

# Pioneer and Soldier: the life of John Francis Flewell-Smith

by Arch Buckley and Janette Flewell-Smith.

The foundation of the Flewell-Smith family that we know today had its beginning in England in 1863 when John Smith married Emily Harriott Parton. Their first child, John Francis, was born on the 11th September 1863. Having the same first name as his father, the infant was called Frank and carried that name for the rest of his days. Frank did not see a lot of England as on Christmas Eve 1866 his parents, Frank and his younger brother Ernest (James) boarded the *Royal Dane* which had been an old China Tea trade clipper and ventured forth to a new homeland.

This ship, with Captain Davis as master, was considered to be a fast one and took a full complement of migrants all hoping to make a good living in their new homeland. The ship and its passengers had a rough trip through the Bay of Biscay. The ship lost one mast, one sailor died and Frank's mother so sea sick the doctor thought she would not complete the trip.

After seventy-seven days the *Royal Dane* anchored in Moreton Bay on the morning of the 11 April 1867. While Frank, Ernest and their mother Emily stayed aboard, his father John went ashore in butcher Bayne's boat to find lodgings in Brisbane. Next day Emily, Frank and Ernest went ashore in the same boat. Emily, now fully recovered from sea sickness, was overwhelmed by the beauty of the river banks. They were covered in timber, sugar cane and bananas and she felt as if she were in a dream.

After several days in town, Frank's father who had been well supplied with money and letters of introduction by his father, James Smith, set out to buy land. As the family had paid their own passage out they received a land order from the Government and bought a block of 150 acres at what was then called 'Stinking Gully', now Fernvale. Frank referred to it as 'poor miserable land'.

The land was over-run with brumbies and scrubbers (wild horse and cattle) who ate the crops they were planted. The Smith family first had to get some type of dwelling in which to live. This was done by employing the local Aborigines to strip bark from the trees and so a bark hut was constructed. Next, John had to make a living for his family, so the ground was then cleared for growing cotton.

Life was far from easy for John and his family. After crops were planted settlers had to contend with climatic conditions in what to them was a strange land. In addition they had to contend with plant disease without the benefit of modern chemical sprays.

If life was hard for John then it was equally so for his wife Emily. As in many other families I am sure the Smith menfolk would concur that it was through their wives support that their achievements were made possible.

While living on their first selection two tragic events occurred that Frank remembered clearly. First was the death of his baby sister Katie. 'He did not know what death was then'. His mother woke in the middle of the night to find the baby stone cold beside her. 'Then the rush to light a fire and get the baby into hot water. It was all too late the baby was gone and nothing left now except the little grave on top of the hill'.<sup>1</sup>

Soon after this tragedy, while Frank was only a six year old lad, his mother was cooking by an open fire. She had no stove, only a three legged pot and a camp oven. Emily, dressed in the clothes of the era, was wearing a large crinoline skirt which suddenly caught alight. With great presence of mind, she tore the burning clothes off but not before she was badly burnt.

As the area was not closely settled, Frank, at his mother's instructions, ran half mile or more to their nearest neighbour for help. On arriving at this farm he was unable to make himself understood to the German farmer's wife. It was Mrs. Cronau's daughter Mary aged seven who finally interpreted to her mother what had happened 'next door'.

Without any sign of panic, the good lady then ran all the way to the Smith residence where she then dressed Mrs. Smith's wounds and put her to bed. She then prepared a meal and fed the family.

The next day another German lady came and helped the family. Before leaving she showed Frank what to do and from then on he became nurse and mother until Emily was well enough to rise from her sick bed and take over the household chores.

The incidents just mentioned were all taken as part of pioneering life in the bush. Frank recalled those days in his Diaries and had fond memories of many happy hours spent with the early German settlers and Aboriginal lads with whom he grew up and who were most helpful to one another.

It was around this period of time, 1870-1872, while living at Stinking Gully that the family name became Flewell-Smith. So many Smiths resided in the area and John had become sick and tired of other people



*John Francis Flewell-Smith in uniform.*

opening and reading his mail before he had. The added name of Flewell came from his mother Mary Ann's maiden name of Flewell. Since then the family name has always been that of Flewell-Smith.

One event that brought families from miles around to the waterhole on the Flewell-Smith farm was the introduction of two red deer, a stag and a hind. These were one of two pairs presented to the Government by Queen Victoria taken to Cressbrook in 1873.<sup>2</sup> It was also at this time that the name of this area was changed from Stinking Gully to Fernvale. It was also in this year that John Flewell-Smith sold his property there and moved to Lockyer Creek in the Lowood area. It was here that Frank grew up. For John his financial burden had been helped considerably eased around 1874 when he received the sum of £1100 following the death of his father James in in England. This enabled him to pay off the mortgage on his property and build a new home.

It was on the 29 January 1879 at the age of 15+ years that Frank made what was probably the most far reaching decision of his life. He enlisted in the army, a decision that was to affect his and his family's life for many years to come. As to why he did so is pure

speculation as we have no record of his predecessors holding military rank.

Frank's introduction to 45 years of military life, had a very simple beginning. A school master friend of Frank's went with him to Lowood where he was introduced to the army drill instructor as a possible recruit. The enrolment proceeded thus.

Sergeant: 'How old are ye?'

Frank: '15½ years'.

Sergeant: 'Ye'll have to say ye're 18'.

Frank: 'Alright 18'.

Sergeant: 'How far do ye live from town?'

Frank: '25 miles'.

Sergeant: 'Too far, Ye can't attend'.

Frank: 'With a good horse I can attend and I have several of them'.

Sergeant: 'Allright I'll try ye'.

And so Frank's military career began.

That same night he had his first drill and was issued with a Snieder rifle and uniform. The uniform was of light grey with a round cap for drill and scarlet coat with blue trousers and white helmet for dress. The unit to which he now belonged was A Company Second Regiment Volunteers Lowood. This was later to become part of the Moreton Regiment. The Officers commanding this company were Captain John Skinner (School Teacher) and Lieutenant Albert Thorn. These officers would take the company once a month to Brisbane for Battalion drill.

Frank wrote freely in his diaries about the everyday life and work on the farm and about training in the military forces, but he was not so explicit with his early promotions and ascendancy through the lower ranks, such as Corporal and Sergeant. In 1890 he sat for his exam as Major and was confirmed in 1891.

With his childhood years behind him Frank now assumed a more mature perspective of life with its social events and those more demanding ones of earning a living and fitting into adult society, while still helping on his parents property. With his earlier training and family background he was able to fulfil these requirements quite capably.

During this time, he left the farm for a short period and went droving, taking cattle owned by the McConnell family from Cressbrook to Glenhouten Station on the Robinson River. Apparently droving was not for Frank, as he returned to what he knew best, farming.

Although life on the farm was one of long hours and hard work it also had its happier moments of family parties and musical evenings with dances at the local school. It was at one of these dances at the

Wivenhoe State School in 1884 that Frank met his future wife. The young lady, Frances Maude Stephens, had been staying at the school master's residence while on holidays. After this initial meeting, Frank did not see her again until 1886. To quote Frank at his second meeting, he wasted no time in making his intentions known and they were engaged on the 10 August of that year.

The Stephens family lived at 'Rochmount' at Highgate Hill and Frances was one of ten children. Her parents were John and Charlotte Stephens. John Stephens was manager of the the *Brisbane Courier* in 1862. By 1885 he was Clerk for the Government Savings Bank, South Brisbane. One of Frances's brothers, Francis Hugh, was a dentist and was later Mayor of Maryborough for three years.

On the 25 April 1888 Frank and Frances were married in Brisbane. Frances left her parents' home at 'Rochmount' for the new cottage that Frank had built on the home farm with money he had received from the sale of his property at Cressbrook. With much hard labour Frank and his young bride converted their surroundings into a beautiful garden, but alas this was all swept away in the 1893 floods.

Although their courtship lasted only some few months, once they were married their compatible union was to bind the young couple happily together through all adversities for fifty-four years. Frances bore seven children of whom, sadly, only three lived to a mature age. The other four departed this life in the most unfortunate circumstances.

Their first child, Elsie, was born in 1889. She died in tragic circumstances late in 1896 at the age of seven. Elsie had been attending school at Southport where her Aunt Miss Essie Stephens was teaching. Elsie is buried at South Brisbane.

Dorothy was born in 1890 and was to later marry Lex Martin Wilson who was an engineer with a business in Brisbane.

In 1891 the Military was called out to the shearers strike at Barcaldine. Frank with other troopers were sent to keep law and order. It was here that some of the mounted troopers put emu feathers in their hats. Frank maintained that this was the start of the Light Horse Regiments wearing the traditional slouch hat trimmed with emu feathers.

The next member of the family was born in 1892. Stephen, when he came of age, enlisted in the Army like his father and became a member of the Lowood Company. In 1909 at the age of seventeen, Stephen died in an unfortunate drowning accident. His cousin Dorothy Board was staying at the Flewell-Smith's place on holidays and had gone to the river with family members for a swim. She got

into difficulties and Stephen dived in to save her and both were drowned. Members of Stephen's Company paraded on their horses to give him a Military Funeral. He is buried at Lowood Cemetery.

Frank and Frances also had their home covered by mud-laden water in the devastating 1893 floods. Frances moved into Lowood town with their children while Frank and members of his family went to help other victims. Frank, assisted by his brother Malcolm and two other men, safely removed the Vernors from the tree to which they had tied themselves and took them to Lowood. For their bravery, the four men were awarded the Royal Humane Society Medal.

Following the second episode of being flooded from their home, Frank and Frances moved from Orchard Farm to the mountain called Pine Hill, into a new home built by Frank's brother Will.

Frank and Frances' second son, Bernard, was born in 1898. After his early schooling at Lowood, Bernard then went to Ipswich Grammar School where he was to distinguish himself as a brilliant scholar and win a scholarship. During World War I he enlisted in 1916 and went to France where he was decorated with the Military Medal for bravery at the battle of Hamel. After the war Bernard worked on the family farm. His organising ability was recognised when by sheer hard work and dedication, he eventually became the General Manager of the Committee of Direction of Fruit Marketing (COD).

It was during their period at Pine Hill that Frank passed all his degrees in the Masonic Lodge and also became a Justice of the Peace. He and his father John were often called to try cases in the Lowood Court. In 1898 Frank was sworn in as Commanding Officer of the Moreton Regiment and next year was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel in the Queensland Militia. Frank had to leave the running of the farm to Frances and the family when in 1899 he reported to Colonel Aytoun in Brisbane and took over the Regimental Office from Captain Carroll. His quarters were at the Normanby Hotel. Frank stayed in this position until his departure for overseas service. His weekends were spent on the farm in Lowood.

In August 1900, the year war was declared with South Africa, Frances presented the family with another son, Donald. The happiness of this event was short lived as at the age of 16 months the young child died of Diphtheria.

With Australian troops going to the Boer War it was only natural that Frank would volunteer and on the 27 January 1901 Frank was made Commanding Officer of the 5th Australian Contingent which sailed on 6 March on the *Templesmore* for South Africa. After service with the Australian Bushmen as they were called, Frank was transferred to Colesburg as Area Commandant. Amongst a rebel farming

population he had 4 District Commandants under him and his area covered 8,000 square miles. He had the power to raise mounted troops and town guards. He had to watch the rebel farmers and supervise all supplies. Frank completed his service and returned home in 1902. On 19 June that year he resigned his commission in the Queensland Defence Force and returned to Lowood on the 13 August.

In 1905 Frank became Warden for the Church of England Church, President of the Progress Association and Vice president of the Lowood School of Arts. This public recognition was again saddened when their youngest son Ian died aged fourteen months after a short illness.

On 31 October 1906 Emily gave birth to another son, Geoffery. Even now their troubles were not all over as Geoff when a young school boy had his skull badly fractured by a stone thrown by another lad. This injury was to give Geoff problems for many years to come. Although he commenced schooling at Lowood most of his primary education was at Sandgate State School. He became interested in the scouting movement and was one of the original members of the Sandgate Troop where he served with distinction. Another of Geoff's interests was the army and like his father and brother, he enlisted in the Militia and with the rank of Captain. He became Officer in Charge of B Company 9/49 Battalion (Sandgate Company). At the outbreak of World War II, W.W.2 Geoff enlisted in the A.I.F. 2/9 Bn. and served with that Battalion in the Middle East. In 1939 Geoff married Mabel Parker.

At various times Frank applied for positions in the armed forces and in 1909 he was seconded for six months to the British Army in India. He left for India on 16 October arriving at Tuticorim twenty days later. This was a time of learning and watching how the British troops, the 1st Royal Sussex Regiment, performed under mock battle conditions in Rawal Pindi and surrounding areas. Whilst there Frank toured as much as possible, viewing the Himalayas from Kashmir, Delhi, Agra. The Taj Mahal, he said, was 'the most glorious thing I have ever seen'. He visited Colombo, Kandy and Fremantle on the return journey.

From then, Frank's life was filled with the usual mundane chores of running farm and home and training the local military troops whom were in his charge. He was still involved in many local activities. In 1913 he was elected as one of the Directors of the Queensland Co-operative Bacon Company and was nominated by the Womens Electoral League as candidate for the seat of North Brisbane. He was not successful.

In 1914 Frank sold the Lowood property and moved to Phillip Street, Brackenridge. This new property was to eventually consist of two farms 'Killara' and 'Warra'. At first, Frank and his family grew small crops

but as the years went by, rough leaf pineapples became the real source of income. By the thirties he was reputed to be the largest producer of rough leaf pineapples in the state. By then the original two farms had been supplemented by a third property at Dohle's Rocks Road [Kallangur].

When World War I broke out in 1914, Frank made his final trip overseas. He was Commanding Officer on the Troop Ship *Boorara*, in charge of 20 officers and 1079 men, who were reinforcements of the A.I.F. bound for England then to France. While in England Frank visited many of his relatives who he had not seen since infancy. After forty-five years in the Army, Frank was honourably discharged with the rank of Brigadier General or as the present day Army would say, Brigadier.

One of the many fond memories of his military career was a phone call from General Wilson concerning the handing over of the old Moreton Regiment Colours to the Dean of St. Johns Cathedral on Sunday 10 November 1935. The ceremony was impressive. The Regiment paraded opposite the Cathedral and trooped the colours to the tune of 'Land of Hope and Glory' played by the Regimental Band. After the salute, the colours were marched into the Cathedral to the tune of 'Auld Lang Syne'. Colonel Radford handed over the Kings and Regimental Colours to the Dean, and Frank handed over the special Banner granted by his Majesty the King for the South African War. This ceremony meant a lot to Frank as besides his own personal connections with the Regiment, his son Geoff was now a Company Commander in the regiment which paraded outside.

Despite his age, Frank still worked on the farm, milking and chipping (weeding). He had an interest in an experimental block at Bracken Ridge, where Gatton College scientists were investigating diseases in pineapples.

Although mentally alert and retaining a keen interest in the farm, the ravages of arthritis restricted his movements. In December 1942, after a short illness, Frank, who had achieved so much in his lifetime, passed peacefully away.

#### ENDNOTES

Our thanks to John Flewell-Smith and Peter Flewell-Smith for access to the diaries of John Smith and John Francis Flewell-Smith. Both John Francis Smith and his father John Smith senior kept diaries and were very meticulous in recording the day by day events of their lives and the events that made news headlines. These diaries should, we consider, be preserved.

1. Diaries of John Francis Flewell-Smith, in possession of John / Peter Flewell-Smith.
2. Ruth S. Kerr, *Confidence and Tradition*, (Esk, Esk Shire Council, 1988), p.23.