

# TIME OF THE TIGER!

## Settling Tasmania's wilds — what it was really like

THE year was 1935 and my father was living at Oatlands when the letter arrived! It advised that he had been transferred to Waratah, "a tin mining town, 50 miles inland from Burnie, with a population of two thousand".

BY VERA FISHER

It was obvious there would be disadvantages. My parents were not to take any furniture or effects with them because the postal residence had been condemned as unfit for further habitation, and they were instructed to board at one of the hotels with their accommodation cost subsidised by the department.

So it was that my parents came to meet a man who was a legend on the West Coast, Mr Ray Whyman, licensee of the Bischoff Hotel in the town's main street.

### Distinction

Residents could travel to and from Burnie each day on a rail motor, via Guilford Junction, but once a week a proper steam train chugged into Waratah and brought heavy freight. But while lesser mortals commuted by train, Mr Whyman had the distinction of owning a car and being able to come and go when he pleased.

He told my parents of the time he was delayed in Burnie on business and it was dark as he drove home through the Hellyer Gorge. Suddenly, the headlights

picked up a Tasmanian tiger standing in the path of the car. If the driver was surprised to see the animal, he was really non-plussed when it decided to hitch a ride.

It sprang lightly on to the car's running board and travelled some distance down the road, barking through the window at the driver. Then it leapt off and vanished into the scrub.

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Many armchair critics of modern times look with jaundiced eyes at the activities of the early settlers who once killed this animal, but none regret its passing into oblivion more than these pioneers.

To those who opened up the interior of the island, two things were essential — the fowls that kept them in eggs, and the sheep that provided their living.

With a large family to feed, the men would go out, trapping kangaroos and skinning them and leaving them ready for the week's meat supply.

Quite often, they would get up next morning to find that devils had taken their game, or raided their poultry yard.

With no friendly corner butcher, it was a case of setting the snares again or going hungry.

With tigers making inroads into flocks of sheep, the Government introduc-

ed a bounty system and the early settlers would have been falling in their obligation to neighbouring landowners, had they not fallen in with the Government's plan to control these marauders.

What was Tasmania like for those early farmers and their families?

My great-grandfather, John Sawford, arrived at Oatlands in 1830 and raised a large family.

### Behaviour

One son, Henry William, was drowned in Oatlands at the age of 8, on Christmas Eve, 1844.

His sorrowing parents were comforted by the Rector, Rev Gregory Bateman.

This gentleman it was who really put the town on the map by his unorthodox behaviour at the burial of a convict.

A funeral so unusual that it had to be reported to London! But as this incident has already been told in "The Blasphemous Funeral," back to the Sawfords...

Two other sons were John and William — they married two Powell sisters and lived at Swanston (William had formerly been a cheesemaker at Ross.)

If a man had the misfortune to gash his foot with an axe, his wife could

not afford the luxury of fainting clean away, as she was often his only hope.

So, she would calmly reach for a bottle of oil pour it over until the blood "set" then elevate the foot and wrap it in towels until next day when the long journey to the nearest doctor might have to be undertaken in a cart.

The fat of the Tasmanian Devil was rendered down into oil and used to polish the horse's harness and the family's shoes.

The clear oil derived from porcupine fat was used medicinally—rubbed in for rheumatism or taken orally to cure a cough or cold.

Apples and cherries flourished in the mild climate at Swanston, and one family used to climb on the roof of their home to pluck the fruit from a high cherry tree.

When the time came to reap the fine wheat crops, the women laboured all day in the fields beside their men. At nightfall, they came in and would grind wheat by hand to make something for the evening meal.

After this was cleared away, the parents would teach the children their lessons.

On one occasion the Sawford family had some of their kitchen crockery broken by a slight earthquake which rocked Swanston, and there was, of course, no shop where they could obtain replacements.

Once every six months a bullock dray full of provisions would arrive from one of the Midland towns.

Another day, the family found a wonderful "bee tree". They carried home the honey in buckets for two days, and the finished product filled a good sized bath!

These women of bygone days would be astonished at the change that "progress" has brought.

Now, the approaching birth of a child is a signal to pack the frigate with enough food for a week, pack a case, and make a fifty mile flit to the city to be confined amidst strange surroundings.

In the past, the onset of labour meant a withdrawal to one's bedroom with one of the local area midwives in attendance.

### Arrival

The husband would take his other children for a long walk in the bush and when they returned, baby brother or sister would be waiting to be admired, and the little household would revolve happily around Mother and babe.

The small percentage of medical men who make snide comments on the efforts of these early midwives, may never themselves have set out alone, on foot, in the darkness of midnight, scrambling up the mountainside in rain and snow, fearful that each fresh gust of

wind would extinguish the lantern.

Pressing ever onwards toward some tiny cottage where man, woman or child had need of them.

But, if pregnancy was regarded as a normal part of living, so was death easily accepted.

It was inevitable that the older members of the family, or in some cases, the very young, would succumb to diseases. In remote parts, a Clergyman was not always available.

There was neither car nor phone to summon him, so the family would hold a funeral in the front garden of their home.

A child might be buried under a shady tree in the garden itself — an adult would be interred some little distance away, and friends would arrive, tether their horses and some neighbour would then read the burial service.

Members of the family would pick flowers and put on the grave for many years to come.

When my old Grandmother Sawford died, far from her native England, the burial service was read by Mr John Page Junior, a landowner in the area.

The early settlers were very particular about having their children baptised. Mr and Mrs John Sawford who lived at the Sugar Loaf, walked 7 miles carrying one of their babies, until the track became wide enough to take a cart, then they drove for some three

hours to reach Oatlands from Swanston.

On their arrival, the Anglican Rector was away from home. When Mrs Sawford asked her husband what they had better do, he replied simply, "We'll go up to the Presbyterian Minister, and if he's away, we'll come back to the Catholic, as we are not taking that child home, without it being baptised."

A number of cattle ran wild at Swanston, and John Sawford, his brother William and their brother-in-law, James Powell, went out to search for them.

Suddenly, John saw a huge tiger lying majestically in front of a fallen log.

He raised his gun to shoot, but for the first time ever, the gun jammed, he quickly fired the other barrel, but incredibly this also jammed.

The tiger got to its feet with a look of disdain and began to pick its way down to a lower level, passing right in front of Mr Powell.

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a tiger himself and he felt strangely moved by the beauty of the animal. In the mud, he tracked where she had come up the gully, and behind her prints, there were two sets of tiny paw marks.

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He guessed she had young and tried to find them to take home and care for, but without success.

Next day, he looked again and discovered one cub lying under a log where it had frozen during the cold snap.

Since it was already dead, he supposed he might as well hand it in, though he doubted there would be any bounty on such a little animal.

But he was paid £1 for it, a huge sum when one considers land was five shillings per acre.

(These amounts paid by settlers, in addition to the Government bounty of £5 per head, emphasises the serious view taken of this animal, at that time.)

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The year was 1952, and I was on holiday at Burnie. As the waitress at the hotel cleared our breakfast, she suggested we should not leave without seeing Fern Glade.

As we roamed through its damp beauty, we met a gentleman coming the other way.

With the usual Tasmanian informality, we began to talk. He told us that in his youth he had trapped tigers for zoos.

He would select a tree with an extending bough, high enough to be just out of reach.

A piece of meat would then be tied to the bough.

Right under it a pit would be dug and limbs of dried leaves placed lightly across it.

The tiger would spring for the meat, and fall into the pit and it would be too deep for him to spring out.

I asked the man if he believed the tiger to be extinct? "Certainly not. Why many and many a night I hear them in the hills behind Burnie, the tiger calling to its mate."

And 20 years later? Does the tiger still lurk just beyond the fringe of progress?