

More From Colebrook, Tasmania

I find it surprising that there are so many similarities in the past histories of our two communities, even though physically there are few examples that could be compared. Their climate is much milder than ours; they have smooth, rolling hills, for the most part devoid of trees; in other words, perfect country for raising sheep, which is exactly what they do. Two hundred years ago, our Colebrook looked much the same as Colebrook Tasmania looks today; our trees had been clear-cut for the production of charcoal to run the iron furnaces concentrated in northern Litchfield County as well as to provide open space for farming and agricultural pursuits.

It is difficult, if at all possible for a contemporary to gaze upon our mature forests and visualize it as sheep grazing country, but that is exactly what it was. My parents bought a 125-acre farm on Beech Hill in 1930, and at that time there was mature forest over 85 acres with the rest in open pasture or cleared fields. Shortly after their purchase, an elderly man stopped his car at the end of the driveway, got out, looked all about himself, and announced to my father that he remembered when he was a boy that whole hillside (indicating the south side of Beech Hill) being covered with sheep with only an occasional tree left for shade. He said the small groups of grazing sheep reminded him of patches of clouds scattered across the sky. I remember looking at our hillside after having heard this tale and being totally unable to visualize one sheep, let alone a large flock of them grazing in that forest! On the other hand, much of the 40 acres of cleared land that my father had is now nature forest, and I know that my grandson must have difficulty envisioning the fields that I tell him were there that I used to help hay every summer.

I don't know whether Colebrook Tasmania's future holds the possibility of reforestation on the scale that we experienced, but it certainly is a possibility. When we consult old ledgers and record books of our early years, we can see that our predecessors were faced with the same problems that our contemporaries are faced with in Tasmania. It is for this reason that I am as fascinated in the comparisons as I am.

The June 10 Email from Lynette contained a picture of a building that she identified as "Nicholl's Store", and here again, there is a remarkable similarity between their building and Colebrook Connecticut's Wheeler's Store. In case you are unfamiliar with Mr. Wheeler's store, it stands about a mile north of Colebrook Center in a small cluster of buildings just before the Rock School and the intersection with Sandy Brook Road. Alpha Sage erected the store shortly after the commencement of the nineteenth century and years later when the property passed into the ownership of John Wheeler it remained a general store. This was in the years prior to the Civil War when it was common to find a store, or what the people in those days referred to as a store, scattered about the countryside, serving a relatively small community. They must have been more of a convenience to the neighbors than a moneymaking proposition for the storeowner. At any rate, along came the Civil War, and with it inflated prices for those goods still available. Mr. Wheeler's inventory was maintained as well as it could be during the war, but along with peace came normalization of prices, and Wheeler found himself with a store full of goods that he couldn't sell except at a loss. This reality, along with the fact that he had been held up by a robber, made him padlock the building, never to enter it again. Long after John Wheeler had passed on and others owned the property, the store

languished in obscurity until, in 1907, all the items that had lain there for 37 years were auctioned off. An estimated 500 people came from miles around to catch a glimpse of these pre-Civil War objects.

Now compare our story with that sent to us by Lynette Munnings in Colebrook, Tasmania telling of an old closed-up store there that had an auction after many years behind a “closed” sign:

“At the height of the auction, auctioneer Harry Tomlinson brandished a revolver and threatened to shoot the lot of them. Roaring and rumbling around him were 300 or more good people from the Southern midlands and beyond intent on enjoying the biggest event at Colebrook since the 1967 bush fires.

Nichols Store, circa 1840, was being cleared out to make way for new owners who had bought the old stone store, its outbuildings and half a hectare [one fifth of an acre] of land at an earlier auction.

Halfway through agonizing bidding of odd implements, the noise from the potential buyers broke his traditional personal reserve. Mr. Tomlinson shouted: ‘This place used to be called Jerusalem – the way you people are bidding it will be renamed the Wailing Wall’.

Someone finally bid enough to start it all going, but one of Tasmania’s last repositories of genuine bric-a-brac was cleared for something like \$3,500.”

“ ‘It was a great sale’, Tomlinson said, ‘but they kept finding uncles, aunties, cousins, brothers, sisters and lost interest in the sale. In the end I was trying to sell this revolver – it would shoot, don’t worry – so in desperation I tried to get a bid and threatened to shoot the lot of them if they didn’t pay attention.’ ”

“The Nicholls Store was built in 1840 by the Dean family, who kept it in operation for the next 40 years, at which time it was sold to Alfred Nicholls, who continued to operate the store while raising a family in the then Jerusalem, a prosperous farming and coal mining center. His youngest daughter, who was 82 in 1979 said in an interview: ‘I was brought up in the shop, and people used to come from miles away to do business. Money wasn’t so important – we used to barter a lot – your eggs for someone’s butter, and the farm goods for the stuff that had to be imported.’ She said.”

“When she married, she and her husband set up a store across from Nicholls Store on Jerusalem’s main street. Two of their sons continued to run the store until 1967, when they found themselves on the wrong side of the road when the bush fires raced through town. Their store, along with most of the other buildings on that side of the road was destroyed. The old Nicholls store, empty for years, was pressed into service, and a week later the Clark brothers re-opened for business until a new store could be built on their property on the opposite side of the street.

It was the last spark for the Nicholls emporium – the Clarks moved into their new shop, leaving the Wiggins family to continue to use the older premises as the home they had made it before the fires.

In 1996 another family purchased the store and reopened it as an art and craft gallery. Two years later a tearoom was added. Locally grown fruits are used for jams for sale there.

Originally called the Exchange Store, the local population called the old shop ‘Nicholls Store’, and now it has been officially named that as remembrance of earlier times.”