



Balwyn Historical Society Newsletter

April 2018

Meetings

Thursday 12 April 2018 – 8 pm

Speaker: James Nicolas

Topic: The Secret of *Fairyland*, Kew

James Nicolas has written several books on local history. His most recent book was on a house in Kew which was known to children in Kew and neighbouring suburbs as *Fairyland*.

Thursday 10 May 2018 – 8 pm

Speaker: Isabel Simpson

Topic: The Three Ms – Mitchell, Melba and Monash

Isabel Simpson, an accredited tour guide, will offer an illustrated peek into the lives of this fascinating trio. Isabel has designed and conducted many tours of the City of Melbourne.

Thursday 14 June 2018 – 8 pm

Speaker: Richard Peterson

Topic: Balwyn Bungalows

**All meetings are held at the Balwyn Evergreen Centre,
45 Talbot Avenue, Balwyn**

Email: balwynhistory@gmail.com website: www.vicnet.net.au/~balwynhs

Recent Speaker – Andrew Kelly

Andrew Kelly took us for a leisurely pictorial meander along the Yarra River and through the early years of Melbourne's history when the river and the growth of Melbourne were intertwined. He engaged the audience with a quiz on some of the facts and figures relating to the river. He then showed us how the growth of Melbourne had an impact on the river as gold was discovered at Warrandyte and industries set up along its banks

Andrew had a wonderful collection of pictures and maps which documented the changes to the course of the river after it was

diverted to provide a shorter route between the bay and the docks as well as maps showing the development of the Fisherman's Bend area.

He also spoke about the role played by the Yarra today in supplying water from its catchment area to Melbourne and surrounds. Several of our members were also able to contribute to the discussion of how Melbourne Water is involved in the linking of dams such as the Upper Yarra dam, the Thompson River dam and other catchment dams.



Horse drawn drag which conveyed visitors from the Mont Albert tram terminus (Corner Whitehorse and Union Roads.) to the Wildlife Sanctuary in Greythorn Road in the 1940s. Source: Ken Lyall

German speaking Immigrants: The Finger and Fankhauser families (Part 1)

By Marilyn Poole

Introduction

This article is the first of a series in which I will discuss the migration to Australia of the **Finger** and **Fankhauser** families and their early settlement in Hawthorn, Balwyn and Doncaster. I will select just a few family members with connections to Boroondara and nearby areas as these are very large families and it is not feasible to take all into account.

In the early years of the 19th century there was political and economic instability in much of Europe. The Napoleonic wars ended in 1815 and rising prices and insufficient work for returning soldiers led to economic difficulties especially in areas such as Prussia. Many people emigrated because of unemployment, crop failures and for political and religious reasons. The 'Old Lutherans' opposed the forced union of the Calvinist and Lutheran churches to form a new state church with the introduction of a new prayer book. Those who tried to continue with the old ways and opposed the union of churches were persecuted and property confiscated. As Glenda Dovile (2003 p. 5) writes at the beginning of her family history of the Finger family that during the 1840s their lives became difficult as 'there was economic collapse, famine, religious intolerance and revolution'.

The **Finger** family came from Silesia, then a province of Prussia later part of Germany. In World War II Silesia was invaded by Russia and most of the German speaking population were expelled and many were murdered. This area is now part of Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

The **Fankhauser** family originally came from Lanersbach, Zillertal, Tyrol, Austria. In 1837, about 400 people left the valley of Zillertal in order to escape persecution for their Protestant beliefs, many of these exiles finding a home in Silesia where they established a 'colony of faith'. They were offered housing and land near Michelsdorf, Silesia (now Myslacowice, western Poland) by King Friedrich Wilhelm III of Prussia. Johann Gotthard **Fankhauser**'s family were among those who left Zillertal for Silesia.

The decision to emigrate must have been a difficult one as Christian Benjamin Finger was middle-aged and it was courageous for him and his family to search for a better life free from religious persecution. The safe haven that the Fankhauser family had found in Silesia changed with the death of King Friedrich Wilhelm III and they, too, found that religious persecution would drive them from Silesia to migrate to Australia.

Emigration

The question of German immigration to the Port Phillip District was raised in 1846 (Darragh & Wuchatsch 1999 p. 2). An editorial in the *Port Phillip Gazette* in December 1846 referred "A healthy, useful and moral immigration has been taking place during the last five years between Germany and South Australia. Our Adelaide contemporaries speak in the highest terms of their German colonists – they are most industrious, temperate and peaceable and their habits unexceptionable..." (Ibid p 1)

Large groups of German speaking immigrants began to arrive in Victoria in 1849. William Westgarth was the leading figure in organising German immigration to Victoria and was Convenor of the German Immigration Committee formed in 1849. Westgarth was a merchant, financier,

politician and historian and left Leith in Scotland in 1840 for a new life in Australia. He was impressed by the quality of German immigrants to South Australia and ‘persuaded the colonial land and emigration commissioners to subsidize the emigration of German “vine dressers, agricultural labourers and shepherds” to Port Phillip and made the recruiting arrangements in Germany’ (Serle 1976). The first ships from Hamburg arrived in 1849. In March, 1850, some German and Wendish farmers established the Westgarthtown settlement (part of Thomastown since 1900). Other groups settled in Hawthorn, Richmond, and Boroondara and also founded a community in what is now Doncaster.

It is interesting to note that on Christmas, 1850 so soon after their arrival, these German speaking immigrants introduced the tradition of the Christmas tree and set up the first Christmas tree under the Southern Cross in Melbourne. They continued the traditions of their home-land and held a religious service, sang hymns, distributed gifts to children and were assisted in their efforts by English officers and friends (Darragh & Wuchatsch 1999 p.84).

Both the Finger and Fankhauser families travelled to Melbourne on the immigrant ship the *Pribislaw*, a 350-tonne barque, which left Hamburg on 23 August 1849 with 223 passengers (Wuchatsch 2010). On board was Christian Benjamin Finger together with his wife and six children plus three from his previous marriage. Also on board, was Johann Gotthard Fankhauser who travelled with his wife and 4 children and two single Fankhauser males. (Wuchatsch Passenger list of *Pribislaw*). The original passenger list of the *Pribislaw* has not been found. The embarkation list would have been prepared in Hamburg but apparently lists pre-1850 have been lost or destroyed. Reconstructed passenger lists have identified 183 of the 198 passengers who arrived in Melbourne (*Pribislaw* 1849/50 Passenger list).

The voyage was arduous resulting in the deaths of two adults and ten children so that the passengers forced Captain P. W. Niemann to make an unscheduled stop in Rio de Janeiro on 27 October 1849 (Wuchatsch 2010). The passengers signed a petition which they sent to the Hamburg consul in Brazil regarding the quality of and shortage of food on the voyage so far. Although the consul could not help them, the Brazilian authorities were prevailed upon to investigate the passenger’s complaints regarding the food.

Our ship bread consists mainly of pea flour and is of the worst quality, that is, hard as stone, totally mouldy and decayed and interspersed with worms...only a small portion of it was consumable...the peas and pearl barley were mainly stale and mouldy...The drinking water, being the main part of the provisions, would have stayed fresh, if it had not partly been filled into barrels which had formerly been used for fish oil and other things and therefore added an unbearable taste to the water and made it undrinkable...The butter is of the worst quality and hardly worthy of the name butter. About this we only remark so much that the people on board collected it in kegs in order to use it as wagon grease in Australia...But to show what importance butter and bread have for us, we give our daily meals here: for breakfast, coffee with bread and butter; for lunch, meat and vegetables; and for dinner, tea with bread and butter. Thus, we are dependent on bread and butter for the majority of our meals. The existing flour is mouldy and part had to be given to the pigs and part thrown overboard...Brazilian civil servants came on board our ship, investigated the existing leftovers of our provisions, and had them thrown overboard because they were rotten. Worms were even found in the vegetables and maggots in the butter (excerpt from a passenger’s journal reproduced in Wuchatsch 2010).



PRIBISLAW aka PRIBISLAW 1850

from Hamburg 24 - 08 1849 via Melbourne 18/2/1850
Captain P.W. Niemann, arrived Port Adelaide on 1-03-1850

Passengers (19 in steerage - names not listed)

BERNDT, Dr - cabin LEMKE, G - cabin

Not only did the passengers complain to the Consul in Brazil, they also wrote to the authorities in Hamburg regarding their treatment on board. Passengers also sent a long letter of complaint back to Hamburg while they were in Rio de Janeiro (signed by 57 passengers) which was published in a Hamburg newspaper and received publicity in other papers (Ibid). The *Pribislaw* finally left Rio de Janeiro on 2 December 1849.

The *Pribislaw* arrived in Port Phillip on 2 February 1850 as reported in Shipping Intelligence in *The Argus* (Monday 4 February 1850 p 2). Many of those families aboard settled in Westgarthtown (now Thomastown).

The Finger Family

Christian Benjamin Finger was born 19 January 1799 in Michelsdorf, Landeshut, Silesia, Prussia. He was brought up on a farm and attended Michelsdorf Evangelical School where he learned reading, writing and arithmetic (Dovile 2003 p. 53). In 1820, he married Maria Klara Lorenz in Michelsdorf, however she died young leaving him with three children. About 1826 he married Caroline Friedericke Rumler who was born in Hermsdorf, Silesia in 1803. In 1828, they moved to Quirl, where she and her husband raised the three children of his previous marriage plus eight of their own. In 1838, Christian built a farmhouse on his property (Ibid).

Following their arrival at Port Phillip, the family organised themselves quickly. The two older children of the previous marriage (Christian Gottlieb and Henriette) moved to Richmond where Henriette married in June and Christian Gottlieb married in November 1850 (Ibid. p.57). The rest of the Finger family joined other German speaking families all of whom had travelled on the *Pribislaw* (including that of Johann Gotthard Fankhauser), to settle in the as yet to be named Hawthorn (the name Hawthorn first appeared in 1851) (Ibid). Both Christian Finger senior aged 51 and Johann Fankhauser aged 50 were naturalised on 30 December 1850 giving their address as South Yarra. Naturalisation was imperative as they would not have been allowed to buy land in Australia. In 1852 Christian Finger became naturalised again when the Port Phillip District separated from New South Wales in 1851.

A report of the meeting of the *Deutscher Verein von Victoria* (German Association of Victoria) held on 13 January 1851 contained three reports on agriculture, horticulture and bee-keeping and mentioned Christian Finger senior on the River Yarra (Darragh & Wuchatsch p.84). According to Glenda Dovile (p.57), in a conveyance deed dated 19 February 1851 Edward Kobelke (also a passenger on the *Pribislaw*) purchased 38 acres of land, Crown Allotments 45 and 46 which he subdivided into 11 acre lots. He subsequently sold a third of this land in Hawthorn to Christian Benjamin Finger and a third to Johann Gotthard Fankhauser (Ibid). The Finger family planted a vineyard on their land. In the 1850s, these two allotments on either side of the privately constructed German Lane were known as the 'German Paddock'. In 1860 a petition from residents requested that German Lane be properly made and it was named Weinberg Road. In the light of anti-German sentiment in World War I the road was later renamed Wattle Road, Hawthorn.

In February, 1853 Christian Benjamin purchased another 13 acres on what is now Wattle Road for £133 and later purchased part of Crown allotment 64 on the corner of Glenferrie and Oxley Roads, Hawthorn (ibid). By 1880 most of the land along Weinberg Road had been sold to German settlers. The Hawthorn builder, Wilhelm Finger (eldest son of Christian Finger senior) and Johann Kaiser, erected many houses in Hawthorn.

According to his grandson, Ferdinand Finger, Christian senior and his sons cleared the native Australian forests and the sawn up wood was sold providing an initial income. The bush was transformed into well-kept vineyards and gardens. It is not known how long the family lived in primitive conditions with back-breaking work. Not only did they clear the land but had to undertake a daily walk to collect water by bucket from the Yarra river which then needed to be boiled before drinking (Ibid pp 57-58). According to Dovile (p. 60) the rate books indicate that by 1857 and 1858 two houses were occupied, with Christian Benjamin living at what was later numbered as 43 Wattle Road, Hawthorn.



Christian Benjamin and Caroline Finger's house in Weinberg Road (now Wattle Road), Hawthorn being restored, March 2003. Source. G. Dovile.

Christian Finger senior made a number of land purchases and sold them to his sons and others (Ibid). By 1854, he and his sons were finalising land transactions in Doncaster and in Richmond. By the late 1850s Christian senior had purchased lots 6, 14, 26 and 30 of Elgar's Special Survey. On an 11.8-acre property, he established a market garden. Campbell Street now runs down the middle of what was Christian Benjamin's property on Mont Albert Road Balwyn. His son Carl Heinrich Finger (always known as Henry) and son-in-law Christian Volkmann lived nearby. Shortly after this purchase he gave lots 26 and 30 to his son-in-law Christian Volkman a site where Camberwell Grammar School now stands (Ibid).

In 1855 land was reserved in Kew for a cemetery and in 1858 the first Board of Cemetery Trustees was appointed by the Governor-in-Council. The trustees represented the main religious groups. Christian Finger senior was appointed to the first Board of Trustees for Boroondara cemetery in 1858 (Ibid p.47). He continued in this position for many years. The *South Bourke Standard* recorded the meetings of the trustees and Christian Finger attended meetings and was in the position for many years well into his 70s. The second burial at the cemetery was held on 22 March 1859 of his four-day-old unnamed grandson (Ibid).

The Lutheran community were anxious to hold regular services in their own church and the Lutherans were one of the first religious groups to receive a land grant in East Melbourne on which to build their church. A trust fund was established to finance the building and Christian Benjamin Finger was appointed one of the five trustees and donated £30 towards the building and his wife Caroline donated £1 (Ibid p 62). His children were also generous in their donations.



The German Lutheran Church, East Melbourne. La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria

The new church building was dedicated in June 1854 and the first wedding there was Christian's daughter Marie to Andreas Kaiser (Ibid). In 1873, it was decided that the original building was too small and a larger building was needed. As an honoured trustee and the oldest member of the congregation, Christian Benjamin (known as *Vater Finger*) laid the foundation stone for the new building on 17 March 1874 (Ibid). Christian continued to be involved in church and missionary affairs until his death.

According to Dovile (Ibid) Christian senior continued to sell his produce at the Queen Victoria market until his 80th birthday travelling from Mont Albert Road, Deepdene to the market in a spring cart. Around the time of his 80th birthday his horse "played up" and he decided to retire.



Caroline Friedericke Rumler wife of Christian Benjamin Finger c. 1879 source Gwyneth Baker



Christian Benjamin Finger c 1879 Source Gwyneth Baker

Christian Benjamin Finger died in Hawthorn on 5 August 1884 aged 85. His wife Caroline Friedericke died in Hawthorn a few weeks before her husband on 17 July 1884 aged 81. Both are buried in the Boroondara cemetery. The year after Christian senior's death *The Argus* (Saturday 29 November 1884 p.4) reported on the changes since the arrival of the families.

There was once a German settlement in Hawthorn, on the hill behind the Sir Robert Nickle Hotel... The party of Germans who formed that settlement came here in 1850 from Silesia, in Prussia, and bought 40 acres lying on each side of Weinberg-road, at £10 per acre. There were six families, and it is scarcely necessary to say they were industrious. Even the women used to work in the gardens. The 40 acres have long since been subdivided and built upon, and the German families dispersed. Some of the land is still held by Germans. Mr. Finger, builder, of Hawthorn, was a member of one of those families. He recently sold an allotment forming part of the settlement and measuring 60ft by 315ft. for £1,080. There was a building upon the land, but Mr Finger states that the land alone was worth more than the sum paid by the Germans for the 30 acres'.

Acknowledgements

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Sources

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