

Our Ancestors

Our story commenced when the dainty little lass, with the soft brown curls, Frances Whitcombe¹, daughter of a Somerset farmer², met and married the fine upstanding blue eyed young man, Robert Stacey, son of John Stacey, head gardener for the local squire or, as it is known in Devonshire, the big house. Robert was apprenticed to a tanner, and served his time of nine years, having started at the age of 13 years.

At the time of his marriage he was a qualified tradesman, earning three shillings and sixpence a week. They paid sixpence a week rent for a small cottage. Frances said a shilling would buy more foodstuff than she could carry home. Foodstuff in those days consisted mostly of flour, tea, sugar, cheese, bacon, meat and vegetables. The vegetables were mostly home-grown. Apples were and still are one of the main crops grown in both Devonshire and Somerset; they are adjoining counties in what they ---- the warmest part of England. Robert wasn't satisfied with things as they were at that time in England. There being talk of the opportunities there were in the new land of Australia and free immigration had started, so Robert and Frances decided to migrate.

Learning that there was a free immigrant ship to sail from Plymouth in 1855, about August of that year Robert secured a passage for himself, his wife Frances, and infant daughter Mary Jane. After some months at sea croup broke out among the babies. There being little or no medical help for them, the babies died and were buried at sea, among them being Mary Jane Stacey.

The trip was a trying one, lasting six months. Frances was ill most of the time. After spending Christmas at sea, the ship arrived at Humpybong (now Margate), Moreton Bay, early in 1856, where they landed amid blacks, flies and mosquitoes.

Robert Stacey and his wife went into the depot until Robert got work, which he did very quickly. The work secured was working on a barge, taking merchandise from the ship in Moreton Bay up the river to Limestone, now Ipswich.

Having secured a cottage at the One Mile, Ipswich, he came back to Humpybong, got Frances and their worldly possessions, boarded the barge and sailed up the Brisbane river to Ipswich. After settling in, Frances did her shopping at the well-known shop of Cribb and Foote, then a small wooden building run by two very nice young men, Frances' own description. Mr. Cribb used to make his delivery in a wheelbarrow. Mr. Foote was chemist, preacher, Sunday School teacher and everybody's friend.

After a time Robert grew tired of the barge work. His boss, Mr. R. J. Smith, offered to set him up in business at his trade of tanning, but Robert didn't like the tanning business, so refused the offer. He finally gave up the barge work and decided to try country work. He rolled his swag and set forth to look for work, working his way north, where he finally reached the Dawson. He was on the Dawson at the time the Fraser family were killed by the blacks. One of the boys escaped. As he fell, after a knock on the head by a nulla nulla, he rolled under a sofa, where he lay until the blacks were gone, believing he was dead. When he recovered, the Government of the day gave him a permit to shoot any blacks he met for 12 months, which he did, but he made the mistake of shooting the black boys working the stations for the white men. The permit was withdrawn before the twelve months were up.

It was while Robert was on the Dawson that he learned to shear sheep. Between shearing seasons he returned to Ipswich. In 1857 Ipswich had a very high flood and Frances was taken out of the house by boat. She said she was rowed over the tops of houses when taken from her home.

On the 13th April, 1858, a second daughter was born, whom they named Mary Jane after the little daughter who died at sea. Two years later, on 11th July, 1860, a son, George William, was born. Both children were born in the

same house, but not the same State, as on the 10th, 1859, this State of Queensland was declared.

In 1861 Robert took his family and household goods by bullock dray (travelling was very slow), and when they got to a place called Begg's Camp (a railway camp, they were then building the railway link between Ipswich and Toowoomba). At the foot of little Liverpool Range they had to wait a fortnight until there were teamsters and bullocks, so that when the bullocks were linked up the leaders were able to get a footing on top of the range, so that they could haul the drays up one by one.

During camping, Frances had to cook at an open fire and cook her bread in the ashes. She had a piece of flat iron on which she built her fire. After the fire burned down she would push the ashes off the iron, place the dough on it and cover with the hot ashes. She did not like the ashes on the bread so thought she would try an experiment. She would place her three-legged pot upside down, over the dough, put ashes over the pot. The bread cooked quite all right, but she couldn't get it out because the side of the pot was wider than the top. The bread had risen up and filled the pot, so she had to wait until it cooled, and then cut it out.

It took them a month to reach Drayton. After climbing the range, they passed through the Green Swamp, now known as Toowoomba. Frances and family stayed in Drayton while Robert went shearing at the various stations on the Darling Downs, travelling as far west as Dalby. It was while shearing at one of those stations Robert's shirt wore out and, there being no shops near, he couldn't get another, so he got a corn sack, cut a hole in the bottom to put his head through, slits in either side to put his arms through and wore that to shear in. Having finished a successful year, Robert brought his family back to Brisbane.

In 1862 Robert and family travelled by ship to Sydney and Newcastle and by train to Lochinvar, where he got work on an orchard, he being keen on that class of work (he being a descendant of a long line of gardeners).

In 1863 a daughter, Susan, was born and died at the age of six months at Lochinvar. It was during this period Robert did a bit of share farming as well as working on the orchard. He planted a crop and before the crop could be harvested the floods came and destroyed it. He got busy and planted another lot of crops and again the floods came and destroyed his crop. He said he was caught twice but wouldn't be caught a third time so he bought a horse and tilted dray and, with family and household goods aboard, started up country. For camping arrangements he fitted up a bunk for the two kiddies by making a stretcher by placing two poles through two sack bags and fitted it in across the back with poles resting on the sides of the dray, making quite a comfortable bed; the kiddies slept heads and tails. Robert and Frances slept on the bottom of the dray with their feet up under the kiddies' bunk. Cooking utensils were hung on the side of the dray or piled underneath the dray. Frances was back at camp cooking again.

Eventually they reached Inverell, securing work at Bannockburn Station building dogproof sheepyards and other contracting jobs. During this period their living quarters were the dray and Frances did her cooking in a bark cooking galley, on an open fire.

When all the jobs were finished, Robert harnessed the horse and set off with the family for a holiday at Luscantyre, where they stayed with Frances' brother, George Whitcombe. After their holiday they returned to Graman, where the first job he got was to put a pole in a bullock waggon for which he received a bag of beef in payment. Next he had a contract to build sheep pens, which were placed in a running creek or river, in which the wool was washed on the sheep's backs. The dirty sheep were in a yard on the bank and put into the water in No. 1 pen, a few at a time, soaped and washed, then the men pushed the sheep down into the water, under the bottom

rail of the pen into Pen No. 2, where the soap was all washed out. Then they were driven or pushed up a ramp into the drying yard where they were kept two days to dry out before being shorn. The men used a stick with a board nailed across the end like a "T", pushing the sheep under the water. This method of wool washing did not last long for three reasons. The sheep were knocked about too much and they were easily drowned; also the soap and wool yolk polluted the water and it was difficult to get men to do the work as they had to work all day up to their knees in water and it wasn't an eight-hour day either.

The family moved on to Gullangutta Station, owned by Gordon Bros., to do station and contract work, then on to Reedy Creek, where Robert was doing contracting work. It was at Reedy Creek that their fourth daughter, Sarah Ann, was born, in 1865. Moving on to Maitland with his family, in his covered dray (the forerunner of the present day caravan).

With his earnings he bought a large dray and five horses and loaded up with potatoes, onions and Swede turnips and sold out before he reached Tamworth. He returned to Maitland, loaded up again, and did the same trip but when he had only two bags of potatoes left, he sold the dray, horses and business to a man who was anxious to start business in that line. During this period Frances had charge of the family home on wheels, and followed her husband on his trips. After the sale, Robert had to make his money safe, the family camped a few days while he mortised a hole in the axle bed of the dray and put in £120, tacked a piece of tin over it and painted it the same colour as the rest of the wheel and said "anyone who could find it would be welcome to it." They then continued their journey to Inverell. It was while on this trip that they met Thunderbolt, at Chain of Ponds. The family were having breakfast one morning when a man with a black beard rode up on a beautiful chestnut horse. Robert offered him a pint of tea, which he drank, while sitting on his horse. He asked Robert if he knew who he was? Robert said no and didn't care either as he would give any man a pot of tea. The man thanked him for the tea, told him he was Thunderbolt and that in less than twenty minutes police and black trackers would come along, asking for him and to tell them he was going to Bundarra. Robert said he would tell the Police he had gone the other way but Thunderbolt said no, he wanted them to be told he was going to Bundarra. Sure enough the Police soon turned up and on being informed which way the man had gone, set off at a gallop for Bundarra. Thunderbolt had only ridden into the bush and waited until the Police had gone past, then rode into Bendamere where he held up the bank, there being no Police left in the town.

They continued their journey to Inverell and then to Bannockburn Station, owned by Frazer and Anderson, where Robert did all kinds of station work for two years. Then they built him a house and gave him as many cows as he could break in to milk. Frances set the milk and made butter, which she sold. Robert also had land on which to grow fodder for the cows.

Up to the time Robert broke in the cows and started milking there had been no milk on the station. All the cows and calves belonged to the station.

It was during 1868 at Bannockburn Station where George first met his future wife, he being eight years old and Louie five. At that time Louie's mother married her third husband, Mr. G. Geisler from The Wattles Station³. Before he went to Yetman to bring the family up he told George that he was bringing up four little girls, he should have his pick. When the family arrived, Mr. Geisler lined up the little girls and George picked rosier cheeked little Louie and tried to kiss her, but she was a shy little lass and didn't like strange boys kissing her so she smacked him on the nose and made his nose bleed. His sister Jane, a girl of 10, wanted to slap her face in defence of her brother as she thought George had a perfect right to kiss whom he pleased. At this time George had a white pony on which he used to show off his horsemanship. The little girls used to watch him and think how clever he was.

The wedding between Mr. Geisler and Louie's mother took place at Bannockburn, Robert and Frances Stacey being Matron of Honour and best man. The bride and her maid wore

frocks made with plain-fitting bodices and very full skirts very similar to what the lasses are wearing today, only the skirts were long. They both wore bonnets and very beautiful shawls, which Louie's mother had brought out from Germany with her.

In 1869 another son, James, was born. During the next year Robert took up a 40-acre selection on Byron Station on that portion later known as Oakwood and built a home and moved once more. The house was a low built place, three rooms long with a wide front verandah and skillion rooms at the back with a large detached kitchen at the back, with a fireplace large enough for all the family to sit around the fire. There was a long table down the centre of the kitchen and stools for seating. To make the stools Robert found a suitable tree about ten inches in diameter, felled the tree, cut it in suitable lengths, took the bark off and split the log in half, adzed it smooth, bored four holes at a slight angle, two at each end, in which the legs, round sticks, were placed. The stools were then rubbed smooth with soap, sand and bathbrick⁴. Along one side of the kitchen wall were long shelves on which the crockery was placed; on the opposite wall, near the fireplace, was another long work bench, under which there was a shelf on which all the pots were arranged and above all the lids and meat covers of all sizes were hung on nails. They were all polished until you could see your face in them. The floors, tables and stools were scrubbed white.

All cooking was done over the open fire and bread baked in camp ovens. The house was built well back from the main road. Robert planted an orchard in front of the house; there was a lane from the main road, past the side of the house. Robert obtained a wine licence and used the room nearest the lane for the bar.

All meals for family and visitors were served in the kitchen, except the "toffs," meaning the station owners, managers, etc. - they were served in the parlour, with its long lace curtains and lovely white crocheted antimacassars. Many of the station owners made it a stopping place for a meal and a rest for themselves and their horses. Robert crossed swords with J. R. Black, of Wallungra⁵. He was being a bit bumptious. Robert told him he needn't be so superior as Robert remembered him, J.R., when he was a "loppy" on a station in Queensland. After that he and J.R. were quite good friends.

After 12 months he took up another 40 acres, where he grew wheat and other crops as well as the orchard. Also had a few sheep, horses and cows. So in all, his property was quite productive, being one of the first wheat growers in the district and the first man in the district to buy a wheat stripper.

The property was known as Willow Farm, Oakwood, as willow trees were growing down by the well.

In 1871 the fifth daughter, Susan, was born. In 1874 the third son, John Henry, was born and, in 1879, Mary Anne, the sixth and last daughter was born. During the time Robert held the Wine Licence he saved all the sixpenny pieces until had enough to buy his third piece land which cost £10.

After holding the Wine Licence for some years, Robert got an Hotel Licence and called the house the "Sportsman's Hotel," and organised races and sports which he held every year, at Oakwood.

Frances at this period was a stout little person, full of energy and she, with the help of her elder daughter, did all the work of cooking, sewing, washing for the family, besides helping to run the hotel. She was a jolly little person and had a great sense of humour and enjoyed a good story of which young George had plenty on his return from shearing and various other jobs, and he enjoyed entertaining his mother and sisters. He still tells funny stories. Robert, at this period, through his hard work and outdoor life, had developed into a solid, broad shouldered man, efficient and capable and made a good job of all his undertakings.

Many good years passed by. In 1878 the eldest daughter, Mary Jane, was married to William Skaines. Robert gave them the third piece of land he selected and built a

home on it for them in which they lived and reared a family of six sons and one daughter.

Then George's 21st birthday came round and it was celebrated by a sports day and dance at night. A year later he was married to Louie, the little lass who made his nose bleed so many years before and took her home to live on his first selection. They had a family of 10 children - seven daughters and three sons.

The next to marry was Sarah, who married William Ryan, a blacksmith, who worked for Ryan and Buxton. Later he moved his family to Wallangra where he ran his own business. They had a family of four sons and four daughters.

It was somewhere in the '80s a new Licensing Act⁶, which required some alteration in the building. Rather than go to the expense of the alterations Robert gave up the licence and the name reverted to Willow Farm.

In 1894 Susan married William Fletcher, who was a draper. They lived in Inverell and for a time at Ashford and eventually moved to the Northern Rivers. They reared a family of five daughters and two sons.

A few more uneventful years passed when, like a bolt from the blue, Robert was killed in an accident. He had gone to Inverell on business and was returning home. The railway was being built from Moree to Inverell, it crossed the road, and it was there the accident happened, on the 10th October, 1900.

In 1900 James married Edith Mowkes⁷ and had a family of seven - four daughters and three sons.

In 1900 Mary Ann (or Min, as she was known) married Herbert Mowkes⁸, who carried on Willow Farm for a time, then it was sold. Herbert Mowkes eventually moved to Delungra.

Frances lived the remaining years of her life with her daughter Min and family. She passed away to her long rest in 1915.

John Henry married late in life and had no family. The years have rolled on and the family, one by one, have passed on, there remaining only George and two sisters-in-law and numerous grandchildren, great grandchildren and great great grandchildren.

They were two fine people, good loyal citizens who did a fine job of helping to make Australia what it is today. They reared a fine family who never caused them any heartaches, who have all helped to further the good work started by their parents.

This history was compiled by my sister, Frances, eldest daughter of George Stacey, who like ourselves, is very proud of being a descendant of such fine people.

¹ Spelt Witcombe for events registered at General Register Office

² Frances' father Solomon Witcombe was an agricultural labourer

³ The marriage was in Mr Sinclair's residence at Bannockburn on 4 July 1870

⁴ Powdered brick used as a coarse abrasive

⁵ Presumably typographical error which was meant to be Wallangra

⁶ Presumably the Liquor Licensing Act of 1882 (NSW)

⁷ Spelt Mawkes for events registered at NSW Register Office

⁸ Spelt Mawkes for events registered at NSW Register Office