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CHURCHES OF THE FRONTIER: NARRABRI



Chapel at Narrabri NSW in 1913

by

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CHURCHES OF THE FRONTIER: NARRABRI

In 1899 the editor of *The Australian Christian* pointed to promising indications for the cause of “primitive Christianity” in Sydney. He noted with concern the meagre representation of Churches of Christ in rural NSW. He wrote:

Outside Sydney the only fields in which we have evangelists labouring are Corowa and Lismore. In most of the large cities and towns such as Newcastle, Bathurst, Maitland, Armidale, Grafton, Glen Innes, Goulburn, Albury and others we have no churches and no immediate prospect of establishing any. In Victoria and South Australia we have many country churches and it will probably be found that on enquiry they owe their existence and prosperity largely to help from the strong churches of Melbourne and Adelaide.¹

The editor’s observations are borne out by the statistics. In 1899 there were some twenty churches in NSW with a total membership of 1382. Over 1000 of these members were linked to the near city churches of Enmore, Surry Hills (Sydney), Marrickville and the mission church of Woollahra/Paddington. Of the 20 churches, 10 might be regarded as rural. Among them were Bungawalbyn (14 members), Junee (13 members), Mungindi (18 members), Moree (31 members) Wagga Wagga (19 members) and Wingham (16 members). A church at Bowraville closed that year, and Mungindi was known to be in trouble.² It is doubtful if in some of these little towns there was a sufficient mass of population to support other than a small congregation.

Problems supporting churches in rural NSW

The work in these areas was hampered by the distance from Sydney, the lack of available evangelists and the paucity of funds available to the Home Missions Committee. The newly formed committee largely tapped into the same handful of metropolitan churches for its financial support. There is little doubt that the lack of evangelists was a major handicap. The Home Missions Committee supported church at Woollahra was beginning to grow strongly under the leadership of Thomas Bagley who spent much time on raising funds to build a chapel at nearby Paddington.³ The church at Lismore in northern NSW managed to appoint its own evangelist in 1899 (W.J. Way) and reported over 30 additions in the ensuing year.

The Newtown/Enmore church provided occasional ministry assistance to country churches before the 1880s but such support was too haphazard to be of enduring benefit. Under the sponsorship of the Conference Committee, C.T. Forscutt of Enmore visited churches in the Manning River area and conducted a brief mission in Dubbo which resulted in two baptisms (in the Macquarie River). Despite a vigorous follow up interim ministry by R.C Gilmour, the Dubbo church plant failed to take root. Until the extension of railways in the 1880s distance was a major impediment to regularly servicing remote inland churches in NSW. Limited shipping was available to some larger coastal towns.

The typical pattern of church planting in NSW was the decision by one or two couples to set up the Lord’s Table in their homes and then draw others in. It may well be that the sheer isolation of some of the frontier towns helped draw kindred spirits together. In the bigger towns like Bathurst, Grafton and Goulburn there was more social amenity. Setting up a small communion service in a home was a fairly simple thing to do and required no great theological literacy. This is not to detract from the devotion, dedication and determination

of those pioneers who sought to advance the gospel in this way. The absence of a meeting house, or chapel, was not just an accommodative inconvenience, but hindered the creation of a public presence. Strangers tend not to walk into private homes.

This paper tells the story of the establishment of a church at Narrabri. It speaks to the dedication, devotion and determination of pioneers George and Gracie Carslake. It outlines how the friendly little church established in their home later built a chapel and secured the appointment of evangelists.

Beginnings at Narrabri

George and Alberta Grace ("Gracie") Carslake (nee Lawrie) moved with their young family to Narrabri NSW from Balaklava, South Australia, in 1911. What prompted this move to north western NSW is not clear, but they were probably attracted by the farming opportunities in the district. Accompanying them on their journey was a newly wedded couple, Mr. and Mrs. Will May.

Narrabri, situated some 500 kms from Sydney, had a population at the time of around 4000 people. There were five churches in the town. The Carslakes attended the little Methodist church but occasionally went to the Presbyterian or Anglican churches. But with a rich background in Churches of Christ (at Long Plains and Mallala SA) they longed for their familiar Sunday morning service and the opportunity of "meeting our Lord around His table"

Carslake appealed to the NSW Home Missions Committee for assistance. He wrote:

We have come to West Narrabri from the church at Balaklava, S.A., and are anxious to start meetings. It is a comparatively new district. There are a lot of new settlers here, who I believe would meet and join in with us if you could send along a very energetic man to give us a start. The Catholics seem to have possession of the town so far, and we are all anxious on that account to start; and as we have a nice large room, could make a start there.⁴



CARSLAKE FAMILY.

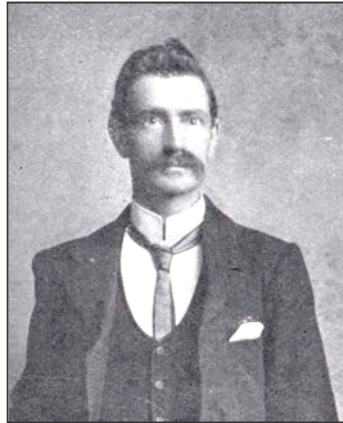
Back: Robert (Bob), Joy, Ivy and George jnr. Front: Grace, Faith and George snr.

In the event the Carslakes set up the Lord's Table on their verandah and met with the Mays. Others were invited to join and their numbers swelled. Among the new settlers were brothers Arthur and Harold Goulter from Colac in Victoria. A younger brother, Oswald,

joined Arthur and Harold as a farm hand. They were made welcome in the Carslake home and attended services there. The Sunday church program included:

“Bible study, an informal church service with words of edification and the observance of the Lord’s supper. An ample dinner followed, and in the afternoon there were hours of good natured conversation which shifted from farm problems to questions about the church and Christian life”.⁵

The friendliness of the Carslakes and their neighbourliness left a deep impression on Oswald Goulter who later reminisced “He [George Carslake] was a living demonstration of the biblical truths of the passages he read to us”.



E.J. Waters, Inverell⁶

The house meeting transferred to the School of Arts hall and E.J. Waters, the minister of the Church of Christ at Inverell (some 180 kms away) was invited to undertake some occasional preaching. Under his preaching the Goulters made their decisions for Christ and were baptised by Waters in the Namoi River.⁷ These men had a Baptist background so the transition was not difficult. But the baptismal service itself left quite an impression on spectators on the river bank, one onlooker requesting baptism.

In his youth at Colac, Oswald Goulter recalled once hearing a sermon by H.G. Harward and being impressed by his reasonable presentation of the gospel. He received a tract from Harward on the Great Commission. In obedience to that Great Commission, Oswald Goulter later went on to become a Disciples of Christ missionary in China. He was interned by the Japanese and persecuted by Communists. His story is told elsewhere.⁸



Harold and Oswald Goulter

Early Home Missions Support

In January 1912 the Home Missions Committee reported that a splendid opportunity existed at Narrabri where a “band of enthusiastic disciples offers to pay a good sum towards the support of a preacher, and also provide him with a trap and horse”.⁹ Soon after, the Committee facilitated the appointment of Walter Waters to the position:

....through the agency of E.J. Waters [minister] of Inverell, the Moree and Narrabri districts were organised, funds were raised, and the service of W. Waters of Queensland secured to undertake the work of the evangelist.¹⁰

The foregoing suggests that Waters’ ministry was to be a shared one between the churches at Moree and Narrabri which were 100 kms apart.

This shared arrangement seems to be confirmed by Waters’ first post in *The Australian Christian* which reported on Moree:

The writer has begun work in these important towns and surrounding districts. Lord’s Day May 5 was spent with the brethren at Moree. Despite the times of adversity which the church has been suffering, quite a number met together with to remember their Lord...At night a gospel service was conducted. The electric light recently installed was used for the first time and greatly appreciated.¹¹

It is not clear what “the times of adversity referred to”—possibly the vicissitudes of rural life. It is known that very adverse climatic conditions applied in parts of Australia between 1911 and 1916. In July of 1912, Waters indicated that “he visits Moree alternate Sundays” and that he “proposes to re-open the Lord’s Day school there”.¹²

In the short term, Waters’ focus was on the church at Narrabri where he was based. On 19 May 1912, a three weeks tent mission commenced with State Evangelist T. R. Coleman as the missionary. This resulted in eight decisions. Some assistance was provided throughout the mission by E.J. Waters and Janet Cosh of Inverell.

A business meeting in late June 1912 reflects the emergence of a more institutional form of church. George Carslake was appointed church secretary and S.S. superintendent. The school had an initial enrolment of 17 and an adult Bible Class. The report indicates that a “Sister Williams was appointed as Home Mission collector”. It is of interest that having been the recipient of Home Missions assistance, the little church felt constrained to contribute to others through this ministry. The sister Williams mentioned here may have been the “Sister A. Williams” who married Arthur Goulter in August 1912.¹³

The Decision to Build a Chapel

An important decision at the business meeting was a decision to erect a chapel. A quarter acre allotment was purchased in the centre of Narrabri. Fund raising and planning occupied the small congregation for the next six months or so. In the meantime the regular work of the church went ahead.

In October 1912, Waters and Carslake visited Wee Waa, some 40 kms distant, where they met up with six disciples whom they encouraged to travel to Narrabri for services when weather permitted. In November, Waters travelled to the Queensland border and met with Disciples at Boomi where a small Sunday school was being conducted, and at Mungindi where a church was meeting on the property of A (Alfred?) Winter. Waters

reported a baptism at Mungindi and about forty attending a gospel service in Winter's woolshed.

Work proceeded steadily on the erection of the chapel at Narrabri. To lessen the cost it was decided that members would cut the logs for the building and have them trimmed into building planks at the local sawmill. Carslake mentions that "Mr. Winter of Moree was a great a help" (referring presumably to a substantial donation). A liberal donation of £17/6/- was received from the Long Plains church, S.A., with which George Carslake had been associated in his youth.

The new chapel was opened on 23 February 1913 with W.J. Williams of Rookwood [Lidcombe] as the occasional speaker.¹⁴ At the time of the opening of the chapel, the church had a membership of 23. The opening of the chapel enabled the church to expand its programs. In addition to the Sunday school the establishment of a Christian Endeavour Society and a Dorcas Society are reported. The church was admitted to the NSW Conference in 1913.



Narrabri Chapel 1913

Reports from the church during 1914 indicate that the work continued to be well maintained, despite a drought. There were movements of members in and out but Carslakes' overall assessment was that they were "getting on top of things".

Waters continued to minister to adherents in the wider region. But in January 1915, he indicated a desire to leave the ministry at Narrabri. Carslake reported this prospect as a "crash".¹⁵ Evangelist Waters' last report was published in *The Australian Christian* on June 1, 1915. In that post he advises two confessions of faith—both members of his own family—and a successful Bible School demonstration in which funds were raised to send New Testaments to the Australian troops. Waters left at the end of the month. A report indicates that it was his intention to go to Taree.¹⁶

Waters was undoubtedly worn out after an extensive three year ministry in Narrabri and the wider region. A Conference related report summarises his contribution as follows:

Mr. Waters has done a good job but after three years of travelling and preaching...he feels that he would like a change. Everywhere Mr. Waters has been noted for his faithful and helpful preaching and has been the means of leading many to a knowledge of the truth which saves and gives freedom.¹⁷

The Conference Report for 1915—1916 indicates a membership of 26/27. The report mentions that an arrangement had been with “the Moree and Narrabri brethren where practically nearly all the money needed to support his successor had been guaranteed”.¹⁸

Ministry Changes

Waters replacement was Percival A. Warhurst from Narracoorte in South Australia. Warhurst took up his appointment on July 11. In a letter he wrote to the *Narracoorte Herald* a month after his arrival he described the circumstances confronting him on arrival:

Narrabri is dependent on farming and stock raising, but like most other parts of the Commonwealth has had a terrible set back on account of the adverse seasons...The people of Narrabri on the whole are much given to sport and practically two days per month are set aside for horse racing. Coursing is also very popular here...They have 23 licensed bars here, twelve of which are in the main street, within the distance of a little less than half a mile.¹⁹

Five churches, twenty-three pubs and lots of racing! For someone raised in a temperance and Sunday observance tradition these conditions may have caused “shock and horror” but they would not have been atypical of any town in western NSW.

Notwithstanding any misgivings he may have had, Warhurst quickly picked up the mantle laid down by Waters. This included visiting members and centres in the large parish which stretched from Baan Baa, a small village 40 kms in the south, to the town of Mungindi on the Queensland border, 200 kms to the north. To do this, he relied on a “Rudge” motor cycle. A report in January 1916 tells of a journey of over 600 kms. This would not have been a comfortable journey over dirt roads and on a poorly sprung primitive motorbike. But a primitive motorbike gave more mobility than a “trap and a horse”.

In February 1916, the church decided to erect two vestries for use by the church auxiliaries which now included a Christian Endeavour Society. This was again a co-operative effort with one giving the timber, another supplying a team and wagon to transport it. This work was completed in March and the rooms declared “open” by school superintendent George Carslake. A Sunday school competition was arranged between the Narrabri and Wagga Wagga Sunday schools and an appeal was made for books for a Sunday school library.

This was clearly a busy time for the Carslakes who lived at West Narrabri, some 15 kms distant from the chapel. In his biography, George Carslake described their Sunday schedule as follows.

We would go into church for the 10.30 service, take our dinner and tea with us, have dinner in the vestry and be ready for Sunday School at 2.30, again have our tea in the vestry and be ready for church at 7.00pm...this with three young children...and my wife [Gracie] was organist as well.

In May 1916, Warhurst started preaching services in the home of Arthur and Janet Goulter at Bohena Creek, 20 kms south-west of Narrabri. The following month Warhurst addressed a gathering of around 30 people at Bellata 42 kms to the north. Bellata seemed like a promising outreach and Warhurst visited there again in July and the local group

accepted responsibility for the hire of the hall where meetings were held. In the meantime Carslake signalled that the central church at Narrabri was not making much progress among the adults of the town but the youth work was going well and becoming the main source of additions to the church. At this stage no mention is made in the reports of Moree.

War, Weather and Weariness

The Home Missions Committee extended an invitation to Warhurst to continue, but in January 1917 he became ill and on doctor's orders resigned. The likely cause was nervous and/or physical exhaustion. Warhurst and wife returned to South Australia.²⁰ The Conference Report for 1917 near the end of Warhurst's term indicates ten additions by faith and baptism during the year and one restoration. The report also indicates generous support from the NSW Home Missions Committee but notes ominously that "the failure of crops prevented local brethren from contributing more to the cause".

The church also lost the services of stalwart, Harold Goulter, who had enlisted. Goulter had served as an officer of the church, Sunday school teacher and organist. In addition, E.J. Waters, the Inverell minister who had assisted Narrabri in its early years moved to Wagga Wagga. Furthermore, Carslake, the guiding light for the Bible School since its inception, was forced to relinquish his role as superintendent due to "home duties". He was presented with a wallet as a token of the esteem in which he was held. However he continued to submit reports on the work of the church.

Alfred E. Marler replaced Warhurst in May 1917. Carslake described his addresses as a "treat" but it is clear that the church had lost much of its verve. Charles Rush, the Home Mission Secretary, visited the church for consultations in July 1917.

Carslake's penultimate report in February 1918 sounds an ominous note:

Since our last report [October 1917] meetings have been poorly attended. We hold no gospel service on account of not having a preacher, Bro. Mailer being called away to take up the work in a more prosperous church [South Kensington –later renamed - Kingsford church NSW]. Several of our members have left the district, which reduces our numbers at the morning meeting, and also Sunday School. Last Sunday afternoon the writer baptised one young woman. We regret we will not have her in membership with us. One of our city churches will gain a member.²¹

No report appeared in the NSW Conference Reports in March 1918 and a membership figure of 36 was simply brought forward unchanged from the previous year. Significantly, a motion was adopted recommending "a new church at Narrabri and Moree". This suggests a reorganisation or resuscitation was being considered.

After a lapse of over twelve months, a final report was posted in *The Australian Christian* in May 1919. Carslake notes that the "Lord's table had been spread every Sunday since the departure of Bro. Mailer" with attendances from between 10 and 30. He acknowledges receipt of some assistance from Inverell and that the "Lord's day school was keeping up fairly well". Some time later that year the church must have closed. The Narrabri entry in the Conference Reports appeared unchanged in 1919 but no entry appeared in 1920. The building on which so much effort had been expended, was sold in 1921.

Whatever the precipitating events that led to the closure of church, they remain unknown. Carslake hints at a few factors but being the “Christian gentleman he was”, he refused to allow any adverse criticism to appear in his biography.²² It seems clear that the prevailing drought had played havoc with the little church and possibly also the loss from the town and the church of young men because of the war. But it also seems likely that the punishing program undertaken by the church took its toll on ministry. The resulting short term ministries did not help. Carslake notes that attendances tended to drop back with ministry changeovers. It is unlikely that any of the ministers had had much theological training.



George A Carslake circa 1970

For the next year or so, George and Grace attended other churches in Narrabri but in 1920, following the death of Grace’s parents in South Australia, they decided to sell up and return to South Australia (Loxton) where they developed another farm. They moved to Western Australia in 1932 where they became foundation members of the Morawa Church of Christ. Grace Carslake died in 1954 and George in 1974. Their grandson, Graham Carslake, and his wife, Freda, live in Perth, WA, and continue to serve in interim ministries after more than 50 years of pastoral ministry.

A Church closes but its Ministry Continues

Narrabri was always going to be a “tough call” and the attempt to link Narrabri and Moree and their nearby villages into some sort of circuit may have been a town too far. But Church closures are always painful events. With their closure, die the aspirations of those who invested time and effort in their establishment and development.

Though devastated by the closure of the church at the time, George Carslake was more sanguine about it later in his life. In his biography he wrote:

“We had some wonderful times, and although the general opinion was that the effort was a failure....we who went through the years of service for the Lord knew better”.

He goes on to mention those whose lives had been touched by the ministry at Narrabri—a disreputable family turned into “respected citizens”, the little boy who so boldly gave himself to the Lord at a mission, the conversion of a member of his own family, and the baptism of Oswald Goulter who went on to become a great missionary. Carslake was particularly proud that he had the opportunity of baptising Unita Schatz, a gifted young lady, who married the church’s last minister, Alfred Marler, and became a wonderful “influence for good” in his life.

Historian Geoffrey Blainey has spoken of the “tyranny of distance”. While Blainey had in mind the effect on Australia’s culture of its distance from Europe, distance also had an internal effect on Australia’s development and on evangelism. The frontier church at Bungawalbyn (near Lismore) wrote “The distance from any large city has militated against the little community.”²³ Arguably church planting was more effective in Victoria than NSW, not because its evangelists were more effective (many served in both States) or because pioneering members had greater resolve, but because the State’s smaller size and its closer pattern of settlement allowed more support from others and minimised membership loss by relocation.

H.E.Hayward,
July 2014

¹ *The Australian Christian* Vol. II, 19 October 1899, 383. At the time there was a small church in the Newcastle inner suburb of Merewether.

² The secretary of the Mungindi church wrote “The church is in a languishing condition, chiefly through the faithlessness of some - drink and indifference, the sins of the age. We number eight to ten regular communicants.” *The Australian Christian* Vol. III, 26 April 1900, 173.

³ Bagley had the view that a church which started its life with a large debt was badly handicapped and spent much of its effort paying off a mortgage rather than on evangelism.

⁴ *The Australian Christian* Vol. XIV, 4 May 1911, 303.

⁵ Powell, W.E. “Scattered Seed,” Bethany Press, 1969, 21-22.

⁶ Maston, A.B. (ed.) *Jubilee Pictorial History of Churches of Christ in Australasia* [JPH], Austral, 1903, 333. Edwin John Waters was an officer of the Corowa church at the time. He moved to Wagga Wagga in 1917 and thence to Victoria (Warragul).

⁷ “Scattered Seed,” 22.

⁸ An Occasional Paper on Oswald Goulter and his work in China is forthcoming.

⁹ *The Australian Christian* Vol. XV, 11 January 1912.

¹⁰ *The Australian Christian* Vol. XVI, 15 May 1913, 331. Walter and E.J. Waters were brothers.

¹¹ *The Australian Christian* Vol. XV, 16 May 1912, 331.

¹² *The Australian Christian* Vol. XV, 25 July 1912, 527.

¹³ Janet A. (“Annie”) Williams had been a friend of Arthur Goulter in Colac.

¹⁴ Williams served as MLA for Broken Hill from 1901 – 1904. While serving in Parliament he apparently came into membership with the Petersham church and was among the group of officers whose photo appears in the *Jubilee History* (p.328). After he lost his seat in Parliament, he entered the ministry and served at a number of locations some of which were under the auspices of the Home Missions Committee. He may have been at Narrabri as a representative of that Committee. He died at Taree in 1915.

¹⁵ George Carslake’s words were “We were getting on top when the crash came. We had to change ministers” from his biography “Memories of the Past” (unpaginated).

¹⁶ *The North-Western Courier* 28 June 1915, 3. He did not enter ministry there and his future is unknown. He originally came from Queensland.

¹⁷ *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners’ Advocate* 26 December 1914, 13.

¹⁸ *Conference Reports 1916—Statistics*, 3

¹⁹ *Narracoorte Herald* 13 August 1915, 2.

²⁰ Warhurst was back preaching at Narracoorte in March 1917. See *The Mail* 31 January 1917, 9.

²¹ *The Australian Christian* Vol. XXI, 21 February 1918, 121. Marler only stayed at Kingsford for about six months, moved to Queensland. He entered the Baptist ministry in the early 1920s.

²² The words “Christian gentleman that he was” are those of his grandson Graham Carslake. George Carslake insisted that several comments which may have reflected adversely on anyone be deleted from his original manuscript.

²³ *Jubilee Pictorial History of Churches of Christ in Australasia*, 1903, 337.

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