

## ELTHAM REMINISCENCES ... Tim Erickson

Patrick Carrucan (born circa 1831 in Doolin, County Clare, Ireland) and Mary O'Brien (born circa 1838 at Ennis, County Clare, Ireland ) were married in 1856 at Ennistimon, County Clare, Ireland. At that time, Mary was 19 and Patrick was 27. Later in that same year of 1856, they left Ireland, bound for Australia to join Patrick's sister Bridget and her husband John Coleman in Eltham.

Bridget and John had already purchased and established their own farm in what is now known as Coleman's Corner in Eltham North. It was not long before another farm of some 20 acres (3 large paddocks and a house block) was purchased for the new arrivals, in Dalton Street. An existing farm, it was bought by the Carrucans late in the 1850s from a family called Ball. Initially Patrick and Mary lived in a hut on the farm but Mary's father Sylvester O'Brien came out from Ireland and built them a house at the corner of Dalton St and Bible St.

Patrick and Mary arrived in Melbourne during the great gold rush period of the 1850s when large numbers of men walked from Melbourne up through Eltham to the Caledonia diggings. To the local Eltham farmers, the gold rush provided the chance for some prosperity with high prices for meat, potatoes and grain and the chance to carry goods to and from the goldfields. Patrick holdings soon swelled to incorporate a second property of some 15 acres on Main Road near Bridge Street and a third property of around 100 acres in Research.

Patrick and Mary also owned an orchard but its whereabouts is uncertain. One school of thought is that it was out of town but the family view was that the orchard was opposite the Dalton St farmhouse where the dairy was subsequently built, in what was called 'the bottom paddock'.

Mary and Patrick quickly established a family of 10 children: Bridget (1858), Michael (1860), Susan (1862), Patrick (1864), Thomas (1866 died as an infant), Mary Anne (1868), Catherine (1869), Margaret Theresa (1871), Frances (1872) and Annie (1874).

With such a large family, the lines of descendants quickly grew. Of the girls, Bridget married Patrick Lane in 1875, Susan married Edward Kent in 1881, Mary Anne married Jeremiah Lodge in 1895, Catherine married Laurence Foley in 1900, Margaret Theresa married Edward Bourke, Frances married Thomas Keane in 1896 and Annie married James Calnin in 1897. Thus direct descendant lines included Carrucans, Kents, Lodges, Foleys, Bourkes, Keanes and Calnins. But more of that later.

A wonderful insight into the life of an Eltham farmer can be gleaned from a personal diary, kept by local farmer John Sweeney.

Monday July 2, 1883	Ploughing
Tuesday – Thursday	Cutting wood for Melbourne
Friday	Mary Murray here
Saturday	At home all day
Sunday	At home. Mary Benson here in evening.
Monday – Tuesday	Ploughing
Wednesday	Ploughing
Thursday	Working about farm
Friday	Ploughing for Mr Gordon
Saturday	Working at home.
	Annie and Agatha went up to Murrays in evening.
Sunday	At home all day
Monday	Ploughing in morning.
	Went to Mrs ? funeral in evening.
Tuesday	Ploughing for Mr Gordon
Wednesday	Mick (Carrucan) went to Melbourne with wood
Thursday	Ploughing for Mr Gordon

The diary goes on with monotonous regularity. The diet was one of cutting wood, ploughing, planting or digging up potatoes, taking produce or wood to Melbourne to sell and the various special occasions when someone visited or the family visited someone. This was subsistence farming at its purest – nothing excess, everything done with a reason and to an end. With large families of up to 10 children, it was without doubt a continual struggle to make ends meet and put food on the table.

The diary also lists the cost of labour in shillings.

1 Day Ploughing	15/-
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1 Day cutting firewood	15/-
½ day carting soil	7/6
Carting wood to Melbourne	19/-

Of special interest to us is a diary reference to Michael Carrucan, the eldest son of Patrick and Mary.

*Michael Carrucan commenced to work for me on Tuesday the 10th day of April 1883 at the rate of fifteen shillings a week. J. F. Sweeney Culla Hill, Eltham.*

When Patrick went to market, he left at 4:00pm and arrived at the market by midnight. Mary (who was said to be illiterate) would accost the first farmer returning from market and ask the price of cherries, etc., so that she would know how much Patrick should be handing over.

As if 10 children was not enough, the family swelled further in the early 1880s when a young Michael John O'Heare was sent to live with the family. Sargeant Michael O'Heare was a policeman who somehow knew the Carrucan family in Eltham. He and his wife Ellen (nee Burns) had twelve children including Michael John who was born in 1879 in Geelong. The young Michael was only about three when his mother died in 1882 and his father was possibly forced to foster out some or all of his children.

In later years, Jack Carrucan described how his father Michael Carrucan took the lad with him on various trips to Woods Point when hauling supplies with horse teams, probably in the late 1880s when gold mining was in full swing in that area. Later, Michael O'Heare became a well known solicitor in Melbourne, a founder of the firm Cole and O'Heare and the Carrucan family solicitor.

Now Woods Point seems a long way from Eltham but local farmers had to supplement their incomes whenever possible, especially during the Great Depression of the late 1880's. At that time able men travelled far and wide in an effort to bring in extra money. One of the Depression initiatives was the building of the water canal at Research and surrounding areas and Michael Carrucan (and probably other Carrucan men of the time) also worked on that project.

Patrick and Mary lived at Eltham for the rest of their lives. When Patrick died on 6<sup>th</sup> October 1894 at the age of 63, his eldest son Michael took over the family farm in Dalton St. His now widowed mother Mary continued to live there for a further 33 years until she died on 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1927 at the age of 90.

Patrick and Mary are buried in a family plot in the Catholic section of the Eltham Cemetery. The current gravestone on that plot (shown below) is a new one, donated by Betty Erickson (nee Carrucan) in the late 1970s to replace the original which had fallen into disrepair. Unfortunately this gravestone, like the original, only honours Patrick Carrucan and does not record the other family members buried in this family plot. Perhaps this will be rectified in the future.



**The final resting place of Patrick and Mary Carrucan**

The farm at Dalton St stayed in family hands until eventually Jack Carrucan, their grandson, died in 1976. As he was the last of the Carrucans in Eltham, what remained of the farm was subdivided and sold and the old original farmhouse was demolished.

Our story now follows the continuing life of the Dalton St farm which passed to Patrick's eldest son Michael. One might have expected Michael to marry once he became the farm owner - he was 34 years of age and certainly an eligible bachelor by the standards of the day. Yet it would be another 16 years before his wedding to Mary Sweeney.

Thomas and Margaret Sweeney were the first freeholders to settle in Eltham in 1838 and the Sweeney and Carrucan families had lived on farms only 2 miles apart. They went to the same Elementary School, they attended Mass together (Mass was held in the front parlour at Culla Hill in the early days) and it was inevitable that the families should intermarry. And so they did on 12<sup>th</sup> October 1910. Michael at that time was 16 years older than Mary but age differences meant little then and many marriages matched younger girls with older established men.

The marriage was celebrated at St John's Catholic Church in Heidelberg and the following photo shows the Bridal Party which included Michael O'Heare as best man.



**The wedding of Mary Sweeney and Michael Carrucan at St John's Catholic Church in Heidelberg. Celebrant Rev Fr. Parker. From left to right: Catherine Sweeney, Michael O'Hare, Michael Carrucan, Mary Carrucan, Thomas Sweeney, Ellen Smith (nee Sweeney)**

Mary moved to the Carrucan farm in Dalton Street and joined in the tough farming life of the day. The horses were the most important pieces of machinery available and teams and drays were prized possessions. Jack Carrucan subsequently kept two beautiful drays in his sheds long after the horses had gone. He could not bear to part with them.



**Two teams of horses in the top paddock at the Dalton Street farm, early 1900s.**

As was the norm in those days, Mick and Mary Carrucan started their family quickly and soon had three young children to care for.

Patrick John Carrucan	born 14 December 1911
John Francis (Jack) Carrucan	born 22 May 1913
Elizabeth Agatha (Betty) Carrucan	born 28 December 1915



**Mary Carrucan with baby John Francis (Jack) at Eltham in 1913**

Following Irish traditions, the children were named after older family members. Pat, as the first born boy, was named after his paternal grandfather, Patrick Carrucan. Jack was named after John Francis Sweeney, his mother's younger brother and Betty was named after Elizabeth Agatha Sweeney, her mother's older sister.

The 1911 Post Office Directory has under Eltham the names of Michael Carrucan (gardener), Denis Carrucan (carrier) and Thomas Sweeney (farmer).

On 8<sup>th</sup> December 1915, Mary's youngest sister Kathleen (Cassie) married Francis (Frank) Carrucan (1872-1953), thus creating a second marital connection between these two pioneering families and a son, Francis Kenny Carrucan, was

born the next year on 12<sup>th</sup> September 1916 at Ivanhoe. Alas, tragedy struck when Cassie died 4 weeks later on 14<sup>th</sup> October 1916 at Culla Hill.

Mary and Mick took in the young baby and the family at the Dalton Street farm grew from 3 to 4 children. The following photo, taken in about 1920, shows the 4 children in formal pose. Although Ken was the youngest, he was soon the tallest and grew into a strapping handsome man who stood well over 6 feet in height. Pat and Jack were more typical of the Carrucan/Sweeney stock and stood about 5' 8" as men.



**Back: Pat (1911-1991) and Jack (1913-1976)**  
**Front: Ken (1916 – 1997) and Betty (1915 – 1990)**

Both the Dalton Street farm and the Culla Hill property were the central points for the Carrucan and Sweeney families, now interconnected with children, grandchildren, uncles and aunts. There was a constant flood of visitors to Dalton Street on weekends from the now far flung clans. The old aunts were especially formidable with their lilting Irish brogue and their strong personalities and independent ways. Jack Carrucan used to delight in telling how, whenever they saw some young woman expecting a baby, the comment would quickly come

*“That poor gal. What brute of a man has done that!”*

But this must be seen in the context of the day. The families were typically large and women were tied to their families by the constant drudgery of cooking, washing, working around the farm and looking after the farm animals. It was a tough life and not one that the old aunts saw in a very positive light.





**A bevy of aunts at Eltham – from left to right, we have Annie Smith (1860-1934), Ellen Hooley (1874-1943) and Nessie Sweeney (1869-1955).**

This photo, taken around 1927, is at the side gate to the family house in Dalton St. and shows the old kitchen behind the fence. The picture shows Pat at the back and from left to right at front, Betty, Ken, Mary and Jack. The rigours of farming life are already telling on Mary who has lost her youthful look and is now around 50 years of age.



Holidays or excursions of even a day were few and far between but the following photo shows one such occasion, at Black Rock visiting the Ryans. Pat, Ken and Jack are in suits and hats in the front. Betty is in the white dress second from left.. Mary is the lady kneeling back right. On the far left is Nellie Murray (born 1907), the sister of Jim Murray (James Eugene born 1911) who was the last of the old Eltham Sweeney relatives to die.



The Eltham Elementary School in Dalton Street (School Number 209) had been started in the 1850's and was just a stone's throw from the Carrucan farm. All the children attended and this photo of the 1921 Grade 1 and 2 class shows some 39 children ranging in ages from about 6 to 10. Betty is fourth from the left in the second row from the front. Ellen (Narna) Sweeney is the teacher on the right hand side.



The boys had to take the milking cows from the Dalton Street farm each morning up to the Bridge Road block and then bring them back each afternoon for milking. Jack Carrucan told many stories of the adventures that this entailed. On one occasion the boys stopped at Burgoyne's shop for some lollies and the cows sauntered off up the road on the well worn trail. Fitzsimmons, the proprietor of the Eltham Hotel nearly had a heart attack when he walked into the main bar and was confronted by a cow. On another occasion, some thunder sent the dog wild and it got into Burgoyne's shop and nearly wrecked it in its frenzied attempts to hide.

With the Depression of the late 1920s putting huge pressure on the working class families of Melbourne, any school related aspirations were put aside by the boys. Each had to finish his education after Grade 7 and move into the workforce and earn a living to supplement the farm income.

First Pat was apprenticed into the building industry but did not finish his time. He was then sent to the block in Research to milk cows and to make a go of it. Alas, the land was poor and better suited to mountain goats and he had little chance of success. He married one of the local girls, Louise Norman, and spent some years there before eventually moving to the Goulburn Valley to find better long term employment in the Railways and State Rivers. He died in 1991 and is buried in Tatura.

Jack was apprenticed as a pattern maker but found that the hours would be shorter if he worked on the foundry floor so he arranged for his papers to be transferred and he trained as a moulder. He then spent the rest of his working life in the foundry.

Ken worked on another dairy farm in Eltham before working as a storeman lumping wheat bags in Eltham and then working for a timber merchant in Heidelberg. He was tall and strong and could hold his own with anyone.

Only Betty was given the opportunity to continue her education. She was a gifted student and the following extract from 'The Advertiser', dated December 24<sup>th</sup> 1931, details the Eltham Elementary School Prize night.

*Mr. Stewart presented the Rhodes Ideal girls' prize, which was presented for the first time this year. This medal was donated by Mr. and Mrs. E. Smithers, to be awarded on the same basis as the medal which has been presented to the boys by Mr. A. Smithers for some years past. The winning of this medal demands not only scholastic attainment, but also those other qualities that go towards making desirable citizens such as efficiency in sport, bearing and character. The announcement that the award had been won by Betty Carrucan was a popular one.*

Betty won a scholarship to Melbourne Girls' High School and from there won a senior government scholarship to Melbourne University. She was the first Eltham girl to go to University and was awarded a Newman College Exhibition. She gained a Bachelor of Arts with Honours and worked as a teacher in an illustrious career that spanned 40 years. She eventually retired in 1982 and died in 1990. She is buried at the Eltham Cemetary near Jack and Ken.



**Betty Carrucan, 1933, photo in Melbourne Girls High School Magazine**

Although Culla Hill was lost to the Sweeneys in the 1930s, the farm in Dalton Street continued in Carrucan hands. Jack had worked long hours in the foundry during the war years and was close to exhaustion by 1946. He resigned from work, used the money he had saved to build a modern dairy at the Dalton Street farm and worked with his mother Mary in milking a herd of some 20 cows. But as luck would have it, 1946/1947 saw a dreadful drought. They were supplying milk to the Eltham Dairy run by Hardings but times were so tough that Hardings could not always guarantee to pay for the milk they supplied. This combined with the high cost of feed for the cows nearly ruined them and they were forced to sell the herd.

Jack travelled to Western Australia for a long holiday and stayed with Tom Lane and his family. It was probably a necessary holiday to help him overcome the draining experiences of the previous few years. Returning to Eltham in 1947, he rejoined the foundry and worked there until 1958. He initially became President of the Moulders Union (an honorary position – he still worked on the floor) and eventually won the paid Trades Hall position of Secretary of the Moulders Union. But Mary's health started to deteriorate so badly that he resigned from this position in 1957 and spent the next 4 years caring for her until she died in 1961.

Sometime in the years after the war, the other blocks were sold off and Dalton Street was left as the one remaining section of the farm.

When Mary died, the Diamond Valley News of November 28<sup>th</sup> 1961 carried the following obituary

*The death last week of Mrs Carrucan, the last surviving member of the Sweeney family, brought a long chapter of Eltham's history to a close.*

*It was in 1838 that her grandfather, Thomas Sweeney, made his home at Culla Hill, a homestead of stone and mudbrick that still overlooks the Yarra the end end of Sweeney's Lane. Mrs Carrucan was born there in 1876, one of the ten children of John Sweeney.*

*When she married in 1909, she went to the house in Dalton Street, and apart from 4 years in Western Australia, lived there until her death. Her daughter Mrs. Erickson is a teacher at Eltham High School, her son Pat is living in the Goulburn Valley and her son Jack lived with his mother, caring for her with great devotion in her long illness.*

*Mrs. Carrucan was always shy of good works in the public eye, but throughout her long life, her character and courage, her kindness and gentleness, gave her a lasting place in the hearts of many friends.*

Jack continued to live at the Dalton Street farm after his mother's death and he dabbled in cattle dealing. But during the intervening years until he died in 1976, he was forced to subdivide the property and gradually sell off sections to make ends meet. Thus the area gradually changed from farming to housing as the suburbs encroached onto the farm.





**This photo shows Jack at the front of the old homestead in the early 1970's.**

The following view of the old farmhouse at the same period shows the ravages of time. It was not possible to walk on the front verandah due to white ant infestation. It was only possible to walk lightly in the front rooms adjoining the verandah as the white ants spread further.



On Jack's death, the remainder of the property was sold off and the historic home was finally demolished to make way for a modern brick dwelling. The house would have taken a lot of money and effort to save and this was not deemed to be a viable proposition. The Culla Hill property, still in continuous use, now remains the only remnant and reminder of those early pioneering days.



Now the old cyprus tree and the stone retaining wall are the only reminders of the farm.