

Remembering Territory families

Growing the Katherine – the Tapp family

My mother's family came up to the Northern Territory in 1947 after the war. Two of my grandmother's brothers had been in Darwin during the war, went back to NSW, Cobar, and said, *You must go to the Northern Territory – that's where the future is for young people.*

Conditions for the Forscutt family in Katherine were sufficient but basic:

The house was a Sidney Williams hut. A massive great big tin shed that had virtually three rooms. One end was the bedrooms, which were basically rows of beds with mosquito nets over them. That sort of defined the sleeping areas from where people lived or slept, other than my grandmother's room which had half a wall, and there was a toilet down the back, a long-drop toilet down the back, which I was terrified of, and fall down the hole. The middle section was lounge, dining, I remember there was a big old wood stove, which burnt all the time and a donkey out the back for the hot water, for the laundry and the showers. You know, 'hot water donkey'? Which is the 44-gallon drum with a fire under it.

Bill Tapp purchased Killarney Station in about 1960 and two of Toni's uncles began work there. Killarney is about 270km southwest of Katherine, originally an excision from Victoria River Station. Bill Tapp, a colourful character, used to stay at Toni's grandmother's place when he was in Katherine. When Toni was about 5 or 6 the family moved out to Killarney. Bill Tapp met and fell in love with Toni's beautiful mother June, 'the Elizabeth Taylor of the outback'. Within six months of meeting, she had moved out to Killarney Station living 'under a bough shed with an upturned water tank for our wet season abode and having more children'.

Toni remembers it as a 'fantastic, happy time'.

I remember living out in the open, literally out in the open, and the kitchen, that was a big bough shed and mum used to cook in there, big open fire outside with the holes to put the camp oven and everything in. Our swags were just out on the flat, like our family slept in one area near some trees, and the stockmen slept in another area, the young men, male stockmen, and we had one Aboriginal family living over in another area under some other trees and that family... They became like family to me... For me, personally, a very integral part of my life and who I am because they were amazing, amazing people and I had that opportunity to grow up with a traditional Aboriginal family... The station was our family. Black white everyone was our family.

Everything we did, we did together. Christmas, often was on the front verandah at our house. It depends on how many people round. Everyone used to come to Christmas lunch. Black, white, drunks, whoever was there! Melbourne Cup was one our biggest functions, which was fantastic, we used to always have sweeps... The Katherine Show was a big thing.

Like many Territorians, Toni spent a number of years away from the Territory. After her marriage to Shaun Coutts in 1976, they moved to Victoria where they lived for four years and started a family. But the Territory drew them back. After they returned to the Territory Toni and Sean lived out on pastoral stations, from the Victoria River to Borroloola. At the end of 1994, the family moved back to Katherine with a feeling of coming home.

With that old Territory family connection, I did just come home basically... Just after I moved here I had a big discussion, argument actually with a girl, a woman my age whom I'd known all my life who said to me, *Well! I don't know why you keep claiming you're a Katherinite – You don't even live here. You've never even lived here.*

She didn't understand that for the bush people, Katherine is their town. It's their hometown. And for many people they had their babies here, and even though they only do School of the Air, it's still their central service area, and their home... I think it's that wide variety of people from so many walks of life that give it its character... I think I see myself here forever. I'm very happy here. It's a very easy place to live... I feel very at peace with myself, with myself, who I am, where I am...

[Northern Territory Archives Service NTRS 3163, BWF 41, Toni Tapp Coutts]