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## Intro Music

Hello and welcome to Grand Final history, for a special supplementary episode on the Father of Football, Henry Colden Antil Harris, better known as Colden or for close friends Coley. Mr Harris died in 1929 aged 92, I covered this in episode 32 but, given his significant role in the development of Australian football, he deserved a separate episode.

We will explore his childhood, the move to Melbourne and his professional, personal and athletic life. We will also cover the early history of football and the foundational role played by his cousin, and also brother in law, Tom Wills and the subsequent recognition that was granted to Colden Harrison, a recognition that may have faded in recent years as Tom Wills profile has risen.

His life and family bridged the early convict settlement era through to the establishment of Melbourne as a major city, federation and the introduction of modern technologies such as telephones, radio and aircraft. And, as we will see, he fostered the development of Australian football as a game, as an entertainment for spectators and set the foundations for the extraordinary enterprise that the AFL has become.

Colden Harrison was born in 1836 at the pastoral property Jarvisfield in Picton NSW. Jarvisfield was owned by Colden Harrison's uncle Henry Colden Antil who had arrived in NSW as the aide-de-camp to Governor Lachlan Macquarie in 1809. Maquarrie had been sent out to the young NSW convict colony to fix up many problems including the notorious Rum Rebellion.

The property is now a golf course but it is a good example of how recent white settlement is in Australia. There may still be people alive today, who as children might have met Colden Harrison before he died in 1929 and yet his uncle was a key part of the administration of the very early years of the NSW Colony.

Colden Harrison's father decided to take up land in Port Phillip in 1837, while it was still a part of NSW. He spent three months travelling overland with his wife and one year old Colden, along with sheep and cattle. They eventually settled on the Plenty River on land now occupied by the Yan Yean reservoir. Here Colden recalled he lived a bush life, fishing for blackfish, yabbies and eels and allegedly even had an encounter or two with Bushrangers.

Less romantic histories tell of a property that was too small to be profitable, lost stock and a father who accidentally shot himself in the arm, leaving a permanent injury. Hard times.

At 14 Colden was in Melbourne, boarding at the Diocesan Grammar School, a forerunner of Melbourne Grammar. The pattern of senior football administrators coming from some of Melbourne's private schools has a long history.

In the early 1850s his father took him to the goldfields where they lived in a tent and tried for their fortune. After three months they had made about £100. While his Father got caught up in political activities on the diggings Colden found himself hungry and struggling to sleep in a tent on flea infested blankets. In the second half of 1853 he made his way back to Melbourne. A town that was experiencing boom times as the gold rush saw massive increases in population. The streets may have been wide but they were yet to be paved, drainage and sewerage was primitive and people were looking for accommodation wherever it could be found.

Then aged 17 he entered the Victorian Colony's Customs department as a Tidal Officer with his office in Williamstown. A Tidal Officer duties included boarding ships as they arrived, assessing the value of their cargo and imposing the appropriate import duties.

He seems to have done well and in 1860, after seven years in Williamstown he was transferred to Geelong for a year

He married Emily Wills, Tom's sister and his cousin in 1864 when he was 28. Emily was of independent means and between his successful public service career and her own means they were able to live a comfortable life and Colden was able to pursue his amateur sporting interests in his leisure time. Sporting interests that would bring him fame and recognition. He was Victoria's amateur athletic champion for nine years defeating all comers in 100 and 440 yards as well as hurdles and steeplechase.

In 1888 when he was 52 he transferred to the Victorian Titles Office and eventually became the Registrar of Titles, that is he was responsible for managing land titles in Victoria until his retirement in 1900 aged 64.

It was a successful professional career and, given the role in Land Titles you might be interested to see the layout of his large mansion home in Walpole Street Kew. The property was subdivided after his death but the State Library of Victoria has Board of Works maps for many old properties and these show a large home with croquet lawn, tennis court and fish ponds. A copy is available on the [grandfinalhistory.au](http://grandfinalhistory.au) website.

So how did he become the Father Of Football? It starts with his cousin Tom Wills.

Tom Wills was already known in the colony of Victoria for his cricketing feats when he published his famous letter calling for a game of football to keep cricketers fit in July 1858.

On the 31<sup>st</sup> of July 1858 a game of football, of sorts, was played. But with no clearly understood rules and the players having a range of experience and expectations it had very little resemblance to the game we know today, but the seed had been planted and football in Melbourne, however it be defined, was getting people's attention.

Perhaps the timing was right, the city was young, the population growing with people clearly open to new ideas, the fact they had moved to Melbourne indicated they were open to opportunity. And with the increased prosperity of the times there was increased leisure time for playing sport or being a spectator.

In May 1859, not quite a year after that first scrappy game Tom Wills and three of his colleagues met in the Parade Hotel, just over the road from the MCG. There had been more attempts to play a game of football but it was agreed that some commonly understood rules were required.

Over a few drinks they defined and documented the first set of agreed rules for Australian Football as a unique game. The need was clear, confusion about rules was leading to disputes, fights and even broken limbs.

The first laws of the game as defined by Tom Wills, James Thompson William Hammersly and Thomas Smith only had 10 rules. A player of the time later described them as “simple and concise, easy to remember and free of all those peculiarities which render the rules of various schools in England so difficult to remember.”

By way of comparison Association Football, or soccer as it is often called, did not define their rules until 1863, four years after the 10 laws of Australian football were set down in the Parade hotel.

A critical, fundamental point agreed by the founders was to avoid an offside rule, for simplicity and to allow the ball to be kicked forward to players up-field.

And to be clear, Colden Harris was not involved in these original laws of the game.

So, there were simple, easy to remember rules but there was still no organised competition, clubs would form, challenge each other to games and players could play for different clubs as their availability and inclination suited and some clubs dissolved as quickly as they formed. Games were played on paddocks and definitely not the sacred cricket grounds. But it was popular both with players and spectators.

Tom Wills was an elite sportsman, renowned for both his football and cricket abilities, even if he could be challenging person to deal with. He developed innovative tactics. Rather than massing all the players around the ball as was common, he got his team mates to space themselves out along the ground and with fast kicks they were able to move the ball rapidly up the field in a manner that caused amazement.

By the early 1860's Colden Harrison was starting to make a name for himself for his football and running exploits. Now working in the city, rather than in Williamstown, he became Captain of a Richmond football team. (Not the Richmond club that would join the VFA and then the VFL, this was one of those early teams that came and went). He succeeded Tom Wills as captain of Melbourne and when his work in the Customs office relocated him to Geelong in 1862 he became captain of Geelong returning to work in Melbourne in 1863 where he once again became captain of the Melbourne Football club.

Colden's football talents were recognised, voted as "Champion of the Colony" five times by the local press. He could drop kick a goal from 50 yards, in a time where balls were heavier and more difficult to handle than modern footballs.

As the 1860s progressed and Melbourne continued to grow, the popularity of the game was also increasing, new clubs were forming both in Melbourne and country centres. Crowds were often measured in thousands and many women would also attend games.

But seven years after the famous 1859 10 Rules, drafted by Tom Wills and his colleagues, it was clear the game's regulations needed clarification. Players had started running the entire length of the ground with the ball, so the Melbourne Rules, as they were called at the time, needed some work.

In 1866 Harrison was recognised as a leader for his skills in the game, his captaincy of the Melbourne Football club and his network of friends, former team mates or schoolmates now at clubs all across the city and suburbs.

Delegates from four leading clubs (Melbourne, South Yarra, Royal Park and Carlton) met to review the rules. The 30 year old Harrison had been asked to draft a revised set of rules and to chair this committee. This meeting was held at the Freemasons hotel. Pubs and football have a long, intertwined history. Harrison used his experience and talents in communication and negotiation to bring a consensus, even if it meant he gave up a personal advantage. Colden's well known speed had helped him run with the ball, gaining ground in many games, but this was going to change.

Some of the fundamental elements of the game that we know today were established. Bouncing the ball, or touching the ground every "five to six yards" was required, bumping and tackling were allowed but hacking of the shins was still banned. Goal umpires were introduced although still no central umpire. Free kicks were decided by team captains.

Now there were 12 Rules. The Amateur Athletics Club printed copies of the newly revised rules and these could be purchased from Colden for 11 shillings per thousand copies. The rules were soon adopted by all clubs around Melbourne and would also be taken up by clubs in regional areas around Victoria. They helped create an attractive game, rather than a heavy mass of bodies around a ball, in football games using these rules, a player could move quickly, pass to players further up the ground and yet a fair tackle could swing the momentum. The game became even more popular.

In 1870 there were some who questioned Harrison's playing style. One letter to the Australasian claimed he had injured a man by deliberately jumping on him while he was down. Harrison would defend himself in the press as vigorously as he did on the field. He wrote to the same paper saying "The Melbourne men have always played a straight forward and manly game ... Football is essentially a rough game all the world over and it is not suitable for men poodles and milksops". Not sure that would help as a defence at the tribunal in modern times.

His last season as a player was 1871. Melbourne was playing Carlton at the Albert Park oval to see who would win the Challenge Cup. There was no time limit and no change of ends, the winner was the team that scored two goals first. Harrison lost the toss and Melbourne had to kick into a gale, despite valiant defence and even when the wind eventually calmed down, it was Carlton that scored two goals to take the prize.

Harrison went home to bed, feeling every one of his 35 years, it took him a month to recover. His playing days were over but he would continue to be heavily involved in the administration of the game, initially on the committee of the Melbourne Football club.

In 1877 Football in Adelaide was experiencing the common challenges of clubs playing under different rules and different interpretations of what football was. Addressing the challenge was David Twopenny, a young man, born in England, a childhood in Adelaide, returned back to England for his schooling and he had also spent time in Perth, Melbourne and New Zealand. Yet he was still only 19 when he managed to get the local clubs to form the South Australian Football Association and adopt the Victorian Rules as supplied by Colden Harris.

This was a catalyst for the leading four clubs in Melbourne to form a new organisation to give structure to this popular sport. On the 7<sup>th</sup> of May 1877, in Olivers Cafe, Collins St the Victorian Football Association was born. For once, a key moment in football history not in a pub.

Nineteen years after Tom Will's wrote that letter and 11 years after Colden had revised and standardised the rules and six years since he had last played the game, the VFA was established to coordinate the essentials of football.

The VFA's inaugural president was William Clarke, a powerful landowner and rich grazier. Wealthy football administrators have been a common theme from the start of the game's history. There were two vice presidents one of which was Colden Harrison. The VFA provided an over arching administrative structure to resolve disputes between clubs, adjudicate on rules, arrange inter-colonial games and select Victorian teams. And, where necessary, discipline players. Initially clubs still arranged their own games but programming the season fixture soon became a VFA function too.

Six years later, In 1883 Harrison chaired the first inter colonial conference designed to support uniform rules and coordinate inter-colonial games.

Games moved to enclosed cricket grounds from the late 1870's, despite one MCC member complaining that "It is only a money grubbing scheme to play on an enclosed ground so that a charge for admission can be made". But with 33,000 people watching South Melbourne defeat Carlton in 1890 on the MCG, the cricket clubs were more than happy to accept the revenue from admission.

The move away from the paddocks of Royal Park and the tree interrupted, gravel fields outside the MCG onto the enclosed cricket grounds saw the playing field transform from a rectangle to the oval we know today. As well as the benefit of charging admission, cricket ovals had fences around the ground, these stopped the hazardous practice of spectators moving onto the playing field to get a better view of the game.

Victoria experienced a property bust, bank closures and a depression in the late 1890s generating significant financial pressures in homes and businesses and this was felt in football clubs too. There was an unintended benefit in the spread of football to other states, in particular Kalgoorlie in WA, as men left Melbourne looking for work or their fortune on the Goldfields, taking the Victorian game with them.

The larger, more financially secure football clubs were frustrated with the VFA, claiming, amongst other things, they were providing too much support for the smaller less secure clubs and this led to the formation of the Victorian Football League in 1897. Harrison was a delegate from the Melbourne Football Club and one of the key figures setting up the new competition.

By 1905 the VFL had established itself as the leading football league in the country and it was pivotal in organising the conference to establish the Australasian Football Council to ensure uniform rules for the game, coordinate interstate games and the jubilee celebrations and future carnivals and to promote the code, especially in the reluctant northern states. Colden was the chair of the conference, lending his dignity and long history in the game to the proceedings. At this meeting he was elected a life member of the Australasian Football Council for "special services rendered to Australian Football".

In 1908 the Football Jubilee with representative teams from every state and New Zealand celebrated 50 years of Australian Football. 50 Years since Tom Wills had written a letter to the paper and set up that initial scratch match on the grounds outside the MCG.

While at the 50 Year Jubilee the Australasian Football Council held a meeting. One of their first agenda items was to formally declare Colden Harrison the Father of Football, to recognise his role as a leading player in the early years and a pivotal administrator, helping to establish rules of the game and found the VFA as well as the VFL. In some respects it was also a recognition that he was one of the few early pioneers of the game still alive.

Despite the title, Colden Harrison, always made it clear he did not invent the game. In an article published in 1911 He gave credit to Tom Wills for suggesting that football should be introduced to Melbourne. He made it clear that Wills advised that they should not play football as it was at Rugby School because it was unsuitable for grown men but, rather, to work out a game of our own.

But poor Tom Wills did not have a long nor happy life. Despite his unrivalled sporting prowess, his personal and business life were troubled, to say the least. After his return to Melbourne in 1856 he was articled to a Collingwood Solicitor but he never practised as a Lawyer. The focus and inspiration he demonstrated on the playing field did not flow into his personal life.

Then came the tragic move to Queensland, with his father to establish a property at Cullinlaringo about half way between Gladstone and Longreach. While Tom was away getting supplies his father and 18 other members of the party were massacred by a group of Gariyi men, the local indigenous people. It was one of the largest massacres of white settlers by indigenous people in Australia. The attack was reprisal for the unjustified murder by one of the Gayiri men by Wills neighbour, Jesse Gregson, after a mistaken accusation of cattle theft.

The murder of his father and companions on what was supposed to be the start of a new chapter in his life would be reason enough to trouble Tom Wills in later years but recent research has uncovered an even darker element of the story. There is an article published in Chicago in 1895 capturing the recollections of an old timer's pioneering days in Queensland. This has some compelling evidence, including detailed and specific comments implying Tom Wills took part in the revenge attack on the Gayiri, one of the most brutal punitive expeditions in frontier history. It is a difficult article to read, with explicit racist content and many inaccuracies in the recollections have been noted. Yet, there are specific details, such as Wills's outrage at the theft of his treasured I Zingari cricket jacket, a memento of his time with the glamorous English amateur cricket club. A copy of the article can be found on the [grandfinalhistory.au](http://grandfinalhistory.au) website page for this episode but be prepared for a confronting, disturbing read if you look it up.

Tom Wills would return to Victoria and was clearly damaged by the experience. He still maintained good relations with local indigenous people, coaching a team of aboriginals from Western Victoria who played a game on the MCG on Boxing day in 1866. This team would later travel to England, the first touring Australian team in 1868 but Wills would not be with them. His erratic behaviour and excessive drinking was catching up with him.

In May 1880, just 22 years after that now famous first football game, despite being under observation because of his own threats to himself, in the grip of delirium tremens brought on by suddenly stopping drinking after one last bout, it is thought he had run out of money to buy alcohol, while suffering paranoid delusions he managed to stab himself in the heart with a pair of scissors. Dead at just 44, a sad, tragic end to a man who had shone so brightly in the Melbourne sporting landscape.

And with so many scandals, the drinking, the erratic behaviour, the bad debts, a common law wife and suicide, establishment Melbourne at the start of a new century was not going to elevate Tom Wills to a high profile in the new game's history when it could bestow the honour on a respectable, sober, mature, successful sportsman and administrator.

And Colden's recognition was not without merit as we have discussed in this episode. As late as 1926, when Harris was 90 years old, a journalist who saw him at the MCG wrote "every groundsman, and official and member is a friend of his. He loves to loiter in the dressing rooms, where there is the reek of training oil and perspiration. It is the spell of powder to a warhorse. Before the game starts he has some advice to give to both sides. It is to tell them to play the game, and to remember that football is a game."

1926 was also special for Colden as his beloved Melbourne Football Club won the premiership that year, the second in their time in the VFL. Of course he was found joining in the celebrations in the change rooms after the game. The team he had captained on the gravel fields outside the MCG when the game was young, with rules he helped define, had triumphed in front of 60,000 people.

In 1927 another carnival was held in Melbourne, though New Zealand had long ago dropped out of contention, every Australian State was represented. During the festivities, perhaps reflecting on the fact that in Melbourne alone, attendance over a VFL season would exceed 2 million people, the Chairman of the Australian Football Council, Alfred Moffat of Western Australia, said Mr Harrison and his colleagues "had builded better than

they knew”

Outside of football and his professional career Colden Harrison was a physically active man engaged in running, cricket, rowing, boxing and gymnastics. He would spend Christmas holidays on the Yarra with his brother, rowing a small boat, fishing and camping. Perhaps recalling their childhood on the Plenty river or goldfields.

In 1896, when he was 63, he surprised all by riding a push bike from Melbourne to Sydney in the February heat, on roads that were not sealed he averaged about 100km a day. He made it to Sydney in time to watch a test match between Australia and England, feeling fit and having lost about 3.5 kg.

On family matters Colden and Emily would have experienced joy but also much sadness. They had ten children but five died before the age of four. One son, Norman, became an architect but died of dysentery aged 25. Of the four surviving daughters two married and two remained at home. Adding to the loss within the family his Grandson, died suddenly aged four. Yet Colden seemed indestructible, even surviving a fall from a tram when he was 87. While he may have been the Father of Football, with the loss of so many children and only grandchild, Colden left no direct descendants to carry on his heritage.

Colden Harrison was was 92 when he died. He was buried at Boorondara cemetery in Kew with representatives from the league, clubs and interstate competitions. The VFL supplied a wreath in the shape of a football made of violets. The New League Headquarters on the corner of Spring and Little Collins Street was named Harrison House but this connection was lost when the VFL moved to new headquarters in Jolimont rd, East Melbourne in 1972. Harrison House at 61 Spring St was sold and demolished in the 1980s

A grandstand built at the MCG 1908 was also named for Harrison but that was demolished in 1936 to make way for the Southern Stand

His home in Kew, Mologlo was sold, demolished and subdivided in the 1930s.

So now Henry Colden Harrison is remembered in the Football History books and the occasional podcast but the game he helped nurture is the most fitting memorial to the man

Join me for the next episode when we return to the usual format and look at Season 1930

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## Resources

1. Immortals, Football People and the Evolution of Australian Rules (Lionel Frost)
2. Australia's Game The History of Australian Football (Nicholson, Stewart, Moore, Hess)
3. Up Where Cazaly? The Great Australian Game. (Sandercock and Turner)
4. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-09-18/suggests-afl-pioneer-tom-wills-participated-indigenous-massacres/100463708>
5. Old days in Australia Chicago tribune 27 Jan 1895
6. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tom\\_Wills](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tom_Wills)
7. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H.\\_C.\\_A.\\_Harrison](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H._C._A._Harrison)
8. <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/204146435>
9. <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/4034734>
10. Kew Historical Society Newsletter **No. 113 DECEMBER 2015**