

The Wonderful Stories and History of 112 Bridle Path Road

By Lyn Benfell

We purchased 112 Bridle Path Road in 1984 in this beautiful Heathcote Valley and have discovered its many stories.

Edwin Mouldey aged 9 arrived with his family aboard the Cressy in 1850. He became a successful speculative builder, confectioner, merchant and land dealer. In the early 1870s in bought a four hectare property on the eastern side of Heathcote Valley. There he built a house, planted fruit trees, plums, apricots, pears, peaches and grapevines.

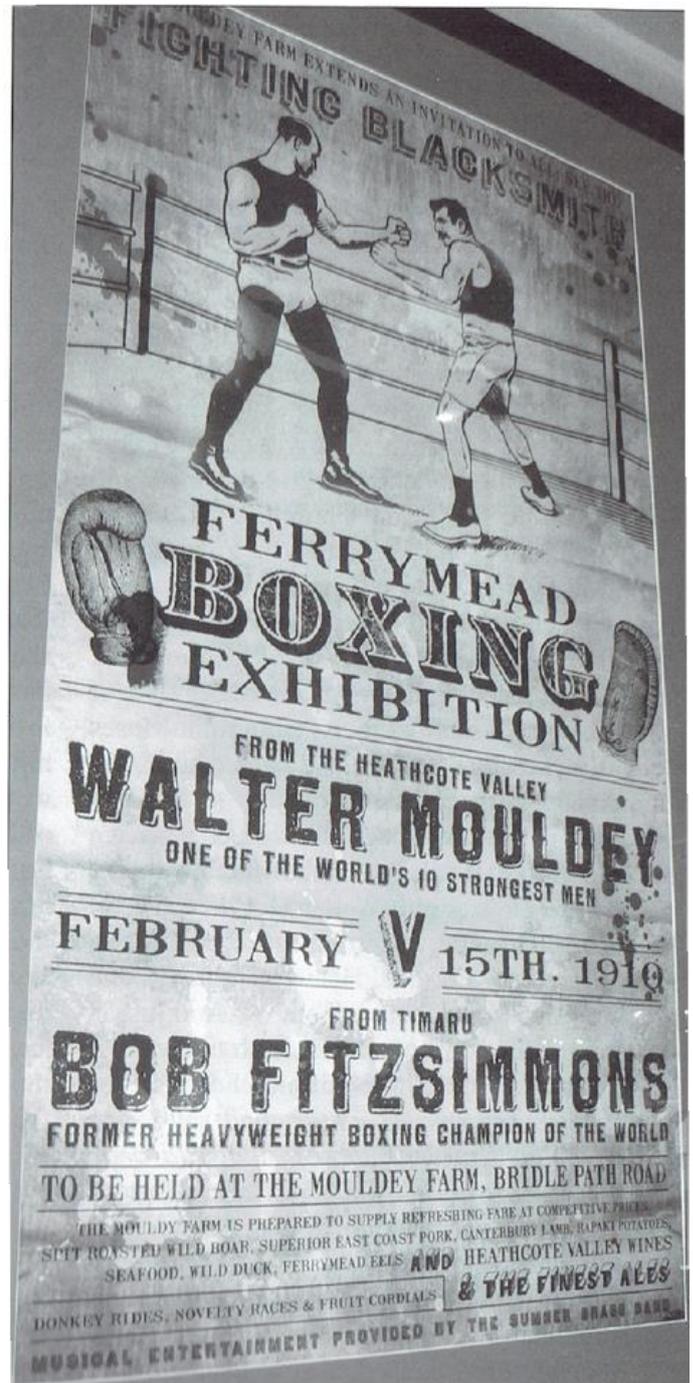
By 1872 Edwin was selling fruit wines from his Christchurch shop, the fruit being sourced locally. In 1878 he married Jessie Lander. They had five children including Walter. Prior to WW1 the vineyard became an important industry and its distillery was the only one in the South Island and remained until 1939. The equipment was then transferred further up the valley to Villa Nova owned by the Meyer brothers.

The orchard thrived and the fruit was packed and taken by dray to the Heathcote station and sent by rail to the market. The packing shed was a hive of industry; the fruit was packed mainly by women with the boss keeping a close eye on things. The pickers worked tirelessly to get the fruit picked while it was at its peak. Walter helped run the family farm.

Walter Mouldey was one of the World's 10 Strongest Men. He maintained his fitness by swimming against the current in the Heathcote river and running up and down the Bridle Path. Boxing held a fascination for him. He built a gym on the farm. It had all the equipment and visiting boxers trained there including Bob Fitzsimmons, former Heavyweight Boxing Champion of the World.

In 1910 Walter Mouldey and Bob Fitzsimmons staged an exhibition fight on the Mouldey Farm.

The Mouldey farm, determined to make it worthwhile, prepared an amazing selection of food at competitive



prices. Spit roast wild boar, East Coast pork, Canterbury lamb, Rapaki potatoes, seafood, wild duck, Ferrymead eels, and of course Heathcote Valley wines and finest ales. Walter probably supplied the wild boars turning on the spit as he hunted wild pigs on Banks Peninsula and the Port Hills. The Sumner Brass band was engaged

to supply the music. By all accounts it was a very successful day.

Even the children were catered for with donkey rides, novelty races and fruit drinks.

Walter wrote four books under the pseudonym of Main Royal. Most of the stories are



of his experiences at sea during what was the transition period of sail to steam. After lengthy periods at sea he would return to the valley, carry out work on the farm and scour the slopes, rock crevices and caves for Maori artefacts.

Water was always a problem as the farm relied on rainwater. This was stored in large concrete tanks one of which, although incomplete, remains up the hill. At times water had to be carted for stock and the household.

On the valley floor water could be found at a shallow depth. An old well digger said he thought water could be found and encouraged Walter and his Dad to give it a shot.

There were many sceptics, Doubting Thomases in the valley.

The well was to be six foot square with the sides boarded up. It was all pegged out and digging began. Walter and his mate were soon six foot down through the soft soil and clay. A windlass was then rigged up with a very substantial brake. A ten gallon drum was lowered on a rope, filled and hauled up. Two men manned the windlass. Well digging stopped at 5 pm. As always there were farm chores, after which a hot shower was welcome.

The diggers were exceedingly pleased with their two days effort but found the cramped working area hard to get used too. Regular trips to the top for a smoke and eats helped with this. The Mouldey women were

all good cooks. The first setback the diggers encountered was a large rock. Fortunately it was able to be broken up into manageable pieces. Excitement when reaching 20ft with the discovery of fossilized moa bones, four pieces leaving a puzzle. Where were the rest of the bones?

The digging continued until a large rock blocked the way. This one required blasting. Once the smell of the explosion dissipated they discovered the shot had done a great job.

It was not all digging. Periodic days were spent in the vineyard and winery. At certain times of the year the distillery was in action under the supervision of the local custom authorities. When in operation it was a day and night job lasting about a week. The distilled spirit was 58-60 overproof run into casks and put in the custom bond attached to the distillery and sealed.

It was recognised that to finish up the job in a fit and proper manner all hands should shout for one another and anybody else who happened to be about. There was a great selection of wines, old, mature, medium, young, red and white, sweet and dry. Each person selected a wine and everyone had one with them. As selections progressed so did the moods happy, gay, earnest until "don't give a damn" stage. At this stage Walter became a Māori chief with a huia feather tied round his head (which came from a turkey). His mate was a Roman emperor with a small wine funnel upturned on his head with a white lily sticking out of the top (the sign of a blameless life). The engineer was a cross between a Beefeater and a Mexican bandit. The other member was just himself with his eyes popping. The last drink was to be one on the house of the lately distilled spirit 60 overproof. A toast was performed to one another and down it went. It was said it would make a gargle for a rhino. High jinks then occurred and it was decided to inspect the well a Māori chief, a Roman emperor and a Mexican bandit. It was agreed more refreshments were required but it came from a different source. The family were bringing down tea and edibles. Four silly looking mutts, a Māori chief, a Roman emperor and a Mexican bandit were all having a day off. The Roman emperor decided it was up to him to pour the tea. Although a lot of cups were spread out, where he poured there were none. Later

all wandered off—one down the drive, the Māori chief to his boyhood tree hut and the Roman emperor to a tent beside the Matipo trees.

After the high jinks of the day before well digging recommenced. Have to wonder what their heads felt like. Just about knock-off time moa stones were discovered. No skeleton bones only the stones. The moa swallowed these small stones the same as a hen swallows grit. The Moa bird a most intriguing study. Bones were found 20ft from the surface then stones another 20ft down. How many million of years had gone by between the bones and the stones?

Interest was shown by the villagers who would come by to watch the operation, most believed water would not be found. One person who came by was an old well digger, Jimmy. He suggested the use of a small donkey engine which made the work much easier for the men on top. After observing for a day or two Jimmy noticed moisture in the contents of the buckets coming to the top. His advice to the diggers was to dig a small hole as deep as possible in the middle and leave it till tomorrow. Jimmy had been a bare-knuckle fighter in his day and had lots of stories to entertain the diggers after they finished for the day. All were up early to see the results but Jimmy had beaten them, there was water in the hole. Now, as Jimmy said, it would be two buckets of water to one of mud. A very hard day for the diggers. They were covered in mud and occasionally a bucket of water cascaded down on them. Walter then had an idea: why not tunnel the job at the bottom? So they worked under the sides of the well making a reservoir.

The news was heard in the village, most of the comments were “its only a fluke”. The Mouldley family were delighted and even Walter’s dad didn’t object to a little drink. The next job was to box the sides in. This was done with jarrah timber which will stand indefinitely under water. Cages were made and lowered on top of one another until the sides were completely boarded in. The artesian well sinker who loaned the donkey engine was sure that artesian water would flow to the bottom of the well. It would not rise higher. If this was so the farm would have an endless supply of water. A pipe was driven down 150ft from the diggings where a stratum of water was found. A pump was fixed immediately over the water and a 13 horse

power Campbell engine was used to pump the water to the top tanks to be gravity fed to the land below. There was now a continuous supply of water for the distillery when in action. The well diggers were given a well earned holiday.

Shortly before 1914 the orchard was sold to the Booths, Joseph and his son Cyril. They planted more stone fruit and sold it on to Fredrick Taylor. During these changes Walter leased the winery.

When the First World War broke out New Zealand didn’t enter the fray swiftly enough for Walter. He paid his own way to the UK and joined up there serving with the Lancashire Fusiliers. He rose to the rank of Lieutenant but was badly gassed in France. He was shot through the chest and also suffered leg injuries from shell splinters. Only his superb physique and dauntless spirit saved him. He was twice mentioned in despatches for “gallant and distinguished service in France” before being invalided home.

Walter continued to produce wine for blending from Californian grapes until 1939 when he retired. Such an amazing man, an orchardist, a wine maker, a well digger, a boxer, a sailor, a soldier and last but not least a writer whose books are now collectors items I am told.

