

SAOA Historical Series No 28

Erhard Franz Boehm (1911 -1994) 'An extraordinary amateur ornithologist'

Part 1

Despite having seen Erhard Boehm on only one occasion nearly forty years ago, he made a huge impression on me and my brother Nick who were then novice birdwatchers. Erhard, a tall upright man with a very loud voice, addressed the SAOA in the old lecture theatre behind the SA Museum in the early 1970s, on a topic that I do not remember. What I do remember is his insistence on the need to observe and record thoroughly and rigorously. I have no doubt been guilty at times of not following his advice. However Erhard must have been a single-minded and extraordinary natural historian from a very early age. This first part will delve into Erhard Boehm's family history and background while later parts will cover his contributions to ornithology and other branches of natural history. I am indebted to his daughter and son-in-law, Cynthia and John Zimmerman, for much of the discussion of family, the district of Sutherlands and Erhard the man.

Franz Erhard (pronounced Herod without the 'H' by his family but others pronounced his name phonetically 'Er' and 'hard') Boehm was born on 8th April 1911 at Eudunda. While the SA Register of Births gives his name as Franz Erhard, he always referred to himself as Erhard Franz and was called Erhard. He was the first of six children born to Johannes Boehm and Anna Emilie (nee Schiller) who were married on 1/1/1911 in St John's Lutheran Church in Kapunda. Anna was also called by her second name, Emilie, which appears to have been a common practice amongst the Germanic families in South Australia at this time. Emilie was born on 23/5/1889 at home at Neales Flat and baptized in the home of August Schiller of Sutherlands whose home was used for services prior to the dedication of St John's Church, Sutherlands. Educated at St Pauls Lutheran school at Brownlow, the young Emilie worked at home, in farm duties and as a servant girl and

did grape picking during the season in the Barossa Valley.

Erhard's father, Johannes (or Jack), was born a twin on 27/12/1883 in his parents' home at Sutherlands; he was a weak baby and presumably only given one name as he was not expected to live. His twin brother, August, survived for only two and a half months. Johannes rented a considerable acreage of Marginal Lands Country in the early 1940s which was part of the property ultimately passed on to Erhard. After Jack's sudden death in 1960, Emilie continued living on the Sutherlands property, which was then owned by Erhard. At the age of 80 Emilie moved to the Lutheran Rest Home in Tanunda where she died aged 92 years. Johannes' parents were cousins Carl Gottfried (called Gottfried) Boehm and Christine Ernestine (nee Schiller). Both were born in 1853 and they were married on 26th November 1874 at Light's Pass, taking up the property (Section 247 Hd of Neales) at Sutherlands in 1888, after working on various properties at Neales Flat and Sutherlands. Christine died in 1941, with Gottfried passing away at Eudunda on 8/2/1947, aged 93 years. Christine was the daughter of J. Carl Friedrich Schiller and Caroline Henriette (nee Fichtner), both from Tentschel in Silesia, Prussia and in 1855 they emigrated to South Australia like so many from this part of the world.

I have paraphrased Noris Ioannou's (1997) account of the influx of Prussians to South Australia, particularly from the 1830s to 1850s. In 1817 King Friedrich Wilhelm III issued a decree to bring about the union of the Calvinist royal family and his Lutheran subjects. The majority accepted this but a minority, particularly amongst the peasant population, resisted, leading to another decree in 1830. This was upheld by oppression and religious persecution, in which churches were closed and

congregations fined for conducting home services and using lay preachers. This chapter in Prussian history initiated the first wave of Lutheran migration in 1838, mainly from the provinces of Posen, Brandenburg and Silesia. At this time about 8000 Lutherans left Prussia, with 1500 coming to Australia. Although the persecution lessened with Friedrich Wilhelm III's death in 1840, pressure to conform continued until 1846. However migration was maintained through the 1840s by crop failures, political unrest, industrialization, the military draft, population growth and the letters from family and friends already in Australia. By 1900 18000 German migrants had arrived in South Australia, of which two-thirds settled in the German areas of the Barossa Valley and the Adelaide Hills.

A potted history of land survey and distribution in the Eudunda district will enable a better understanding of farming in the Sutherlands district east of Goyder's Line and the hardships that many families endured in this marginal country. Information for this section comes from Dreckow's (1986) excellent history of the Eudunda district. A growing population in South Australia in the 1840s and 1850s encouraged the government to open up new land for farming in areas adjacent to settled areas. The Counties of Light and Eyre, which embrace the Eudunda council area, were proclaimed in June 1842 and surveys were carried out to allow the proclamation of associated hundreds from 1851 through 1883. The Hundred of Neales, where Gottfried Boehm acquired land in 1888, was proclaimed in July 1866. During the mid-1880s the government initiated a scheme to settle working men in rural areas and, as the Stock Routes were not required any more, they were surveyed into small blocks near towns and in the wetter areas (< 20 acres) and larger blocks outside townships.

Pastoralists and speculators in Adelaide purchased most of the first government land sold in the Hundreds of Julia Creek, Dutton and Neales. The speculators did nothing to improve the land and soon rented or sold their holdings to farmers at a profit. The farmers cleared and

fenced the land, built pug, timber, stone or limestone homes and small communities formed, often with a church and a school. The farmers were the backbone of Eudunda, Sutherlands, Bower, Hampden and Julia, keeping tradesmen such as blacksmiths, wheelwrights, carpenters, saddlers, carriers and shopkeepers in business. Farms were initially small but gradually they increased in size. For a few years farms prospered but droughts and the decline in the soil's fertility through lack of added fertilizer led to the demise of many.

The township of Sutherlands had its inception in the decision to finish the railway line from Adelaide to Morgan. This broad gauge (5'3") line was to link the new city with the river transport corridor along the Murray. In 1877 the final stretch of railway between Kapunda and Morgan was completed and was opened in September 1878. The as yet "unknown" Sutherlands was on this line and the fettlers cottages were 2 miles east of the Sutherlands railway station. Early in 1881, William Alexander Sutherland built a "dug-out" house on the north side of the new railway line, ten miles east of Eudunda. He was involved in various undertakings in South Australia, including supplying river red gum timber to Adelaide from the site of Millbrook Reservoir. Sutherlands was granted 2000 acres of land in 1882 and began cutting mallee and transporting it by railway. His workmen were German immigrants who had moved to the settlements founded by George F. Angas in the Barossa Valley. A siding, 'spur' line and a weatherboard manager's house were all constructed by Sutherland, who became the postmaster and store-keeper as well. In 1884 he moved to Adelaide to set up a woodyard there, leaving his affairs in Sutherlands in the hands of his manager.

The woodcutting and carting business grew from these small beginnings, necessitating a new store (1884), butchers shop (1885) and blacksmith. Water was scarce and a well was sunk in 1886, but was disappointing with the water at 160 feet being salty. Water was always a problem for Sutherlands (a district with about

250-300mm average rainfall, close to Goyder's Line). Ed Schubert relates that a Government Dam was built on the Stock Reserve east of Sutherlands, from which water was filled by bucket for transport by wagon to farms (Breckow 1986). Tilly Dohnt's memoirs (Breckow 1986) relate how the goods trains bringing water from Morgan to the water tower often arrived half full, due to the shunting at stations along the way. She also told how washing water was left to stand so that the scum could be removed before watering pots and gardens. This certainly rings some bells with Adelaide residents in the current drought and water restrictions. For washing Tilly used a washboard and plenty of "elbow grease" and a coal-filled iron for ironing. In 1919 water started to come from the Warren Reservoir, Eudunda.

Perhaps a surprising early development was the inception in 1888 of the Sutherlands Brass Band, which competed fiercely with the Neales Flat Brass Band. To provide residents with a meeting place, a Club was built in 1890 of stone and weatherboard. The stone portion still stands and is incorporated into the present hotel building. On a change of ownership in 1892 the Club became a hotel. The three churches date from the 1880s and 1890s. Lutheran services began in 1880 and St John's Church was dedicated in 1890, with foundation members including Gottfried Boehm (Erhard's grandfather) and several Schiller families. From 1900 on the church was served by pastors from Eudunda and services in English were not introduced until 1935! The Wesleyan Church built a weatherboard chapel in 1894 on the site of the present tennis courts and the Anglican Church began regular services in a building west of the hotel in 1899.

Substantial improvements were made to the railway infrastructure in 1890 when a larger siding and passenger platform were erected. It is noteworthy that 14270 tons of firewood, 60 tons of wheat and one ton of wool were dispatched via the railway in this year, as well as 683 tons of supplies being imported into the town. Over the next few years other businesses sprang up -

a greengrocers, two blacksmiths and a general store. In 1893 a Co-operative Buying and Selling Society was born, with wood being used to pay for groceries and this developed into the present Eudunda Farmers Co-operative Society. The wood business continued to prosper and, in the drought year of 1895, 19124 tons of wood were transported. The census of 1911 indicated 165 adults lived in Sutherlands but this was not to last.

Another drought in 1914 brought extreme hardship and the closing down or sale of a number of businesses. This decline continued as wood had to be carted from longer distances from the railway line, wood prices slumped and droughts affected the viability of farms and especially grain growing. With declines in workers in the wood industry and farmers, the local businesses closed until the situation today where the present town has very few residents.

The history of the Sutherlands School mirrors the history of the town. In 1883 Mrs Nellie Clarke schooled 8 pupils in a dug-out, charging 6 pence per week. The school continued with Mrs Bratten charging one shilling per week for the privilege of being taught in her front parlour. A state school was established in 1889, with local children walking up to 5 miles to school and those from Bower arriving by passenger train. A German school opened in Brownlow in the 1890s and many students transferred from Sutherlands, but numbers picked up when the Florieton school closed in 1894. The opening of the Bower Private School in 1904 saw an exodus of pupils. Until the 1920s numbers remained above 50, but by the 1940s there were less than 20 students and further declines saw the closing of the school in 1953. In all 720 children were educated at Sutherlands School, with the last students transferring to the Eudunda Area School.

A rather sad story narrated by Bill Loffler in Dreckow (1986) indicates that the German communities suffered from their German origin during and after the First World War. When Bill was about 10 years old and attending Eudunda School there was a Victory March in 1918 from the Eudunda Institute to the Oval. The teacher forced Bill and five other boys of German

descent to carry a rough wooden coffin draped with the German flag. Bill's parents were understandably very upset, but Bill's position was difficult, as he couldn't disobey his teacher and his parents were so angry that he only just escaped a flogging.

We know little of Erhard's early life, except that he was brought up on the family farm at Sutherlands, attended the Sutherlands School and was awarded a book prize for attaining the highest marks for boys in the Qualifying Examination in his last year of schooling in 1924, when he was aged 13. Religion presumably played a large part in the family's life, with the St John's Lutheran church not far from the property. Erhard was a lay reader but in the mid-1930s stopped attending church, reacting to a split in the Lutheran dogma, only returning to his faith shortly before he died. When Erhard was a child German was spoken in the home and apparently at the Sutherlands School, as a non-German speaking teacher only lasted 6 months there, to be replaced by a teacher with a Germanic name. Erhard married his younger neighbour Doreen Melva (nee Schiller) on 1st June 1948, making this the third generation of Boehm/Schiller matches. Their two daughters were Raelene, born on 29/4/1949, and Cynthia, born on 5/6/1951.

Erhard's farm, 2.5 miles ESE of Sutherlands township was about 3000 acres, but had originally been seven holdings, each supporting a family. Some of the land had been cropped in earlier years, but cropping ceased about 1950, with sheep then providing the main source of income. Doreen kept five or six dairy cows and the milk and cream were sent by train to the Eudunda butter factory for additional income. Erhard was a conservative land manager, leaving some of his property uncleared and lightly stocking these scrub blocks. The area had been heavily cut for firewood in earlier times but some mallee was still cut for firewood. One block was black oak and blue bush which was kept in good heart by Erhard. The Agricultural Bureau invited him to take part in trials of fodder crops, so experimental crops of grasses, saltbush and exotics were planted. The trials coincided with a drought and only the fenced saltbush plots survived near the house.

In his memoirs reported in Dreckow (1986), Erhard relates that most of the original blocks of land were less than 200 ha (500 acres), with some less than 80 ha (200 acres), which was thought at the time to be sufficient to support a family. Over time failed farmers left the district and their holdings were incorporated into the surviving farms, with the result that farms became ten times larger than those of the earliest settlers. Horses were widely used for vehicles in the 1920s while tractors became common on farms in the late 1930s and 1940s. He comments on the hard lives of the early settlers, particularly the women:

"The wives of the pioneers shared the hard life of the time. They helped stacking firewood ready for carting; picked mallee roots on cultivated land and stacked them; turned hand-operated wheat-winnowers and bagged the grain by hand because an elevator was too costly; sewed up bags of wheat; stooked loose hay and helped to cart and stack it; and in very busy periods, even cut firewood for the open hearth of the kitchen. All pioneer women hand-milked their cows and separated the milk, and made butter, and baked bread for the family. With all the work outside the house, the women still had to find time to clean the house, prepare meals, rear children, and do the week's washing by hand. Life for pioneer women was nearly always one of isolation and loneliness in the surrounding dense scrub, from which situation they could not see any neighbouring homes, not even the occasional wagon passing along a dirt road with a load of firewood or wheat."

The railway continued to be important for Sutherlands; for example Cynthia remembers that the bread and newspapers came by train. Erhard mentions in letters to John Sutton that he would be catching the train to Adelaide when he went to visit the Museum. Erhard used horses and bicycles around the farm until his purchase of a Bedford truck in the mid 1940s. Their farm did not receive electricity until the early 1960s so kerosene fridges and lights were the only options until then. Presumably cooking was done until then on a wood stove, which must have been testing during the long hot summers.

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