

MERENDA

MEMORIES OF STATE SCHOOL 488, MERENDA. (BY ONE OF THE FIRST SCHOLARS)

In the latter end of the year 1851, the late Moses Thomas, of Mayfield, who had purchased the farm on the Plenty still occupied by members of his family, having a family of young children growing up and being a man highly educated himself, started an agitation to have a Government school established in what was then known as Morang. In his efforts he was ably assisted by the local residents, among others there being Messrs Peter Hunter,, Patrick Nelson (father of the late Ex-Cr Nelson, also of Mr Patrick Nelson, of Doreen), Robert Charles, of Carome, John Grierson, of Yan Yean, Edward Steele, Thomas Rowe, and a number whose names I have forgotten. The result of their efforts were that a temporary school was established in the barn at Carome. Mr Thomas Noble, the first Government teacher, settled in the district early in 1853, and steps were taken to have school erected. This was built on the site of the present school on two acres of land given by Mr Thomas for school purposes. Mr Thomas then headed a list with £25, to which the late John Wilton, J.P., of Wilton Vale, added another £25, and in a short time funds were in hand to build a teacher's residence with school attached. Prior to this, Mr Kane, of the Education Department, attended a public meeting convened for the purpose, and the first school board, under the name of the Board of Patrons, was duly elected. Mr Moses Thomas was the first Chairman and Correspondent—a position he held until he died in 1878, a period of 25 years. Messrs J. Wilton, R. Charles, Peter Hunter, John Grierson, P. Nelson, and Thomas Rowe were the first School Committee. The new Committee proceeded energetically with their work, and about the end of 1853 or early in 1854 school was held in what was then known as the Plenty State School. Not one single member of the Board of Patrons is now alive. The new school being occupied, for a short period Mr Noble taught and then he left to be succeeded by one of the best educated teachers this State has ever had, viz., the late John Higgs. Mr Higgs, in addition to high educational attainments, was also a born teacher, and when after a, few years a new classification of teaches was made, giving those in the service the option of being examined for a first class certificate, Mr Higgs was one of the first, if not the first, in the colony to be examined, coming out with all but the maximum number of points in each subject he was examined in. The late Mr Orlebar told Mr Moses Thomas that he had never met Mr Higgs' superior as a scholar—a great tribute from a competent authority. Mr Higgs, in his connection of about 17 years with the school, passes many students through his hands, who to this day show the benefits of his teaching. Among others, Cr Walter Thomas, of Whittlesea Shire fame, who does credit to Mr Higgs' tuition in all but his writing, which might and should be better; Mr John Grierson, foreman printer of Sands and M'Dougall; Mrs Thomas Hicks; Mrs J. Pratt; Messrs. F. and W. Wilson, of Melbourne; Mr J. Higgs, one of the leaders on the "Daily Telegraph," of Sydney; Miss Johnson, of Yalca; Mr Patrick Nelson, and a number of others. Mr Higgs was ever ready to help on his boys and girls as he called the school children, and when they did well. Mr Higgs for many years was the Secretary of the Cornucopia Lodge of the M.U.I.O.O.F., a lodge which now has about £1000 to its credit and one that has distributed a large amount in sick pay and otherwise in the district. He, in conjunction with the late Moses Thomas and the late John Cockerell, founded the lodge. After many years of useful life as a teacher and a citizen Mr Higgs died and was succeeded by the late Hugh Thomson, who for about 20 years filled the position of head teacher to what was now called

the Morang State School. The reason why the name was altered was that the post office was called Morang and being held at the school it led to confusion. Mr Thomson had a successful career as a teacher, but whilst lacking the educational qualifications and ability of his predecessor, he turned out many capable scholars who in after life have done well, their early education having been gained at S.S. 488, Morang. Among others were Inspector Lewis Thomas B.A., of the Education Department; Miss Isabella Thomas, now in charge of the infant school at Hawksburn; Miss Jane Thomas, in charge of the infant school at Kew; Mrs G. Bland, formerly teacher at Yarram; his son, Mr Albert Thomson, of the Education Department, Pretoria ; and a number of others. Mr Thomson retired many years ago and went to live at Preston, where he suddenly died from heart failure. His family, all but one, now reside in South Africa, the oldest daughter being Mrs. John M. Hunter, of Yarra Glen. Mr Thomson, after a short interval of temporary teachers, was succeeded by M. J. P. Danaher, probably the most successful teacher S.S. 488 ever had. He was here 12 years, and he put through 27 teachers in that period—truly a great record, some of the teachers being of exceptional ability. Among others were Mr Thomas Dickenson, a gifted teacher, but unfortunately being troubled with bad health; Messrs D. and O. M'Donald; Amy, Marion and Bessie Thomas, daughters of Mr Thomas; Messrs F Turley and W. Scott. Mr Danaher seemed to have a happy knack of getting on with his pupils. Although a number of those who first went for teachers have now returned to other walks of life, they still show the effects of the tuition that they received from Mr Danaher. Mr Danaher is now first assistant in one of the largest town schools and is equally useful and respected there. After a short spell of temporary teachers, the present teacher, Mr S. S. Glass, took charge, the name of the school in the meantime being changed again to Plenty. Mr Glass, in the short period that he has been here, has ably upheld the traditions of the school and is equalling the best of his predecessors. In his work, courteous, assiduous and able, I look for a good future for the school if able to retain Mr. Glass' services. Mr Glass is ably assisted by Mrs Glass and his two daughters in promoting the welfare of the district. I always have a warm heart for my old school, and the memories connected with it are entwined around my heart. It is the school where the early education of my children, my brothers and sisters, numerous other relatives, and my wife and myself was carried out. I feel proud of the record of the work done here. As a proof that the work was effectually done towards the end of the fifties, in September 1857, the best scholar in what was then known as the Plenty School was sent by his father to the Scotch College to study for the law. The then teacher of the Morang School (Mr. Higgs) sent a letter to the Principal of the Scotch College saying that the scholar in question was the best of his school. The Principal smiled and put the best boy in the country school in the 2nd Class of the College. Within 14 days that country boy was in the Upper 6th of the College in those subjects that Mr Higgs had taught in his school, and the following year was runner-up at the examination in his class at the College. That scholar to this day has some of the prizes he won through Mr Higg's teaching. Education has advanced with enormous strides since a school was first established in the Mernda district. We commenced with the Board of Local Patrons. This was succeeded for many years by Boards of Advice, which of late years has been succeeded by School Committees, which are Boards of Patrons under another name, but which are in many instances doing good work. S.S. 488 has collected a large amount since a Committee was formed and has a fine new shelter shed. When the late Mr Moses Thomas died in 1878, Mr M. M'Laughlin was for about two months elected Chairman and Correspondent of Board of Advice 134, after which Mr Walter Thomas was elected to the position, holding the office continuously until the abolition of the Boards of Advice. Since when for about 12 months he was only Correspondent of S.S. 488, but is now Chairman and Correspondent—a long record for one family, first the father for 25 years and then the son for 35 years, in all 60 years' service. Of the real old scholars of S.S. 488, Morang, I am sorry

to say but few remain. Among others are Cr and Mrs Walter Thomas, Mrs Holdsworth (Mansfield), Mr Patrick Nelson (Doreen), Mr George Horn (Strathewen), Mr John Grierson (Preston), and Mrs John Pratt (Glenvale). There may be others alive, but I am not sure. I trust the old school will prosper and go on with its useful work. Of one thing I feel certain it would be hard to place it in better hands than Mr S. S. Glass and his two assistants, Miss Thomas and Mr Welsh.

Education is now free to all. In my young days my father had to pay £1 per quarter for tuition for me and purchase books in addition, but what a splendid thing it is for the children to be able to receive such an education free. More shame to those parents who do not allow their children to take advantage of it.

[Funding for digitisation contributed by State Library Victoria]