MARIE-CLAIRe NEMEC

A MEMOIR

WITH ADDITIONAL MATERIAL AND EDITING BY
Margaret Worrall
INTRODUCTION

My sister Marie has asked me to put together a memoir about her life and the life of her dearly loved husband, George Nemec. Most of the material contained in this piece was written by Marie herself and only needed a little editing. I have added material from other sources such as letters, scrap books, photo albums and the memories of other family members.

Some of Marie’s writing about her life is in the third person, but to make it clearer to the reader that it is Marie speaking, I have, with her permission, changed her work into the first person. I have made some minor additions and grammatical corrections to provide clarity. I have done my best to indicate which material comes from which source, and quotes – including the pieces written by Marie - are in italics.

Marie has had an active life and been very much involved in the communities in which she has lived. In George she found an ideal partner who was gentle and protective of her, but encouraged her to be her own person and follow her own interests. His death at the age of fifty-four has been a continuing sadness for Marie. She tells me that despite George’s insistence that she should marry again after his death; she has never had the desire to do so. Marie-Claire has filled her life in other ways and I hope this memoir is a fitting tribute to her.

Margaret Worrall - Innisfail - 2014
Marie-Claire DICKINS

Fourth child and second daughter of Charlotte Spurgeon Robertson and Sidney Edmond Dickins

PART I – 1928 – 1957

Marie-Claire Dickins was born on September 29, 1928 at King St, West Geelong, where her family was living at the time. Her name, Marie-Claire, came from a French novel that her mother, Lottie, had been reading. She was a pretty child, with blue eyes, blonde curly hair and a turned up nose.

In her book “Mrs Dickins’ Horrible Children” Marie’s sister Joy describes life at King St, and games of her three older siblings - Mac, Joy and Neil. These games included an incident when Marie, aged three, managed to climb over a tall trellis and had to be chased down the road.

In 1934 the family moved to North Shore about seven kilometres out of Geelong. With the birth of two more daughters, Barbara and Margaret, there were now six children in the family. North Shore was a semi-rural area with lots of space and open paddocks, and Marie remembers it as a happy place to live. She started school in 1935, attending the North Shore State School with her older brothers and sister. Later in the year Marie was moved to the Hermitage Church of England Girl’s Grammar School, where she was enrolled on September 13. The reason her Mother gave for the move was that Marie had started swearing! Marie still has two school reports from the Hermitage. In one of these her form mistress states that Marie “is not really working up to her ability”, and another teacher mentions “marks lowered by absences”. Marie recalls - As I always had a cold on my chest when my feet got wet, I can only presume, at this distance in time, I continually got my shoes wet walking across the paddock with the other children, as they all walked to school, and had chest problems. During the winter, Marie always sat at a desk near the fire. Perhaps these chest colds were an early indication of the lung problems Marie was to have later in life.

The North Shore house was opposite the beach and swimming was one of the family activities. Marie remembers – Mother was a great floater. I can remember her floating for what seemed like hours to me. Her feet never sank.

1 Now known as Isabella St.
2 “Mrs Dickins” Horrible Children”. Published by Marie-Claire Nemec, Cairns, 2004.
3 M Nemec to MW- November 2000.
Joy gives a delightful description of life at North Shore in “Mrs Dickins’ Horrible Children”. Marie was part of the activity that took place there and many of her memories are incorporated in Joy’s book. One of Marie’s memories that Joy does not relate in her book is of Auntie Hettie, one of Dad’s sisters. *She had no children of her own and was very house proud.* Whenever we visited her she put newspaper all over the veranda, the carpets and the hall runners. It seems to me we always stayed in the kitchen or out in the back yard. Auntie Hettie married Ted Stone. Uncle Ted worked in the railways. At the time I remember he must have had a job working with railway stock. When he got home each night after work, he had to strip off his dirty clothes in the outside laundry before he went inside the house. I thought this very odd. Uncle Ted later rose to be a station master before he retired.

Auntie Hettie had no children to leave her money to, and when she died in 1961 she kindly left her money to her nieces and nephews. There were twenty-four nieces and nephews and each one received $537.59.\(^1\) The money was always referred to the money as Auntie Hett’s millions.

When the family moved to Melbourne in 1937 Marie attended the Auburn State School with Joy and Neil. Joy moved on to Swinburne Technical School and Neil moved on to Melbourne High School, where Mac was enrolled. In 1940, rather than leave Marie at the state school on her own, Marie was moved to Ruyton, a private girls’ grammar school in Kew, where her younger sisters Barbara and Margaret were enrolled.

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\(^1\) As per letter Marie to MW, 8.5.67 when Hettie’s estate was finalized.
Marie – this portrait was probably done at the Melbourne Agricultural Show
The early 1940s were a difficult period for the whole family because of the breakdown of our parent’s marriage. Maire writes about her parent’s divorce – *When our mother attempted to leave Dad we spent the weeks in a lovely quiet old wooden house. The garden was neglected and there was a swing hanging from the branch of a tree. So peaceful.*

*As I remember the only one of us who went to school was Mac, who was in his final years. Someone followed him home from school.* (Ed: And told Dad where we were).

*The year of the divorce was 1943. I remember that the only relatives that supported Mother were her cousin Belle Cairns, and her brother Arthur Robertson. They were always welcome in her home.*

*For the period of the divorce case Margaret, Barbara and I were boarded at our school, Ruyton Girls Grammar in Kew. I think this was for nearly a fortnight. Mother was not well enough for us to return sooner. I remember sitting on the back veranda of the boarding house on a Sunday afternoon, feeling alone, depressed and isolated. When we went home I felt the change in atmosphere in the house. Mother and Joy were able to laugh again.*

*At school part of my brief, given to me by Mother, was to stop Dad if he tried, from taking my two younger sisters away from school and out of Mother’s custody. From memory Barbara and Margaret were both below the age where they could choose which parent they wished to live with. This, I think, was twelve years. During school time I would try to sit in the classroom so I could see the driveway leading to the Headmistress’ office, so that I could stop Dad taking the two youngest girls. When our Father was to marry again I remember him saying that he would have some decent children now.*

*I disowned my Father completely. After all, from the Bible and stories I knew parents disowned their children. It was only with great reluctance that I accepted his birthday and Xmas cheques, and then, I was only persuaded to do so by my Mother. Dad paid for Neil’s and my schooling and keep until we were eighteen years old, when all the money for us stopped.*

*The reason for me disowning my father was his marriage to my cousin Mary Robertson. I considered that his action was contrary to Christ’s teaching. That three of my Mother’s brothers – all three ordained ministers of religion – could support my Father in this marriage was abhorrent to me. That Dad later would be appointed an Elder in the Presbyterian Church turned me against the Church, although not against the Christian Philosophy.*

*Our parent’s divorce was the best thing that happened to us children. Dad never interfered with our upbringing and never took any action our behalf without first discussing it with our Mother. As Mother often said, she tried to be both mother and father to us and there was only one set of rules – hers. As a family we pulled together and supported each other morally and later financially as well.”*
Her Ruyton school reports suggest that at first Marie did quite well academically; despite an absence from school of twenty-one days in the last term of 1940. (Ed: Was this perhaps the period when Mum tried to leave Dad?) From 1943 onward the reports suggest a decline in her school performance and in her final year, when she was to sit for her Leaving Certificate, there is the comment that her work was “not up to the required standard”. Marie completed her Leaving Certificate by going to night school after she started working.

Marie continued her association with Ruyton and the many friends she had made there, through the Old Ruytonians’ Association, participating in plays and musical productions put on to raise money for the school. Her membership of the association continued into her final years and gave her much pleasure.

Marie was good at sport and she captained the school hockey team. After leaving school at the end of 1946 she continued playing hockey and refereeing games. One time she was responsible for giving another girl a broken nose when she accidently hit her with her hockey stick. (Ed: I particularly remember this incident because Marie is a gentle person and never violent either physically or verbally.)

In her early twenties Marie took up canoeing with her then boyfriend Harold. A whole group of young people canoed down the Murray River, Neil going along as chaperone. Marie was also a great bike rider.

On leaving school Marie obtained work in the library of the Munitions Supply Laboratory at Maribyrnong and studied for the Australian Institute of Librarians preliminary examinations, which she passed in 1949. Working with books seemed an appropriate choice of employment for Marie because she was a real bookworm. One very hot day, when the rest of us were wearing as little as possible to keep cool, Marie was curled up in a chair wearing a warm jumper. She was reading a story involving ice and snow, and was so immersed in the book’s setting, she was feeling cold. Later Marie moved on to work at the Kew Public Library not far from home, but found working amongst dusty books exacerbated her asthma - an affliction she was to suffer with, on and off, for the rest of her life.

In 1949 Marie turned twenty-one and there was a dance at Barkers Road to celebrate. A newspaper clipping that Marie kept states –“Some of the 80 guests will come from as far as Benalla and Camperdown to attend a dance tonight in honour of the coming-of-age of Marie-Claire Dickins. It will be given by her mother, Mrs C S Dickins, at her home in Barkers Rd, Kew. Among those present
will be Marie-Claire’s great aunt, Mrs S Cairns; her three sisters, Sidney-Joy, Margaret and Barbara; her brothers Mac and Neil; her sister-in-law, Mrs Mac Dickins and her small nephew Greg.” Marie wore a lovely bright red off-the-shoulder dress that Joy must have made. Mrs S Cairns was Aunty Mary, the wife our mother’s Uncle Sam. As a child Marie used to stay with Aunty Mary and Uncle Sam at their farm in Camperdown. Marie still has a Kookaburra brooch she found in Aunty Mary’s garden and was allowed to keep.

Marie’s twenty-first was just one of many parties held at Barkers Rd. With the double doors to the study and lounge opened up, there was plenty of room for dancing. The carpets would be rolled up and the floors waxed. Joy made lots of wonderful food for supper and as decoration Mother created beautiful flower arrangements with flowers from the garden.

An earlier party for Marie must have been held for her eighteenth birthday. This would have been the first formal party after the end of the war. There was a scavenger hunt in which the young couples went off to collect items from a list they were given. One item on the list was the strangest thing they could find. One couple came back with a picket off a neighbour’s fence and another with the sign from the dairy down the road. Both items had to be promptly returned. At this party Marie wore a full length blue evening dress with a shawl collar. On the skirt and the collar Joy’s friend, Joy Tervooran, painted orchids. An advantage for Marie at these parties was having Neil as a slightly older brother. This meant there was a good supply of boys to match up with Marie’s girlfriends.
Maire’s scrap book is full of invitations, programs and paper cuttings regarding the many social activities she and her friends were involved in over the next few years. In November 1953 Marie was a bridesmaid for her friend Meg McHaffie at St John’s Church in Toorak. Neil’s membership of the Melbourne High School Old Boys’ Lacrosse Club took the whole family, but particularly Marie, into the social; activities of that organisation. There was the current craze for square dancing, and in the off-season there were picnics to the beach and tennis parties at Barkers Rd. For some time Marie went out with David Harvey Williams who was secretary of the club and a friend of Neil’s. Marie’s good looks and ladylike ways attracted men and she was never short of boyfriends.

Marie took family responsibilities very seriously. She never complained about the jobs she had to do. In the morning before going to school, she pushed the roller broom over the carpets – much to the chagrin of some other family members because it woke them up. She and Neil cleaned out the chook pens and painted the perches with kerosene to kill the lice. She did her best to keep an eye on her two younger sisters, which must surely have been a trial because unlike Marie, they were quite keen to get out of the tasks they were allotted if they possibly could. Barbara was quick tempered and argumentative and Marie, who kept her emotions under tight control, found Barbara particularly difficult to deal with.

When Margaret was learning piano from a teacher in South Yarra and Mother considered her too young to travel so far on her own, Marie was delegated as escort. The journey involved two tram trips and a long walk. In the winter they were rarely home before cold darkness set in. Marie used the opportunity for taking a book and she would read on the tram, as well as in the dim light of the teacher’s hallway as she waited for Margaret to have her lesson.

Later after Barbara had left home to go nursing and Marie was working, she bought season’s tickets for the ballet and opera so she and Margaret could attend together. Back home doing jobs around the house they would converse in operatic style. Marie wanted to improve her voice so that she could sing songs to the children at kindergarten, and for a time she took singing lessons from a well-known singing teacher. These were only partially successful because Marie only had a “small voice” according to Jessie Smith, the teacher.

It was during this period that Gregory the Great Dane came to live at Barkers Rd. He was really Marie’s dog and she wrote the following piece about him. She wrote it in the third person, but with her permission, it has been changed into the first person.

DOGS CATS AND OTHERS THROUGH THE YEARS.

It seems to me that all through the years in our family, we always had a dog and a cat. There were also chooks and usually canaries and budgerigars, even at times ducks. At times we all had to feed the animals, we all had preferences. Cats and birds did not interest me, but dogs were another thing.
The first dog I remember was a black and white Fox Terrier in the far distant past. I cannot remember much about it but it seems to me that its main influence on me was that I have always liked short haired dogs with clean lines.

The next dog I remember was Father’s Cocker Spaniel, also black and white. A stupid animal! This was at Barkers Rd. It used to dig up the garden, a common habit with all dogs.

It must have been either Christmas 1942 or 1943, when I was given a bike on which I used to ride to school. One day I picked up a Whippet in poor condition, and I took it home. Probably Mother would have advertised the finding of a lost dog, but anyway we kept it. I used to put the dog in the basket on the front of my bike and take it everywhere with me. Really it was too big a dog to be in the basket but we both seemed to manage. Unfortunately the Whippet and the Spaniel did not get along. Father decreed that the Whippet “had to go”. So an approximate six-week honeymoon ended. Great Sadness!

Then came two little dogs with mixed pedigrees. Roto was first. He looked like a black and tan Corgi. He must have passed on to dog’s heaven for one of the American marines, Sharon, who visited the family when he was on leave during WW2, gave Joy, Squeaker. Squeaker was a fluffy bundle that squeaked. He was a typical Australian Terrier.

In 1948 I started working at the Kew Library as a junior assistant Librarian. The (senior) Librarian had a friend who had seven Cocker Spaniels and one Great Dane. Through conversation with the Librarian it came out that her friend wanted to get rid of the Dane because it continually fought with the spaniels and it was uncontrollable. She considered it a ‘rogue’ dog. After discussion with Mother and the family it was agreed that I should have the dog. The owner wanted to get rid of Gregory and gave him to me with due warnings and his impressive pedigree. I picked him up in the car and brought him home.

Gregory of Goreth was a magnificent dog. The pigeon house was turned into his kennel, with a raised platform made to lift his sleeping area out of the dirt. The area of the kennel was about six by eight feet. (Ed: approx. two by two and a half metres) Gregory’s shoulder came level with my hip. He was good tempered. Margaret remembers Squeaker and Gregory having a terrible fight in which Squeaker came off worst, with a bad tear, and he needed the Vet’s attention. However (after that) they were an awesome pair. Our dogs were always allowed in part of the house, mainly the hall and the study (family room). Many visitors received a fright when, after ringing the doorbell, Gregory’s head looked out at them from the study window. More frightening in the summer was for a visitor to see through the front door flywire screen, Gregory standing barking, with Squeaker standing between his front legs yapping.

Gregory was a big strong dog. To begin with he was given the run of the quarter acre property. However a six foot fence was no obstacle, he would half jump, half clamour over it. If a foreign cat passed through the property he was off over the fence and numerous neighbours’ fences as well. Fortunately there was a
fenced-in area running the length of the house on the inner side of the house, which acted as a safe, roomy run for him.

Each morning I took Gregory for a walk. Once I had been pulled off my feet and pulled along the asphalt footpath for fifty yards, I soon learnt how to use a choker lead. The walk usually ended up at an oval a few miles from home, where Gregory was let off the leash for his run. I regret that I never completely trained him to come when called from a distance. I considered having him retrained by ‘an expert’ but was informed by the trainer he would only do this if I followed his training method completely, which was to thrash the dog when he was not obedient. This man had originally trained Gregory. This was not acceptable to me and under Mother’s instruction, a rolled newspaper was used if he did not obey, this being the way Mother’s brothers trained their sheepdogs.

One horrific morning Joy, Neil, Margaret and I decided to give Gregory a good run on land near the Yarra River. We all bundled into the car for a lovely morning outing. We arrived and got out. Only Gregory noticed the milking cows in a nearby paddock. Off he flew, straight through the wire fences, ‘hunting’ the cows, baying as he jumped for their throats. Horror! The four of us with difficulty, cornered Gregory, bundled him into the car and drove home. No damage had been done to the cows; however we were sure that some of the milkers would have lost their milk.

I decided that Gregory, with his long pedigree, should be shown at the Great Dane Shows. When Neil was playing lacrosse on the playing fields in Batman Avenue beside the Yarra River near the city, he would drop me and Gregory off. The first Great Dane Club Show we attended was on October 29 1949. Off we went. I was so nervous. Once out of the car Gregory began to get frisky. I had not taken any rolled paper so looked around for an administering stick. Nothing was available, so I picked up a dried piece of grass. This shaken in front of Gregory did the trick. In we went to the show. Gregory did not really behave very
well. Nor did the other owners of Great Danes. As soon as Gregory appeared they pulled in their dogs and would have nothing to do with Gregory or his owner. Gregory was obviously a ‘rogue’ dog.

At the four shows I took Gregory to, he received two seconds and two third prizes in his class. This he achieved without any help from me, who shook like a leaf and was unable to ‘place’ the dog to his best advantage. I still believe, with proper handling, Gregory would have been champion in his class. Unfortunately in about 1952 Gregory died of food poisoning.

Fun Things: Gregory liked to put his front paws onto people’s shoulders. The family trained him to do this. A pat on the person’s shoulders and the command “Up” and up would go Gregory. Neil was the tallest in the family at five foot ten, and he and Gregory would almost be face-to-face. Even Mother did this.

As I have already said, Gregory was only allowed in part of the house. He would be let in by the back door and would be up the hall before the door was closed behind him. One day a pound of butter sitting on a plate on the kitchen table disappeared. Gregory must have deterred through the scullery door, out of the kitchen, and back into the hall, swallowing the butter as he passed through.

On some occasions after Gregory had jumped the back fence, there would be a ring at the front door and a small child would have Gregory in hand, asking, “Does he belong to you?” Children were generally not frightened of the dog but some adults were terrified.

A few months after Gregory died Neil brought home a littler bundle of joy, a Golden Labrador. He had a pedigree of course but the family, after great discussion, named him Ranleigh Itma Gunleigh. Itma meant “It’s that man again” and was a prominent street drawing (graffiti) of the day. Ranleigh was a good natured dog, as all the family dogs had been. He lived to a ripe old age and when I left home to teach in Darwin, he became Mother and Joy’s dog.
After resigning from the Kew Library, Marie worked as a title searcher at Garlick and Stewart, where her brother Neil worked as a surveyor. In 1951 she started training as a kindergarten teacher and after graduating in November 1953, she worked as Director of the Camberwell Kindergarten, with a salary of £612.10.4 per annum.5

All through my life I have had problems with lung infections and allergies. This has never stopped me getting on with life and following my interests. Our mother always encouraged us to do this - adjust to the circumstance and move on.

In 1956 I was in the third term of my third year teaching as a senior pre-school teacher at the Camberwell Kindergarten. I had a very bad attack of bronchitis and was off work for six weeks. Our family doctor, Dr Milvain, told me that unless I moved to a warmer climate I would end up a chronic bronchitis sufferer. Horror! He suggested Darwin would be a good place for someone with my lung problems. He had been in Darwin with the RAAF during World War 2 and loved the place. I discussed this idea with my area supervisor. She had a friend who was a pre-school supervisor in the NT. So as easily as that, the decision was made.

I applied to the Northern Territory Department of Health, (which was responsible for running pre-schools) for a position in Darwin. My application was accepted and I was appointed as senior teacher at Maranga Preschool, a full-day kindergarten with a staff of three - a senior teacher, an assistant teacher and a cook.

My fare was paid for and I flew from Melbourne to Darwin arriving one week before the school term started. This gave me time to familiarise myself with the pre-school, Darwin and the area. I had never flown before and it was all rather exciting. The plane was very small by today’s standards - a DC3 - and the trip took 11 hours. After leaving Melbourne the plane landed in Adelaide, Alice Springs and Daly Waters. At each stop the passengers got out and the plane was refuelled while the passengers had a light meal and stretched their legs. It was a pleasant flight. As we approached Darwin I am sure I saw the moon coming up over a dam and for years I believed I was seeing the rice paddies at Daly Waters.

I was met at the Darwin Airport by the Joyce ?, the Kindergarten Supervisor, and taken to Mitchell St Hostel for single professional women, where I lived for fifteen months. Single women were housed upstairs in a long dormitory style room, downstairs was occupied by married couples.

Some of the girls were rather wild in the way they behaved. We slept under mosquito nets and one night I woke up to someone screaming. Then I realized it was me. There was a man trying to get under my mosquito net. When he

5 Letter of appointment from Camberwell Town Clerk, Dec 15, 1953.
realized it was me, he was severely embarrassed and full of apologies. He had picked the wrong bed and the one he wanted was down the other end of the room!

Later I move into Abbott House where I had my own room

WORK AS A PRE-SCHOOL TEACHER.

Maranga Pre-school was an all-day facility situated on the Stuart Highway almost opposite the Australian Air force base gates. The Stuart Highway has since been realigned and part of the Maringa Hotel was built on the pre-school site. (The hotel has now been demolished.)

The school building was an old high-set Darwin house. The roof and walls were probably fibro. The toilets were downstairs. The roof was very high and unlined and at rest time the children could see tarantulas up on the ceiling. Many times, during story or rest time, the children and teachers had to be moved as no one wanted to sit or lie directly under the spiders. It was a mixed group of children, both black and white. The majority were from the RAAF base. This was quite a good introduction to the Darwin population itself.

One of the amusing things that remains in my memory is the matter of frogs in the toilet and under the inside of the toilet seat. The toilets had none of the modern covers of toilet seats. During the Wet Season it was necessary to remove the frogs from the toilet before the children arrived. The assistant teacher would not touch them, so this was my task. Of course some of the determined frogs returned, to the horror of some of the more timid children.

(Ed: Marie told us about another incident that probably happened about this time. A little boy at the pre-school was repeating a word that was new to Marie. “That’s a nice sounding word”, said Marie and sat with him as he continued to repeat it. Not knowing Marie was there the cook leaned out the window and said “if you keep saying that I’ll ..... Oh Miss Dickins I didn’t realize you were there”. Marie had to go and ask what the word meant. She would never tell anyone what the word was!)

I worked at Maranga for two years. The hours were quite long, and I soon found that many children were being dropped off as early as 7.30am. Because of this it was necessary to catch a bus out of the city at 7.15am to be there before the children. The day ended at 4pm. Fortunately the assistant teacher lived in town and was willing to drive me home each day.

In 1959 I was appointed to the Charles St Kindergarten in Stuart Park where Barbara Jones was the director. Stuart Park was the site of an old Army camp comprising tin Sydney Williams huts. One of the huts was used for the kindergarten, another was a shop. The other huts were occupied by low income families, mainly of mixed blood. Some of the parents were unable to read and write and did not own a clock.
With the help of Kathy Nielson, (her previous assistant), Barbara started the Stuart Park Youth Group. At first this was run in the kindergarten building using the preschool equipment. The reason for this was because local children kept breaking in and using the equipment and material. The Department then allocated a dilapidated hut for the youth group to use.

I also became involved with running the youth group and after Kathy left I took over helping the girls make skirts – machine up the side, hem the bottom, and a slot in the top for the elastic to go in. Mum used to help with the girls when she was visiting me in Darwin. During the holidays I would have the girls in for afternoon tea and they could use my sewing machine.

Barbara and Kathy moved interstate and I was left in charge with help from one of the fathers whose child had attended the kindergarten. We ran the group for about two years but it became beyond our capabilities. The area was changing, with the old huts being replaced with Housing Commission houses. 6

I gave up preschool teaching at the end of 1961, but was still involved with the recently formed NT Parents Pre-school Association, acting as president for a couple of years. (Marie is a life member of the Graduate Association of the Institute of Early Childhood Development.)

In Darwin Marie met George Jiri Nemec who had come to Australia from Czechoslovakia in 1950.

When, I arrived in Darwin in 1957, George Nemec had already been there since 1952. He was a Technical Officer employed by the Federal Department of Works. The Section he worked in was Country Roads. He was employed as a surveyor and at that time he was in charge of just one survey party in areas outside of Darwin. As a result of this he would be in the office in Darwin during the wet season, say 4-5 months and the rest of the year he could be working anywhere within the Northern Territory, coming back to the office, at least every four weeks.

When in Darwin, George lived in the single men’s quarters, called Rose Cottage. Each man had an individual, small cottage. These cottages had been built to

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6 Marie suggests Maisie Adam’s book about the Stuart Park Community is a useful reference for this period.
house Army officers during WW2. I only visited the cottages once and that was after we were engaged, and George had a bad bout of flu. The cottage had no telephone and I was worried about him. George did not approve of my visit (he did not think it was safe for me to be there), although he was pleased to see me. He insisted in escorting me back to my hostel, even though he was a little wobbly on his feet.

*Photo of Marie taken by George*

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When reading George Jiri Nemec’s life story, you must remember that George has been dead for a long time. It is now 2010 and George died on 15th July, 1979. I am writing his life as I remember it after I meet him in 1957, when he was already 31 years old. He had already had a long and eventful life.

George was born in Prague, in Czechoslovakia, on 30th July 1925. He left Czechoslovakia for Germany and finally sailed to Australia in 1949. All his early documents are written in Czech. George had his school and university documents translated after he arrived in Perth; however his birth certificate and the family tree, with all the names of his forebears are in the Czech language.

Obviously George and I told each other about our early lives. That was part of getting to know each other. He kept in touch with his parents until their death, even though his letters and gifts were sometimes censored, and some of them never arrived. He also kept in touch with his sister, Irena, and her daughter and son, until he died. I tried to keep in touch with them after George’s death, but the difficulty of language and different life styles gradually defeated us.

I should explain that George’s registered birth name was JIRI NEMEC. However, I only knew him as George Jiri. On 3rd February 1955 George changed his name by Deed Poll from Jiri Nemec to George Jiri Nemec. George being the English equivalent name for Jiri. Australians would pronounce his name as JERRY. This was unacceptable to him, because Germans were called Jerries during the war.

One of the problems that I have had is that I cannot either read or speak Czech. George’s early papers are, naturally, written in Czech. I have tried over a number of years to contact someone who can translate these papers, but without success. I am now starting from the period of his birth. This section will be scrappy, as I only know a few episodes in his early life.

1925 – 1949

Jiri Nemec was born, in Prague, Czechoslovakia on the 30th October 1925. His father was Jaroslav Nemec, a bank employee, born 15/11/1896 and his mother Julia Nemcova, nee Klolenerora, housewife, born 12/08/1903. His sister, Irena, was born three years after George.

The family lived in Prague, together with the children’s maternal grandparents, who had quite an important influence on George’s early life. Their large flat must have been quite near to the centre of Prague, because as a young adult, George used to walk to the theatre to attend operas and concerts.

His grandmother was a member of the Prague City Council, and when he was about three years old she would take George with her. Large books were piled on a chair and George sat at the table looking through books. She must have
shared the family cooking and when George was young he would sit on her knee and they would “read” cookery books together. After our marriage, George translated a number of his favourite recipes, which I cooked for us. Many of them I enjoyed myself, but I was never a cooking enthusiast. Cooking is a necessity of life.

George’s mother belonged to outside organisations, but when she acted as treasurer, she took the books home for her husband to balance. The fact that the female members of his family all had their own outside interests meant that he more or less expected that I would also have my own outside interests, which of course I did. That it would be any different never entered my mind, until I met some Czech women. However George always liked to know where I was going and what time I would be home at night. If I was late returning home, he worried. Funnily enough I always felt safe in Darwin.

George’s maternal grandfather was a cabinet maker, and as he grew up he spent time in his grandfather’s work shed. As he grew, it was his job to deliver small items of furniture to customers in a very large wheel barrow. One customer could not afford to pay for an ordered item, so instead of cash, Mr. Klolenerora, took a grand piano. George learnt music on this piano. I guess this is how he developed his great interest in music.

His father, Jaroslav, was an Anglophile, so one of the subjects Jiri learnt at school was English. Speaking some English was useful once the American Forces arrived in Prague in 1944/5, towards the end of World War 2, and in his time at Augsburg Resettlement Centre in Germany. However it was of little help to him when he first arrived in Australia. Arriving by ship he heard the wharfies on the dock talking and he thought he had come to the wrong country.

I have none of George’s early school records. However, the spectre that followed him through his junior years of school, was that of his, great great grandmother, Bozena Nemcova (1840 -1862). She was a very famous Czech authoress, who, during the revolution of 1848, fought for freedom from the Austrian Empire. She helped re-introduced the use of the Czech language and wrote ten books in Czech. (Ed:-Information about Nemcova can be found on the Web)

George was an athletic boy and in the late middle 1930’s his was training for the gymnastic section of the 1940 Olympic Games. In one training session he was hanging on the swinging high rails when another boy pushed him from behind. This injured one of his vertebrae, which affected him occasionally for the remainder of his life. Of course, the Japanese 1940 Olympics were never held due to the outbreak of the war in 1939.
With the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Germany in 1940 life changed. Initially schools remained open, but when the heavy bombing by Allies started, schools and other public facilities were closed down.

While at University, George took up gliding, joining the established club. It was there that he and Jiri Petru cemented their lifelong friendship. One story he told me, happened when he was treasurer of the Gliding Club. Apparently, as a child and a young man, George had a trigger temper. Always being tall and strong for his age, he was taller than most his schoolmates. A member of the Gliding Club accused him of fiddling the Club’s books. He lost his temper with this member, nearly killing him. He decided he would never lose his temper again. As his wife, I found him very even tempered and just took it for granted that this was his normal nature, even after hearing the above episode.

**PRAGUE TO PERTH**

In 1945, as part of the carve-up of Europe at the end of the Second World War, Czechoslovakia and other (West European) nation states came under the control of Russia. Very tight controls were imposed.

George left Czechoslovakia in the late summer of 1949. He had finished his third year of an engineering degree at Prague University and was into his fourth year when there was a political purge, which prevented him from actually sitting for the examinations in Mechanic and Strength of Materials. This was the last subject he needed to complete his degree. He was told that unless he joined the Communist Party, he would not be allowed to complete his final year. This he would not do. He refused to join the Party.

He looked for work, but not having a Party Card he ended up in an unskilled job in a paint factory. After he had worked there for some time, the manager of the factory took him down to the basement of the building, where the vats were for mixing the paint. The manager told him that unless he got a party card, i.e. joined the Communist Party, he would never get anything other than the lowest of jobs, and there would be no future in Czechoslovakia for him. George considered that the manager showed great courage, for if he had been reported he would have been in trouble.

When George left Czechoslovakia in 1949, he did not tell his family for fear of reprisals against them by the authorities. He wore his ordinary clothes as if he was going to work. He carried in his pockets some necessary things for his trip, including some documentation and his watch, but little else.

George believed that, when he reached Germany he would be able to join the British Army that he thought would be forming to push the Russians out of the independent Slavic countries Russia had annexed. By the time he had walked and climbed, over the mountains between Czechoslovakia and Germany, he knew this “invasion”, by the British would never occur. He was very bitter about that.
It was fortunate that George had learnt English at school, and he had learnt German during the wartime occupation by Germany. He had translated for the occupying Americans after the Allied Forces defeated Germany.

George ended up in a Displaced Persons Camp in Germany. Photographs George took indicate that he spent Christmas, 1949, at the Grafenaschau Refugee camp. Soon after this he moved to the Augsburg Resettlement Centre. There, on 20th January 1950, he was given a smallpox vaccination. On 27th January 1950 his “International Certificate of Inoculation and Vaccination against Smallpox” was signed with the result – “Reaction to Immunity.”

After the end of WW2 many countries were willing to take in war refugees. Officials from those countries attended the different Displaced Persons camps giving information about each of their countries. Because of his interest in aeronautical engineering George hoped to go to America. The waiting time for refugees to enter America was two years. Had George stayed with his desire to go to America he may have spent another two years in the camps in Europe?

His second choice was Australia. During his interview with the Australian Immigration representatives, he was told that his university three years study would be accepted if he continued his engineering studies in Australia. We in Australia knew at that time, that no overseas qualifications were accepted and the services of many very well qualified political refugees were lost to Australia.

The other thing that stood out in George’s memory at that interview was that his hands were inspected. He did not realize the significance of this until he arrived in Australia, when he was sent do manual labouring. George must have signed a contract to work for the Australian Government for two years in any government
project, as directed. This was required by all displaced persons as a condition of them being accepted into Australia.

After his application to enter Australia was accepted he travelled to Naples as a first step in his new life. The new immigrants travelled to Australia on the M/V Dundalk Bay. This was a ship of the Irish Bay Lines based in Belfast and was actually a cattle boat. It was converted to carry Displaced Persons (DP’s) to Australia. It departed Naples at the end of January 1950. George took photographs at a number of seaports on his way, including Naples, Stromboli in Sicily, Port Said and Colombo. As the photos from these last three ports were taken from the ship, I presume no passengers were allowed to land.

On board the Dundalk George acted as a translator for many of the passengers who spoke little or no English. I believe that English classes were conducted on the ship. During the trip out on the Dundalk, George was employed as a Worker Leader from 3rd to 29th March 1950. In his papers is a “To whom it may concern” letter, signed to this effect by the Purser & Chief Steward, dated 28th March 1950.

The Dundalk was originally expected to dock at Port Melbourne, Victoria, however it docked at Fremantle, West Australia in late March 1950. The voyage took about one month. As I have already said George thought he understood English, but as he listened to the wharfies he thought he had docked in the wrong country. He found for a time, that he would have trouble understanding Australian/English and many Australians had trouble understanding him. Later, he solved this problem by putting a pencil or a cigarette in the corner of his mouth.

George was “employed” by the Western Australian Department of Public Works, Water, Drainage and Irrigation, from 19th April 1950 to 25 March 1952, in the capacity of labourer, vibrator and carpenter assistant. His two years of work was regarded as “very satisfactory” and his reason for leaving was “change of occupation”. He worked on both the Mundaring Weir (1950–1952) and Wellington Weir (1952). In a “To whom it may concern” written on the 16th August 1951, K.J. Kelrall, B.E. AMIE (Aust) gave George a glowing reference. He is “a
very conscientious worker who was quick to understand any new phase of the work.” It records that on 19th April 1950 George was employed at Mundaring Weir construction. He worked in the concrete gang.

The town nearest to the Mundaring Weir was Northam. George usually got on well with people and most people liked him. In his 1949 to 1955 photo album are pictures of the DP’s Camp, many of his friends there, the Mundaring Weir, Australian animals, buildings in Perth and Nuriootpa, and fun on the beach etc. The country and its plants must have fascinated George. Few of these photos are identified except for the Gilbery family from Northam. Mr. and Mrs. Gilbery and their three teenage children were English migrants. George and the attractive daughter were apparently quite close.

The “To whom it may concern” letter given by Mr. K. J. Kelrall at the end George’s work at the Mundaring Weir

The workers’ accommodation at Mundaring Weir
From other photos it appears that his Prague University friend, Jiri (George) Petru, visited Perth after George arrived there. George Petru had been a year ahead of George Nemec at university, so, had been able to complete his Engineering Degree. He already had a position with the Federal Government in Darwin. The two remained close friends until George Petru’s death in a plane crash into Lake Eyre.

By this time George’s parents must have mailed over all of his educational certificates. These included all his school and university certificates and reports, which I still have. All of these, he took to the University of Western Australia for translation and certification. The important phrase in the certification letter from the WA University was, “In view of the evidence submitted, if Mr Nemec were to apply for admission to this university he would probably be granted matriculant status”. Later in Darwin George did a correspondence course to acquire some English qualifications, but I know little about these and have no paper work on them.

“Certificate of Authority to Remain in Australia” given at the end of George’s contract with the Commonwealth of Australia.
1952 - 1957

Leaving Perth, George flew to Darwin to meet up with his friend, George Jiri Petru. George Petru was already employed with the Commonwealth Department of Works as an Engineering Surveyor. On the 7th April 1952 George commenced work with the Department of Works, in the Northern Territory, as a Chainman-Ganger.

For the next fifteen years most of George’s working time was spent surveying throughout the Northern Territory in towns, roads and out in the virgin shrub. Having started as a chainman, by 1954 he had been upgraded to an engineering surveyor, leading his own survey party. Jiri Petru supported his application for an upgrade as George had been working under him as a chainman. George kept advancing in the Department’s surveying structure until 1967 at which time he was in charge of two and three survey parties. Attached is a copy of the work George he did between 1952 and 1959. This must have been part of one of his applications for advancement within the Commonwealth Public Service. It was typed on a very small and light portable typewriter, and copies were always typed on very thin paper called a “flimsy”.

The Surveyor at work

After WW2 housing was at a premium in Darwin. The Federal Government needed to provide accommodation for all of its public servants in Darwin. In 1952 the accommodation for single men was in an old American army camp in the block of Daly, Cavenagh, Smith and McLachan Streets, Darwin. This was locally called the “Belsen Camp”. The basic, fibro, army huts had push-out ‘window

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7 See Appendix 1
which supplied air, ventilation and light. They would have accommodated a number of men. The design of these huts was similar to the Army’s larger corrugated iron, Sydney Williams huts, but smaller. The Sydney Williams huts were pre-fabricated and were used in all the Army camps throughout the Territory. Very few remain standing today and they are now considered “heritage buildings.”

George left Belsen when it was demolished to make way for a block of flats and the building of the, rather lovely, Catholic Cathedral. (Ed: Marie and George would later live in a flat in Daly St.) George then moved to the old Rose Cottages, which had been Officers quarters during WW2. Rose Cottages were on the extension of Bennett Street which led down to the Railway Station.

In the periods he was in Darwin, George took up his earlier interests of basketball, gliding and photography. He used to turn up at the basketball court and played when there was a player short. His height and strength would have been an advantage in this game. George enjoyed his hobbies, but gliding he gave up on our marriage. When queried, he said it was too dangerous a hobby for a married man.

The Czech border was open for a short period in the middle of the 1960s, but it closed again before we could arrange to go over and meet his parents outside of Czechoslovakia.

His interest in photography stayed with him for the rest of his life. Initially, George did all of his own developing and printing. He often took photos for the Darwin paper and got paid for these. Because he travelled so extensively throughout the Territory his collection was vast. Unfortunately not all the photos and slides can be identified. Also the names of many places have now been changed.

In the 1980’s, I sent over one hundred of his pre-1975 Northern Territory photographs to the Darwin Library where they are listed as the “George Jiří Nemec Collection”. This action resulted from a request by a friend in about 1980, for photos of the 1956 (?) Catherine floods, as she could not find any of that period. I had not realized the great loss of historical data to the Territory as a result of the 1974 Cyclone Tracy. I had been too busy with my own life in Cairns.

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PART IV – MARRIAGE

In January 1958 Neil Dickins married Bernice Solomon in Adelaide and Marie came down from Darwin to attend the wedding. She then moved on to stay with Mother and Joy in Melbourne. George had already arrived in Melbourne and was staying in a hotel awaiting Marie’s arrival.

The day after everyone got back to Melbourne, George was to come and meet Mum and the family. Marie told him not to be late, so he turned up at 8am when Marie was still in bed asleep.

Marie and George’s engagement was announced on January 24.

Marie-Claire Dickins and George Jiri Nemec were married at the Paton Memorial Presbyterian Church in Bourke Road, Deepdene, Melbourne, on Saturday 3rd January, 1959. Mac gave the bride away, Joy was Matron of Honour, and Neil acted as George’s best man. Barbara and Margaret were unable to attend because they were overseas.
Marie takes up the story: We spent our honeymoon at a beach resort near Melbourne in a big luxurious unit lent to us by friends. The weather was terribly hot and Mum was suffering from the heat, so George insisted she and Joy also come and stay at the beach where it was cooler. When mother protested, saying, “No George it is your honeymoon and you want to be alone with Marie.” George replied, “I have the rest of my life to spend with Marie.”
We returned to Darwin in late January, staying at Paspaley’s Darwin Hotel on the Esplanade. As an employee of the Federal Public Service George was now entitled to married accommodation, and early in February we moved into our new home on the corner of Duke St. and Winston Ave. This house stood on a very large block that had been part of the old police horse paddock. It was on a high ridge and overlooked the city, the railway line and the bay. The large fuel tanks, across the road were directly below the street level and did not impair on our view unless we walked across the road and looked down. The wind kept the house cool and when the wind failed the fans would come into use. Under a large Acacia tree we found the entrance to an old air raid shelter, which we had to fill in as the roots of the tree grew around the hole not through it. One of the things that grew well in the yard was broken glass!

The house, was on a quarter acre block, and had two bedrooms. It was a prefabricated building, placed several inches off the ground on a concrete slab and built of aluminium or something similar. Approximately 50% of the exterior walls were rows of glass louvres. The main walls of the bedrooms had rows of glass louvres and the second bedroom had three walls of louvres. This type of prefabricated house was rather rare and I only saw three others of the same type. As far as I know none of these houses ever had a white ant infestation. Other prefab house did.

Lottie Dickins at 11 Duke St, in October 1962. Lottie made a number of trips to Darwin.

George continued his surveying work with the Department of Works and Marie went back to teaching. George’s job as a surveyor for the Department of Works, meant periods working away from home living in remote bush camps. Sometimes Marie was able to accompany him.
George did not like me going out alone when he was away in the bush. After we got the car I drove George to work one morning still dressed in my nightdress and housecoat. As I was driving home I passed a kindy friend and pulled up to talk to her. We sat in the car talking. In the meantime George came home to get something he had forgotten, and found me missing. He was worried about me and despite having two senior people with him, he stayed at the house till I came back.

We had a friend living down the end of the street and she asked George to get some suitcases down from the top of a cupboard. I think the cases had belonged to her dead husband. When she opened them they were full of money. George helped her count the money. Where it came from and what she did with it I do not know, but she just kept on living the same modest lifestyle.

Marie was hoping to have children, although George was not particularly worried one way or the other. Sadly after a miscarriage Marie was told that she would never be able to have children. (She had a second pregnancy some years later and that also ended in a miscarriage.) Unable to have children herself, Marie felt she could not continue working with young children and resigned from her teaching position at the end of 1961. She decided to train as an Accountant, combining study by correspondence with work for several accounting businesses in Darwin. A full record of her accounting experience is contained in the attached Curriculum Vitae (Appendix 2)

Marie’s scrap book for this period indicates her interest in Indigenous affairs and the history of the Northern Territory. She belonged to the Business and Professional Women’ Club and served at least one term as President of the Gardening Club. In August 1967 the Nemecs moved from the house in Duke St. to Flat 12, NTA Flats, Daly St.
Family connections were kept up through visits to Melbourne, Mt Gambier, Canberra and Innisfail. Mother visited Marie in Darwin on a number of occasions, flying from Melbourne on Qantas overseas flights because of her heart condition - the Qantas planes were pressurised. Mother was there in October 1962 when the Worralls drove over from Queensland to stay with Marie and George at their Duke St house. On a visit to Innisfail in 1969 George helped John with survey work for the new carport he was building. There was also letter writing and some of the details in this account of Marie’s life have been obtained from Marie’s many letters to Margaret. One time when Margaret teased George about his migrant status he responded – I am a better Australian than you, because I chose to be an Australian, you just happened to be born as one.

Marie was very close to our Mother. From 1967 Mum’s health deteriorated and she could not be left on her own. Marie’s visits to Melbourne were often designed so she could look after Mum while Joy took a holiday.

At the beginning of 1970 George gave up ‘bush work’ so he could spend more time in Darwin with Marie. At the time he was in charge of two survey gangs and the change meant taking a downgrade to the position of senior draftsman.

In 1972 Marie took her final accountancy exams and became an Associate Member of the Australian Society of Accountants. To gain experience she worked part-time for an Accountancy Firm.

Barbara, who lived at Mt Evelyn near Melbourne, with Graham and their three children, had been unwell for some time with thyroid trouble. On October 28, 1974 she had a massive heart attack and died. She was forty-three. This was the first death among the siblings and affected them all deeply.

**CYCLONE TRACY**

Marie and George’s flat is on the top right hand side. They were able to take shelter in the basement after escaping down the stairs that are behind the centre brick wall.
The months after Cyclone Tracy were a period of great uncertainty for Marie and George. Immediately after the cyclone a large section of the population was evacuated from Darwin, but Marie and George remained. Marie worked for the Department of Social Security supervising the distribution of relief to victims of the cyclone.

In a letter to Margaret on January 22 Marie describes how some of their books were saved – The roof went and the ceiling fell down across the face of the cabinet, successfully closing off the books against heavy rain. The books on our open bookshelves were soaked and mainly a write off.

Our car is mechanically in quite good condition, but it was completely surrounded by roofing iron, and another car had rolled over against the roofing iron. The general condition of the exterior is poor – the passenger window and window structure are damaged, the aerial gone the sun visor twisted and the duco paint scratched back to the metal in large swipes. ..... We have no intention of repairing the car unless the insurance company insists, but there is no one to do the work here anyway. We would rather drive the car to the end of the year and then get a new one. (George later drove the car to Brisbane.)

Probably you have heard the reason why the cyclone did so much damage. The centre contracted as it crossed from the sea to land and a series of tornadoes developed around its perimeter – thus the damage – quite unexpected in Australian weather patterns. When one sees the damage done it is a continual surprise so few lives were lost.

We are still surviving but received a blow on Monday. It is possible that George’s section may be temporarily transferred to Brisbane for 1-2 years. The section and Dept. are fighting hard against such a move but we must await the outcome. Most people who are still in Darwin remain because they wanted to, and intend to live on here. People who wanted to move took the opportunity the cyclone offered and got out.

The people who occupied the flat below Marie and George were away on holiday and although it was damaged, Marie and George were able to ‘camp’ in that flat, stacking their friend’s possessions into one of the bedrooms.

Marie again – Cleaning up Darwin has slowed down now the first month is over, and it seems to me that it will be 12 months before all the rubble is cleared away. The meeting of the Darwin Reconstruction Commission last Monday was a great disappointment. People here want a lead as to the future of Darwin and
themselves, and much was expected of the meeting. Absolutely nothing constructive came out of it – as the Commission had not real authority until the Federal Government passes the necessary legislation at its February sitting.

Before the cyclone Marie had arranged to go to Melbourne in March to look after Mother while Joy went on a trip to South America. This she did. On March 3 Marie wrote from Mum’s house at 5 Bramley Court, Kew.

Have no trouble settling into ‘civilised’ living conditions here in Melbourne. Neither George nor I have any desire, or gain satisfaction from slum living, which is what living in Darwin has degenerated to. George says the conditions have been getting worse and worse, with almost no improvement. Government indecision and dithering makes life very difficult and a fortnight of rain – which runs down the walls and through the cupboards, and shortages of certain foods, eg. bread, does not help.

George has made his decision – in which I concur - we are leaving Darwin, even if George’s section is not finally transferred. George has put in for his delayed leave and applied for a transfer out of Darwin. Should his section be finally moved to another capital city temporarily George will cancel his application for leave and a transfer, and move with his section.

George has spent the weekend packing what is left of our gear, which is to be stored at the Government store in Darwin. Considering we lost approximately two thirds of our belongings we are very surprised at just how much one third is. Still we are thankful we still have the nucleus of a home.

On March 23 Marie writes, - At last George and I have some more definite idea of our future plans. George’s office is to be opened in Brisbane on 14th April. ……..George is planning to leave Darwin on the 4th or 5th April and drive to Brisbane. I am planning to fly up to Brisbane on the 7th. As we have almost no furniture now, a furnished flat is essential, at least for a time, but once we are in the flat we can consider our position. Both George and I feel that after three months of uncertainty and slum dwelling, we will be very pleased to be settled and living like civilised beings again. Joy returns home (from her trip to South America) on Tuesday.

In 2012 Marie’s great niece Amelia Glass sent Marie a series of questions about Cyclone Tracy. These are attached with Marie’s answers in Appendix 3

Marie and George lived in Brisbane for twenty months. During this time George had a recurrence of hernia trouble; probably as the result heavy lifting he did during the cyclone clean-up. He had to have corrective surgery. In November George’s close friend, George Petru, was killed in a gliding accident in Central Australia. Both Marie and George attended the funeral in Canberra.

Lottie Dickins had been semi-invalid for some years, and as she moved into her eighties her health and mental state seriously declined. Marie’s letters to
Margaret at this time express her concern for Joy, who had the main responsibility for Mother's care, and for the financial burdens involved. At the beginning of 1976 the family made the decision that Mother should be moved into a nursing home. In February Marie went down to Melbourne to help Joy with the move. On February 26, only a few days after moving into the nursing home, Mother died. The family gathered in Melbourne for the funeral. It was the last time the remaining brothers and sisters would all be together in the one place. Also at the funeral was Auntie Eddie, Dad's sister. It was the first time the family had seen her for many years. Both Marie and Margaret kept in touch with Auntie Edie after this unexpected reunion, and visited her in Burley Heads. Mum was cremated at the Springvale Crematorium and her ashes placed in the rose garden. In 2004 her ashes were re-interred at Port Campbell.

Under our Father's will Mum was left an income and the use of her house until she died. The estate now had to be wound up and arrangements made for Joy's future. This was all done amicably among the family with Mac, Neil, Marie and Margaret ceding (as a permanent loan) their share of money from the sale of Bramley Court so that Joy could buy a house for herself. Marie was in Melbourne in August to help sort things out with the Trustees, the sale of the house and the disposal of furniture. In September Joy bought, and moved into, a house at 33 Tower Rd, Balwyn.

During the two winters she spent in Brisbane after Cyclone Tracy, Marie again had trouble with asthma, and 'escaped' to the warmer north by spending time the Worralls in Innisfail. She and George decided that when George retired they should remain in the tropics as this seemed to suit Marie better. They made plans for retiring to Cairns.

Marie undertook further study while she was in Brisbane and completed her accountancy exams in 1976. She was also able to extend her interest in historical things by joining the National Trust.

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PART V - GEORGE'S DEATH AND MARIE'S MOVE TO CAIRNS

Marie and George moved back to Darwin at the end of 1976. On December 28 Marie writes - *What struck us as we drove into Darwin was that the trees have still not recovered their normal foliage. It is fairly obvious that even more trees will die as a result of the cyclone.*

Their new address was 68 Wulagi Crescent, Sanderson, a new house, made to cyclone specifications about twelve kilometres from the city. The yard had been completely cleared of native vegetation, so they had to start a garden from scratch.

In late May of the following year Marie started working twenty-five hours a week for accounting firm, R V Lowry. This involved company secretarial work for private companies which gave her practical application for the study she had been doing while in Brisbane. In the following two years she was given increasing responsibility. Meantime George’s interest was now very much involved with computers and computer programing.

On July 1, 1978, the Northern Territory became an independent State, rather than a Federal Territory. This sparked some uncertainty about the future for those like
George who had previously been Commonwealth Public Servants. He worked for the Department of Roads and this would become a State responsibility.

There were plans for a Dickins family reunion in Mt Gambier at Christmas time 1978, but events turned out differently and the reunion was never held. George was increasingly unwell and at first he was diagnosed with hepatitis. Further investigation in September revealed a serious blockage of the duct between the liver and the duodenum. The next month George had an exploratory operation and was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. The future suddenly became very uncertain. George took sick leave and they moved from Sanderson into the city to be near the hospital. (The new address was 1/118 Smith St).

In the meantime other members of the family were also experiencing problems. Bernice had a fall, damaging her coccyx, and in November had an operation to repair the damage. In December Mac was diagnosed with kidney cancer and had one of his kidneys was removed. Margaret was having difficulties of a different kind as her marriage to John disintegrated.

George’s condition was up and down over the coming months, but in February it appears to have been fairly stable. On the 11th Marie writes – At the moment George continues on a fairly even plateau and we are having a happy period, even if a little routine and uneventful. George has recommenced (computer) programing, trying to complete work he was in the middle of last year. Two or three hours a day is about his limit, but he still walks up to the paper shop each day, a round trip of one and a half miles, and does all our washing, which is a great help to me. He also does other household chores – gets my lunch on work days – as and when he feels like it.

A month later, although still uncertain about George’s prospects, Marie announced that they were going ahead with plans to move to Cairns. Cairns was to have been their retirement destination and George wanted to see Marie settled there in the event of his death. By April however, George’s condition had deteriorated and he spent Easter in hospital. They were advised ‘to take one day at a time’. We are generally quite cheerful – and rather thankful that the end, for George, is not so far off. (April 29) Marie kept working at reduced hours for as long as she could, as this was one way of distracting her mind from the inevitable.

George died of pancreatic cancer on July 15, 1979. Marie was thankful that she was able to keep him at home until the day before his death when he became unconscious and was moved to the hospital.

As always there was family support. Joy went up and stayed with Marie two weeks before George’s death, but had returned to Melbourne before he died. Neil and Bernice were in Darwin for the funeral. Margaret was in Samoa and could do little more than be supportive from a distance.

George is buried in the Darwin Cemetery. Marie planted a Carpentaria Palm at the foot of his grave.
After George’s death Marie went back to work full time as a way of keeping herself busy. At the same time she went ahead with plans to move to Cairns. This was something she and George had discussed and decided she would do. She avoided most of her old social activity, but joined the Lawn Bowls Club, with the idea that she would be able to transfer her membership to Cairns. She spent the first Christmas without George with Neil’s family in Mt Gambier, and also visited Joy in Melbourne.

In March 1980 Marie moved to Cairns, renting a unit in Abbott St. One of the other people living in the units was Anne Sutherland. Anne became the first new friend Marie made to help her settle into Cairns.

In June Marie purchased, and moved into, a house at 5/56 Martyn St. This was a brand new house and one of six on a strata title. It was still under construction when Marie bought it, so she was able to have some modifications made to her requirements. Margaret was in Cairns to help her with the move and remembers – Marie was trying to hammer a nail into the wall to hang a picture. All of a sudden she got really angry, threw down the hammer and exclaimed – ‘George, you should be here to help me do this.’ It is one of the few times I have seen
Marie lose her temper and I took as a good sign of the progress in her grieving process. She burst into tears but after a few minutes we both ended up laughing.

Joy was now the only family member still living in Melbourne. Joy decided to move closer to one of her siblings. After considering Canberra where Mac lived and Mt Gambier where Neil lived, Joy settled on Cairns to be near Marie. In July 1981 she made the move and bought a house in Whitfield. This house provided a lovely view over Cairns and gave her space for a studio. Joy would become a well-known participant in the Cairns Art Community.

Marie was able to get part-time casual work, but no permanent position. In 1981 she decided to set up her own practice, working from home with seven clients. She found she had to overcome a certain amount of prejudice because she was a woman. This was both professional and community prejudice. Through perseverance and tenacity I consider I have overcome this and now stand on equal terms with my male colleagues. The practice flourished and two years later she opened an office at 330 Sheridan St, North Cairns. In 1994 the office was moved to 152 Grafton St. Marie employed Doreen Barrett as an assistant and a fellow accountant who gave her a lot of support was Paul O'Connor. In 1990 she went 'electronic' for lodgements with the Taxation Office. Marie was registered as a Local Government Auditor and did audits for a number of shires in North Queensland between 1983 and 1994. This gave her an opportunity to visit some of the remoter parts of the State.

In her Curriculum Vitae Marie states – A breakdown of my professional practice in 1990 was Taxation and Business Consultation 75%, Audit 25%. I built up areas of expertise in advising small business people and artists. ........ Most of my new clients are referrals from satisfied clients.

Marie had high ethical standards and if a potential client suggested she apply some dodgy practices, she advised them to go elsewhere. One time, when there was a moratorium for people who had failed to lodge their tax returns, a man came into Marie with a pillow-slip full of documents that represented his financial dealing for the past five years. He asked Marie to sort them out for him. Marie did this, and the man’s tax return was lodged. Sometimes clients did not have the money to pay her fee and one time she was paid with a painting, and another time with a marble sculpture (now donated to the Cairns Gallery).

One of Marie’s ‘clients’ was Margaret. She was absent from North Queensland for three years and Marie took on the management of Margaret’s house in Innisfail, which was rented to tenants. She did her best to give Margaret financial advice, not all of which Margaret heeded, much to Marie’s frustration!

As a member of the Australian Society of Certified Practicing Accountants, Marie took an active part in that organisation’s activities, serving as branch Treasurer, Secretary and President. She also taught accountancy students at the Cairns Business College. Marie sold her practice in 1994 with the intention of retiring. However, other accountants kept offering her work, so she continued working on a part time basis until 1998.
Retirement allowed Marie to spend more time on her many other interests. Financially she was secure, with her own savings and George’s superannuation pension. She had a portfolio of shares and took an interest in the stock market.

In 1992 Marie had moved from Martyn St to a house not far from Joy in Whitfield. The main reason for this was a series of burglaries she experienced. Jewellery and other goods were stolen. Efficient as always, Marie had photos of the jewellery and the police advised her to do the rounds of the local pawn brokers and show them the photos. Marie was in one shop when a man came in to sell a moonstone necklace. Both Marie and the pawnbroker recognised it. The pawnbroker made an excuse to go into the back room, and while he rang the police, Marie stood quietly beside the robber; both of them admiring the beauty of the necklace. That time Marie got her jewellery back, but it was stolen a second time and never recovered. After the second robbery Marie decided to move to a quieter, and hopefully, safer suburb.

The house at 16 McHugh Crescent, Whitfield, had a large garden, and allowed Marie to indulge her love of gardening. Her specialties are orchids and bromeliads. Marie is a long-term member of the Cairns Gardening Club and in 2012 she was made a life member of the club. Coleen Herries, also a member of the gardening club, was one of Marie’s neighbours in McHugh Cres and they became friends. Coleen was from an old Cairns family and Marie was active in helping to have the old Herries Hospital in McLeod St saved from destruction and included on the Queensland Heritage Register.

Marie has been an active member of the National Trust for many years, undertaking research and conducting tours of the McLeod St Pioneers’ Cemetery in Cairns. She has been involved in the preparation of several publications dealing with the history of the Cairns region and she has written a book about those buried in the Pioneers’ Cemetery - “Walking through the McLeod St Pioneer Cemetery”. In 2001 she received a Commonwealth Year of the Volunteer award for her cultural and heritage work. She is a member of the Cairns Historical Society.

Right: Marie conducting a tour of the McLeod Street Cemetery. Joy is on the far right.

Marie was on the fund raising committee set up to establishment an Art Gallery in Cairns, and is a member of Friends of the Cairns Regional Gallery. She has donated artwork to the Gallery. For many years she

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8 Written and published by Marie-Claire Nemec, Cairns, 2002.
participated in the University of the Third Age. She believes in the right of people
to end their lives through euthanasia and has been a member of the Exit
organization. Marie inherited our mother’s baby grand piano and in retirement
she took piano lessons. Niece Lisa Worrall now has the piano.

In 2000 Joy and Marie visited Singapore and Thailand as the guests of Tan Kah
Hoe. Kah Hoe had been one of those university students who worked in Mother’s
garden all those years ago, and had kept in touch with Joy. Trips to visit family
continued, as well as several trips back to Darwin. Her last trip to Darwin was
made on the Ghan from Adelaide in July, 2006. She was accompanied on this
trip by Margaret and Bernice, and in Darwin she stayed with old friends.

In 2004 there was a family gathering at Port Campbell in Victoria for the launch of
the book Margaret wrote about our Robertson forebears.9 This was attended by
over one hundred and fifty Robertson descendants. The family used the
occasion to re-inter Mother’s ashes in the grave of her parents and grandparents
in the old Port Campbell Cemetery, and to attach a memorial plaque to the grave.
Mac was unable to attend the re-union because of ill health. Mac died in
Canberra of cancer on June 8, 2005.

In 2008 Marie-Claire was awarded an Order of Australia Medal (OAM) “for
services to the community through historical, seniors, civic and aged care
organisations in the Cairns area and to accountancy”.

Marie writes: - On Tuesday 1st April, my sister Joy Stewart and I flew to Brisbane
so we could attend my Investiture Ceremony at Government House on the
Wednesday morning at 10am. We were met at the Brisbane Airport by my
younger sister Margaret and her daughter Tracy Worrall. Life was really
becoming quite exciting.

On Wednesday 2nd April Tracy drove we three to Government House early. This
was just as well. We were able to park very close to Government House, which
is on a steep hill. We were directed to the front gardens where we were to wait –
plenty of seats. More people arrived, until the area was quite crowded. At 9.30
those people receiving medals were invited into the formal room. The Aid-de-
Comp explained the morning’s procedures and we were all seated. The medals
were already arranged on tables near the dais.

Our family and friends were escorted in and seated, and the procedure was
explained to them. Families were allowed take photos during the ceremony. The
official guests entered and were seated.

We were then asked to rise. A short version of the Governor’s anthem was
played and the Governor, Quinton Bryce entered and took her position on a low
dais. As each recipient’s name was read, they stood up and walked to stand in
front of the dais. Both the Governor and the recipient bowed their heads to each
other and the Aid-de-Comp read out the citation giving the reasons for which the
award was given. We then stepped forward and shook the Governor’s hand.

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9 “The Folk form the Wind Wound Isle”
The Governor then spoke quietly to me and to each of the recipients, discussing the work they had done.

Of the twenty-five people who received awards on that day, only five were for voluntary work in the community, and three of these were women. The other twenty were for service in the police, the armed services, education and the publishing industry.

After the ceremony we all enjoyed morning tea and chatter in the lovely gardens of Government House. Quinton Bryce moved amongst the people, speaking to the recipients and their families. She sat down next to us and talked about her efforts to have awards given to the many Queensland women who have given a lifetime of voluntary work, and who are still not being recognised for their work.

Marie’s health has deteriorated in recent years and now, in 2014 at the age of eighty-five, she lives quietly at the Woodward Retirement Village in Whitfield, Cairns. She made the move to the village in 2003 when it became apparent that the maintenance of the house and garden in McHugh St was becoming too much of a burden. She took her orchids and bromeliads with her and is still a keen gardener. Joy has a house in the same complex.

Marie sums up her life in the following words: As life goes by I have adjusted to the difficulties I have experienced. When I find I have to change my lifestyle I have adapted and try not to think back too much.
### GEORGE JIRI NEMEC

**Year Employed and Type of Experience**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Employed as</th>
<th>Type of Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>Chainman – Ganger</td>
<td>Meat production road Timber Creek – W. A. border&lt;br&gt;Batchelor – Rum Jungle assess road. Running reconnaissance traverses and their plotting, use of aerial photographs, settings of centre lines and curves, calculations of curves, levelling, calculation of grade lines, setting out inverts of earth works, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1954</td>
<td>Engineering Surveyor</td>
<td>Town survey in Darwin area. Setting out work from plans for civil engineering works, obtaining survey information to enable design of civil engineering works. Surveying road; Stuart Highway – Humpty-Doo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td></td>
<td>Supervising location and survey of Humpty Doo – Middle Point Road (one surveyor D.o.W.) Locating and surveying bridge over Beatrix Lagoon. Preliminary reconnaissance for road: Larrimah – Top Springs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td></td>
<td>Calculating all quantities necessary for preparation of bill of quantities for the design of seven (7) crossing in Victoria River district and two (2) at Katherine. Supervising location and survey of roads: El Sharana – Goodparla (survey by contract surveyors).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

continued
GEORGE JIRI NEMEC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Employed as</th>
<th>Type of Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Preparing bill of quantities for above road.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Supervising survey and locations of roads:-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Limestone Creek – Willeroo (survey by contract surveyors).</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Preparing bill of quantities for roads:-</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>King River – Limestone Creek.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Preliminary reconnaissance for roads in the area: Katherine – Willeroo - Top Springs - Daly Waters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Location and preliminary survey for the road:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Timber Creek – Skull Creek</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>Senior Technical Officer Gr.II</td>
<td>Locating and surveying road: Willeroo – Timber Creek, and after Dept. of Works provided two additional surveyors, supervised final setting out and levelling of certain sections.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Supervising location and survey of roads:-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Batchelor – Menelling Farm and Batchelor - Banyan Farm (two from Dept. of Works).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td></td>
<td>Supervising location and survey of road :-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Top Springs–No. 11 Bore (one surveyor D. o W.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Supervising location and survey roads; -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Victoria River Downs Station - Timber Creek (two surveyors D. o W.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Supervising locations and survey of roads:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stuart Highway – Tortilla Flats (one surveyor D. o W.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Resurveying parts of the Stuart &amp; Barkly Highways.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Designing roads Stuart Highway and Tortilla Flats.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX 2

MARIE-CLAIRE NEMEC – CURRICULUM VITAE

1. NAME Marie-Claire Nemec

2. BORN 29 September, 1928 at Geelong, Victoria.

3. MARITAL STATUS Widow.
   When I commenced my accountancy studies in 1965 I was encouraged and supported by my husband George. It was after his death in 1979 that I moved to Cairns.

4. EDUCATION
   2. Rathmines Rd Central School, Hawthorn, Melbourne

5. PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION
   3. Admitted as a Member of the Australian Society of Accountants after completing the Society examinations 13.2.1973.
      Advanced to Associate – 12.2.1980
      Advanced to Fellow -2.5.1990
      Received the top marks in Qld.

6. PROFESSIONAL ORGANISATIONS AND ACTIVITIES
   Australian Society of Certified Practising Accountants. Darwin and Cairns.
   I have taken an active part in all the society’s activities. I have served on the council of the FNQ branch of the Society for six years – three of these as Branch Chairman -1985/87, one as Treasurer- 1989/90, and two as Secretary in 1996/97.
   I have encouraged young people to consider Accountancy as a profession to be particularly suitable for women and have spoken publicly on this topic. One of my previous employees completed her Bachelor of Business at the University College of Southern Queensland in 1996.

7. PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE.
     Income tax accounting for individuals and companies.
     Company Secretarial for Companies.
   January 1975 – Department of Social Security. Financial control of emergency cash payments made by the Department to residents of Darwin after Cyclone Tracy.
     Income tax accounting for individuals, partnerships, companies and trusts. Preparation of financial statements. Interviewing clients at the beginning and end of engagement. Use of in-house computer to assist in the preparation of financial statements. Managed Secretarial Service Company for the Group, and was wholly responsible for the standard and quality of company secretarial work provided for local and interstate clients. Audited under the supervision of a registered Company Auditor.

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Income tax accounting for individuals, partnership, companies and trusts. Company secretarial for companies.
Systems analysis, tax accounting, and company secretarial.
Tax accounting.

1982-84 – EM Collins, Audit Clerk. Atherton, Qld.
Casual. Auditing of Mareeba, and Carpentaria Shire Councils as required under the Queensland Local Government Act.
Casual. Auditing of company and local (non-profit) associations

Income tax accounting for individuals, partnerships. Auditing small associations.
Accounting Fundamentals. One term.

As honorary auditor, performing some audits at no cost or nominal charge.

8. SOLE PRACTICIONER.
In October 1980 I commenced as a Public Accountant with seven clients, working from my home.
In FNQ I met with prejudice against women, which I had not previously encountered in Victoria and the Northern Territory. This was both a professional and community prejudice. Through perseverance and tenacity I consider I have overcome this and now stand on equal terms with my male colleagues.
In 1982 I moved to professional offices at 330 Sheridan St, North Cairns and then later to 153 Grafton St.
A breakdown of my professional practice is 75% Taxation and Business consultation and 25% Audits.
In 1990 my practice went on to the Electronic Lodgement System with the Australian Taxation Office.
I have built up areas of expertise in advising small business people and artists, consulting with them regularly during the year.
I have established a small satisfactory clientele. Most of my new clients are referred from satisfied clients.

9. CLUBS AND ASSOCIATIONS
1. The Old Ruytonians Association. 1946 to present
3. The Darwin Garden Club – 1965-1990. President for 3 years
5. Cairns Historical Society. Since 1980

10. INTERESTS
I have many interests and hobbies but the enduring interests that remain are -
1. Reading, Politics, Economics, Detective stories, History and Historical novels.
2. Gardening, specialising in tropical orchids
3. Hand work and sewing.
5. Preservation of both natural and built heritage and environment.
APPENDIX 3

Cyclone Tracy – 24/25 December, 1974. Questions put to Marie Nemec by M Worrall on behalf of Amelia Glass on January 31, 2014 and mostly written down verbatim. The text in brackets was added by Margaret for clarification.

How strong were the winds to you?

Very strong. All the glass in the house was broken and things were thrown around. We had to get to the storeroom (at ground level). We had an enclosed staircase we could get down to the storeroom. We had to cross an open space. I hung onto anything I could find and crawled. George just stepped out into the wind and was flung backwards. He then crawled on his hands and knees like me.

Houses just blew out. A baby was found lying in the ruins. It was crying. It was all right. I can’t remember whether I found it or just heard about it. Maybe you shouldn’t tell Amelia about that.

Why were you in Darwin?

I lived there because I have bad lungs and asthma. (Marie’s husband George worked for the Department of Works as a surveyor planning roads. Marie first went to Darwin in 1957 and worked there as a kindergarten teacher. She married George Nemec on 3.1.1959)

Where were you during the cyclone?

I was in my home (a third floor flat in Daly St, Darwin)

Were you evacuated to a high school or somewhere else and if so where?

No, but afterwards we went to the High School up the hill

What happened to where you were staying?

Very damaged, we were on the top floor. Underneath we had our own store room big enough for us to sit in. I wanted to open the storeroom door but George wouldn’t let me. The car in the garage was moved around somewhat, but it was still there and still drivable

Were there many hippies living in Darwin at the time?

Because we were permanent and we were working we didn’t really see people (like hippies)

What happened to you, were you hurt? No.

Did you have any pets and what happened to them if you had them? No.

What happened to the people you were with if any?

People in the other flats had their own store rooms. They were OK. People helped each other

How old were you?

(Marie was 46, George was three years older.)
Did Santa pull through and visit you?

Only if you call helping other people “Santa”.

Did you go back to find anything? If so what did you find?

Some furniture. I can’t remember. (Marie later spoke of going back into the flat to get clothing. I also know they were able to rescue some photos, and household goods and books that Marie still has.)

What was your worst memory of Cyclone Tracy?

Being scared. It was worse after the cyclone.

Were you prepared for (and expecting) the Cyclone? Did you bring shoes? Did you have a storeroom to shelter, did you have food and water?

Yes. We had shoes and food and water. We took our personal papers with us (down to the storeroom).

Were you evacuated out of Darwin, if so where to, when and by what?

(This was a bit garbled so I have put it as best I can). Yes, but not till later. For about a month I worked with the Dept of Social Security supervising the handout of financial aid to victims of the cyclone. George stayed there working till his department (was) moved to Brisbane. I went ahead to find us accommodation. We got help from the Government for this. People in the flat below were on holiday (at Christmas) and had left a key with us so at first we stayed in that flat stacking their furniture into a corner. When they came back he threatened to sue us. Then the people in the bottom flat gave us a bed.

They brought ships up for people to live on. I think George stayed on one of those after I left. He did not want me to stay on one of those because the conditions were not very nice.

(Marie is very unclear about these details so I looked up in my Family Chronology. Marie was in Melbourne in March 1975, staying with Mum while Joy was in South America.)

Did you go back straight away, if not when did you go back if at all?

(In April George and Marie moved to Brisbane, living in Indooroopilly. They must have still been there in November 1975 as Marie came to stay with the Worralls in Innisfail because she was having trouble with her asthma in Brisbane. I think they moved back to Darwin soon after this, when George’s Department was moved back to Darwin)

A final thought for Amelia.

Amelia would not have liked it. She would have to be very strong headed to go through with it and get on with life. Some people didn’t.