

UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE

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The buildings these workers lived in were primitive, TITLE: **THE EARLY HISTORY OF AWABA.** and the cracks between the slab walls filled with hessian or cornsack. The cooking was done in backyards with ovens made of clay. There was a bakery which operated with a butchers shop and a small general store all of which were quite rough and primitive. Postal facilities were

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Squatters were the first white people to live in the Awaba area from 1881 - 1894. The decision of the New South Wales Government to build the Sydney to Newcastle railway provided the only reason for development and settlement in the Awaba area. On the 23rd March 1881, a reserve of crown land was proclaimed to serve as a construction camp for the proposed railway. As the railway was being constructed workers camped at the depot as the settlement was known.

Timber was hauled to the depot by bullock teams. The drivers of these teams had to travel a long way from where the timber was cut to where they had to deliver it. The drivers of these teams came from Mulbring, Mount Vincent and Quorrobolong, when these drivers were too tired to go home they were <sup>allowed</sup> ~~allowed~~ to stay overnight at the camp at Awaba.

The buildings these workers lived in were primitive, slab humpies with bark roofs, floors of earth and the cracks between the slab walls filled with hessian or cornsack. The cooking was done in backyards with ovens made of clay. There was a bakery which operated with a butcher's shop and a small general store all of which were quite rough and primitive. Postal facilities were established on the 1st October 1889; there was no building especially made for the post office and remains till this day at a private address. The building of a brick school in 1891 provided an interesting contrast to the rough slab huts in the yet unproclaimed village.

The establishment of the railway station, school and the presence of many squatters led to the decision to subdivide the land for residential use. The railway reserve proclaimed in 1881 was revoked and Awaba was declared a village on the 20th January 1894.

Crown land was put up for auction on 28th April 1894; only 18 residential village lots were sold out of 58 that were offered. The blocks without houses sold for £14.00 each while blocks with houses the prices varied, one block sold for £21.5.0 which included £8.15.0 for improvements of two small huts and a larger building. Another block sold for £14.0.0, the price included £8.0.0 for improvements which included a building in the middle of the block. Terms of the sale was a deposit of 25% and the balance in twelve months with 5% interest. The reason not many blocks were sold was that an economic depression was occurring and many residents decided to move to more centralised locations for work.

Most people had large families and times were very hard, while the timber industry provided some income which was not great. People had extensive gardens, fruit trees, fowls and cows. The cows could roam the bush for feed and after school some of the children had to find them and bring them home to be milked. Everyone knew their own cows by the sound of the bells the cows had on around their necks. After milking was done, the milk was set in a big enamel dish and put in a safe made of wood and gauze while wet bags were placed over the top of the safe to keep it cool.

When the cream was set it was skimmed off and butter was made. The butter was put into a basin then in a bucket tied with a piece of rope and lowered into the underground well. Care had to be taken with the water, it couldn't be wasted as in dry weather the wells would get very low in water.

The laundry was done outside, white clothes were boiled in a kerosene tin on an open fire. An old piece of broom handle called a pot stick was used to poke the clothes down when they were boiling and to lift the clothes from the tin to put them into round tubs. A wooden washboard was used to scrub the other clothes but in latter years a glass washboard was invented. Ironing was done with big heavy irons, some weighed 4lbs and others 8lbs. These were put in front of the open fire until they were hot enough to iron with, then carried to the kitchen table and rubbed with beeswax then a cloth to clean it. The ironing was then done on the kitchen table which was covered by an ironing sheet and blanket.

Awaba had no resident doctor, the nearest being at Teralba. If the doctor was needed, four men would have to use a railway trike which involved two men on one side and two on the other, each pair pushing down on handles alternatively and thus running the trike along the railway line to fetch the doctor to Awaba. At one time a girl was bitten by a snake and had to be taken on the trike to the doctor at Teralba. A midwife resided in the town and delivered the babies although a few were born stillborn.

Awaba began to stagnate after World War I with the closure of the town's sawmill and the onset of the great depression when unemployment was high. The unemployed were put to work making roads for which they received a docket from the Government to take to the food store to receive a certain amount of food. Some men were employed as fettlers on the railway line, therefore quite a few families moved to Awaba and lived in tents on railway property, some later brought houses at Awaba. The wages for fettlers was £9.0.0 a fortnight.

When World War II began, Awaba became involved with some of the young men enlisting. People were issued with butter and clothing coupons as a lot of commodities became very scarce. The Government opened the State Mine in 1947 at Awaba which made life much better for it's residents. Electricity and water was connected and promised a way of life that had previously been impossible.

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## SUMMARY

Awaba is a small town near Lake Macquarie, four kilometres from Toronto. Despite its small size, its history reflects the general history of a wider area on the western side of Lake Macquarie.

Being rather unique, Awaba has retained its identity over a long period of time. This is probably because of its isolation and the strong family and community ties which have developed along with the town. While this essay identifies some of the hardship the residents of Awaba experienced in its early days, this was not confined to Awaba alone. Awaba was more fortunate than most, the opening of the mine saved Awaba as it provided employment and encouraged more people to settle in or return to the town. These hardships brought with it a closeknit community with help and assistance given freely.

While the wages seem low to today's standards, living expenses were not as high and these families appeared to manage reasonably well. When the older people refer to this period they look upon it with fondness, contrary to what people today would say if faced with similar hardships. Although the day to day life was harder they did not have to face the rush of today's life. In 1947, the Awaba State Mine was opened and not long after, Awaba was connected with electricity and running water which made life much easier in <sup>particularly</sup> ~~particular~~ for women whom now were able to have labour saving devices.

*Many of the people in Awaba say that the mine saved Awaba from becoming a 'ghost town'. Awaba was enhanced by the development of the railway and Awaba's history may again be altered by transport with the opening of the Sydney to Newcastle free-way with one section running through Awaba.*



TRANSCRIPT

ANSWER: Well it wasn't easy, all the work was done

QUESTION: Would you just like to give a short background to how long your family has lived in Awaba?

ANSWER: Well, my mother's parents came from Derby in England, and they went to Wallsend to live then he took up a hundred & eighty acres at Stoney Creek, that's near Palmer Creek. Mum was born out there in 1891, my father's family then shifted to Awaba in 1894 when grandfather brought ground. Grandmother and grandfather Field had a very large family of 15 children, 2 never survived and my mother's mother & father, they had 8 I think it was, and then in later years my father meet my mother and were married at Awaba.

QUESTION: Did your family play a part in the construction of the Sydney to Newcastle railway line?

ANSWER: Not in the early days they didn't, later on they shifted to Awaba because of the work on the railway. With their bullock teams quite a few of the brothers had bullock teams and they used to cut the timber of the logs out in the mountain and draw them into the railway station at Awaba where they used to unload them there to be cut up for sleepers.

QUESTION: Was there many people employed doing this?

ANSWER: Well quite a few bullock teams from other areas of the place, like Wyong and Quorrobolong up Martinsville way, used to bring timber into the railway yard at Awaba.

snake one time and she had to be taken to the doctor on the strike - the only - we had a midwife who lived on Awaba. she used to help deliver the babies and there are a few were stillborn.

QUESTION: Was it hard work?

ANSWER: Well it wasn't easy, all the work was done manually cutting the timber in those days and where they had to bring the timber to the station there was a pub called Palmers Pub and the one's that drank used to stop there for a drink, and the story goes that the publican used to give them that much to drink that they'd get pretty drunk and could'nt pay for their loads and when they came around their loads would be gone because he would have sold them to pay for the drink.

QUESTION: Was all the cutting of the wood done by hand?

ANSWER: Yes, every bit of it, axes and crosscut saw and then it would be loaded onto the wagons then unloaded when they got to the station then they'd have to get on top of the load and shove the logs off with a thing, a spiky thing they used to use.

QUESTION: Did your family do this for long?

ANSWER: I know dad did for quite a few years and then he used to cut props for the pits but in those days the old timber getters never rape the bush like they do now, they used to know what size trees they needed to get their props and the logs from.

QUESTION: During your childhood where was the nearest medical help?

ANSWER: The nearest medical help was over at Teralba and a trike had to be driven along the railway line by four men if you needed a doctor. And my sister was bitten by a snake one time and she had to be taken to the doctor on the trike - the only - we had a midwife who lived on Awaba, she used to help deliver the babies and there are a few were stillborn.

QUESTION: Did this cause any problems?

ANSWER: Well really it did because it was a long way to push a trike from Awaba to Teralba to get the doctor or take somebody over there.

QUESTION: Was <sup>it</sup> there any instances where this did cause death or anything?

ANSWER: Not that I can remember.

QUESTION: Whereabouts did you attend school?

ANSWER: I went to the Awaba Primary School in 1921 and I left the day I was 14 and went to work on my aunty's dairy farm. My brothers and sisters they also attended Awaba school and I can remember when the boys was going to get the cane they would split the end of the cane and put a piece of horse hair in it and when they got the cane it would split the cane down.

QUESTION: How did the building of a mine in 1947, affect life at Awaba?

ANSWER: Well, really it brought Awaba back to life, because before then there wasn't much employment at all, quite a few people worked on the railway line as fettlers including my husband and then there was other people shifted to Awaba and lived in tents on the railway property, then some of them brought houses on Awaba, and the pay was £9.0.0 a fortnight in those days on the railway.

QUESTION: Did the railway line play a major part in distributing the coal?

ANSWER: Yes, a lot of coal was loaded from the coal mine on the trains, at one time it was taken by train to the power house at Wangi but then they gave that away because they started to cart the coal by coal truck.

QUESTION: Before electricity, what kind of entertainment did you have?

ANSWER: Well, for music we had old windup gramophones and the wireless used to be run by battery and the kids used to swim in the creek, part of Stoney Creek, which runs through Awaba. We used to play hopscotch with a boot polish tin with sand in it for our 'tor' and we'd save the jacks out of the legs of lamb, boil them down and clean them and then paint them, used to play jacks with those.

QUESTION: Were there any social functions?

ANSWER: Yes quite a few, every pay Friday night they held a dance in the Awaba hall, they were the good old fashioned dances where you done the first sets and all that kind of dancing and they used to have euchre parties and housie to raise money to help pay for the hall.

QUESTION: Was there any sporting?

ANSWER: Yes there used to years ago, there was a cricket pitch down along the side of the railway line and the men used to, the older men used to play cricket down there and the women used to cook big hot dinners and take them down to the men when they were playing cricket, and I can remember us kids used to go down there and watch the cricket being played, and then later on there was football at Awaba, and cricket at Awaba.

QUESTION: Was there a big emphasis on sport in Awaba's history?

ANSWER: Yes, there has been quite a few sporting people in the football world and the cricket world.

QUESTION: Did the church play a major part in your day to day life?

ANSWER: Yes it did, we had to go to sunday school everyday and when my grandfather on my mother's side was living with mum at times, you had to say grace before you had a meal, he read part of the bible out everyday and he was a very religious man. And the Awaba church which was built in 1898 is quite a unique church because it is a union church where any religion can come and preach in that church, it is about the only one left now in probably Australia that is a union church. It's only a very small church, it's very well looked after and it seats about 56 people.

QUESTION: In your day to day life, did you come across much discrimination as you being a women?

ANSWER: No none whatever, we in those days women were never discriminated against because they had to work just as hard as the men.