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“Ten Pound Pom”

ARRIVES IN THE TERRITORY

My husband was in the RAF in Scotland, and in 1954 when he got demobbed, we decided to immigrate to Australia.

As “Ten Pound Poms”, we arrived in Adelaide, with our two girls, after a month long voyage on the “Stratheden”.

After two years in civilian life, my husband decided to join the RAAF and his first posting was to Darwin.

Our trip to Darwin in 1956 was on a Fockler Friendship, and although we left Adelaide at 6am it was late evening before we arrived.

Stops along the way included: Leigh Creek, Oodnadatta, Daly Waters, Alice Springs, Tennant Creek, Katherine and finally Darwin.

Being the middle of the “wet”ⁱ season, it was still very hot and humid (even late evening) and as the airport was a tin shed on the edge of the tarmac we felt that we had arrived in a very “frontier” town.

You could always tell a newcomer to the Territory, they would be covered in mosquito and sand-fly bites, which would become tropical ulcers if not treated.

AS the RAAF did not supply accommodation, we had to find our own. My husband had managed to find a “caretaker Tenancy” which we shared with another RAAF couple. (In those days you paid for the privilege of caretaking someone’s house).

This house (in Fannie Bay) was on stilts, but had no window glass, just push-out bamboo slats. There was mosquito netting, which I could never sleep under, and the luxury of a small table fan. In the early days I had

nightmares, watching the geckos, cockroaches and other “wee beasties” crawling across the ceiling and walls.

Another “caretaker tenancy” we had was at Myilly Point in a Burnett house. Much has been said about the design of these houses, but I didn’t like them. Although the lounge room was quite roomy, the kitchen was very poky and the bedrooms small.

One house (this was a misnomer as the accommodation was half a Sydney Williams hut), we rented, was at the old Army hospital site at Nightcliff. These huts had been taken over by “squatters”, and eventually claimed as their own and sold or rented out. When the N.T. Government resumed ownership of this land, to build the Nightcliff Primary School, I believe the “owners” of these huts were allocated land in the newly opened suburb of Nightcliff.

Later we rented another house at Nightcliff. We never had to worry about being burgled. We couldn’t lock up when we went out, the house didn’t even have a door!

When caretaker tenancies and rentals were unavailable, we had the option of getting a tent out of stores and camping at Mindil Beach Caravan Park.

The bus service to Nightcliff was very sparse, and if you didn’t have a car, it was a nightmare. There was a bus to take you to town for work, one to bring you home, but if you wanted to go to the “Star” cinema at night, it was a race to have dinner and change, as the bus that brought you home, only stopped at Nightcliff for half an hour before returning to town. The next bus was the final bus that left town for Nightcliff at 11.15pm.

When we lived in Nightcliff, I worked in a shop in town, and, there not being a bus on a Saturday that would get me to town in time for work, I walked from Aralia Street to McMillan’s road where I would get a lift from a pig farmer going to town. I had to take a sheet of newspaper with me as the truck was quite dirty.

The bus terminal in town was the vacant block of land on the corner of Smith Street and Knuckey Street. A tin shed with benches, located at the corner of the block, protected you from the wet weather.

Eventually, we had our own house built in the newly opened suburb of Nightcliff, (the block of land cost 156 pounds and the house 2,900 pounds,) and it did have glass windows, fly screens and a lockable door.

The telephone directory at this time was a three page piece of cardboard!

Without television as a distraction, there was a very active social life. Saturday night was usually a night out dancing at Berrimah Lodge 122. Although only a tin shed with a concrete floor, dress standards were very high. The men wore white duck trousers, very hard to keep clean, and starched very stiff, white long-sleeved shirt, black cummerbund and black bow tie, and the ladies wore $\frac{3}{4}$ or full-length silk, satin or taffeta dresses. The children slept on rugs under the trestle tables.

The band consisted of Dot Dyer on piano and her husband Jim on drums. Dot's signature tune at the start of the evening was "I Love Aeroplane Jelly".

We looked forward to these nights, as they were such fun.

Occasionally we would go to the Green room at the Hotel Darwin for a formal dance, but this was more upmarket and children were definitely not allowed!

Sundays were always either picnic or barbeque days and with other RAAF families, we travelled to places such as, Howard Springs, Buff Creek, East Point, Fly Creek, Dripstone Caves and sometimes as far afield as Edith Falls. Our car at this time was a Vauxhall Velox, and managed the dirt roads quite well.

Shopping was quite a headache, with vegetables very hard to get and very expensive. I remember I once paid 4/- for a quarter cabbage when a whole cabbage in Adelaide would have cost 1/-. Arrivals from south would always

disembark from the plane with string bags full of vegetables. Fruit wasn't the same problem as there were always plenty of mangos, paw-paw, bananas, etc.

Over the years, many organisations have claimed to have held the first Darwin Mardi Gras, however, I believe this honour must go to a Darwin icon, Billie Pitcheneder, (or Billie Nichols as she was then.).

Billie held this event in 1961/62 to raise money to build the C.W.A. restrooms on the corner of Mitchell Street and Knuckey Street. The person or persons who raised the most money, by raffles etc., would be crowned King and Queen of the Mardi Gras. My husband and I won that honour. Our prize was dinner for two at the Hotel Darwin, and flowers and chocolates for me. Although this building is no longer the C.W.A. restrooms, the water fountain, donated by Billie, can still be seen on the front of the building.

Incidentally, Billie ran the tuckshop at the primary school at Frog's Hollow and was affectionately known to all children as "Aunty Billie". I am sure she sold more raffle tickets and, raised more money for various causes than anyone else in Darwin.

Five of my six grandchildren were born here, my eight great grandchildren were born interstate, but, sadly, I am the only one to remain in the N.T. I could not imagine living any other place than Darwin.

During my time in Darwin, I have seen many changes, gone through many cyclones, including Tracy, seen unbelievable changes in the Darwin skyline. However, I will always consider myself a Territorian who once was a "Ten Pound Pom".
