A Very Short History of Tennant Creek from a woman’s point of view.

Though it might seem hard to believe today, there was a time, when Tennant Creek with a population of about 3,000 located 1000 klm south of Darwin, was bigger than Alice Springs – population 25,000 - and Tennant gold helped keep the wheels of the Australian economy turning.

The Tennant Creek gold rush began in 1933, at the height of the Great Depression, when several hundred gold hungry men arrived in what was the middle of nowhere. Australia’s last great gold rush was a consequence of the nation wide unemployment which followed the collapse of the global economy.

Three years before the rush proper, Francie Udall and her English born husband Jim, drove to Tennant to take up the lease of the Great Northern Mine, Tennant’s first gold producer. Francie was probably the first European woman to make Tennant her home. By 1936, there were approximately 10 men for every woman and child on the gold field.

From 1930 to 1942, when most of the gold mines were closed, Francie wrote to relatives in Sydney. Her letters paint a detailed picture of daily life in what was one of Australia’s roughest and remotest towns.

Francie’s correspondence begins in 1930 shortly after she and her husband Jim had driven up the Oodnadatta Track.

Click the letter to view the media player.

Click on ►► to listen to an edited selection of Francie’s letters from 1930 -1937.

It’s clear from Francie’s letters that though the Udall’s owned a working gold mine, the money orders Francie gets from her relatives help the Udall’s survive. The money orders are the repayments of a loan Francie made to her relatives so they could buy a house.
If you are annoyed by the sound of flies, just be thankful that you didn’t have to live with them! They were so bad that even the most macho of Tennant’s miners wore fly veils until the 1970s when the African dung beetle was introduced and the worst of the problem disappeared.

Car history buffs might like to know that the engine noise you can hear whenever Francie and Jim travel anywhere is the sound of the actual truck which carried Francie’s letters to Tennant Creek in the 1930s. The truck is now part of at the National Transport Hall of Fame in Alice.
The outbreak of war in 1939 eventually brought an end to Francie’s Tennant Creek life.

And yes, you heard correctly, Francie starts signing herself ‘The Ant’ instead of ‘Aunt’ which says something about how gold dust gets into the bones.

**What happened to Francie after she left Tennant Creek?** See the biography on the last page of this pdf.

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**For more information** about life on Tennant's Goldfields visit ‘Freedom, Fortitude and Flies’ an exhibition at the Battery Hill Mining Centre in Tennant Creek, created by Megg Kelham and long time Tennant Creek resident and awarding winning artist Alison Alder.

and/or

**Watch** “Kevan Weaber: A Tennant Childhood’ on Youtube. Click here: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wTNFTOvavDw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wTNFTOvavDw)

and/or

**Read** ‘Discovering Local History at the Battery Hill Mining Centre’ also available from this web site. This text includes educational activities for learning local history.
References:

The text of Francie’s letters and the photos are part of the Havard Collection, Museum & Art Gallery, NT and were donated by Francie’s niece a few years ago.

If you have precious items like old letters and photos at home please consider donating them to a public institution for the rest of us to enjoy.

Francie on the Oodnadatta Track 12 miles from Farina. Havard Collection. MAGNT PIC 048/001

Megg Kelham is a professional historian who lives and works in Alice Springs. For more information on professional historians visit: www.historians.org.au or contact her on meggkel@yahoo.com. Please put Udall in the subject box.

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Francie Udall, 1884 -1982: a biographical note

Francie Udall was born in Melbourne in 1884 where she worked as a teacher, before she looked after her aging mother full-time.

When her mother died in 1922 Francie moved to Katoomba in NSW to look after an infant niece. She also lent her niece’s parents the money to buy a home. The money orders in Francie’s letters are the payments of interest on this loan.

In 1930 Francie bought a shop in Milson’s Point, Sydney, near where the Harbour Bridge now stands. Jim Udall, an English mining engineer and veteran of the First World War, met Francie in her shop because he bought his cigarettes there. He married her and they moved to Tennant Creek where they worked the Great Northern Mine for 11 years.

In 1942, after the Japanese bombing of Darwin, which lead to the evacuation of the Territory’s women, children and civilians not directly involved in the war effort, the Udall’s went to Victoria where Francie worked in a munitions factory.

After the War Jim mined tin in the Australian Alps. When he died of lung cancer in 1951 Francie moved back to Bendigo. Francie died in August 1982. She was 98 years old.

Dariel Larkins, one of Francie’s nieces, remembers Francie as ‘a tiny woman, less than 150cm in height’ who ‘had been brought up in a refined household in Melbourne. She was positive in outlook, forthright but humorous in speech, and never complained about her lot. Life to her was an adventure’.

Adapted from information supplied by Dariel Larkins, 2005

In her book, *The Great Australian Loneliness*, published in 1937, Ernestine Hill writes about meeting Jim Udall who she describes as a ‘young man … who opened an old shaft, erected a crude and ingenious stamper mainly out of an old motor car and put through a crushing of six ounces to the ton’.

William Hatfield, author of *Australia through the Windscreen* published in 1936 also mentions meeting the Udall’s in Tennant Creek. The photo, above, of Francie, Jim and car outside their Tennant Creek camp was taken by him.