

GEORGE MATTHEWS

By Allen Walsh (2006)

If you prefer the strong, silent type you would have liked George Matthews.

My grandfather was a 'genuine six-footer' at a time when average heights were many inches shorter than today. George was born at Ballarat on the 15th April 1878, the youngest in a family of four girls and seven boys. His parents, James and Elizabeth, had migrated from Cornwall in the sailing ship 'Atalanta' in 1867.

Many Cornishmen who had been tin miners came to Victoria at that time, as the alluvial gold was running out and men with experience in digging hard rock were in demand to tackle the 'deep lead' mining.

Cornwall was one of the few areas of England still populated by Celts. The Celts had been driven to the west and north of Britain in successive invasions by Angles, Saxons and Normans centuries before. Most Cornish people were staunch Wesleyan Methodists and helped to establish their church throughout the goldfields.

James worked as a miner in his early days in the Colony, but during George's childhood he was Mine Manager at the band and Albion Mine in Ballarat. The Band and Albion Mine was located on the west bank of the Yarrowee Creek at the end of Leith Street and worked from eleven shafts. In 1869 it employed 900 men. It became the second largest gold producer in Victoria, extracting a total of 8.5 million grams of gold.

Life in Victoria in the 1880's was extremely prosperous – these were the years of the 'Marvellous Melbourne' building boom and the family would have been living well. A photograph of the whole family, probably taken in 1888 shows everybody dressed in the finest clothes.

Young George went to the State Schools at Redan and Dana Street, but did not enjoy school at all. At the same time he quite liked going to Sunday School and was proud of the book prizes he had won.

When George's father died in 1888, of Miner's Phthisis caused by stone dust, the family income would have dropped alarmingly. Four of the boys were already married.

Whether it was shortage of money or dislike of school is not known, but at the age of eleven George went to work for his brother Joe who had started a business carting wood and equipment to the mines, using horses and wagons. Great quantities of timber were needed to shore up the shafts and leads in addition to the firewood required to stoke the fires under the large boilers which activated the machinery and pumps.

We were interested to find out from the 1851 Census of Penwith District in Cornwall that James' mother, a widow, is listed as a 'van proprietor and carrier' and James at the age of eighteen was employed as a van driver.

Young George apparently continued working with his brothers for many years, traveling as far as Daylesford to the north and Pitfield Plains to the south. Large teams of horses would be required to pull the heavy loads over dirt roads in the hilly goldfields country. While away from home the men would set up camp and sleep in hammocks slung below the waggons.

In 1901 George married Bertha Ford who lived with her Cornish Methodist family at Mr Pleasant. Their only child, Vera Lillian, was born at Ballarat on 6th December, 1903.

At about the start of World War 1, George moved with his small family to Geelong, and worked mainly as a labourer for a number of years. One of his jobs was digging lime at the Cement Works quarry.

Vera married Maurice Walsh of Geelong in 1925. George and Bertha moved to Melbourne at about that time and lived in Footscray.

My earliest recollection of Big Grandpa and Little Nin (so named by the family to distinguish them from Dad's parents, Little Grandpa and Big Nin) was in the early 1930's when I was toddler. They were living at 54 Whitehall Street, Footscray at the time, and Mum and Dad, Nancy, Brian and I would visit them every fortnight or so from West Brunswick. Our family never owned a car, and it was a very complex job to take three young children a distance of less than five miles.

We would catch the West Coburg line tram in Melville Road as far as Royal Park railway station, take the train to North Melbourne railway station, change platforms via two long ramps and catch another train to Footscray Station. A walk down Bunbury Street would get us to Whitehall Street about an hour after leaving home, if lucky. Home was at 15 Wales Street, West Brunswick, since altered to number 37.

Number 54 Whitehall Street was a simple semi-detached single storey weatherboard house built in about 1920. A long passage led from the front porch past three bedrooms on one side only, ending at a combined lounge/dining room with a kitchen next in line. A bathroom, toilet and laundry opened off a porch behind the kitchen. The front and rear yards were quite small and were connected by a walkway against the northern fence. Halfway down the hall/passage there was a simple plaster arch and a heavy curtain hung from a rod at this point to reduce draughts.

The lounge fireplace had the popular all cast iron built-in unit with a surround of small pale blue glossy tiles. The hearth was also of glossy tiles in a tan colour and was fitted with a timber fender having a small brass rail at the top. The fireplace had a nicely made and highly polished timber surround and over mantel.

The room was furnished with a French polished extendable oval table which was always covered with a heavy velvet cloth for protection, six cabriole-legged matching dining

chairs with sprung leather seats, a matching sideboard, a leather couch, two leather lounge chairs, a piano and a piano stool with stored music books.

I was always intrigued by a framed lightly coloured ink drawing which hung over the fireplace. It depicted a small steep-sided island set in a bay and connected to land by a curved causeway just above water level. The upper part of the island was surmounted by a castle-like stone building. The style of drawing looked quite old and I was told the island was St. Michel's Mount in Cornwall and that the Matthews family originally lived nearby. I have never seen the drawing since Nin and Grandpa left Footscray in about 1939, and I think it must have been lost in one of their many house moves.

While at Footscray, Grandpa worked at the 'wood-pipe' works. The wood pipes seemed to be made of Jarrah and must have been for Government use in the carriage of water as they were more than one foot (300 mm) in diameter. The pipes were made up of long timbers accurately machined with tongue and grooved edges and curved in cross section so that when fitted together they would complete a circle.

On completion, the pipes would be coated with hot liquid bitumen and (I think) rolled in sand. Grandpa's job must have been connected with the bitumen process as on arrival home he always had to change his clothes and scrub himself clean with sandsoap and Lifebuoy soap at the laundry trough.

I mentioned earlier that Grandpa was six feet tall. Possibly due to the hard physical work he always did, he never had an ounce of fat on him. 'Angular' would be the word to describe him. Like most of the Matthews family he had a long nose that curved in at the bottom, and a protruding chin. He had a simple bushy moustache like Henry Lawson's and thinning straight hair turning grey. The face was rather thin and the eyes deep-set under bony brows.