

ORBOST & DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY Inc.

P.O. BOX 284 ORBOST VIC 3888



President:	Heather Terrell
Vice President:	Marilyn Morgan
Secretary:	May Leatch
Treasurer:	Jenni York
Museum Committee:	Lindsay and Noreen Thomson, Geoff Stevenson, John Phillips
Collection Management:	Marilyn Morgan, Marlene Robb, May Leatch, Barry Miller
Research Secretary:	Lois Crisp
Newsletter Editor:	May Leatch

NEWSLETTER No. 126 April 2016

Pioneering at Lake Road, Newmerella 1959 -1966 - Bob and Brenda Johnson

This Newsletter has been compiled from a booklet written in 2001 by Brenda Johnson titled [The Orbost Story](#).

In 2000, Brenda's daughter Ellen and her husband Calvin came to Newmerella in search of the crown lands block where Ellen's parents had struggled to develop a small farm from 1959- 66. Further searches in the Lands Department in Melbourne revealed Bob and Brenda's file containing their initial interview, details of the contract relating to their Government Purchase Lease, and correspondence seeking permission to sell the block in December 1966 to Mr Purcell.

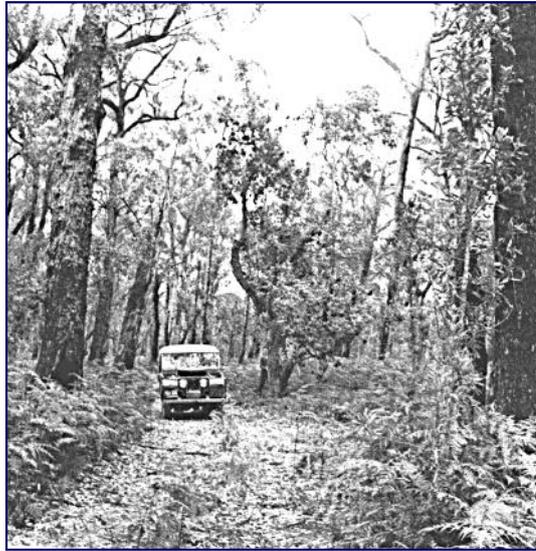
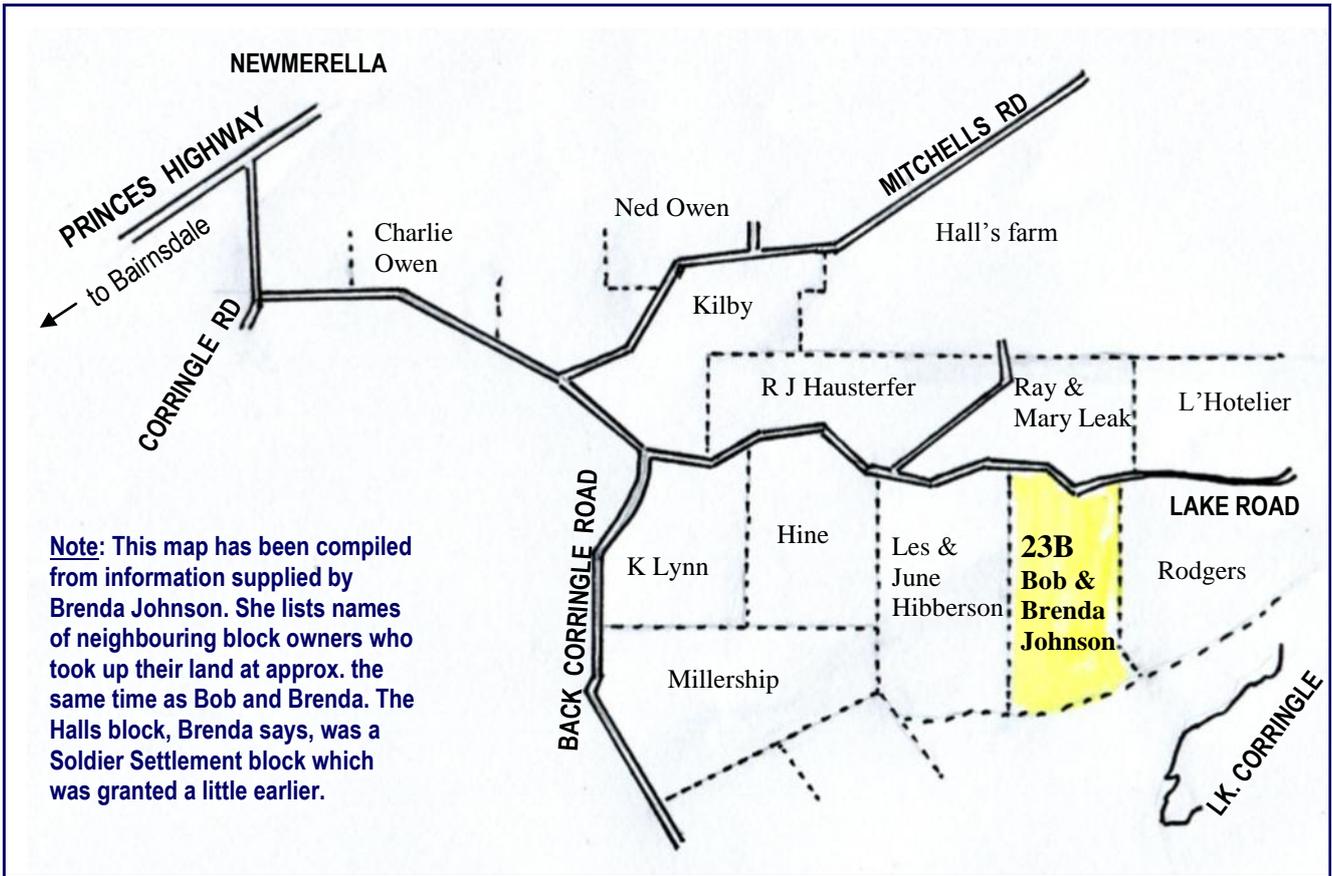
Another memory jogger for Brenda in recalling the story was the bundle of letters which Brenda wrote home to her father in England. In these letters, she graphically describes her life in the bush at Newmerella. As you will see, Bob and Brenda's pioneering experience was cut short by near tragedy.

Pioneering isn't just something that happened in the Orbost district in the 1870s-1880s, it also happened in the 1950s when blocks of crown land were being allocated to ex-soldiers and also to other young people wanting to get their own piece of land and go farming. Some of these people were new immigrants to Australia.

This is the pioneering story of Bob and Brenda Johnson who did their pioneering on a 233 acre timbered block in the Lake Road area of Newmerella from 1959-66.

Bob and Brenda Johnson, both from England, met on the *S Orcades* when coming to Australia in 1955. While Bob had previously spent three years in Australia and had worked on farms, Brenda was a complete novice, a "*£10 Pom*" from suburban London who didn't know a thing about farming. They married in 1958, coming to Orbost in 1959 after securing a Government Purchase Lease of Crown Land under the Civilian Settlement Scheme. This was **Block 23B of 233 acres at Newmerella** and it was almost impossible to imagine it as a farm because it was heavily timbered on black sandy soil, and was accessible only by primitive bush tracks.

The deal was that Bob and Brenda could purchase the block for £20 per acre over a period of 20 years, additional to a £28 survey fee and a £2 per acre levy for road construction. They also had to be living on the block within one year and to have cleared six acres in that time. Other conditions meant that they had to have improved 100 acres within five years, also built a permanent house within six years, and to have the whole property fenced within seven years. Eventually, the title could be theirs. If these conditions were not met, the block would be handed back. Also, although they could fall timber for fence posts, they could only sell timber with Forestry Department permission.



TOP LEFT:
Survey marker for Bob and Brenda's block.

LEFT:
The bush track leading to Block 23B.

BELOW LEFT:
Day one at the block — Brenda takes a break from unloading the car-case timber.



Brenda was three months pregnant when they arrived in their Land Rover and trailer with their possessions. They had also invested in a load of car-case timber (for building), galvanised iron, barbed wire, a wood stove, ice chest, a swing saw, a pan toilet, tools, flat irons, kerosene lamps, and a treadle sewing machine.

Firstly, they needed shelter, a home. Bob felled trees for house framing and cut timber with his swing saw. Fibre-cement sheets lined the walls inside. (The outside weatherboards did not go on for several years). A galvanised iron roof, and a rough table and stools made from car-case timber were added along with cupboards with no doors. Their



FAR LEFT:
Having a cuppa near the wood stove after unloading.

LEFT:
The house takes shape. Notice the ice chest and the stove still outside the house.

BELOW:
Brenda with an egg-stealing goanna.

18ft by 17ft 6ins house was divided into two by a masonite wall. Over the back steps was a skillion roof. Everything was extremely basic.

Brenda: “Our first visitors were Pat and Val Joiner. Val was celebrating her birthday by a drive down the back track to see what was going on. They had five children, the eldest being about 11 years old at that time. Their dairy farm was three miles down the track in the opposite direction to Newmerella.”

Bob and Brenda also met their neighbours Les and June Hibberson who were living in Orbost where Les was working as a carpenter. At weekends, they came out to their block to clear the undergrowth. The two families became firm friends.

Myrtle and Alan (Snowy) Hall were also in the district, living on Griebenows Road about two miles away through the bush. The Halls had a Soldier Settlement block and had cleared their land by hand and were now milking cows. Very few of the new owners actually lived on their blocks at that time. One family who did was the Millerships.

To bring in some money, Bob was able to get work picking and carting maize. He could also drive a bulldozer and use a tree-pusher, skills which came in handy around the district. Brenda meanwhile was often on her own, “I seldom saw anyone. I would pick up and stack wood and cut bracken which was a never-ending job. We had wrapped some chicken wire around four saplings to make a temporary chook yard. The trouble was that the goannas liked the idea of fresh eggs, so I took to my knitting (for the coming baby) and waited for the chooks to cackle so that we had the eggs and not the goanna. I was taught how to use a pea rifle but though I think that I got a couple of goannas, I wasn’t a very good shot.”

After daughter Susan was born in Orbost, Brenda returned to the block. White nappies soon became grey with the black sand. She also remembers that when she was filling



the kerosene lamps outside, two thrushes would come to preen themselves in the shiny reflectors.

Once some land was cleared, kikuyu runners were pushed into the sand, hoping that the grass would grow and smother the bracken eventually.

For £100, they purchased an old Twin City tractor which was used to clear timber and make tracks. Sometimes the only way to get to town was to go by tractor and trailer for the first three miles to where Bob had left the utility.

With their second baby coming, Bob and Brenda decided to leave and return to Colbinabbin where Bob had work until after the new baby came. When the new baby Andrew



ABOVE:
Bob using his swing saw.



LEFT:
Stacking timber and burning off.

was one year old, Bob and Brenda and their two youngsters returned to their Newmerella block, noting that nothing had been disturbed in their home during this time.

In another effort to get some money to keep them afloat, Bob and Brenda tried share-farming on a farm owned by Jack Joiner. Here they lived in an extremely primitive house, milked 40 -50 cows and fed pigs on the skim milk. Another daughter, Ellen was born whilst Bob and Brenda were on the Joiner farm. Unfortunately, the share farm was not a success. All of the cows, and pigs tested positive to TB [closely related to human TB] and had to be replaced, and the chooks were also condemned. At the same time, Bob was trying to do fencing on the Newmerella block.

So they gave up share farming and went back to the block. Weatherboards were hammered on outside the frame of the house and another room and bathroom were added. To provide sleeping space for the whole family, they purchased an old school bus which had been gutted and pulled it up to the side of the house. With clean lino on the floor, the place was looking pretty good when they moved back in February 1963.

Bob got work at the Waygara timber mill earning £19 a week at that time. Later, he also worked in a mill at Cabbage Tree. Brenda and the children were often alone in the bush. She was always anxious about the children

getting lost in the tall bracken and made them wear bright coloured clothes and beanies so that she could see them. She remembers listening to "Housewives Choice" on the wireless and also enrolled the children for "Mailbag Sunday School".

New neighbours, Ray and Mary Leak moved into their house on a nearby block at Newmerella.

A milking bail was set up for the cow, Speckles, which they got from the Joiners. They also bought two pigs and some poddy calves and the children helped with the feeding. The bracken was still a problem, so they tried spraying with "Trysden" but without success.

"It was a busy and relaxed life. Certainly there was no room for luxuries, but we were very happy, content. We felt we were moving in the right direction."

Then came the fateful day of June 14th 1964. Bob was putting up the frame for an extension to the house when it fell back and trapped him. Brenda and the children were away visiting Val Joiner at the time, so it was young Ray Leak who heard Bob crying out. He fetched his dad and an ambulance came. Bob was transferred to Sale Hospital with crushed vertebrae, broken ribs and internal injuries.

Brenda tried to keep the place going during the four months that Bob was in hospital and the Methodist Church provided food parcels and the neighbours also helped. When Bob came home he was very weak and in a lot of pain. The doctors were amazed that he was able to walk at all.

"It was obvious that he could not work our block and we had no capital. We could not fulfil our contract with the Department. So we had a clearing sale which many of our neighbours attended and raised the price on stuff."

On November 21st 1964, Bob and Brenda left Newmerella for good and went back to Colbinabbin where they had friends. In 1966, they got permission to sell their Newmerella block and recoup a bit of money. So ended their valiant effort at pioneering on their block at Newmerella.

UPDATE: Bob recovered from his injuries, though was never able to do heavy work again. In 1974, Bob and Brenda moved to Western Australia, living for six years in Kalgoorlie Boulder. Over the years, they have made several trips back to Orbost and still keep in touch with Myrtle Hall. Brenda says that joining a life writing class has given her the chance to write. Now aged in their late 80s, Bob and Brenda have lived in Bayswater a suburb of Perth for the past 20 years.

The [Orbost Story 1959-1966](#) booklet is in the Orbost Historical Society's collection.