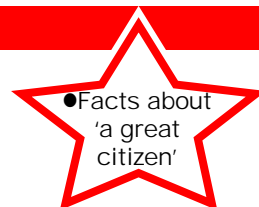


**Inside:** An insight into life on the southern Moreton Bay Islands a century ago.

WELCOME

# Tribute Magazine



Published to highlight the exhibition of the Bill Branch bronze sculpture at Russell Island RSL Club

●SPECIAL EDITION

## A lifetime on Russell Island

*... That was the simple title that Mary Davies gave to this speech which she wrote as a "This Is Your Life" presentation for Bill Branch's 90th birthday. Bill died in 2003, aged 94.*

**T**ODAY, January 26th, 1999, is not only Australia Day, it is the 90th birthday of William James Branch the third of Russell Island, better known to us as Bill.

Even though Bill has never lived on "mainland" Australia, I think after 86 years on Russell Island he could be considered a "dinky di" Aussie, don't you?

And now, as a tribute to the Branch family who played an integral part in the development of Russell Island I would like to share with you some of the highlights of the life of Bill Branch.

**W**ILLIAM James Branch, our Bill, was born in London, as were his father and grandfather before him, both also named William James Branch. His father married Miss Violet Broadbridge in London around 1903. They had four children, Violet, May, William and Albert.

Bill's father was apprenticed to a stone mason. He worked on some of London's famous buildings, including the Tower of London. However, he also worked with his mother's relatives, the Cox family, who were engaged in furniture building.

By the time the Coxes decided to come to Australia to ply their trade, our Bill's dad was a foreman with them and he came also, bringing his wife and young family.

After brief stopovers in Rockhampton and Maryborough, they arrived in Brisbane where they set up their furniture business.

During the next two decades many members of the Cox and Branch families immigrated to Australia. At least two furniture businesses, which were started by them, still operate in Brisbane to this day.

In 1913 Bill Branch Snr and his cousin, Ben Cox, came to Russell Island to clear land for the Willes family, one of the first families to settle on the Island. ▼



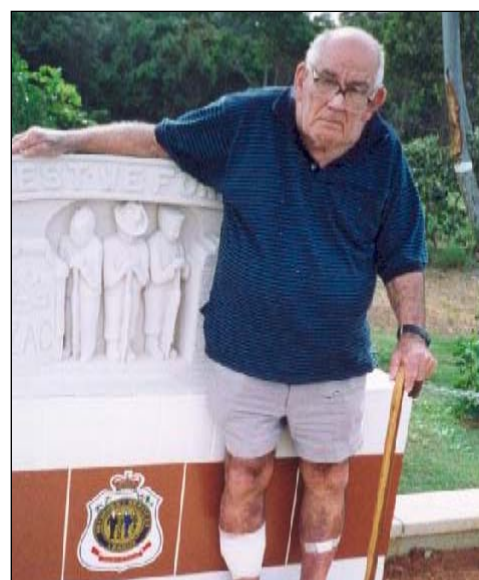
*Left : Bill Branch in slouch hat and plume during his active service in New Guinea during World War Two.*



*Above: The bronze character study of Bill Branch that will feature in the proposed redevelopment of Russell Island RSL Club.*



*RSL Bay Islands sub-branch president Ivars Valuks joins Iris Orme, a friend of the late Bill Branch, and sculptor Jenny Rumney at the 2004 unveiling of the bronze.*



*Bill Branch in his twilight years inspects the RSL club's war memorial.*

►Very soon the magic of the Islands convinced these two young men that this was the place to settle and their wives and families soon joined them.

Together they set up "house" in tents near the jetty, just in front of the present Robb home, on what was then known as "the rafting ground". This area was so called because it was to here that the bullock teams dragged the tallwood logs which were felled on the Island to be loaded on to rafts to be towed to the mainland.

Only four years old at the time, young Bill probably thought it quite fun.

It is hard to imagine a young English mother of four coping with her family and all their belongings in one tent ... cooking outside in all weathers ... enduring the unaccustomed heat; the flies; the mosquitos; the midgies... Had she been blessed with just some of today's electrical appliances I doubt she would have complained about an occasional blackout!

Unfortunately, clearing the land did not prove as lucrative as the two had hoped so they decided to take up farming.

Bill Snr settled on block number 13. He cleared his own land and spent the rest of his life on Russell Island, as his son did, except when duty called him to defend his adopted country in the Second World War. In 1916 there was great jubilation among Island families when, after much negotiating, a little school was moved from Labrador and relocated on the edge of the Black Swamp.

Miss Eileen Willes rode her pony to the school each day to teach her 16 pupils, including Bill, his two sisters and brother and two of the Cox children who also rode or walked to school.

Bill tells me he does not actually remember the school being erected, but he does remember when, in the mid 1920s it was relocated to its present site because the Island population had increased in the northern section and children had also enrolled from the other islands so this site was more central.

**M**OSQUITOES and midgies must have been a real trial to the new settlers and Bill remembers that everyone used to carry "smoke pots", in which they would burn anything from bracken fern to cow manure in an effort to keep them at bay.

I am afraid that "smoke pot" may have a different connotation today and affect more than mossies.

Bill was a keen student and showed great potential which was recognised by his teachers and the school inspectors. However, to continue his studies on the mainland after primary school would have been quite difficult due to lack of transport and boarding costs so he continued at Russell Island until he reached the accepted school leaving age of 14 years.

During his final year Bill found himself, more often than not, ▲

“ It was to here that the bullock teams dragged the tallwood logs which were felled on the Island to be loaded on to rafts to be towed to the mainland ”

►acting as instructor for the younger pupils in order to assist the teacher to cope with some 35 children and seven classes in the one-room building.

Always a keen reader and writer, Bill wrote often for the Macleay paper and had letters on many topics of interest published. I did hear that he once won a writing competition at Beenleigh. Bill is still interested in literature and sponsored a writing competition run by the local girl guide group only last year.

On leaving school, Bill joined his father on the farm. Their main crop was bananas which were sent to the markets in Brisbane, firstly to Roma Street, which became very congested as traffic increased, and then to Rocklea.

**B**OTH Bill and his father were very active members of the Banana Growers Association, especially Bill Snr, who served, often in an executive position, for 27 years while our Bill served for 21 years. They worked untiringly to improve conditions for growers.

At one time, the Bay Island branch of the Country Women's Association used to raise money to buy fruit for the occupants of nursing homes in the area, especially in the Christmas season.

Bill would buy the fruit at the markets and, with his sister Violet, deliver it to the appropriate home.

He was, apparently, a pretty smooth talker and managed to always get very good value for money. Probably the one lady who would remember this would be Peggy Saunders.

Peggy has known Bill Branch all her married life and to quote Bill is "one of our greatest citizens". I am sure all who know her agree. Peggy tells me that Bill and her husband Harry had a wager on who would marry first.

When Harry married Peggy, Bill honoured the bet and, as a result, he bought her a very pretty teaset. By the way, she still has one cup and saucer left.

A very keen sportsman in his younger days, Bill represented his island in tennis, cricket and soccer. At that time mainland cricket teams would visit the islands to play and one of Bill's greatest ▼

► memories is of having the honour of playing with Bill Brown who, in Bill Branch's words was "the greatest opening batsman Australia ever had!"

A top score of "88 not out" is something Bill Branch can be proud of to say nothing of the two hat-tricks he bowled. Perhaps they account for the comment I heard to the effect that Bill had a habit of making a little bow just before he bowled ... or was that just being polite to the batsmen before he dismissed them? Bill still likes to follow sport, albeit from his chair, and he has now reached "90 not out" – a fine effort indeed!

In 1926 Bill, his father and his brother, with help from the neighbours, built a new house for Bill's mother, Violet. She was very excited about this and proud of her new home which, although modernised now, is still lived in today by Phoebe Dupont who, together with her husband, purchased it from Bill in 1967 following the deaths of his father and brother.

**C**HILDREN of the Island, when not helping with the daily chores, made their own fun, mainly swimming and joining in sporting activities. They enjoyed a simple but happy, healthy and active lifestyle. Dances were held regularly in the little church hall and, when a picture theatre was built at Jacksonville, everyone turned out to see the films shown each Saturday night.

With the advent of television, attendances declined and the theatre closed, eventually burning down after a lightning strike. Although Bill thinks that television spoilt things a bit socially, I am quite sure that he does not miss too many tennis or cricket matches when they are on the telly!

When World War Two broke out, both Bill and his brother enlisted for national service. As the war escalated both were called up for active service.

While in New Guinea with the 2nd 15th Regiment, Bill recalls having a very high temperature and being sent back to the first aid centre for treatment.

The next thing he remembers is being on the hospital ship three days later suffering from dengue fever. After the war was over he was to read an article stating that, although many soldiers in New Guinea caught Malaria, only one man ever caught dengue fever.

The one thing that really surprised Bill when he joined the army was the ages of so many of the soldiers. No more than boys, many had lied about their ages to be part of the "excitement" of the war. How sadly they must have been disillusioned.

Bill was taken from active service due to his age and offered a desk job. However, he was able to convince the "powers that be" that, if he came home to work the farm, he would at least be doing something useful towards the war effort. More evidence of his smooth talking, perhaps?

Back on the farm, Bill and his father worked hard producing food crops and when only two tractors were allocated to the whole of Queensland they managed to secure one of them, much to the chagrin of many I would imagine. Ah, yes.. a very smooth talker indeed, Bill Branch!

Bill's wardrobe, like that of most children from farming communities in those early days, rarely included shoes and boots, so army supply boots, not being your favourite items, were quickly discarded on his return to the farm.

Unfortunately, his feet had definitely softened during his four years in the army and, after his horse planted his hoof firmly on one, Bill decided that his barefoot days were over.

**W**HEN the war ended, Bill enrolled to study book keeping. The course required that he complete ten papers which he did, receiving an average mark of 97%. This most certainly proved his ability to continue accountancy but he still chose to stay, with his Dad and Bert, on the farm.

Needless to say, these skills meant that he was often in demand to handle accounts for organisations and friends; a chore he enjoyed.

It was largely due to Bill's letter writing prowess and perseverance that lights were installed at the "Ws". This was a particularly difficult passage to negotiate on a dark night with no markers to show the channel. ▲

► Sometimes the light from the home of Sam Hall could be used as a guide on a nasty night but, according to Bill, Mr Hall had an annoying habit of turning it out early on such a night and going to bed.

Sometimes a skipper, knowing that he would be travelling after dark, would hang a lantern on the beacon near the "Ws", but these could easily disappear if someone going past hankered after a new light.

Bill was, at this time, secretary of the Fruit Growers Association. This group would sometimes act as a Progress Association to assist growers so Bill wrote to them requesting that a light be installed at the "Ws". In reply they suggested that the skippers from the islands be told to use a compass.

Bill promptly informed them that all were not actually skilled in compass reading and asked could they send someone over from the association one really dirty night to give some instructions.

He received no reply to this but, after some two years of correspondence, kerosene lamps were installed by them at both ends of the passage. These were to be maintained by islanders. This was just one of many community improvement projects in which Bill Branch was directly involved.

Actually there was a time Bill even made headlines, photo and all, in the Brisbane papers. I know he has not forgotten the time a brown snake fell from the banana basket he was carrying on his shoulder and, obviously annoyed at being removed from its usual habitat, struck out and bit Bill on the leg.

Bill, who had previously "pooh hooded" the existence of dangerous snakes on the island, remembers nothing until he regained consciousness in an ambulance en route to the hospital in Brisbane.

There he found himself the centre of attention from staff and media alike, as a bite from a brown snake usually proved fatal. On discharge from hospital the next day, Bill mentioned to the doctor that he had a rather large lump in his groin. The doctor suggested that perhaps the knife used to cut his leg before applying condy's crystals had not been properly sterilised. Bill, upon reflection, decided that he was rather glad that the folk at home had not waited to boil the kettle to sterilise the knife or he may not have been around to use the tickets in his wallet for the Davis Cup tennis match scheduled for that very day. Of course, he attended the tennis.

**T**RAGEDY struck for Bill and his family in 1960 when his brother, Bert, suffered a heart attack out fishing and died. This was a most traumatic time for Bill, who found him, for the brothers were the best of mates and had done everything together all their lives.

Bill used the farm as an outlet to deal with his loss, now doing the work of two men and more as his father's health deteriorated. Then, six years later to the day, Bill's father also suffered a heart attack and fell from the jetty. The ensuing trip to the hospital proved too long and he died in the ambulance. Caring for his mother and running the farm, even though sister Vi came home to help, became more and more difficult for Bill and eventually he decided to lease and then sell the farm to Gordon and Phoebe Field.

Bill then built another home on the property which had belonged to his brother. Here he grow bananas for the local market and established a fine garden with the help of Vi, who comes to live with him.

Orchids became a great favourite with Bill and it never needed much encouragement to get him to show anyone who was interested his enviable collection.

Bill has always been a loyal supporter of the horticultural society since its inception well over 30 years ago and always manages to attend the society's annual display.

In later years Bill did a spot of travelling and, on a trip to New Zealand with Vi, saw snow for the first time that he could remember.

Then in 1973 he left the Island to visit the land of his birth, England. He travelled on the Fairstar and was amused to find that the younger folk on board seemed to adopt him. They must have seen that he was still young at heart and "fancy free".

Because Bill was London born, they assumed that he would be able to answer their many queries about London. Personally, I ▼

► would love to have heard what he told them when he had not been anywhere near there since he was four years old.

We already know that Bill was a confirmed "Islander" but that did not necessarily mean that he wished to stay permanently in Tahiti. After an enjoyable taxi trip and lunch with some other passengers from the Fairstar, they all waited for the taxi to return to the ship ... and waited ... and waited ... and waited ... sailing time and still waiting ... no other taxi in sight ... everyone around spoke only French ... panic was just about to set in when it arrived ... a hair-raising ride and Bill arrived at the dock to find, luckily, that the captain had delayed sailing to wait for them.

Perhaps that was the reason Bill declined a trip to Panama City at his next port of call. However, he did step ashore so that he could at least claim to have stood on American soil.

Bill tells me that he found the Panama Canal, with its locks for transferring the ships from the Pacific to the Atlantic Ocean quite fascinating. Just one port left to go.

**L**ONDON lived up to all Bill's expectations. He said it was a wonderful city. He made it his base for some six months and from there made trips to Scotland and to Europe.

Listening to Bill recount his experiences in Europe it seems that he was repeating his "big brother" act... but this time it was looking after ladies who had left their husbands at home ... "Shame on you!"

While in London, Bill visited the Tower of London on which his father had worked so long ago upgrading the 300-year-old plumbing system. It was late in the day and the Tower was closed to visitors.

After talking at some length with the attendant in charge, Bill convinced him that his father had carved his initials on one of the inside walls while working there so long ago (well, it seemed a good story at the time and, well, who knows?) so the attendant allowed him inside for a quick look before the building was locked for the night. Once a smooth talker-always a smooth talker it would seem!

I wonder how you would have felt, Bill, locked up at midnight with the headless ghost of Anne Boleyn? In Edinburgh, Bill looked up an old acquaintance from Russell Island who had returned to Scotland. He really showed him the sights before Bill returned to London where, but for the timely intervention of a friendly London bobby on the beat, Bill tells me he could have been blown to pieces by an IRA bomb which exploded nearby.

Travelling the world was fine but Bill missed his Island home and so he booked his seat for the long flight home.

One island project which was very dear to Bill's heart was the establishment of a Returned Services Club on Russell Island. Many long hours of voluntary work went into raising money towards this goal from men and women alike and meetings were first held in the Anglican Parish Hall.

Then in 1989 Bill donated part of his brother Bert's estate to the RSL so they could have their own clubhouse built and this, of course, is where we are today. Extensions and improvements to facilities are ongoing and Bill feels much satisfaction watching the progress. He is very proud of "the Club" and sees it as a memorial, not only to his brother, but to all who served their country in times of war.

Bill loved to listen to his mother play her piano. A self-taught but talented pianist she was in great demand at local functions, and he gave her piano, which is still played today, to the RSL.

**W**ILLIAM James Branch you have seen many, many changes in your lifetime on Russell Island. You have seen the transition from sailing boats delivering mail once a week or towing barges, to motor boats which picked up and delivered mail bags each Saturday, to the present day with deliveries each weekday ... and of course we complain at the slightest delay.

You saw the first telephone line in 1923. It came from Dunwich via a cable under Canaipa Passage and was then attached, sometimes to poles but more often than not to trees until it reached the top of the hill. (I guarantee reception was none too clear on a windy day!) A wireless phone was established in 1930 but, until the 1940s, there were no private phones installed in private homes. ▲

► As Bill says: "It is a funny old world and people are never satisfied. Imagine ... no wireless or television ... no telephones ... boat service once a week ... newspapers only once a week ... no pensions ... no motor vehicles ... no freezers and no refrigerators ... no washing machines ... no Island shops ... mostly very basic housing, no more than a roof over your head literally ... and yet these people made the most of what they had and worked as a community ... friends helping friends ... accepting their lot in life ... and basically happy living on the Island which they loved." Russell Island.

In conclusion I would like to read a snippet of island philosophy passed down to us from Bill's father.

*"Island Spirit"*

*The Island tempers the people who come.*

*It is stronger than the individual.*

Both Bill and his father obviously felt this "Spirit of the Island".

Let us all join and sing "Happy Birthday", played on Violet Branch's piano, as her son Bill cuts his 90th birthday cake. Bill you have seen so much; you are a great citizen and a good friend

BILL BRANCH... THIS IS YOUR LIFE!

**The following article appeared in the Rural Press paper, Bayside Bulletin, on August 20, 2004:**

**F**ROM war to peace and across separate generations of service, the community work of a World War Two veteran featured on Vietnam Veterans Day on Russell Island.

The late Bill Branch, a veteran of the New Guinea campaign more than 60 years ago, was the focus after a Russell Island service for Vietnam veterans on Wednesday, August 18.

The Returned Services League's Bay Islands sub-branch received a sculpture honouring Mr Branch, who was its patron before his death last year.

The sub-branch commissioned artist Jenny Rumney to create the bronze sculpture in memory of the veteran who was its greatest benefactor.

Sub-branch president Ivars Valuks, said Bill Branch had been a "hands-on" supporter from the sub-branch's foundation in 1946.

"The existence of the Russell Island RSL Club is due to Bill because in 1989 he donated the land," Mr Valuks said.

The sculpture would have a prominent position in the club's pending redevelopment, he said.

A member of one of Russell Island's oldest families received the sculpture on behalf of the sub-branch.

Toowoomba-born Iris Orme moved to the island in 1946 as the bride of Jim Orme, who like Mr Branch, had active service in New Guinea.

Mrs Orme, 84, said the Branch and Orme families both had migrated from England early last century and had remained close, even though one settled on Russell and the other on the mainland.

"I remember Bill as a very passionate and very generous person," she said.

Mrs Rumney said she had not met Mr Branch so had researched photographs and written records and talked to many people before producing the artwork.

"Bill died just before I moved to Russell Island but in doing this project I have been touched by the contribution he made to the community," she said.

She hoped the bronze sculpture, apart from honouring Mr Branch, was a permanent reminder of the spirit and determination of those who served their country in all branches of the military.

Mrs Rumney said she had post-graduate qualifications in fine arts and exhibition credits dating from the 1970s, and had produced metal castings since the mid-1980s. Her bronze mask of the Whitlam Government Minister and High Court judge Lionel Murphy stood in the Sydney office of the Lionel Murphy Foundation.

Mrs Rumney's monumental works also included a cast alloy sculpture of Sunshine Coast Jazz Club patron Rick Farbach and, in partnership with another artist, Cathy Money, a tribute to banksias at Buderim Mountain State School.