

SAOA Historical Series No 27

Walter J Harvey Part IV

There are a few descriptions of the types of activities that kept Walter and his brother busy about the farm. Harvest and shearing are mentioned often because they were particularly busy times that didn't leave much opportunity for birdwatching. In winter 1928 he tells Sutton that he has been busy planting out a large consignment of pines, but does not elaborate on where these came from nor why he was planting them. On one occasion Walter talks about visiting a neighbour to borrow a binder part, and in the process came across an Australian Pratincole. On another occasion he and his brother were out the back rolling scrub when he secured two specimens for the Museum, so before dinner he had to ride to the house, prepare and box the specimens and get them to the station by 2pm. The birds were a Hylacola and a White-fronted Honeyeater. In the same month while painting a trough he disturbed a finch, probably a Beautiful Firetail, coming into drink. After an early break to the season in March 1931 Walter found a Little Button-quail being eaten by a Sleepy Lizard when stooking hay.

Walter's time at Coombe was not without illness and injury although he only mentions these in passing and often to explain why he hasn't written or been birding. The first mention is of a bad cold that prevented him from visiting the Museum when he went home for Show Week in September of 1928 (when he was 22). Less than a year later he is writing to Sutton about the doctor allowing him to return to Coombe after three weeks on the sick list, but does not tell us what the problem was. In January 1930 a bad tooth necessitated a trip to Adelaide and in mid 1931 Walter was unable to wear a boot for some time having cut his toe. This resulted in lost time which he could ill afford due to seeding and very bad weeds. At one stage Sutton confides that he has been unwell due to indigestion and Walter sympathizes and

says that he has suffered from this for seven years – one wonders if the restricted diet had something to do with this. Fleas appear to have been a major problem; Sutton must have mentioned something to do with fleas and Mr Mellor as Walter replies in 1930 that they haven't been too bad for three years but "time has been when all the profits of the place (more or less) have gone in ineffective insecticides".

Walter obliquely refers to the difficulties of running properties in this area in his letter of 18 October 1929 when he tells Sutton that he is more busy than usual due to looking after the property of a neighbour with the help of another neighbour. This is necessary because the man is absent having suffered a nervous breakdown due to financial and physical worries. Consequently Walter is working on Sundays as well as every other day. The weather was a constant thread running through the letters, particularly as it related to the crops; this combined with the depredations of the native birds and financial worries from low commodity prices would have made farming in this country a risky business. Confirmation of the hard times comes from Nicholls (2006) who reports a drought in 1927, with only 14.8 inches of rain at Tintinara (compared with the average of about 20 inches). In September 1928 Walter comments that it is very cold and bleak but that the present rain is very welcome. A few months later he notes some rain around Christmas time which damaged the oat crops and tells Sutton that the country and fauna north of Goyder's Line is in a deplorable state. By June they are nearly out of rainwater and wanting rain very badly. The early crops are backward but healthy, while the later ones are "not so good". He comments that this is not surprising as there is little moisture and they are averaging four frost nights per week.

Walter sounds more hopeful a year later in 1931 with every indication of a record season for feed in his district. However a fortnight later his tone has changed and he admits that he cannot pay his SAOA subscription due to some bad debts and

poor estimation of the market. The Great Depression of the early 1930s was no doubt taking its toll on the economy and perhaps on the psyche of the country as well. In spring of 1931 Walter is busier than usual again as his brother has returned home to Salisbury and his offsider doesn't know the ropes. The season ended badly with a dry spring and frosts that damaged the early crops. Walter talks of bounteous rains in July 1932 but just three months later is relaying "worrying times" and in May 1933 he tells Sutton "...depression or not, we are never out of a job even though we may be 'out of pocket'". Although this is the last letter in the SAOA collection from Walter at Coombe, there is no suggestion that he will be leaving the area; in fact he talks about being in the middle of seeding. We know that he was living at Waterloo by December 1935 as Sutton addressed a letter to him there. One wonders if his decision to leave Coombe was connected to the Depression. All that we can be certain of is that the Harveys sold the property in 1938 and that there was a manager for a period, possibly after Walter left in 1933, 1934 or 1935.

We learn more about the Coombe district of the late 1930s (just after Walter's departure) from Nicholls (2006) and the Tintinara Historical Society's records. The Moeller family purchased Sections 47 and 48 Hundred of Coombe in 1938 (S. 48 had been the Harvey's property). Their land was 5 756 acres, of which 800 acres were cleared and 300-400 partially cleared. From Stan Moeller's memories:

"The total number of families using Coombe siding was eleven. The Kennetts, Fulwoods, Spackmans, Summers, 2 Moellers and a railway gang of four families. The nearest doctor was Doctor Broadbent, who practised at Bordertown over 50 miles away and as there was no highway we had to go past Brecon to get there. Parts of the road could only be described as nothing short of horrific.

We had no telephones, the nearest public telephones being at Tintinara and Keith, although in an emergency we were able to use the railway telephone. I was able to get hold of three old telephones. These were connected to a neighbour on either side of us. The connection was by a single wire and the insulator was a beer bottle with the bottom knocked out. This was placed on a mallee stick that was tied to a fence post. The phone was good company for the women folk, being used by them to let each other know when to expect the next swaggy along."

The Spackman brothers came to Coombe in 1938 and Evan drove 1 500 sheep from Murray Bridge to the new property. Another view of the area and times is provided by Karel Saint on behalf of Evan Spackman (Nicholls 2006):

"At that time 90% of the area from Tintinara to Banealla was scrub. 'Calimpa' consisted of 9 000 acres of which 6 000 acres had a ring fence around it. There was a shanty on the place and they ran scrub wethers. A team of ten horses with an old scrub plough was used for clearing, though yaccas had to be grubbed by hand. Rabbits were a common part of the diet. Emu and kangaroo needed to be young to be eaten. Kangaroos and wild dogs were such a problem that people were nearly out of sheep, which had to be yarded at night. A horse and cart were used when chasing kangaroos.

Many people milked their own cows and sold cream to either Bordertown or Murray Bridge. Cream and eggs were sent on the passenger train. This money was used for house keeping, as it was too long to wait for the wool cheque."

Bill Matheson wrote to me after the publication of Part I of Walter Harvey's story. From 1953-56 Bill was stationed at Murray Bridge as the soil conservation officer, working as far as Kingston and Naracoorte. His job was to inspect all the scrub land before it was cleared and map sandhills likely to erode if cleared. This involved inspecting 200 000 – 300 000 acres per year. Bill relates that some illegal clearing occurred, particularly away from the main access roads. He thinks that much of the Upper South East was cleared post-World War II. The soils were light and sandy, but the

sandhills were not occasional or low, but there were many large precipitous sandhills in Coombe, Carcuma and adjacent Hundreds. An area that was experiencing a lot of development at this time was Carcuma (the next but one north of Coombe), where the landowners had limited cash and poor equipment. When staying with one family for a night or two, Bill was fed kangaroo tail soup.

Penny Paton

Acknowledgments

Ms Audrey Tucker, Chairperson of the Tintinara Historical Society, kindly made available to me a Coombe History prepared for the Bicentennial Celebrations and alerted me to the history of the Tintinara district (Nicholls 2006). Many thanks also to Bill Matheson for his personal impressions of the area from the 1950s.

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Abbreviated reference for Harvey's contributions to SAOrnithologist

SAOrn 1928 9 (8): 267-269

SAOrn 1929 10 (1): 20

SAOrn 1929 10 (3): 85

SAOrn 1930 10 (5):171-2

SAOrn 1930 10 (8): 281-2

SAOrn 1932 11 (5): 137-9

SAOrn 1932 11 (8): 225-6

SAOrn 1933 12 (2): 61-2

SAOrn 1933 12 (4): 126

SAOrn 1935 13 (4): 123

SAOrn 1936 13 (6): 177

List of Correspondence relating to Walter J Harvey in the possession of SAOA

SAOA Correspondence Box 1929-32

23/6/30 Handwritten letter from Walter J Harvey to John Sutton re snakes and birds; after 8 years at Coombe in mallee Walter is moving to a station in NSW (encloses letter from Mr Filmer re emus)

8/4/30 Handwritten letter from Walter J Harvey to John Sutton re bird specimens & sightings

24/1/30 Handwritten letter from Walter J Harvey to John Sutton re birds

SAOA Correspondence Box 1929-38

20/12/36 Christmas card from Walter J Harvey (Riversource Farm, Waterloo SA) to John Sutton belatedly paying subscriptions

Batch of letters between Harvey and Sutton pinned together:

All letters hand written in ink & signed WJ Harvey (occasionally Walter J Harvey)

Letter 1 from WJH to JS 6/6/28, Coombe (in JS hand – 11/14)

Letter 2 from WJH to JS 24/6/28 Coombe (in JS hand – 26/28)

Letter 3 from WJH to JS 3/7/28 Coombe (5/-)

Letter 4 from WJH to JS 28/7/28 Coombe (2nd August)

Letter 5 from WJH to JS 4/9/28 Coombe (10/24)

Letter 6 from WJH to JS 29/9/28 Coombe (Oct 2/8)

Letter 7 from WJH to JS 1/11/28 Coombe (3/-)

Letter 8 from WJH to JS 5/11/28 Coombe (6)

Letter 9 from WJH to JS 10/11/28 Coombe(13/15)

Note 12/11/28 – with specimen of male Crimson Chat secured this morning (one of a pair)

Letter 10 from WJH to JS 2/12/28 Coombe (4th Dec/5)

Letter 11 from WJH to JS March 31st Coombe (April 2/6)

Letter 12 from WJH to JS 6/5/29 Coombe (May 8/19)

Letter 13 from WJH to JS 14/6/29 Coombe
(June 20/23)

Letter 14 from WJH to JS 11/7/29 Coombe
(15/28)

Letter 15 from WJH to JS 10/9/29 Coombe
(12/17)

Letter 16 from WJH to JS 18/10/29 Coombe
(Nov 26/6 Dec)

**Jan, Apr & Jun 1930 – 3 letters in general
correspondence (see above)**

Letter 17 from WJH to JS 27/10/30 Coombe
(29/29)

Letter 18 from WJH to JS 2/11/30 Coombe
(6/12)

Letter 19 from WJH to JS 18/11/30 Coombe
(21/24)

Letter 20 from WJH to JS 26/11/30 Coombe
(28/11/30/21 Dec)

Letter 21 from WJH to JS 24/3 31 Coombe
(27/29)

Letter 22 from WJH to JS 4/6/31 Coombe (11)

Letter 23 from WJH to JS 19/6/31 Coombe
(24/28)

Letter 24 from WJH to JS 26/9/31 Coombe
(30/3 Oct)

Letter 25 from WJH to JS 17/12/31 Coombe
(22/29)

Letter 26 from WJH to JS 27/7/32 Coombe
(July 30/Aug 5)

Letter 27 from WJH to JS 20/10/32 Coombe
(25/6 Nov)

Letter 28 from WJH to JS 11/5/33 Coombe
(17)

Letter 29 from WJH to JS 26/2/36
Riversource Farm, Waterloo (March 2)

Carbon copy letter from JS to WJH 6/11/32

Cc letter from JS to WJH 16/5/33

Cc letter from JS to WJH 24/12/35

Cc letter from JS to WJH 25/4/36

(the dates in brackets at the end of listings of
letters from Harvey are the dates that Sutton
wrote on them: the date of arrival and the date
of his reply where relevant)