Snippets

from our collection

Balnarring and District Historical Society Inc.
® A002.25691B
P O Box 183 Balnarring 3926

August 2026 **Editor: I. Hackett**

SUICIDE BY HANGING

(*Information from contemporary newspapers and the internet.)*
On May 10th, 1876 the body of a young man was found hanging by a rope from a beam in an unoccupied house in Balnarring. The man was 33 -year-old John Coates.
Coates had been a patient at the Cremorne Lunatic Asylum, a privately run asylum in Richmond. He had recently been discharged into the care of family and friends as it was thought that a 'change of air' would be good for him. Coates had been living with his brother-in-law, John Irwin, at Irwin's farm in Balnarring, not far from Coolart.

The Cremorne Asylum was a privately run asylum owned by Mr J.H. Harcourt. It had opened in 1866 on the grounds of the former Cremorne Pleasure Gardens after that entertainment venue had closed and the site auctioned. The private mental health facility was the only one of its kind in Victoria

Cremorne Pleasure Gardens, on the banks of the Yarra River, was established in 1853 by James Ellis and was based on the pleasure gardens popular in 19th century England. It was designed around a lake and, for a decade, it was *the* place to go for amusement. Visitors could take a paddle steamer from Princes Bridge in Melbourne's centre and arrive at a special jetty at Cremorne. There they had a wide choice of entertainments. There was an open-air theatre where theatrical productions were held, as well as concerts, music and dancing. A brass band played from a rotunda. The gardens had a menagerie and an area where small amusements could be tried such as bowling or skittles or aunt sallies. Firework displays lit up the sky nightly; tightrope walkers balanced on a high wire that stretched across the lake. It became a place where people met for picnics or where marches and processions took place. The first hot air balloon ride took place here.
Ellis had sold on the business to N.P Scott who added panoramic pictures depicting world events and he, in turn, passed it on to theatrical entrepreneur, George Coppins and his friend, the actor, Gustavus Brooke in 1856. The gardens expanded in area under their ownership. Three hotels were within the parks' boundaries. Coppins had a house built for himself. Brookes withdrew from the partnership in 1859 and Coppins continued to run the Cremorne Gardens for another four years. It was his "indulgence and hobby". However costs to maintain it were enormous, Melbourne's weather didn't favour outdoor entertainment year round and there were problems with the authorities over 'moral issues' – the availability of alcohol and prostitution. Coppins eventually closed the Gardens and auctioned off the site.
It was bought by H.J. Harcourt and the existing structures were modified to turn it into a facility suitable to house patients with a mental problem. It was to become the only private mental facility in Victoria at the time. The lake was drained. Mr Coppins' house became the residence of the asylum's superintendent, Mr Tucker.

The refreshment rooms became sitting rooms and bedrooms for patients. The former theatre housed thirty females from the government-run, Yarra Bend asylum. The pit in the former theatre became a dormitory while the dress circle was turned into a room for the matron and attendants. Apart from the women's group, it was a private asylum with paying patients. Family and friends of those at the asylum were encouraged to visit two days a week. Visitors at the time noted that the bedrooms were lofty, well-ventilated and scrupulously clean. The keepers were "skillful and respectable" and the principal attendant had some medical knowledge although there was no resident surgeon. Many patients, however, had their own medical men who visited often and Dr Youl visited daily. None of the residents was restrained nor confined to bed but there were dark cells into which refractory patients might be put, should that become necessary. In 1865 eighty-two patients were in residence.

This is where John Coates had been admitted and where he spent several weeks. Those in charge noted that he was "reticent and melancholy but not unsound of mind" and a special attendant was not deemed necessary. But he did not seem to be making any progress. It was recommended that a change of air might be beneficial to his mental state.
Coates was a family man. He had married Irish-born Elizabeth Irwin in St James Chrush in 1868 when he was twenty-six and she, twenty-one. By the year of Coates' death the couple had four young children. The eldest was seven years old and the youngest a newborn. The family lived in Hotham (North Melbourne) where John Coates had worked as a 'vellum binder' (book-binder). He owned his house.

When Coates left the asylum he did not return to his residence in Hotham but came to Balnarring to live at his brother-in-law's farm. Perhaps it was thought that the quieter country location would be more beneficial to his peace of mind and speed his recovery.
After five weeks with the Irwin family, on the morning of May 10, Coates refused breakfast and later in the morning he couldn't be found. John Irwin went looking and eventually located him in a deserted house about a mile from the farm. He had taken his own life.
At the inquest held at Mornington the jury found that "the deceased hanged himself while of unsound mind".

PALMERS HILL

Palmers Hill is the highest point of the headland between Balnarring and Merricks beaches. It is also the name of the house that was built by S.O. Woods in the mid-1920s as a holiday residence for him and his family. Where does the name 'Palmer' come from?
In the early 1860s when Crown land was surveyed into lots and opened up for selection, the name of the person who first selected the lot was written onto the survey map. 'Palmer' appears on three lots close to the coast.
Many selectors did not see the land they were buying but they had an indication of what the land was like from a description of the vegetation and soils that were marked on the maps. The land to the east of Merricks Creek just before the creek turned to flow west and parallel to the coast was described as *good soil, thick timbered, excellent pasture.*

This land had been part of the Coolart run, held under lease at that time by Joseph Hann. Hann purchased his homestead lot by Pre-emptive Right and also further lots east and adjoining the preemptive right – lots 28, 29, 30 and 31 to the north of the creek and lots 39 to the south of the creek. Lots 36, 37 and 38 were bought by John Palmer.
Who was John Palmer and why did the land change hands again?

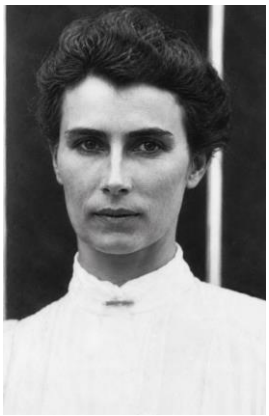


In the 1850s there was a John Palmer who was living in Prahran. Palmer was on the municipal council and owned gas works in Regent Street. He also had a shop and a bakery. A report in the *Argus* newspaper mentions that John Palmer had a station at Westernport where he had begun to grow tobacco in order to make cigars. Both Cuban and Havana varieties were planned. However, the venture was not a success. Although some of the cigars were reported to have a "tolerably good flavour" most were not fit for smoking. The soil was blamed for the failure of the tobacco crop.
It was "too much impregnated with nitrate of potash".
Palmer did not keep the land and the three lots again became part of the Coolart holdings.

LIFE FOR THE PIONEERS

by **Elsie Beeching**

(from B.D.H.S. archives)



Miss Elsie Beeching came to Balnarring in 1920 to take over as Head Teacher of the Balnarring State School. An Englishwoman by birth, Miss Beeching took a lively interest in both the school and its district. She wrote a short description of what life was like for Balnarring's pioneering families.

'In 1861 under the First Land Bill settlers began to arrive in the district.
An old pioneer of the past explained how he got his land. He arrived by steamer at Schnapper point (Mornington) and went to Big Plain. His only guide was the surveyors' peg. There was a track to Coolart. He went up a hill to make a camp but found that the creek was dry and although a shaft was made twelve feet deep no water was found.

It was difficult to tell exactly where the land which had been selected was situated, but after a time a number was found on a tree and that was to be the place of settlement
This same old gentleman said he wanted to go in for agriculture so he bought a plow. It was a wooden one with no wheels and a cast-iron mould-board. He explained that it would have to be cleaned twice in going down one furrow and when it struck a root the driver would go up in the air. He says there was nothing but hard work. The corn had to be reaped with a sickle and thrashed with a flail. They had no buggies in those days but used a dray and a couple of bullocks when taking the wheat to be ground and even when a settler got married, he used to bring his wife home in a dray.
There was no high living. Kangaroo flesh was sometimes cooked but except for the tail part it was almost uneatable. Now and then two or three families would join him and buy a bullock and get it salted. Afterwards it was smoked and hung up for a few months and then it became so hard that one would have to saw it to pieces. Sometimes a few potatoes were obtained but there was no baker and damper was the chief food with, of course, tea.

At that time people who wished to settle were guided by one description given in the old plans – red soil, pepper and gum near the coast, further out grey soil etc. These descriptions were the only idea new settlers had of their future block. Land was very cheap. Mr. Downward M.L.S. is said to have got his for £1 per acre but he had not seen it when it was bought. It is part of Balnarring.

Those were the days when an old pioneer felt a thrill seeing the smoke of a new residence. The bark of a dog or the crowing of a cock were often the first intimation that neighbours had arrived. Settlers got their mail about every three months when someone went to Schnapper Point. The first mail carrier was a man called “one-armed Dinny” who used to bring the letters on horseback from Hastings. The first P.O. at Balnarring was kept at a rambling old house which still stands, named “Warawe”[sic]

There was no doctor in the district at all and according to the pioneers, the chief medicine used was kerosene. As most of the pioneers here lived to a great age, and most of them kept all their faculties to the end, it would seem that the old ladies who did service instead of doctors were ‘wise in their day’.
Many of the pioneers raised large families. . . .”

SOMERS FIRE BRIGADE - IT’S BEGINNINGS

(Recently a photograph was posted on social media of a fire truck in Somers. The date and make of the vehicle were sought. The photo was probably taken in the late 1940s and the truck appears to be a Dodge Fargo. Most likely it belonged to a local farmer and was fitted out to carry water to wherever it was needed for firefighting. The Somers Fire Brigade was not formed until 1948.)

Before a fire brigade was formed in Somers neighbours helped each other if a fire threatened. It was all voluntary assistance. Fire outbreaks were also attended by navy personnel from the H.M.A.S. Cerberus base at Crib Point and, during the years of the Second World War, Air Force personnel based at Somers were also called on to help put out a blaze.

In 1947 Somers residents met to discuss the need to have their own brigade but it wasn’t until December 1948 that a public meeting was held in the Pavilion at the Somers Caravan

park. Captain Stanton from the Balnarring Fire Brigade chaired the meeting which resulted in the formation of the Somers Fire Brigade. Elections took place with the resultant positions being filled – Captain: Percy Sanderson. First Lieutenant: Ken Boadle: 2nd Lieutenant: Terry Hope-Campbell. 3rd Lieutenant: Ray W. Stone. Apparatus Officer: Ron L. Stone and Foreman/Communications Officer/ Secretary: Stan Byrne.
The Brigade was officially registered with the C. F. A. on 10th January, 1949 and Captain Stanton from Balnarring helped the new group get organised. Stan Byrne notified members of 'turn outs' by means of the manual telephone exchange at the Post office. Equipment at the time consisted of a few knapsacks and a few beaters which were kept at the General Store. At first they had a hand-pulled furphy tank. Somers relied on tank water at the time and a couple of local farmers could transport water in their farm vehicles. Ken Boadle from 'Korbanui' had a tank fitted to his truck and it was used to respond to fires in the area. Charlie Temby from near-by Balnarring also had a truck fitted to carry water.



The photo from the Somers Community web page.
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Not long after the brigade was formed the Somers Migrant Hostel opened in the buildings that were once part of the Air Force Training base. The hostel had a fire tanker that was used and crewed by the Somers Brigade.

In the 1950s the Brigade decided to purchase a vehicle that could be used as a fire truck. Through Bill Edgar and Norm Freestone who owned the Balnarring general store, they acquired an old Bedford that had seen service as a Golden Fleece tray truck. Cec Hibbert was the main driver. Wes Wade, a member of the brigade, remembers "we fitted it out with the accoutrements so essential to this type of work. It was a possession of pride and lovingly looked after by its members".

In 1967 Somers was connected to a reticulated water supply and that year the brigade received six new knapsacks, 300 feet of canvas hose, two rake hoes and a hydrant from the Authority. For the summer fire season of 1967–68 the C.F.A. supplied Somers Brigade with an old Ford Tanker which was returned in April when the fire season ended. Then, in the latter part of 1968, the brigade received an Austin tanker, the first C.F.A. tanker to be permanently placed at Somers. It had come from Lang Lang and was officially handed over to the brigade in January 1969.

One of the first fires attended by the Somers Brigade was one that broke out when most of the residents were out of town. It was the annual school sports day which was being held in Hastings. When the sports had finished and the men were all at the hotel, word passed around that a fire was burning near the present Somers school. There was a mad rush back to Somers. At the time there was no reticulated water in Somers and the lack of water remained a major problem for many years.

During the 1960s many major advancements were made. In 1966 discussions centred on the building of a fire station and in November of that year plans were drawn up to seek Shire Council approval for suitable land. Public appeals were held to raise funds and $1,4447.20 was raised towards the building of a new station.

The following year land was obtained from the Hastings Shire for a site in Ocean View Crescent. It was on vacant land next to the brick building that served as the Pre-school and Infant Health Centre. Work started on building a station.

By Australia Day in 1968 the Somers Brigade was able to hold its first meeting in the new station. It was a brick building with a cement floor. A long work bench ran across it from wall to wall.



Building the fire station 1968.
Ted Wiltshire, Stan Byrne, Dot Byrne and Chester Reid at work

In February of that year a VHF radio was purchased and a siren was fitted to the alarm.
It could be heard all over the district.



Chester Reid with an early radio.

With the help of fundraising and donations the fire station was later extended to supply storage facilities for extra equipment and a proper meeting room.

By the 1970s fire awareness and fire prevention had become an important part of the brigade's duty. During the 1970s the brigade purchased a second- hand Holden ute. This received an upgrade in 1974 when a Heathkit Electronic siren was added and a set of

revolving red lights. A trailer unit was obtained the following year. The unit had a pump and a tank and could be used as a first support unit when the Brigade's Austin tanker was out of the area. The Holden was later sold and replaced with a Toyota one tonner.

In 1971 the CFA purchased land next to the fire station for extensions to the existing fire station building. Plans were drawn up and work commenced in 1972.



The unit responds to the fire at Palm Beach Store 1967

Some of the major fires attended during the brigade's earliest days were the one at the Palm Beach Store, one at a residence in Bonview Ave., the blaze at Red Hill and fires on the foreshore near Sandy Point. Inexplicably the Somers Brigade was not called when the disastrous fire broke out in the hospital section of the Somers Migrant Camp in 1953.

[*Information from All Our Somers by Bruce Bennett; "From Homeless Knapsacks to State of the Art" - A History of the Somers Fire Brigade .1948 – 1998 compiled by John Rogash and Wes Wade's "Memories of Somers*".]

COORA COTTAGE HERBS

(information from contemporary local newspapers)

From the mid-1970s until 1985 Sue and Dick Thompson ran Coora Cottage Herbs on their farm along Thompson's Lane in Merricks. Here they grew a variety of herbs for both cooking and medicinal use, as well as old-fashioned roses and other plants suitable for cottage gardens.

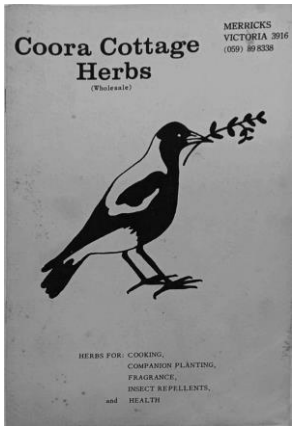


SUE and Richard Thompson surrounded by some of the many varieties of herbs at 'Coora Cottage'.

The catalyst for the business was the Red Hill market. When the suggestion of a community market at Red Hill was proposed, the Thompsons liked the idea and wondered what they could sell if they had a stall. For the first market which opened in September 1975, Dick made some wooden window boxes and Sue planted them with either herbs or perennials, such as petunias from their own garden bed. She also made up some tussie mussie posies. The herbs in particular sold well and they soon found they were receiving orders in advance.

This led to them to establishing a wholesale nursery specialising in herbs on their five-acre property that adjoined Dick's parents' land. They named their nursery business 'Coora Cottage', Coora being a koori name for the magpie, a bird that was often seen on their property.

Because of the increasing interest in herbs and cottage garden flowers and because the Red Hill Market was their only local retail outlet, Coora Cottage initiated an Open Day in 1979. It became an annual event. Admission was by donation that went to the Balnarring Red Cross whose members collected donations at the gates and supplied refreshments during the day. Sue and Dick were on hand to give advice and plants in pots were on sale as were other products made from herbs, such as herbal teas and pot pourris.



For a time Coora Cottage Herbs had an outlet at the Merricks General Store where the Thompsons opened a small shop. Here their plants and herbal products were on sale. Sue also wrote two small books which were available at the store. The first was A guide to herbs for cooking, companion planting, fragrance, insect repellents and health' and the second had the title A Descriptive Guide to the Use and Enjoyments of Herbs (1979). The books were very popular. Over 8,000 copies of the guide were sold and it ran to four re-prints.

Over time the nursery doubled in size and the half-dozen or so common herbs that had graced their original bed grew to over 400 varieties that could be used for both culinary and medicinal purposes. A number of these were imported from overseas. The area had traditional circular planting beds plus banks and rockeries over which creeping herbs could spread. There were lawns of chamomile and of thyme and slopes and hedges of various coloured lavenders. In 1981 a new rose garden of old-fashioned varieties was planted.

Propagating the plants took place inside several plastic domes and by 1982 a staff of six were potting an average of 2,500 seedlings a day. These were delivered to city markets with mint being the best seller. That year, 1982, the Thompsons gave up their stall at the first-Saturday-of-the-month Red Hill market to concentrate on their business. By 1983 Coora Cottage was supplying herbs to retailers all over Australia.

The Open Day had become so popular that in 1982 it was decided to open for two days over a weekend. Two years later it was estimated that 10, 000 visitors had attended and in 1985, that number had doubled. The Open Days were always held in the summer when the flowers were at their best and visitors came to picnic on the lawns. Proceeds went to charity. By 1974 Coora Cottage was the largest commercial herb grower in Australia. The Thompsons installed an automatic potting machine that could handle 2,500 pots a day

The nursery provided employment for a number of local people. The work was labour intensive. In 1974 more than six thousand specimens were potted in one week and these were sent to markets throughout Victoria and interstate. In latter days the permanent staff numbered five with four, then eight, part-time workers. Jennifer Wilkinson worked for ten years at the nursery, from its beginning, and became its chief propagator. She also wrote and illustrated articles about the various herbs for The Age newspaper. Jenny went on to publish her own book, Herbs in Australian Gardens. Peninsula horticulturalist, Angela Roach, is another who spent time early in her career working at the nursery. It fostered her interest in horticulture.

In July 1985 Dick and Sue Thompson sold Coora Cottage to retired banker, Allen Etherton, his wife Mary and their daughter Marilyn. The Ethertons continued the Open Weekend at least for 1969 when staff members took visitors on conducted tours through the gardens and work areas. That year Odyssey House benefitted from the entrance money taken.

When the Thompsons stepped back from Coora Cottage Dick turned to making hand-crafted outdoor furniture with his brother David while Sue, using her maiden name, Susan Wright, returned to her painting.

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CHECK US OUT

The Balnarring & District Historical Society now has its own web page. You can check on the work we do and the general history of our area.

balnarringdistricthistory.org.au

Congratulations to Ian Wisken and Ilma Hackett who each received an Award of Merit from the Royal Historical Society of Victoria for their contribution to local history.

