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A Country Builder: E.A. Schuller (1868–1924)

Anne-Maree Whitaker

Abstract: Engelbert Schuller was a French-born building contractor in the Riverina district of Australia in the late 19th and early 20th century. He constructed buildings which would become regarded as part of his adopted country's patrimony, including the first 20th-century-style building to attract the support of the New South Wales National Trust. The heritage-listed Nowra Showground pavilion and Nangunia at Berrigan are still standing, but perhaps his best-known project was Valetta in Albury which was demolished in 1970 after a concerted campaign to save it. His widow and children kept alive the memories of his life and career and passed them on to later generations. With the aid of digitised newspapers in the 21st century the scraps of family legend could be pieced back together to create a biography of this country builder.

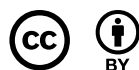
Introduction

This article examines the career of a country builder, Engelbert Schuller, who worked in the Australian states of Victoria and New South Wales (NSW) at the turn of the 20th century. Until recently such an ordinary person would leave little trace in the official records beyond birth, marriage, death and immigration. There are also family recollections about their lives and times, which commonly are impossible to verify. The methodology for this study combines two elements: memories handed down through the family, and digitised regional and country newspapers. In doing so it seeks to meet the challenge: 'Can the family recollections of Englebert Schuller's building career be evaluated through the print media of country towns in Australia?'

Family recollections – a critical evaluation

There are many cautionary tales about the unreliability of 'family legends'. Evan Best, examining his family's tales of 'valiant deeds and armigerous gentry', decided that the claims were based on assumptions rather than fact.¹ On a more encouraging note Lindsay Swadling, after shining a light on his family tradition of descent from a Governor's aide-de-camp who turned out to be a mere policeman, concluded: 'such stories should not be discarded without investigation—there may be more than a grain of truth in them.'²

Richard Hite, in his book *Sustainable Genealogy: Separating Fact from Fiction in Family Legends*, advises researchers to interrogate family traditions by examining whether the informant could have known the people described.³ In this case the builder, Engelbert Schuller, died in 1924 at the age of 56, and the youngest of his eight children died in 2014 at the age of 95. Most of the events his children 'recalled' actually took place before they were born, so were clearly 'family legends' instilled in them by their widowed mother who survived until 1942.^{4,5} As these snippets of family tradition have been passed on over many decades and on multiple occasions, it is not possible to pin them down to a single conversation or informant.



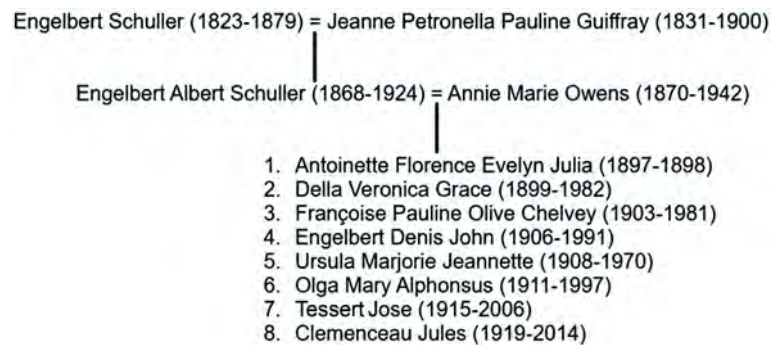


Figure 1. Schuller family tree.

In a later article Hite laid out the methodology for investigating family legends:

1. Assess what you know.
2. Identify records that could prove or disprove the story.
3. Dig into records.
4. Make a determination.⁶

The relevant records in this case comprise country newspapers, with their eclectic mix of community news and advertising. Australia is fortunate to have an extensive range of digitised newspapers available free over the internet via the National Library's database Trove (in 2025 the database included over 1800 newspapers and 26 million pages).⁷ Despite the imperfections of OCR, this collection provides a wide range of information on individuals and communities which is well recognised as an important resource for historians.^{8,9} The articles which can be traced not only shed light on Schuller's life and work, but also help in many cases to confirm the family legends passed down to his children and grandchildren.

While digitised newspapers have been readily embraced by family and other historians, some notes of caution have also been sounded. One of the pitfalls identified by historians such as Sarah Roddy and Tim Hitchcock is the tendency to 'cherry-pick' information without examining its context.¹⁰ The ease of keyword searching for a name or topic can lead the unwary to accumulate data without undertaking immersive reading to assess its significance; a process which would have occurred naturally for researchers using hard copy or microfilmed newspapers before the advent of digitisation. In this study the existence of family traditions provides a check on the tendency to merely collect copious mentions of Schuller and his building projects, and focus on the role which events played in his life and career.

Engelbert Schuller's Beginnings

Engelbert Albert Schuller was born on 28 May 1868 in Lyons, France. His father, also Engelbert, was a tailor and his mother a dressmaker.¹¹ Engelbert (aged 12) and his eldest sister Pauline (aged 29) arrived in Sydney on the *Norval* in 1880.¹² His widowed mother and four siblings followed later the same year.¹³ Engelbert completed school in Sydney and trained as a carpenter, possibly with his brother-in-law's building and architectural firm Douzans Brothers. His family believed he built a staircase at St Joseph's College, Hunters Hill, Sydney; if so, this is likely to have been during his apprenticeship at the time when the college was under construction.

Much of Engelbert Schuller's career as a country builder occurred in the Riverina district of New South Wales, which lies between the Murrumbidgee and Murray Rivers. Its southern boundary is the Murray River which forms the border between New South Wales and Victoria. The region relates more closely to Victoria and its capital city, Melbourne, due to proximity and transport routes. The major border city, Albury, is 325 kilometres from Melbourne but 550 kilometres from Sydney. The Riverina is an agricultural district; many of its landholders originated from Victoria, and the Riverina 'became the fattening ground for Victorian meat and the outlet for squatting enterprise'.¹⁴

Engelbert Schuller's first solo job was the new lock-up in the NSW town of Yass in 1890 for a price of £1100.¹⁵ In 1891 he moved to Melbourne, where he married Annie Marie Owens on 11 January 1896 in the Free Christian Church, 422 Queen Street.¹⁶ The church was attached to a matrimonial agency which may have introduced them.¹⁷ At the time of their marriage his address was given as Abbotsford in Melbourne's inner north, and hers as South Yan Yean, 34 kilometres north of the city. The following year saw them in Deniliquin (NSW), where their eldest child was born in March 1897.¹⁸ Nothing definite is known of Schuller's work in Deniliquin, although one newspaper reported in 1896 that three schools were being built in the district.¹⁹

The first success in matching a family tradition to a newspaper entry was achieved with the assistance of a copy of a note dated 1897 in the archives of the NSW National Trust. The architect Beverley Ussher recommended Schuller for a forthcoming job and stated that: 'The lowest tenderer has just completed a house for me in New South Wales near Swan Hill and is a very satisfactory and honourable man to deal with'.²⁰ The family stated that he 'built something near Swan Hill' but the addition of the architect's name enabled a more focused search in the press which uncovered a tender notice placed by Ussher in 1897 for a homestead at Mellool station (pastoral property), 130 kilometres west of Deniliquin on the New South Wales side of the border opposite the Victorian town of Swan Hill.²¹

Ussher, who trained under Melbourne architect Alfred Dunn, was to feature again in Schuller's career. On completing his articles Ussher travelled to England, where he met Walter Richmond Butler who mixed in the arts and crafts and domestic revival circles centred on William Morris and Norman Shaw. In 1888, at Ussher's suggestion, Butler emigrated to Australia and the following year they formed the partnership of Butler and Ussher in Melbourne.²² The firm earned a solid reputation as a designer of modern homes in Melbourne's eastern suburbs such as Kew and Boroondara. While these were sometimes called 'Queen Anne', Ussher objected to this description; the preferred terminology for this dominant style of turn-of-the-century domestic architecture is now 'Federation villas'.²³

From Deniliquin, Schuller moved on in 1898 to Albury, a thriving border town which provided him with multiple projects over the next five years. The first was a residence for local doctor William Cleaver Woods, which saw Schuller continuing his collaboration with Ussher. The house, named Valetta, was in Swift Street next to Woods' private hospital. Schuller's quote was the lowest of ten and as noted above it was recommended by Ussher. Designed in the Federation style with multiple gables and a Marseilles-tiled roof, Valetta had 13 rooms for the residence and another seven for professional rooms including surgery and dispensary. One Melbourne newspaper described it as 'the finest private house in the town of Albury', declaring that 'this beautiful, unique home reflects credit not only upon Mr Beverley Ussher, the architect, Mr Schuller, the contractor, but also upon the popular doctor'.²⁴



Figure 2. Valetta, Albury.

Reference: Images. Photograph. Albury City Library. (c.1950) Valetta, Albury. www.librarymuseum@alburycity.nsw.gov.au: accessed 18 September 2025.

A more routine project for Schuller in the Albury district was a new school building at Wagra (now Wymah) around 50 kilometres east of Albury. The township featured one of the earliest ferry river crossings which conveyed both people and livestock. Optimistic locals considered that the settlement should 'lose no time in putting in a claim for the federal capital', the location for which was then under consideration. The brick school, built at a cost of £657, was 'a spacious and imposing structure, neatly finished, with due regard to ventilation, &c, which is up-to-

date and perfect'. The press report added: 'The work reflects much credit on the popular contractor (Mr. Schuler) who carried out everything without a hitch'.²⁵ The Wagra school is now Wymah museum.²⁶

A Priest and a Donation

One of the family legends concerned a Catholic priest announcing during Mass that the builder had made a substantial donation to the project he was working on. The amount quoted varied, of course, but the family characterised this as an ambush announcement, intended to embarrass the victim into making a donation he could not afford. Thanks to the newspaper research it was established that this event probably related to the Catholic church at Barnawartha, 27 kilometres west of Albury on the Victorian side of the border. The job was worth around £1,000, and it was awarded when the Schullers were expecting their second child within weeks. However at the laying of the foundation stone by the Bishop of Bendigo in August 1899, the parish priest announced that the contractor and his wife had donated 5 guineas each to the building fund.²⁷

For a young builder who started with £40 in capital, 10 guineas (10½ pounds) was an enormous sum.²⁸ The Schullers' child was born on 5 September and named Della.²⁹ She was always told she was named after a Catholic priest named Delaney, and the only priest in NSW and Victoria with this surname in the 1890s was Edward Delaney, the curate of Chiltern parish which included Barnawartha. Presumably he managed to negotiate some compromise over the supposed donation.

The Barnawartha Catholic church, a neat structure in red brick, is typical of churches of all denominations which dot the Australian countryside. Schuller contributed his fair share of them over his career, including the Wallendbeen Church of England, 20 kilometres north of Cootamundra, in 1902. It measured 32 feet by 20 feet and was designed for a congregation of 100 persons.³⁰ Another was the Church of England at Grong Grong, 23 kilometres east of Narrandera, which had a capacity of 150 and cost £474.³¹

In 1900 Schuller suffered a buggy accident which caused a compound fracture of the leg. He found himself under the medical care of Dr Cleaver Woods whose new Albury home he had built two years before.³² He recovered from this accident with one leg shorter than the other, causing him to wear an elevated shoe on one foot. After this setback he continued working on projects spread across the Riverina which resulted in some logistical problems travelling between sites. Materials which could not be procured locally were sent by train from Melbourne or Sydney and picked up by carriers for delivery to the job sites.

Hotels and Hospitals, Churches and Showgrounds

Schuller's next undertakings included the Ganmain Hotel for publican James Lynam at a cost of £1200, and a residence in Junee for John Boyce for £425.³³ Boyce was a train driver and alderman on Junee Municipal Council who obviously had aspirations to civic respectability, and his house at 20 Kemp Street reflected this status.³⁴ Press puffery described the 'well and faithfully built'³⁵ Ganmain Hotel as 'greatly admired by travellers as well as local residents, being an ornament to the township, and is universally characterised as the finest building on the line, between Junee and Narandera.'³⁶ The hotel was badly damaged by fire in 1908 and was rebuilt by a different contractor.³⁷

Another project in Junee was the new fever ward at Junee Cottage Hospital, at a price of £347. The foundation stone was laid in February 1902 and the brick building consisted of three large, well-ventilated and spacious wards, a small emergency ward, and nurses' room. The fever ward was designed to isolate those with infectious diseases such as typhoid from the main hospital.³⁸ It was opened by the Premier, John See, who arrived with a posse of MPs and 'made an exhaustive statement, dealing with the hospitals of the state, and referred to the generous assistance given them by the Government'. After the opening had been completed the Ministerial party took themselves to the races.³⁹

The church at Barnawartha was not the only tricky situation faced by Schuller in negotiating the tender process. One church commission was the new presbytery for St Patrick's Catholic church at Albury in 1901 which had a budget of £2,240. However due to an unrecorded reason the project did not proceed, and was completed several years later with a different architect and builder.⁴⁰ Indecision also arose over the construction of a house to provide rent-free accommodation to attract a doctor to the town of Walla Walla, 40 kilometres north of Albury, in 1899.⁴¹ Schuller's tender was accepted, but the committee then re-opened a debate about whether to build a 4-room brick house instead of a 7-room weatherboard house. They eventually decided on the larger house, in accordance with the specifications.⁴²

The contract for the Narrandera showground grandstand in 1901 produced another last-minute hitch. At the opening of the tenders it was discovered that the lowest was £700 with Schuller's just £5 higher. The architect, Ernest Rees Laver, stated that if the lowest tender was accepted he declined to undertake supervision of the work, recommending a clerk of works be appointed in his stead. The committee decided to ask Schuller to drop his tender by £5, and a revised tender was drawn up on the night to meet the request.⁴³ This was the start of Schuller's

long association with Laver, who had trained in the Victorian Public Works Department and practised in Melbourne before moving to Narrandera in 1893.⁴⁴

The Narrandera grandstand was designed to seat 500 spectators, and was completed in time for the district's show in August 1901. The pavilion was an instant success, with one commentator boasting that 'it is considered the handsomest structure of its kind in any country town in the State.'⁴⁵ The *Australian Town and Country Journal* agreed that it was 'one of the finest buildings of its character on any showground in the State'.⁴⁶

While continuing to be based in Albury, Schuller's jobs ranged across the Riverina. In 1902 he travelled 220 kilometres north to Cootamundra, where he carried out repairs and painting to the municipal buildings under the direction of E.R. Laver.⁴⁷ This type of job was routine but all part of the regular work for country architects and builders. Another bread-and-butter job in 1903 took him to Tumbarumba, 160 kilometres east of Albury. This time it was repairs and painting to the post office, a tender for £229 securing the contract.⁴⁸

A more substantial project with a high community profile took up the middle of 1903, when Schuller won the contract to build a new school at the Newtown Orphanage in Albury for a price of £265. Later known as St John's Orphanage, Thurgoona, the building was designed by 'honorary architect and clerk of works' Joseph Adams, a local builder.⁴⁹ The brick schoolroom measured 45 feet by 20 feet and 14 feet high. The interior had varnished Murray pine ceiling and wainscoting and the exterior was ornamented with Gothic roof, windows and buttresses. At the opening in August 1903 parish priest Father Daniel Griffin paid tribute to Adams for his voluntary services, and thanked Schuller for 'the fidelity with which he had carried out his contract', which was completed in under two months.⁵⁰

Before he embarked on his next project with Laver, Engelbert Schuller built his only known Sydney property in 1903/04. The two-storey brick home on a greenfield site at Rose Bay, in Sydney's eastern suburbs, was a commission for his aunt and uncle Pauline and Francis Tessert. Pauline accompanied Engelbert to Sydney in 1880, and in early 1903 he named his newly born daughter Françoise Pauline after them.⁵¹ The rendered brick house, which they grandly named Versailles, has a gabled hip roof with Marseilles tiles and decorative ridge cappings. There is a two-storey verandah to the northern façade with a terracotta tile roof, decorative carved timber posts and balustrade. The house abuts the property boundary on the eastern side where it has French-style wooden window shutters.⁵²

The Nowra Pavilion

While Schuller was living in Sydney, Laver alerted him to a call for tenders for a pavilion grandstand he had designed at the NSW south coast town of Nowra. Schuller's successful tender for £1100 was sent from 208 Sussex Street, the address of the Tesserts' International Hotel, and he relocated his family to Nowra for the next two years.⁵³ Before they even arrived the selection of a tenderer from out of town proved controversial. Laver's was one of two plans submitted for the new pavilion, the other being from local builder George Muller, who estimated he could complete his own design for £1178 but quoted £1300 for Laver's proposal. One member of the Agricultural Society committee said it was 'a crying shame for the committee to send the money to Sydney'. The president retorted that Schuller's tender was the lowest by nearly £200.⁵⁴



Figure 3. Nowra Showground Pavilion.

Reference: Images: Photograph. Shoalhaven City Council. (2025) Nowra Showground, Shoalhaven. (creative commons) Photographer unknown. www.gov.au/Community-and-culture/Community-facilities/Nowra-Showground/Pavilion-Exhibition-Hall: accessed 18 September 2025.

The tension over awarding the contract to out-of-towners seems to have continued, with mutterings about the sturdiness of the design. Laver addressed the complaints in his speech at the laying of the foundation stone, adding that:

“He would back his opinion, supported as it was by the highest authorities on architecture, against the opinion held by any country amateur architect. His recommendation was in accordance with recognised formula, and would bear looking into by any competent man. They would excuse him if he spoke a little warmly, but as a practical man he resented the criticism of bush authorities, of whom there a number in every country town.”⁵⁵

In the end the new pavilion was judged a resounding success. As well as providing a spacious exhibition hall with grandstand above, it had the latest architectural flourishes with a complex design of hips and gables. The grandstand roof is supported on simple posts with arched timber filigree decoration. Completed in time for the show in February 1905, the building is now listed on the Shoalhaven Local Environmental Plan and has been described by the National Trust as ‘one of the best pavilion grandstands in NSW’.⁵⁶ The Agricultural Society’s annual report recorded its public praise: ‘The architect (Mr E.R. Laver) and the contractor (Mr A. Schuler) completed the contract in a highly satisfactory manner.’⁵⁷

After Nowra, Laver and Schuller moved on to another joint project in the Riverina town of Jerilderie. The town of just under 1,000 people had a national claim to fame from bushranger Ned Kelly’s visit 27 years earlier, when the Kelly gang held up the Royal Mail Hotel and locked the police in their own cells before robbing the Bank of New South Wales. Now William Egan, the licensee of the Royal Mail, was building a new hotel confusingly named the Royal Hotel. Schuller won the contract for £2,500,⁵⁸ erecting a grand building with over 30 rooms including bars, dining rooms and accommodation: ‘a bold two-storey structure of brick, tastefully painted in tints, modernised with beautiful, coloured glass window decorations, carrying an 18 feet balcony all round it.’⁵⁹



Figure 4. Royal Hotel, Jerilderie.

Reference: Images: Photograph. (1920-1930) Colony Inn Hotel Jerilderie – ex Royal Hotel. card 2 side 2. Photographer unknown. Noel Butlin Archives Centre, Australian National University. <http://hdl.handle.net/1885/122262> Open Research Repository Library. Australian National University: accessed 18 September 2025. <https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/entities/anarchivesitem/63bd52f2-b213-4d05-927f-a009f06366c0>.

The Downfall

Following this success, in 1906 Schuller embarked on a couple of projects in the Berrigan district which were to be a watershed in his career. The family recalled that his downfall was caused by E.J. Gorman and Fr Vaughan. Specifically he had built a house for E.J. Gorman, who disputed the bill. There was a court case but Schuller was not paid, although the architect was paid with racehorses! Newspaper records produced the confirmatory details. The project was a homestead at Nangunia, Berrigan, for the local shire president Emmanuel James Gorman. Gorman was a third-generation Victorian, born in Avenel, who moved to Berrigan in 1888 as a stock and station agent and in 1898 purchased the 27,000-acre Nangunia station for £70,000.⁶⁰ He was involved in politics as a campaigner for the Hume Dam and an initiator of the Riverina New State Movement. He convened the conference at Corowa in 1893, which is now regarded as the start of the Federation movement. He also bred horses which won major races in Sydney and Melbourne.⁶¹

Schuller won the contract for the Nangunia homestead with a price of £2,250. The house was a mixture of Italianate design with Federation fittings and details, using materials sourced from Sydney and Melbourne as well as locally. Wunderlich ceilings and gold leaf came from Redfern, while timber and bronze finials came from Blackwattle Bay (both in Sydney); drainpipes, fire bricks, lead and iron roofing were procured from Melbourne. Like a 1900s version of 'Grand Designs' the extras mounted up until they added the infernal figure of £666 to the original tender.⁶² Schuller took on other jobs at the same time as Gorman's palatial homestead. One was a brick infants' school attached to the Tocumwal convent for Father Martin Vaughan, whose Berrigan parish covered the smaller town; another was a new vicarage for St Aidan's Church of England in Berrigan.^{63,64}

Schuller moved his family from Nowra to the Berrigan Hotel, where his elder son was born on 4 August 1906.⁶⁵ Work on Nangunia began in April, but at some stage the architect Louis Harrison parted ways with the project. Perhaps Gorman considered the plans were sufficient for him to complete the project with less qualified supervision. The State Heritage Inventory listing for Nangunia shows John North Kelly credited

as the architect rather than Harrison, who certainly prepared the original design and advertised for tenders.⁶⁶ Kelly was not an architect but a retired municipal engineer from Victoria; his unstated significance in the scenario is that he was E.J. Gorman's father-in-law.⁶⁷

Whether it was the constant changes or simply a matter of juggling too many jobs at once, Schuller was served a sequestration order in July 1907. It was filed by Kauri Timber Company in Sydney, his biggest creditor, which was owed £301. When all the claims were submitted his total liabilities were found to be £1170. Schuller claimed underpayment of £494 by Gorman and £271 by Father Vaughan, but these amounts were not forthcoming. As well as Nangunia the Tocumwal convent school also had extras not in the tender, including toilets, interior plastering and varnishing the ceiling. The contract price was £510 and the extras were another £116. The sequestration hearings had been remembered by the family as a 'court case', and newspaper advertisements inviting creditors to submit claims led to the bankruptcy records held in New South Wales State Records and Archives. The official payment on the estate was 4 9/16d. (four and nine-sixteenths of a penny) in the pound.⁶⁸

A New Beginning

The bankruptcy drew a line under the debts and enabled Schuller to reactivate his business. After spending the first 12 years of his marriage moving his family from job to job, he decided to establish a home base in Jerilderie. The town was located on the Hay–Tocumwal railway line, providing access on to Melbourne, and had a convent school for his growing family. His next project there was a 'very nice commodious private residence' at 9 Coreen Street for Percy Meillon, who acted as his solicitor during the bankruptcy proceedings. The local paper had nothing but praise: 'The way in which everything has been finished off reflects great credit on the contractor. The residence is one of the neatest and prettiest in the town.'⁶⁹



Figure 5. Nangunia, Berrigan.

Weekly Times Melbourne Australia. (2025) Photograph of Nangunia Station. Berrigan. *Weekly Times*. Photographer unknown. <https://www.weeklytimesnow.com.au/property/nangunia-station-berrigan/image-gallery/b9586d3bdf32e90e711c08243094fc2b>; accessed 18 September 2025.

Jerilderie boasted six hotels for its 1000 residents, due to its strategic location on the inland route between Melbourne and Brisbane (now the Newell Highway). Demand from travellers for accommodation meant the hotels were constantly upgrading and expanding their facilities. During 1908 Schuller built 'additions and vast improvements' to Mary Anne McCrabb's Courthouse Hotel.⁷⁰ In May 1909 it was the turn of Andy McInnes's Albion Hotel, with 'substantial brick additions' including a large dining room, a bar parlour and a private parlour. Schuller contracted to complete the extension before the annual show in July, which was another drawcard for the town.⁷¹

With the outbreak of war between Germany and Britain in 1914, Schuller applied for naturalisation. His application was witnessed by William Elliott JP, who as a young teacher held the bag open for the Kelly gang when they robbed the Bank of New South Wales in 1878.⁷² Schuller's

own children were not involved in the war but he lost two nephews on active service, Jules Schuller junior with the AIF and Albert Mamelin with the French Army's Bataillon mixte du Pacifique.⁷³

Schuller's fourth hotel project in Jerilderie saw him working with Allan McDonald, an architect based in Temora, but previously of Numurkah in Victoria where he designed the Numurkah Hotel and Savings Bank (both in 1910).⁷⁴ He designed a 2-storey extension for Con Curtin's Riverina Hotel in Jerilderie in 1914 which added 43 rooms. The brewers Tooth and Company records contain information and photographs on this hotel.⁷⁵ It is not clear if Schuller was involved in this project but he was certainly the builder of a further extension in 1917, also designed by McDonald, which involved another 14 rooms and used compressed wood fibre sheets known as 'beaverboard' instead of weatherboard for the ceilings and partitions.⁷⁶ The family's recollection was that he built a pub for Curtin, so it may have been the 1914 project.

There were plenty of small jobs to keep a builder busy in country areas. According to his younger son Clem, Schuller worked on projects at Clifford Downs station near Carrathool and Boonoke station near Conargo. Another such commission was the construction of a new woolshed at Yanko station, 30 kilometres north of Jerilderie. Their 42-stand woolshed burnt down in March 1923, just before crutching. Schuller undertook to complete the shed in time for the next shearing in August.⁷⁷ The woolshed was built of Murray pines, which although more brittle than hardwood, are much more resistant to white ants. They were harvested from the property using two 18-horse teams and wagons to cart the timber to the site.⁷⁸

This was his last known job, as Engelbert Schuller died in Jerilderie on 28 August 1924 of tuberculosis at the age of 56.⁷⁹ His family included three more daughters (Ursula, Olga and Jose) born in Jerilderie, and a younger son born in 1919 and named Clemenceau after the French Prime Minister who led his country out of the ruins of World War I.^{80,81,82,83} Schuller's 18-year-old older son took over the building business, but eventually moved on to Queensland where he worked as a contractor in Ipswich and Moura. Schuller's widow stayed in Jerilderie until her younger son finished high school, then followed her daughters to Sydney. After she died in 1942 her husband's remains were brought from Jerilderie to join her in South Head cemetery in Sydney's eastern suburbs.⁸⁴

The 'Opera House of domestic architecture'

And there the tale rested until one day in 1969, when a heritage campaigner in Albury entered a pharmacy with a petition to save the house Valetta, earmarked for demolition to build a new civic centre. Explaining that the architect was Beverley Ussher and the builder was Engelbert Schuller, the campaigner was surprised when the pharmacist commented: 'That's my father-in-law'. She was the wife of Clem Schuller, who had come to Albury as principal of the technical college. As well as the petition there was a campaign of letters to the press and public meetings organised by the Save Valetta Committee.⁸⁵

The NSW branch of the National Trust gave the building an interim classification of C, meaning it was 'a building of considerable interest, preservation of which should be encouraged'. Valetta was the first building of this type to be classified. It was felt this classification might be too low, and the NSW committee relied on the Victorian branch to inspect the house and make an accurate classification. The Victorian branch regretted that it could not classify the building as it was stylistically of the 20th century, but noted that it was 'the earliest known example of Queen Anne architecture in the particular style where roof form was integrated with the plan', and 'an early example of the use of Marseilles pattern terracotta tiles'. However, the Victorian branch of the Trust set up a sub-committee to establish a register of 20th-century buildings which would include Valetta.⁸⁶

Expert opinions were obtained from George Tibbits of the University of Melbourne and Professor Max Freeland of the University of New South Wales, who agreed on the importance of Valetta as an early example of the Melbourne style of 'Queen Anne' architecture. Tibbits explained that Ussher was one of a small group of 'radical young architects' who sought to overthrow the Italianate/cast iron style. The Australian style they envisaged was characterised by red bricks, Marseilles tiles, decorative timberwork and picturesque roof profiles.⁸⁷

Cedric Flower, chair of the NSW National Trust's historic buildings committee, flew to Albury for a day and pronounced the building to be 'the Opera House of domestic architecture', adding 'if it were pulled down people would say in 50 years' time, "if only we had realised"'.⁸⁸ In the end despite petitions and public meetings, Valetta was demolished in February 1970. A staircase, fireplace, windows and doors were salvaged from the house and are preserved at the Jindera Pioneer Museum 15 kilometres north of Albury.⁸⁹

Conclusion

There are now numerous online sources for those researching their family history in Australia (and many other countries). Immigration and convict records are held by the various state archives. Military service records provide a poignant link to the experiences of servicemen and women, with most World War I and many World War II files digitised by the National Archives of Australia. The Australian National University

website hosts the Australian Dictionary of Biography and its related sites Obituaries Australia, People Australia, Indigenous Australia, Women Australia and Labour Australia.⁹⁰

The reconstruction of Engelbert Schuller's life and career provides an interesting case study in examining the life of an ordinary citizen whose activities are recorded in country newspapers. These are now widely available through digitisation and the internet, enabling searches to be conducted and primary sources perused anywhere in the world, not just the remote country library. In addition to the newspapers, family recollections or 'legends' provided prompts to expand keyword searches beyond Schuller's surname to his protagonists such as E.J. Gorman and Father Vaughan, and to places where he lived and worked. In turn the research was led to other documentary sources including naturalisation records, heritage registers, bankruptcy files and the archives of the New South Wales National Trust.

Some claims, of course, could not be verified, but a great deal of the research did serve to confirm the Schuller family's recollections. This research methodology may not work for every family – an unusual surname certainly helps narrow the field – but it is surprising how many people leave a footprint in digitised newspapers. Deaths and weddings are obvious examples, but in addition there may be reports on school prizes, accidents and robberies, businesses, local sports teams and so on. These details add light and shade to ordinary lives which is not available through more standard records such as land titles, postal directories and maps.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anne-Maree Whitaker has a PhD from Macquarie University and is an independent historian based in Sydney. The author of 11 books and numerous articles, she is a fellow of the Royal Australian Historical Society and of the Royal Historical Society (U.K.). Engelbert Schuller was her grandfather.

Dr Anne-Maree Whitaker

nswhistorian@yahoo.com.au 