

Labassa *lives*

Volume 10, Issue 1, 2022

Knowing the Halfords



NATIONAL
TRUST

Labassa

Inside this issue

Knowing the Halfords	1
Vale Betty Hogan (nee Nutting)	4
Distant voices become clearer	5
Danish connections	6
Wild ride	7
Labassa Women	8



Left: Vera Halford. Date unknown.

Photo: Barbara and Brian Morley.

Fred and Vera Halford occupy a special place in the Labassa story. To some they were a 'very nice old couple' who drove an 'ancient car' and kept to themselves. Others, invited into their flat for a sherry, learned about their wartime heroics and exotic adventures. Former resident Andrew Lemon recalls: "I loved listening to their stories. They were like something out of central casting. Nobody would have created them."

Most stories about the Halfords have undergone embellishment over the years. Fred, through his letters and memoirs, remains our most reliable narrator.

Fred and Vera were not "chickens" when they married in April 1955. Their marriage certificate says Fred was 55 and Vera 47. Vera was actually born in 1893, so the bride had adjusted her age by 15 years, an adjustment repeated on her death certificate in 1978. Neither had been previously married and as Fred explained to his brother Bob: "Life was becoming too lonely and as one gets older the old friends drift away and one makes fewer new ones."

"As she is not in 'Who's Who', Fred wrote, "I had better tell you something about my wife. Maiden name Vera McLennan, Australian Scotch extraction, reared and educated in Toorak from a well-to do family I believe. Had a lame and later totally invalid sister who she devoted her life to until she died some years ago (soon after I met her). This left an indelible impression on her from which she is only now adjusting herself.

"Has lived in Sydney for a number of years where she conducted a fashionable frock shop in the heart of the city evidently with success. This she dropped when her sister died. Earlier interest and hobby was motoring and reliability trials some of which she performed with credit. ... during the war was a Land Girl and was a tractor operator instructor. So Vera is versatile. At present her main interest – besides me – seems to be home decorating."

continued page 2

Knowing the Halfords (cont.)

Above: Fred Halford c.1973. *Photo:* Peter Johnson.

The Halfords moved into Flat 4 (Master Bedroom) around 1967 as Labassa was transitioning from a household of migrant families to a population of students, artists and young professionals. Fred was familiar with a more illustrious Labassa: he had been a student at Melbourne Grammar's Grimwade House, opposite the mansion, in 1914.

For more than a decade the Halfords lived with raucous parties, some outrageous behaviour and the lingering whiff of marijuana. They sometimes complained to agent LJ Hooker but mostly enjoyed the company of their young neighbours. The Halfords even attended the wedding of Flat 8 residents Judith Cordingley and Andrew Lemon in December 1975.

The Halfords came from pioneering families. Vera's "well-to-do family" was said to have been the McLennans who operated a flour mill at Mooroopna, Victoria. Any kinship with this family, however, is obscure. More likely, Vera's money came through the maternal line, the Dunne's of Netley Station. Netley Station, a vast pastoral run along the Darling River, was owned by her great uncle Joseph Dunne who left a trust benefitting his nieces. Vera's father, Donald McLennan, worked at Netley before his marriage to Johanna Dunne. Vera's brother, Donald Jr, managed Netley for more than 20 years.

Fred also came from a prosperous family. His grandfather, George Halford, was Australia's first professor of medicine having been appointed to the University of Melbourne in 1862. Fred's parents owned a dairy farm at Kongwak, South Gippsland before becoming wheat farmers at Urana, NSW. However, with six sons and a daughter, the parents didn't have a fortune to pass on and their children made their own way in the world.

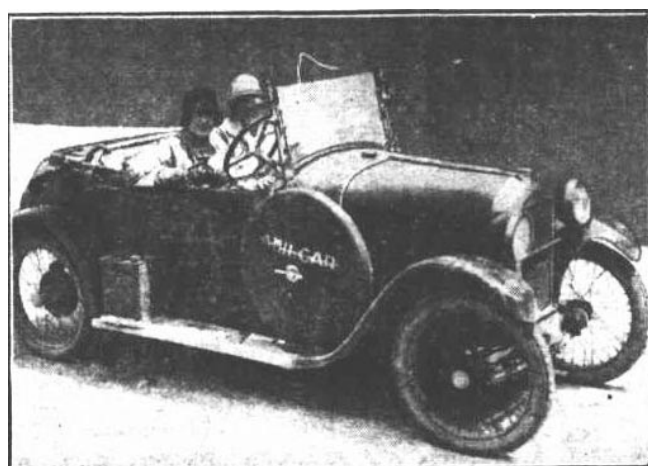
Fred worked variously as a clerk, labourer, gold miner and engineer. In later years he farmed at Melton with his brothers.

Vera had indeed been an expert rally driver in the 1920s. When her French Amilcar lost a wheel on a bend in 1928, it was only her skilled handling of the car that avoided an accident. Most women attended rallies as passengers but Vera was a regular competitor in events run by the RACV, Light Car Club and *Herald* newspaper. She was the only woman competitor in a *Herald* four-day dependability trial in November 1928, and, the only competitor to reach a control point on time by maintaining racing speeds. Even when she failed, her courage and expertise were applauded.



Left: Vera Halford, c.1931. *Photo:* *Herald*, 30 September, 1931.

Original caption: Miss Vera McLennan of Inverleith Court, St Kilda, who is well-known in motoring circles. She was one of the competitors in the recent Light Car Club race and has also taken part in several hill climbing contests that have been organised by the Royal Automobile Club.



Above: Vera at the wheel of her French Amilcar with sister Jessie in the passenger seat.

Photo: *Australasian*, 17 December, 1927.

continued page 3

Knowing the Halfords (cont.)

In December 1927, her car stalled on the worst stretch of road at Mount Hotham. On awards night, Vera received an enthusiastic reception and was presented with a special trophy for her “wonderful performance”.

Vera’s motoring skills were put to use during the Second World War and she was among the initial group of 14 ‘girls’ to learn how to drive tractors. The graduates drove their tractors through Melbourne central in the Empire Day parade of May 1940. The training scheme lasted less than a year as both state and federal governments withheld their endorsement. Tractor driving was considered an exclusively male role.

Fred enlisted in the army in January 1942 eventually attaining the rank of acting Sergeant. He first saw action in New Guinea with the Volunteer Rifles which occupied the goldfields and were regularly bombed by the Japanese. In an interview with the *Camperdown Chronicle* in 1942 Fred said he had seen “our planes bomb Salamaua and also had a birds-eye view of them plastering Jap ships.” He returned to New Guinea following the war and applied for agricultural leases.

We don’t know how Fred and Vera met but it’s unlikely to have been in New Guinea during the Second World War as once suggested. Fred says in a letter that Vera’s sister died “soon after I met her [Vera]”. Sister Jessie died in 1951. At the time of their marriage, Fred’s usual place of residence was Wau, New Guinea and the couple briefly considered living there. Fred wrote: “... I had to quash this idea. In all my time it was hardly necessary to lock one’s house. When I left, or soon after, they were putting bars etc. on their windows, and this would not have suited the wife. She went back to her real estate (houses) interests. Acquire a place in top position, live in it and modernise it and also keeping it old world in style was her long suit. Thus I was a Collins Street farmer living a lot of the time in her house and merely camping out on the farm [Melton] when I had work to do there.” Something of New Guinea did make it to Labassa, however – a preserved head of a bird of paradise, which was apparently used to decorate one of Vera’s hats.

The Halfords seemed to be in complete accord with the gracious old mansion, always maintaining an appearance of style and decorum: Fred raised his hat as any gentleman should. Vera was always beautifully dressed for an outing with seamed stockings, gloves, a stole and fabulous hats.

With thanks to Elaine Auld and Barbara and Brian Morley.



Above: Fred’s official war record photo.

Image: National Archives of Australia.



Above: Fred and Vera, c.1973. *Photo:* Peter Johnson.

Vale Betty Hogan (nee Nutting)

1926-2021

Betty Nutting lived opposite Labassa for 33 years (1941-1974). As her bedroom at No.19 overlooked the mansion, she witnessed many changes. Betty was there when the remaining brolgas and urns were knocked down from the roofline and the large magnolia tree in the front garden was uprooted. She saw the demolition of the mansion's fountain featuring the figure of a boy holding a fish. Her father, Roy, rescued the boy's head and installed it in the family's garden where it was enveloped by a tree. A subsequent owner donated the head to the National Trust.

Betty also watched the construction of the two-storey Kazer house in Labassa's front garden. She recalled that Mr Kazer didn't employ an architect and realised far too late that a light pole in Manor Grove directly in front of his new driveway rendered the garage useless.

Betty's mother, Irene, formed friendships with several long-term Labassa residents including the Chadwicks, Edes and Kingstons. Betty herself took Willas resident David Granger to Sunday School every week. She had plenty of stories to share about neighbour, Barry Jones who lived in the Ontario Flats. As a boy Barry played in the street with all the Manor Grove children. Role playing was popular and according to Betty the kids would say: "I'm Robinson Crusoe" or "I'm Captain Cook" and the young polymath would say "No, no you've got all the dates wrong."

During the Second World War the Nutting family, like many Australians, hosted service men and women in their homes. Betty and her cousin Jean are pictured above with two sailors on shore leave in 1943.

Betty and her husband Brian were founding members of the Friends of Labassa in 1988. Over the decades Betty shared her stories and photos with the National Trust. She passed away on 27 December 2021 aged 95.

Right: Labassa taken from the front garden of 19 Manor Grove (undated). **Photo:** Betty Hogan.



Above: Left to right: 'Ben', Betty Nutting, Jean King (Betty's cousin) and an unknown sailor (1943). **Photo:** Betty Hogan.



Left: Labassa (undated). **Photo:** Betty Hogan.



Distant voices become clearer



Above: Isabella Janet Bowman (undated).
Photo: Sue Samuel.



Above: Dr Amos Walter Bowman (undated).
Photo: Sue Samuel.

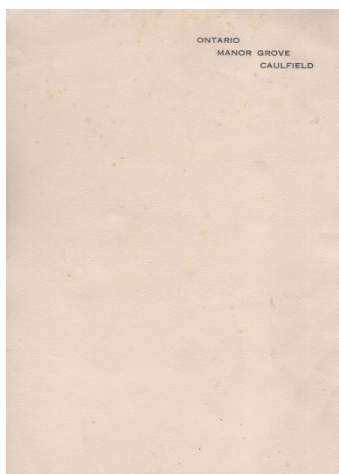
A letter from Sue Samuel

I write to you in response to your article titled 'Distant Voices' on page 8 of *Labassa Lives* Vol. 9 Issue 2, 2021. I am happy to identify for you my grandparents, Dr Amos Walter Bowman and Isabella Janet Bowman, residing in Ontario Flats¹ in 1926.

Amos, from Melbourne, had been the doctor at Holbrook, NSW 1913-1926. (Holbrook was named Germanton until 1915 when a name change was made due to World War I). He married Holbrook local, Isabella Ross and they had three daughters. They moved to Melbourne in April 1926 for their daughters' education. The girls were six, eight and ten at the time. (One went on to study nursing, while the other two studied social work and commerce at the University of Melbourne.)

For the first two months the girls lived with Amos' parents at their home in Balaclava Road on the corner of Labassa Grove, while Amos and Isabella made a trip to Hong Kong and Japan, Amos acting as ship's surgeon. The girls were enrolled at Strathfield College, and I note with interest your 2018 article in *Labassa Lives* on the principal Dora Miller. On their parents' return, the family moved into one of the Ontario flats, while Doctor Bowman opened his medical practice at Lister House, 61 Collins St, Melbourne. The family lived there for the rest of 1926, about six months, until they bought a family home in East Hawthorn, and the girls moved to Fintona to continue their education.

Amongst the family memorabilia in my care there are two sheets of Ontario writing paper, unused although not pristine. We would be happy to donate them to the National Trust.



¹ In 1926, Ontario's former stables rejoined the Labassa Estate when owner Robert Hannon purchased the unoccupied building and converted it into three flats. The new Ontario remained part of the Estate until 1933 when it was sold by Mr Hannon's Trustees.

Left: Ontario letterhead, 1926.
 donated by Sue Samuel.

Danish connections



Above: Painting of Claus Grønn by Peter Hansen.

A portrait of Danish pioneer Claus Grønn by Labassa's 1890 art decorator Peter Hansen has been located. Jason Grønn, great great grandson of Claus made contact after reading an article about Hansen in the *Latrobe Journal*.

Grønn came to Australia in 1854 and worked on the goldfields for many years acquiring an epithet as the 'grand old man' of Danish diggers. Hansen's portrait, completed in 1901, was reproduced in Grønn's book *Gold, Gold! Diary of Claus Grønn, A Dane on the Diggings*. The frame may be the work of carpenter Jaan Kannuluik, Hansen's brother-in-law. Grønn is shown wearing a service medal from the 1848-49 war between southern Denmark and northern Germany.

The painting was reviewed in the Danish language newspaper *Norden* on 25 January 1902: "Mr Hansen has this year but one exhibit – the portrait of Claus Grønn, the excellent quality of which outweighs what he lacks in quantity. The picture is painted with a marvellous faithfulness to the model and a keenness in observation of detail which testifies to Mr Hansen's indisputable talent as well as to the careful training he has received at the Royal Academies of Copenhagen and Munich. His portrait of Mr Grønn will forever hold its artistic value."

Upstairs at Labassa



The Hansen 'portraits' on Labassa's ceilings are part of a decorative scheme. The main hallways on both levels feature the faces of young women who were once speculated to be the daughters of owner Alexander Robertson. These images of the upstairs ceiling, which is yet to undergo conservation cleaning, suggest that this is highly unlikely. The young girls are wearing caps with side pleats which were traditionally worn in Denmark, Peter Hansen's homeland. **Photography:** Jon Rendell.



Wild ride

Owner Alexander Robertson and his brothers John and Colin migrated to Australia in the 1850s. Their brother William briefly considered joining them as a partner in their Cobb and Co. Coachlines business but returned to Canada. John Robertson's letter to William in March 1863 highlights that the wild and ready days of Cobb and Co. were not for everyone. The incident described in John's letter happened shortly after Robertson and Wagner extended their Cobb and Co. operations into NSW.

Bathurst, March 1863

My Dear William

I trust this will find you o.k. and enjoying good health as it leaves me enjoying the same. Hoping I fancy by this time you will be a pretty good ladies man after having a good time of it driving and visiting last autumn and no doubt a continuation of it during the winter season and now you will be in good trim for the Spring work which will prevent you from getting too fleshy. I think you have made a good choice in not comming [sic] to this colony for I do not think that you would like it – the country is now in a fearful state with bush rangers – but this Government are to hang a few of them this month that have been captured. The Gold Escort while on their way to Sydney a few days ago were attacked by the bushrangers about one mile from the stopping place for the night at 9pm. The robbers had a fence across the road and when our driver approached the fence the robbers fired two shots at them – the horses immediately startled and jumped over the fence drawing the coach after them and while cropping, the rangers fired a volley at them which wounded two horses and killed one and one bullet lodged in the driver's coat, another scratched the sergeant's of the Escort. Cheek – but no lives were lost but afterwards we counted 13 bullet marks on coach and horses.

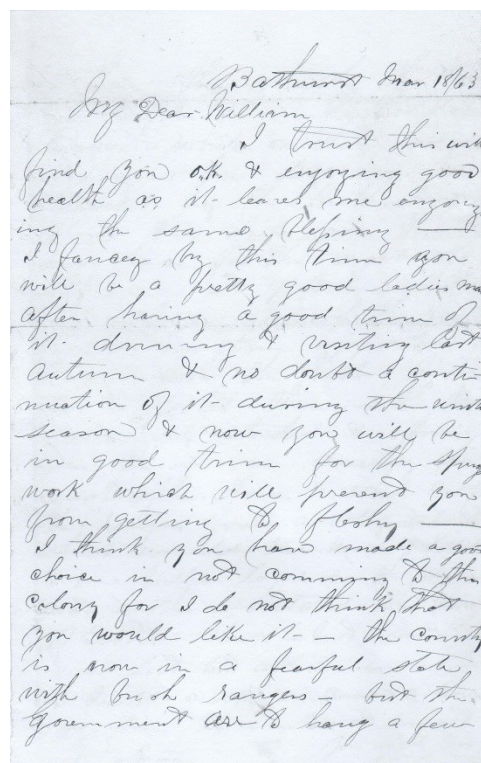
My time is limited at present W. Robertson.

Your aft bro J. Robertson.



Above: John Robertson. John managed Cobb and Co. from Bendigo where the company had offices in the Shamrock Hotel.

Image: Johnstone O'Shannessy & Co. Date unknown.



Above: Copy of the first page of John Robertson's letter to brother William.

Copy: Late Neil Robertson.

Volume 10, Issue 1, 2022

Forthcoming Open Days

Contributions, corrections, information, comments and articles are welcome.
Please forward to:
vickijshuttleworth@yahoo.com.au or
PO Box 363, Chadstone Shopping Centre,
Chadstone, Vic. 3148

Labassa is open on the third Sunday of each month, except in December when it is open on the first Sunday. Please check the National Trust website to confirm dates, times and booking details:

<https://www.nationaltrust.org.au/places/labassa/>



Over 700 people have lived at Labassa, the majority of whom were women. *Labassa Women* is an 8-day celebration of their lives across two centuries – glamorous socialites, intrepid trailblazers and those rendered invisible through domesticity and divorce. Take a walk through time and experience some of these stories as told through imagery, costume and object.

This exhibition will draw on an archive of previously untold stories, photos, memorabilia and the National Trust's costume and object collections.

Meet Vicki Shuttleworth, author of *Labassa: House of Dreams*, and hear more about how these women contributed to the mansion's unique history, lifestyle and survival.

Labassa Women is part of the Australian Heritage Festival 2022, so book early. Don't miss Jane Clifton's reflections on life at Labassa in the 1970s at the special opening event on Sunday, 1 May.

Sunday 1 May**2.30pm**

Opening event with special guest
Jane Clifton

Monday 2 May – Friday 6 May

10.30am – 12pm, 12.30pm – 2pm

Saturday 7 May – Sunday 8 May

10.30am – 12pm

12.30pm – 2pm

2.30pm – 4pm

Sunday 15 May

Encore viewing: Labassa open day

10.30am – 12pm

12.30pm – 2pm

2.30pm – 4pm

Bookings: Eventbrite.com.au

Below: A small selection of the women whose stories will be told as part of *Labassa Women*.

Photography: Peter Johnson, Newton Lane, Peter Watson, Clive Eastwood, John Harland.

