

BILL HAMBLING – OLD-TIME WOLFRAM CAMP CARRIER

by Edward R. Healy

Grandson of Amy Alice Hambling (Healy) the younger sister of William James Hambling

Leadingham Creek, a Walsh River tributary on the edge of the once flourishing Hodgkinson Goldfield, was the locality chosen by the earliest farmers and graziers in this part of North Queensland. These were folk who had arrived during the gold rush days, and seeing the potential of the land, settled in true pioneering fashion more than a hundred and thirty years ago.

Just below where the "Old Northcote" township flourished briefly, in a picturesque bend of Leadingham Creek where the Port Douglas to Thornborough coach and wagon road crossed, was the home of the Hambling family. Today there remain a few ancient fence posts, a date palm and frangipanni on a ridge overlooking the creek, and below, on the flat, the unmarked grave of the pioneer, John Hambling. Not far away is the marked grave of Frank Leadingham, the carrier after whom the creek was named.

This then is where William James Hambling, the second youngest of a family of seven children was born on June 2, 1888. His father, John Hambling, had been one of the very first to go to the Hodgkinson Rush in the 1870s. A bullock and horse teamster on the Port Douglas road, he had met and married Mary Gallogly, a young Irish girl from Omagh in County Tyrone. A descendant of the Scottish mercenaries who had fought in Ireland against the English, she had first arrived in Victoria but subsequently travelled overland to North Queensland. One of her brothers, Mick Gallogly, later settled at Nigger Creek, Herberton. She and Hambling were married at Kingsborough on July 24, 1878.

Conditions were primitive – education opportunities were below meagre and only provided by a part time provisional school until children were old enough to ride to Thornborough, a few miles away. John Hambling, however, was well educated and is rumoured to have studied medicine in his early years in England where his family had lived in Rendham, Suffolk, for centuries.

His mother, Mary, also had a fair knowledge of medicine and was in constant demand as a midwife tending to the wives of the settlers in the district. Because of demand, both parents were very often absent from home. The older children were left in charge of those younger though at times all lived in dreaded fear of the hostile natives who roamed Leadingham Creek.

As a result of his isolated and independent upbringing it seemed natural that young Bill should go droving at an age when most children were still at school. At home they bred horses for the Cobb and Co coaches, so all the children were naturally good horsemen. The boys as well were above average athletes, his older brothers Bob and Herb in local championship class.

When Bill was 21 years old his father died at Leadingham Creek on May 27, 1910 and his mother not so long afterwards at Mareeba on November 13, 1913. As a young man Bill had gone to Dimbulah and became both coach driver and general assistant to William Johnson of the Junction Hotel. This association continued until Johnson's death after which Bill purchased the coaching and carrying outfit from the estate of his former employer. Bill then continued as the obliging mailman and carrier who plied between Dimbulah and Wolfram Camp for almost half a century.

Bill married Bertha Hamill, a member of a well known Tate pioneer family on September 13, 1916 in Cairns. Over time his family increased by four daughters, Eva (Mrs Ned Ericson) born 1917; Amy (Mrs Adam Hendry) born 1919; Ellen (Mrs Tansey) born 1925 and Bernadette (Mrs Bankie) born 1934.

As well as his coach driving, Bill also raised cattle from his homestead at Dimbulah. These cattle sometimes roamed the vast unfenced district and beyond. For many years he also bred horses for the India Remount trade, but when values fell from £10 (\$20) a head to nothing, he let 600 horses go in one mob. While driving his coach to Wolfram Camp he once commented:-

"See those brumbies?" He points the whip to forty or so wild horses trotting by the foot of a bald faced mountain range nearby. "Well, well, they belong to me if I could catch them."

He remained particularly fond of a good horse and his entries for races throughout what became known as the Northern District Racing Association (N.D.R.A.) territory were a feature of the racing circles of the 1930s.

Bill Hambling was one of the first to recognise the potential of the new tobacco industry and he rented out to prospective tobacco farmers, on very liberal terms, almost all of his land held under completed mining tenure lease. By 1931, the Dimbulah district had become the centre of a tobacco rush, but although some of the best leaf produced in Australia was grown in Dimbulah, bad seasons ruined many of the 120 original settlers. Mostly only the foreigners remained who were too poor to get out.

“Good fellows, yes, yes,” Bill comments.

He also gave an area of land to the Education Department for a new school and cut up further portions in response to the demand for residential sites. In all dealings he was recognised as generous.

A niece of Bill Hambling, Anne Collins (Dungavell) relates that Uncle Bill, in the early 1920s drove a coach from Dimbulah to Wolfram Camp and then on to Mount Mulligan.

“Uncle took me on the coach for a mile to the Walsh River. I was petrified as Uncle was galloping because he was doing the mail run. It was the Cobb and Co coach and it had four horses. He had the mail for Wolfram Camp so he had to call in there and then he had to go on to Mulligan, change horses and come back. It was 27 miles (43km) by train to Mulligan but the train used to go round everything.”

By 1929, because of the lack of people and the fact no-one could afford to pay him for carrying, Bill Hambling only continued to drive his mail coach out to Wolfram every Wednesday because his sister, Mrs Mary Beatrice Thorburn, lived there alone on the banks of Wolfram Creek. The only time she saw or spoke to anyone was when she met her brother on Wednesdays. When Mrs Blakeney from Wolfram died, Mrs Thorburn went to the Eventide Home in Charters Towers where she died in 1973, aged 87 years. Bill Hambling also looked after his younger sister Amy Alice who had married Bill Healy at Wolfram Camp in 1912. In the 1920s he would travel direct from Dimbulah to Tolga where she was living, taking meat, goats for the boys to haul a water sled, and even a retired race horse for his brother-in-law. To the children of this family he was ‘Uncle Willie’. In later years, in the 1940s, he would call and see her in Cardwell when he was taking cattle down by train to the Townsville meatworks.

P.F. Rowland, the Headmaster of the Townsville Grammar School, travelled to Wolfram with Bill Hambling in the late 1930s during a visit to his son. He later wrote of his journey in the *North Queensland Register*:

“The entire population of Wolfram was then thirty men plus the Postmistress. By now ‘Old Bill’ was driving the coach two half days a week, mostly as recreation.

His Majesty’s Royal Mail, which leaves the township of Dimbulah for Wolfram Camp every Monday, however, is no brilliant mustard coloured stage coach ... but these days with the decline of mining thereabouts is simply an old buckboard which you discover is an ordinary buggy without springs, hood or cushions. He tells me that he has been thirty years on the road, and what a road, leading for sixteen miles (25km) over rivers, gorges and rocks. A mile out, we cross the Walsh River. No car could possibly have made the crossing but the old buckboard horses (28 and 22 years’ old) with water up to their haunches stagger and strain their way over.

‘No need to worry,’ old Bill assures me with the water up to the buggy’s floor. ‘Only once in thirty years have we been washed away.’ (The wooden bridge which later replaced this crossing was named the ‘Hambling Bridge’ in his honour. This bridge has recently been upgraded.)

We pass an Overland Telegraph patrolling linesman who asks where he can post a letter by us in the morning. Bill’s answer, ‘Just leave it in the fork of a tree. I’ll see it. No need to worry.’

Next morning on the return journey travel is slow for we have about 12 cwt (600kg) of Wolfram and Molybdenite plus a kangaroo shooter whose corned meat was missing last night when the stores were delivered. Bill’s reply to his query, ‘It’s not in Dimbulah. I don’t know where it is I’m sorry. No need to worry. Good night.’

Presently old Bill pulls up, for lying in the wheel tracks is the missing bag of meat. The shooter gets down and begins untying his horse when Bill announces, ‘Well, well, all the years I’ve been on the road, funny thing, I’ve never lost a thing, never lost a thing.’

‘You very nearly lost this then Bill,’ retorts our friend.

‘Oh, no, that wasn’t lost, that only fell off. That often happens, but somebody always seems to find it.’

Further on, from a tree, the linesman’s letter is picked up.

Bill’s only worry, though he’s never been past Cairns, is the international situation (pre World War II).”

Bill died in Herberton on Friday, December 6, 1957 and was buried on the Saturday. His wife Bertha lived on until February 4, 1975.

The Hambling Family’s last link with Leedingham Creek was severed with the death in 1979 of the youngest daughter Amy Alice Healy of Cardwell.

Charlotte Amelia Collins had died in Mareeba in 1946, while Bill’s two older brothers, Michael Herbert (Herb) and John Robert (Bob), both single, had been buried in Mareeba in 1953 and 1955 respectively. Rose had died in Brisbane in 1962 and Mary Beatrice Thorburn as mentioned in 1973.

Many of Bill’s descendants remain in the Dimbulah and Mareeba areas. His eldest daughter Evelyn (Eva) Ericson died in 2006.

Sources: *Wild River Times* – “Hodgkinson Pioneers”, Ialeen Healy; *North Queensland Register* – P. F. Rowland; *Pioneers Country* – Glenville Pike; *The Cairns Post* – “Obituary” W. J. Hambling; *The Northern Sun* – “Home Life at Wolfram Camp”, Ned Ericson; *Hambling Family History* – Delmae Murray and others