Introduction

They Came to Thunderbolt Country

Sandon County was one of the first pieces of country in New England to be stolen from the black Australians by the white ones. Things have happened in this area that have seldom been heard of in other parts of New South Wales. There are stories that can make one proud, and tales that give one cause to feel ashamed, but for all that it has never been boring. So for better or worse, the memories of the early folk in Sandon County's past are offered to the reader just as they have been passed down to me. I think you will agree that the tales in these pages should not be allowed to fade into the mists of time, but be preserved for the enjoyment of generations to come. As you weep or laugh over the escapades of the people who made up the population of the County in the last decades of the 19th century, it is well to remember that they could be part of your own ancestry, so please judge them with love.

The main town in the county today is Armidale, though the Walcha people would tell you that their district was settled much earlier and no doubt they would be quite right. However, most of the Walcha district is in Vernon County, and that is another story. It was to Uralla and Rocky River that the cosmopolitan crowd of miners made their way and left their mark behind them. The land they found was verdantly beautiful, but they left it pitted with shafts and scarred with piles of rubble, which bear mute evidence of their passing to this day. The gold, which they worked so hard and long to possess, eventually petered out, and one by one the miners packed their tents and moved on. There were, however, some that for many reasons were unable to leave, and it is these people of different nationalities who make up the bulk of the founding families of the present township.
They Came to Thunderbolt Country

Great Northern Road to Armidale before the sealing of the highway (note cartwheel tracks).

Thunderbolt's Rock near Uralla (note the absence of graffiti).

2 They Came to Thunderbolt Country

Introduction

The bark rooted huts, the first homesteads in Uralla, gradually gave way to more sophisticated houses, and small streets ran at right angles to join the tree lined highway to Armidale. Shops and hotels gathered in groups along the main road running north and south, and today they still line the New England Highway. The highway earlier known as The Great Northern Road followed Queen Street, but the road which is now Bridge Street cuts through the heart of the town, and for three blocks, banks, hotels, and tradesmen plying their wares on either side of the busy traffic lane are the only sign of commercial activity in an otherwise apparently slumbering village.

The Uralla District's greatest claim to fame was its association with the bushranger Thunderbolt. Although some say that the grave inscribed with the name of Fred Ward actually contains the body of his equally brave step-brother Fred Britton, others say that it was not the famous outlaw at all, but some poor fool who got in the way of Constable Walker's bullet on 20th May 1870. Well, whoever he was, he left behind a fiercely loyal and doting public. So great was his influence on the local population, that not only has his grave been carefully tended for more than a century, but the Uralla shire council is about to erect a huge statue of a bushman on a great black horse, as a memorial to their hero, right in the centre of town.

The stranger to Sandon County does not have to go far to find someone willing to regale him with a rollicking tale of the bushranger's exploits, and there is always somebody whose grandmother actually met, danced with, or was kissed by the gallant bushranger. Thunderbolt, under whichever name one perceives him to have lived, has become almost the patron saint of New England, and particularly of Sandon County, for the Uralla district proudly proclaims itself 'Thunderbolt Country'.

As these tales unfold the reader will discover that Thunderbolt was not the only colourful character to inhabit the county, for the second half of the 19th century was a settling down period for those left behind after the bulk of the gold miners had returned home and, even today, the slumbering blanket of respectability is sometimes lifted to reveal the occasional bandit or robber following in the footsteps of their local hero. Little boys sometimes go on a spree of breaking and entering, running off with petty cash, and the odd box of chewing gum.

One of Thunderbolt's most adventurous disciples of modern times was a young man who managed a long and successful career of robbing banks with a toy pistol and a borrowed motor bike, while still living a respectable and friendly existence in his home town. Often in these days of shifting population, strange people arrive, stay a short time and then move on, unrecognised until their pictures appear on the front page of national newspapers.

Local police have been shot at, spat upon, roughed up, and
They Came to Thunderbolt Country
generally made to feel uncomfortable. A policeman's lot, in this part of Sandon County, is not as the song says, "an 'appy one''!

The good folk of Uralla are not very pleased that such a situation should exist in their beautiful village, but it has always been so and most people did not even notice it. Doubtless many other small Australian towns can boast about, or vehemently deny, their connection with a bushranger. There will always be the respectable sector, as well as the disreputable (and very often most amusing) 'other people'. There was a time, before the 'shaking down' of the population, when it was hard to know one from the other, and that is the period we are about to explore.

Among the original patriarchs of the Uralla district were many unusual personalities. They built their reputations, raised their families, and passed on, leaving descendants who still inhabit the area. Among the most colourful was Benjamin John Smith, one of the first blacksmiths in Uralla village. With his large family he lived during the era in which we are most interested. It was the youngest of his sons known as a child as "little Brucie", who told me most of these stories, just as they had happened to him, his family, their friends and neighbours.

Bruce Smith, as I knew him, was a kindly and cultured man, born in Uralla almost 100 years ago, who made many yearly pilgrimages from his home in Rockhampton, Queensland, to spend Christmas in the town of his birth. During these visits, he would spend long hours reminiscing about his childhood, and many of his yarns are to be found between these pages. There are other stories to be found here of other families also, some of them too interesting to be left out. Because of the manner in which the folk of the county lived, it was hard for any happenings not to affect the lives of all. Although the McCrossin family has been honoured among the founding fathers, and other names feature in Uralla's hall of fame, the Smith family was such that they usually had some part in public events one way or another. Bruce Smith died just a few years back. So this book is dedicated to him who inspired its writing and to all those helpful friends in 'Thunderbolt Country' who provided further tales and documentation.

A special thanks to Professor Russel Ward for his Foreword and his encouragement and Dr Bruce Marshall for his unfailing patience.

When the two brothers Smith, produce merchants of Tidfermether in Wales, speaking only Welsh, set out to make their fortune in Australia, they were not searching for gold like most of their fellow travellers. Unlike other adventurers on board the sailing ship, they had taken stowage in the cargo-hold for crates of goods, as well as passage for themselves and the elder brother Henry's English-born wife, Martha, whom he had married in 1838. A tall fair girl, Martha inherited her adventurous spirit from her Norwegian father, and it was at her instigation that they were on their way to try their luck in the colony of New South Wales. The brothers were experienced merchants, and the promise of an untouched market place was like a magnet to their steel. Deep in the hold lay goods to the value of two thousand pounds.

The Smiths were ambitious and they believed that their fortunes would be made not so much in digging for gold, as in selling goods to those who did. All one needed, they believed, were customers, premises, supplies and a steady head.

When their ship docked in Sydney, they lost no time in acquiring a buggy and three horses. After several days' searching they commissioned a bullock driver to convey their trading goods to the Bathurst goldfields. It was then that they made their first mistake. New to the colony and its ways, they did not seek the advice of the local traders, who might have warned them of the importance of staying with their cargo to the journey's end.

Having seen their goods stowed on the dray and watched the bullocks slowly starting on their way, the three went on ahead to
purchase a suitable storehouse and, with more enthusiasm than know-
ledge, left their goods in the doubtful care of the bullock driver. It was their
misfortune that the man and the load never arrived in Bathurst.
Undaunted, Henry sent his brother back to Wales for another consign-
ment, and settled in Maitland to await its arrival. The family store, in the
main street of West Maitland, prospered and Martha and Henry's son
Benjamin was born there in 1840. A daughter was born later and Martha
named her Kate.

Henry had built up a large business in Maitland by the time Ben was
12 years old, but he was still apparently quite gullible and unused to the
ways of the land he had chosen for his home. The store in Maitland
was situated near the Angel Inn, and the stables of the hostelry backed on the
spare store-rooms of the shop. On one occasion a gentleman staying at the
inn asked Henry's permission to leave some of his boxes in the
storeroom for safe keeping as he had to go "up the country" to obtain
suitable premises for a store. Remembering his own experience with the
bullock driver, Henry was happy to assist a person he considered to be a fellow businessman.

Unfortunately the goods were stolen and the fellow had left town just
one step ahead of the troopers. When the goods were found in Henry's
storeroom, it was useless for him to plead his innocence. He was arrested
for possession of stolen goods and, still protesting, was charged and
sentenced to a term in Maitland Gaol.

Benjamin John Smith in his twelfth year was horrified at the
injustice of it all and developed a hatred of authority which stayed with
him all the days of his life. Henry's wife Martha, gentle and middle class,
ever quite recovered from the shock of her husband's imprisonment and
as a result became a stern parent to her son, and later an austere
grandmother to his children, seldom showing them affection, whilst
insisting on good behaviour at all times.

After the release, Henry and his family moved to the goldfields of
Rocky River, buying the shabby store at Sydney Flat, now known as
Maitland Point, from Mr McCrossin, where they remained until
Henry's death many years later. They were to become one of the best
known families in Sandon County and though young Ben's exploits were
not always commendable, they were never too far outside the law.

At the age of 14, Ben was apprenticed to an Armidale blacksmith and
agricultural implement maker by the name of Alexander McKay. Of
exceptional height and strength, McKay was a man to be reckoned with.
He had a reputation for being a fighting man and few could stand against
him, but he was a good tradesman, and Ben and his fellow apprentice,
John Hamilton, were considered lucky to have the opportunity to learn
their trade from him.

Married to an Irishwoman, the former Maria Freckleton, with a
daughter Frances Ann, Alexander McKay had a very successful
business. His shop stood at the corner of Rusden Street, on the site now
occupied by The Minto Building, and was considered well set up. The
boys received a good grounding in their chosen trade. Their master
worked them hard, but he was a fair man, and because both were
illiterate, he sent them to the tutor of his own children. For this privilege they
were expected to pay the teacher two shillings a week. Mr Baker,
sometimes called 'Cranky Baker', was a violent man and would think
nothing of breaking a slate over the head of a luckless pupil, but he was a
good tutor, and the boys learned their lessons well.

Frances McKay had a sweet voice, and led the choir in the
Presbyterian church in Armidale each Sunday. As the year progressed,
young Ben became very fond of the girl and she of him. Because of his
mother's Norwegian ancestry, Ben grew into a fair young giant. His
tough training as a blacksmith developed his muscles, and he was on the
way to becoming a very handsome man.

When Ben and John Hamilton had served three years of their
apprenticeship with McKay, they decided they had had enough, and
planned to run away. Because the laws of indentured apprenticeship
were very strict, they had to do it secretly. So they travelled down the
Horton River and lived with the Aborigines for two months, after which
they made their way to Goondiwindi, where they met a man who said he
wanted some help. He was an agent for a company which was recruiting
men to travel to Cooper's Creek to found a cattle station. When he heard
that the two young men were blacksmiths he was delighted to hire them,
and at three pounds a week and 'keep', Ben and John were even more
delighted to accept.

The party travelled for several weeks, to arrive at the station where
men were putting down dams for the expected stock and building sheds
for machinery. After three months the boys became valued employees,
and they began to consider themselves safe until one day, when they were
relaxing under a tree at "smoko", they were horrified to see their lawful
master riding into the camp. McKay had ridden a horse from Goondiwindi,
tracing them from information given to him by the Aborigines on the
Horton River, and the agent at Goondiwindi. Reminding the boys about
the law of indenture, he threatened to turn them over to the police if they
did not return home with him immediately to finish their time. To their
chagrin, he also demanded and received all the pay that was due to them
for the previous three month's work. It was two very unhappy young men
who followed their legal master all the way back to Armidale to complete
their final year, working twice as hard as before.

At 18 Ben came home to his parents at Maitland Point, where
he made his home. Because of his strength and daring he was much
admired, and he became a gold courier for the Rocky River miners. He
was not only courageous, but was considered by some as 'wild', and out
of control. He developed a penchant for fast horses, and strong liquor,
and prided himself on his ability to 'hold' both.

Ben's friendship with McKay's daughter Frances had developed into a love affair. Despite her father's disapproval, they managed to meet quite often and their bliss continued happily until Ben was almost 19 years old.

McKay had always been noted for a very bad temper. He had no regard for persons, and would strike any man, or animal, who got in his way. He took exception to real or imagined injuries. The big blacksmith loved a fight, and would walk down the streets of Armidale, wearing a stove-pipe hat daring any man to knock it off. A man who took up his challenge to fight was sure to be sorry about it. He was an unfair fighter who would use his boot as often as his fist.

Ben both feared and admired him, and later he would emulate his master's habit of provoking a fight whenever he could. He was known to walk into a bar anywhere in the County, and throw out a challenge to all those in attendance, "I am Ben Smith, and I can lick any man here". His muscles hardened by his profession, and standing over 6ft in height, there is no doubt he could have done it too!

Because McKay was a violent man when drunk, and strong enough to make any would-be assailant think twice, his wife and daughter knew when to keep out of his way. However, at about the time of Ben's twentieth year, the big man came home one night much the worse for 'the demon rum', and started to beat his wife. When Frances went to her mother's aid, the drunken bully turned on her, swinging a stirrup iron, and it caught the young girl a glancing blow on the head. Frances was not a heavy person, but she was tall, and bravely she grabbed for the swinging iron. For a moment her father was nonplussed and stepped back. Then all was confusion. As the heavy man staggered backwards, he stepped on a loose board in the floor and fell, striking his head on the bearers. Seeing her father unconscious, and with her own head bleeding from the wound inflicted by the stirrup iron, Frances decided to leave before McKay woke up.

After packing a few of her belongings in a small bag, she made her way across country to Ben at Maitland Point, where she was cared for by Martha Smith. She was never to return to her father's house.

In some of the early photographs, a much younger girl named Annie appears, and is referred to as 'Auntie' Annie on some of them. Whether she was Frances' younger sister by Alexander McKay, or her mother's second husband, Peter Platz, is not known. Not much is known by the family about Peter, but there is a record of two Platz families arriving in Australia on the bounty ship *Aurora* in 1855. Mr Platz could have been one of these. He is believed to have been a widower at the time of his marriage to the widow McKay.

The records do not tell where the emigrants made their homes, but the gold diggings at Rocky River attracted a great many of those who later settled in the district.
McKay's furious temper was well known around the district, and no one would have blamed his daughter for defending herself. There is a tale about two kangaroo dogs that frightened a horse McKay was shoeing, causing the horse to kick the blacksmith. He was so angry that he went inside and got an old muzzle-loader gun, and killed both dogs. The owner of the animals took him to court, where the Magistrate asked McKay if he had indeed shot the dogs. When he admitted that he had, the magistrate told him he was "nothing but a scoundrel!". At this McKay lost his temper and abused the police, and the magistrate. Consequently, he was fined heavily, and forced to pay for the dogs also.

As a fighting man, he was feared by most of his contemporaries. Descendant of a Waterloo veteran, he took pride in his prowess. When he walked into a bar, most of the drinkers gave him a wide berth. No one dared to fight him for the privilege of knocking off his hat. His apprentices often felt the power of his fist, and there is no doubt that it was mostly from his influence that Ben developed his belligerent attitude and pride in fighting.

Alexander McKay never recovered from the concussion received when he fell through the floor, and died shortly afterwards. Because of his brutality, he was mourned by neither his wife nor his daughter, who lost no time in marrying the man of her choice.

Ben and Frances were married by the Rev. S. Hungerford, the Presbyterian minister of Armidale. It was this same minister who testified for William Monkton at his trial in Armidale in 1868, and although there was no doubt that the boy had been a companion of Thunderbolt the outlaw for a period of three years, the parson's intervention saved the 18-year-old from hanging. The Rev. Hungerford gave testimony to the hardship of William's earlier life and aroused public sympathy for the lad. Monkton was sentenced by Judge Meymott to three years in Darlinghurst gaol, but after only 14 months he was set at liberty, and later became a respected citizen in the Howell District. It was ironic that Thunderbolt was killed by Constable Walker at Kentucky Creek on the very day that William was released from Darlinghurst gaol.1

McKay's furious temper was well known around the district, and no one would have blamed his daughter for defending herself. There is a tale about two kangaroo dogs that frightened a horse McKay was shoeing, causing the horse to kick the blacksmith. He was so angry that he went inside and got an old muzzle-loader gun, and killed both dogs. The owner of the animals took him to court, where the Magistrate asked McKay if he had indeed shot the dogs. When he admitted that he had, the magistrate told him he was "nothing but a scoundrel!". At this McKay lost his temper and abused the police, and the magistrate. Consequently, he was fined heavily, and forced to pay for the dogs also.

As a fighting man, he was feared by most of his contemporaries. Descendant of a Waterloo veteran, he took pride in his prowess. When he walked into a bar, most of the drinkers gave him a wide berth. No one dared to fight him for the privilege of knocking off his hat. His apprentices often felt the power of his fist, and there is no doubt that it was mostly from his influence that Ben developed his belligerent attitude and pride in fighting.

Alexander McKay never recovered from the concussion received when he fell through the floor, and died shortly afterwards. Because of his brutality, he was mourned by neither his wife nor his daughter, who lost no time in marrying the man of her choice.

Ben and Frances were married by the Rev. S. Hungerford, the Presbyterian minister of Armidale. It was this same minister who testified for William Monkton at his trial in Armidale in 1868, and although there was no doubt that the boy had been a companion of Thunderbolt the outlaw for a period of three years, the parson's intervention saved the 18-year-old from hanging. The Rev. Hungerford gave testimony to the hardship of William's earlier life and aroused public sympathy for the lad. Monkton was sentenced by Judge Meymott to three years in Darlinghurst gaol, but after only 14 months he was set at liberty, and later became a respected citizen in the Howell District. It was ironic that Thunderbolt was killed by Constable Walker at Kentucky Creek on the very day that William was released from Darlinghurst gaol.1
way called 'The Pinch', and it was hard going for the little yellow men slowing them up somewhat. Heavily wooded it was an ideal place for the bushrangers to pounce, and the miners were robbed of their gold on many occasions. Then one day the outlaws were disappointed: they found no gold, and the Chinese went on their way. Later they returned carrying supplies. Twice the outlaws were disappointed, and twice the miners returned carrying supplies.

The next time Thunderbolt stopped the single file of walkers, he searched them, but found nothing until his boy pointed out that all the Chinese wore very long, fat pigtails. Lifting up the hair of one miner he discovered a small chamois bag of gold plaited into the pigtail. In a fit of spite, Thunderbolt cut off all the pigtails, stole the gold, and sent the poor miners on their way very upset. It was not so much for the gold, which was bad enough, but the loss of their pigtails was a great humiliation to them.

The Smiths' store at Maitland Point prospered. Their customers were spread far and wide and Henry would deliver the orders in a wagon which he drove himself. It was whilst on a particularly long delivery towards Bendemeer at the age of 70 years, that Henry collapsed and died. He was found on the following day in the back of his wagon, where he had apparently fallen from the driver's seat. The horses had just kept walking on and were quietly browsing in some long grass by the roadside, when they were sighted by a farmer from Bundarra who drove the wagon back to Uralla and handed it over to the police. Henry Smith was buried at Maitland Point, but the cemetery has completely disappeared. There was also a Chinese burial ground there, but no sign of that remains either.

Not long after Henry's death the family decided to move into the township of Uralla. So Martha sold the store, and bought land in the part of Uralla known as West End. With his share of his father's estate Ben also bought land in the same area and with his parcel of land added to his mother's portion it was considered large enough to support a family. So it was there that Ben built his first family home.
At the time of the family's move to the township, Cobb and Co coaches terminated in Uralla, and passengers proceeding to Armidale were obliged to do so in private carriages. Freight was carried by teamsters, who made a good living. There was quite a large volume of horse traffic passing through the fledgling township. So Ben decided that this would be a good place to establish a blacksmith shop, and his first venture was just above the bridge in the centre of town. It was Mr Sandelands of Rumella Station who assisted the young tradesman with a loan that was quickly repaid for the business prospered. Ben later built a bigger and better complex, on the site now occupied by the National Bank, and it was here that he built a large shed for building carriages and farm implements for the growing population of landowners in the surrounding county. One of his inventions was called a 'forest devil' and was used for uprooting trees. It was so good that in no time it was being used over most of New England.

The house that Ben had built in Leece Road was comfortable, a slab cottage, with a verandah on the back, a shingle roof and sufficient space for his growing family. Martha moved into the cottage with them, and remained a permanent member of the family for the rest of her life. Known to all as Grandma Smith, she became more stern as the years passed by, her clipped English accent unaffected by her years in the colony. She always dressed in black, and was remembered by her grandchildren and visitors by the black silk aprons she wore. There was one in particular which had beautiful red roses embroidered on it and was a favourite of her youngest grandson. He remembered it in detail for most
They Came to Thunderbolt Country

of his life. Martha wore a bonnet long after they had ceased to be stylish, and in her later years carried a walking stick, though she seldom went far from home unless one of the grandchildren accompanied her.

When she was a young girl Frances had taken a tumble from a horse, and as a result had suffered a deformity in her lower pelvic area. This affected her child-bearing capacity, her babies being injured at birth. Six little ones died before the age of six months, until a new doctor in town was able to recognise the fault and correct it. When the seventh child was expected, he had a special chair constructed into which Frances had to be strapped during her waking hours for a period of three months. The deformity was corrected and the child lived. The delighted parents named the little girl Lucy.

Eight more children, following in quick succession, were to make up the Smith family: Harry, Alexander, Kate, Flora, Benjamin, Frank, Oliver, and the last was little Brucie. Small and delicate, he was born on 2nd January 1888. There were times when it seemed doubtful that he would survive, and Frances Smith kept him in long warm infant’s clothes well into his second year. Because of the bitter cold of Uralla’s winters, and much to the little boy’s embarrassment, he was forced to wear long winter nighties for sleeping until he was six years old.

Raising a large family in the 1880s was no easy task, but Frances was a loving mother, and a sensible woman, and took most things in her stride. But even for her there were problems which a modern mother would find hard to face. There was a time, when Frances took Alex her second baby with her when she went to milk her cow. Wrapped in a blanket, she placed him on the ground behind her while she proceeded with the chore. The bucket filled, she bent to pick up the still sleeping child, only to find to her horror that a black snake had also slipped onto the blanket, and gone to sleep against the baby’s warm little body. The terrified mother sat and waited for what seemed to be an eternity until the little fellow opened his eyes. Cuts and bruises the Smith family: Harry, Alexander, Kate, Flora, Benjamin, Frank, Oliver, and the last was little Brucie. Small and delicate, he was born on 2nd January 1888. There were times when it seemed doubtful that he would survive, and Frances Smith kept him in long warm infant’s clothes well into his second year. Because of the bitter cold of Uralla’s winters, and much to the little boy’s embarrassment, he was forced to wear long winter nighties for sleeping until he was six years old.

Raising a large family in the 1880s was no easy task, but Frances was a loving mother, and a sensible woman, and took most things in her stride. But even for her there were problems which a modern mother would find hard to face. There was a time, when Frances took Alex her second baby with her when she went to milk her cow. Wrapped in a blanket, she placed him on the ground behind her while she proceeded with the chore. The bucket filled, she bent to pick up the still sleeping child, only to find to her horror that a black snake had also slipped onto the blanket, and gone to sleep against the baby’s warm little body. The terrified mother sat and waited for what seemed to be an eternity until the little fellow opened his eyes. Cuts and bruises

Eight more children, following in quick succession, were to make up the Smith family: Harry, Alexander, Kate, Flora, Benjamin, Frank, Oliver, and the last was little Brucie. Small and delicate, he was born on 2nd January 1888. There were times when it seemed doubtful that he would survive, and Frances Smith kept him in long warm infant’s clothes well into his second year. Because of the bitter cold of Uralla’s winters, and much to the little boy’s embarrassment, he was forced to wear long winter nighties for sleeping until he was six years old.

Raising a large family in the 1880s was no easy task, but Frances was a loving mother, and a sensible woman, and took most things in her stride. But even for her there were problems which a modern mother would find hard to face. There was a time, when Frances took Alex her second baby with her when she went to milk her cow. Wrapped in a blanket, she placed him on the ground behind her while she proceeded with the chore. The bucket filled, she bent to pick up the still sleeping child, only to find to her horror that a black snake had also slipped onto the blanket, and gone to sleep against the baby’s warm little body. The terrified mother sat and waited for what seemed to be an eternity until the little fellow opened his eyes. Cuts and bruises

The Family at West End

devilry common to little boys, they also played a game of jumping on the nest of big soldier ants, just to see who could do it fastest. They would take turns to jump into the middle of the nest, then run off as quickly as possible. Sometimes they were not fast enough and suffered accordingly. With much skipping and bowing the victim would head for home. The ants were tenacious, and often had to be pelted off the screaming child one at a time. Luckily those monster ants seem to have disappeared from the township area, but there is on record an incident of an elderly woman who wandered from her home on Mount Mutton, fell into a gully and broke her leg. It seems that she had fallen very close to one of those soldier ant nests, and when she was found almost three days later, she had been literally eaten alive by the creatures. These ants are no longer a threat, but sometimes one comes across one of their descendents inside a gardening glove, or uncovers a small nest whilst digging among the roses. They are still tenacious, and can deliver a very painful bite. So the wise gardener gives them a wide berth.

Oliver, the second youngest boy, would always follow his older brothers, and insisted on taking his turn in the mischievous games, but he was the most accident prone, and it was always he who fell prey to the wasps or ants. In one year the hailstones in spring were as big as pigeons’ eggs. During one sudden storm, the other boys made a dash for the house, but Oliver was slow in taking off and, caught in the open, he collected the full force of the hail, finishing up with two black eyes and a large head ache.

Even simple tasks were a hazard for Oliver. Each child was expected to do his or her share of the household chores and so at milking time, it was the little boy’s job to put the cow in the bail and tie back her leg so that she couldn’t kick over the bucket while his brothers did the milking. One occasion he was a little too slow, and the cow caught him bending. Collecting a solid kick in the rear, poor Oliver fell face down in a fresh cow pat. To clear the air passages so that he could breathe, the two older boys had to wash his face with milk. Ben and Alex roared with laughter, and indeed teased him about his tumble for years after, but their discomforted young brother was not amused.

Changes of season brought the usual spate of childhood diseases, and winter always claimed a few victims among the town children. Weakened by poor diet and lack of proper attention, due to poverty which followed the exodus of the gold miners, some of the Smith children’s school friends succumbed to croup, winter chills and pneumonia each year. The little cemetery in John Street bears mute testimony to this fact. The spirit of adventure, as well as the usual bush accidents, took their toll, but the young Smiths all lived to maturity, and most, like Bruce, to a ripe old age.

As the girls grew older Martha helped with their training in the ways of good housekeeping. The household was run by the women, and although their methods were primitive measured by today’s standards,
the house was always tidy and warm, and the family clean and neat. Boys being boys, it was impossible to keep them clean at all times, but it wasn’t for lack of trying. The two eldest girls, Lucy and Flora, were clever with a needle, and with their Grandmother’s help they became clever seamstresses. Later they were able to keep the family neatly dressed, and indeed Flora made her living by sewing. Eventually she went to work for a well-to-do draper in Maitland as an ‘alterations hand’, became manageress of the store, and later married her boss. Although Mr Francis Sheedy was somewhat older than Flora, they had a good marriage and when he died she was left very comfortably provided for. Lucy remained in Uralla and in 1890, she married a young carrier and blacksmith named John Thomas Welbourne. Their descendants still live in Uralla, and there is at least one Welbourne following the trade that his two grandfathers pioneered in Sandon County.

On washing day Kate and her mother would fill the great boiler in the back yard. It was the duty of the boys to build and maintain the fire to boil the clothes. They had no laundry as we know it, but a bench on which stood two tubs made of galvanised iron with handles at both ends. These were used for washing and rinsing, including a final ‘bluing’ for the white clothes. On bath night the tubs were carried inside by the kitchen fire, and the bigger children were expected to fetch their own bucket of warm water, from the copper outside, for bathing.

Their method of washing was primitive by modern standards, but that of the miner’s wives at Rocky River were even more so. Great ‘Grandmother’ Swilks, whose descendants still live in the township, was fond of telling her female relatives, just how she and the then young ‘Granny’ Neal and their friends would bring their washing to ‘The Cutting’, a gully at the back of what is now the Rocky River School. The miners had brought water to wash their gold bearing dirt from Sydney Flats at the head of Mount Welsh Gully by a series of ‘races’, and the resultant pond became a place of congregation for their wives. They made it an outing and a chance for a gossipy get-together, whilst doing the family wash.

The Smith family’s ironing was done with flat irons, heated in front of the kitchen fire and rubbed with bees’ wax, on an old blanket covered by a clean sheet at the end of the big kitchen table. The smell of freshly ironed clothes was something Brucie would always remember. He loved to sit and watch, as his beloved Kate worked on the family ironing, and help her to fold the small pieces.

Kate was a tall girl, and her brothers considered her beautiful. In her sixteenth year, she was gentle, kind and very generous, but she had a furious temper when aroused and would fight like a tiger if one of the younger children were threatened. There was nothing her brothers would not do to please her. Because she was a good cook, she helped her mother in the kitchen. This room was the nerve centre of the house, where the
They Came to Thunderbolt Country

family gathered when the day’s work was done, and where the visitor was entertained with a cup of tea. The water was always kept boiling on the fire for just this purpose. Because of the primitive kitchen conditions, accidents were a common occurrence. On one occasion a near tragedy was averted by the quick thinking of one of the boys. The evening meal was being cooked in a large camp oven, and Kate was placing the large water fountain back on the fire, when the heat caused her to turn her back. As she turned her long skirt caught fire and within seconds she was ablaze from ankle to waist. Young Benjamin caught his sister up in his arms and rushed to the door. As was the usual custom, a rainwater tank stood just outside. With a mighty kick Ben dislodged the tap and the water gushed forth extinguishing the blazing skirt. Ignoring the precious water running away he carried his sister gently inside whilst Alex rode off for the doctor.

Poor Kate was burned severely, and even after treatment by Dr Williams, she was forced to lie face downwards for six weeks. Such was her patient nature, that she endured excruciating pain without complaint. Her survival was due to the loving kindness of her family, and the skilful nursing of Frances. Their mother’s nursing ability was something the family, and indeed much of Uralla’s population, had reason to be grateful for on many occasions. Frances was an accomplished midwife, and she was often called to attend one of her neighbours in the cold winter nights. Because of her skill, she would be the first person to be called to an accident, and many a life was probably saved by her method of first aid, whilst waiting for the one and only doctor to be found. The sight of Mrs Smith walking briskly down the unpaved Uralla streets with her little bag of medicines was a reassuring sight to many of the local inhabitants.

Some time after her marriage, to a man in the Inverell District, Kate gave birth to a still-born child, and her farmer husband, through ignorance or neglect, failed to send for the doctor. After some days had elapsed, Kate’s mother-in-law realised that the young woman was very ill, and took her to the small Inverell hospital where her condition quickly deteriorated. When the news reached Ben and Frances they were very angry, and Ben with his two elder sons drove a buggy to Inverell. Storming into the hospital, they bundled the sick girl into blankets and drove at full speed back to Uralla, handing Kate over to her mother’s care. All of Kate’s hair had fallen out, and she was very near death. It was only because of the constant nursing of her mother and the loving care of her family that her life was saved. Ben was so incensed by her husband’s neglect, that Kate never returned to her marital home.

Survival was the key word in Australia during the 80s and 90s. Few working people had jobs. The country was suffering from the effects of strikes and depression. Collapse of land values and the gold boom made poor men of others. Of those who selected land, few had the farming experience to make a living, or other skills with which to support
They Came to Thunderbolt Country

night, sometimes the worse for drink, but still riding fast and erect in the saddle.

The bushland of West End in the 1880s was much thicker, the trees larger and older than those of today. Ben Smith's holding in Leece Road ran down to the creek, and back to Burying Ground Gully. His front paddock had a good dam in it that Ben and his older sons had dug themselves. It never ran dry, and even to this day it varies very little in summer or winter. People say that a spring which feeds the dam accounts for the constant supply of good clean water. In this paddock Ben kept his wagon horses, and the gate was always kept locked. One of Brucie's first memories concerned this gate.

The six year old boy had not yet started school, and because of his poor health and small stature he was left very much to himself. Finding it impossible to keep up with his older brothers, he made a small world of his own. He was, however, able to assist them by carrying out small tasks. He would run errands for his mother, or attach himself to his dearly beloved sister Kate. Her patience was unending, and it was to her he carried all of his fears and secrets. It was she who dried his tears, tied up his cuts and rubbed his bruises. It was Kate who brought him his small puppy for a birthday present, carrying the tiny creature home in her apron, and it was to her that he carried the magpie with a broken leg which he found under the datum tree in the back paddock.

Like her mother, Kate enjoyed caring for their sick or elderly neighbours, helping with the chores, and sometimes cooking a meal or supplementing their larder by baking a batch of biscuits or cakes. Two of her charges were extremely old women, one known as 'Granny Boness'. Nobody knew just how old she actually was, but it was generally believed that she had been a convict. Kate would often spend the night in Granny Boness' cottage for it was feared the old woman might do herself an injury. She had a great fondness for rum, and a constant watch had to be kept; for no matter how careful her guardians were, she always seemed to be able to find a supply.

The other of Kate's 'old ladies' was Granny Leek, who also had a fondness for rum. It was as a direct result of this weakness that the old woman was forced to wear always a type of 'mob cap'. At a period of her earlier life in Uralla when there were several more hotels in the town than there are now, she was a constant tippler at one or another — often becoming coarse and abusive. Eventually she would be thrown out into the street, to lie unconscious on the footpath, until a policeman managed to get her to the lockup where she would sleep until nearly midday. On one such occasion, a young policeman new to the job, borrowed the innkeeper's wheelbarrow, so that he might convey her to the cells. As Granny Leek was too fat to carry, and the constable not strong enough to drag her, this seemed a logical method. Placing his prisoner in the barrow, he proceeded towards the gaol at a brisk pace.

Ben's business prospered, the big handsome man found reasons to travel into Armidale more often, and his capacity for strong drink became a legend. He was still an excellent horseman and would often attend a sale or a meeting in the town arriving home at all hours of the night, sometimes the worse for drink, but still riding fast and erect in the saddle.

As Ben's business prospered, the big handsome man found reasons to travel into Armidale more often, and his capacity for strong drink became a legend. He was still an excellent horseman and would often attend a sale or a meeting in the town arriving home at all hours of the

The Family at West End
They Came to Thunderbolt Country

He hadn't gone very far when the wheelbarrow stopped short, and the unfortunate woman fell out with a thud. Her long hair had become entangled in the wheel, and the weight of her body as she fell to the roadway tore it out by the roots. Anaesthetised by the rum, she knew nothing about her misfortune, until she woke next morning with her head swathed in bandages. Her hair never grew again, and poor Granny Leek remained as bald as a bandicoot until the day she died. The West End children thought her some kind of a witch, and gave her cottage a wide berth, but to the kindly Kate Smith she was just another old and infirm person in need of her help. Kate sometimes spent the night in her cottage.

It was on one of these nights, that Brucie's first remembered adventure occurred. It was his responsibility that night to lock away his father's small flock of sheep. He was supposed to move them from the back grazing paddock, place them in the dam paddock and lock the gate. It was a job that the small boy had done many times before. Some of the sheep wore bells and so they were easy to find. Although the winter's night drew in early, it was not very dark, and he succeeded in the main task. The sheep were safely in for the night, and the gate was locked behind them. It was then that Brucie made his first mistake. Because it was so cold, and he was hurrying to his mother's dinner table, he dropped the key!

Ben was fussy about that key. It had to be replaced on one particular hook just inside the saddle shed, so that it was easy to find in case a job should come up for the team, and it often did at any hour. It was getting dark quickly, and Brucie was very much afraid of the dark, mainly because his older brothers were fond of teasing the little fellow and telling him scary stories of ghosts.

With the key lost in the long grass and the night closing in, he was terrified. Afraid to face his father and admit that he had lost the key, but more afraid of the darkness, he made his way back to the shed. Thinking that his brothers might be watching and would tell his father what they saw, he pretended to replace the key on the hook. Then shutting the door, he ran as quickly as he could back to the cosy kitchen. Winter meals were warm and nourishing, for Frances Smith always managed a well laden table for her family.

With the older children fed and relaxing for the evening, Brucie was tucked up in his long winter nightie and packed off to bed some time before his father arrived home.

It was unfortunate that, when his father did come home, it was in the company of some men who wished to use his team and wagon to carry some goods to Walcha that night. When he discovered that the key to the gate was missing, he sent two of the older boys to wake the little fellow and ask him what he had done with the key. Sleepy and frightened, Brucie was carried to the shed to find it. When it became clear that he had actually lost the key, his father was very angry, and he shouted furiously at the child, "Find it at once. Go find it — NOW!" And he pushed Brucie out into the blackness in the general direction of the locked gate.

Terrified of the dark, ghosts, and strange noises, Brucie began to run. The bushes clutched at his nightgown. His bare feet were cold and wet, and he lost all sense of direction. A night bird flew past and he fell in the darkness. His first thought was to get to Kate, and the protection of her soft warm arms. Running in the direction where he thought to find Granny Boness' cottage, he floundered into the creek, cutting his feet on the sharp stones and soaking the already wet nightdress, which clinging to his goose-pimpled legs impeded his progress still further. Out of the darkness he heard his mother's voice calling him to come home. He ran towards her, but catching sight of her white apron shimmering in the darkness, he imagined it to be a ghost and fainted at her feet. Frances gathered her baby up and carried him back to bed. Little Brucie knew nothing more until morning.