

Soldiers settled on the land

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SOLDIER settlements were seen as one of many ways to repatriate soldiers back from service in World War I.

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HELP THE MAN with the MEDAL

What the Department of Repatriation has done during the first ten months of its existence, that is, from 8th April, 1918, to 25th January, 1919

TEN MONTHS' OPERATIONS		
Total number of applications through all branches	- - - -	60,287
Total number of applicants assisted	- - - -	44,188
Total value of assistance granted	- - - -	£583,566
Made up as follows:—		
Gift	- £413,663	
Loan	- £154,455	
General	- £15,448	
EMPLOYMENT SECTION		
Total number of men placed in employment	- - - -	29,260
VOCATIONAL TRAINING SECTION		
Total number of men approved for training	- - - -	4,365
Total number of men completed training	- - - -	1,230
ASSISTED PASSAGES		
Amount paid to date for passages of soldiers' dependents to the Commonwealth (485 passages)	- - - -	£5,772

[Issued under the Authority of Senator the Hon. E. D. Millen, Minister for Repatriation.]

The Pikedale (Amiens), Stanthorpe and Cottonvale Soldier Settlement (one of many established around Australia) became the vision of a future life for 501 returned men and their families. They brought with them the names of the battles they had participated in – Amiens, Bapaume, Messines, Bullecourt, Passchendaele, Pozieres, Fleurbaix, and these became the names, of villages,

railway sidings and areas, that still exist today. Their legacies are manifold.

In May 1917, Mr Hunter the Minister for Lands,

announced that 17,000 acres of land had been reserved at “The 13 Mile” on Pikedale, about 15 kilometres from Stanthorpe.

Surveys were made of 138 portions comprising 4,368 acres consisting of blocks ranging from 18 to 76 acres. It was decided that the blocks were suitable for fruit growing, and ringbarking was commenced of five-acre areas on each



Surveyors Camp

block preparatory to clearing. Clearing commenced in August 1917. Some 20 acres was also set aside as a nursery and state farm, for training the soldiers.

By the end of 1918, Mr A.P. Devereux, an ex-soldier had been appointed manager of the settlement, a sawmill had been established, 4,000 apple and peach trees had been planted, and five acres set aside for a school.



Amiens School built in 1920

Preparations were being made for the building of the school and recreation hall, and 19 returned soldiers were already camped, or housed at The 13 Mile. In order to take up their allotments the soldiers were each given an advance of 500 pounds (this was later increased to 625 pounds – this sum was equivalent to about two and a half years' pay, for an average worker), at an interest rate of three and a half per cent payable over a 40-year period.

This advance was intended to allow the men to purchase their land, equipment, and necessary materials in order to

make a beginning. Soldiers had to apply to the Land Settlement Committee, to be considered for the available blocks of land, had to be honourably discharged, and to have an aptitude for farming.

By early 1919 Miss Bertha Smith had 13 children attending what was to become Amiens State School and plans were being made to construct a tramway, with a three foot six inch wide gauge (about a metre) from Cottonvale a distance of 13 miles (approximately 20 kilometres). At this stage 46 soldiers, with families, in many cases had been settled and most were living in bark huts, including Miss Smith.

The tramway construction from Cottonvale to Amiens began in June 1919, with some of the tramline coming from used line in suburban Brisbane. It was

July 26th, 1920 – HRH Prince of Wales opens Cottonvale-Amiens Branch Line.



completed in September 1919, with 120 men involved in the building, and cost 35,000 pounds.

Other initiatives that had commenced by the middle of 1920, included the Pikedale Soldiers Settlement Co-operative Canning, Jam, and Preserving Company. The visit by the Prince of Wales in July of that year was also a major event, by which stage about 400 returned men were involved with the settlement.

Lode tin, a little gold, silver, wolfram and other minerals were discovered at Swiper's Gully in 1920 and many ex-soldiers went mining while waiting for fruit trees to grow. Many fruit trees needed at least five years to mature.

Progress at the settlement was rapid, as can be demonstrated by the fact that 193 buildings had been erected by the end of 1920, a cannery established, churches, cold rooms, 1666 acres of land had been cleared and ploughed, 110,000 fruit trees planted and blocks allotted to 354 applicants, and two full-time nurses were employed in the settlement. Some 143 ex-soldiers were actually settled by then. With so much activity and so many people involved it was inevitable that problems would arise and they did. By 1922 the following were being reported.

1. It took about five years for the orchards to become profitable.

2. Frosts and hail affected the establishment of orchards.

3. The 625-pound loan advanced was considered insufficient, by many settlers.

4. After all the development work the market value of the properties was less than the loans that the soldiers had undertaken. They had been overcapitalised.

5. Health problems, as a result of service, of many ex-soldiers affected their ability to work.

6. Abandoned farms became overgrown and orchards untended.

7. Whereas originally five acres of cultivatable land was considered adequate, this figure was later realised to be inadequate.

8. A lot of nursery stock obtained from Tasmania was found to be diseased, and/or root bound and these problems were only noted a couple of years after planting. When the government agreed to replacement stock, it too was found to be unsuitable.

9. Poor soil drainage and lack of water on many blocks.

10. The cost of fertiliser.

11. Interest payments on the loans were to be started immediately, yet most soldiers had no income and a number of years before crops would be profitable.

12. Uncertain markets.

13. Vermin and disease.

14. Ironically, on occasions, the soldier settlers produced a glut of vegetables, for the markets, and so creating low prices and unreasonable returns for their labour.

15. An unresponsive administration, who were responsible for numerous settlements all around the state.

By the end of 1921, 60 soldiers had deserted their Amiens blocks. In March 1922 an auction was being organised by the State Government for the sale of equipment. Recriminations and criticism began to mount, but many soldier settlers battled on. All up, at this time, there were 391 soldier settlers in the Stanthorpe area and in a radius of three miles of Amiens there was a population of 600 people. In 1927 only half, or about 200, of the original settlers remained on their farms.

Some settlers turned to other sources of income, besides orchards and vegetable growing. Some grew tobacco, others tried fox and possum farming for their furs. But with the arrival of the 1930s, more settlers had left their farms, the cannery had been sold and the sawmill sold, and some corruption reported with the sale of the Soldier Settlement Store, which was valued at £9956 but sold for £3550 to the one and only tender, who happened to be an employee!

Ironically many who had been able to “hang in” on their farms had independent sources of income such as disability pensions from the Repatriation Department. In a 1937 newspaper article it was reported that of the 500 original settlers, in the Stanthorpe district, only about 50 remained. In the Amiens-Bapaume area of the original 235 settlers, 25 remained.

The descendants of these families still remain in this region. Despite the overcapitalisation and numerous other problems, which led to many failures, these soldier settlers demonstrated what was possible.

The families that came after them and took on the partially developed farms were able to build on that work, which has led to the reputation of this region for fruit and vegetables second to none.



Aerial view of Harslett Farm 2018. Jack Harslett and his wife Edith took up Soldier Settlement Lot 241 in 1919. Now a much larger farm, the original lot is still owned and farmed by the Harslett family.