestyles. When my wife and I were moving to Naracoorte in the South-East of South Australia, at the beginning of 1980, we knew that this was where Great-grandfather Henry Holmes had lived and worked in the 1860's. He was a stone mason and the beautiful two story bank residence he built in 1864 was still in use. One of our sons looked up ancient copies of the local paper to see if he could find any reference to the family. My grandfather and his line had moved away, but some of his brothers and sisters had stayed in the South-east.

He found three references to the Holmes family. One about a Holmes who had been a lay preacher in the Methodist church, one who was secretary of the Buffalo's Lodge, and one who had been arrested for being drunk and disorderly!

But just to finish off the story about my birth - I was born in my parent's bed, in the house where they lived all their married lives, but not because my mother believed in "home birthing". It was simply that the nearest Bush Nursing Hospital was a rough trip in a horse and trap, on a winding road, to the bottom of the range of hills on which we lived: not an ideal journey for a pregnant woman. In 1924 doctors were among the few who had motor cars. It was



Ron Holmes as a baby

easier, and probably cheaper, for him to come to the home.

Red Hill was the name of the district where I grew up. Since there is a Red Hill in nearly every state of Australia, I need to point out that this one is located in the state of Victoria, on the Mornington Peninsular about 80 kilometres south of Melbourne. In those days it had a school, 2 churches, a general store, a post-office and a community hall.

Most of the inhabitants were orchardists growing apples, pears, plums and cherries. My father was a timber miller. He cut the boards to make the wooden cases in which the fruit was transported in those days. These were usually of pine, often grown round the borders of the orchards as a wind-break. Canny orchardists grew two parallel rows, so that, later on, they could sell one row to the mill and still have their wind break.

As a child I loved the smell of the resin which oozed from the cuts made by the crosscut saws, as Dad and his men sweated on the handles of saw and axe to fell these giant trees. Some were sixty feet high (twenty metres) and 3 feet (one metre) or more in diameter. The art of dropping them in confined spaces, between fruit trees and buildings, was a skill possessed by timber fallers who had spent their lives in the bush. One, who had learned his trade in the Tasmanian forests, would size up a tree with his eyes, walk 20 or more paces away from the butt, hammer a wooden peg into the ground a few inches, and then fall the tree on top of it so that the peg was flush with the earth.

This of course, was before the days of chain saws and mechanised winches. Everything was done by hand or by horses. During the school holidays, when I was quite young, one of my jobs was to ride the big old draught horses out to the bush where the men were falling trees for logs or sometimes telephone poles. It was a time consuming task as they lurched along slowly for sometimes several miles. It saved a lot of wages if I was available to take them. I wasn't old enough to drive them skillfully at that stage, so I would play around in the bush while the men used the horses to drag or "snig" the logs or poles up to the road, where the truck could load them. When the snigging was finished I would ride them home again. It was amazing how much more quickly those horses travelled when they were going home!

By the time I was old enough to work on the mill, we had a truck with a winch on the back. In difficult tree-falling situations, someone would climb a fair way up the tree to attach a pulley, through which a wire rope from the winch on the truck would be passed. The other end would be anchored to another tree stump. The idea was that the truck and anchor stump would be arranged so that, when the truck winch was activated, the tree would fall between anchor and truck, rather than on the nearby shed or house. One day I was in the truck cabin to activate the winch. The faller chopped a great wedge out of the tree, facing the direction it was to fall, then sawed

through the opposite side, moved back with his eye on the tree top, and shouted a warning that she was coming down. I put the winch in gear and gradually pressed the accelerator. Suddenly Dad noticed a gust of wind coming through the remaining trees. The falling monster began to swing towards the truck. I can still hear him shouting "Give it to her. Give it to her." I roared the engine and watched the toppling tree coming towards me. It landed with a splintering crash. But all was well. Only the smallish top branches reached the truck, and the metal cabin just had a few more dints added to its already battered appearance.

Talking about the winch on Dad's truck, reminds me of the Sunday morning when, just as we were about to leave for church, Dad received a phone call from a neighbour who had accidentally driven his car over a bank at the side of the road. Could Dad come with his winch and drag him back onto the road? So, while the rest of the family walked the short distance to church, Dad got the truck out and set off to 'help thy neighbour'. After the car had been pulled back on to the road, the neighbour was very grateful and apologised for calling Dad away on a day he knew he usually kept for church activities. To which Dad replied, "That's alright Joe. The bible says that if an ox or an ass falls into a pit on the Sabbath day it's OK to pull him out."

Dad's mill also cut hardwood for house-building timber. That came from forests of messmate gum, which still covered much of the peninsular in those days. When I was born, the mill was located in an area belonging to the family, a few miles from where we lived. The saw benches were driven by a portable steam engine about the size of a small train locomotive. One of my earliest memories is of the day the engine was hooked up behind a bullock team, to transfer it to a new location on property we owned in the valley behind our house. As the bullock driver and Dad passed our house, they stopped for a cuppa, and I was hoisted onto the back of one of the bullocks for a photograph. I remember the bullock driver as a rather fierce man. Perhaps it was the way he shouted at the bullocks and cracked his whip.

Eventually the steam engine, and the rest of the movable equipment, arrived at its new home in a clearing cut in the middle of the bush, on the rear section of Dad's seventy five acres. The mill was set up, under its long low galvanised iron roof, near the creek. There had to be water continuously pumped into the steam boiler. Then it was ready to mill the bigger trees in the area around it, as well as those carted from properties all over the peninsular. New settlers often wanted their land cleared and earned money from the royalties Dad paid for the timber. The track from the road in to the mill wound through the bush. Deep mud tracks, formed in the winter, in summer became hard and acted like train lines for the truck. Where the ground was impassable in winter, corduroy tracks, made of small logs laid together, kept it open.

From the house where we lived the mill was about a twenty minute walk. You went down the hill, across the cleared paddock where the house cows and mill horses

grazed, and then along the narrow track by the creek, through the tree ferns and paperbarks where the ring-tailed possums nested. Every morning at about 5.30 my father would walk to the mill to light up the firebox in the engine, so that there would be steam up by 8 a.m. when work would start for the day.

Near the mill was a weatherboard hut with a galvanised fireplace built into one end. A couple of bunks, formed from chaff bags stretched over a pair of poles, were attached to one wall. Here one or two of the men, who lived too far away to travel each day to work, camped during the week and went home weekends. If my parents were away for the day, I would walk down to the mill after school and have tea with the men. The menu was invariably sausages and mashed potatoes with plenty of butter. Sitting in front of the fire, in the light of a kerosene lantern, I thought it was great. I reckoned, when I grew up, I would like to live in a hut like that!

Of course bush mills were always at the mercy of the bush fire. It was not possible to insure them because of the risk. When fire came, one hot summer day, to our section of the bush, the mill on which Dad had spent so much time, money and effort was completely wiped out. The steam engine survived, but the wooden benches, the shed, the long wooden skids where the logs were stacked, the cut and stored timber: all were left a smoking heap. My mother told me how Dad came home that day completely exhausted, flopped on the couch and said, "Its all gone Mum - the lot." What happened after that? He built it again. There was nothing else to do. Of course there was no income during the rebuilding, and he still had to pay the men's wages, and all the replacement costs. So the overdraft at the bank grew still larger.

I can't ever remember a time when Dad was not working on an overdraft, and this is related to the fact that, all my life, I have found it difficult to vote labour. Needless to say, I am not always happy with the other side of politics, but I have an inbuilt distrust of unions which I find hard to shake off.

It all goes back to a time when I was about ten years old. In 1934 the depression was well in sway and, while Dad had plenty of orders, he had great difficulty in getting paid. People would order their needs and they would be delivered, but then they could never find the money to pay for them.

At that time he had about ten men working for him, or I should say with him. He spent a longer day than they did in the exceptionally heavy work of milling in those days. His office work was done at night after they went home. At that time, in round figures, the award wage for a mill worker was four pounds a week. Because of the financial situation, Dad had made what would be called today "a workplace agreement" with his men. He would keep them in work at three pounds a week.

They were happy with this, because work was difficult to find, and the alternative was to go on the dole at one pound ten shillings a week. In those days the dole did

not mean surfing in Queensland while the money rolled in. It meant breaking stone on road building projects forty-four hours a week and living in a tent. On three pounds a week the men were probably doing as well as Dad, if not better.

But then the unions heard about it! Their representatives came down from Melbourne to look into the situation. They told Dad that he had to pay the award wage. Dad told them that if he did he would have to sack half the men. In his twisted logic he thought it better for ten men to have a job at three pounds a week than for five men to have four pounds a week and five others go on the dole. Particularly when most of the men and their families were personal friends with whom he went to church, played sport etc.

But the union reps were not interested in logic of any kind. The award said four pounds and that was it. So Dad had no option. He cut his work-force in half, probably did better out of the whole situation himself, and five men went on the dole. As a ten year old I simply could not believe grown men could be so stupid. I have no doubt that there are situations, particularly with big companies, where union strength has been, and still is, necessary. But even though it was nearly seventy years ago I have never forgotten that union meeting at the mill.

While we are talking about "politically incorrect" views, it has always annoyed me when the "greenies" blame timber millers for destroying the forests. Again there are situations where big companies looking for short term gains can be blamed, but for the genuine privately owned timber mills the opposite is true. My father certainly cut down trees so that they could be used for legitimate human needs, but the last thing he wanted was for the forests to be lost. In fact he spent most of his spare time planting trees. If he didn't his business had no future!

As a child I remember countless Saturdays spent digging up pine seedlings growing along the roadside under the windbreak rows of pines around the properties. Then they would be planted and nurtured on my father's property for future milling. Sometimes we collected the pine cones, took them home and put them in the oven or by the fireside so they would open and give us seeds to plant.

It was not the millers who were responsible for the loss of the forests, which once covered the Mornington Peninsular and most of the rest of arable Australia. It was the graziers and farmers and orchardists, who wanted cleared land on which to grow their crops or graze their stock. The millers were only the method they used to help them clear it.

Talking a few moments ago about the men Dad employed on the mill, reminded me of a humorous incident relating to one of them. Well, it was eventually seen as humorous anyway! During the depression, our church social service director was trying to help a family which had fallen on hard times. Bert, with a wife and three

children, had been a successful jeweller in Melbourne and once owned three shops. But, through the depression,. he had lost his business. When the social service people found them they were living on a pittance made by his wife and himself covering and selling coat hangers. They needed accommodation and work.

A church member at Red Hill offered them a house. Dad was asked could he provide a job. Having a jeweller working on a timber mill was a bit like giving a prize axeman a job in a jeweller's shop, but Dad said he would give Bert a try. Bert did his best but, as might be expected, mill work was not really his line. Nevertheless he stuck with it and his honesty and conscientiousness made him a valued employee.

One day, not long after Bert had started, the whole gang was loading some extra heavy logs on to the truck. The logs were about twelve feet long and three feet (nearly a metre) in diameter. To load them on the truck they were rolled up a pair of skids, which ran from the ground to the edge of the truck tray. It required a row of men with plenty of muscle all along the log. If they had to stop for any reason such as a lump on the log catching on the skid, or simply to take a rest, the log had to be held at the height they had gained with wooden chocks. These were wedge-shaped pieces of wood about a foot long. There were always a number lying around. They had already loaded two logs and the third was giving some trouble. The men were straining and nearly exhausted so Dad decided they would have a rest. "Bert," he yelled, "bring us a couple of chocks, quick!" Bert dashed round in circles looking for suitable chocks and arrived with a couple which the men gratefully set on the skids and eased their aching limbs for a few moments. Then it was back to work.

With a final heave the log rolled on to the truck tray and thumped against the ones already there. With the result that those logs rolled straight off the other side followed by the one they had just loaded. "Bert!" says Dad. "Where did you get those chocks?" "Off the other side of the truck," says Bert sheepishly. "I didn't realise they were there to hold the load on." Dad's sense of humour saved the day but Bert never lived the story down, though he remained working for Dad for many years.

I should add that Bert was one of the finest men I ever knew. He and his wife ran the Christian Endeavour youth group at the church and he was one who most encouraged me to take up the ministry. I still clearly remember the day I was sent to call Bert from the mill up to the house to answer a phone call. It was about his son who was away with the army and had been reported missing. He had been found, in a German prisoner of war camp! Bert was greatly relieved.

I have before me as I write a 'Postkarte' dated 5th January 1942 addressed to me - 'Red Hill, Sawmill, Victoria Australia.' It was from Bert's son Eric in Stalag POW camp in Germany. It reads, in part-

'Dear Ron, I believe you are secretary of the Endeavour now so I take this opportunity of through you wishing the Society every success in the new year. Hoping to be with you in the next.'

My father had originally come to the Red Hill area as a boy of about 8 or 9 with his parents and brothers and sisters. They had previously lived on a property at Neuarcurr near the South Australian border. His mother and the girls travelled by train for much of the journey but his father, who was a blacksmith, built a special wagon on which he loaded all their possessions. Grandad Holmes drove the wagon all the way, with my father and his brothers riding horses behind.

It was a distance of around 500 kilometres. At Red Hill they bought a property and became orchardists with the whole family working together. They built a sawmill to cut the cases and timber they needed. When the boys grew up and married, the property was divided among them, with my father's two brothers taking over the orchard sections and my father receiving non-orchard land plus the mill.

Talking about my father's boyhood reminds me of a story he told me. When he was about 12 there was a concert at the local hall. The entrance fee was a shilling. Coins of that value were not common with the Holmes children in those days, but his 16 year old sister told him she would take him to the concert and not to worry about the money. A crusty old Scot was on duty as usual collecting the shillings. When they arrived at the door he put his hand out for their money. Dad's sister grasped the old chap's hand and said, "Good-evening Mr. McKosh. It's lovely to see you again. How is your wife? Please remember me to her won't you." By this time Dad had slipped in behind her, as, with a dazzling smile, she finally let go the outstretched hand and sailed through the door, while the flustered doorkeeper had to turn his attention to the rest of the queue.

My mother also spent her early years in South Australia. The family lived at Aldgate in the Adelaide hills. She went to Sunday School at the little Aldgate Valley Church of Christ.

Again there is an amusing story passed down through the family. When she was about twelve years of age, she was learning to play the organ and had a small number of hymns in her repertoire. One day there was a wedding at the church and the organist did not turn up. Desperately searching for someone to fill in, they asked my mother. She replied that she couldn't because she had never played the wedding march etc. and didn't know how. So they said, "Well just play one of the hymns you do know." So it happened that as the bride walked down the aisle to the front of the church, the organ played a well known hymn of the time which went - "Christian walk carefully, danger is near."

I have always been impressed by the concept of coincidence. More than seventy five years after that occasion, I was minister at Park Street Unley church in Adelaide. We were in need of an extra organist and I was told that a teenage young lady was learning the organ and could be interested. The family went to a different church, but I paid a visit and asked the girl's mother if Vera was likely to accept our request. She replied that Vera was not home yet, but soon would be and I could ask her myself. She mentioned that at the moment she was practicing for her first wedding. To fill in time, I told the mother the story of my mother's first wedding at Aldgate Church of Christ. To my amazement she said - "That was my auntie's wedding. The story has come down in our family too".

My mother's father was an interesting character who worked in a hat shop in Rundle St. Adelaide, travelling to work by train each day from Aldgate. There is some evidence that he was a member of the local council, and in later life he once stood for parliament but apparently was not elected. Certainly he was a champion bike-rider, winning medals for long distance events.

When my mother was about 18, he decided to move to Sydney, and somehow he became a mining engineer working in New Guinea. There is a mention in Ion Idriess's book, "Gold-dust and Ashes", about Engineer Clark being one who was keen to see aircraft used in transport for the mines. One of the reasons I am writing this story is that I have no idea how Grandfather Clark moved from being a hatter to a mining engineer, and there is no one alive who can explain it to me.

When I was young we occasionally had holidays at Grandma Clark's home in Watson's Bay on Sydney Harbour. I remember the hall being filled with spears and shields and axes which Grandfather had brought home from New Guinea. He himself was only once at home, during our holiday, that I remember.

One big event of those days was when, in March 1932, I was taken to see the opening of Sydney Harbour bridge. At 7 years of age I didn't see too much because of the vast crowd, but I was impressed by the aeroplane flying overhead. It is probably difficult for children of today to realise, but once, when I was at primary school, the sound of an approaching plane resulted in the lesson being stopped and the whole class being allowed outside to watch it fly over.

Prior to her marriage, my mother worked in the office of John Sands in Sydney. Each day she caught the ferry at Watson's Bay and got off at Central Quay. Her brother Walter had gone to the first World war, about the time they left Aldgate, and her other brother, whom we children knew as Uncle Jack, had gone to theological college and then to China as a missionary. During his college days in Melbourne, he had come as the first student preacher to the church at Red Hill, and became a close friend of my father. During one vacation, the two of them rode their push-bikes from Melbourne to Sydney, and there my father met my mother for the first time. Dad's

story was that when he arrived he was so exhausted after a week pedalling the bike - no gears in those days - that Mum grabbed him and he was too weak to get away! Well, that was his story anyway.

Three years after my birth my sister Betty was born, and three years later my sister Phyllis. Both married and had a family, but, sadly, both died from cancer in their early fifties. My mother had also died in her early fifties from stroke. At the time, I was in North Western Australia with the RAAF and was not able to be home for the funeral. My father died at 74, also from a stroke.

So much for my general family background. No doubt, the effect of these people on my life will come into the story at a later date, but for now I will return to my childhood memories.

CHAPTER TWO

I started school at the age of four and a half. In those days there were no pre-school arrangements. You began at school itself, although I think there must have been a beginners year prior to grade 1. I did not have far to walk as the school was built on a block about a quarter of a mile up the road. This had originally been part of my father's property. Some children walked up to four miles, (six or seven kilometres) each way. A few rode bikes and a couple came on ponies. It was a solid brick and cement rendered building of two class rooms, and an entrance passage with hooks for our coats and schoolbags. The ground at the front of the building was gravelled. There we were assembled every morning to salute the flag and repeat our pledge of loyalty to King and country before marching in to school.

Harry Amos was the head teacher. When he first arrived at Red Hill he boarded with my parents but later bought a block and built a house. I'm not sure at what stage he married but he moved from our place about the time I was born. He operated in the main classroom where he taught grades 5 to 8. Grades 1 to 4 met in the other room and were taught by a lady teacher who sometimes had an assistant.

How those teachers managed to teach four classes at the same time, in one room, all at different levels, with no aids, apart from a blackboard and chalk, ink-wells and exercise books, must seem incredible these days.

Of course, the big secret was that teachers were able to exercise discipline. Work was done, even if unwillingly, because that was what school was for. The strap in the headmaster's drawer did not come out very often, but it was always there, and used if necessary.

My teacher started at the school the same day I did. Her name was Berta Smith. For the majority of the students, the eight or nine years at this school gave them their