

"Not The Boy Next Door"

The following is a schoolboy's account of his time at Slim School. All events are taken from his diary, which he kept of his experiences whilst at Slim School. The author has requested anonymity so some names may have been changed.

Episode 3.

Activities at Slim School.

Of all the outside leisure pastimes the new farm club was my favourite thing to be involved in. I had for some reason always been interested in farming, maybe from the summer holidays I spent on my uncle and aunts farm near Newmarket. To be a member of the farm club you were required to purchase shares at 50 cents each. I was encouraged to have five dollars worth equivalent to about 1.25 in new money. I had never spent so much pocket money in one go. The idea was to teach us basic economics and to take a real interest in how the farm was going.

The farm was set up with help from the Malayan Agricultural Research Centre based just outside the local town of Tanah Rata. They gave much guidance in how to keep chickens and pigs in particular. They also assisted us in planting crops, which they were doing on a test programme basis with us kids providing much of the labour. Digging the soil was never one of my favourite pastimes! We initially tried wheat, barley, maize and corn

on the cob. Crops one didn't often find growing in this part of the world. The Cameron Highlands had a few large tea plantations and a great deal of eucalyptus trees. They used to be cut down and then had the sap pressed out of them for use in the production of medical and beauty treatments. At one time they found tin in the area and our sports field at one time was an open tin mine. I am not aware if there are any tin mines left in the Cameron Highlands.

Because the farm building was outside the confines of the school perimeter the armed guards used to keep a watchful eye over us. They were overlooking the farm area from outside the back of the school buildings on top of the plateau behind the boy's dormitory whilst we were carrying out our studies in the valley below. Generally speaking there were up to four children on a rota basis in the morning and the same in the evening. Usually two girls and two boys on each shift, one of the four being the team leader.

The morning shift met in the kitchens at about six to collect swill from the day before which was saved by the kitchen staff and placed in a small dustbin. This ghastly mixture of trash food was used to feed the pigs. After we had each cooked ourselves a slice of toast with a generous helping of butter we made our way down the jungle path leading to the farm buildings carrying this

dirty old dustbin between us. Blimey, it really did stink to high heaven.

There was an old copper boiler down there the sort of thing back in England that my mother boiled the weekly washing in. This was used to heat up the swill if it wasn't hot enough and whilst waiting for the food to warm up we went into the chicken runs to collect the eggs then clean out their pens. One morning a couple of weeks before the end of term it was raining hard hence I was wearing my lightweight raincoat. I was allocated the task of collecting the eggs but after searching around there was only one in the nesting boxes which I put in my raincoat pocket and then completely forgot all about it.

Alzheimer's at twelve years of age?

At the end of term and on returning home, two weeks or so later mother went to empty my untidily packed trunk and got quite a surprise by the dreadful stench making its way out of the trunk when she lifted the lid. Yes, one well-rotted broken egg in the pocket of the raincoat was a smell that was there forever and needless to say the coat had to be thrown away and I was not the flavour of the month for that.

Continuing my duties, a fairly quick job was to sweep out the hen run which did not take too long because only twelve hens were involved. Then back to the four sows who by now were becoming very anxious as to when they would receive their smelly fare. The steam rising from

the boiler smelled dreadful and when it was stirred it was enough to make you gag. After filling the buckets with this stinking mess it was delivered to the concrete trough in the pigsty. That wasn't easy because the pigs were pushing and shoving and trying their damndest to get at their grub whether it was in the trough or not. The little buggers were screeching and grunting and very impatient. We had to be careful because these old sows were pretty heavy and could knock you to the ground if they fancied doing so. Once it was finally delivered into the trough they were in there like a shot, happy at last. Whilst they were busy consuming their gastronomic delight, it was our job to hose down and sweep out each sty and barrow the muck to a heap along the way. Jobs done it was time to go back up the hill and into the bathroom for a good wash, well as good as any youngster will make of it!

Unbeknownst to us, during the last holiday two of the sows had been mated with a big old boar at the agricultural centre, which had resided on their farm for a good number of years and we soon had many piglets to deal with as well. Sadly, one or two were found dead one morning after their huge mum had lain on them during the night. Apparently pigs like to lean against the wall of the pen when sleeping and the piglets do the same. The research centre advised that if we a wooden rail one foot from the side of the pen and about nine inches above the floor, the piglets could roll out of the way, therefore

keeping them out of danger. Mr Jones came down and helped a few lads do this job and once the poles were fitted the system worked very well.

At the end of term a basic profit and loss account was drawn up, featuring the sale of eggs, chickens, piglets and sows. The exercise was carried out in a special math class usually held at the weekend so as not to interrupt the normal school lessons. We called it Farm Club End of Term General Meeting. During the meeting the teaching of basics of book keeping was carried out and made it all the more interesting with a live situation to account for. Some of this terms piglets would be kept to replace the older sows, which would be sold in the near future. This was to avoid purchasing from outside and it replaced our stock with a known quality animal.

There was one occasion when a sow had been sold to a local hotel but had to be slaughtered before they would complete the purchase. I seem to recall about 4 of us went with the pig to the abattoir and stood there as the slaughter man cut its throat; not a pleasant sight. If asked I would not go again. I think it was then that I knew the meaning of "to bleed like a pig". What a mess that was.

From the sales total the expenses were deducted and a profit or loss was declared with dividends paid on a positive result. Fortunately the expenses were few, the swill being waste from the kitchens and cost nothing. It

saved the school money because had we had not used it for the farm the school would have had to pay someone to take it away. This left only meal for the chickens to be purchased and with only 12 birds there wasn't a great amount of that required. There was from time to time, the purchase of seed required for the kitchen garden but the research centre only charged a small amount for those. In my time at the school there was always a profit and on one occasion I received more than the 5 dollars I had originally invested. Getting that amount in one go, what a result!

Another activity which I enjoyed apart from sport was being a member of the Boy Scouts. We had some fantastic adventures. In the valley below the school was a small river, which wound its way around two sides of the school site. It emanated from the direction of the golf course and then away through the valley to Tanah Rata and beyond. Being that the river was outside the school perimeter the Headmaster would arrange for the resident regiment of troops to send out a patrol and secure the area in which the scouts and sometimes the guides would be working.

The Headmaster had managed to persuade the Army to give us a long thick rope for the tug-o-war competitions on sports day but we were to find another and much more exciting use for it, that was to erect an aerial runway over the river. Mr Jones and others including the cook

assisted us to get this heavy rope up into a tree and tied off on one side of the river and across the river to fix it to another tree. Getting it taut was the most difficult part of the job and needed a lot of "man strength" to do it. It was by far the best thing we had ever done and gave us many hours of pleasure, even the girls loved it.

It wasn't the sort of thing that was done back home in England which made it all the more exciting. To get this aerial runway working two children would take hold of a lighter length of rope and wade across the river dragging the rope behind them and securing it to a pulley which was fixed to the tree and bring the rope back to the start line. The rope on the far side needed to be a tad lower than the launch point. There was usually a clamour of children all eager to have a first go at traversing across the river and soon cries of *Geronimo*, *Tarzan* and noises emulating monkeys could be heard echoing through the jungle as us boys and girls took turns to go over to the other side.

On occasions someone would stop halfway across and had to be recovered by pulling him or her back with the thin rope and making them ready to have another go. Losing ones grip of the pulley wheel meant coming to an unfortunate end by falling into the icy water below. Fun all the way.

Whilst down in the valley we were sheltered from any breeze and with the suns warm rays beating down there

was always a beautiful smell of eucalyptus from the many trees growing around us. There was a forest of these trees along the valley, which created a pleasant border to the dense jungle behind them.

In the valley four of us lads found a narrow gauge railway track in the thick grass. It was perhaps about 15 inches wide. We decided to explore further and followed the track up the valley and after several hundred yards toward the end, we found a piece of rolling stock covered by bushes. It was a rusty old steel wagon with 6 wheels with a V shaped body on it, probably used for the transport of cords of timber, mainly eucalyptus down the valley to the road. A discovery that was irresistible to a group of young boys as we climbed all over it.

We decided to see if we could get it running. Rocking it to and fro we were unable to get it moving. We agreed we needed help, so I returned to the bottom of the valley and persuaded two other boys to join us. They were excited at our find and with the extra "boy power" we were able to get the wagon to move. As the wagon began to roll down the track we jumped on board for a ride down into the valley. It moved very slowly but soon it began picking up speed and ended up hurtling down the track completely out of control. Mind you there were no controls or brakes on the wagon to slow it down anyway. After another hundred yards or so we were literally flying and in danger of coming to a sticky end.

Fortunately for us the track levelled out and we began to slow down a little. Then as we went round a bend the track started to incline up which slowed the wagon even more. The end of our epic journey was in sight but there were no buffers, nothing but a pile of clay which we duly ran into. On climbing down from our transport we found we had derailed. We put on our thinking caps. How were we going to get this beast back on the rails, as it was very heavy and if successful we then had the problem of getting it back up the gradient?

After struggling for quite some time, one lad suggested we try to lever it back onto the tracks with some wooden poles, which were lying around. Brilliant little sod he was. It worked and we finally managed to lever the wagon enough to get it back on the tracks. Now a haul back up the valley to the summit and another hairy ride down to complete a great adventure. Thinking back it was a very dangerous thing to have done. Imagine slipping and getting a limb under a wheel. Doesn't bear thinking about, does it? That's boys I suppose.

As previously mentioned, most of the sports usually involved the girls but as the sports field was a layer of clay intermingled with small white shiny gravel, it wasn't a very nice surface to fall down on, so the girls didn't enjoy joining in the football matches very much. Apparently at some time in the past the area in which the playing field was situated had been a working tin mine,

hence the surface left behind. When playing hockey one didn't get to fall over very often and so the girls were happier to play hockey and it was great fun with most of the participants taking the game very seriously. Miss Pringle and Mr Jones often joined in on opposing teams of course. To distinguish the teams one side wore white and the others wore the school colours.

Playing on the white team I clearly remember a nasty moment during a needle match, which at the time my side was losing by two goals to one. The ball came to me on the right wing and I was about to play it into our centre when I received a whack across my foot from Miss Pringle's hockey stick. She was supposed to be on my side! The reason she belted my foot so hard was due to the fact I had a small black snake some 6 inches long on my plimsoll, it was a bootlace snake.

Lucky indeed, because I hadn't noticed it and those little fellows could give you a very nasty poisonous bite, which in some cases could be fatal but it was the last chance the little fellow would get at harming me or anyone else and it was thanks to a very observant teacher. I was only twelve at the time and with a very painful throbbing foot and not wanting to cry in front of the girls I took shelter in the games pavilion for a while and was unable to take any further part in the game. After my foot soothed a little I came back out to watch the final moments of the

game, which my team won four goals to three. That took some of the pain away.

On another occasion I was again in the white team as the full back. The play was going on at the opposite end of the field called the tree end. It was called the tree end for obvious reasons, whilst the other end was named the netball or basketball pitch end. Our team was attacking the tree end when our centre shot for goal. The ball hit the crossbar, flew into the air to a great height and hit a hornet's nest hanging from one of the trees above the corner flag. You have never seen a playing field clear so quickly as a cloud of very cross hornets set about attacking us. Everyone went running for the pavilion at the side of the playing field and stayed in there until the hornets had retreated, which seemed to take forever. We were banged up there for quite a long time, which was particularly unpleasant for the unfortunate kids who had been stung. There were several children who had received nasty bites from the hornets, which left uncomfortable sore swellings.

These can be very painful without treatment so we needed to get back to the school and to Matron's surgery as quickly as possible. The hornets had dispersed and with the danger receding we made our way back up to school and those in trouble were quickly attended to by Matron and put out of their misery. A few days later the troops arrived with a flamethrower to remove the hornet

danger once and for all, for which we were most grateful. Didn't half burn well!

To go swimming was another welcome event and meant a troop patrol had to be called out to make sure the foot path to Parrit Falls was safe for us to walk along. The falls were about a mile and a half along this jungle footpath. At the foot of the falls was a large lagoon, a beautiful natural area in the jungle not unlike the sort of things you see in films similar to South Pacific. The only drawback was that there was not a great deal of sunlight able to penetrate jungle canopy so the whole area was quite cool. Boys were to get changed on one bank and the girls on the bank on the other side of the river. All properly organised.

On the word "go" we were allowed to enter the water. Gosh it was cold at first but as soon as one got swimming it was most refreshing. Members of staff were keeping a watchful eye on us particularly on those who ventured too close to the waterfall. The water had a drop of some twenty-five feet, which created quite a powerful undercurrent, and one could easily be pulled under if you were not a strong swimmer. It really was a place of dreams and had the added character of having wild life all around making their various noises, which echoed around us in the jungle. The strange thing is that animal noises seem to echo around in the jungle when one would have expected the foliage to dampen any noise, weird.

Often there were monkeys who arrived to witness what was going on in their domain but they never gave us any trouble.

Swimming completed, it was time to get dried and changed back into our day clothes and make the long trek back to school. The path was quiet narrow and meandered around the base of trees and rocks. It generally took us 25 to 30 minutes to get back to the valley below the school and then it was the climb up the hill to school.

At this stage of my life I was not "in love" with any lass. Much too young for that and girls to me were a bit of a drag, except for partnering on dance evenings which were usually held on a Saturday. However, some of the older boys and girls were clearly enamoured with each other and did not hide the fact. Not too subtle!

End of Episode 3.