

# Mt Wilson & Mt Irvine Historical Society



OCCASIONAL HISTORICAL PAPERS

Number 4 June 2003

## ELSEY STATION & THE WALLACE CONNECTION

### INTRODUCTION

On 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2000, the famous Elsey Station, the cattle station made known to practically all Australians through Mrs Aeneas Gunn's *We of the Never Never*, was formally handed back to the Mangarrayi Aboriginal Land Trust on behalf of the four hundred traditional owners '*forever, for future generations*'.

These are the words spoken by the then Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, Senator John Herron, at the handover ceremony that day.

As part of the ceremony, a speech was made by the Honourable Justice Henric Nicholas, who is also a member of our Mt Wilson & Mt Irvine Historical Society. He spoke as a direct descendant of Abraham Wallace, the first person to take up the area that was to become Elsey Station. All fourteen living descendants of Abraham and Matilda, his wife, joined in the celebration on that day.

At the Historical Society's Annual General Meeting, held on 16<sup>th</sup> November 2002, Henric Nicholas again delivered his account of Abraham Wallace's journey. We are grateful for his permission to print it as Number 4 of our Occasional Historical Papers.

### ELSEY STATION & THE WALLACE CONNECTION

#### JRELSEY

To know something of the whitefella's history of Elsey Station is to know something of the history of exploration, settlement and stocking of the Northern Territory. For well over a century, for as long as there have been big cattle stations in the Territory, Elsey has probably been the best known. Its prominence was well established, many years before the publication of Mrs Gunn's books in 1908, and has continued right up until today. The story of Elsey Station is the story of the Territory and the times.

Elsey Creek was named after Joseph Ravenscroft Elsey, on 14 July 1856, during the important exploration expedition led by A C Gregory. Elsey was one of the party of ten, which was then on a great overland trek from the Victoria River heading

east and south to Brisbane. He was 22 years old and the team's surgeon and naturalist. He collected species of birds and insects to send back to England for study. The expedition reached Brisbane in December 1856, and shortly afterwards Elsey returned to England. He died of poor health on 31 December 1857, not long before his 25<sup>th</sup> birthday. By then, his scientific work was recognised: not only the Creek, but also a tortoise and a plant bear his name. Elsey left his name on the map, and was also honoured for his work by explorers and scientists alike.

From the time Elsey passed this way, the country along Elsey Creek and the Roper River has been associated with great events in the opening-up of Australia. A glance at the map explains why. The great explorer John McDouall Stuart passed through this country in June 1862 from the south, having left Daly Waters on his transcontinental expedition that ended on the coast at Point Stuart. His path of travel intersected Gregory's route. Thereafter, the location of Elsey made it a true focal point for those coming overland to the north from the east in Queensland, and for those who came overland from the south in South Australia, as well as those who came inland from the coast along the Roper River itself. Indeed, the first white settler of Elsey Station, Abraham Wallace, was one of the earliest to take the route north through Queensland.

Eight years later, work began on the construction of the Overland Telegraph. By March 1872 work had begun near All Saints Well, a well that was sunk in the bed of the Elsey Creek on All Saints Day. Warloch Ponds was named after the horse of one of the explorers engaged in detailing the line. The point where Elsey Creek and Roper River joined was named Bitter Springs, because of the bitter taste of the mineral waters there; it was not until 1913 that it was renamed Mataranka.

The exploration for, and construction of, the Overland Telegraph Line led to white occupation and stocking of the country, based on telegraph depot stations. From the late 1870s, through to the 1890s, the stock routes ran through Queensland across the Gulf and along the Roper River. The Gulf route became the preferred access for the stocking of the North. For many years the stock were to come from Queensland.

By 1836, the Queensland route to Elsey was well established and Elsey was to become the junction of the routes into the North from Queensland and South Australia.

### ABRAHAM WALLACE

Abraham Wallace was the first person to take up the area that was to become Elsey Station. This area was originally described in his lease as a '*...portion of the Waste Lands of the Crown situated at All Saints Well, NT of South Australia*'. (It is to be remembered that, on 6th July 1863, the land we now know as the Northern Territory was annexed to South Australia.)

Wallace was born in Ireland in 1836 and sailed to South Australia, with his parents, in 1849. They settled at Mount Gambier.

During 1878 and 1879 he obtained title to several blocks near Birdum and fronting the Roper River, of which the block at All Saints Well was one. He then set about travelling to this country to settle and stock it. He organised and equipped a party of six men to head north, buy cattle, and proceed on to the Roper River country. One of the party was his nephew, Mr J H Palmer. The equipment consisted of 120 horses (many unbroken), a large horse dray fitted with six horses (three abreast), a wagonette, a light buggy, a stock of provisions and the supply of rifles and ammunition that, fortunately, were not at any time brought into use.

Wallace's trek began on 21st January 1880 when he set out from his sheep station at Sturt's Meadows in the west of New South Wales, about fifty miles north of where Broken Hill now is. They crossed the New South Wales-Queensland border at Wompah Gate and proceeded to Bulloo Downs Station along the Bulloo River and north-northeast to Blackall on the Barcoo River, the most easterly point of the journey. The party crossed the Tropic of Capricorn near Aramac Station. It moved on to Mount Cornish Station on the Thompson River near the township of Muttaborra, about 100 kilometres north of the present city of Longreach. There, Wallace stopped to purchase cattle. He bought 2,728 head and branded them with his Territory brand, 'W22'. To this point, they had travelled about 750 miles.

Then began the long journey with the cattle, for which the party was increased to sixteen men. The cattle were divided into two mobs, which travelled about a mile apart and camped separately each night. The route was north and west across the great rivers that flow into the Gulf of Carpentaria and carry the names of explorers and pioneers: the Flinders, Leichhardt, Gregory and Nicholson. They crossed Lawn Hill Creek before reaching the Nicholson. Lawn Hill Station was the last habitation before they reached the Overland Telegraph Line near Katherine, over 600 miles away.

It was late in the dry season when the party reached the Nicholson and water was too scarce to go on. It was decided to stop there until the rains came. The cattle were let loose and it was another two months before rain made it safe to

travel again. The party crossed into the Northern Territory at Settlement Creek, and continued through the wet, westwards over the rivers Calvert, Robinson, McArthur, Limmen Bight, Hodgson and, at last, the Roper at Roper Bar.

The trek continued west along the Roper, over Strangways River and eventually ended at the Overland Telegraph Line near Elsey Creek. The Aboriginal people were friendly, and gave the party fish upon arrival to make the first meal. Shortly after, on the same day, a horseman was seen coming from Katherine, driving six packhorses with stores and the first mail seen for seven months.

At a point about three miles up the Elsey Creek from its junction with the Roper, the cattle were let go, and at a point about ten miles further on, a site for a homestead was selected. Wallace announced his intention to name it 'Wallace Park', a dream never realised.

The party arrived on 2nd June 1881, some eighteen months from the beginning of their journey. The distance travelled was estimated at two thousand miles. Wallace and Palmer were the only ones of the original party to make the whole journey.

It seems that almost the next day Wallace set off for Darwin to return to his property in New South Wales, leaving Palmer to stay on as manager. On the way he sent telegrams from the station at Katherine, including one to Mr Charles Todd, the South Australian Postmaster General and Superintendent of Telegraphs, the brilliant supervisor of the building of the Overland Telegraph Line. Dated 5<sup>th</sup> June 1881, it reads: '*I and my party arrived on the Roper with 1,700 cattle and 47 horses. Left behind on the road 900 cows and their calves and 40 horses. Queensland is a grand colony. Comparatively well watered road to Northern Territory. Lost only very few stock through death, all that are left behind are cows and calves.*'

The trek to the Elsey excited considerable interest in the Melbourne and Adelaide newspapers. Wallace had given high praise to the stock-carrying capacity of the Queensland and Territory country that he had passed through, and many in the south had the idea of following him.

Under Palmer's management, Elsey Station was developed and cattle increased. It was noted that by March 1883 there were about three to four thousand head of breeding cattle on the property, which was described as one of the most '*compact little runs in the Northern Territory, being well watered*'. The stock, especially the young stock, were in excellent condition, and good horses were being bred suitable for all kinds of work, including export to India. The task of management and development cannot be underestimated by those of us looking back over a century. Having settled and stocked the property, a market had to be found, and cattle had to be taken to market. Drivers had to be found to handle the cattle. Any homestead was a place very remote from anywhere else. Development was necessarily slow, and stock improvement had to give way to demands for

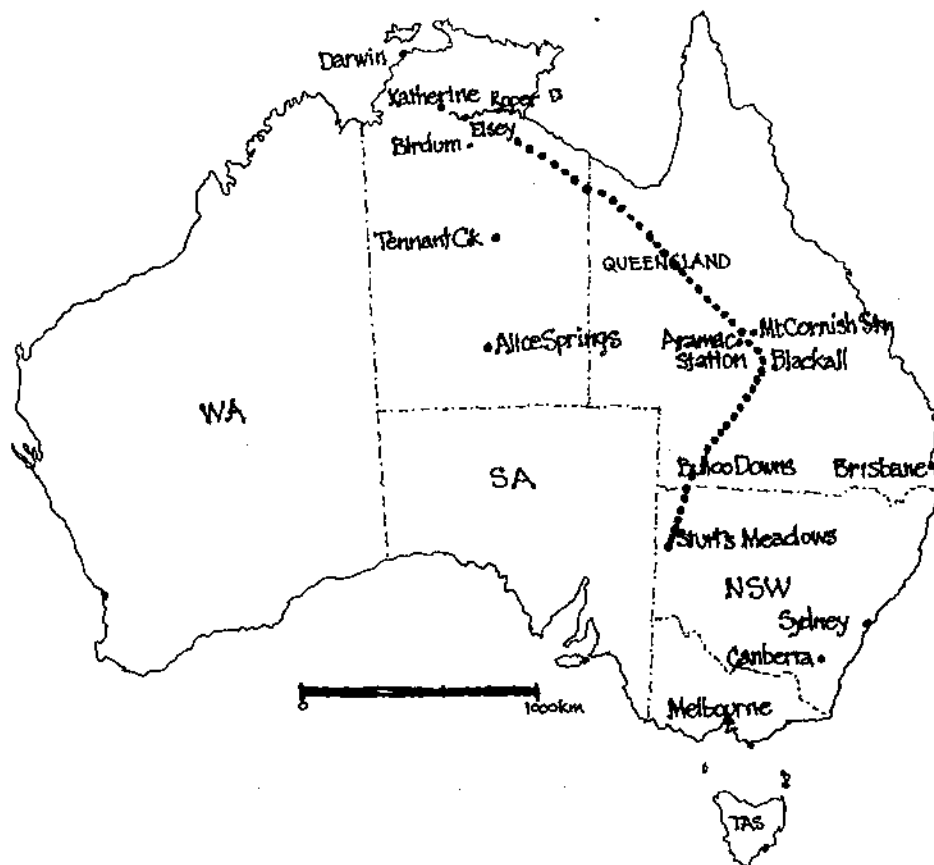


Diagram of 18 month journey taken by Abraham Wallace and his party, January 1880 - June 1881

survival. The supervision of breeding, calving and branding was not easy, there being no fences or facilities to which we have become accustomed

In 1884, while he was still owner of Sturt's Meadows and Elsey Station, Wallace retired from the active direction of his pastoral interests. He built a beautiful home at Reynella, south of Adelaide. His retirement was tragically short. On 27<sup>th</sup> April 1884, his coachman found him lying with his throat cut. At the inquest it was shown that six weeks before his death he was driving between Adelaide and Reynella, when his buggy collided with a hay wagon. He suffered serious head injuries and for some time was in a delirious condition. It was found that he had committed suicide 'while in an unsound state of mind'. He was 49 years old.

Palmer continued as manager at Elsey until early 1885, when he learnt that his uncle [Abraham Wallace] had died. It seems that the station passed on to a Mr Strachan and, on his death in 1886, to the partnership of Osmond and Panton. To put these early events in context, Aeneas Gunn arrived at Elsey Station in 1902 as manager and owner of a quarter share. His wife, Jeannie, accompanied him and was the second white woman to reside there. Aeneas Gunn died on 16<sup>th</sup> March 1903 and was buried at Elsey—the 'Maluka's' grave. Mrs Gunn returned to Melbourne and began writing her first book, *The Little Black Princess*. She completed *We of the Never Never* in 1907, which was the famous account of the life and times of all at Elsey in 1902.

Even before he embarked on his journey to the Elsey, Wallace and his wife, Matilda, had become some of South Australia's earliest pioneers and pastoralists. He married Matilda in 1860 and they lived for a time at Mount Gambier. Following the birth and death of their first child in 1861, they set out to look for land in Queensland, in a wagon with two horses. After enduring great hardships, they reached the Darling River near Menindee in western New South Wales and spent some months roaming that region in search of suitable country for stock. They decided to return to Adelaide in 1863 and struck out across the Barrier Ranges, risking almost certain death from thirst. However, they reached Mingary a few days later and continued on. This was twenty years before Broken Hill was found. It is probable they were the first white people to travel that way; certainly Matilda was the first white woman to do so.

They returned across the Range a year later with fourteen hundred sheep, twenty-five horses and two men to settle some country there. They were the first to take sheep across the Barrier Ranges. During the next few years they moved about this harsh country, and for long periods Matilda was left on her own to manage the sheep. She lost three more babies and faced many perils.

In September 1869 Wallace took up the property Sturt's Meadows and within ten years he had increased it to an area of about 251,000 acres.

On 28<sup>th</sup> February 1871 their daughter, Mary Ann Sarah Wallace, was born at Menindee. She was the only one of their thirteen children to survive. Her earliest childhood was at Sturt's Meadows and afterwards at Reynella.

Matilda died on 21<sup>st</sup> January 1898, aged sixty years. She and Abraham lie buried beneath a splendid tombstone in St Jude's Church cemetery, Brighton, South Australia.

[Mary] Ann married William Henry Woodhead, a director of the British Broken Hill Proprietary Company, in 1888. Their daughter, Mabel (b. 1892, d. 1940) married Harold Sprent Nicholas (b. 1877, d. 1953) in 1914. [Their son, William Patrick Nicholas (b. 1946, married Helen Paton) is the father of the author.]

At present, there are in Australia some fourteen living direct descendants of Abraham and Matilda Wallace. All of them join in the celebrations of this great event, which is another chapter in the history of Elsey Station, which, in turn, has great significance for the Northern Territory, as well as the black and white people of the whole Australian nation. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2000 Elsey Station was handed over to its traditional owners. Thus it is especially relevant to note a condition of the original lease of 7<sup>th</sup> June 1883 of the All Saints Well block on Elsey Creek. The parties to the lease were Her Majesty Queen Victoria and Sir William Cleaver Francis Robinson (then Governor of the Province of South Australia) and, of course, Abraham Wallace. The condition reserves the right to '... Her Majesty, Her Heirs and Successors for and on account of the present Aboriginal Inhabitants of the Province and their descendants during the continuance of this demise full and free right of ingress egress and regress into upon and over the said Waste Lands of the Crown hereby demised and every part thereof and in and to the springs and surface water thereon and to make and erect such wurlies and other dwellings as the said Aboriginal Natives have been heretofore accustomed to make and erect and to take and use for food birds and animals *ferae naturae* in such manner as they would have been entitled to do if this demise had not been made....'

The wheel has turned full circle.

Henric Nicholas

Woollahra, New South Wales

20<sup>th</sup> January 2000

Note:

*The information upon which these notes are based was taken from a number of sources. However, I wish to record my sincere thanks to Mr Mark Powell, of the Department of Lands, Planning and Environment, Northern Territory, who drew my attention to, and provided me with, many valuable references and documents of which I would otherwise have been entirely ignorant.*

*The Mt. Wilson and Mt. Irvine Historical Society Inc. aims to add substantially to the recorded history of Mt. Wilson and Mt. Irvine, to conserve its heritage and to present aspects of its history publicly through exhibitions in the Turkish Bath Museum, the centre for the society's activities.*

*The Mt. Wilson/Mt. Irvine district is part of an elevated basalt plateau located within the Blue Mountains National Park and World Heritage area. From its initial survey in 1868, its history has followed a unique path compared with other settlements in the region.*

*In 1993, an exhibition featuring the history of Mt. Wilson was held in the Mt. Wilson village hall. Following the success of that exhibition, the Mount Wilson Community History Group was formed within the Mount Wilson Progress Association. The Community History Group became the nucleus of the Mt. Wilson Historical Society Inc. which was incorporated in 1996. The Society's scope was expanded in 2001 to include the Mt. Irvine community.*

*The former owners of the Wynstay Estate, Bill Smart and his wife Jane (née Wynne), assisted greatly in the formation of the Historical Society, making the 1880s Turkish Bath building and the surrounding precinct available as a base for the Society's activities on a fifty year lease at a 'peppercorn' rental of \$2 per year.*

*From the entrance, near the junction of The Avenue and Mt. Irvine Road, Mt. Wilson, there is a formed pathway through the precinct leading to the Turkish Bath building.*

*The Turkish Bath is currently open Noon to 3.00 p.m every Sunday, March to May, and September to early November. We hope in 2004 to open on Saturdays in late April/early May as well.*

*Entry fee: \$5/adult, children free of charge.*

*For further information please contact:*

*Mary Reynolds (Secretary)*

*Donna Buang, Church Lane*

*Mount Wilson NSW 2786*

*Telephone 0247-56 2006*

*Facsimile 0247 56 2176*