



*Reminiscences on A History of Spencer: Ma Hannah*



*a: Ma Hannah's boatshed*

*b: Ma 'Girlie' Hannah. Stills from Reflections in the River, DVD produced by Betti and Ken Wood, 1996*

Ma Hannah's boat shed was a feature on the river up until 2003. The ferries from Brooklyn used to drop all the fishing parties along the river; stopping at boatsheds at Bar Point, Gentlemans Halt and Spencer wharf.

Mark Jenkins, who worked at Ma Hannah's place for over twenty years recalls how on Friday night or Saturday morning people would travel from Sydney, arriving at Brooklyn via train and then travel by ferry to stay at the boatshed for a weekend of men only time. Ma Hannah's was the last boatshed accommodation on the river, and by the end second and third generations were coming back with their father or grandfather to hire boats and spend time fishing on the river. There was no charge for staying there but you had to hire a boat.

Gladys Cox (Ma Hannah) was a true Spencer local. After her mother got badly burnt when her crinoline dress got caught in a fire, the Cartwrights brought up Gladys. She went to school in Greengrove and then later went onto Spencer school. In the early 1930's she married a fellow from Upper Macdonald River, Arthur Hannah and became known as 'Ma' or 'Girlie Hannah'. Girlie, inherited the boatshed from the Cartwrights who originally owned it and ran a much-loved place on the Hawkesbury. Described as a tiny woman, rough as guts, 'she wasn't backwards in coming forward ... a space was a spade ... and that was that'. In the early days, the boat shed was strictly male territory, no women were allowed but if wives came to visit they could stay over in the house opposite, known as 'paradise'.

The boatshed slept about 18 people with the bunks made out of hessian bags between two pieces of timber. The toilet was a can going directly into the river or the waste was buried in the ground. Down one side of the shed were 4-gallon drums with timber across and a long bench for cooking. In the middle was a huge table made out of local red cedar with turned legs. Mark recalls how Ma Hannah would provide food: 'In winter time she'd cook up a 4 gallon boiler of soup when they'd come back off the water freezing cold and there it was for everyone - open mess'. Water would sometimes lap across the floor, up

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to calf high on a high tide, including once a black snake that came in with the flood.

When Ma Hannah died on 2<sup>nd</sup> march 2003, this style of basic, communal boathouse accommodation on the Hawkesbury ended signaling a new era of tourism. Ma Hannah's boathouse is still there as the renovated Mystaya River Cottage and available for hire for weekend visits or longer stays.

*Thanks to the conversations with Mark Jenkins, Phil Woodbury and Ray Doyle.*