

DID YOU FORGET TO ASK YOUR MOTHER? THEN CHECK YOUR LOCAL PAPER

This article by Colleen O’Sullivan appeared in the *Mudgee Guardian*, 13 October 2014.

My mother was 91 when she died and there are still things I forgot to ask her – about her early life; about those years before I developed my own consciousness; about my father. It is a relief therefore, as I research the *Mudgee Guardian*, to see her flitting across the pages with her golf sticks, or laughing shyly at her 21st birthday, or dancing at St Dominic’s annual ball in her red matelasse and black velvet ball gown. There she goes again at the Rylstone Memorial Hall, waltzing by in sunset crepe and a green velvet coat. And here she is at the Angus Memorial Hall, in cyclamen cloque with gold accessories. How that generation loved to dance!

By the way are you wondering about those fabrics? Matelasse, the Macquarie Dictionary informs us, is a heavy type of cloth with geometric figuring; cloque is a cotton, silk, or rayon fabric with a raised woven pattern and a puckered or quilted look. It was a material world in those days. And a dancing world.

It’s my observation that most people, even family historians, don’t realise just how valuable their local newspaper can be. Oh yes it did a good job in the old days providing padding beneath the lino or stopping the wind whistling through the weatherboards. It was also an efficient tablecloth spattered with bread crumbs, butter scrapings and golden syrup and then scrunched up and thrown in the fire. And if a smoker didn’t have any gumrice cigarette paper then a torn strip of newspaper would do.

But it was the actual news that people in the old days craved from newspapers. They would go so far as calling out to passing trains “paper! paper!” in the hope that someone who had finished reading would throw one out.

Locals liked to see their names in the newspaper, highlighting their achievements or simply their presence. Just as they do today. A newspaper grounded people in their community. And old newspapers give us an insight into those communities – whether we are searching for family or local information; or simply enjoy reading history.

Do you know that the *Mudgee Guardian* has been around since 1890? And that apart from a few periods between 1890 and 1914 it is available on microfilm at the Mudgee and State Libraries. Searching microfilm can be lengthy, tedious work but if you get the bug you won’t be able to stop. I have spent hours, weeks, months, yes even years, researching the *Mudgee Guardian* in pursuit of ancestors. My bookcases are stacked with files of photocopied and typed up material from old newspapers.

What keeps me going is serendipity. Small treasures like a letter written to the children’s column by my 10-year-old father; and an article describing my mother’s 21st birthday.

Nor did I know where it would all lead. I started out pursuing my grandfather in Kandos and ended up writing a book about Henbury Golf Course.

Researching local papers is easier now, thanks to our National Library. They have designed a website aptly titled Trove – “a valuable find; a source of treasure; a store or reserve of valuable things,” explains the Macquarie Dictionary. Gradually library staff are digitizing hundreds of Australian newspapers so that they can be accessed on-line. The *Mudgee Guardian* has recently been digitized and will be a bonus for all family historians in the district. Unfortunately they are only digitized to the 1950s. Privacy and all that!

The National Library has digitized not only newspapers but books, images, maps, music, archives and more. It is more than a search engine for library resources; it provides access to numerous libraries, museums, archives and other research organisations which contain material about Australia and by Australians.

So go ahead, sit in front of your computer and click on <http://trove.nla.gov.au>. Logging in is not necessary but there are advantages for regular researchers who do. There is much to search on this site but let us stay with newspapers for the time being. As an example I searched for my uncle Frank+Hughes Mudgee and pulled up a list of article summaries. Not surprisingly most were about golf eg:

[Captain Frank Hughes Takes Out Medal Round on Mudgee Golf Links](#)

Mudgee Guardian and North-Western Representative (NSW : 1890 - 1954)

Thursday 24 July 1952 p 4 Article

... Captain *Frank Hughes* Takes Out I Medal Round on -*Mudgee* Golf Links ? ? ?

? OQO ? Captain *Frank* ... 418 words

By clicking on the headline two screens came up, one an image of the original news item which can be printed in a number of formats eg JPG and PDF.

The other screen is an electronic translation of the text. By scrolling down you will see that all the search words are highlighted in yellow making it easier to find relevant content. Words are also underlined in the image but are not so easily identifiable.

If the quality of the image is poor (notice all those question marks above), then the translated text screen is usually difficult to read (a problem with old newspapers). This is where you can help our National Library – by correcting the text (press “Fix This Text”) and saving it.

A quick scan of the articles for my uncle showed me some were irrelevant, others repetitive. However further down I struck a little nugget:

[St. Matthew's Convent, Mudgee. EXAMINATION RESULTS.](#)

The Catholic Press (Sydney, NSW : 1895 - 1942) **Thursday 7 February 1929** p 37 Article

... 99, Madge Beer 09, Oliver Plunkott 95, Daphne Byrne 95; Intermediate, *Frank Hughes* 99, John ... St. Matthew's Convent, *Mudgee*. EXAMINATION RESULTS. The following are the scholastic, commercial ... 602 words

The article revealed he got 99 in the Southern Cross Intermediate Exam. That's impressive. But surprise! Surprise! There a few lines above is his future wife, Meg Brown, also with 99 – in the Elementary exam.

You can also search particular editions of the *Mudgee Guardian* on Trove. Use the birth-date of someone who interests you to become familiar with that era. You might not find a birth notice. Births were rarely announced a hundred years ago. What you will get are advertisements which tell you about clothes and medical remedies; columns such as "Events to Come" and "Mainly about People" which tell about leisure, sport and gossip; classified pages that show jobs and prices; reports on churches, clubs and geographic locations; news about sporting events, fairs, and agricultural shows. You'll get minor and major events; local, national and international ones. In other words you'll get an understanding of the world your ancestor was entering.

"But," I hear you say, "I want to find my great grandmother in the paper." Unfortunately that is a lot less likely than finding your great grandfather. It was a man's world back then and women were generally invisible in newspapers unless they were involved in a scandal or went to a ball.

Perhaps you should start with a male ancestor. Make an assessment on how likely they are to appear in the paper. Did he own a business? Was he a farmer? Did he have a particular sporting interest? Did he belong to a club or association eg the Masons? What religion was he? Did he serve on Council or any company boards? Keep your eyes alert as you search. You might not find his name but you'll learn about the things he was involved in. If for example I wanted to know more about my uncle's role in the Catholic Church I would type in Frank+Hughes Mudgee Catholic.

Start with the date your ancestor died and search the paper for one or two weeks after that, looking for an obituary, death or funeral notice, or Return Thanks. You might very well find information that can lead you into previous editions of the paper. If you know a marriage date look for a report on the wedding. If you know where and when he/she went to school, look for exam results and school news at the end and beginning of each year.

Your research will be a lot less time consuming if your ancestor lived outside Mudgee – Hill End, Ben Bullen, Geurie, Gulgong, Lue, Rylstone, Kandos etc. Areas outside Mudgee usually had their own columns so you can whiz through each edition till the locality pops up. Or simply type in Ben+Bullen and see what you find. Or Ben+Bullen and a particular year. Serendipity!

There will always be questions I forgot to ask my mother but there's a good chance I'll find some answers in the *Mudgee Guardian*. They say nothing is as dead as yesterday's newspaper. But I say at least you can dig up your ancestors.