

Rebecca O'Brien (nee Porter)
(My grandmother)

Rebecca O'Brien was born in Derry, Northern Ireland, as Rebecca Porter.

She often told us that she did not know her birth date, and I quite believe that.

She came to Australia as a young single woman with other emigrants. None of her family accompanied her. She often told me that as her father took her to the ship to see her off he said to her "Well Becky, I hope there is something over there for you, there's nothing here." She never saw her family again.

Apparently she was one of the many assisted emigrants of those years.

She often told us that she was only 19 yrs then.

I wish I had listened more to what she had to say, or if I did listen, could remember what she told me.

I cannot say what her movements were on arrival in Australia. Registration records show that she married one William O'Brien at Blackall, Queensland, on 2nd January 1884. He was born in Toowoomba, Qld, and his occupation is shown as grocer.

They had four children:-

Mary Ellen (Nellie)

Eliza Jane (Jane)

William (Willie)

Annie (Annie)

Annie was my mother. She married George McNeil. She was born at

Muttaura, Qld, on 26 April 1891.

My grandmother gave her place of residence then as Bradley Creek, which is shown on today's maps as south of Muttaburra, and on the upper reaches of the Thomson River. She gave her age then as 26 yrs, but I doubt that is accurate.

Anyway, this puts her into Central Queensland.

As a boy and a youth I became aware, bit by bit, of the tragedy and terrible misfortune that had befallen her in her earlier years, and it was to this effect:

Her husband was employed at a coach horse-change (it could have been of Cobb & Co near (or at) Gunnedah Central Queensland. Their living conditions were primitive, being little more than a tent for the whole family, four children and the parents. Apparently they were on their own.

I can recall her telling me that as she awoke one day from an afternoon nap she found an aboriginal banning over her. He said "Where Billy" (her husband). She said "He just drown at river, be back soon." He left her then. Nothing serious, but an indication of the isolation.

There was a very heavy flood, no doubt from the Thomson & Cooper Creek systems (All the Rivers Run) and travelling was out of the question. They ran out of food, so finally my grand-father decided to walk out for some. Where?

It could have been to Gundah, or to one of the station homesteads.

He left on horseback and was never seen again!! It was presumed he had drowned.

My grandmother was left with the four small children, my mother who was a baby in arms, Willie, Jane & Nellie, then about 6 years old. In her plight she walked far for help, apparently for a couple of days, either into Gundah or to one of the homesteads. For a time she was in a state of mental collapse. Such was her plight, (it was 1891 not 1981) she had to relinquish custody of Jane & Nellie. She never saw them again until years later when she was an old woman, and they were married adults:

By some vagary of education she could read but not write.

In her stories to me I learnt that she ~~once~~ used to work on the station homesteads in the area south of Lengreach and Ilfracombe, also do shearers washing. In those days hands-out of food to one in need was the done thing.

She always had a good word for the shearers. They would help her erect (or pitch) her tent, cut wood, etc.

She would follow the sheds as they commenced their shearing, and this seems to have led her towards Ilfracombe. For schooling purposes anyway.

On one occasion during a heavy storm the ridge pole of her tent broke

and fell on her nose, fracturing it. Ever afterwards she was always afraid of falling, and as she put it "Going over on my nose. Can you blame her?"

My mother and Willie went to school in Ilfracombe so I tend to think they moved into Ilfracombe about 1895. Willie would then be about 6 yrs old. Here she carried on washing and cleaning work. She used to periodically clean the school and post office. Do hotel washing and ironing, and go out to the mail stations. My mother helped her, and she often said that as a girl of nine years she followed her mother around carrying the washing board under her arm.

As my mother and Willie grew older they contributed to her keeps. My mother told me that she once got work in Blackhall and she sent a sovereign home in an envelope - not packed in anything else. As she said "I hate how much sense I had".

Somewhere my grandmother acquired a small block of land, about 25 to 30 perches on Ilfracombe. On this she built (no doubt with some assistance) a "bower" shed. This consisted of four upright forked posts with cross pieces post to post to form a square. Across this square was laced hoop iron of the sort then used to compact wool bales. Across the hoop iron was laid bull rushes cut from those which then grew along the bore drain which

meandered from the town bower (These disappeared in later years). They ate under this, cooked on an open fire, and slept in a tent! My mother, too, often described this. How they managed as the two children grew older, I don't know. I knew that Wilfie went out doing station work at an early age, so that perhaps solved the problem of accommodation.

Later, my father and a builder built her a corrugated iron cottage on the block. When we returned to Ilfracombe in 1927 the old remains of the bower shed were still there

The cottage consisted of a bedroom, a "lounge", front & back verandahs, a detached kitchen connection to the rear verandah by a "landing". The latter was a common feature of the houses of that era.

The house and kitchen had a wood floor, but was completely unlined and unceiled, just bare corrugated iron - but it was the only and best home she ever ~~had~~ had, apart from the bush scene; if she had any better there.

With the advent of the pension she was able to get this and could relax a little:

Her troubles were not over. In 1916 Wilfie enlisted in the 1st A.I.F. However while awaiting in Brisbane he contracted a very heavy ~~attack~~ attack of a virulent ~~flu~~ flu of plague proportions and died.

My grandmother did not get down to see him before he died. She was on the way by train, bus was taken off at Grafton by one of the station staff who knew her. Word had been sent from Telfaircombe to Grafton by railway telegraph.

He lies buried in Leowong cemetery. At a lad of about 15 yrs I accompanied her to Brisbane to see his grave. The only time she did see it.

After my mother's marriage to George McNeil on 1st Oct 1913 at Barcaldine, he moved around Queensland to Oakley, Yeppoon, Barababas, Thargomindah, Mackay and finally back to Telfaircombe. She made visits to us in all these places, and she particularly enjoyed the seaside of Yeppoon. She loved to get up early in the morning and go for a walk along the beach accompanied by me. For as long as I knew her she was an early riser. 5.30 am was her norm.

I got to know her best when we returned to Telfaircombe in December 1927. **

I really perceived what a hard working woman she had been all her life, and indeed ~~was~~ a lonely one, having lost all her family, except my mother.

She was known to many as "Briney", also as Mrs O'Brien, but never Rebecca. It was not the age of the use of Christian names. She seldom complained. When asked "How are you?" The reply inevitably was "Ah! Good". Her Irish came through quite often. When nursing my baby sister she would croon "Tobias, va loo alay" over & over.

Whenever a Ball or special dance was held in the Hall alongside the Wells hot Hotel (in fact it was practically part of the Hotel) she used to sit in the kitchen of the Hotel to be ready to bring the water to the boil for the tea for the supper for the dance.

That was her involvement; she regarded it as a vital function in the night, and no one could or would deny her.

She was a firm believer in God. An Anglican. The Rector from Langridge used to come to Ilfracombe on Sunday once a month to celebrate Holy Communion. She was a regular attender. On the Saturday afternoon prior to that she would sweep out the Church, in fact quite often scrub it; dragging heavy seats around in the process. I helped her when I could, and I wondered however she did it on her own. Only once did I hear her receive thanks. This was when the Bishop of Rockhampton visited there and was told about, by the Lay Reader. ~~she~~ She received this quite calmly, as though she had done nothing.

Evening was held every Sunday by the Lay Reader, who was the Shire Clerk. This commenced at 7.30pm. The church was only a short distance from her home, but she always carried a kerosene lantern so that (as she put it) she wouldn't fall over a goat!! The goats used to lay

around on the streets to the side of the homes, and in her case in a vacant allotment alongside her home across which she walked to church.

In church the lantern was turned low and tucked under the seat in front of her.

I am reminded of an old picture showing Christ holding aloft a lantern. The title was "The light of the World".

If all the two of them come face to face one night I would not have been surprised.

She was the epitome of a grandmother. She took a delight in "sneaking" sixpence or a shilling to us children with a serious whispered caution not to tell "your mother" (In Irish Brogue).

The plural for "You" presents a problem, even today. She never used "Youse" but "You ones" rolled together as "You'ns"

She never and resume intimate contact with Nellie and Jane. They lived away in the South of New South Wales. Travel was difficult. They corresponded through my mother.

Jane became a nursing sister. She enlisted in the 1st A. I. F. and served in the middle east in ^{an} Army camp hospitals. She later conducted a small private hospital in Albury, and later married a hotel owner. No children.

Nellie married a farmer. They had two children, son and daughter.

The daughter Ellen, became a nursing sister, enlisted in World War 2. She lost her life in the retreat from Singapore, if I remember correctly in Bangka Strait.

My grandmother died in 1941. She had a heavy stroke in which she deteriorated. She died in the Brisbane Hospital.

She was a true battler, who never lost her faith through all, nor her feelings for those around her.

From Scripture it would well be said of her "Well done thou good and faithful servant".

My mother had five children. Two are dead. Nellie's two are dead.

There are 13 great grandchildren and 19 great great grandchildren.