

## Object Story of the Photograph

### Washing at the Lachlan River in the 1920s

By Dorothy Balcomb, niece of Chris Davidson

Permission to use the photograph in the Watermarks Display in Orange has been given verbally by two of Dorothy's cousins, Effie Langfield, and Meg Reynolds, daughters of Mrs Chris Davidson, subject of the photograph

This photograph is of Mrs John (Jock) Davidson (nee Christina Norrie) washing clothes at the Lachlan River. The two boys in the picture are her eldest children, Ian, born 27/11/1919, and Duncan, born 07/05/1922. As Duncan, with back turned, seems to be about three years old, it is likely that the photo was taken about 1925. There was another son, Jim, born 08/09/1924, but he would have been a baby and was possibly at home in the care of someone else on washing day. It is not known who was the photographer but it is possible that it was her sister, Annie (Mrs George Davidson), who was my mother, and who loved her box Brownie camera and took many photos to send back to their parents in Scotland.

Annie and Chris Norrie had migrated from Scotland to Australia in 1912. They were the fifth and sixth of the twelve children born at approximately two yearly intervals from 1881 to 1901 to William and Margaret Norrie (nee Ledingham). The two sisters were accustomed to farming and household chores as they had helped in the rearing of their five younger brothers on the small Norrie farm in Aberdeenshire, Scotland, and had come to New South Wales firstly to help their elder brother, John, and his wife, May, after the birth of their second child and secondly to find work opportunities in Australia. Eventually seven of the twelve Norrie children were to settle in New South Wales. Two older brothers, John in 1901, and Jim in 1911, had already migrated. They were influenced to come to Australia for health reasons in a warmer climate in John's case and for better employment opportunities for farmers than in Scotland. They had an uncle, Dr Andrew Norrie, graduate of Aberdeen University, who had settled in Sydney in 1880 to practise as a doctor and Dr Norrie's family provided his nephews and nieces with a welcoming base in Sydney.

Scotland placed high value on education and early had four universities with faculties of Medicine and many Scottish doctors came to New South Wales in this period. Until the University of Sydney was established in 1880, it was not possible to qualify as a doctor in Australia. Annie and Chris Norrie came firstly to the Cowra district where their two older brothers had settled, working on farms. It was natural that their brothers should associate with other Scottish immigrants in the Cowra district and both sisters worked at times as untrained nurses at a private maternity hospital in Cowra. They had experience in assisting at home births in Scotland as their mother served as midwife to neighbours and all her children were born at home. It was through the Cowra Caledonian Society that Chris Norrie met her future husband, Jock Davidson, a Scottish friend of her brother, Jim.

They became engaged while John (Jock) was overseas with the AIF for the duration of the 1914/18 War. They were married on 15 February 1919 soon after his return from the

war, when he was still in his lieutenant's uniform, at the home of Dr Andrew Norrie in Killara.

John bought a farm, which he named *Mooroobin*, in partnership with another Scot, James Reid. The farm was a fairly recent subdivision of the large *Merriganowry* pastoral station fronting the Lachlan River downstream from Cowra. The home of John and Chris Davidson was a slab hut that was part of a cluster of early out station buildings of Merriganowry, first held by noted Canowindra pioneer, John Grant. These buildings, along with another hut nearby, which has been moved to the Canowindra Historical Museum grounds and has become the symbol for the Society badge, would have been used as huts for shepherds and station hands and dated from the early or mid 1880s. They were originally roofed with shingles before the use of corrugated iron, so that catchment of household water from the roof was a problem. There was probably a well for house water but this required manual turning of the windlass to bring water up in buckets. This home was a rude shock for the young bride, who, though used to hard work, had never experienced such primitive living conditions. Tents were used for extra rooms and her first kitchen was a tent. It was very hot in summer and very cold in winter and Chris pasted, with glue made from flour and water, newspapers and pictures on the interior walls to cover up the cracks and stop the draughts. Pasting pictures on the walls was a habit she continued even on the solid walls of their new home built in 1927.

Chris and Jock had three sons born in the eight years from 1919 to 1927 while they lived in the slab hut. Washing at the river, where there was a ready water supply, became her practise during these years. A ford of the Lachlan River at Merriganowry had developed from the earliest European exploration of the Lachlan. On high ground on the opposite side of the river a Depot for supplies for John Oxley's 1817 expedition of the Lachlan was established in 1816 and maintained there for some months in 1817. This was the first semi-permanent European settlement on the Lachlan and it is now recognised as an important historic site. Near this crossing, where bridges were later built, was a natural beach and this became the recognised swimming and picnic spot for the district until town swimming pools were built in the 1940s and 1950s. This was the pebbly beach used for the washing where shallow water was accessible. The first bridge at this crossing was built in 1915 but washed away in a huge flood in 1916. It was not until 1927 that another low-level bridge was built at the site and so there was no bridge there when the photograph was taken. The picture shows three tubs and three or four old kerosene boxes for supporting the tubs and transporting the dirty and washed clothes in a horse-drawn cart between home and the river, a distance of about 2 kilometres. Washing was done with soap, home-made from dripping (rendered down mutton fat) and caustic soda. The piles of washing on the ground give some idea of the enormous task ahead. Washed clothes were taken home in the tubs on the cart and hung out to dry on a line there. Ironing had to be done with a Mrs Potts or flat iron heated on the kitchen stove.

Mrs Davidson is wearing a full-length dress, as was the fashion of the day, with long sleeves rolled up to do the washing, and a wide-brimmed straw hat to give protection from the sun. It would have been hazardous without another adult to watch the young boys when the flowing river was so close. As she is busy at her task and not looking at

the camera, it is likely that the photographer, her helper, intended the photo to record how life was in Australia for a woman in the early days of closer settlement.

The Davidson family moved to a substantial new house built in 1927 with a laundry equipped with cement twin tubs, a wood-fired copper and rainwater laid on that was caught from the iron roof and stored in an underground tank. However, washing day remained a laborious Monday ritual for women until the advent of electricity.