

RUTH HEGARTY
BITTERSWEET
journey

UQP

have any energy to answer out loud. That particular long walk would've been taken by every woman on her way to the delivery ward. There was no vehicle available to transport any of us. A large port filled with the new baby's needs and someone to give support were all one could hope for.

Once at the Hospital I was about to lie on the bed in the delivery room when the baby decided to make an entrance. Her birth was too easy!

At this time Joe was employed at the Forestry and even though his wages would not have been more than about eighteen pound, eleven shillings and sixpence a fortnight, we were living a little more comfortably. I was getting Child Endowment Orders once a month and the Baby Bonus was what provided the baby's layette. The Baby Bonus, which was a Government payment of seventeen pounds for boys and fifteen pounds for girls, was useful for purchasing things from the Mission Store as well as other goods, unlike the Child Endowment. We purchased a cabinet and table and chairs for the kitchen. The Child Endowment, although introduced in about 1941 and payable to all Australian families, was now available to Aboriginal people living on Missions. However, it was not readily made available to us as cash, but could be used to purchase goods, on Order Forms, to the value of whatever you were entitled to.

Once a month on Order Day (it was not called Endow-

ment Day) the mothers in the Camp would arrive early at the Store and wait in orderly fashion until the doors were opened. Some would arrive as early as 7.30 a.m. This meant leaving smaller children in the care of older ones as this would free the fathers to report to work when the whistle sounded. The routine was arduous, we would sit on the ground waiting for the Store to open. Like the rations, the earlier you arrived the better. One by one we were served with our choices of Store goods and much of our Endowment allowance was spent in this way. At the end of the month a list of names, with what remained after the Orders were filled, was placed on a notice board for all to see and we could then register to draw the money out of the Office.

Right out of the blue, with another baby on the way, we were offered a larger home by the Superintendent. Since it was being built over the side of our street we accepted and watched with greatest interest as it took shape. It was a large house with three bedrooms, it had no ceiling or lining, but the windows were made of glass. There was a large kitchen with lots of space around the wood stove — that came in handy during the winter months. Our large washing tub fitted nicely in the space behind the stove so the children could take their baths there at night. The small verandah soon became our lounge room and we purchased some cheap canvas and had it enclosed. We moved into the house after the new baby's birth. This

time it was Duncan Leonard, and we were happy to be in a larger home as it would suit us should there be more children.

The Hegarty Jnr family was feeling really good now, and both Joe and I kept busy digging gardens around the house. Joe erected a fence to keep out the people who used our yard as a short cut. From late afternoon to early morning people who gambled at Muddy Flat often walked through our yard.

Duncan was born on 10 December 1956 and at this time the Cherbourg Hospital was without a doctor. Several women were taken to the Murgon Hospital about four miles away to have their babies. I went there for Duncan's birth and was brought back to Cherbourg the next afternoon. After a few more days in Cherbourg Hospital I arrived home and Christmas Day was spent at the in-laws. As always it was a fantastic time with lots of family and good food. Mrs Hegarty always put on a great spread. Surprisingly my mother arrived to spend Christmas Day with us, along with her friend Len, his mother and sister. At our house there was nothing to offer, so Mrs Hegarty graciously issued an invitation for them to join everyone at her house. Four more to feed was not going to be a problem! These people practised hospitality in a way that gave the impression that they were millionaires. Mr Hegarty earned no more than any other employee on the Mission but they were always willing to share.

Joe was lucky to obtain work at the Forestry again. We didn't see much of him during weekdays as it was many miles away. The other workers who were employed there travelled to work on a pushbike or rode a horse. Joe's wages, at the time, were eleven pound, eighteen shillings and sixpence. He was required to pay a percentage of his gross earning to the Welfare Fund. Three pound per week to the Fund increased to five pound per week. We didn't know about the Welfare Fund then, it was something we learnt about much later.

We were very happy for a time and four children should have been enough. However when Duncan was barely two months old I fell pregnant again. For the first four months of every pregnancy I suffered with morning sickness that seemed to go on all day, but the demands of everyday life had to be met. Glenys was now going to school but I had the three other children to take care of. Norman was so mischievous and every other day I was running him down to the Hospital to get a pea or anything small and round out of his nostrils! It usually happened on a Monday while the doctor was visiting. I once heard him say to Matron, "Not this Hegarty kid again!" I was happy he was not pushing foreign objects into his ears.

* * *

Joe's job at the Forestry came to an end and he was back working on the Mission. He had taken time off on a doctor's certificate due to some sap from the trees they worked with getting into his eyes. He was given some

time off but needed more. However the Superintendent tried to force him to go back to work, probably because of the compulsory contribution of part of Joe's wages to the Welfare Fund. Of course his refusal was taken as an irresponsible act against the Settlement rules. His contribution of three pound a fortnight into the Government fund was more important than his eyesight. After that Joe worked for less wages and this caused us some problems.

There was the endless struggle to put food on the table. I was still going each Monday for rations. I'd take the three small ones with me and, as Norman would not walk, he had to ride in the pram too. The weight of little ones plus the walk from our house to the Ration Shed was hard enough, but with three children and the rations to get home it would take so much longer. Our ration quota had increased considerably, so much so that Monday became rather burdensome. On Tuesday and Saturday there were the meat rations to collect. Also, conditions had not changed much and we were still without a water supply in the house.

I began each day by filling as many containers as I could to save the constant walk out into the yard where our water came from. Everything seemed so far away. To go anywhere meant walking, even the lavatory was out the back. As well as going to the Ration Shed and Meat Shop we were required by law to take the children for a visit to the Child Clinic each week. Here they were weighed and

given a body check, then we were issued with powdered full-cream Sunshine Milk and Aktavite. Since we were not issued with completely full containers we needed to provide empty containers into which a portion of milk and Aktavite were measured, according to the number of small infants in the family. Our days for Clinic were pencilled in and if we did not attend a police escort was sent to our homes. Sometimes, for me, it was a waste of time except for the free issue, as anything I got that didn't cost money was welcome. The Monday ration supply did not include milk, fresh or powdered.

We spent many years in that house. No doubt it was larger than our previous house, but we were forced to live without running water, the roof leaked as the ceiling was never lined, there were no taps or showers' or baths or laundry for washing. The bare floors in the house had to be scrubbed at least once a week. Open fires outside were a constant worry and the halved forty-four-gallon drum was still being used for boiling clothes and heating water for baths.

One time when I was about four months pregnant with Moira, it was bitterly cold and we didn't have enough blankets. That year I joined many of the other women in collecting the large bags from the flour sheds. These gave great protection from the cold, particularly the icy-cold water drips from the tin roofs. I hauled six bags home and, after shaking all trace of flour out of them sewed them

together into what was called a "Wagga". We used it on our bed (was it heavy!) so that the children would have the extra blankets for warmth. There was also the awful smell of the bags to contend with as well the stuff that bags shed, which was strewn like dust among the other bedclothes.

In winter a fire was kept ablaze almost constantly outside at the back of the house. It served to keep the dogs warm on the cold nights and often I would hear family or close friends who were passing through our yard stop to get warm. It was during one of those bitter winters, while Joe and I were enjoying a sleep-in, that I was wakened by screams coming from the back of the house. I rushed out and found Norman, all of four years old, trying to beat out the flames that had almost engulfed his little sister Mayleah. At a glance I could see that she was badly burned. I smothered her against my body, putting out the flames. Her little body was trembling in my arms and as she sobbed I could hear her brother saying, "I didn't do it, Mum. I didn't do it!"

As Joe raced out he yelled, "I'll get the horse."

The horse was our only means of transport, it was kept in the yard overnight. I wrapped a coat around myself and ran with Mayleah towards the Hospital. I was almost there when Joe caught up with me. She screamed as he took her from my arms. As I sat waiting for the Sister to let us know how badly our little girl had been burned I

had the time to look at my own hands which were beginning to blister.

Mayleah was in a lot of pain, but comfortable when we left the Hospital to go home. The other three children were home alone and I can still see their looks of concern when we walked in the door. I gave Norman a hug to reassure him but all I could think was: *If it wasn't so cold this would not have happened.* We could not exist without the outside fire but from then on we were always very careful.

Mayleah was in hospital for some months — at least until the next baby came. We had planned to name the baby after the two young white nurses who had patiently and carefully attended our injured child. Our new little girl, so much darker than Mayleah and Duncan, was born on 26 January and her father called her his little Ginny, a name that is still used affectionately by her brothers. Well, here was Heather Shirley, the name we had decided on. As I was about to sign the register her father rushed in and asked if she could be called Moira Shirley. I did not question why, but it sounded good to me! She was a perfect baby.

My whole life was taken up with being wife and mother, and it seemed to me that there was no longer any trace of the person I used to be. My free spirit was completely gone as all my energy was used up trying to balance the needs of the children against those of my husband. The new baby was an absolute angel, no prob-

lems at all. Duncan was only thirteen months old when she was born and, instead of being able to put all my energy into caring for her, I was still taking care of his needs. He was still a baby and needed my attention.

Life in the big house had its ups and downs, and alcohol began its intrusion into our lives. Joe began bringing his friends home to finish off whatever grog they couldn't finish down on Muddy Flat. He expected me to stay up and help entertain the group, often until after midnight. My health began to deteriorate, my weight dropped from seven to about six stone. Problems arose and we all lived in fear of the violence they produced. As much as I could I was determined to protect my children, so much so that we had a system that worked whenever their father came home drunk. At the sound of a car pulling up at our gate everyone moved together, lights were turned off, and everyone went to their bedrooms, the older ones taking the younger ones. Throughout the whole manoeuvre not a sound was made. For years this scene was played out over and over again. All the children knew it was the only protection that we had against Joe's violence.

During that period our last son, Emmanuel Matthew, was born on 27 May 1959. I wasn't fond of the name but went ahead with it as it was chosen by Mrs Hegarty Snr.

When Manny was just two years old I suffered a mild breakdown. I was raising six children, desperately trying to budget the meagre wage Joe was earning at the time,

and trying to meet the constant demands of the children. Talk about enduring hardships!

I look back and recall the enormous efforts of women who, in the “white” world, would have been labelled heroines or pioneers. The hardships of “black” women are not spoken about or documented to disclose the tremendous effort our people made to sustain and foster family values. I feel privileged to not only have lived in the Camp but also to have shared some of their experiences. These women were tremendous role models, their composure in that almost ceaseless exposure to a life constantly under the scrutinising eyes of Government officials, whose objectives are only now beginning to be known, was inspiring. These were the women from whose lives I learned much, and they acquired this knowledge from their mothers — the knowledge of survival. So many of the older women, during my early years of marriage, told stories of the early Barambah days. These were stories of their families being forcibly taken from their country during the “removal” times. They talked, too, of the various ways the Government used to discipline and control them. Misery and disease caused endless deaths which resulted in children being left orphans, so that the Government took over the care and control of the children, placing them in the Dormitories. The women talked of forced labour, of being poor, of having their wages withheld or

getting no wages at all. They survived because they learned how to.

* * *

Without telling Joe I put my name down at the outpatients to see the doctor. I was in desperate need of help. My first course of action was to pay a visit to Doctor Monz who visited the Mission once a week on a Monday morning. He listened to my sad story but he actually was a very unsympathetic person. Not once did he look at me. I wanted him to look at me! I wanted him to see how much weight I had lost and how awful I looked. But he continued busily writing things down and it was Matron who then spoke to me, "You will be put on a course of tablets, half a tablet three times a day."

I had no idea what I was taking or what this tablet would do for me. All I knew was that I was absolutely knocked out for the next couple of days. A friend who worked at the Hospital identified them for me — Valium — and one of the side effects would be this washed-out feeling. I had far too many people depending on me — my husband (who was the least sympathetic) and the children, all six of them.

To the rescue came a dear neighbour, her name was Jessie Emmerson Wob (or Ya-Ya as Manny loved to call her). Along with her small daughter, Pansy, she walked into our house and first of all asked if I would like her to get my rations for me. I was filled with joy because never had anyone apart from my mother-in-law and Carmen

(who was by now working at the Hospital) ever offered me any sort of assistance. Jessie recognised immediately that I needed help and came every day. She became a very important member of our household. Her daughter Pansy grew up with our children. I was surrounded by such a lot of wonderful people. My in-laws supplied us with fresh milk, vegetables and eggs. And Jessie, being Jessie, insisted I rest in the afternoons before the kids came home from school, while she took the younger ones for long walks. She tackled my huge loads of washing and prepared meals for us all. She was just so filled with energy and talked a lot to herself. Manny could make her laugh at any time, he was the apple of her eye. She was tall and very thin with not an ounce of fat on her.

Joe was assisting the Hygiene Officer and with a gang of men spent a good deal of time spraying DDT around the homes to stop flies breeding inside, and to exterminate cockroaches and mosquitos in the summer. The flies were in great proportions, which caused gastroenteritis. It affected small children and almost every house had lost a child. The Hygiene Officer, while inspecting our home, spoke about the importance of cleanliness. We were all advised to give our children condensed milk to drink as it was less likely to become contaminated. Joe saturated our house with DDT, even under the house. The dogs refused to sleep there but not one of us saw any danger in the practice.

Federal voting and became members of the Labor Party. It seemed the right thing to do. In fact, as each of our children reached the age of eighteen they registered to vote too.

A few weeks into the New Year of 1970 I began to think about giving up work at the Cannery and finding something nearer to home. It was important that I continued to work, our lifestyle had changed somewhat and we were living more comfortably. I'd talk to Joe about finding something closer. A new school meant more costs and then there was the house to furnish. Joe was earning, on average, forty dollars per week, my wage was seasonal and there were the monthly Child Endowment payments. One afternoon after work I got off the train at Nundah to go to the CES (employment) Office. Fate again intervened. It must have been the right day and the right time for me as I was interviewed and given a notice to go to Zillmere Road, Zillmere as they were looking for an office cleaner and tea lady. Margaret Collins, our good friend, drove me to the interview. I could be so lucky! My hours were 6.30 a.m. to 2.30 p.m., I would be paid weekly and the job was only twenty minutes walk from Wavey Street or I could catch a bus that left at 6.00 a.m. I walked home most days. For five-and-a half years I worked for Wilkes Printing, and we were a happier family ... for a while.

Over the past few years the whole family had shared the journey, the ups and downs, the disappointments. However these were not allowed to hold us back in our efforts to move forward. No negative talk, for we were well and truly grounded! Our children showed no outward signs of anxiety. It surprised me how quickly they'd taken to the life away from the Mission. No lectures were given in our house. The rules were set out and the children could choose to follow them or we all suffered. We were all so busy during those times — it was important the children get through primary school, and the girls were marvellous. They took on such a lot of the responsibilities in the home. Joe and I worked every weekday, and talk about a shared journey! Budgeting both wages was shared with the kids, it was important for them to know that we wanted to include them in everything. I loved my family and wanted only the best for them, unlike my own childhood: I had never had the freedom to truly discover myself. For them it was different. At the Dormitory we became victims of a Government policy that destroyed children's ability to have confidence in themselves so that we developed low self-esteem. That led to patterns of behaviour that were considered a good reason for punishment.

Our girls, Pheonia and Mayleah, were fourteen and thirteen years when they entered Sandgate High. I took them down to the school on the first day of the enrolment period and we looked at books, uniforms, the rules, and

the bus timetables. We were now able to access some funding from Abstudy (Government assistance for Indigenous students) and it helped to purchase what was required for school. However, the day before school began OPAL rang to tell me that Brisbane Girls Grammar School was offering a scholarship to one of our girls. I was thrilled to bits but the hard part was deciding which one.

Joe, very wisely, said, "Let the girls choose who will go."

A word of wisdom from Father was just what we needed. My mother was working at the Girls Grammar and was thrilled to bits. She had, for some years, been working as cook for the girls who boarded at the school. I always like to think that it was in honour of her the scholarship had been offered.

That evening we spoke to Mayleah and Pheonia saying that we needed to talk about it as the people at OPAL needed an answer soon. Mayleah chose not to go and that left the way open for Pheonia, who was not so academic but had great potential in softball and netball. She was a very competitive sportsperson and had already represented both school and State while in primary school. I was proud of them both, but I believed in letting them make the decision for themselves. They had been so close since we left Cherbourg, but were discovering their own independence and their own power. They remained, as always, the closest of friends. For the first time in their young lives they would be apart, but that was good as it

led them to discover other friends and their own potential.

The Aboriginal Hostels Ltd was advertising for trainee hostel managers. It had been a busy time since the 1967 referendum; the Government's recognition of Aboriginal people was beginning to take off. In the streets protest marches were being held as our people demonstrated for equal rights. We witnessed the setting up of numerous community-based organisations such as Legal Service, health service and accommodation services. Aboriginal Hostels Ltd was purchasing buildings all around Australia to accommodate students — male and female hostels. They needed to employ lots of people and they advertised to train Aborigines to become managers, bookkeepers, etcetera. I saw this as a chance for Joe to try something different. The kids encouraged their father to apply for a trainee manager position. We had no doubt that he would win a position and that was all the encouragement he needed. We hoped that for the Hegartys it was onward and upward, all positive thinking!

Norman left home after completing Year 10 to do something he always wanted to do, and that was hitchhike around Australia. We were very concerned as he was only fifteen years of age. His keenness to go was brought on through having to live under his father's strict rules and heavy-handedness. On giving my approval I insisted he call home as often as possible, be careful and not take

reveal or disclose. Funny isn't it, since a few years later, in 1998, I wrote and published my first book *Is That You, Ruthie?* I value the eight months I spent at Carseldine and occasionally meet some of the group who are now all professionals in the Social Sciences.

This experience at university was one of the things that prompted me to find out more about my past. One unexpected source of information was the file kept on me by the Department of Native Affairs. In *Is That You, Ruthie?* I write about how awful it was to read the things they wrote about us. There were plenty of shocks and surprises in that file, including Ministerial letters to and from the Deputy Director of the Department of Native Affairs and the Superintendent of Cherbourg with the intent of exempting Joe, me and our two children from Cherbourg. Exemption meant that you were no longer under the control of the Government, but it also meant that you couldn't live on any Aboriginal Missions or Settlements. So exemption for us meant that we would have to move away from Cherbourg and get a permit every time we wanted to come back and visit. My mother had obtained an exemption, that was why she had to get a permit to come to Cherbourg and visit me and her parents. I was surprised to find application forms for exemption — Joe or I hadn't filled them in.

A copy of the letter to the Deputy Director, Department of Native Affairs, Brisbane, from the Superintendent of Cherbourg dated 17 March 1955 reads:

Re Exemption Joe Hegarty Jnr and family

Attached is a completed application for exemption in respect to Joe and Ruth Hegarty. Joe Hegarty has been employed for some time with the Forestry Department. He has a Savings Bank credit of approximately thirty-one pounds. Joe Hegarty is young and intelligent and is quite confident he can manage his own affairs satisfactorily. The fact that Joe has been able to hold his job with the Forestry Department confirms his confidence in himself.

They had to be joking! Holding down a job with approximately thirty-one pounds in the bank would not have been incentive enough to persuade my husband to leave his birth place.

A reply from the Acting Deputy, Director of Native Affairs dated 30 March 1955 reads:

Re Joe Hegarty Jnr and Family

As recommended by you I enclose herewith Exemption Certificate in favour of the above. When they are ready to leave the Settlement please issue such to them and forward their written acknowledgment to this office. No recommendation had been furnished by you with regard to Joe Hegarty's Savings Bank account.

With respect Joe had a child for which he was contributing maintenance. You may consider it advisable to retain his Savings Bank balance against such payments. Please forward your recommenda-

tion on this matter.

Please advise as to the Post Office Ruth Hegarty will collect her Child Endowment payments in order that the necessary arrangements can be made with the Department of Social Security.

Another piece of correspondence also dated 30 March 1955 states that "the Certificate of Exemption is to include children Glenys aged 5 and Norman two years".

A second letter from the Acting Deputy Director to the Superintendent, dated 15 June 1955, reads:

Re Joe Hegarty Jnr and family

Exemption Certificates in favour of the above were forwarded to you on the 30 March last, but to date no acknowledgments have come to hand nor has any advice been furnished as to whether they have left the Settlement and if so where are they residing. Please advise.

So, since 1955 the Deputy Director of Native Affairs and the Superintendent of Cherbourg were corresponding in an effort to exempt Joe, our two kids and me from Cherbourg. From correspondence in my personal files it seems we were to be a test case. I try to imagine how meetings with the Super may have affected Joe since he kept them secret, I was never informed that they had ever taken place.

Any meeting with the Superintendent meant that you were summoned to come before him. That in itself would be very daunting and would raise questions in your mind. Joe would not take too lightly the threat of being forced to

leave Cherbourg. He had done nothing wrong — something the Authorities thought of as wrong-doing was usually what constituted a reason for removal. Joe would not have known that the reason the Superintendent was considering exempting us was due to his not contributing to the dreaded Welfare Fund. This kind of threatening and intimidating of families was one method that was used to control us.

A letter from the Deputy Director of Native Affairs to the Superintendent of Cherbourg dated 11 July 1955 reads:

Re Joe Hegarty and Family

Further to your communication of the 30th ultimo and discussion with Mr Davis on the case of this man and others similarly placed, it is appreciated that Hegarty is not receiving good economic training being allowed to live rent free, in a Departmental house and have his family kept subject to contributing only 10 percent from his gross earnings.

However, any action to collect any increased amount will require an amendment of the Regulations and will involve submission of a special case. Possibly Joe Hegarty's case would be a good test case. Your views on this matter will be appreciated. At the same time will you please advise as to the gross weekly wages he is receiving so that the matter can be considered further. An indication as to the number of other men there are on the Settlement similarly placed together with names of their employers would also be helpful.

The reply dated 30 June 1955 from the Cherbourg Superintendent notes:

Re Joe Hegarty Jnr and family

In reply to your communication of the 15th inst that you are advised the above and his family are still resident on this Settlement. Hegarty has recently been off work owing to an injury to his eye and has advised that he was unable to secure the house which he understood was available at Kilkivan.

I am very much of the opinion, following my conversation with Joe Hegarty today that he is not making a great effort to secure accommodation. His reply to me when I was enquiring from him re his efforts to secure accommodation was "You cannot force me to leave the Settlement."

This man has a Savings Bank credit of seventeen pounds sixteen shillings and five pence after nine months continuous work at award rates with the Forestry Department, plus the assistance received from the Settlement during that period.

The Exemption Certificates will be retained at this office and Joe Hegarty will be reminded that they are available to him.

I read the files with such trepidation — how could the Authorities not know that such a move would have a stamp of fear attached to it? Joe lived in the camp at Cherbourg all of his life and he knew the intolerant action the Government took against people who dared to return to Cherbourg. This would, no doubt, impact on Joe in a way that would threaten his relationship with his family and friends. Outsiders needed permits to visit Cherbourg and time restrictions would be placed upon the visit, for example, it might be limited to a weekend. To overstay that permit involved intervention by the police plus a

meeting with the Superintendent. The permit was a threat and put us in a position worse than what we were in at the time. All Joe needed to hear was that going outside Cherbourg posed a threat that would disadvantage him and disqualify him from ever returning. It would appear that our bank balance was what caused the Department to seriously consider our family for exemption.