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

Rebecca O'Brien was born in Monaghan, Northern Ireland, as Rebecca Porter.
She often tells us that she and her knew
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
recounts 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.
Apparantly she was one of the many assisted emigrants of those years.
She often tells us that she was only
19 yrs. old.
I wish I had listened more to what
she has to say, or if I did listen, could remember what she told me.
I cannot say what her movements
were on arrival in Australia. Records
measure that she married one
William O'Brien at Blackball, Queensland
on 2nd January 1884. He was born in
Canowaringa, QLD, and his occupation
is shown as groom.
They had four children:
- Mary Ellen (Billie)
- Eliza Jane (Jane)
- William (Willy)
- Annie (Annie)
Annie was my mother. She married
George McNeill. She was born at
Mittaburra, 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 Mittaburra, 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 as a coach horse change (it could have been of Cobb & Co near Granada, Central Queensland). Their living conditions were primitive, being little more than a tent for the whole family, four children among the parents. Apparently they were on their own.

I can recall her telling me that as she was out one day from an afternoon nap she found an aboriginal leaning over her. He said “White Billy” (her husband). She said “be just down at river, be back soon.” He left her there.

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 grandfathers decided to move out for some. W here?
It could have been to Gunyah, 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 made for Greendale for help, apparently for a couple of days, neither with Gunyah 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 couldn’t read but not write.

In her stories to me I learnt that she would used to work on the station homesteads in the area south of Longreach and Ilparambe, also on the shearer’s washing. In these days hands out of good 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 sheaers as they commenced their shearing, and this seems to have lead her towards Ilparambe. For shearing purposes anyway.

On one occasion during a heavy storm the ridge pole of her tent broke
and fell on her nose, fracturing it. Even afterwards she was always afraid of falling, and as she put it, "going over on my nose, can you blame her?"

My mother and I like went to school in Telfarrambe. So I tend to think they moved into Telfarrambe about 1895. Willie would then be about 6 yrs old. Here she carried on washing and cleaning work. She used personally clean the school and post office. Do hotel washing and ironing, and go out to the main station my mother helped here, 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 keep. My mother told me that she once got work in Blackall and she sent a sovereign home in an envelope—not packed in anything else. As she said, "That's how much sense I had."

Somehow my grandmother acquired a small block of land, about 25 to 30 acres in Telfarrambe. On this she built (no doubt with some assistance) a "bureau" shed. This consisted of four upright forked posts with cross pieces post to post to form a square. Across this square was laced heavy iron of the sort then used to compact wool bales. Across the hay Pearson was laid, hill rushes cut from those which then grew along the bore drain which
moseled from the town house (These disappeared in later years). They ate under this, cooked on an open fire, and slept in a tent. My mother, too, often described how they managed as the two children grew older. I don’t know. I knew that Albert went out doing station work at an early age, so that perhaps solved the problem of accommodation.

Later, my father and a fellow builder built a small iron cottage on the block. When we returned to Toowoomba in 1927, the old remains of the bowen shed were still there.

The cottage consisted of a bedroom, a "lounge", front and back verandahs, a detached kitchen connected 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 wooden floor, but was completely unlined and uncemented, just bare cementation - but it was the only one beat home the ever heard before, apart from the bush scene; if she said any better than.

With the advent of the pension she was able to get this and recondition a little bit better.

Her troubles were not over. In 1916, Albert enlisted in the 1st AIF. However, while awaiting in Brisbane he contracted a very heavy attack of a virulent "Spanish Flu" or plague proportions and died.
My grandmother did not get down to see him before he died. She was on the way by train but was taken off at Geneva by one of the station staff who knew her. Word had been sent from Ilfracombe to Geneva by railway telegram.

The body was buried in Teawong cemetery. As a lad of about 15 yrs I accompanied her to Brisbane to see his grave. She only time she ever saw it.

After my mother married to George McNicoll on 1st Oct 1913 at Barcaldine, he moved around Queensland to Oakley, Yeppoon, Baralaba, Roma, Mackay and finally back to Ilfracombe. She made visits to us in all these places, and ate particularly enjoyed the beaches of Yeppoon. She loved to get up early in the morning and go for a walk along the beach accompanied by me. Far as long as I knew she was an early riser. 5:30 am was her norm.

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

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

She was known to many as "Binnie", 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 "Johnnie rook a loo a lay" ever so ever
Whenever a Ball or special dance was held in the Hall alongside the Wellington 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 Fingrath used to come to Epsom on Sundays 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 wonder how she did it on her own. Only once and I heard her receive thanks. This was when the Bishop of Rochester visited there and was told about, by the Lay Reader. He received this with calmness, as though she had done nothing.

A service was held every Sunday by the Lay Reader, who was the Church Clerk. This commenced at 7.30pm. The Church was only a short distance from her home, but she always carried a kick-stone lantern so that (as she put it) she wouldn't fall over a goat!! The goats used to say
around in 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 tannum was turned down and tucked under the seat in front of her.

I am reminded of an old picture showing Christ holding a tannum. The title was "The Light of the World." I had 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 smoking a pipe and whistling to 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" talked together as "you're".

She never assumed 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 army camps hospitals. She later conducted a small private hospital at Albany, and later married a hotel owner. The children Nellie married a farmer. They had two children - son and daughter.
The daughter Ellen, became a nursing sister, enlisted in World War II. She lost her life in the retreat from Singapore, if I remember correctly, in Bangka Strait.

My grandmother died in 1947. She had a heavy stroke in which she deteriorated. She died in the Brisbane Hospital.

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

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

My mother had five children.

Two are dead. Neither live nor dead.

There are 13 great grandchildren and 19 great great grandchildren.