



I remain
my dear friend,
Yours Sincerely
R Spencer

The Letters from Rebecca Spencer
to Eliza Saunders 1879-1885

Preface:

Sometimes a confluence of good fortune changes your direction.

In the development of this project there were two confluences of good fortune. The first was important the second was nothing less than amazing.

In November 2011 I was driving through the Hunter Valley on my way to Barrington Tops. As we passed through Aberdeen I related to my friend Andrew McAleer what I knew about the Spencer family settling at Rouchel. I told Andy that I had started working on the family history but had not really achieved much. Andy was a keen Ancestry.com user and spent quite a bit of time urging me to join Ancestry and get to work. More than that Andy made me a guest member of his family tree and did some digging about the Spencer Family. He told me to have a look at a public Spencer family tree that he seemed to think was well put together.

The tree was owned by a Sandy Gibbney. A few weeks later after subscribing to ancestry I contacted Sandy, told him I was a Spencer and I had material to add to the tree. Sandy is not a Spencer relative. He had started the tree with his long term friend David Spencer who is my 3rd cousin. Sandy and David invited me to be an editor of their tree and I have been collaborating with them since.

I am sure David would agree when I say that the vast majority of the painstaking research has been done by Sandy. Sandy deserves many thanks for patiently editing this document several times as it evolved.

In April 2013 David, Sandy and I travelled to Cuttabunda and Brewarrina for Bre's 150th anniversary celebrations. We actually visited the site of Wirra Warra homestead which was demolished in the 1960's without knowing what we were looking at. We did however see the grave of William Henry Saunders (the Willie referred to in the letters) who was struck by lightning in 1886.

On my return to Sydney I decided to look into the Saunders family and initially made contact with Ray Saunders who sent me some photographs and put me in touch with his cousin Paul Bailey. Paul had been working with the letters for several years and initially gave me print outs of the letters which referred to the Spencer family. I began to annotate the letters for Paul so that he could understand all the Spencer family references. That annotation really started me on this project. Paul also had an astonishing number of photographs to add to the letters.

Paul introduced me to meet his uncle, Jack Saunders, who is a grandson of Eliza. Jack is the keeper of the original letters and photographs. Jack allowed me to photograph the original letters that are included here. He also provided more photographs including new photographs of Spencer Family members.

At almost the same time I contacted Maureen Seve who is a descendent of Rebecca and Thomas and like David Spencer a 3rd cousin. Maureen had been researching the Spencer family for many years and provided amongst many other things the photo of Thomas and Rebecca, which is as far as we know, the only existing image of Rebecca. Recently when I bemoaned not having any photos of Rebecca's children at the time of the letters or an image of Rouchel Vale School, Maureen produced the Rouchel Vale school photos included.

What comes from all this is my firm conviction that through collaboration we have been able to reveal the story of Rebecca and Eliza.

Ian Spencer

November 2013

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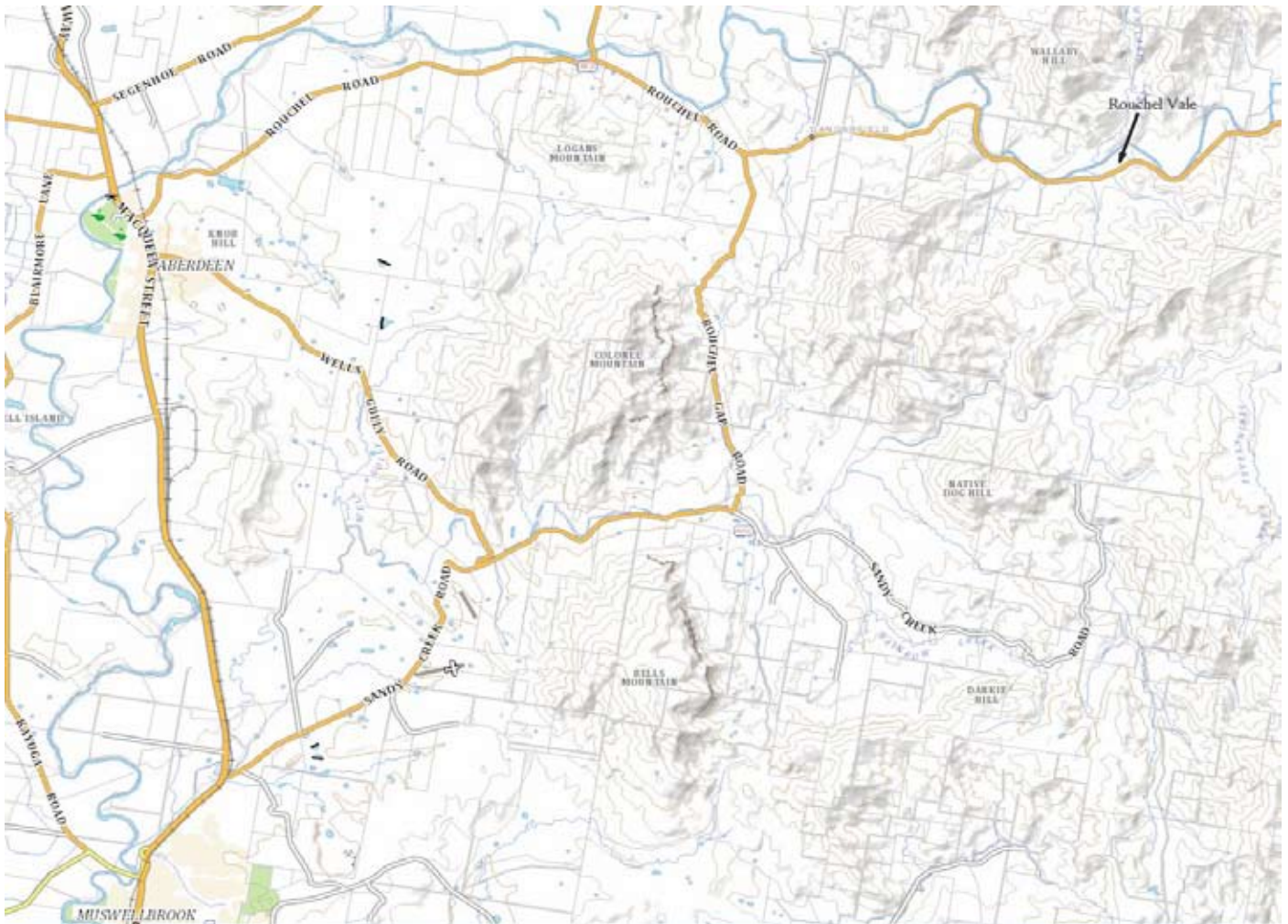
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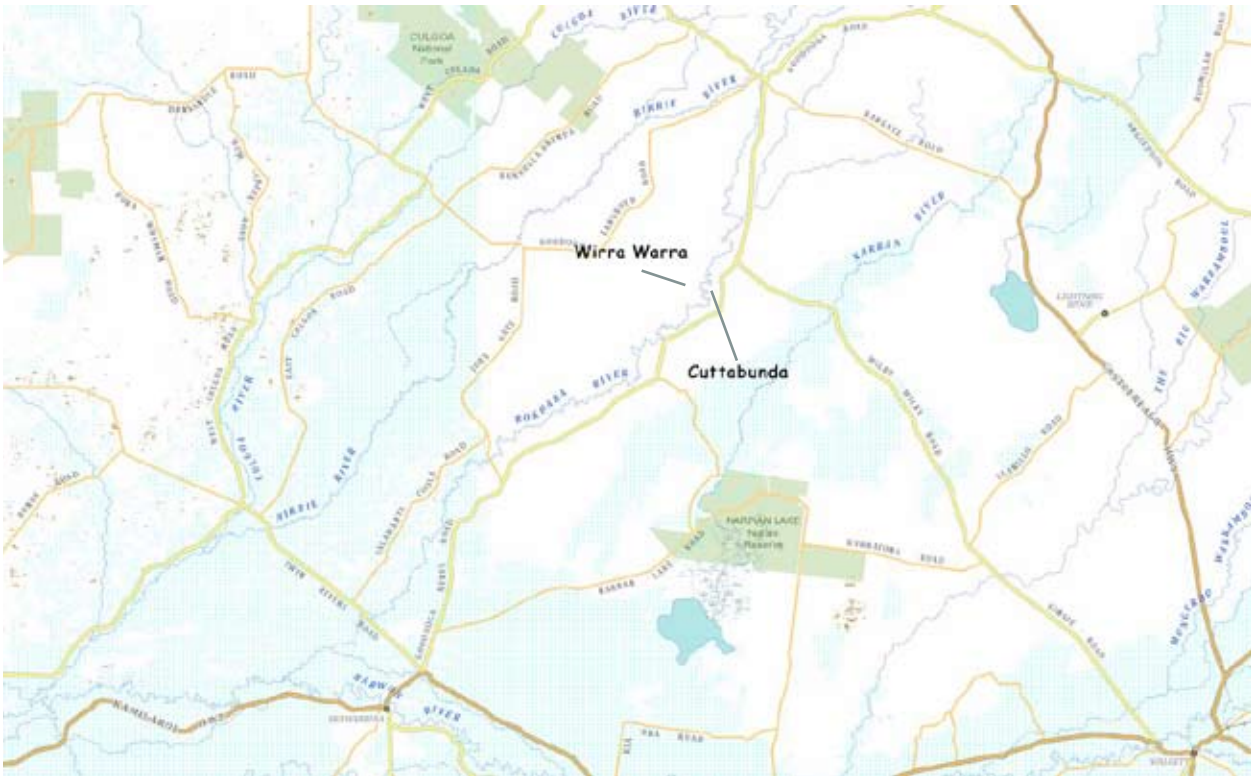
Where is Rouchel Vale?

Rouchel Vale was the name of the Spencer Family property on Rouchel Brook about 20kms from Aberdeen in the upper Hunter Valley. Rouchel Brook is a small river that rises in the Mount Royal Ranges and flows into the Hunter River just north of Aberdeen.



Where is Wirra Warra and Cuttabunda?

Wirra Warra and Cuttabunda are adjoining properties on opposite sides of the Bokhara River about 90 kms north of Brewarrina and 30 kms south of Goodooga. For some reason the property known as Cuttabunda was also known as Coobung. See the map below.



This extract from the 1914 Narran County map shows Wirra Warra and Cuttabunda with its Parish name Coobung. The adjoining properties with the Parish names Wilby and Burrell, were owned from 1896 by the two younger Spencer brothers William and Edward, and were known together as Narran Plains.

Introduction:

Eliza Saunders and Rebecca Spencer were true colonial women. Both were born in NSW. Eliza was born at Scone in 1845 and Rebecca at Muswellbrook in 1850.

A series of letters written by Rebecca between 1879 and 1885 which were sent to Eliza survive*. In these letters Rebecca talks about her extended family, mutual friends and life in general. The letters contain no sensational content but they do give an interesting picture of life during the 1880's in rural NSW.

Rebecca writes from "Rouchel Vale" near Aberdeen in the Hunter Valley. Eliza lives on a property "Wirra Warra" on the Bokhara River 100km north of Brewarrina. Eliza married William Saunders in Muswellbrook in 1865. They moved to William's "Run" Wirra Warra in 1866 and lived there until 1895 when the whole family moved (mostly to Moree) following William Saunders death.

The letters show the two women were good friends. We are not sure exactly when they first met. They may have known each other growing up in the Hunter Valley. Certainly they have common friends who live in Denman and Muswellbrook.

Their friendship however, almost certainly stems from time that Rebecca spent in residence at Cuttabunda, the neighbouring property to Wirra Warra on the Bokhara. As the two homesteads were only 700 metres apart, this is the most likely source of their familiarity.

Rebecca's husband Thomas Spencer, along with three of his brothers, Matthew, John and Absalom purchased Cuttabunda about 1870. In 1872 Thomas and John appear in Grevilles NSW postal directory as Graziers at Cuttabunda. At that time they still owned property at Rouchel with their father Thomas Snr.

There is some evidence that the brothers took turns to spend time at Cuttabunda.

Two of Rebecca's children Alfred Bokhara - born 1876 and Elisabeth (Elsie) - born 1878, were born at Cuttabunda. We also know that Rebecca had just returned from Cuttabunda when the first letter was written in 1879. So it is most likely that Rebecca was in residence at Cuttabunda for several years up to 1879. From late 1882 onwards, John Spencer and his wife Eliza moved their entire family into residence at Cuttabunda. After their move, there was a continuous Spencer family presence at Cuttabunda until 1896 when they were forced to quit the property. After her return to Rouchel Vale in 1879 it does not appear that Rebecca ever returned to Cuttabunda. Rebecca died from complications after giving birth to twins in May 1885, just 2 months after the last letter was written. She was just 35 years old.

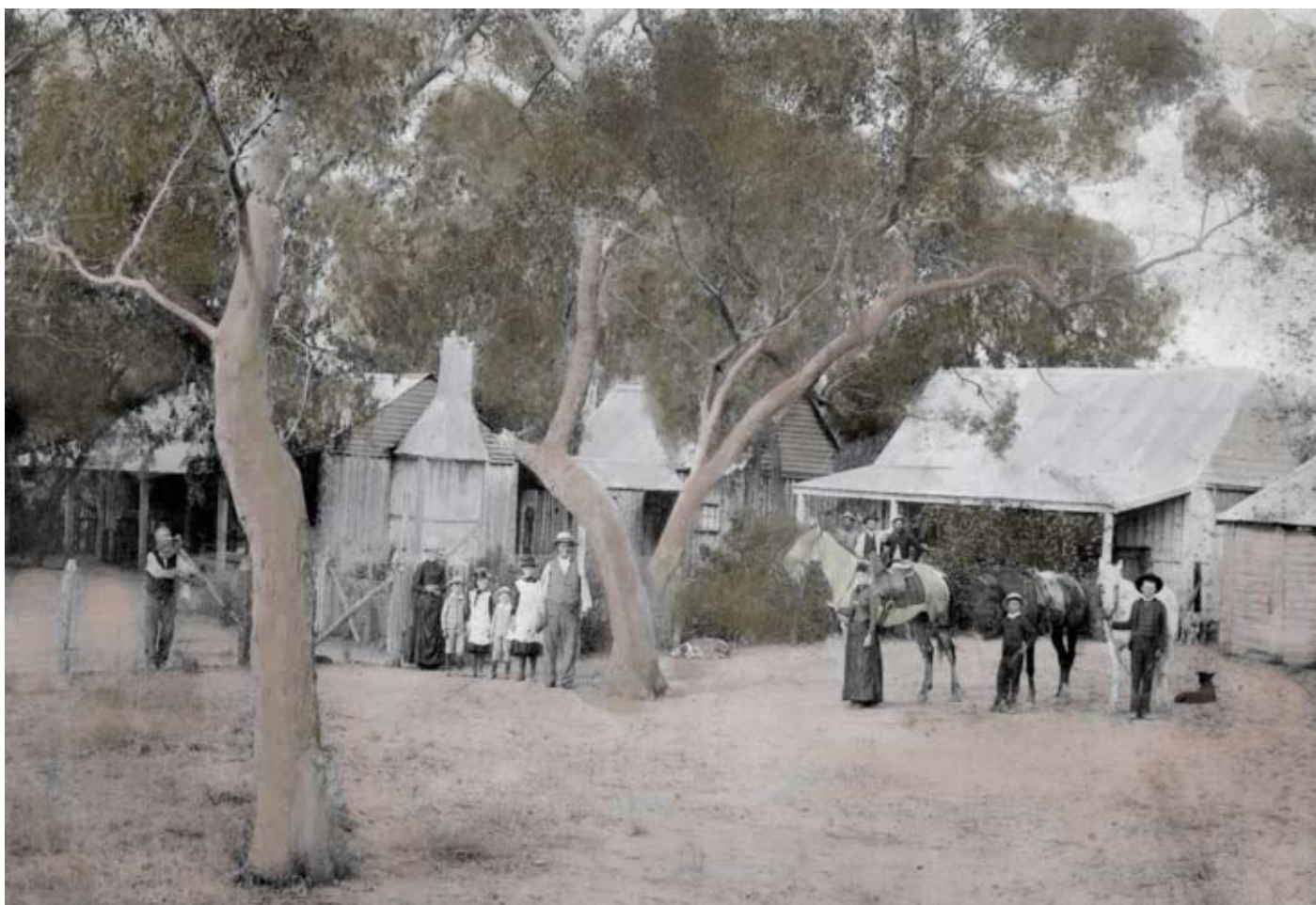
Apart from the obvious discussion of family and friends there are interesting insights into travel and communication in the 1870's and 80's in rural NSW.

Rouchel Vale and Wirra Warra are almost 700 kms apart. To travel this distance by horse and cart in the 1880's would have taken about 2 months. Yet in her first letter Rebecca describes travelling from Walgett to Muswellbrook in just 11 days. 10 days to travel from Walgett to Gunnedah and one day by train from Gunnedah to Muswellbrook. The train had only reached Gunnedah a few months earlier. The train line finally reached Bourke in 1896, Brewarrina in 1901 and Walgett in 1903.

Rebecca also talks about sending requests for shopping by telegram which was available at Brewarrina in 1873 and probably at Goodooga soon after. Goodooga is only 30 kms from Wirra Warra.

Along with the letters some amazing photographs also survive of Wirra Warra in the 1880's. These are included with photographs of the main people mentioned in the letters. In places background material is provided to give context to the letters.

** The Letters are currently held by Jack Saunders - Eliza's Grandson. Many Thanks to Jack Saunders and Paul Bailey for their friendship and ready access to their wonderful letters and photographs.*



The Saunder's Family at Wirra Warra about 1890. The photo was taken after the Saunder's eldest son William Henry Saunders (Willie) was struck by lightning and killed in November 1886. Cuttabunda is located 700 metres to the left of the photo on the other side of the Bokhara River.

note: the photograph was coloured in 2013 using colours from the location of Wirra Warra



Rebecca Spencer



Eliza Saunders

Letter 1: December 3rd 1879

Rouchel Vale.
3rd December, 1879

My Dear Mrs Saunders,

I'm afraid you will be thinking rather hard of me for not dropping you a line before now but I can assure you although out of sight you are not out of mind. It has not been very convenient for me to sit down and write a letter like I know you will expect from me until now.

My dear little Elsie¹ has been (*ill*) since the day I came down but this evening I am in hopes she is on the mend, some complaint going about just now. The Doctor calls it Pleurisy. Alfie² to was sick with it so you may be sure I had my hands pretty full, for the little ones felt very strange coming among a lot of strange faces.

I must mention just a little about our journey down. Of course you heard of our welfare as far as Walgett. After leaving the cattle we got on so well. It was on Thursday we packed and the following Tuesday week I was in Muscle Brook³ and I stayed there until the Saturday, when Mr Dowell⁴ and his man drove me and the children up to the Rouchel. Thomas⁵ arrived the same day. I was very fortunate with the birds, arriving with fifteen but one of the white ones died in Muscle Brook. They were the admiration of everyone. I could have disposed of them over and over. The cheese too got great praise. It certainly is differently flavoured to what is made down here, but I don't think it's better.

I expect you are still very busy with the dairy. Lammie⁶ is cheese making. I am surprised at the way she prepares her cheese. She only turns them 3 times and not heavy levers either and still they turn out splendid. She maintains, by pressing them any longer the butter is pressed out, and she still prefers mine to her own.

How is Mr. S (senior)⁷ and how does his pumpkins look? I never see anything that would be a rarity to you up there but what I think of you and think how pleased I should be if it were possible to send you some.

All Thomas⁸ relatives were so delighted to welcome us. They never knew we had started until they got a telegram from Gunnedah⁹ stating I would be in Muscle Brooke the next morning. When I got there Mr. Dowell¹⁰ were there with a nice turnout to drive me down to Mary's and such a welcome as I received. Mrs Spencer¹¹ happened to be in the Brook to and really they all seemed over joyed and then again on the Saturday when I came up here was another joyful meeting. I'm afraid I did not quite deserve all their kind wishes for me.

I am not aware yet where we will settle down. We remain here until after Christmas at any rate.

We did not get you the Atlas and the Bible yet nor the boots. I could not go out very well while I was in the Brook but the next time I will see about it.

I am having two dresses made. The best one a nice black lustre which is very fashionable and the second best like the pieces enclosed which is one shilling per yard. The dresses are worn "Princess Robe" style, very long train, and trimmed all over with different trimmings such as kilting and velvet and fringe to are very much worn. I bought a very nice hat but bonnets are much more fashionable. All these young ladies here, married or single, have beautiful bonnets and gentleman's collars stand up and turned down a little in the front are quite the fashion for ladies wear with nice ties. The little boy's suits are made very light (and) short, one and three quarter yard will make a suit for Freddie¹² of tweeds and drill. All the little cousins here are dressed so pretty my fingers will set many a stitch before mine are as nice.

I have not heard much news that would interest you except that Lavine McKenzie¹³ is married to Tom Kirk, very much against her Mama's wish so I heard.

Mrs Edward White¹⁴ is quite recovered now.

A Mr Allwood¹⁵ was here today making enquiries of me about J. Newton and Mrs N. His wife was a Miss Newton. He knew you and your better half quite well about Denman¹⁶ years ago.

The cattle market is low and likely to be so for some time – cheering prospect for us is it not?

I hope you have had a downpour. Since we left we have several heavy storms. The country all the way down looked magnificent. All looks very well about here.

How did poor Mrs McKenzie¹⁷ get on at her confinement this time? I hope well. How is Mrs Keelan¹⁸? Don't forget to remember me kindly to her please, also to Henrietta. Mrs McDowell¹⁹ has a very nice servant girl who knew all the Parker family²⁰ well before they went up the country the last time. Her name is Carrie. Her parents are German. You might mention to either of the girls that she wished to be remembered to them.

How are all your children? I believe I have thought as much of you since I left as though you had been my own sister. Tell Willie and Edie²¹ that Freddie and May²² have not as yet taken to two playmates so fondly as they were united to them. They often talk of them. Freddie has the little "P" bird that Willie Saunders gave to him at parting but the two young ones died and the other one flew out of May's hand when she was feeding it on the way down.

I shall expect a long letter from you and shall long to get it to hear all that has on the Bokhara since I left. I managed to scribble a line or two (to) Matt²³ last week. I hope all are well at Cuttabunda.

Has the Minister been around since? Remember me most kindly to old Mr S and also to your good man.* Kiss all the dear children for me and also for their old playmates.

All the grandchildren here are such fine children. Mine are the smallest of the lot, except May. She is able to hold her own among them. William an infant, ten weeks old, would make two of Edie's, and Ethel²⁴, the same age as your Evelyn²⁵, is a monster for her age. Lily²⁶ and Elizabeth's²⁷ oldest boy is almost as tall as Freddie and they are not five years old yet.

My eyes are so weak since I came down, which accounts for my not writing to you before. I cannot see by night to do much. I have had my ears pierced. I thought that might do some good. I am not thinking of visiting the exhibition yet. After Christmas when I have some of my sewing done up and the little ones have got better acquainted with their Aunties I may go.

Father is naturally very anxious for to see me and he insists on my going to the Garden Palace²⁸. My sister, too, promises to meet me there if I will go that far.

If there is anything I can ever do for you down here don't be backward in asking me for I should only be too happy to be of service to you.

Beckie²⁸ has been expecting a little one this last month—that will be the third. Mary has three, Lily has three, Eliza²⁹ three. My dear sister's children were so pleased to see me. They have grown so tall. Oh how dreadfully I missed her when I came down. No tongue could tell but still I was obliged to smother all that feeling. But sometimes I had to indulge in a real good cry before I could get relief.

You must kindly excuse this scribble. Under existing circumstances I had to hurry over it.

Hoping sincerely that this may find yourself and all those dear to you in the best of health and happiness with kindest love.

I remain,
Your sincere friend,
R. Spencer.

Notes:

1. Elsie - Elizabeth "Elsie" Spencer born 1878- Daughter of Rebecca
2. Alfie - Alfred Bokhara Spencer born 1876 – Son of Rebecca
3. Muscle Brook – is the original spelling of Muswellbrook. It takes its name from Muscle Brook which flows into the Hunter River at the town.
4. Mr Dowell - Stephen Dowell Husband of Mary Jane Dowell - nee Spencer (Mary Jane is Rebecca's Sister in Law)
5. Thomas – Rebecca's Husband Thomas Spencer jnr
6. Lammie? - Not sure if Lammie is at Rouchel or Wirra Warra.
7. Mr. S (senior) - John Saunders, Eliza's father in law, seems to have lived at Wirra Warra from at least 1879 until his death in 1891.
8. Thomas' – see note 5.
9. "They never knew we had started until they got a telegram from Gunnedah stating I would be in Muscle Brooke the next morning."

There are two important items in this sentence. Rebecca and her children had travelled overland from Walgett to Gunnedah by coach in order to catch the train from Gunnedah to Muswellbrook. The train had only reached Gunnedah a few months earlier. Also Rebecca telegrams ahead to let the family know she is coming.

10. *Mr. Stephen Dowell - Husband of Mary nee Spencer and Mr George Hayne - Husband of Rebecca nee Spencer see Beckie below.*
11. *Mrs Spencer - Mary Spencer (nee Stark) - Rebeccas mother in law*
12. *Freddie - Frederick Thomas Spencer, b 1870 - Rebecca's Eldest child. Freddie had lived at Cuttabunda and was friends with Eliza's children Willie and Ernie.*
13. *Lavine McKenzie - Lavinia McKenzie was the daughter of James McKenzie. James McKenzie's two older brothers, Andrew and Jack, had previously been owners of Cuttabundah. Another brother, Joseph, owned Bundabullah East station which was a close neighbour of both Wirra Warra and Cuttabunda. The McKenzie family was well known to the Saunders but Rebecca's reference here may also indicate that she at least knew the McKenzies from their Hunter Valley days.*
14. *Mrs Edward White - Wife of Minister who married William and Eliza and also John Spencer and Eliza Marsh.*
15. *Mr Allwood- Mr George Allwood and his wife Sarah Ann nee Newton. George is unrelated to Rebecca when this letter was written, but when his daughter marries in 1907 to Henry John Maxwell Spencer, becomes Rebeccas father-in-law of nephew of husband*
16. *Denman - This reference gives clear evidence that Eliza and probably William Saunders had lived in Denman.*
17. *Mrs McKenzie - Wife of Joseph McKenzie 1828-1920. Owner of Bundabulla station. She is about to give birth to her 10th child, Andrew Herbert.*
18. *Mrs Matilda Keelan appears to be a woman living at Wirra Warra. She may have been a midwife to both Eliza and Rebecca: Could also reference Matilda's daughter, Miss Emily Keelan b1866 - also living at Wirra Warra. Emily's illegitimate infant child, May, died of colic 18th June 1884 and is buried at Wirra Warra by John Saunders, witnessed by William Saunders. Emily marries John Luellan McCauley 1884 in Brewarrina. John Luellan McCauley, boundary rider, commits suicide by gunshot 6 oct 1888 at the Bokarah Hotel. Death record states he was married at Wirra Warra, and he has 2 children, John Thomas Roger McCauley b1885 and Albert Joseph Francis McCauley b1887 d6 nov 1888. Emily marries again to William Facer in Brewarrina 1889 and has 9 more children. Emily Facer d Brewarrina 1942 age76. Her parents names are John and Matilda. Interesting also to note that J. Newton, who is also mentioned in this letter is the Licencee of the Bockhira Hotel 1878-1880, and then licencee of the Comborah Hotel 1885-1891 & 1894-1896*
19. *Mrs McDowell: unknown person.*
20. *The Parker family of Denman, Giants Creek -William Parker had 9 children by his first marriage and 10 by his second.*
21. *Willie and Edie - William and Edith Oldest son and daughter of Eliza and William Saunders.*
22. *Freddie and May - Frederick Spencer (See note 12) and Mary Emily May Spencer ,oldest son and daughter of Rebecca. They obviously had been playmates when Rebecca and Thomas were living at Cuttabunda.*
23. *Matt - Matthew Spencer, Brother of Thomas Spencer Jnr and part owner of Cuttabunda with Thomas Jnr, John and Absalom.*
24. *Mary's - Mary Dowell nee Spencer - Rebecca's Sister in Law*
25. *Evelyn - Evelyn (Evie) Saunders - Daughter of Eliza.*
26. *Lily - Lilian Frost, Daughter of Elizabeth Frost - nee Spencer.*
27. *Elizabeth -See above - Elizabeth Frost nee Spencer - Sister of Thomas Jnr*
28. *Beckie - Rebecca Hayne nee Spencer - Rebecca's Sister in Law*
29. *Eliza - Eliza Spencer nee Marsh - Wife of John Spencer and from 1882 -1895 Eliza Saunders neighbour.*



William Saunders - Eliza's husband



A very formal Eliza Saunders.



Thomas and Rebecca Spencer.

Spring 1879

On the black soil plains around the Bokhara River north of Brewarrina, the winter and spring of 1879 had delivered above average rainfall, resulting in good pastures and a lot of fat cattle and sheep. The sheep from Doyles at Dumble Station near Goodooga were described in the Walgett stock report of 18th November “as big as donkeys, and fit for any show in the world.” In the same report are 190 fat cattle from Spencer’s at Cuttabunda and 230 very fat cattle from Saunders’ at Wirra Warra passing through Walgett bound for market in Sydney. From Rebecca’s first letter we know that she travelled with her husband Thomas and her children as far as Walgett with the cattle drive.

Other events occurring in NSW during the Spring of 1879 would have an impact on Rebecca’s life over the months to come. Not only were the Spencers and Saunders on the move with their cattle but the Colony of New South Wales was on the move too.



A cattle drive near Brewarrina source: Brewarrina Shire Council

After months of build up the North Western Railway line to Gunnedah was finally opened by the Minister for Works, the Hon. John Lackey, on 10th September. Within two months, Rebecca was travelling by train from Gunnedah to Muswellbrook with her children.

Just seven days later amidst much fanfare and a special public holiday across NSW the Sydney International Exhibition was declared open. Over the next 4 months over 1 million people would visit the Garden Palace. Among the visitors were Rebecca Spencer and her father Frederick Hooper.

On November 12th, most likely while Rebecca was travelling to Walgett with the cattle, Sir Henry Parkes introduced the Public Instruction Act into Parliament. This legislation revolutionised public education in NSW. Although it did not become law until May 1st 1880, it was the driving force behind the establishment of Rouchel Vale Public School.

Rebecca left Cuttabunda in early November with the cattle drive going via Cumborah to Walgett a distance of about 100 km. This trip would have taken a week to 10 days. In Walgett she leaves the cattle and presumably travels by coach to Gunnedah a distance of 300kms in just 10 days. It would seem that she left Walgett on the 14th November and arrived in Muswellbrook on 25th November. These dates would fit with the timing of the first letter dated 3rd December 1879.

Gunnedah two months after the arrival of the railway was a something of a boom town. It was described in the Sydney Morning Herald, of 8th September 1879 as follows; “At present, it is variously estimated that, there are from 1200 to 1400 residents, and other persons are daily arriving to take up their abode there.

The buildings are scattered over the township and in this respect differ from the arrangement which obtains in some other towns of placing them nearly all in one street. There are eight or nine hotels, one or two others about to be opened, and a fair number of stores and shops, nearly the whole of them being wooden structures. A new brick brewery has been lately erected, and the brew is said to be of good quality.”

The same article describes why there was so much celebration in the arrival of the railway. “The only roads from Gunnedah

to Breeza are the natural boggy soil and clay of the Breeza Plains. The mail coach crosses the plains daily, and although the distance is only twenty miles, the time of transit averages five hours, sometimes the coach is much longer on the road. A place known as Johnson's Pinch, or Johnson's lane, has long been the dread of all whose necessities have compelled them to travel over Breeza Plains. Only the other day we heard a passenger describing the unenviable plight in which he was placed a fortnight ago, through having to dismount from the coach into mud up to his knees, to help to get the panting horses along. For which felicitous journey he had to pay 15s, the ordinary fare for the twenty miles journey across the plain. An old teamster says he has seen an empty wagon stuck helplessly in the mud, the horses being unable to draw it out; and from the appearance of the place as it is at present, one can well believe the statement to be true. In fact, teamsters have many a time had to camp for weeks, awaiting the drying up of the plains, before attempting to cross."

In fact, virtually the entire journey from Cuttabunda to Gunnedah was travelled on roads across black soil plains. Roads which are impassable even in a modern 4 wheel drive, after more than about 10mm of rain. After 140 years the road from Cuttabunda to Walgett via Cumborah is still unsealed, as is the road to Goodooga and all but 20kms of the road to Brewarrina.

Rebecca does not mention whether she was accompanied by any other than her five children (all under 10 years) on her trip from Walgett to Gunnedah. All we know is that she telegrams from Gunnedah to let the family know she is on her way. She mentions in passing that Thomas has also arrived in Muswellbrook at almost the same time, so presumably they travelled separately.

Rebecca has left behind the life on the remote Bokhara River cattle station with its tiny community at Cuttabunda and Wirra Warra. Within a space of a month she has transitioned from the dawdling pace of the cattle drive to telegrams and railway journeys that compress 10 days coach travel into one. Within a month of arrival at Muswellbrook, she travels on to meet her father in Sydney so she can visit the Garden Palace. Quite a remarkable journey!



A restored Great Northern Railway locomotive and carriages built in 1879 the same year as Rebecca's travels.

Railway travel in 1879 was not cheap. The cost of a second class one way ticket from Gunnedah to Singleton was 23 shillings or just over a pound. This amounts to about \$250 today.. The trip from Gunnedah to Muswellbrook would have taken about 9 hours. image source <http://www.australiansteam.com>

Letter 2: March 24th 1880

Rouchel Vale.
March 1880.

My Dear Friend,

Your very welcome letter of the 8th inst came to hand last week. I now take the earliest opportunity of replying.

Firstly, I was very pleased to hear that you and all those so dear to you are in the enjoyment of the best of health and also that everything with you was in such a flourishing condition.

In this part, we were becoming quite destitute for want of rain but I am happy to say that Providence has sent a beautiful downpour. It is raining while I write I likely to continue all my dear care are at present quite well. Dear little Elsie and Alfie¹ are progressing nicely the former is quite the pick and plaything of the household. She does not talk much yet but is very interesting.

After writing to you last, with a desperate effort I made up my mind to get ready and go down to Sydney which I did and stayed nine days. Poor father was delighted to see me. He could not do enough to make my visit enjoyable. My sister² also came from Braidwood and brought her three eldest children³ so that we all met after an absence of five years from Father and seven from my sister. She has three as nice children as anyone could wish to see and so well behaved, they did her great credit. I was quite agreeably surprised with them.

I heard of your "better half" being in Sydney so that you will hear from him about the Grand Exhibition⁴ but still I must pass my opinion on it for your gratification, which was Perfect Delight.

I had read a great deal about it and imagined far more but my ideas had never reached any conception of the wealth and grandeur and variety of things to be seen there and the music surpassed everything else. I did not take Freddie and May⁵ with me. I regretted very much that I did not. And you was very often in my thoughts while enjoying myself there. I used to wish so very much that you were with me when I would come across anything that I knew would interest you in fact that often did mar my pleasure that everyone was not enjoying it as well as myself. Thomas⁶ was not with me he could not leave home just then and I could not postpone my visit any longer for a private reason which I will tell you more about. So every night I used to sit down and write a summary of where I had been and the principal things of what I had seen during the day and I can tell you, when all put together it was amusing for him or anyone else to read. I was quite taken by surprise the first day I was in the Garden Palace⁷, to meet Mrs. And Miss Packer⁸, also Tye⁹ and his wife. Mrs P looked quite juvenile, dressed so nice, all of them were, all of them were but I think Mrs Tye had felt more comfortable at home. She was such a size, quite a burden to herself apparently. I also met Popperwell¹⁰ several times while in Sydney.

I must not forget to tell you father and I spent an afternoon and took tea with Mrs Wooler¹¹. We met first in the Exhibition and her and Wooler would not be satisfied until I arranged for one afternoon at their place. I enjoyed myself very much. She was making kind enquiries after you. They have very nice place. A nice little girl about thirteen or fourteen (I forget her name) played on the piano beautiful for us. The eldest daughter was away on a visit.

I wish I had thought of those books for Willie and Ernie when in Sydney but really I did not. There were several things I intended getting for myself but I omitted making a list before I started and, think of them when there I could not, for being so excited I suppose, but I will not fail in getting them the first opportunity.

Many thanks to Mr Saunders for his kind intention of bringing my saddle down. It would have been very acceptable but I must thank the will as for the deed.

I went in to Muscle Brook¹² last week and while there I called to see Mrs. Windsor¹³. I was quite pleased and surprised to see her looking so well after all her troubles. She does not look a day older than when you seen her last. She enquired most kindly for you and told me to be sure and send her love. Betsy and Elijah are both doing well.

I did not see Lizzie Taylor when in Sydney. Father did not know her address and he did not seem willing to spare the time from Grander Works to look her up. I was sorry to be in Sydney and not see her.

Besides going to the Exhibition, father took me to several places of note viz. the Museum, the Deaf and Dumb Institution, the University and several of the grand places of worship, out to Manly Beach and several other places. I used to think sometimes I must be in Fairyland. It was such a marvellous change to me and I never seen Sydney before. The sea voyage (to Manly) did not make me the least ill so that I enjoyed everything. I fear you will be weary reading all this but please excuse me this time.

If there is anything you require up by the dray do not be backward in mentioning it for, so long as I can suit your taste, it would be a pleasure to do any commission for you. I think our team will be starting before Winter sets in.

We are settling down at Rouchel Vale. The old couple¹⁴ are retiring from active life into a nice comfortable cottage in Muscle Brook.

The School Board¹⁵ are contemplating opening a school about half a mile from here, at least the inhabitants about here have sent in a partition and received a favourable reply. So if they do, my greatest anxiety will be removed and if they do not I must only make up my mind to part with them and send them into Muscle Brook to their Grandma¹⁶. She will be moving as soon as the weather takes up, so if ever you take a notion to come down country for a trip, you will find plenty of house rooms here and a warmer heart welcome than you got here before, at least that is if I am spared and continue to reside here, which most likely I will do, or go back to Cuttabunda. Tell Willie, Ernie and Edie that neither myself, Freddie or May¹⁷ forgets them.

Freddie is rearing a Kangaroo pup to go up to the Bokhara. He is very attentive to it. May pays greater attention to the birds. They are all doing well as yet and she has a pet pigeon as well.

The little ones do not like the idea of their Grandma and Aunties going away. They would like to go with them. I sent Mary home when her time was up but I shall have to get a girl shortly for there is a great deal to do here and I must tell you I am getting rather stout again.

Remember me kindly to old Mr Saunders¹⁸ and give my love to all the dear children. I understand from the boys that your good man was not taking cattle back. They were talking to him in Sydney, so I suppose if he did not you will soon have him home again.

Enclosed you will find two photos. The sitting one is for you to keep, the standing one you will please return, as it is not to my liking. I only send it to you to have a look at. Show the children and tell me if they recognise it.

How is Mrs. Keelan¹⁹? I shall take any interest in any little item of news that you are kind enough to send me from the Bokhara. I suppose you will be busy dairying again now that the weather is getting cool.

My dear husband's health continues very good. He desires to be kindly remembered to you. All his time did not permit him to visit the Exhibition yet and now there are many of the best courts closed. He may well postpone his holiday until the Melbourne²⁰ one opens and take a trip over there. You ought to make up your mind and take that treat to. I can assure you that the time and money would be well spent and there might not be another opportunity to see such sights in our lifetime. I am sorry ever since I did not stay a month in Sydney.

Freddie and May send their love to their little friends. I would like very much to see them.

Excuse this scrawl and write soon. I thought you was long winded answering my last.

With kind love to all and sincere wishes that this may find all well.

I remain, yours affectionately,

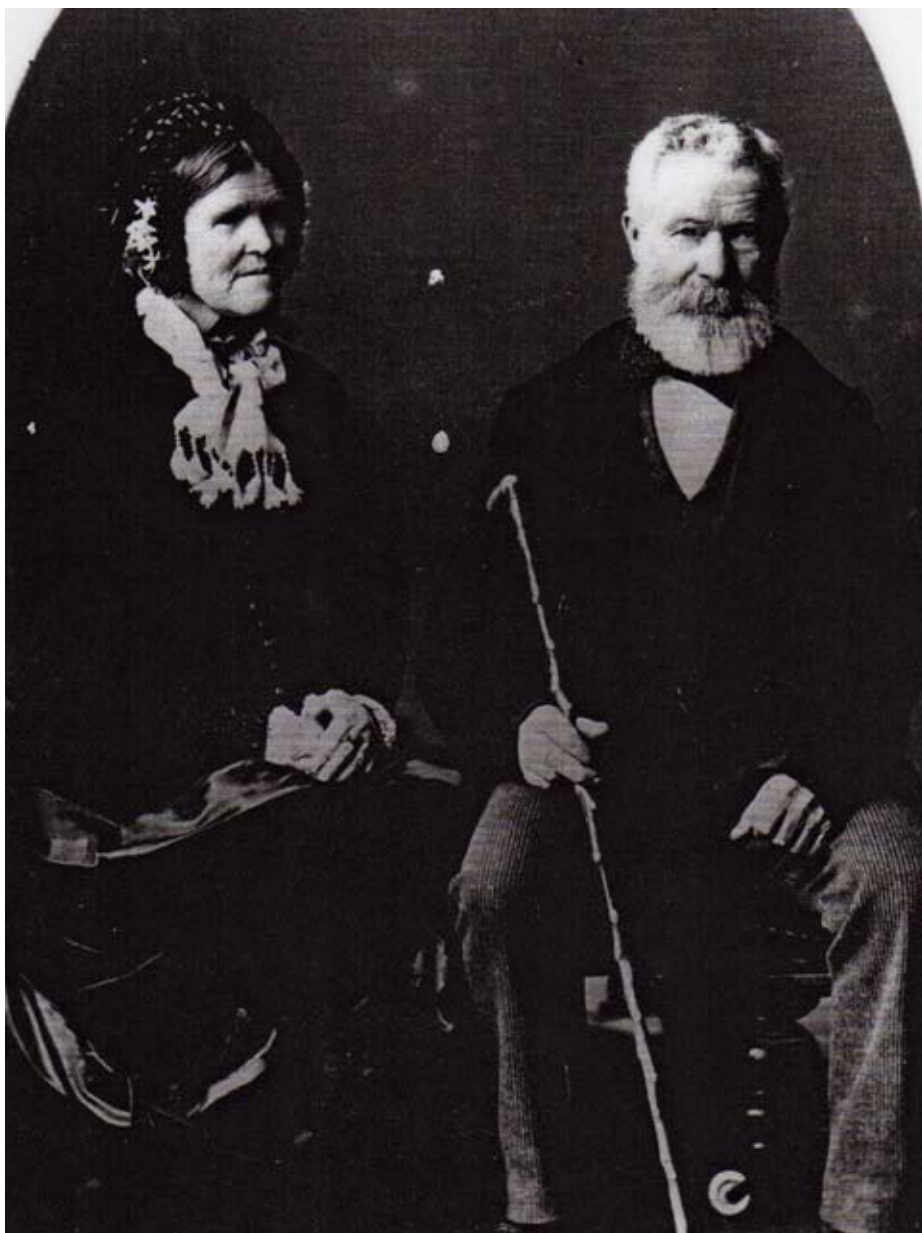
R. Spencer.

P. S. I send you a Princess Robe pattern for Evelyn²¹.

Notes:

1. *Elsie and Alfie - Elizabeth and Anlfred Bokhara Spencer two of Rebecca's children - both born at Cuttabunda*
2. *Rebecca's Sister - Emily Eliza Willmette nee Hooper*
3. *Fanny Rebekah Willmette born 1871 - Frederick William Willmette born 1873 - Florence Emmeline Willmette born 1875*
4. *Grand Exhibition: The Sydney International Exhibition (1879-80) see following section.*
5. *Freddie and May are Rebecca's two oldest children*
6. *Thomas: Rebecca's husband Thomas Spencer jnr*
7. *Garden Palace: The main building at the Sydney International Exhibition*
8. *Mrs. And Miss Packer - Probably Mrs Parker, also mentioned in Letter 1, from Denman(Giants Creek)*
9. *Tye and his wife - Unknown*
10. *Popperwell - One of the Popplewell family, who had a homestead lease "Woolahra" or "Cobran", both on the Culgoa River about 50kms from Wirra Warra.*
11. *Mrs Wooller - Christina Brown Wooller or Wooller nee Murray, wife of John Wooller or Wooller of "Llangboyde" station near Brewarina (about 30kms from Wirra Warra. They have 4 daughter. Ettalina 1873-1946, Jane 1861-1916, Elizabeth C 1863 - 1894 and Mary Constance 1865-1946. In 1879 they resided at 110 Abercrombie Place, Sydney.*
12. *Muscle Brook: Original name of Muswellbrook*
13. *Mrs. Windsor - Lucy Ann Windsor nee Dunn, The wife of Eli Windsor*
14. *The old couple - Thomas And Mary Spencer – Parents of Thomas jnr, Matthew, John and Absalom – Thomas senior was 64 when this letter was written*

15. *Rouchel Brook School – Thomas jnr was heavily involved – see attached story.*
16. *Grandma - Mary Spencer nee Stark*
17. *Frederick and May are Rebecca's two oldest children see note 5*
18. *old Mr Saunders – John Saunders – Eliza's father in law.*
19. *Mrs Matilda Keelan appears to be a woman living at Wirra Warra. She may have been a midwife to both Eliza and Rebecca: Could also reference Matilda's daughter, Miss Emily Keelan b1866 - also living at Wirra Warra. Emily's illegitimate infant child, May, died of colic 18th June 1884 and is buried at Wirra Warra by John Saunders, witnessed by William Saunders. Emily marries John Luellan McCauley 1884 in Brewarrina. John Luellan McCauley, boundary rider, commits suicide by gunshot 6 oct 1888 at the Bokarah Hotel. Death record states he was married at Wirra Warra, and he has 2 children, John Thomas Roger McCauley b1885 and Albert Joseph Francis McCauley b1887 d6 nov 1888. Emily marries again to William Facer in Brewarrina 1889 and has 9 more children. Emily Facer d Brewarrina 1942 age76. Her parents names are John and Matilda. Interesting also to note that J. Newton, who is also mentioned in this letter is the Licencee of the Bockhira Hotel 1878-1880, and then licencee of the Comborah Hotel 1885-1891 & 1894-1896.*
20. *Melbourne Exhibition: The Sydney International Exhibition closed in 1880 and moved to Melbourne. It appears that Thomas did go to Melbourne for the Exhibition*
21. *Evelyn is Eliza Saunders' daughter*



*The Old Couple - Thomas and Mary Spencer -
Rebecca's mother and father in law.*

*Thomas and Mary were free settlers who arrived from Wicklow Ireland in 1841
They settled in the Rouchel Brook area near Aberdeen in the Hunter Valley within
months of arrival. They established the property "Rouchel Vale" from where Rebecca
is writing.*

The Spencer Brothers of Cuttabunda



Thomas



Matthew



John



Absalom

The four oldest Spencer Brothers, Thomas (Rebecca's husband) Matthew, John and Absalom were all owners of Cuttabunda. John and Thomas are shown as Graziers at Cuttabunda in Grevilles Postal directory of 1872. We have a reference to Matthew being badly injured in a dam wall collapse at Cuttabunda in 1874. Eliza's husband William sustained minor injuries in the same accident and a man named Harvey was killed. Thomas and Rebecca and their children appear to be in residence at Cuttabunda from 1876-1879, returning to Rouchel just before the first letter. John, his wife Eliza and family moved to Cuttabunda permanently in 1872. Mathew and his wife Emma and their children moved to Cuttabunda in 1892 or 1893.



Old Mr Saunders – the old gentleman - John Saunders – Eliza's father in law.

John Saunders lived at Wirra Warra for many years until his death in 1891. Rebecca always asks about him and his garden.

He is shown in this photo with Eliza's two eldest sons Willie and Ernie. Willie was born in 1868 and Ernie in 1871. This photo must have been taken in the mid 1870's

The Sydney International Exhibition 1880

Rebecca comments that she thought she was in Fairyland when she attended the Sydney Exhibition with her father. For a woman who has lived her whole life in the rural Hunter Valley, the Exhibition must have seemed almost from another planet. Her comment to Eliza “I had read a great deal about it and imagined far more but my ideas had never reached any conception of the wealth and grandeur and variety of things to be seen there and the music surpassed everything else” sums up her sense of awe.

The Sydney International Exhibition in 1879 was the ninth World's Fair officially recognized by the Bureau of International Expositions. On the 17 September 1879, the Sydney International Exhibition opened the doors of its main building the 'Garden Palace'. Like other international exhibitions held around the world it proved an enormous success, even though Australia was so isolated from Europe and America.

The Commissioners of the Sydney Exhibition certainly felt it had “undoubtedly emphasized a new era in the history of the Colony, and projected the value of Australia on the minds of the inhabitants of those older countries”. The 1,045,898 visitors that passed through its gates were perhaps the most eloquent testimony to its triumph.



The main feature of the Sydney exhibition was an ornate building, the 'Garden Palace', which was over 244 metres long and had a floor space of over 112,000 metres. Based on London's Crystal Palace, the building's plan was similar to that of a large cathedral, having a long hall with lower aisle on either side, like a nave, and a transept of similar form, each terminating in towers and meeting beneath a central dome. The dome was 100 feet (30.4 metres) in diameter and 210 feet (65.5 metres) in height. Sydney's first hydraulic lift was contained in the north tower.

The Garden Palace was sited at what is today the south western end of the Royal Botanic Gardens (although at the time it was built it occupied land that was outside the Gardens). It was constructed primarily from timber, which was to assure its complete destruction when engulfed by fire in the early morning of September 22, 1882.

The exhibition contained artworks and commercial goods from all over the world. The Exhibition Committee ran competitions in many categories of products on view at the exhibition.

The following appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald

19th March 1880

“Sydney International Exhibition 1880.

The fine weather yesterday and the desire to see as much as possible of the attractions at the Garden Palace have had the effect of attracting a very large number of visitors to the Exhibition. Some of the exhibitors are removing exhibits which have been sold to be delivered after the 17th March (the date originally fixed for the closing of the Exhibition), and the

goods in the Japanese Court are being rapidly sold, with the exception of the rare specimens of Japanese skill which have been purchased for one or two Sydney institution's.

The Firm of F. R. Robinson and Co, ironmongers and importers, George Street, have a splendid collection of stoves and kitchen ovens displayed in the basement of the Garden Palace, having been imported from some of the principal makers in England, and the United States. The "Ceramic," "Sydney," and "Defiance." manufactured by J. L. Mott and Co, of New York, are of superior construction, and embody the latest improvements."

8th April 1880

"Exhibition Awards.

Cooking stoves and ranges- 1st Place: J.L. Mott, New York City."



In April 2013, on the Wirra Warra side of the Bokhara but only 100 metres from Cuttabunda homestead, we found the end plate to a JL Mott "Southern Home" cooking stove.

The stove may have been bought at the exhibition or following it. Needless to say the Bokhara was a long way from New York.

The Melbourne International Exhibition

The Melbourne International Exhibition was held from 1 October 1880 until 30 April 1881. Many of the Sydney exhibitors packed their exhibits up and shipped them to Melbourne. 1.459 million people visited the Melbourne exhibition, but it made a loss of 277292 pounds.

Rebecca mentions that her husband Thomas has been too busy to visit the Exhibition in Sydney but is contemplating visiting the exhibition in Melbourne.

It appears he did as this photo of Thomas was taken in a Melbourne photo studio.



Source: Wikipedia and NSW Powerhouse Museum website.

Rouchel Vale Provisional School: 1880

Rebecca's anxiety about the opening of a school at Rouchel is the result of one of the most important social changes in 19th century NSW. In 1879 Sir Henry Parkes introduced the Public Instruction Act, 1801¹. This Act introduced compulsory education for children between 5 and 14. So without a local school, Rebecca will be forced to send her children to live with Thomas' parents in Muswellbrook, so they can attend school there². Rebecca describes the possibility of parting with her children as "my greatest anxiety".

Rebecca's husband Thomas was directly involved in the push to start a school at Rouchel and in 1880 Rouchel Vale Provisional school was opened. An 1880's provisional school required the parents and citizens to provide the school building and the Dept of Public Instruction provided the teacher, books and other materials. The school was called "Rouchel Vale" Provisional School, even though the locality was called Rouchel Brook. Rebecca tells Eliza that the proposed school was "about a half a mile from here". The original provisional school was housed in St John's Anglican church at Lower Rouchel. This church was built on land gifted by Thomas Spencer Senior.



Rouchel Vale School at St John's Church about 1886.

Left to Right: Grace McGregor (teacher), William Spencer (visitor) Lizzie Kennedy, Ida Spencer, Elsie Spencer, May Spencer, Ellen Bridge, Maggie Kennedy, Margaret Bridge, Robina Kennedy, Arthur Spencer, Andy Bridge, Georgina Kennedy, Don Bridge, Alfred Spencer.

This is the only known picture of William Granville Spencer. William married the school teacher Grace McGregor in 1891.

An interesting excerpt from the Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser from 19th April 1884 shows Rebecca's "greatest anxiety" did not occur. It also indicates Thomas' involvement in the school and five of Rebecca's children in attendance. The occasion was the resignation of the first teacher at the school as she is soon to be married.

"On Friday 28th March, a meeting was held in the Rouchel Vale Provisional school of friends, parents and pupils of the above school to present their teacher Miss McDonald on the occasion of her resignation, with an address and testimonial consisting of a silver tea and coffee service. Thomas Spencer, Esq., then read the following address:

To Miss Catherine McDonald³, Rouchel Vale Provisional School,

We, the undersigned pupils in the above school, desire to ask you to accept the accompanying present, on the occasion of your resignation of the school in view of your approaching marriage.

We wish to express our regret, a regret in which our parents sincerely join, at the loss we shall sustain when the connection between us is severed and we can only hope that our loss will be your gain, as we indeed believe it will be.

We feel grateful to you not only for the great pains you have taken in teaching us, but also for the interest you have taken in our being taught many things by you which very few teachers would have troubled themselves about.

Wishing you every happiness here and in Heaven hereafter, we remain, dear Miss McDonald, your affectionate pupils.

Mary (May) Spencer, Arthur Hooper Spencer, Alfred Bokhara Spencer, John Morrison Lambert, John E. V. Gardner, Albert Smith, George M. Gardner, Harriet Lambert, Andrew George Smith, Mary Kennedy, Lucy Kennedy, Georgina Kennedy, Elizabeth Kennedy, Margaret Kennedy, Robina Kennedy, William E. Frost, Lily Evelyn Frost, Mary E. Frost, Elizabeth Beckingham, Elsie (Elizabeth) Spencer, Frederick Thomas Spencer, Mary Ann McDonald, Margaret Sarah McDonald.⁴

Rouchel Vale, 28th March, 1884.

Miss McDonald then replied:

To the Pupils of Rouchel Vale Provisional School - My Dear Pupils

In replying to your beautiful address on the occasion of my resignation as teacher of this school, words fail me to convey to you how heartily I thank you for your affectionate expressions of gratitude and goodwill, also for the accompanying very handsome present. I shall very highly prize your elegant and valuable present as long as I live, among my most valued treasury it will be found, but higher, far higher, do I prize that love and approval which prompted the noble gift of which I am the grateful and honoured recipient.

It is truly gratifying to me, my dear young friends, to find that in my capacity as teacher of the Rouchel Vale Provisional School, I have gained your affections and the goodwill and approval of your dear Parents, whose many acts of kindness



Rouchel Vale School at St John's Church about 1886.

Back Row - Left to Right: Grace McGregor (teacher), Andy Smith, Fred Spencer, Andrew Bridge, Don Bridge, Arthur Spencer, Lizzie Kennedy, May Spencer, Georgina Kennedy.

Front Row: Alfred Spencer, Ellen Bridge, Margaret Bridge, Maggie Kennedy, Ida Spencer, Elsie Spencer, Robina Kennedy

Note: in 1885 Rebecca says Freddie has not grown since he had "the fever" in early 1882.. This photo was taken was taken in 1886 - Freddie (third from the left in the back row) would have been 16. His sister May (second from the right in the back row is actually 2 years Freddie's junior)

towards me I can never forget, and I desire to avail myself of this occasion to convey to them my most sincere thanks. I thank you, my dear pupils, for your affectionate wish for my happiness in this life and in that more important life which is to come.

I leave you, my dear young friends, with feelings of deep regret, and wherever my lot may be cast, whatever my fate may be, I can look back at least to one happy period of my life-yes, back to the happy days I spent as Teacher of Rouchel Vale Provisional School.

That the God of Love, may watch over you, my dear pupils, may He lead you and keep you in the path of virtue, and when life's stormy waves are crossed, may you all be found worthy to enter those mansions above prepared by Him who has said "Suffer little children to come unto me," is the fervent prayer of your affectionate teacher."

C. McDonald

Notes:

1. *The Public Instruction Act 1880 would remain the basis of the State system of education in NSW until 1987, came into force on 1st May 1880.*
2. *Rouchel Vale is 20kms from Aberdeen and 35kms from Muswellbrook. Both distances are too great for children to travel by horse drawn transport.*
3. *Catherine McDonald married William George McMullen and lived on the property Brooklyn for the rest of her life.*
4. *None of John and Eliza's children are at the school in 1884 as they are now resident at Cuttabunda.*

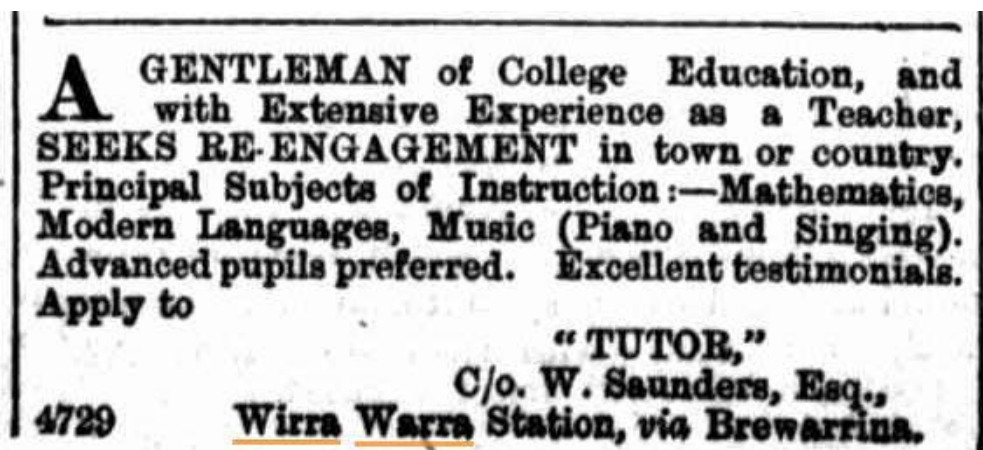
Schooling at Wirra Warra and Cuttabunda:

There is not a lot of detail about the provision of schooling at either Wirra Warra or Cuttabunda in the 1880's. However the Public Instruction Act applied on remote properties as much as anywhere in the colony.

By 1880 the three eldest Saunders children, Willie, Ernie and Edie, required schooling and certainly later in the decade we know that the Saunders employed governesses and tutors.

One of their governesses was Gertrude Whiting who married Harry Connel Loughnan of 'Homebush' near Comborah.

Fritjof Arwidsson was a tutor at Wirra Warra in the late 1880's to 1895. Arwidsson was a very well educated Swedish emigrant who was a prolific and entertaining contributor to various newspapers, particularly the Maitland Mercury and Hunter District General Advertiser. In an advertisement of August 1892 in the "Mercury" he describes himself thus:



Apparently Arwidsson did not find re-engagement as he was still appearing in letters from Wirra Warra right up to William Saunders' death in February 1895.

Arwidsson was above all a music teacher and he certainly had an influence on the Saunders children in this respect. Albert Bokhara Saunders became a professional composer, Evelyn and Corinda became pianists and composers and the family is still playing music three generations later.

Arwidsson had a great writing style and a wonderful turn of phrase which made his newspaper contributions great reading today. Fortunately he wrote numerous articles describing the social and community activities at Wirra Warra, Cuttabunda and Willawillingbah. These writings have given us an invaluable perspective on life on the Bokhara.

In March 1891 he wrote:

“Lest certain of our friends at a distance should labour under the painful delusion that in these out-of-the-way backblocks, we are as heathenish and spiritually destitute as lack of church and clergy can make us. Be it known that a Sunday School is held at Cuttabunda every Lord’s Day afternoon at 3 o’clock, when the noble liturgy of the Church of England is read by the resident tutor, when Sankey’s hymns are tunefully sung, and when neighbouring families make a point of attending and enjoying the service.

More than this, tutors are regularly employed in the district; pianos are common, and are indeed an institution amongst us. Still, as we do not wish to bear false witness against our neighbours, we must frankly confess that what is commonly known as “culture” is not a conspicuous feature in our midst.

There is certainly any amount of hippolatri (discussion of horses), and dissertation on bullock, sheep and dog ; but the broad Bostonian culture of the period has certainly given us a wide berth up to date.....”

Millicent Cameron also appears to have role in running the school at Wirra Warra in the 1890’s.

Of school at Cuttabunda, there is only a passing reference to School being over by Eliza Spencer in 1895. In the early 1890’s, with John and Eliza and Matthew and Emma in residence at Cuttabunda, there would have been about 15 children of school age.



Ernie Saunders about 1884 - Ernie Saunders is mentioned throughout the letters with his brother Willie.

Letter 3: February 1881

Rouchel Vale.

February 28th, 1881

My Dear Mrs. Saunders,

Your very thoughtful notes came to hand on Saturday. I had heard the day previously of poor Mr. MacKenzie's¹ death but did not hear any particulars until I read your note. I am exceedingly sorry for his poor dear wife. It must have been a terrible shock for her and her sister for him to breathe his last and them two selves only there. I suppose there was no time on account of the very hot weather for a doctor to examine him and certify as to the cause of death. I am sure his death has cast quite a gloom on the creeks for he was very popular. The news altogether upset me. I have not been able to set my mind to anything particular since for he was so well liked, both by Thomas² and myself but I hope that he is removed to a far better home above. I would like to hear if he was conscious that death was so near. I suppose that his sorrowing family have left the Bree³ before now. Poor Mrs. MacKenzie must, I am sure, be nearly heartbroken and of course everything her eyes would rest on about the comfortable homestead would remind her of her great loss. She is fortunate in one particular - to have such kind, good friends to think and act for her welfare.

I am happy to hear that you are all well and that everything is prospering with you. This part also looks splendid. All my cares are very well. They muster pretty strong for I have eight. My dear husband is away from home at present. He intends going up to Cuttabunda shortly. It would be quite a pleasure trip for me to accompany him. I would like to see you all again - so would Freddie and May. Mrs John Spencer⁴ was talking of going up but has postponed for a while. She expects a little one about the middle of April, if I might guess aright.

Give my kind love to each of the dear children. Also remember me kindly, Mrs Saunders.

I suppose the old gentleman's garden⁵ looks splendid. I hope his health continues good.

Dear father is still in Melbourne and enjoying himself thoroughly. He intends returning to Sydney in May.

I am sorry to say I could not get the cabbage tree hats for you. This summer has been too hot to work the sinnet⁶. I have tried in two places but I think I could get them done during the Winter and send them up by Eliza.⁷ I have kept your order and will endeavour to send you up those things but I fear I will not be able to choose them myself which I would have preferred doing. I cannot get away from home at all since my dear little Cecil⁸ came. If there is anything else you require particular drop a telegram⁹.

You must forgive me for not writing. I think you would if you knew how fully my time is occupied but do not entertain the thought that I have forgotten you. I am in disgrace with every one of my friends for the same thing. I will get May¹⁰ to write a long letter in a few days. Freddie¹¹ is going to write to Willie¹² when he can gather enough to tell him. He is improving at school nicely but nothing like May. Alfie¹³ is quite a little outlaw. He gets into more trouble than every other child in the school put together.

Who is your little son like? Mine is the picture of Artie¹⁴. He sits alone and crawls about now. How is Emily¹⁵? I hope she is a good girl to you. I hear Thompson has left Wirra Warra.

I must draw this to a close for the mailman is coming. Kindly excuse all mistakes and receive with it my most sincere regards.

From your loving friend,

R. Spencer.

Mrs. Dowell¹⁶ is expecting an increase shortly. Old Mrs Spencer¹⁷ was out for a week with each of us. She would have stayed longer only for Mary¹⁸ being that way.

R. S.

Notes:

1. Mr. MacKenzie - Unknown.
2. Thomas Spencer - Rebecca's husband
3. Bree - Local term for Brewarrina - usually written Bre today
4. Mrs John Spencer - Eliza Spencer nee Marsh who would be Eliza's neighbour from late 1882 for 13 years
5. The old gentleman's garden - The old gentleman was John Saunders - Eliza's father in law who lived at Wirra Warra and maintained extensive gardens and orchards.

6. *Sinnet* - *Sinnet* is a type of cordage made by plaiting strands of dried fibre or grass. It can be used to make straw hats.
7. *Eliza* - *Eliza Spencer* (see note 4) is intending to travel to *Cuttabunda*.
8. *Cecil William Spencer* - *Rebecca's* son born 1880 died 1882.
9. *Telegram* - Interesting casual reference to the use of telegram in 1881.
10. *May* - *Mary Emily May Spencer* - *Rebecca's* oldest daughter.
11. *Freddie* - *Frederick Thomas Spencer* - *Rebecca's* eldest child.
12. *Willie* - *William Henry Saunders* - Eldest surviving son of *Eliza Saunders*. *Willie* was tragically struck by lightning and killed in 1886. His grave is the only remaining marker of *Wirra Warra* today.
13. *Alfie* - *Alfred Bokhara Spencer* born 1876 at *Cuttabunda*. *Rebecca's* son.
14. *Artie* - *Arthur Hooper Spencer* born 1874 - *Rebecca's* son.
15. *Emily* - Probably *Emily Keelan*
16. *Mrs. Dowell* - *Mary Jane Dowell nee Spencer* - *Rebecca's* Sister in Law
17. *Old Mrs Spencer* - *Mary Spencer nee Stark* - *Rebecca's* Mother in Law.
18. *Mary* - *Mary Dowell* (see note 16) was expecting a child.



Eliza Spencer nee Marsh was the wife of *John Spencer*. *John* and *Eliza* moved permanently to *Cuttabunda* in late 1882. *Eliza Spencer* then became neighbours with *Eliza Saunders* for the next 13 years. Six of *John* and *Eliza Spencer's* ten children were born at *Cuttabunda*. There is some evidence that the two *Eliza's* - *Saunders* and *Spencer* were not the closest of friends. Although an 1895 letter from *Eliza Spencer* to *Eliza Saunders* is quite warm and friendly.

This photo was taken in about 1910.

Typhoid Strikes Rouchel Vale: 1882

In early 1882 there was an outbreak of Typhoid Fever at Rouchel Vale. We learn this from an obituary for Rebecca's then youngest son, Cecil William Spencer, in the Maitland Mercury & Hunter River General Advertiser of Saturday 4th February 1882.

"A little one, some eighteen or nineteen months old, Cecil William, youngest son of Mr. T. Spencer, of Rouchel Vale, was called away during this hot weather. Much sympathy is felt for the bereaved parents, whose eldest son is now ill with typhoid fever."

Typhoid Fever is a very unpleasant disease, which has almost disappeared from the developed world. In the 1880's however, it was common around the world and a particular problem in the Australian colonies.

Typhoid is caused by an especially virulent variety of Salmonella bacteria. It is a disease of poor hygiene and sanitation causing contamination of food or water. Typhoid is also very infectious, so it is easy to spread from one person to another. Carers and close family often became infected. A small proportion of sufferers become carriers of the disease even though they have recovered from the symptoms. A carrier of Typhoid could enter a community and unknowingly cause an outbreak of the disease.

In the 1880's there was no treatment (which today is based around antibiotics). The disease just ran its course of high fevers, extreme pain, vomiting and diarrhoea. This typically takes four weeks. The complete recovery time after that may be a few weeks to months or even years. Typhoid is a very debilitating disease.

We know from the obituary that Freddie Spencer has typhoid. It is entirely possible that the same disease also caused Cecil Williams death.

In her letter of June 1882 Rebecca comments "...poor Freddie has promised Willie and Ernie (a letter) when his writing is fit to be seen. That terrible sickness gave his nerves a shaking. He could not steady the pen for a long time. He is coming a little better lately. He looks very well now."

She also mentions "John had the fever, the same time as Freddie in a very mild form but he was a long time rallying out of



Freddie and John Spencer - both of whom suffered from Typhoid in early 1882

it. It gave him a great shaking."

However in her last letter of March 1885 Rebecca refers to the "fever" again while talking about Freddie; "... poor little fellow, he is not one of nature's favoured ones for he has not grown the least bit since that fever. I sometimes think perhaps it would have been better for God to have taken him then, but then again it is wicked for a poor human mortal like myself to judge His Supreme Will. If I have a dozen children, I will never have one dearer to me than what he is.

I suppose it is on account of his affliction he is very useful although so small he takes more interest in the place and stock to see that things are going right than what his father does."

The Rouchel Vale school photo taken the following year shows Freddie aged 16 as very small. He only reaches up to his younger sister May's shoulder. *See the school photo in the story about Rouchel Vale School*

Sinnets and Cabbage Tree Hats:

Rebecca apologises to Eliza, "I am sorry to say I could not get the cabbage tree hats for you. This summer has been too hot to work the sinnet. I have tried in two places but I think I could get them done during the Winter and send them up by Eliza." It is not clear if Rebecca is indicating that she will make them herself, or get them done by someone else.

Cabbage tree hats were very popular in NSW from about 1800 until 1900, particularly in the country in much the same way that Akubras are today. There was a widespread cottage industry making both the sinnets and the hats from the sinnets.

In the 1886 photos of the Saunders at Wirra Warra William Snr, his father John and the younger boys are all appesar to be wearing cabbage tree hats. These hats were not cheap ranging from 2 to 5 pounds each depending on quality.



A description of how Cabbage Tree Hats were made was provided in a Sydney Morning Herald article in November 1929

The bark of the cabbage palm is almost as tough as the horn, and the tree tried an axe in felling. Once down, the best "hands" were taken home and subjected to scalding for about ten minutes then a vigorous shaking, would cause the leaf to open out like a fan ready for bleaching white, or as white as possible in the dewy night air. The leaf was then split into narrow strands of equal width by means of a home-made splitter, consisting of a short, light wooden haft, into the end of which were inserted peg-tooth points, or teeth, filed from stay husks, the implement thus resembling a miniature rake in appearance, six inches in length. *(These narrow strips were then plaited into sinnets or long plaited strands. This task was often done by school children to earn a few shillings.)*

Having a supply of plaited sinnet, the hat maker started at the centre of the crown, widening the circles ever outward. Then the sides were made and blocked on a crown shape of wood, and well ironed into permanent form. Next came the brim and its attachment, the lining, the black velvet band, the leather chin strap, and, finally, the "button" over the crown centre. This was neatly made, and, with its ornamental stitches of coloured silk, added the finishing touch to the hat. The quantity of plait used in the making of a hat varied with the size and the fineness and closeness of the sinnet. The main thing was the stitching at every "corner," which took time, but gave greater strength and durability to the hat, which, if well made of the best sinnet, would last a man three years.

The jolly drovers come in from the blazing west were very partial to the cabbage tree, and many a man invested in a new "tile" at Kurrajong when passing through with his mob for Homebush, and it frequently happened that he was commissioned with orders for others on some outback station. One hat was usually kept for ordinary rough wear, while a real "dandy" was carefully boxed up at home for special occasions, such as the annual races or show, on which occasions it was quite a common thing to see one man walk up to another, lift his mate's hat off, ask him its maker's name, its price, and wind up by making him a sporting offer for it.



In another photo from Wirra Warra taken in 1895 the men are now wearing felt hats. The Cabbage Tree hat had disappeared. Felt hats were the new fashion for men at least.

The famous Aussie Slouch hat was actually adopted for military use by all colonies in 1890.

It is also interesting that Benjamin Dunkerly started making rabbits fur felt hats in Hobart about 1874.

His business had expanded so much that he moved to Sydney in 1904. Dunkerly was the inventor of that Australian icon the Akubra.

Letter 4: June 1882

Rouchel Vale,
June 4th, 1882.

My Dear Mrs Saunders,

I am quite ashamed of myself for postponing to write to you until now but I hope you will pardon me again this once and now I have sat down to write. I fear I shall not be able to make up a very lengthy budget but to begin, I must tell you, on the 30th May I was confined of a dear little girl¹. Both myself and little one are doing well. She is not as fine a baby as "dear little Cecil"² was but she seems healthy and strong and is, as yet, very quiet. May is so delighted with her. I have not picked a name yet. All my other cares are, I am thankful to say, very well, as I hope this may find you all at Wirra Warra.

I am expecting to hear of another addition to your family circle. Do not forget to tell me next letter. Tell Willie, Ernie and Edie³ their old playmates do not forget them. May⁴ is often talking about writing but I fear I am to blame for I keep her so employed. She has, I may say, no spare time but the holidays will soon be now. She must write then and poor Freddie⁴ has promised Willie and Ernie when his writing is fit to be seen. That terrible sickness gave his nerves a shaking. He could not steady the pen for a long time. He is coming a little better lately. He looks very well now. They both send their kind love to you all and would like to see Wirra Warra and all residing there very much and so would their Mama, too. I often think of the pleasant afternoons we used to spend together.

I suppose you was a little surprised to hear that Matt⁵ had really taken a wife⁶. He was such a long time thinking about it. What a blessing you are having such splendid seasons up there. I expect you are busy with your dairy. I make sufficient for our own use. I made a nice lot of cheese in the Spring but I am quite out and I do miss it.

How do they get on at Cuttabunda? I suppose you never go over. How does the old gentleman get his health⁷? I am picturing his garden looking splendid about this time with the reasonable rains. We have no vegetables in ours. Thomas⁷ has been too busy to work it as yet.

I must not forget to mention that my father⁸ continues to enjoy excellent health. He still resides in Sydney.

I daresay you noticed in the Mercury paper that poor Mrs John Cox⁹ was dead. I was very sad to hear the sad news. She was such a kind friend of mine.

The very last time I was in Muscle Brook¹⁰ I went over to see her (she was bed ridden then) and she seemed so pleased that I went to see her.

Where is Mrs. Keelan¹¹ now? I suppose Emily is with you still. She must be a great help. I would like to hear from you on receipt of this but I know I do not deserve you to write promptly to me but really I was so busy after coming home from Muscle Brook and I had to make all new baby linens, which occupied every spare minute.

Mrs. Frost¹² has a little son, nearly three months old now. She called him Cyrus Loftus Spencer Frost¹³. That makes five children for her now-- two sons and three daughters.

I hope your better half enjoys good health. Mine looks first rate. John¹⁴ had the fever, the same time as Freddie in a very mild form but he was a long time rallying out of it. It gave him a great shaking.

We are having splendid rains down here this last fortnight, just fortunate for the farmers.

My little one is making a hint that I had better bring this scribble to a conclusion so, with kind love and the best wishes for each and all your dear ones, not forgetting your own self.

I remain,
Dear Mrs Saunders,
Yours Very Sincerely
R. Spencer.

The next time you write I will endeavour to answer by return mail.

Notes:

1. "Viy" Muriel Ida Stark - Muriel Ida Maud Stark Spencer born 30th May 1882 – Rebecca's daughter
2. Cecil - Cecil William Spencer Rebecca's son died 17th Jan 1882 aged 2. Possibly from Typhoid

3. *Willie, Ernie and Edie – Eliza's three eldest children*
4. *May and Freddie are Rebecca's eldest children.*
5. *Matt – Matthew Spencer – Thomas Spencer's brother*
6. *Matthew Spencer - Rebecca's Brother in Law, married Emma Walker in 1882 – he was 39years old when he married.*
7. *Thomas – Rebecca's husband.*
8. *Frederick Hooper – Rebecca's father.*
9. *Mrs John Cox*
10. *Muscle Brook – old spelling of Muswellbrook*
11. *Mrs Keelan – a woman living at Wirra Warra. See detail in notes of letter 2*
12. *Mrs. Frost - Elizabeth Spencer – Rebecca's Sister in Law*
13. *Cyrus Loftus Spencer Frost - Elizabeth's son born 14th March 1882*



Mrs Elizabeth Frost nee Spencer - Mother of Cyrus Loftus Frost and Rebecca's Sister in Law.

Letter 5: August 1882

Rouchel Vale.

August 4th, 1882.

My Dear Mrs Saunders,

I was very pleased indeed to hear of your safe delivery of a dear little daughter¹ and sincerely hope you are both continuing to do well. I was really thankful when I heard the good news for it is a very anxious time always but it seems doubly so, situated as you are. I was sorry that you had not Mrs. Keelan², but hope you done as well as though she had been with you.

My little pet is doing nicely. She seems very small to me to what my other darling was. I had her christened on Sunday last in Muscle Brook. You will smile when you read her name- "Viy" Muriel Ida Stark³. The first is her Papa's fancy name, the second mine, which I intend to call her and the last is her Grandma Spencer's maiden name⁴.

There is a probability of a Mrs. Spencer being at Cuttabunda⁵ before very long, though which one is not decided yet. If neither of the others will go I hold myself in readiness, but it would be inconvenient for Thomas to be there.

All our family are very well at present. I was in The Brook⁶ for two or three days this week. We have the buggy thoroughly done up and a hole in it fixed. It looks very nice now.

Matt⁷ tells me your children are grown so much and the boys ride so well. I would like to see them. Give them all my kind love. My boys are very short and stout. May⁸ is the only one that grows well. She is quite to my satisfaction in ability as well as stature. I do not keep a girl, consequently I am kept very busy myself. Baby is quiet for I should not be able to manage without one. There are always men here at work. Thomas has finished delivering the hay⁹. There was about 80 tons. He is very busy now, having another crop just in. If it is a good season, they expect to have as much again more than last year.

Harry Holiday¹⁰ has been here for a fortnight. He has gone out shearing again.

Have you any idea of coming down country for a trip? The railway is getting nearer and nearer to you. I am very pleased to hear you have been fortunate in procuring a good teacher for your children, how anxious you were about your children's education.

Tell Willie and Ernie¹¹ that Freddy¹² has a pony and saddle and two kangaroo dogs and his greatest delight is in a kangaroo hunt. I am afraid he is not so industrious as they are.

I hope the old gentleman¹³ is quite well. He was ailing from a severe cold the last time you wrote. Give him my kind regards also Mr Saunders. I suppose he still looks as jolly as ever.

Is there an old woman living where poor Mrs. Burrell¹⁴ lived? I missed her at Gideon's¹⁵ place. I was thinking perhaps his partner----- and if so---- she would be a nice neighbour for you.

I seen from the paper that Mr. Eather and Miss Crothers are married.

Please write soon and don't forget to tell me the dear little ones name and who she is like. My three girls are all alike, fair complexion, blue eyes and fair hair.

Excuse this horribly written scrawl but accept with it my very best wishes for yourself and all your dear ones.

Hoping it will find with kind love,

I remain, my dear Mrs. Saunders

Your Sincere Friend

R. Spencer.

Notes:

1. *Eva Martha Corinda Saunders - Eliza Saunders Daughter*
2. *Mrs. Keelan - Miss Emily Keelan b1866 - a woman living at Wirra Warra. - See Notes for Letter 2*
3. *"Viy" Muriel Ida Stark - Muriel Ida Maud Stark Spencer born 30th May 1882 - Rebecca's daughter*
4. *Grandma Spencer's maiden name - Thomas' mother was Mary Stark.*
5. *John Spencer and his wife Eliza and their family moved to Cuttabunda permanently in late 1882.*
6. *The Brook - colloquial name for Muswellbrook*

7. *Matt - Matthew Spencer - Rebecca's Brother in Law*
8. *May - Rebecca's eldest daughter*
9. *Hay - The Spencers were pioneers in growing lucerne for hay in the Hunter Valley.*
10. *Harry Holiday - Unknown*
11. *Willie and Ernie – Eliza Saunders' two eldest sons.*
12. *Freddy - Rebecca's eldest son*
13. *the old gentleman - John Saunders Eliza's father in law who lived at Wirra Warra*
14. *Mrs Burrell - A Mrs Burrell is shown as the witness of the birth of Rebecca's daughter Elsie at Cuttabunda in 1878*
15. *Gideon's - neighbour of Wirra Warra – lived at a settlement Denman on the Birrie River*



Wedding photo of Matthew Spencer and his wife Emma Walker. Matthew was 39 when he married Emma. Matthew and Emma moved permanently to Cuttabunda in 1893. Two of their eight children were born at Cuttabunda.

The earliest reference to any of the Spencer Brothers actually being at Cuttabunda is an 1874 report of Matthew being severely injured in a dam wall collapse that slightly injured William Saunders and killed a man named Hogan.

The Last Letter: March 24th 1885

Rouchel Vale.
March 24th, 1885.

Dear Mrs. Saunders,

It is not because I write so seldom that I think any the less of you, especially at this trying time that this particular part of our country are going through. I say ours for although I am not on the spot our interest lies at Cuttabunda.

Abs and Willy¹ arrived home safely a week ago, they both look well and did not have such a hard life as we anticipated for when they got to Boggabri they trucked to Aberdeen all the lame cattle and any that were very weak which of course was a great help.

Fortunately the season has been splendid about here lately ere has been no scarcity for them now, a week's rain has improved them wonderfully.

We were pleased to hear of you all by those that had seen you lately. Abs was telling us we should not know Willie he is quite a young man. Freddie² would like to see him very much indeed, poor little fellow he is not one of nature's favoured ones for he has not grown the least bit since that fever. I sometimes think perhaps it would have been better for God to have taken him then, but then again it is wicked for a poor human mortal like myself to judge His Supreme Will. If I have a dozen children I will never have one dearer to me than what he is.

I suppose it is on account of his affliction he is very useful although so small he takes more interest in the place and stock to see that things are going right than what his father does.

Abs and Willie³ are taking some fat cattle to Sydney after Easter. Abs is anxious for me to let him go with them. I think I will it would be a great change for him. His Grandfather Hooper⁴ made him a present of a nice watch he values it greatly.

May⁵ is getting well and is my right hand. I have everything to be thankful for in her at present. I may say she does everything in the house except the washing and ironing and baking for although my baby is so young I am drawing quite near my confinement again and are more helpless than ever before. In fact it is quite a task some days for me to move about at all. I like your little son's name very much. I suppose he is still getting on well, it would be a great pleasure for me to see you and all your dear ones.

I have one very nice child Muriel⁶ she surpasses all the rest although she was a much miserable baby. You will think I am writing all about my own but that is just what I want you to do sit down and tell me about each one of yours no doubt Emma's felt it hard losing her little one the way she did. I saw the account in the "Mercury". Mrs. Dowell⁷ had a little one born on Boxing Day she named it Violet Pearl⁸ poor little thing it was never healthy nor ever would have been the Drs. Told her so, it was a mercy both to mother and babe when God took it about 3 weeks ago. I went in the day it was buried to see her. That was the first time in 5 months. I go out very little although Thomas has everything so comfortable for me to go and is pleased when I consent to go as possible but I always seem to be wanted most at home.

How is the old gentleman⁹ getting his health, remember me to him. Willie¹⁰ tells me he looks much the same.

I am sorry you and Mrs. John¹¹ do not see more of one another. I thought it would be nice for each of you when she was at Cuttabunda but you have another neighbour now in Mrs. Sharply. Tell me about her when you write. Mrs. Matt¹² lives almost in call from me we get on very well although seldom visiting each other during the week, either one of us cross over on Sunday sometimes. She is not much for visiting any more than myself but is very kind and neighbourly.

You will see by the Mercury Mr W. E. White's¹³ safe arrival. I do not think the rest of the party have arrived yet. I cannot think of any news worth sending you, tell Edie she must excuse May¹⁴ writing so irregularly to her it is not her fault she is very fond of letter writing when she can make the time but that is not often she sends her fond love to both and would like to see you very much. There was great rejoicing between her and Uncle Willie¹⁵ when he came home, they are tenderly attached to each other.

When your better half was down I could hear of him both times but none of our people could see him. I used often to think how lonely and anxious you must have been when both him and the boys were away but I suppose you have them all around you once more and I trust we shall soon hear of the blessed downpour being sent and all will be well that ends well.

With kind wishes to your worthy husband and fond love to yourself and the dear children I hope soon to hear from yours and trusting this may find all well.

I remain my dear friend
Yours Sincerely
R. Spencer.

Notes:

1. Absalom Sherwood and William Granville Spencer – Rebecca's Brothers in Law - Absalom was one of the 4 Cuttabunda owners and William was an owner of Narran Plains with his brother Edward Spencer from 1886. See note below.

2. *Frederick Thomas Spencer b.1870 - Son of Rebecca and Thomas Spencer.*
3. *See reference 1 above.*
4. *Frederick Hooper - Rebecca's father*
5. *Mary Emily May Spencer b.1872 - Rebecca's daughter*
6. *Muriel Ida Maud Stark Spencer born 1882 - Rebecca's daughter*
7. *Mary Jane Dowell- nee Spencer – Rebecca's Sister in Law.*
8. *Violet Pearl Dowell died March 1885*
9. *Probably John Saunders – Father in Law to Eliza Saunders*
10. *William Granville Spencer – Rebecca's Brother in Law - see 1. above.*
11. *Mrs John Spencer - Eliza Spencer nee Marsh – There is some evidence that Eliza Spencer and Eliza Saunders were not the closest of friends despite being close neighbours for 14 years.*
12. *Mrs Matthew Spencer - Emma Spencer nee Walker*
13. *Reverend William Edward White or Canon White who married William and Eliza Saunders and also John and Eliza Spencer. William Edward white was born near Muswellbrook - possibly at Rouchel.*
14. *see note 5. Above*
15. *William Granville Spencer – see note1. above*



Abs and Willy

Absalom Sherwood Spencer (Abs) was a younger brother of Thomas, Rebecca's husband.

Abs appears in several of the letters from Rebecca.

Absalom never married and was killed in a horse accident in 1896 at Bourke.

William Granville Spencer (Willy) was also a younger brother of Absalom and Thomas. Born in 1858 he was 16 years younger than Thomas and 11 years younger than Absalom.

William acquired a homestead lease adjacent to Cuttabunda in 1886 with another younger brother Edward Spencer.

William died suddenly of natural causes in 1894 and is buried in an unmarked grave at Cuttabunda

Note: The Willie referred to in this letter is William Henry Saunders - Eliza's eldest son.

Just to cause total confusion John and Eliza Spencer named two of their sons Absalom and William.

Both of these children were born and grew up at Cuttabunda. In later letters they are referred to as Abs and Willy.

Bouchel Vale
March 24th 185

My Dear Mrs Saunders

It is not because
I write so seldom that
I think any the less of
you especially ^{at} this trying
time that our particular
part of the country is passing
through I say ours for altho
I am not in the spot
our interest lies at Cullabunda
Abs & Willie arrived home
safely a week ago they both
look very well and did
not have such a bad trip
as we anticipated for them
when they got to Boggabri
they trucked to Aberdeen all
the same ^{cattle} ones & any that were

very weak which of course was
a great help, fortunately the
season has been splendid
about here lately, there is
no scarcity for them now a
week even, has improved them
wonderful.

We were pleased to
hear of you all by those
that had seen you lately
Ab's was telling us we should
not know Willie, he is quite
a young man, Freddie would
like to see him very much
indeed poor little fellow he
is not one of nature's favored
ones for he has not grown the
least bit since that fever
I sometimes think perhaps it
would have been better
for God to have taken

him then, but - then again
it is wicked for a poor
human mortal like myself
to judge His supreme will
if I have a dozen children
I will never have one dearer
to me than what he is, I suppose
it is on account of his affliction
he is very useful. Altho so small
he takes far more interest
in the place & stock &
see that things are going right
than what his father does,
Abs & Willie are taking
some fat-cattle to Sydney
after Easter. Abs is anxious
for me to let him go with
them. I think I will, it
would be a great change for
him. his Grandfather Hooper
made him a present of a

nice watch, he values it greatly.
May is getting on well & is my
right hand. I have everything to
be thankful for in her.
at present I may say she does
every thing in the house except
the washing ironing & baking for
altho my baby is so young I
am drawing quite near my
confinement again, and am
more helpless than ever I was
before, in fact it is quite
a task some days for me
to move about at all.

I liked your little cousin
dame very much I suppose he
is still getting on well it
would be a great pleasure
for me to see you & all your
dear ones. I have one very nice
child Maribel she surpasses all the

rest although she was a
most miserable baby you
will think I am writing all
about my own, but that is
just what I want you to
do sit down & tell me all,
about each one of yours
no doubt poor Emma Keelen
felt it very hard losing her
little one the way she did,
I saw the ad in the "Mercury"
Mrs Dowell had a little
daughter born on Monday
day she named it Violet Pearl
Poor little thing it was never
healthy nor ever would have
been the Drs told her so
it was a mercy both to mother
& babe when God took it
about 3 weeks ago, I went in the
day it was buried to see her

that was the first time in
five months I go out very little
although Thomas has everything
so comfortable for me to go and
is as pleased when I consent to
go as possible, but I always seem
to be wanted most at home

How is the old gentleman getting
his health remember me please
most kindly to him. Willie tells
me he looks about the same
I am sorry you & Mrs John
do not see more of one
another I thought it would

be so nice for each of you
when she was at Cullabunde
but you have another

neighbour now in Mrs Sharpley
tell me about her when you
write. Mrs Watt lives almost
within call from me

we get on very well altho
seldom visiting each other
during the week either one
of us crosses over on Sunday
sometimes she is not much
for visiting any more than myself
but is very kind & neighbourly.

You will see by the Mercury
of Mr. W. E. White's safe arrival
I do not think the rest
of the party have arrived
yet. I cannot think of
any news worth sending you
tell Eddie she must excuse
my writing so irregularly to her.

It is not her fault she is
very fond of letter writing when
she can make time but
that is not often she sends
her fond love to you both
& would like to see you very much

there was great rejoicing between
her & Uncle Willie when he
came home they are tenderly
attached to one another
When your better half was
down I could hear & I hear
both times, but none of our
people could see him
I used often to think how
lonely and anxious you
must have been when
both him and the boys
were away but I suppose you
have them all around you once
more and I trust we shall
soon hear of the blessed
downpour being sent and
then all will be well that
ends well with kind wishes
to your worthy husband and
love to yourself & the dear children

we hope soon to hear from you and
trust this may find all well

I remain
my dear friend
Yours sincerely
H. Spencer

This last section of text was written at right angles to the text on the last page of the letter, as you can see on the previous page.



The Old Gentlemans gardens. John Saunders established extensive vegetable gardens and orchards at Wirra Warra. This photo was taken about 1890 and shows a gardener hand watering John's beloved fruit trees. Whilst no remnant of the homestead remains, there are apricot trees growing in the bank of the Bokhara river, at the site of the gardens today.

Postscript: 3rd July 1885

Rouchel Vale.
3rd July, 1885.

My Dear Mrs. Saunders,

Your very kind and sympathetic letter of the 31st last month came duly to hand. Where true friendship and genuine sympathy exist as I know it does in your kindest of hearts. Words are entirely inadequate to convey the depth of your sorrow and sympathy for the sad and irreparable loss I have sustained in the death of my poor dear Becky. To die so unexpectedly is so hard to realise that, even now, I momentarily forget that she is gone and often turn to ask or tell her something.

I know you truly sympathise with me. I know you feel more than words can express. Among the many letters of sympathy and condolence which I have received none is, I am sure, more genuine and sincere than the one I have received from you, my old and valued friend. I need hardly tell you my poor dear wife numbered you among her dearest friends.

I need not now give any particulars of her death further than to say that she died of Puerperal Fever¹ that dread and fatal complaint which carries off so many mothers. A good wife and mother has gone. How hard it is to say "Thy Will Be Done".

It does seem a strange dispensation of Providence that a good fond mother should be called away from a young and helpless family. Strange indeed it seems to our finite minds. My loss is great but my poor little babes' loss is still greater.

You have of course heard all about the death of the two little twins². They were two fine children when born but they did not long survive their poor dear mother.

I hope these few lines will find you and your family in the enjoyment of good health. Give my kind remembrances to Mr. Saunders and the old man. Hoping to see you all some day, believe me to be,

Yours Sincerely,
T. Spencer.

Notes:

- Puerperal Fever or Childbirth Fever was one of the leading causes of death for women until the 20th century. As early as 1800 it had been shown that strict hygiene by the doctors and midwives attending a birth reduced the incidence of infection by over 90%. However for nearly 100 years the medical profession ignored and even ridiculed this information. In most cases the attendants were the source of the infection.*
It is possible that Rebecca in giving birth to twins required more assistance and was infected by the attendant. It is also possible that the same infection was passed on to the twins who then suffered the same fate as their mother.
Puerperal Fever is not a single disease but rather the chance infection of the mother immediately following birth with a range of bacterial agents. Typically this would ultimately cause septicemia which untreated was fatal. Better hygiene and antibiotics have made this type of infection very rare today.
- The twins were George Granville Spencer and Una Rebecca Spencer. They were born on 18th May 1885. George died 14 days later on 1st June and Una 2 days later on 3rd June. They were buried with their mother.*
- Presumably Eliza has asked Thomas for the address of Rebecca's father, Frederick Hooper. Thomas has written on the bottom right corner of the letter F. Hooper - School of Arts - Sydney. See following pages*



The death of Mrs. Thomas Spencer, of Rouchel Brook, which took place on the 25th inst, is one of those sorrowful occurrences so unavoidably interwoven with our human existence, and not only demanding, but commanding sympathy in its widest sense with Mr Spencer.

A short time ago the deceased lady came to reside in this place, and a few days ago she was confined of twins. There are six other children living. The burial took place on the 26th instant, and was numerously attended by persons from every part of the district.

The Maitland Mercury & Hunter River General Advertiser Saturday 30 May 1885

Rebecca, George and Una Spencer are buried in Muswellbrook Cemetary

On the following pages is a copy of the original manuscript of Thomas' letter to Eliza including the black mourning border on the first page.

Rochester N.Y.
3rd July 1885.

My dear Mrs Saunders.

Your very kind and
sympathetic letter of the
31st last month came duly
to hand. True true
friendship and genuine
sympathy exist as I know
it does in your kindest of
hearts. words are utterly
inadequate to convey the
depth of your sorrow and
sympathy for the sad and
irreparable loss I have

My loss is great but my poor
little babes loss is still greater
You have of course heard all
about the death of the two
little twins. They were two fine
children when born but they
did not long survive their poor
dear mother

I hope these few lines will
find you and all your family
in the enjoyment of good health
Give my kind remembrances
to Mr Saunders and to the
old man. Hoping to see
you all some day believe me
my dear friend to be.

H. Hooper.
School of Arts
S. J. Jones

Yours very sincerely

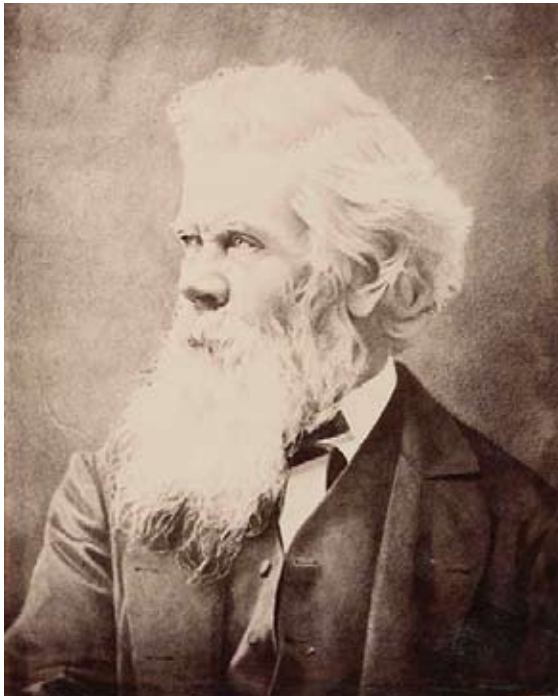
L. Spencer

Conclusions: The Personality of NSW

A perspective on the Rebecca to Eliza Letters or the entire Cuttabunda and Wirra Warra experience should include reference to the range of underlying factors that were shaping the personality of NSW and its people.

- 1859 NSW achieves Responsible Self Government.
- 1861 The Robertson Land Acts totally change land title and availability in NSW introducing for the first time affordable Pastoral and Homestead Leases amongst many other changes.
- Railways are moving outward from Sydney and Newcastle reaching Gunnedah in 1879, Boggabri in 1882, Narrabri in 1884 and Moree in 1887.
- A separate line reaches Dubbo in 1881, Nyngan in 1883, Byrock in 1884 and Bourke in 1885.
- Telegraph has reached Brewarrina and Goodooga in 1873.
- 1880 the Public Instruction Act makes school compulsory for 5 to 14 year old children.

These significant social changes were nearly all driven by successive state governments who at last had control of their own destiny and were in a hurry to catch up with the rest of the world.



Sir Henry Parkes - Five times Premier of NSW and one of the most remarkable politicians in Australian History. He is most remembered for his promotion of Federalism that eventually saw the foundation of Australia. His social reforms in NSW which included the Public Instruction Act and the promotion of railways are in many respects more important and far reaching.

Parkes even convinced Florence Nightingale to send trained nurses to NSW to start a process of nurse education to improve patient care and hygiene in NSW hospitals.

His visits to the United States where he met with President Ulysses Grant may have also influenced his enthusiasm for Telegraph and Railways, both of which were major factors in the Union winning the US Civil war.

The period from 1850 to 1861 saw the start of this process. The end of convict transportation meant NSW was no longer being treated as a repository for undesirables from England and Ireland. The gold rushes in NSW and Victoria saw a huge influx of new migrants and also the creation of significant wealth. The establishment of responsible self governments in the eastern colonies changed the entire sense of identity for the colonies and their inhabitants.

The Land Acts of 1861 in NSW (just 2 years after self government) dramatically changed the nature of land tenure from a system previously managed by grant or auction and favouring the already wealthy to a much fairer system which allowed people of modest means to own or lease land and make a productive life for themselves. There is no doubt that the Land Acts allowed the Spencer Family to acquire and accumulate a reasonable holding on Rouchel Brook. Similarly the same Acts allowed William Saunders to select a "Run" on the Bokhara that ultimately became the Pastoral Lease Wirra Warra. The creation of Cuttabunda as a Pastoral Lease occurred under the same system and at about the same time as Wirra Warra. The older British system of land ownership dominated by the privileged classes was overturned and replaced with a very "Australian" egalitarian system.

Nearly all of the adults mentioned in the Wirra Warra letters are the children of assisted immigrants. The changes in land tenure opened up an opportunity that must have seemed almost impossible to their parents who had come from poor rural and urban backgrounds in England and Ireland.

The development of railways and the telegraph were also largely driven and funded by the state government. Communication and rapid transport were seen as essential to economic development.

In 1879 Rebecca takes weeks off her journey from Cuttabunda to Muswellbrook by catching the train at Gunnedah. Five years later she reports, that her brothers in law, Absalom and William have put cattle on the train at Boggabri. This would conceivably reduce the journey to Sydney by several months!

The availability of Telegraph meant that in 1874 a dam collapse at Cuttabunda that killed a man named Harvey, severely injured Matthew Spencer and slightly injured William Saunders, could be reported to the police at Brewarrina so they could start out on horse with a doctor. The same story was covered in the Maitland Mercury almost on the same day, presumably by telegraph.

By the 1880's Rebecca is saying to Eliza, "if you want anything sent up with the dray, send me a telegram".

Sir Henry Parkes' Public Instruction Act of 1880 formed the basis of the NSW Public Education System for over a hundred years. It also embroiled Parkes in a fight over public funding of private schools. A topic which still troubles politicians to this day. Not dissimilar to the Robertson Lands Acts it created a universal egalitarian education system for everyone (including aboriginals) in NSW. No longer was an education the sole preserve of the affluent.

Perhaps the most interesting component of this rush to catch up with the world was the Sydney International Exhibition. Sponsored by the NSW Government it was an attempt to show not only NSW to the world but perhaps just as importantly to show the world to NSW.



Sir John Robertson - Also five time Premier of NSW introduced the three Lands Acts of 1861 which changed land tenure in NSW permanently.

Robertson and Parkes were initially political foes. However, in 1877 faced with essentially a hung Parliament they joined forces. Robertson moved to the Upper House and became leader of the government in that house while Parkes became Premier. This unity government was the driving force behind almost five years of furious activity and reform in NSW.

Robertson was part of the government party at the official opening of the North Western railway to Gunnedah in September 1879.

Unlike Parkes, Robertson was vehemently opposed to Federation.

Rebecca who is 30 years old has never been to Sydney and finds the experience of the Exhibition a wonderment. Like the majority of NSW citizens who attended the Grand Palace it would have changed their world view permanently. A result the government was happy to lose over one hundred thousand pounds to achieve.

The Rebecca to Eliza letters give us an insight into the daily lives of the two women and their families. They also unconsciously give us a view into the social and economic transition from a colony to the State of NSW. Released from colonial control from London in 1859, NSW became one of the most progressive democratic states in the world for the next 40 years. The great Australian social experiment had begun.

Rebecca, Eliza and their families had lived through the period from 1860 to 1885 with a sense of opportunity, optimism and economic progress. Rebecca's unfortunate and untimely death seems a fitting end point to this period.

The next ten years were something of a reality check for the Spencers, Saunders and in fact the entire colony of NSW.

But that is a tale for another day.

Rebecca's Family

Rebecca was the daughter of Frederick and Eliza Hooper. Frederick and Eliza arrived in Australia in 1839 as free settlers. Although Frederick and Eliza had 5 children, only Rebecca and her sister Emily were still alive at the time of the letters. Rebecca's mother died in 1870 and Rebecca and her two sisters inherited their mothers property in Muswellbrook, independent of their spouses.

*# **Rebecca Hooper**

B: 1850 - Muswellbrook

D: 1885 - Muswellbrook

Rebecca married Thomas Spencer in 1869

*# **Thomas Spencer Jnr**

B: 1842 - Rouchel

D: 1917 - Aberdeen

They had ten children

Frederick Thomas Spencer (Freddie)

B: 1870 - Rouchel

D: 1943

Mary Emily May Spencer (May)

B: 1872 - Rouchel

D: 1901

Arthur Hooper Spencer (Artie)

B: 1874 - Rouchel

D: 1953

Alfred Bokhara Spencer (Alfie)

B: 1876 - Cuttabunda

D: 1959 -

Elizabeth Spencer (Elsie)

B: 1878 - Cuttabunda

D: 1945 -

Cecil William Spencer

B: 1880 - Rouchel

D: 1882 - Rouchel

Muriel Ida Maud Stark Spencer

B: 1882 - *Rouchel*

D: 1975

Vivienne Lauretta Spencer

B: 1884 - Rouchel

D: 1954

George Granville Spencer

B: 1885 - Rouchel

D: 1885 - Rouchel

Una Rebecca Spencer

B: 1885 - Rouchel

D: 1885 - Rouchel

denotes mentioned in the letters

* denotes a writer of a letter.

Eliza's Family

Eliza Pearce was the daughter of Henry Pearce and Mary Ison. Her father died when she was 3 years old. Her mother was murdered when Eliza was 16

*# **Eliza Pearce (Pierce)**

B. Scone 1845

D. Moree 1909

Rebecca married William Saunders in 1866

William Saunders

B. Gloucestershire England 1842

D. Brewarrina 1895

They had ten children

John Saunders

B: 1867 - Wirra Warra

D: 1867 - Wirra Warra

William Henry Saunders (Willie)

B: 1868 - Wirra Warra

D: 1886 - Wirra Warra

Ernest John Saunders (Ernie)

B: 1871 - Wirra Warra

D: 1921

Edith Mary Saunders (Edie)

B: 1873 - Wirra Warra

D: 1951

Arthur Thomas Saunders (Artie)

B: 1876 - Wirra Warra

D: 1949

Evelyn Pierce Saunders (Evie)

B: 1879 - Wirra Warra

D: 1951

Albert Bokhara Saunders (Tally)

B: 1880 - Wirra Warra

D: 1946

Eva Martha Corinda Saunders (Crim)

B: 1882 - Wirra Warra

D: 1940

Earl Stanley Saunders

B: 1884 - Wirra Warra

D: 1966

Hubert Gordon Spencer Saunders

B: 1886 - Wirra Warra

D: 1949

denotes mentioned in the letters

** denotes a writer of a letter.*

Thomas' Family

Thomas Spencer was the son of Thomas and Mary Spencer who arrived in Australia as free settlers in 1841. Thomas was the eldest of eleven children many of whom are mentioned in the letters

Thomas Spencer

B: 1816 - Arklow, County Wicklow, Ireland

D: 1888 - Muswellbrook NSW

Married Mary Stark 1840

Marky Stark

B: 1817 - Vale of Avoca, County Wicklow, Ireland

D: 1901 - Muswellbrook NSW

*# **Thomas Spencer Jnr**

B. 1842 - Rouchel

D: 1917 - Aberdeen

Matthew Spencer (Matt)

B: 1843 - Rouchel

D: 1910 - Muswellbrook

John Spencer

B: 1845 - Rouchel

D: 1924 - Burwood NSW

Absalom Sherwood Spencer (Abs)

B: 1947 - Rouchel

D: 1896 - Bourke NSW

Mary Jane Spencer (Mrs Dowell)

B: 1847 - Rouchel

D: 1892 - Muswellbrook

Elizabeth Spencer (Mrs Frost)

B: 1849 - Rouchel

D: 1913 - Parramatta

Rebecca Spencer

B: 1851 - Rouchel

D: 1914 - Mosman

Susan Spencer

B: 1853 - Rouchel

D: 1894 - Muswellbrook

Sarah Spencer

B: 1856 - Rouchel

D: 1912 - Mosman

William Granville Spencer (Willy)

B: 1858 - Rouchel

D: 1894 - Cuttabunda

Amelia Spencer

B: 1860 - Rouchel

D: 1861 - Rouchel

Edward Spencer

B: 1862 - Rouchel

D: 1915 - Wee Waa

denotes mentioned in the letters

* denotes a writer of a letter.

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Page 4-5: Maps and air photos sourced from six.maps.nsw.gov.au

Page 7: Saunders Family - Jack Saunders collection - coloured by Ian Spencer : Rebecca and Eliza photos as pper cover.

Page11: William Saunders and Eliza Saunders photos from Jack Saunders collection : Rebecca and Thomas photo from Maureen Seve collection.

Page 12: Cattle Drive from Brewarrina Shire Council collection

Page 13: Steam Locomotive from www.australiansteam.com - permission still pending.

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Page 17: Thomas - David Spencer collection : Matthew- Maureen Seve collection : John - Ian Spencer collection : Absalom - Jack Saunders collection

Page 18: Sydney Exhibition - Wikipedia under creative commons.

Page 19: JL Mott Stove - Ian Spencer collection : Thomas jnr - David Spencer collection.

Page 20-21: Rouchel Vale Shool photos: Maureen Seve collection.

Page 22: Advert from Maitland Mercury via trove.nla.gov.au

Page23: Ernie Saunders - Jack Saunders collection.

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Page 26: Freddie Spencer - Maureen Seve collection : John Spencer - Ian Spencer collection.

Page 27:Wirra Warra Family photos - Jack Saunders collection. : Cabbage Tree Hat photo - Illawarra Historical Society.

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Page 33: Absalom Spencer - Jack Saunders collection.

Page 32-42: Rebecca's Last Letter - Jack Saunders collection.

Page 43: Garden at Wirra Warra - Jack Saunders collection.

Page 45: Rebecca's Headstone - Sandy Gibbney collection.

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