Bonville Creek Station
to
Sunny Sawtell

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Bonville Creek Station
"Bonnie Bonville Beach"
became
"Sunny Sawtell"

Early map of the Bonville Creek mouth and the land on which Sawtell is now built

The Sawtell Story
(The notes following were prepared by Mr George England, 1966c, for the Coffs Harbour Historical Society. Words of clarification additional to Mr England's are italicised.)

Long, long ago there was an aboriginal settlement at Bongil Bongil, up along Bongil Creek (now known as Bonville Creek). This was a place where one stayed 'a long time' because of the abundance of food available to the aborigines.

There was plenty of fish, oysters, and shellfish available, all within 400 metres of the camp, which extended west of the gate of the present camping reserve. Birds, ducks, cranes, pigeons and similar were available nearby.

About 180 to 200 aborigines camped here but there activities took them to Boambee Headland, Bonville Headland and the present Reserve, where traces of their activities have been found. These consist mainly of smooth stones which were worked over to form axe heads. These were usually flaked to shape on high ridges near the sea.

In 1861 Government surveyors set aside an area as a Reserve for future needs. The first white settler arrived about 1863, when Walter Harvie brought his team of bullocks to the tall grasses of the Reserve. From this base he proceeded to rescue the cedar logs in a little 40 ton cutter which had gone ashore about 2 miles (over 3km) down the beach. Tucker Bros had bought the wreck in 1861.

Having removed the timber, Harvie then removed the useful materials, rigging masts and finally burnt the hull and collected the copper bolts and nails to be used again in the shipyards on the Lower Bellinger a few miles away.
The local Historical Society (recently) suggested that the name of the cutter 'Chase' be given to the unnamed creek in the vicinity. This was accepted by the Lands Department.

For a number of years Harvie remained at Bongil Bongil, drawing cedar from the headwaters of the stream and floating rafts of cedar logs down to the mouth of Pine Creek—so named because of the large amounts of pine (colonial or Dorrigo) cut along its banks. The rafts were floated up Pine Creek with the rising tide almost to Raleigh, (now Repton) whence they were shipped to Sydney markets.

By 1864 a number of selectors heading for the newly opened scrublands of the Bellinger were passing through from the Clarence farm lands, which they found subject to frequent floodings and frosts.

Three groups of the Bayldon family selected on the Bellinger and brought heavy furniture, originally from England, to their new home. The deep waters of Bongil Bongil Creek prevented them crossing. Walter Harvie was called in and soon had the heavy furniture, including a grand piano, floating up Pine Creek towards Raleigh, where it was again taken over by Bayldon’s own team and delivered to their farm.

Bayldon returned a few years later and selected land at the present Lyonsville with the idea of raising young stock and grazing dry cows on it in 1871. This was the first selection in (what is now) the Coffs Harbour Shire.

In the 1880’s the land had passed into the hands of the “Macleay Millionaire” Phillip Mc-Ateer, who then owned large areas of the rich Raleigh flats. He found difficulty in securing suitable overseers until a man named Childs and his wife took over. They were paid £70 per year plus an amount of flour, sugar, salt, jam and meat each month.
They lived in a large hut, timbers from which are now incorporated in a car shed at the rear of the adjacent house on the aboriginal midden. Early owners had planted out a large area with fruit trees—oranges, lemons, plums, persimmons, guavas, pears, china pears and grapes. These were sought after by travellers held up by high tides and sharks which made the waters dangerous for people crossing the stream, especially after dark. Records show that several attacks were made by sharks on calves, dogs and aborigines. When the pioneers moved eastward to the aboriginal midden the orchards were neglected and in the bush fires of 1886 the trees were wiped out.

Childs took ill, with only his wife to care for him and look after the stock for whom water had to be drawn from a deep well, dug by Bob Reedy. Rats invaded the large hut, and in the final nights attacked the ailing man, whose wife sat by him all knight driving the attacking rodents off with a stick, while the flames of the fire flickered low. She could not leave him to seek help. Finally he died, and his wife, driven by sheer desperation, ventured to cross the stream to seek help. Helpers arrived and found the dead husband badly chewed by the rats.

For some years the farm lay idle until a Mr Lyon took over and built a new home near the crossing place (at the creek). Mr McFadyen managed the property until the mid (nineteen) twenties.

The Reserve became a popular holiday place for a few regular holiday makers early in the (20th) century. Indeed Duke England and two Bushell lads camped on the headland near the bay in 1895 and made a good living fishing within a mile of the coast.
By rising before daylight they returned early in the day with a boat load of fish which they took in the sulky to Bellingen, selling choice snapper at 3d (2c) a pound (nearly half a kilo). An unexpected upset in the surf put an end to the venture.

By 1912 a considerable number of campers made their way to Bonville Reserve for the summer holidays. A simple galvanised iron shed, open on one side, collected water for the campers whose horses had to make do with water drawn from the deep well on Mr Lyon’s place.

In the period to 1920 the number of holiday visitors increased until 1916 saw a hundred campers and on important holidays—Boxing Day and New Year's Day, crowds of a thousand visitors arrived to spend the day in the surf or fishing for whiting, which came in great schools and were easily taken with the old pipi baits or the new baits of beach worms which few could catch.

In 1920 a few permanent shacks had been erected to house the large groups of holiday makers. The tenure of the land did not encourage better types of buildings and so the simple shack sufficed.

Until 1916 it was possible to drive out onto the headland along a high sandbank that extended from the Reserve to the headland and cut off Middle Creek from Bonville Creek. Heavy seas in 1916 so eroded the sandbank that Middle Creek flowed freely through the new opening which needed only a few digs with a spade to let the built-up waters of Middle Creek flow through and scour an opening into Bonville Creek.

In 1912 a small store opened during the holidays. By 1919 this store became an all year round store, still catering for large crowds over the holiday periods.
Sawtell township are had been selected by John England as a cattle run in 1906, and was sold to Oswald Sawtell for £500 early in the (nineteen) twenties. After subdivision and road making the depression was upon the newly created subdivision. Land sold for half price and less and although there were satisfactory sales, the prices were low and they attracted a group of shack builders and for a time attracted railway workers on holidays.

They had little need of modern kitchen equipment and for a few shillings per week were let to this group of tenants. I think we can fix the date of the decline in fishing with these holiday makers who took large numbers of under-sized fish and so began the reduction of legal sized fish.

In 1927 Sawtell became the official name of the village, named after the land owner. A few shops were set up but it was difficult to attract customers. With the opening of the roads, Coffs Harbour took over most of the trade of Sawtell which became a small subsidiary of Coffs Harbour. Sawtell has gradually risen in status with new homes, new subdivisions and shopping centres towards Boambee Creek, while the old Sawtell remains substantially the same.

An extension of the village across the roadway leading from the township will see the two centres ultimately link up to form a single town.

The development of land, according to a plan, in the upper reaches of Boambee and Bonville Creeks will round off the expansion of the Sawtell area.
1915 the reserves popularity with campers was legendary throughout the district. In later years the tents became shacks then holiday homes.

Earl road making the hard way with horse and dray

Significant Dates

1861 Government surveyors set aside a future reserve area.

1863 Walter Harvie grazed his bullock team on this reserve Bonville.

1871 Bayldon selected land presently called Lyonville.

1880 Phillip McAteer owned the Raleigh Flats his overseer Mr Childs.

1880's Settlers Robert Reedy, Mr Lyons,

1880's Gold was discovered where the railway crosses Middle Creek in the eighties, and three miners did well with alluvial gold washed down the creek from the south.

1904 20th August Bonville Reserve was gazetted for recreational purposes.

1906 John England selected land as cattle run.

1915 The campers on the reserve during the Christmas time numbered over 200 families. Capt Cockle, dressed in his kilt, would pipe out The Old Year and the New Year in.

1923 Bonville Creek Station renamed Bonville.

1925 Osmond Campbell Sawtell gained approval for his subdivision east of the railway line.

1927 On the 25th November the name "Sawtell" was officially gazetted.
Early road building using traction engines and gravel roads 1940 to 1950's

Oswald C Sawtell

The Sawtell family emanated from the Dorrigo. Oswald C Sawtell (Ossie) first became interested in the Bonville Reserve area when he acquired some land near there in order to run dairy stock. With the nearby Reserve being such a successful holiday destination, he decided to tap the potential of the area and establish his own village, thereby becoming one of our first entrepreneurs in tourism.

The intended township location, which adjoined the dairy run, had been selected by J R G England in 1906, two years after Bonville Reserve was gazetted. Ossie bought the selection from England in the early nineteen twenties for £500 ($1000) and applied to Council to begin bringing his dream to fruition. Council was supportive but in their wisdom included two conditions on the venture; he was to build a connecting bridge to the Bonville Reserve, and also had to construct a rail platform for the convenience of holiday makers. Bonville Creek station, later renamed just Bonville station, was too far removed, and Boambee siding was also considered unsuitable.

The Advocate on May 6, 1925, reported the building of the new station as being “well under way” and Ossie doing “brisk business”. No doubt the bridge was also in use by then. With the cold winds of the Great Depression still some years away Ossie was able to sell a number of blocks, mainly to buyers who normally camped at the Reserve, but saw advantage in building their own frugal holiday huts.
Others followed. It is claimed in the Advocate on May 6, 1925, the Gwydir branch of the Country Women’s Association acquired six blocks, for example, where they intended to build a hostel for country women. According to the Advocate in August 1935, however, it is stated that Ossie had given an acre of land to the cause. This article says the Rest Home was completed in 1935, “one of the show places of Sawtell”.

Ossie not only decided the railway station should be named as Sawtell, but referred to the whole development as Sawtell, the name that was finally made official by gazetted on November 25, 1927. It was also his decision to name the streets as avenues with numerical prefixes, with the main street being 1st Avenue. There are now 25 Avenues between Sawtell Beach and Sawtell Station.

Sawtell village quickly materialised, with businesses such as the hotel, a boarding house and shops and even a theatre becoming established in 1st Avenue. This launched the commercial centre that Bonville Reserve lacked. However, during the Depression land values fell to half, and it wasn’t till after the economic growth following the second World War that Sawtell was able to flourish into the boutique suburb so many permanents and tourists now enjoy. Ossie Sawtell would have been very happy with what his dream village has now grown into at the start of the 21st century.

Merv Pitman
Sawtell Fun Day held each year

Sawtell's pride and joy the "Old Fire Engine"

Sand and Surf

Sawtell Surf lifesavers 1950

The Sand Sculptures were made by Mr Suchomlin in 1962. His sand art was world renowned. Each year he would donate a sand sculpture to his beloved Sawtell community in the spirit of Christmas.
Athol Bray 1st shop at Sawtell 1940
now call the "Hill top Store "by the locals

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