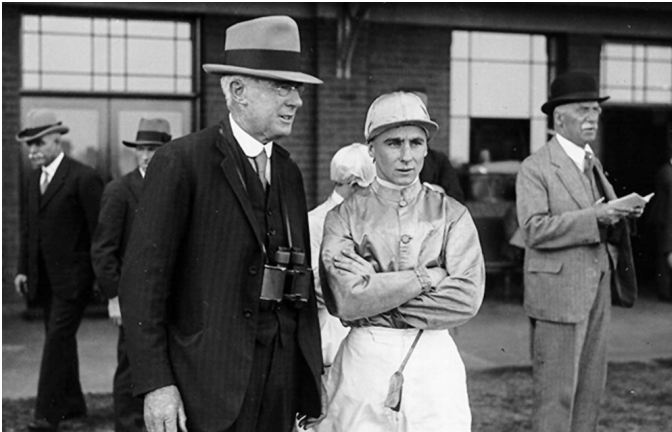# Stories of Frank McGrath (1866 to 1947)

Frank was the 1st son of James McGrath (about 1826) with his second wife, Kate Cain (or Cahill). James had two other children to Kate Cain, Joseph (b. 1868), and Maurice (b. 1870), all born in Boorowa, NSW, Australia.

Frank (1866) became a legend in Australian racing and was inducted into the Racing Hall of Fame in 2003.

He was first a jockey and then a trainer who established a reputation as a first-class conditioner of thoroughbreds. With Abundance he won the AJC Derby in 1902 and the St Ledger the following year. With Prince Foote he won the 1909 AJC Derby, Victoria Derby and Melbourne Cup. He went on to win the Caulfield Cup with Amounis along with two Epsom Handicaps and the W.S. Cox Plate. He won two Melbourne Cups with Peter Pan and one with Prince Foote along with a host of other races. With Beau Vite he won the W.S. Cox Plate and the metropolitan Handicap. He retired in 1947 having won 121 feature races. Frank's son, also named Frank, took over the stables, but was unco-operative when I tried to talk to him about family. He seemed to have some bitter resentment to them. Why, I could never find out.

This is what was written up in the news when Frank was inducted into the Racing Hall of Fame in 2003.

Frank McGrath (1866–1947)

Frank McGrath's career spanned 65 years. As a jockey he rode with considerable success; he was fortunate not to lose his life in Australia's worst race accident, the 1885 Caulfield Cup won by Grace Darling.

In the early 1900s he took to training and quickly established a reputation as a first-class conditioner of thoroughbreds. With Abundance he won the AJC Derby of 1902 and the St Leger the following year. Another star of his early career was Prince Foote with whom he won the 1909 AJC Derby, Victoria Derby and Melbourne Cup.

In the 1920s and 1930s McGrath trained a series of champion gallopers. With Amounis he won the Caulfield Cup, two Epsom Handicaps and the W.S. Cox Plate. Peter Pan won for him two Melbourne Cups and a host of feature races. With Beau Vite he won the W.S. Cox Plate and the Metropolitan Handicap.

In 1947 he retired, having won 121 feature races, and handed over his stable to his son.

McGrath was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 2003.

The Late Frank McGrath (1866–1947)

From the Morning Bulletin (Rockhampton, Qld: 1878-1954) Thursday 30 October 1947

Late Frank McGrath

(By J. J. ANDERSON)

The late Frank McGrath, probably the last of the old school of Sydney trainers to answer the call, was well and favourably known in Central and Northern Queensland. He paid his first visit to Rockhampton for the Carnival race meeting in 1918, accompanied by his friend Tom Hannan, a well-known Sydney racing man.

Hannan, amongst other horses, owned Lager by Maltster, which later became the dam of Eusebius, winner of the V.R.C. Derby of 1918. Incidentally Desert Rose and Beverage (both by Maltster) all out in the same year, were the then best three-year-olds in Sydney.

Frank McGrath trained Desert Rose for Robert Richards, of the Riverstone Meatworks, and won the V.R.C. Maribyrnong Plate with her. Beverage won both A.J.C. and V.R.C. Derbies. He was trained by the late William Kelso, who won the Melbourne Cup of 1928, with Statesman. I mention Beverage and William Kelso because I will later refer to Mr Kelso.

Tom Hannan and Frank McGrath did the Northern annual after leaving here in 1918. Hannan never paid us another visit, but central and North Queensland so impressed Frank McGrath that he made the trip whenever possible and made many lasting friends In Rockhampton and the north. These trips were the elixir of life to Frank and enabled him to escape the Sydney winter. Travel restrictions during the war years caused a break. Then he renewed his visits, but last year was his last trip and he had to curtail it on account of failing health. He could not come this year.

His early associations with racing as a youth were with John Mayo (Newcastle) known as "The Wizard of the North," and John Alsopp, of Randwick. The grounding that he received from these past masters of the Turf stood to him when he launched out as a trainer in Sydney.

John Mayo was connected with Black Swan and Lady Trenton, and he won the Melbourne Cup of 1903 and 1908 with Lord Cardigan and Lord Nolan.

John Alsopp, one of Sydney's leading trainers in the 90's, won, amongst many other important races the V.R.C. Newmarket and Australian Cup of 1905 with Playaway and Lord Ullin's Daughter. Alsopp also had the celebrated Sir Modred, which Frank told me he once rode from Flemington to Caulfield races (about eight miles), when transport facilities were not what they are today.

As a jockey in his late 'teens, Frank McGrath was involved In the Caulfield Cup disaster of 1885 when 13 horses fell and a famous lightweight of the day, Donald Nicholson, was killed. With Sam Cracknell, a leading horseman of his day, Frank was for many weeks unconscious in a Melbourne hospital, and he carried a momento of this accident for the rest of his days. It was only by his steady life and careful living that he was able to achieve his remarkable success as a trainer.

Amongst the first good horses he trained was Kingloch (by Lochiel), a top notch miler which won the Villiers Stakes carrying 9.2; and Royal Laddie, which won many races. This was early in 1900. In 1906 he won the AJ.C. Doncaster with his own horse, Little Toy. Amongst his clientele at this time was Bob Phillips, a West Australian bookmaker of repute. For this owner, Frank won the V.J.C. Derby of 1902 with Abundance and was considered unlucky in not winning the Melbourne Cup the same year. He ran third. For other West Australian owners he trained New Tipperary, which won the Australian Cup,

Maikal and many others. He also trained horses for New Zealand racing men, amongst which was Lady Medallist, Master Brierly (a w.f.a. winner at Randwick), On Parade, Silver Jubilee and Beau Vite. He was also successful with hurdle horses and steeplechases, winning the Grand National Steeplechase with Grafnax. Honeydew, Cherry Ripe and Prismatic were his best hurdlers amongst others.

He trained the winners of three Melbourne Cups, two Caulfield Cups, three Epsoms, two Metropolitans, two Cantala Stakes, two A.J.C. and V.R.C. Derbies, two Tattersalls Cups, three Anniversary Handicaps, Doncaster Handicap, Williamstown Cup. Carrington Stakes, and other important races in Sydney and Melbourne. What a wonderful record for a trainer to leave behind him!

His best horses were Peter Pan, Amonnls, Prince Foote, Denis Boy and Beau Vite.

Success never altered him, and he was always ready to assist those in need. His gifts to charity are well known in Sydney.

At his home, Doncaster Avenue, Kensington, overlooking Randwick racecourse, one could always find Frank writing out a sheet of wires on the morning of an important race meeting to his many friends in Central and Northern Queensland.

McGrath raced many horses himself, principally of his own breeding. He had a soft spot for Stormy, which paved the way for his success and after which his home in Doncaster Avenue is named. In 1920 his mare Warspite beat Molly's Robe in the Shorts Handicap at Randwick. From a Maltster mare he owned Sweet Malt and a good performer. He bred Fair Rosaleen which won at Randwick and a Wagga Gold Cup. From Fair Rosaleen he bred Australia Fair, a first class horse and good performer in Sydney and Melbourne. A full brother to this horse, Sydney, he sold to the Beak Pastoral Co., and at Willangie, Sydney is now doing stud duty.

It was my pleasure on occasions to accompany him to Randwick in the early morning, and among many I would like to mention an early morning interlude between the late Bill Kelso and Frank McGrath. As a green colt, Peter Pan, having his second race, ran a dead heat with one of Kelso's, Babul. Kelso said to Frank, "You know that dead heat, Frank, between Babili and Peter Pan at Canterbury Park, well, I would have run it off, but the rules of racing would not permit of it. Now every time I think of it I laugh to myself." Peter Pan went on to win the Hill Stakes, A.J.C. Derby and Melbourne Cup in the same year, whilst Babili never rose above an ordinary suburban horse. When Peter Pan won his second Cup with 9.10, Kelso was on his way to the books to have his usual £10 bet on Peter, but could not get through the crowd in time. So is racing history made.

Whenever racing men congregate, Frank McGrath's passing will be spoken of with sincere expressions of regret.

(Peter Pan Plaque)

McGrath, Francis (1866–1947)

This article was published in Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 15, (MUP), 2000

By RICHARD WATERHOUSE

Francis McGrath (1866-1947), jockey and racehorse-trainer, was born on 17 October 1866 at Boorowa, New South Wales, eldest of three sons of James McGrath, carpenter, and his second wife Catherine, née Cahill (late Kane), both from County Tipperary, Ireland. Frank learned to ride early and had his first win on his father's horse, Killarney, at the Gullen races in 1875. Apprenticed to Sydney trainer John Alsopp in 1877, he moved to Edward Keys and in 1880 joined the Newcastle stables of John Mayo, for whom he rode Prince Imperial in the 1885 Caulfield Cup: McGrath suffered head and eye injuries when sixteen of the forty-one runners fell in the straight. Although he was plagued by constant headaches, he returned to the saddle, won the 1886 Epsom Handicap on Zeno and continued to ride until 1892.

By 1898 McGrath was successfully training ponies at Canterbury, Sydney. His winnings from Stormy enabled him to buy a house and stables in Doncaster Avenue, Kensington, in 1900 and to obtain a No.1 trainer's licence from the Australian Jockey Club. On 23 July that year, at St Mary's Catholic Church, Crookwell, he married 25-year-old Bridget Stapleton. His early successes included Abundance, winner of the 1902 Australian Jockey Club Derby and the 1903 Victoria Racing Club and A.J.C. St Leger stakes, and Little Toy which won the 1906 Doncaster Handicap. He trained Prince Foote for 'J. Baron'; the horse won the A.J.C. and Victoria Derbys (1909), the Melbourne Cup (1909) and both St Legers (1910). McGrath later maintained that the prize-money he collected early in his career provided him with the 'kick along' to sustain him through the inevitable lean years.

Despite rarely having more than twenty horses in training, McGrath prepared the winners of many major events, among them the Epsom Handicap (Amounis 1926, 1928), Caulfield Cup (Amounis 1930, Denis Boy 1931), Metropolitan Stakes (Denis Boy 1932, Beau Vite 1940), A.J.C. Derby (Tanami 1910, Peter Pan 1932, Pandect 1940) and W. S. Cox Plate (Beau Vite 1940, 1941). His greatest horse was R. R. Dangar's Peter Pan. In addition to taking numerous V.R.C. and A.J.C. weight-for-age trophies, Peter Pan overcame severe interference to win the 1932 Melbourne Cup (returning to scale with grass-stains on his nose), and ploughed through the mud carrying 9 st. 10 lb. (62 kg) to 'blitz' the 1934 Melbourne Cup field. Supported by experienced racing officials and some seasoned jockeys, McGrath always maintained that Peter Pan was a better two-miler than Phar Lap.

McGrath was never accused of malpractice by any of the principal club committees. He was always willing to provide advice to young trainers, and to extend a helping hand to those who had fallen on hard times (during the Depression he often 'forgot' to collect the rent from tenants of the cottages he owned). In 1941 he was elected president of the New South Wales Breeders', Owners', and Trainers' Association. He retired in 1945, handing over his stables to his son, Frank junior. Survived by his wife, two sons and three of his four daughters, McGrath died on 28 October 1947 at his Kensington home and was buried in Waverley cemetery. His estate was sworn for probate at £15,537.
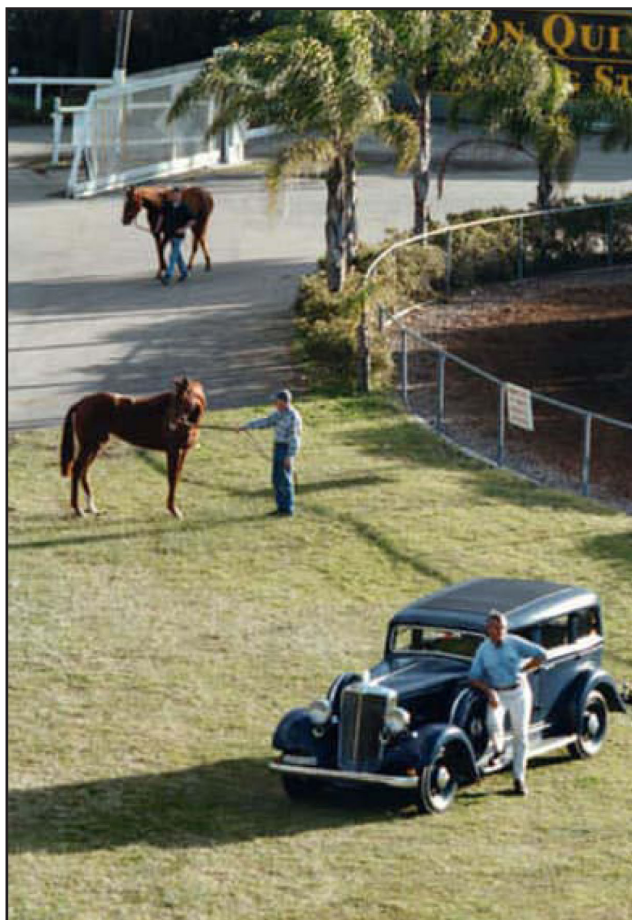
(Left: Beau Vite)

(Right: Peter Pan)

McGrath's exit spells the end of an era

By MAX PRESNELL

'The horse was galloping towards me. I could have either dived left or right or stayed where I was but I dived right, and it proved a bad decision."

This was all in a day's work for Frank McGrath, the last of the family dynasty at Randwick racecourse, harking back to 1869.

(Courteous: Frank McGrath and his family's circa-1930 Hupmobile at Randwick. His family's association with the track stretched back to 1869. Photo: Craig Golding)

They had taken off on a clear morning during . Usually McGrath, the attendant at the (1600) gap, catches and doesn't collide. Despite being in hospital for six weeks, his doesn't rate with the worst family spill.

(The error in above para was in the newsprint copy so I have left it as such rather than guess at what had happened.)

Recently McGrath, renowned for manners and courtesy where others boil under the pressure-cooker of conditioning thoroughbreds, retired after 33 years at Randwick, mostly with the Australian Jockey Club and, more recently, the Australian Turf Club.

With his departure to Bulli, a great racing family will no longer have a presence around headquarters and Doncaster Avenue, Kensington, where his grandfather, Frank, became established as one of Australia's turf greats.

It could have ended in 1885.

''My grandfather was an apprentice at the time, and had a bad fall from Prince Imperial in the Caulfield Cup," Frank recalled. ''Half the field came down, and a special train had to be sent from Melbourne City to pick up the injured jockeys - one at least was killed. Grandfather was in a coma for a month but recovered enough to ride the Epsom winner a year later."

He went on to train Peter Pan, winner of the Melbourne Cups in 1932 and 1934, and regarded as the equal of Phar Lap. He also prepared Prince Foote, (1909 Melbourne Cup), Amounis (two Epsoms and a Caulfield Cup), Denis Boy (The Metropolitan and Caulfield Cup), Geebung (Epsom) and Beau Vite (two Cox Plates and The Metropolitan). Also, the US-bred Hupmobile cannot be overlooked. The story compares with Peter Pan. Certainly, the ''iron horse" is some stayer.

''When Peter Pan won his first Cup grandfather looked at finances and said, 'Everybody else is getting a car, we might as well.'

''He took my father [another Frank, known as 'Lofty' around Kensington] into town by tram on his way

to the Buick agency. Walking down Elizabeth Street, my grandfather walked past somebody he knew who recommended the Hupmobile. We had to wait a couple of months for a new shipment, and when the boat arrived my father took delivery and got his licence on the very same day.”

One of the more fashionable vehicles of the era, the Hupmobile cost £950. ''We still have the receipt,” McGrath jnr said. ''For the same amount we could have got three Chevrolets or three Fords.

''Grandfather never drove; my father was the only one to drive it … until the war, when he went overseas with the army.”

Around Kensington, the Hupmobile, with Lofty in the saddle, was legendary.

In 1966 Lofty, who prepared On Line to take out the 1959 Sydney Cup, put the family car on the transfer list, but later his son, the present Frank, brought it back to the family stable.

Given a guest drive around Centennial Park you really appreciated the purr and feel of 1930s horsepower, but the call of Hupmobile and Randwick were always compelling to McGrath.

Before his return, he studied law and became a solicitor.

''Thirty-odd years ago I saw the light and moved back,” he said.

The mile gap was his territory, often with the barometer very low indeed. He maintained the traffic flow to and from the training circuits. At the end of the session markers had to be replaced, fencing repaired, everything spick and span for the next morning.

''One away,” often rang out. Monday was a bad morning for bolters. With one notable exception, Frank would take the situation in hand. ''This big chestnut horse came barrelling back in the pitch dark,” McGrath said. ''I caught it and put it in the tie-up stalls. I rang Mick Stanley and said, ‘I don’t know how the rider is but I’ve just caught Noble Comment [a Victorian].’

''Mick replied, ‘You’re f---ing kidding. You wouldn’t know Noble Comment.’ But he had been at the mile when George Hanlon would stable with Pat Murray for a campaign or two. Still Noble Comment had just been transferred to J.B. Cummings who enters from the half-mile. Being in the dark you’d think Noble Comment would have got lost, be impossible for horses to have a homing instinct, yet he remembered the happy times at the mile … ''
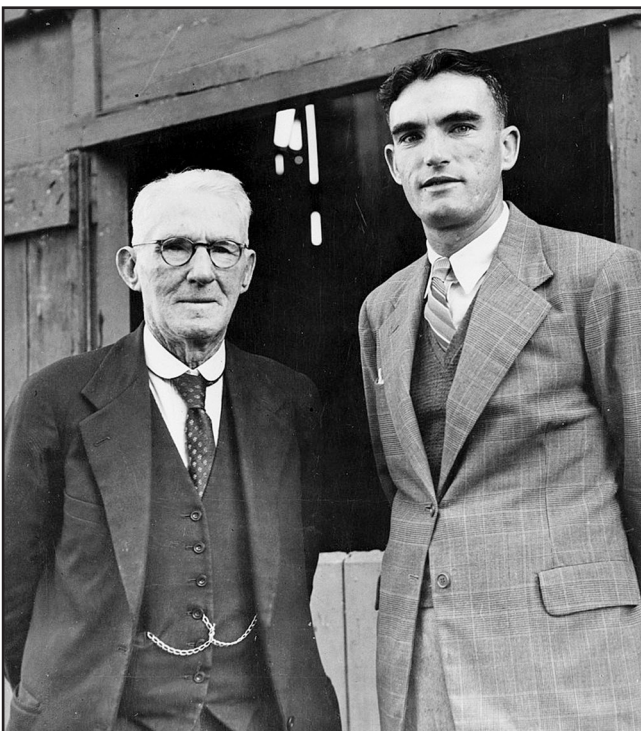
Many track employees run their pitch like a sergeant-major but not McGrath. ''With very few exceptions the co-operation between trainers, jockeys and riders made winter mornings much easier,” McGrath said.

The McGraths have departed and the Hupmobile, too, is on the transfer list again.

*(Frank McGrath, snr, and
Frank McGrath, jnr)*