

# Half Moon Flat Wildlife Refuge, Mongarlowe

By Sandra von Sneidern

This fascinating property has attracted many creative and interesting people over the years, to live among its varied natural landscapes and abundant wildlife.

Half Moon Flat Wildlife Refuge lies between Braidwood and Morton National Park on the Mongarlowe River; a tributary of the Shoalhaven. A long way back in geological time as the Mongarlowe River meandered through Half Moon Flat it formed an oxbow. Later the river broke through the high rocky ridge producing a 'headland', now known as 'Sydney Heads', leaving lagoons with deposits of gold in the bypassed riverbed.

## Early goldmining

In 1852 gold was found near Mongarlowe and the influx of goldminers, both European and Chinese, subsequently affected the surrounding landscape along the river and its tributaries. Often, when the Europeans gave up, the Chinese moved in and meticulously worked over the same ground with good results. They used tailings to carefully construct vertically stacked stonewalls to either facilitate drainage, dam up water supplies or to keep rainwater from the workings. Unlike the Europeans, the Chinese were well organised and worked cooperatively. The whole of the Half Moon area is riddled with shafts, tunnels, mullock heaps and the water races used to wash the dirt through the sluice boxes. In the early days mercury was used as an amalgam to extract the gold. Some mercury is probably still in the soil while tests have shown its presence in the Mongarlowe River. Later on cyanide was used to extract the gold.

James Williams and William Mc Dowell were the first to purchase land on Half Moon Flat. John Feagan built the only large house in the area in 1863—a substantial two storey stone building called The Brook which at one time was run as a dairy farm. Feagan's daughter, Eleanor, married James Richardson and their son Edwin Arthur also lived there with his wife Mary Seidel where their son, Ted, was born. He became a well-known identity and had many stories to tell about the people who lived around there and Mongarlowe.

## SUMMER

This place's quality is not its former nature but a struggle to heal itself after many wounds. Upheaved ironstone, mudstone, quartz and clay drank dark blood once, heard cries and the running of feet. Now that the miners' huts are a tumble of chimney-stones shafts near the river shelter a city of wombats. Scabs of growth form slowly over the rocks. Lichens, algae, wind-bent saplings grow. I'll never know its inhabitants. Evening torchlight catches the moonstone eyes of big wolf-spiders. All day the jenny-lizard dug hard ground watching for shadows of hawk or kookaburra. At evening, her pearl-eggs hidden, she raked back earth over the tunnel, wearing a wide grey smile. In burned-out summer, I try to see without words as they do. But I live through a web of language.

Judith Wright



*Boronia rhomboidea.*  
Photo: © DECC, H Matthews

In 1902 a dredge was built on Half Moon Flat and worked its way through the lagoons. Water was required for hydraulic sluicing and a flume was built over the Mongarlowe River at Sydney Heads to take water from a race on the western side to the dredge. The flume was 61 metres long and built of wood and the water was then carried through a rock tunnel to the dredge.

As well, there were extensive mine workings along Feagans Creek with water races, huts and vegetable gardens. A bridge was constructed across the lower part of the creek so that miners could walk over to the workings on the other side. The remnants of this can still be seen—if you know where to look.

The Day Dawn Mine on the western side of Feagans Creek was started around 1884 and eventually reached a depth of 122 metres. Due to the high-water table in the Half Moon area, pumps were constantly in use and it eventually closed down in 1908 with the low gold yield making the mine uneconomic.

## Recent history

Half Moon escaped the bushfire that almost destroyed the Mongarlowe Village on the 13th January 1919. Ten years later, with winds from the west, Half Moon was on fire destroying Richardson's and Seidel's properties and spreading to Currockbilly where the school and other houses were lost before continuing through to the coast. Since then there have been no serious bush fires in this area and native vegetation has reclaimed the land, covering the scars of human endeavours.

Ted Richardson remembers the Depression years when the area up and down Feagans Creek was heavily settled, people cultivated vegetables, raised stock and fossicked to keep alive. Mary Harris remembers riding with Harry Neilsen past the many remnants of huts and a large house site that may have been the boarding house run by the Seidel family, who owned the land up to the Half Moon gate. Years later Herman Seidel was murdered by his wife after one beating too many. She was acquitted.

## Beginnings of the Wildlife Refuge

In 1962 Stewart Harris bought Half Moon Flat from Harry Neilsen. It was then bounded by the Mongarlowe River, Bobs Creek and Feagans Creek. The land was added and the old stone house built by John Feagan was restored with the help of a government grant.

When Harry Neilsen wanted to sell the Seidel property which he had bought earlier, Stewart acquired it as well and now owned all the country between the river and Feagans Creek, and from the gate 1.3km down Half Moon Road to Bob's Creek further north. This resulted in a total of 2500 acres on which they mostly ran cattle. This was Half Moon.

Except for a small area near The Brook the country was mostly scrub with some of the ridges covered by an impenetrable blanket of *Alloasuarina nana*. There are very few large trees but much regrowth since the miners and eucalypt distillers disappeared.

Mining turned over a lot of soil, pitted it with shafts, tunnels, holes and mullock heaps leaving the soil denuded and

unproductive with erosion a continuing problem.

There is a wide diversity of animals and birds in the Half Moon area. Swamp wallabies live in the gullies, red necked wallabies are everywhere with grey kangaroos mainly staying in more open country. Quolls have been seen; echidnas waddle around; wombats leave their calling cards and platypus play up and down the river and its tributaries. There are several pairs of gang gang cockatoos; the Rufous Whistler nests here and the yellow tailed black cockatoos scream across the sky. The rare species, *Eucalyptus recurva* and *Boronia rhomboidea*, have been discovered on Half Moon. They are remnants of Ice Age plants also found among the high mountains of Tasmania.

Hunters, fishermen, fossickers and vagrants used to come to Half Moon to shelter in the remnants of buildings or shacks. Stewart Harris was concerned with the influx of people causing damage to the land and the campfires out of control. As an environmentalist, he decided in 1972 to register Half Moon as a Wildlife Refuge hoping to control trespassers. Story goes, a year later he cleared away all the building remnants and shacks.



Red-necked wallaby. Photo: © DECC, H Matthews

## Stewards of the land

The following year, Stewart subdivided the Seidels part of Half Moon into lots of around 100 acres. He wanted to sell the property but also wanted to make sure that only people who were environmentally aware and would care for the land were allowed to buy it. Stewart interviewed the prospective purchasers (much to the amazement of Phil Shoemark, the local estate agent) to sound out their attitude to the environment. If they 'passed muster' each was required to sign a Wildlife Refuge agreement with NPWS.

Having met all the requirements, amongst the first people to move to Half Moon were the poet Judith Wright, Solvig Baas Becking a weaver and Alan Geier, a marine biologist. Judith Wright lived here until a few years before her death. She named her part Edge because it was on the edge of Half Moon. The poem *Summer* was written at Edge and in her essay *From the Ridge to the River* she takes a walk around her bush retreat describing the rocks, plants, animals

and birds in intimate detail. Judith never considered that she owned the land—it was hers to care for.

Solvig Baas Becking AM who became a close friend of Judith, built her own home on the property, Mithem, where she lived from 1975. The surrounding landscape inspired some of her most outstanding woven floor rugs—*Gum leaves*, *Rusty Iron* and *Rain on my Dam* amongst many others. Some of her floor rugs are held in national and state galleries. They all express what she saw around her. On her property mining in the past has caused huge erosion problems. A 6metre actively eroding gully was sending tonnes of sediment into Settlers Flat Creek. Mongarlowe Landcare together with the Catchment Management Authority (CMA) worked to alleviate the situation with a 400mm pipe attached to a sump taking water directly to the creek and the surrounding bank revegetated with trees, scrubs and *Lomandra* native to the area.

From 1985 the rest of the property was sold, except for The Lagoons. All the incoming owners signed a Wildlife Refuge Agreement. In this way Mal and Jenny Sharpe, Pru and George Ingham, both designers in wood, Roger Ford a filmmaker, Jill Ford, Ailsa Korten, a statistician, John Real and Anthony Maxwell became part of the Half Moon Wildlife Reserve. Christine Bot an artist and her husband Sasha Grishin eventually bought The Lagoons a few years later.

Half Moon has had its share of fighting threats to the environment and this continued with a meeting on 15th February 1986 when several people from Half Moon met at Judith Wright's home to fight against proposed gold mining development and dredging lease of the Mongarlowe River. Their concern was for the Macquarie perch and spiny crayfish as well as the platypus. There was a danger that dredging in particular would stir up the mercury lying in the sediments of the river which together with the resulting turbidity would threaten these populations. Although the Tallaganda Shire Council had given consent this was later quashed in the Land and Environment Court.

Since then, the original group has expanded becoming the Friends of the Mongarlowe River Inc. and still includes 11 Half Moon residents many of whom are founding members. The aim of the organisation is still the same—'to work for the protection of the Mongarlowe River and its catchment areas, and the maintenance/improvement of its quality.' The present ongoing project is to assess the presence of the now nationally endangered Macquarie perch, its

distribution and habitat under the tutelage of Mark Lintermans a Senior Aquatic Ecologist with Environment ACT.

The Macquarie perch requires a clean river with clear access across riffles in order to spawn and multiply.

Cattle have been largely removed from much of Half Moon over the last 30 years, except for some stock on cleared country. This has allowed the country to revert to a more natural ecosystem.

Half Moon was a Wildlife Reserve with multiple owners in 1985. Since then some of the original owners have sold or subdivided their property. However nearly all the new owners and residents, have pledged to carry on the intention of the original Half Moon Wildlife Refuge.

We all know one another and have a common purpose—to keep Half Moon as a natural environment, a refuge for plants and animals.

### References:

- Roger McDonald, ed (1990) *Gone Bush* Bantam Books—Includes *From the Ridge to the River* by Judith Wright
- Judith Wright (1994) *Collected Poems* Angus and Robertson - Includes *Summer* (reproduced with permission)
- Barry Mc Gowan (1996) *Bungonia to Braidwood* self-published
- Bruce Russel (1994) *Mongarlowe and the Little River Goldfields* Braidwood and District Historical Society
- Judith Wright's Archives-Friends of the Mongarlowe River National Library - includes *Meeting on 15/02/1986*
- Solvig Baas Becking—*A retrospective Catalogue* from Goulburn Regional Gallery
- Netta Ellis (1997) *Braidwood Dear Braidwood* self published

### For information and anecdotes the following people have been invaluable:

- Mary Harris—the wife of Stewart, who lived on Half Moon for many years.
- Paul Dann who lives on Half Moon and has detailed knowledge of mining sites and activities over the whole of Half Moon.
- Solvig Baas Becking, Mal Sharp, Prue Ingham and John McGrath all contributed vital information about the area.



Mongarlowe River. Photo: © DECC, H Matthews