DARWIN -- LIKE NOWHERE ELSE

We had seen with interest while we travelled up from Katherine that most of the houses were built on stilts with bamboo shutters propped open outwards and no glass. The houses in Darwin were similar and mostly surrounded by trees. The overpowering scent of frangipanni laced with a whiff of decay and humidity had gradually increased as we neared the city. World War Two had had over for ten years but we noticed the abandoned air strips and rusted military vehicles and fuel drums beside the highway. However the sight of many half sunken ships in the harbour and a crashed aircraft on a hill, was unexpected and it seemed that the war had been real here and that we had hardly known about the destruction. It was ironic that later the ships were salvaged by the Japanese by arrangement with our government. Some buildings had been partly destroyed and abandoned, neither repaired or demolished and were already overgrown with vines and wild grass.

We arrived in December and the "knock-em-down" rains had not completed their task of battering the long grass, but it did rain every afternoon, giving temporary relief from the humidity.

Our house over-looked the Shell installations. There were several large tanks of fuel and we were assured that these were scrupulously maintained and adequately fitted with lightning conductors. However, we did have frequent magnificent storms with spectacular displays of forked lightning which we would watch from our front steps. Mitt and the boys loved these storms; maybe the girls and I were not so sure, and, although she was assured by her father that it was safe, Alison was only two years old and I think it left her with a life-long fear of storms and lightning.

The house was somewhat different from the older ones on Railway Hill. It was mounted on three-foot "stumps" not high enough for us to use the area beneath for recreation purposes as those mounted on seven or eight foot posts allowed. It was new, two internal "rooms" without doors which we used for dressing and store rooms. None of the walls reached the ceiling as there was no ceiling, the area above was open for cross-ventilation, wooden beamed with an iron roof. Nothing could be enclosed in wardrobes or cupboards, especially in the "wet" and shoes had to be kept in the air to prevent them going mouldy.

We all had to sleep under mosquito nets. We slept on three sides of the building, boys one side, us in the front and girls on the other side. The external walls of the building were fitted with metal louvres which were mainly kept open. Each mosquito net was monitored by a gecko who sat in the day-time on the wall at the bed head. At night it would descend to feast on the insects which would come to the net above the face of the sleeper where they would be gobbled up by the waiting lizard. These geckos were very territorial and sometimes they would fight in the night if one strayed into the wrong space. The nets excluded the mozzies but nothing had been invented to beat the sand-flies which were much smaller. Although it was said that sand-flies were only found a few feet from the ground they managed to bite Alison on the top of the head, causing infected sores and her head had to be shaved around the crown so that she looked like some form of midget monk. They got me too on my "bad" leg where there are varicose veins and that was when I discovered that I am allergic to Penicillin.

On the fourth side of the building the kitchen was at one end, again with no door. We had an electric stove and electric refrigerator. At first we had a kerosene fridge which had to lie on its side to make it work, which is a ridiculous situation. Both appliances were the property of the Commonwealth Railways. Some groceries had to be kept in the fridge anyway to discourage weevils and ants. At the other end of this side of the building was the bathroom and the toilet. Both these facilities had doors! We all got accustomed to being
watched at our ablutions by large green frogs which sat on the top of the walls and sang to us. The frogs also liked to sit on the ball-float of the cistern in the latrine which meant that the water ran constantly until Milt and the kids would have a blitz on them. Milt would clear them out and hurl them one by one through the louvres where the kids would try to catch them and batter them to death.

Water from the Man 'ton Dam was piped into Darwin. It was beautifully soft, like rainwater, so that when I first used the laundry which was a separate small shed at ground level with two sides and a roof of galvanised iron and a concrete floor, I used the same amount of laundry powder as I had used in Port Augusta where the water was piped from the Murray River. I had a Simpson washing machine, the round type with a ringer on top. I went inside for a few minutes and when I returned there was a collar of foam about eighteen inches high revolving on top of the machine. It took several rinses to get rid of the soap. Washing and ironing were a bit of a hazard. Things had to be dried as quickly as possible. Graham started High School where the uniform was a white shirt, white drill shorts and white socks. I had been warned not to damp down clothes and leave for more than a few minutes as the metal tabs on the sides of the shorts would rust and leave marks. These shorts had to be starched too. Most of the Public Servants, Bank employees and other "respectable" men also wore the same garb. There was a particular brand of rust remover which fortunately got rid of the stains for there were many young men living in Darwin for a term who would have needed gallons of the stuff. Milt wore grey drill shorts where stains were not so important.

Cotton material was readily available in the Chinese shops, and later, when I had joined the Gilbert and Sullivan Society and had to make a dress for being in the chorus of The Pirates of Penzance, I was able to reuse the material to make dresses for all three girls.

The boys had some money-earning enterprises. They sold newspapers for a while outside the pubs but there was an episode where I think they tried to short change a patron and thought it best to give up this employment. They made some kind of raft and went out to the wrecks to get bits of copper and brass which they sold to an old man who lived in an abandoned building at the edge of the sea. I did hear tales of them placing a foot on the weighbridge to increase their profit when they thought he was not paying enough.

Graham joined the Sea Scouts. Fortunately the uniform was similar to the school clothes. Once when Milt had to go on the initial run of the new railcar to Larrahah which was taking some parliamentarians there was room in the back carriage for us to go too. Graham didn't want to miss some function to do with the scouts, and decided to stay home alone. I was a bit apprehensive about it but he was happy to do it and the rest of us went for the trip. It was a fairly narrow gauge and the grass was almost as high as the carriage so we didn't see much along the way. But at Larrahah we met some people, one of the men had been in Alcatraz in California and had the most beautiful handwriting I have ever seen. Another time both boys went with their father to Larrahah where he had some work to do and stayed the weekend. The job wasn't finished and the boys had to return the 200 miles without Milt which didn't exactly please Brian but they had to be back for school.

At the bottom of Railway Hill near the Station was the Railway Store, where groceries and some other goods were sold. Sometimes there were even fresh fruit and vegetables which was a treat as the so called fresh food in the shops was of pitiful quality and very expensive. We mostly used tinned fruit with home-made custard and sometimes jelly. Even now when I open a packet of jelly I can smell the railway store in Darwin.

Brian and Helen were already in Primary School when Bernice started in the Infant School. She had had some time at Kindergarten in Port Augusta but was apprehensive about starting school in Darwin. The teacher was of the old school and demanded that the mothers left, particularly as some (including me) had smaller children with them. Bernice wanted me to stay but I couldn't. To this day she still thinks I abandoned her.

Everything in Darwin was expensive, and although there was an Electrical Trades Union it was not very active so that although its members were underpaid nothing was done about it.
This didn't matter much to those who were local as most had afterhours jobs anyway. Being new it was more difficult for us, so I got a job in the evenings working in a little café attached to the Workers' Club where I cooked and served steak and eggs, bacon and eggs, etc. Some of the men had been drinking for a while and wanted something to eat before going home. One night a man fell off the chair and pulled his plate on top of himself. He was out cold and I had to run three shops up to get someone to call the police. They hauled him out and took him to the station to sleep it off. I gave the job away after that.

 Sometimes Milt would go into town and take a couple of the girls with him to wait in the car. On one such occasion a man approached them and wanted them to go with him. Alison was too young to know better but Bernice was immediately alert and got rid of him. Alison was quite wary of men for a long time.

 We went on picnics with the Gigneys who had moved to a better house nearer the Railway offices. One morning we went to swim in the pool below the Darwin Hotel. This pool was filled and emptied by the tide. Maurice was walking around the wall and suddenly called out "everyone get out" in a voice which got everyone out in a hurry. There was a large sea-wasp in the corner of the pool where Milt was with Alison in his arms. We never went in there again, no matter how tempting it looked. We went instead to Howard Springs and Berry Springs to swim. There were no crocs at Howard Springs like now. We did get bogged once late in the afternoon and it was almost dark when we were pulled out by a truck. The prospect of spending the night in the car in a swamp did not appeal.

 After almost twelve months it was evident that we couldn't stay any longer. Milt was not happy with work and hated the German tradesman with whom he had to work so he put in for a transfer to Alice Springs. I was very relieved when the transfer was approved as I had liked what we had seen of the place on the way through. Our kind neighbour, a lady of mixed Aboriginal and Chinese races who had eight children came over early on the morning we were leaving with homemade pasties and apple pies to see us off our way.

 If I was sorry at all to be leaving Darwin, it was because of the people I had met.

 Elsewhere in Australia the "White Australia Policy" precluded a mixing of nationalities, whereas in Darwin the Chinese and other races had been there for many years and it was an established mix of society where I felt there was a great tolerance and openness. One of the first things I noticed was that if someone had a grudge or disapproved of some action they would speak about it and resolve the issue. It was too hot and sticky to worry about differences.

**BERNICE, HELEN, ALISON**  
**ON THE LITTLE RED ENGINE**  
**DARWIN PRIMARY SCHOOL**