

**Finding something decent to do:  
Memoirs of a Brisbane activist for Aboriginal  
rights, 1956-1971**



Transcribed from original hand-written notes, organised and annotated by  
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## Editor's note

Joyce Wilding was an extraordinary woman who devoted her life to helping Aboriginal people in Brisbane, Queensland at a time when draconian, racist laws applied. She suffered abuse, death threats and public vilification but never wavered in her commitment to supporting poor and destitute Aboriginal people, despite living in near-poverty herself. Although her compassion and recognition of the rights of Aboriginal people was far ahead of her time, her lack of understanding of Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal agency was very typical of her time, viewing Aboriginal people as helpless and in need of direction. Reading her memoirs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is often awkward but her compassion and goodwill shine through every page.

Joyce Wilding was born Doris Winifred Harman in Southampton, England on 3 January 1909. Her father was an English soldier named Job Henry Harman, who had served in India, Burma, the Channel Islands and Ireland. Her mother, Sarah Florence Minty, was Anglo-Indian. The couple married in Madras, India in 1889 and moved to the UK in 1894. When Joyce was nine years old, her mother died in the Spanish flu epidemic, and her father died the following year. Joyce and her five living siblings were orphaned and she spent the rest of her childhood in the care of foster parents or church institutions such as the Church of England Waifs and Strays Society.

At age 16 she went to work at a Catholic convent in Portsea, Hampshire. She felt that the love and care that the Catholic nuns gave her was genuine and heartfelt, compared to what she saw as the cold Christian charity dispensed by the Church of England. She converted to Catholicism and changed her name to Joyce as a symbol of the change in her life. After marrying Frank Wilding and having her first child, the family emigrated to Brisbane, Australia where they remained for the rest of their lives.

As an adult, Joyce was always motivated to help the poor and disadvantaged, as she knew how harsh the social systems of the day were to those who were powerless. She was motivated by her own unhappy childhood to help others.

On arriving in Brisbane, Joyce's concerns turned towards Aboriginal people. She was very much a product of her times, defining Aboriginality in terms of skin colour alone and believing that the best hope for the wellbeing of Aboriginal people was for them to assimilate into white Australian society as quickly as possible. Joyce herself was of mixed-race: her mother was an Anglo-Indian of mixed Indian and British ancestry. Joyce's mother was sufficiently Indian to bar her from entry into prestigious whites-only clubs in India. It's hard to know how much Joyce's perceptions of her own race played into her thoughts about Aboriginal people – at the time, the mark of Anglo-Indian success in life was to 'pass' as a white person. On the other hand, being orphaned at a young age may have meant that she knew little of her mother and her mother's experiences in India. Ironically, Joyce was perceived as a 'white do-gooder' in Brisbane and it's probable that she saw herself in this way too. She never mentioned her Indian ancestry to her children. Her sister Elsie, who also migrated to Australia, was aware of their Indian ancestry but actively concealed it, fearing that she may be deported as she had entered Australia during the harshest days of the White Australia Policy.

Joyce first opened her own home to Aboriginal people in 1956, then worked hard to establish a government-funded hostel to support as many people as possible. Her memoirs provide the details

of the struggles and the opposition faced by Joyce and the One People of Australia League (Opal). Opal House in Russell Street, South Brisbane was opened in 1962 and the Opal Joyce Wilding Home was opened in 1971. The latter still operates today and is simply called the Joyce Wilding Hostel. It is managed by Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Community Health Service (ATSICHS) Brisbane. To date, more than 20,000 Aboriginal people have been cared for in one of these homes at their time of greatest need.

Joyce was a founding member of the One People of Australia League (Opal), which was formed to counter what was perceived as communist intervention in Aboriginal rights groups. Opal largely comprised white, middle-class, Christian women and men, and had close links to several churches. Opal perceived itself as offering social support for Aboriginal people to keep them from the clutches of communism and atheism, but was viewed by other Aboriginal rights groups as a stooge for the government: trading sovereignty for accommodation and funding.

Her activism was a thorn in the side of politicians. One told her, 'If you have so much energy, why not play cards, find something decent to do?'. Clearly he felt that supporting Aboriginal people in her own home was not a 'decent' way to spend her time. It is this comment that inspired the editor to name these memoirs '*Finding something decent to do*'.

In the process of writing a forthcoming book about Joyce's life, the editor obtained Joyce's hand-written memoirs. They cover the period from the time she first opened her own home to Aboriginal people (1956) to the time that she resigned as matron from the Opal Joyce Wilding Hostel (1971). It is divided into four main parts, each associated with a home or hostel in which she welcomed guests: Bank Street, Melbourne Street, Opal House (on Russell Street) and Opal Joyce Wilding Hostel. Apart from the broad grouping of the four residences, it is not in chronological order.

The memoirs were transcribed by the editor and annotated where necessary. The memoirs were mainly contained in a tattered three-ring binder, but many pages had been removed and were interspersed in piles of newspapers clippings and photographs, so the structure, if there ever was one, was unclear. Most pages had a category written at the top in red ink. The editor organised the papers into the categories, usually the ones chosen by Joyce, such as 'Funny Things' and 'Child Neglect'. These are mainly stand-alone vignettes of Joyce's experiences and do not necessarily provide a straightforward narrative structure.

At times the hand-writing was difficult to read. The poor spelling, bizarre punctuation and odd sentence construction sometimes made it impossible to determine precisely what Joyce was trying to say. Joyce was a woman of action, not letters.

The words and terms used throughout the memoirs are Joyce's own and there are some expressions that would not be acceptable today. For example, her use of the term 'pet' for Aboriginal children was considered affectionate at that time but is offensive today and her continual references to 'our Aboriginals' is anachronistic, to say the least. Joyce was simultaneously a woman of her time and a woman way ahead of her time.

Editor's notations are in footnotes and very occasionally in square brackets in the text. All other words are Joyce's.

This memoir focusses entirely on the good work done by Joyce Wilding, Opal, the police and government departments. There is a complete absence of any acknowledgment of the work done by Aboriginal people and groups. In fact, the work of an Aboriginal pastor, Don Brady, in encouraging Aboriginal sovereignty and setting up self-governing Aboriginal Councils is questioned by Joyce. Similarly, there is a complete absence of any recognition of Aboriginal culture, other than fleeting references to 'Uncle Willie' clicking his boomerangs together to entertain white visitors. Aboriginal culture seems to be equated entirely with material objects like boomerangs.

This memoir is very much part of a deficit discourse, with the emphasis on how disadvantaged Aboriginal people were, with no acknowledgement of any strengths or recognition of the role of culture in building resilience, surviving and thriving. Joyce Wilding and Opal were fervently seeking assimilation of Aboriginal people into mainstream white society and Joyce's praise for Aboriginal people who had 'succeeded' always involved them adopting a white lifestyle, such as becoming a member of a Christian religious order, getting a job as a housemaid, going to university or getting married and settling down in the suburbs of Brisbane. She writes often of Aboriginal children being 'placed in care' and being 'cared for by the state' and seems to view this as a good outcome. Her memoirs reveal her desire to 'control' wayward people and teach them 'how to behave'.

This is not to say that Joyce and her work should be dismissed or condemned. This memoir reveals that she had a genuine, sincere love for Aboriginal people and a commitment to their welfare, if in a maternalistic way. She openly recognised that she had no training in social work nor understanding of Aboriginal culture. In the 1950s and 1960s, when such things were unheard-of, she welcomed hundreds of Aboriginal people into her own home and lived in near-poverty to support them all, enduring abuse and death threats from white neighbours and anonymous strangers. She opened the first ever crisis accommodation for Aboriginal people in Queensland, and the stories outlined under the headings 'Cases' and 'Child Neglect' reveal the lengths she would go to support, and sometimes rescue, children and vulnerable people in need, regardless of background.

It is hoped that these memoirs provide an insight into a time of vicious racial discrimination and the efforts of one woman and her supporters to right many wrongs. As she says several times in the memoirs, she did it her way.

Cathy Day

20 June 2020



## Dedication

### My dedication to my story

I dedicate my story to my husband Frank, and to my family, without their understanding and support there would be no story to tell.

*Joyce Wilding*

This account was written about 1973.

*Joyce Wilding M.B.E.*

25/10/78

## Preface

The wording of my story and its expression are the words, as they have been spoken. All statements are authentic.

There were hundreds of stories and happenings that could never be written.

Stories of hate, misery, injustices, death, severe criticism of me & my family, untruths deliberately circulated. These things are best left unsaid, or written. My husband and myself, and my two daughters, Helen and Ruth<sup>1</sup>, worked to help the Aborigines for many years.

This is my story – or part – of the work that was done, to help bring these people of two races together, the black and the white.

To elevate the Aborigines to a place of dignity in this country, but to first wipe away the dirt and the mud that had encased them for so many years.

To all those who shared with me the task, my thanks. This was my way of doing things, not always the right way.

**But I did it my way.**

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<sup>1</sup> Joyce and Frank Wilding actually had three daughters, Betty, Helen and Ruth, and a son, Jim. However the older two, Betty and Jim, had moved away from home by the time Joyce opened her first hostel, and they are not mentioned in the memoirs.

# Bank Street

West End, Brisbane

I lived in Bank Street West End, in a very large boarding house, where I looked after 20 boys & men. It was here really where my work began. It was my first home for Aborigines.

I had prayed earnestly for many years previously that something could be done for the Aborigines. I had witnessed something many years before, something that had happened to an old Aboriginal woman. I could never forget it. I could not get it out of my mind. I could not believe such things could happen in Australia to a human being. She was the first Aboriginal I had ever seen.

As my family were very small, my time was taken up looking after my four children and my husband. I read literature about the Aborigines, but there was so little known about them, and no-one seemed to care.

My family of four, with my husband, discussed how one day I would try to help these poor people. Our children always became part of the family conference in anything we undertook to do. It was always a family affair. I told them of my desire to help the Aborigines when they grew older.

As I read, listened, and found out different things I was shocked to learn of the way they had been treated and of the lack of interest shown in them by the Government and the people. I knew I could not move mountains, against such big odds, but I would try to do something however small.

My great opportunity came one evening<sup>2</sup>. I was reading the Courier Mail<sup>3</sup>. I saw a home was required for a young lad (Aboriginal) who was to be an apprentice at Evans Deakin<sup>4</sup>, as a shipwright. He needed a home, where he could study and be looked after. Bishop Ian Shevill<sup>5</sup> from North Queensland had advertised for nearly three months for this lad. He had had no response.

It was only by coincidence that I read this article and saw the picture of a young Aboriginal boy – Tennyson Kynuna<sup>6</sup>. I ran to the phone, very excited, and offered my home for him to come and live in.

A few days later Bishop Ian Shevill had sent his representative, Father Hawkey<sup>7</sup> to see me. He saw through my house, the rooms of the other young men, and was satisfied.

Bishop Ian Shevill was most kind to me, advising me of things I could come up against. Tennyson Kynuna came to live with us. It is only of late years that I have come to understand what Tennyson must have gone through. His absolute isolation from his own people, and my not being fully aware of the part I could play to help him. I wanted to do so much for him, but didn't know how; my fears each day that he would be led away by some undesirables worried me tremendously. I could feed him, clothe him, but the things he needed most of all, I couldn't give him. I didn't know where to

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<sup>2</sup> This was in 1956, according to another set of notes by Joyce Wilding

<sup>3</sup> The Courier Mail is a Brisbane daily tabloid newspaper.

<sup>4</sup> Evans Deakin Industries was an Australian shipbuilding company based in Brisbane. It operated from 1910 to 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Bishop Ian Shevill (1917-1988) was the Anglican Bishop of North Queensland. He was nicknamed "the boy bishop" as he was only 34 years old when he became Bishop of North Queensland, the world's youngest Anglican bishop.

<sup>6</sup> Tennyson Kynuna was of the Bar Barrum people and lived at Yarrabah Mission. He was a successful claimant for Native Title over 2,000 km<sup>2</sup> of land in North Queensland, recognised on 10 June 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Eric Hawkey (1909-1986) was Bishop of Carpentaria 1968-1974. He ordained the first Aboriginal priest in the Anglican communion, Patrick Brisbane, on 29 Oct 1970.

look – companionship of his own race, and other things I cannot remember, only the tears that fell from his big brown eyes. Yes, he studied and went to work, never uttering one word of how he coped, or what prejudices were put against him. He was unhappy I know. He wanted to run away and go back to the mission where he belonged, and was loved.

It was not long before the Department of Aboriginal Affairs came to see me, asking to accommodate two more Aboriginals who were going to start at the Teachers Training College. I was very happy about this, for at last Tennyson would have some of his own people with him. These two young men<sup>8</sup> arrived, and I can still see the gleam and excitement in Tennyson's eyes – at last he had one of his own colour to be with him. The two worked and studied, passed their examinations and became the first Aboriginals to teach in their own schools.

Tennyson passed his examinations too. They were very hard for him. Still he passed and became the first Aboriginal shipwright in Queensland.

I soon found my first real experience of racial hatred – two of my white boys were so unhappy at having to tell me they must move out, as their parents were concerned about their living in a house with the 'blacks'.

Inside twelve months every white person had left, because of - living in the house with the coloureds - it was just not done.

My home was filled with Aboriginals - 22. We all lived together with dignity – there was no drinking, no wild parties, just a very large family working and living together as in any well conducted house. The difference was that my home consisted of 22 Aboriginals, and my own family.

This is where I met Tom Toogood<sup>9</sup>, a student doing social work. He was tremendous, and helped me so much. He formed a club amongst the members of the house – calling it the Kangaroo Sports Club<sup>10</sup>, He coached and worked with his team, and they toured many parts of Queensland. The Kangaroo Sports Club was formed in Bank St West End. It exists to provide recreational and sporting activities for Australians regardless of colour, race and creed. This club was formed by Tom Toogood who did so much to help better understanding between the two races.

There were sporting activities, social evenings, film evenings, barbecues and weekend excursions. The Kangaroo Women's Basketball Team, Kangaroo Men's Team, Belvederes Women's Hockey Team

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<sup>8</sup> These young men were Phillip Stewart and Mick Miller (1937-1998), who were the first Aboriginal people to become teachers. The Courier Mail of 1959 identified Phil Stewart as the first 'native' to teach in schools in Queensland. Phil Stewart served as an inspirational model to Aboriginal students, teaching them that "Captain Cook did not discover Australia" and encouraging them to have pride in their ancestry. Mick Miller became an Aboriginal activist and politician, eventually marrying Pat O'Shane, a leading Aboriginal lawyer and magistrate.

<sup>9</sup> Tom Toogood was a student at the University of Queensland (UQ). In 1959 he wrote an article in the UQ student magazine bringing to the attention of its readers the dire situation on Aboriginal settlements such as Palm Island and Cherbourg Mission, for which he received a strong backlash. His comments were supported by Joyce Wilding in the next issue. Tom later became the social worker at Allawah Grove Aboriginal Settlement in WA.

<sup>10</sup> The Kangaroo Sports Club was formed in 1957, according to another set of notes by Joyce Wilding

and Belvederes Hockey Team, their women's manager being Miss Val Williams (an Aboriginal). The men's team managers, Michael Miller and Phillip Stewart<sup>11</sup> – both trainee school teachers.

New members and visitors were always welcome in the Kangaroo Sports Club. Its membership reached over 70, comprising both 'dark' and white Australians. They believed that there is something to be gained by the vitality and colour in the spiritual heritage of the 'the Aboriginal Way', and that enriched by this link with their traditional background they can become more truly Australian, more deeply a part of this land of theirs.

We had social evenings, concerts, all sorts of other things to build the morale of these people. We had some very interesting guests – Joyce Stirling<sup>12</sup>, Margaret Valadian<sup>13</sup>, members of churches and other 'notables'. Uncle Willie<sup>14</sup> gave a demonstration by singing and clicking his boomerangs together, singing about the lost tribes and the sorrows of his people. There were tears in many eyes as this dear old gentleman sang. This was his way of saying, 'Please be kind and help my people'.

Tom Toogood, as he was leaving to go North after laying a good foundation in our sports club, said to me, 'One day Mrs Wilding, you will have a big hostel and everything you need'. 'No, it could never happen surely?', I thought. Not to have to worry about making ends meet and other problems (my husband's wages were completely absorbed in the running costs for the House). Those who lived there paid their board, but what of a real home with Government support? It was but a passing dream.

We had wonderful evenings together, discussions on what could be done. We had now discovered the rising tide of Aboriginals coming to the fore. What could we do – the Aboriginals had no voice – they were not allowed to be heard.

As the home was conducted in a decent manner there was no cause for concern by the neighbours. We all lived happily together, sharing with each other our different cultures. Our landlord Mr J. Nickelson<sup>15</sup> was a good and understanding man. When we learned that the place was to be condemned and pulled down, he gave me three months to find another house for my very large family. We were very worried, as by then I had many families, who would come to discuss their problems.

Often the police would bring in young men and women who needed help. People were beginning to know that something was being done for Brisbane's Aboriginals. Nothing like this had ever been done before in Brisbane. Having no contacts, no trained staff to direct me, I often made mistakes. I wanted to help so much, but I learned the hard way.

I became aware of the criticism that was slowly creeping in. It showed in the remarks that were made to my children who would come home and cry. I was 'bringing my daughters up with the

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<sup>11</sup> For more information on these men, see footnote on previous page

<sup>12</sup> Joyce Stirling was a journalist for the Brisbane Telegraph in the 1950s

<sup>13</sup> Margaret Valadian (b.1936) is an educator who was the first Aboriginal graduate of the University of Queensland, where she earned a Bachelor of Social Sciences in 1966. In 1976 she founded the Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teacher Aides Development Project and in 1978 founded the Aboriginal Training and Cultural Institute in Sydney. She was appointed MBE in 1976 and AO in 1986.

<sup>14</sup> See page 67 for more information on William McKenzie, known as Uncle Willie

<sup>15</sup> Spelling uncertain

blacks'. I must be 'a bad woman and a bad mother, to live and allow my family to be brought up in such an atmosphere'. This did not deter me in any way, only adding to my zeal and the belief that a wrong must be made right. I then started my daily rounds to look for a house large enough for my big family, I scanned the papers daily.

'Joyce Wilding, oh yes, that's the woman who lives with the niggers'. The filth that was spoken to me as I tried to find a house for these people could never be repeated. I learned a lesson - what it must be like to be an Aboriginal, to look for a house, employment, to suffer the insults and degradation they suffer from because their skin is black. I, too, suffered just a little, for their cause. I walked many miles during the next three months.

Yes, I found a house in Melbourne Street, South Brisbane. The people knew I wanted it badly. Yes, I could have it – if I paid £500 for the key. I took it and moved in<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> This was presumably in 1958, according to another set of notes of Joyce Wilding.

# Melbourne Street

135 Melbourne Street, South Brisbane

## Origins

It was here I saw the ugly head of racial hatred rise. I saw the injustices, the humiliations and the sufferings of every conceivable nature. Soon I became deeply involved with their problems. Feeding the hungry, giving shelter to the homeless, comforting and tending the sick and lonely. Working and living with my husband and our two young daughters, Helen and Ruth, under very hazardous conditions, struggling against impossible odds, I yet found myself increasing in faith that this was God's work and that He would see me through.

Hatred and bigotry, obscenities, attempts on my life kept me striving to love the unloved, caring for the uncared for and working increasingly to make my contribution towards the elimination of poverty and suffering and the creation of a better world for all those who seek peace, justice and prosperity for all people. This was the work of Melbourne Street, South Brisbane.

My husband gave his all. Without him by my side, his advice, his understanding in what I was trying to do – a silent partner, but without him I could never have sustained this way of living. We had experienced deep concern for our two daughters, Helen and Ruth, who became part of this life and we watched carefully and prayed that no harm would touch their little lives. We were one family sharing together, my family, and those who came to our home for help.

We had nine rooms in the house and these sheltered at times 60 people or more. We slept in the bathroom, in the laundry, in the toilet, on the cement in the yard, and under the house, which was very low, so that we had to crawl on our hands and knees to get under. The little babies slept in the copper, in the washing tubs and anywhere there was shelter for them with protection from the evils of the night. I too slept under the house and in the toilet, giving my bedroom to those who were ill or pregnant.

It wasn't long before the smoke signals blew into the skies and all around the countryside. The message? There was someone who cared!

We lived on my husband's wages, a few brought in their board to keep but we really struggled to live and prayed each day to God because He had promised even the birds of the air that He would care for them and we knew His promise would be fulfilled. The numbers grew and grew and so did the problem of feeding them all. As we prayed one morning with a very definite thought in our minds that we had only four shillings left to feed 50 people, we reminded God of His promise to us. Bang – bang – bang! It was on the front door. Flo, one of our guests, hurried to the door. I was wondering what could have happened when in came Flo her face all smiles. 'Oh Mum', as they often called me, 'He has heard us already!'. She could hardly speak for excitement. A man standing on the front doorstep smiled as I approached him. 'Here's a few cases of bananas for you'. I raised my heart in thanks. God had heard.

There were many people who were becoming aware that I was trying to do something for these people, but many did not, and much unjust criticism was thrown at me and my family. My daughters suffered at school by the unjust remarks put by different children.

The white Australians would soon shake themselves out of the dreamtime which have long kept the Aborigines as the havenots of our society. It was strangely noticeable to me that the general attitude of some people towards the Aborigines ranged from complete apathy to offhand paternalism and



there were a few people who still quoted they were too dim witted to be other than a second-class citizen. The weight of scientific evidence shows this to be an old wives tale.

As their numbers grew, more and more came to Brisbane and other cities looking for housing, some to pursue their education, or to take employment. Some were successful in finding houses for their families, others did not. Mostly in the South Brisbane area, where it became a little Harlem. There was nowhere else for them to go. As their problems began, they came into Melbourne Street thick and fast.

There were cases of murder, prostitution, beatings, child brutality, and every conceivable sin that life brings. There were deaths, suicides, gross unhappiness, a big burden to carry. I was not trained to do these things. I simply did them my way.

We had no Government support in any way. No-one cared – this was not their problem, it belongs to the other man: but –

Who is the other man?

As I was referred to as being an absolute fool and a nut, I smiled. I tried to discuss what could be done for these people, and certain notable statemen remarked that I probably ‘needed a room in Goodna’. (Goodna is a mental hospital). Another said, ‘If you have so much energy, why not play cards, find something decent to do?’. ‘But why the Aborigines?’, they said, ‘Who are they that they should have special attention?’. ‘We have departments for such people’. ‘Yes, departments that open at 8:30 and close at 4:30’, I said, ‘What happens in between? Where do they go if they need help?’. With a shrug of his shoulders, ‘That’s their problem, not ours’. This made my determination all the more fixed.

We were feeding an average of 60 daily, depending on my good cooking and knowing how to economise. God only knows what we all went through to show a Government that the Aborigines were people too. Part of the Australian heritage and well might Australia hang its head in shame for the shocking conditions under which these people lived. Many dogs are better cared for.

On the floors, under the house, in the bathroom and in the toilets we slept, making quite sure there was coverage for these unwanted people. Now it was quite often that between 80 to 90 people slept in this nine-roomed house at night. The pregnant girls would sleep in my room or on the floor next to a little room shared by my daughters. I would sleep under the house or on the bare cement with my friends. Often I gazed at them while they slept, on the cement outside, sometimes with no coverings, there were too many to provide for. I would lie and think of man’s inhumanity to man.

There were no problems as they slept, as I said God bless to them and as they turned over to sleep, I always asked God to put His loving arms right around us, so that no harm could touch us and thus they slept.

As things grew worse with overcrowding in Melbourne Street we decided to use the toilet at night as a bedroom. The outside one was left for use. Two other ladies and myself slept in there. We would spread all the old rags on the floor, we had no mattresses to spare, and cover ourselves with one blanket. We put a clean cloth over the pedestal and a little bowl of flowers. Then as we lay down, we would laugh and sing. We even discussed such possibilities as a house or hostel where everyone had

a bed to sleep on, but no, that could never really happen, could it? We wondered what would happen if the Minister of Health suddenly arrived to see us all on the floor in the toilet. We also prayed each night that there would be a place for these people to go.

I think those days were the happiest of my career. There was always our faith in God that we would survive against the odds. It was a real family affair, each trying to help the other to do whatever we could to make life more bearable. A real challenge to the Government who said it could not be done, to the people who couldn't care less, and to the Aborigines, a start perhaps for better things to come.

Soon I had created problems with my neighbours. I had done the wrong thing. Too many blacks around, too many drunks, too many people in a house that catered only for 17. I did many wrong things because I did not fully understand the laws and regulations. I did things my way.

My thoughts were for people and their problems. I became deeply concerned with the thought that if I were sent to jail, who would look after them? Who would care where they went? But for myself I didn't care one bit. I felt that it would be worth it, to make our Government and our people aware of this terrible mess.

I had a good friend in the Police Commissioner F.E. Bischof<sup>17</sup> who discovered that I was quite genuine in what I was trying to do. He gave me faith and hope to keep going. He provided us with meat, vegetables and clothing, assuring us of his support at any time if we required it. His continued support for many months carried us over many rough passages.

As time passed, our problems grew larger. We did not have enough money for anything like what was needed for the growing number of the Aborigines seeking our aid. During this time I had attended a few meetings of the Queensland Council for the Advancement of Aborigines. My only thought was to get money or advice and help to continue my work with these people. To discuss with them what could be done to help.

For years some people were eager to work with the Aborigines. People associated themselves with the Queensland Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (QCAATSI). This had been inaugurated by the Women's Christian Temperance Union. As the Constitution stated that membership should be open to all, immediately some members lost no opportunity using this Council for a platform for the most bitter and constant abuse against the Churches and the State.

Some members also opposed any form of welfare and social work to help our Aborigines wishing only to stir up political strife. Soon after the meetings were re-convened in 1961, the executive therefore decided to disband<sup>18</sup>. It was at one of these meetings I met Mrs Muriel Langford<sup>19</sup> who had

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<sup>17</sup> Frank Bischof (1904-1979) was Commissioner of Queensland Police from 1958 until he resigned in 1969, having been charged (but not prosecuted) for stealing. He was an inveterate gambler and allegedly operated a number of "protection" rackets, although this was not proven. Bischof made significant changes during his period in office, in linking the police with social service organisations, trying to improve the general public's view of the police and encouraging police-public co-operation.

<sup>18</sup> This is not strictly true. QCAATSI split into two groups: one prepared to fight for land rights and legislative change and the other prepared to work within the existing system and focus on providing welfare. The latter group was mainly composed of Christians and became the One People of Australia League (Opal).

been very interested in both the welfare and the cultural side of our Aboriginal work. She came to Melbourne Street South Brisbane to see my work and was quite impressed. We had several discussions on what or how things should be done and for the first time I felt I had at last really found someone who felt as I did. No, she was not afraid, she would be in the fight with me. She would help to carry the load, together we would carry on.

“But, no, Joyce”, as Muriel Langford said. “It is not your burden, or mine. It belongs to the Government, to the people, to the Aborigines themselves, but we shall help them carry this load until it no longer exists.”

To me, at that time, Muriel Langford was my answer to prayer. She was the brain, I was the worker, to do a job that no-one had ever before tackled alone in Australia. To help stem the tide of terrible injustice that was swamping a whole race.

Prior to this however, the health authorities had been alerted to the fact that my home in Melbourne Street was registered for 17, but held as many as 80. Knowing full well that this was not an ideal state of affairs, I yet could not bring myself to put people out, to sleep in the park, or under the bridges, or anywhere they could find. I learned that a swoop was to be made. So there was only one thing to do – to inform Dr Noble<sup>20</sup> frankly of the state of affairs. He was extremely distressed at what he was told, and asked for a committee to be formed, to which the Government could channel help. A house was to be found. This was passed in Parliament.

Shall I ever forget that day. My unhappiness and my depression as I walked thorough Musgrave Park<sup>21</sup> thinking how I had to find another place as my lease was due and would not be renewed. Where would we go? Would the Government really help? They hadn't so far! These what nots of our society. In three days I had to leave. I had tried every possible place, but again my name Joyce Wilding linked itself too closely to the blacks, and this would never do.

I prayed, how I prayed, and asked God to hear me, to please not desert me. Where could I find a friend? There was no-one who wanted us: no-one.

As I slowly walked back to the house, my despair had nearly overcome me. A young woman came running over towards me stating that a man had been waiting a very long time for me and would not leave. The first thought that came to my head was “Which bill hadn't I paid? Has the council caught up with me at last? Was it trouble with the bank?”. So with a deep fear in my heart I went inside and a young man came forward with a lovely smile on his face. “Congratulations Mrs Wilding! Did you hear the news?” I haven't heard a thing. I had been roaming around in the park praying for a miracle to happen and it had. He had heard, had seen and knew my problem. He did not let me down. I could not speak for a while. The tears just rolled down my cheeks. I had no hanky at the time but brushed away the tears with the back of my hand.

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<sup>19</sup> Muriel Langford was a former missionary in India who had become concerned about the plight of Australian Aboriginal people through reading a magazine article about their problems, and was shocked at how they were treated in Queensland.

<sup>20</sup> Dr Winston Noble (1909-1964) was the Liberal member for Yeronga in southern Brisbane from 1950 until his death in 1964. From 1957 until his death, he was the Minister for Health and Home Affairs.

<sup>21</sup> Musgrave Park is a park in South Brisbane of over 6 hectares (16 acres) which has cultural significance for local Aboriginal people. It is also a place where destitute people congregate.

What was said was a personal message between God and myself. My heart sang with thankfulness. I could not believe it. As we gathered together with such excitement about finding a new home, words could not express our feelings and many hearts had a big burden lifted because now they would have a house and somewhere to go.

Our next move was to form a committee which Mrs Langford did. Mrs Langford and I went to look at many places, one being in Whynot Street, West End. Again, the ugly head of hate raised itself high into the clouds. There were deputations to the Minister. People gathered together to prevent us from moving into the Street. Petitions were sought. Many names, including church members, were among those who signed the petition. Angry people complained about the fall in the values of their properties. They would not be able to go out at night or leave their houses in the daytime. As one journalist wrote:

“In Whynot Street an Aboriginal hostel: why not?”

So the fear and the hate instead of help and trust came back. Achievement and advancement were unlikely to emerge from the environment of the shanty and squalid conditions under which so many Aboriginals were living. This was the only way for them to live because they had never had a real chance of anything better and we were going to try to do something about it. The government policies and the missions were well enough, but the time had come for something more bold, more positive. If for no other reason, it makes good economic sense that Aboriginals should now be set on the road to becoming tax-paying citizens rather than a drain on public funds. Australia can find little to be proud of in past dealings with our Aboriginals. We owe them something: a fair go. Once they were the most self-reliant people in the world, they had to be. How did they survive? How did they avoid death - by locating food and water daily for their tribes. And they did survive, with the dignity of their race, till the coming of the white man.

A lady <sup>22</sup>loosely coupled the word *ignorance* with *benevolence* and *paternalism*, a vast difference exists between the meanings of these two sets of words. It would be wrong also to couple the misdemeanour of a few Aboriginals with every existing Aboriginal problem. The Aboriginal was the victim of institutional racism, but to advocate improvements through Aboriginal administration is to propose a form of institutional racism. It also must be realised that any democratic government, however well-disposed, can only move as fast as the people will allow and though it may take forever to win men's minds by persuasion, that is quicker than you can do by hate or violence.

Why is it then when a person has done something untoward, if he is of a different nationality or race to ourselves we often hear, “What else do you expect? They are all the same.” Prejudice is the curse of us all, for we are all guilty of it sometime in our lives. Yet because an apple in the barrel is bad does not mean all the others are too. There is good and bad among all nationalities, races, and our own countrymen too, even in our own locality.

Yet prejudice is fostered in our own children in our own houses. More often than not by careless words thoughtlessly spoken, but remembered by a child. The first time an opportunity arises the child remembers, uses the same words, “Mum said this - this must be right”, and once again prejudice is nurtured onward.

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<sup>22</sup> The 'lady' is not further identified

The need for mutual understanding is a basic element that we all desire. To be understood and to understand others. So is there any wonder at times the Aborigine is wary of the white man. If we are hurt we are wary of being hurt again but how often it is said, "The coloured man has been arrested." You hear, "That's only to be expected" but overlook the fact that possibly ten white men have been arrested too.

## Cases

### Mary, a young lady

A young Aboriginal girl came to me for a job. She had searched for me for days, finally she found me. She was an excellent worker as I soon found out, as she used to help with the work in Melbourne Street.

A lady in a very select part of Brisbane had applied for a housemaid/laundress with a very good wage for the right person. I went with Mary as she was a rather shy girl. We discussed wages, time off and duties. The lady showed me a lovely little room for Mary to sleep in. I went home feeling very pleased that Mary had found such a nice place. When her time off came, she would come back to Melbourne Street as this was her temporary home, her parents living too far away.

Three weeks passed, and no Mary. I thought perhaps she was spending her time with a few girlfriends. She arrived home one afternoon. I was so pleased to see her, I had so many questions to ask. But she wasn't at all happy. "No, she didn't like her job at all", she said. The lovely room that was to be hers wasn't. She had been in there two days when a guest had arrived. Mary was put somewhere else. She would not tell me whether she had been paid for two weeks. Something about her story worried me. She went back to her job, after I had promised to see what other job was available.

At 10:30 in the evening I called to see Mrs S. She was quite surprised to see me. I had not rung or made an appointment. I asked to see Mary as it was most important. She could not allow this, she said, as Mary was fast asleep in her bedroom. "I understand she is not sleeping in her bedroom. Where is she?", I asked. Mrs S pointed across the lawn and I walked over. There was Mary asleep, on a stretcher in the toolshed. The only remark made by Mrs S was "She would not know any better, so why all the fuss?". I collected Mary's wages and her belongings and took her home to Melbourne Street.

### Abandoned baby

A baby of six weeks had been left in a house for 4 days. A young Aboriginal woman came to tell me that the mother had run away leaving the baby alone. I arrived at the house late into the night to find it occupied by a woman. I asked her if a baby had been left there and she nodded and pointed to an empty corner. On a piece of sack a little baby lay. It was so cold.

I rushed it to the hospital. The doctor looked at it, he said "Good God!". It was badly dehydrated and near-death. I prayed to God to let it live, to have a little warmth and comfort, they put it into a humidicrib crib just as it was. The baby lived and was placed in a home - poor little pet.

I went back to the house. The young woman was angry with me as I had asked her why she had not fed the baby. She couldn't, for she had nothing either, and it was found that this young woman too

was in great need of someone to care for her, but where could she go? She lived with us in Melbourne Street, sharing with the work and doing whatever she could until she went into a domestic job. At least she had friends, food, and somewhere to sleep, even if it was only on the floor.

### Mick, a little boy

A little boy whose case history could have made one believe this world was made of monsters living on the earth instead of people. I am sure no-one would believe me if I wrote the full history of this little boy and his family.

He came to the home in Melbourne Street with his father, mother, four sisters and three brothers. They were living and sleeping anywhere, and had finally ended up in the park. Each night as the police van came around they would hide in the bushes. The police caught up with them eventually and brought them to the home.

There were no facilities for families, and we were overcrowded but they were happy to sleep on the floor and in the laundry on the outside, mother and children on the laundry floor and father out on the cement outside, but this was at least a protection from the night.

The little boy, we shall call him Mick, had a problem - poor little pet - we called him The Collector. He would go around the house taking anything from any room, all sorts of things, but of course they belonged to other people! He would hide them under his bed in the laundry. I gave him a bag to carry over his shoulder, he would put all the things inside. When he was asleep I would put the things back where they belonged and this would continue each day, without any problem. This was quite alright really until he started school, as he started collecting there. At the headmaster's request we discussed his problem together.

I made arrangements to see the doctor at the hospital where his case history was discussed. As we were speaking the doctor and I moved over to a window leaving young Mick sitting at the doctor's table. Doctor advised treatment, then we left to go home. As we were driving home Mick sat in the back of the car, rubbing his little hands across his chest and smiling all over his face. I felt his little chest with my hand, wondering why he was continually putting his hand like that then I said to the driver of the car, "Please turn back to the hospital". I rushed back to the doctor's room, holding young Mick's hand in mine. I couldn't see the doctor as I peeped around the corner and then I heard him yell and shout at one of the nurses, "I put the bloody thing down here on my table!". I made him aware of my presence then my heart thumped. He glanced at me, then at Mick. I pointed to Mick's shirt. As the doctor bent towards young Mick with a big smile he opened his shirt and there it was - the doctor's stethoscope.

### Jim, an old man

A patient who came from the Brisbane Special Hospital<sup>23</sup> under my care for rehabilitation. He was a white man, very meticulous in his appearance, a kind but unhappy man. He saw me sitting at my table one day and asked me what was wrong. "Why the worry, could he help in anyway?" he asked, bless him. I jokingly said, "Yes Jim. Ask the bank manager for a £200 advance on my overdraft. I'm

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<sup>23</sup> This was the largest psychiatric hospital in Australia. It was called the *Brisbane Special Hospital* (1963-1969), then *Wolston Park Hospital* (1969-2001) and is now called the *Park Centre for Mental Health*

always in trouble trying to make ends meet.” He then replied, “I don't like to see you worried like this. You do so much for others.” I thanked him for his kind thoughts and went about my work. An hour later he came in all smiles, “Never mind, dear” he replied, “The manager will see you in the morning about your overdraft, he will help you. I told him I was your manager and we needed help”. Dear Jim. I saw the manager the next morning, he smiled and said he was fully aware that something was not quite right. He did help me tremendously in advice and support. There are some good bank managers you know. I found one in West End, and Jim felt so proud that he had been part of getting help from the bank.

### Auntie B

Auntie B, a darling, a lost soul, unwanted, a living thing, God's handiwork, had no home, nowhere to go, living under trees, under the bridges, or anywhere out of sight. I found her in the bushes, at the back of the lane in Melbourne Street South Brisbane.

She was so black, and it was so dark you just couldn't see her, she was about 54 years. As I looked at her hidden in the bushes, I thought of man's inhumanity to man. She peered at me, then smiled, “Mama, youse was born to help us”. As I took her into Melbourne Street, where I housed about 60 people, the unwanted, she sat on the floor and cried.

In those days we didn't have much to eat, our food was practically nil, we were then living on my husband's wages and anyone who gave us things to help, someone who believed that I was genuine in trying to help these people. One night we heard a noise, in came Auntie B, drunk as she could be, and half carrying and struggling with a box of groceries. She smiled at me and said, “It's all for you, Mummy!” Then I saw a police car coming along the road. I pulled Auntie B inside the house with her groceries, and told her to lay down as I knew that she would be picked up for drunkenness if they had seen her.

Where did she get the groceries from? I do not know, I had an idea, and without shame I do know we had a little more to eat the next day.

A complaint had been made, a man had lost his groceries from the back of his car. Was I dishonest? What could I do!

Auntie B died by the hand of a man. She was murdered, and as I stroked her head as she lay in her coffin, I put the rosary beads in her hands. They were brought from Rome for me by Father Bergin<sup>24</sup>. Auntie B always said she would ‘pinch’ them from me one day. I thank God that she had a few decent meals, a bed to sleep on if only on the floor, but care in the last few months of her life. There was a little kindness and love for those who have nothing, not even a place to live in this land of theirs.

### A Peeping Tom

In Melbourne Street we had many worrying problems. Often the young girls would be waylaid on their way home, suggestions made to them, and generally the coloured girls lot was a hard one.

On the outside of the house adjoining the bathroom and toilet we had a large bedroom. We slept 6 girls, sometimes 8, according to necessity. One girl came to me saying that she was terrified to sleep

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<sup>24</sup> For more information on Father Bergin see page 65

out there as a man used to climb over the fence, tap on their door and make filthy suggestions to them.

I could not believe this. I called all the girls in my room to see if this was correct! Yes, he had been doing this for several weeks now but no one had informed me. "We shall soon do something about this," I said. Two boys asked could they take over. "As long as there is no violence, it's alright" I said. "Just give him a fright!"

They waited in a small passage by their room. Yes, he came, in one second they grabbed him, pulled off his pants and painted him black. He never came again. I was shocked when they told me of the cure they had for nasty men.

### John, a young white man

A young man living in Melbourne Street (white) being out of work and with nowhere to go was brought in by the police to see if I could help him. He found work and continued to live there. After three months he disappeared owing money for rent and other things. At this time things were very grave in the house as there were so many people, but very little money coming in. I did not have the money to pay my electric light bill. I had been given a certain time to pay. It was impossible to raise £35. I had nothing left to raise money on, and I did not have the courage to ask my friends again who had so readily given to support me.

God had promised. I knelt and asked Him to help me find a way. As I watched the click of the clock, the hours speeding by, my heart sank. For I knew if I had not paid the bill by the afternoon, they were coming to disconnect the lights.

"Oh ye of little faith", these words came to me loud and clear. I, ME, was not believing in God's promise. I was watching the clock all the time. I then closed my mind to the worry, and went about singing, in my mind thinking, "You can hear me and know my wants".

At 2:30 a knock came to the door. "Oh no! It's too early yet. It can't be!" As I opened the door it was John, the lad who had run away so long ago.

"Can I throw my hat in?" He looked sheepishly at me and smiled.

"Come in, John." He was very smart and clean. The first thing I could not help but notice. He put his arm around me. "Mum, I'm sorry I did that to you. Come and have a look", as he showed me a green Volkswagen - brand new. "It's mine!"

"Where did you steal it from, John?" I asked.

He explained his work in the cane fields in North Queensland working hard, saving money. He then drew from his pocket £50. "Mum, I am truly sorry. Will you please take it?" and handed me the money. I could not speak, silently and shamefully a prayer of thanks were uttered.

"Oh ye of little faith". I was in too big a hurry to wait and listen but God knew long before I did my problems and He kept his promise. This lad not only paid my electric light bill but bought £50 worth of groceries to keep us going. Perhaps the teaching, a little, had something to do with it because he told me all he could think of was us and how we were going along. God had guided his footsteps.



## Police care case

An early morning police visit with the big black paddy van caused concern as it drew up outside the house home. As I looked to see, "Surely not another one to feed?" No, but a big burly policeman came from the back of the van cuddling a lovely little boy, black as could be and it was a beautiful sight to see. No fear, only beautiful smiles as this little fellow looked at the policeman, he only felt love and comfort, security as those big arms around him brought him in.

A domestic fight between a family, and the little pet really came in danger of losing his life, but the police had fought with the father to save this little child. It was with tenderness that their huge policeman said, "Here is a beauty Matron, look after him", gave him a big hug and squeeze then gave him to me.

This policeman called back to see him on several occasions, bringing new toys and clothes. He really cared. Yes, the little baby was the dearest little pet anyone would love to have kept. He was finally put into a children's home.

## Funny things

### Auntie R and the party

We arrived at a party and I had been asked by my hostess if I would like to bring four Aborigines with me to join in the party as my friends knew I was trying to launch them into our society. It was a wonderful party but as there was so much there I thought it wise not to stay too long. I explained this to our hostess who fully understood. I had versed my friends in behaviour as I knew that people would watch to see for any fault. We left before supper and walked quietly back to Melbourne Street.

Auntie R - a real darling cranky one, was very cross with me. "All that good tucker up there", she said, "nothing like that at home!" She grumbled all the way home calling me all the names she could think of but to make matters worse, out of sheer aggravation she scuffled along, taking small steps and wobbling all over the place.

When we arrived home she told me to go and she would make me supper. I knew that Melbourne Street did not have such luxury but perhaps one day we would be able to provide such things. Leaving the supper made Auntie R so angry not a chance to even get a taste of that delicious food. In a little while Auntie R called out, "Come on Mummy" but keep your eyes closed. As I found a hand to guide me to the kitchen table, Auntie said, "Open your eyes Mummy". I did open my eyes I was speechless, for on my table, was chook, ham, cakes and chocolate. As for Auntie, her face beamed. "There you are Mummy, tuck in". "Do you know this is stealing!" I said. Auntie looked at me with her mouth full of chook, "It's not, it's sharing" she said. I rang my hostess to let her know that we had part of her supper down here, but she just laughed. "Eat and enjoy yourself Joyce" she said. Could I? - oh no - I realised now why Auntie R could not walk fast coming home. I had my cup of tea only, while my friends sat down and enjoyed their supper. I vowed then I would never take Auntie R to a party again, unless we had supper before we left.

## Rose and her hat

We had received many boxes of clothing for our people. Among the contents were two lovely hats. Rose and Clare made a swift grab at one. Rose was the first to get and ran into her room with it saying as she went, "This is mine to wear to church!"

Whilst Rose went out shopping for me, Clare went into her room and took away the hat and wore it into town.

Then the trouble began when Rose arrived home and found her hat had disappeared. "I'm going to beat her up when she comes home", she screamed, "she won't have a head to put a hat on!" I thought quickly. "Now Rose we can do something better, listen to me", and she did. The next morning we were at TC Beirne's<sup>25</sup> when the doors opened, I gave her one pound, this was a lot of money in those days and things of course were much cheaper.

She would not allow me to see her purchase so with a big smile on her face and several parcels under her arm we came home. On Sunday as they were ready to go to church, she kept her hat hidden under her coat, so that no-one could see. When the girls arrived from church, I had a ring from the minister. "Please Mrs Wilding don't let that girl wear that hat anymore to church if you can help it. The people were watching the hat instead of listening to my sermon".

I finally saw the offending article. Just a little white straw hat but covered with beads, feathers and ribbons.

"A model", as no-one else could describe it. It gave her a confidence, it was hers, she had decorated it, it was new, no one else had worn it before. "So there," she said furiously as I asked her to take just a few of the trimmings off.

## An islander

An islander used to come each night and sing under my window, each night was a different love song. At first we used to laugh and first thought he liked to sing to us. I explained to him that I could not sleep at night. "But neither can I," he replied, "All I want to do is sing for you."

I was obliged to ask police to give him a friendly warning which they did. Even today as I see him he waves his hands and throws a kiss.

## John, a young boy

A young boy who had walk many miles to find out where "that woman" Mrs Wilding lived. As he was brought through to the kitchen to meet me he had a little parcel under his arm. He gave me a big smile and said, "Thank you, I will stay here." Then he went into our little drawing room where the TV was and sat down contentedly. TV had only just arrived in Queensland and we were all greatly excited about it. Each felt it belonged to them as we were paying it off at the princely sum of 2/6 weekly.

At Melbourne Street we had only one bathroom and each had to take his or her turn. When it came to John's turn for a bath, he completely ignored my request for him to take his turn and continued to watch the TV. This continued for 3 days - no bath. In desperation I went into the bathroom, filled up

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<sup>25</sup> TC Beirne was a department store in Fortitude Valley, Brisbane which was constructed in 1902.

the bath, put a little Rinso<sup>26</sup> into the water and called John. He came running in to see what I required, in he came, and I closed the door behind him, standing against the door. "Into the bath, John" I said. He was furious with me. I turned myself to the door so that I would not embarrass him while he was getting undressed. I waited for 5 minutes then turned. There he was with his arms folded across his chest, looking with dignity like a king, still fully clothed. "No dugi (white person) has ever bathed me." By the look of hatred as he glanced at me, I knew that I had a fight on my hands. "Try" he said and I did but before I knew he had grabbed me, I was in the bath with him. I stayed in there too and I scrubbed him. He was fighting me too, I really thought my end had come – "death by drowning in the bath". I got out quickly, ran into my room, I changed my clothes and came back to the bathroom. He was out by then, but no longer looking like a full blood but a half caste and the water well, it had changed colour too.

This young man became one of our most trusted friends. He went later into a college in Sydney, studied well, and took his rightful place in society. We often laugh when we meet and he rubs his nose. I know what he means, only he and I know the full story. This was his bath - leaving the tap on and just rubbing water on his nose. He will go far I am sure, as he tries so hard meeting his problems and joys in the right way.

### A dear old lady

Dear little lady who had appeared in court for drunkenness so many times the magistrate warned her if she appeared before him again he would put her in jail. The next day I received a phone call from the watch house. Away I went, there she was crying because it was the same magistrate on the bench as the day before. "What shall I do Matron?"

"Now when you appear before him dear, "I said, "Just say this: I am really sorry Mr Prosecutor, but I will really try if you will please give me one more chance."

She beamed at me. Perhaps it would be alright now that Matron was in the court with her so the little lady appeared before him. As he looked down upon her remembering her and his words of yesterday, "What have you to say today?" he asked. She glanced around at me. "I am sorry Mr Prostitutor, but ..."

"Case dismissed!"

Why?

Not an eyelid was batted in the courtroom.

### School friends visit

When my youngest daughter was attending her first year at high school she came home one afternoon asking if she may bring two girlfriends home for afternoon tea. The two young girls wanted to know more of the work I was doing as word had spread around about us. Young Ruth was a little worried being concerned that everything would be alright. Living in a house with Aborigines was not the done thing. Having such a small place with so many people I was determined to make everything as nice as possible for her against such odds.

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<sup>26</sup> Laundry detergent

The afternoon came. I had everything in order and as nice as any ordinary home because I did not want my daughter embarrassed in front of her friends. As they sat around the table laughing and chatting, Ruth was very happy with everything.

I heard a cry. "Oh please Mum!" called Ruth. I was in the kitchen. I came out quickly, passing through the dining room where the girls were having their afternoon tea. An elderly gentleman, as black as the ace of spades, as naked as he was born, standing holding himself. "Oh, oh, I want to pee Mum". I put my arms around him and guided him back in his room. My poor Ruth.

To this I must say there was no evil intention in the man, just a natural function of the body but no bad thoughts. He later apologised.

It was our society and thinking that would call out and say, "How disgraceful! In front of those young women!" To me, and I know what I am saying, he was a dear old man who could see no wrong in passing through to go to the toilet. He did not see who was there.

He was blind.

## Moving day from Melbourne Street to Opal House

The moving day<sup>27</sup> from Melbourne Street to Opal House must have been the biggest house moving operation in Brisbane. It was such a happy day, yet tearful. Aboriginals were at last going to live a more dignified life. At least some of them were.

They settled in with a minimum of fuss but a maximum of joy and happiness. It was fun, to some of them, the stream of going backwards and forwards collecting our belongings and conveying them back to Opal. The distance was about 200 yards. We did not need a carrier.

There were so many ready to lend a hand. Judith Wright<sup>28</sup> the great Australian poetess. Father Bergin, two well-known barristers of Brisbane joined with us to help carry our load. There were many other friends as well.

There were police hovering around "just in case". There had been threats of violence if we moved in and a lady rang to say she hoped I would drop dead. A man also rang telling me to expect "something" and one or two unpleasant things to spoil our day.

As the complaints poured in over the moving in, with its boos and hisses by the people standing around, I knew we were in the right position in Russell Street to clean it up. A properly conducted Hostel would do this. It would keep those who had bitterly complained about the filthy language and conduct of those undesirables who frequented the Park<sup>29</sup>.

This is what we did.

The beginning with our neighbours were very strained at first but we tried so hard to cause no bother or worry in any way. Things that happened to myself and the residents at the Hostel, not

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<sup>27</sup> Opal House was purchased by the Queensland Government in 1962.

<sup>28</sup> Judith Wright (1915-2000) was an Australian poet, environmental activist and advocate for Aboriginal land rights.

<sup>29</sup> Musgrave Park. See footnote on page 18

forgetting the little children as well, who had stones, dirt and water thrown over them as they walked past, including the foul language that was thrown at us by some of the so-called civilised whites. Those who called the loudest about the filthy language of the Aborigines. I have heard and I have seen the same type of language come from the mouths of those who so bitterly complained about the “decency” of living.

It wasn't long before our neighbours realised that we were cleaning up that area. It was a lesson for both sides. A remark made by our friend Mr F Bischof, Commissioner of Police, the crime rate had decreased in South Brisbane by 90% since the opening of Opal House. Police and detectives also stated no-one would believe as they passed the Hostel at night that it housed as many as 90 people. We did keep a decent respectable Hostel under the care of myself and the Opal organisation.

# Opal House

Russel Street, South Brisbane

## Origins

The Government has given us a hostel in South Brisbane, 19 Russell Street South Brisbane. Again the ugly head of hatred rose. The Government would help us, and it was the first Aboriginal hostel of its kind in Australia. The building would be equipped to accommodate 35 residents. It had adequate grounds, was near to the city and close to the people who needed it. Representations to The Honourable Minister for Health and Home Affairs were most favourably received and followed selection of the present premises known as 19 Russell Street South Brisbane for the hostel requirements and the Government purchased the property, handed it over to the organisation in trust to be used as a hostel.

A complete list of those who had shown concern for my work in Melbourne Street, and on July 4<sup>th</sup> a meeting was convened composed of representatives from the following organisations:

Catholic Church	Rev Father Basil Bergin <sup>30</sup>
Presbyterian	Rev James Sweet <sup>31</sup>
City Congregational	Rev Rees-Thomas <sup>32</sup>
Methodist	Rev Welles
Anglican	Mrs Langford and Rev Dean Baddeley <sup>33</sup>
Rotary	Mrs L.G. Worfold <sup>34</sup>
WCTU <sup>35</sup>	Mrs Pepper
Toc H <sup>36</sup>	Mr Rane Neiper and Mr Cawley
Postal Overseas Union <sup>37</sup>	Mr J. Cranitch [ <i>possibly Cravitch</i> ] <sup>37</sup>
YWCA	Miss Alcorn <sup>38</sup>
Dept of Native Affairs	Mr C. O'Leary <sup>39</sup> and Mr Davis
Private member	Mr James Hamilton <sup>40</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> For more information on Father Bergin see page 65

<sup>31</sup> Rev James Sweet was Secretary for Home and Foreign Missions, Queensland for the Presbyterian Church in 1954. He was the Administrator of the Weipa Mission.

<sup>32</sup> Rev Thomas Rees-Thomas (1910-1993) was a Congregational minister of the City Congregational Church in Brisbane from 1948 until his retirement in 1980. He was a strong advocate for the union of the Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational Churches and a strong and public advocate for social justice.

<sup>33</sup> Mrs Langford is described on page 18. The Very Reverend William Baddeley (1914-1998) was born in London and ordained in 1941 in England. He was Dean of Brisbane from 1958 to 1967.

<sup>34</sup> Lloyd Worfold was a supporter of Opal and co-authored a book on the history of the Rotary Club of Fortitude Valley in Brisbane. His wife was Gwendolyn, so this Rotary representative is presumably her.

<sup>35</sup> Women's Christian Temperance Union

<sup>36</sup> Toc H is an international Christian movement founded in 1915

<sup>37</sup> Could this be the Universal Postal Union? If so, what are they doing in this group?

<sup>38</sup> Presumably a daughter of either Ivan or Cyril Alcorn, prominent Methodist ministers in Queensland at that time, with a commitment to social welfare

<sup>39</sup> Cornelius O'Leary (1897-1971) was a Queensland public servant, appointed Protector of Aboriginals in 1922 and Director of Native Affairs 1942-1963. He had a genuine interest in the welfare of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, but held views that would be considered paternalistic today. He believed that Aboriginal and Islander people needed strict discipline, including rewarding obedience and punishing dissent.

<sup>40</sup> Jim Hamilton was an Aboriginal man born in Duaranga in 1908. In the 1960s he was employed by the Department of Aboriginal and Island Affairs as Liaison Officer with Opal, and later worked as a lecturer in the Department of Education.

This group formed itself into an organisation taking the name of an Australian gem, a gem of many different shades, but of one state, under the presidency of Mr James Hamilton an Aboriginal gentleman. A constitution was formed. The main clauses:

- 1) Our aim shall be to weld the coloured and white into one people. To this end we would seek all possible cooperation and assistance from each other. We shall endeavour to solve by influence an example of the difficulties of coloured people. Firstly in the Brisbane area, then throughout Queensland.
- 2) To attract organisations of repute to the ranks of our organisation.
- 3) To win coloured people into God's family by spreading such love and understanding that the keen feeling of rejection fostered by these people will melt away, taking with it the shanties and humpies of the fringe dwellers, those without hope and devastating drinking of liquor for boosting morale.
- 4) To procure funds for *[sic]* further our aims. To promote opportunities for coloured and white citizens to meet together for social, religious and educational foundations.
- 5) To explore means of providing opportunities for housing, employment, and education.

It was the intention of Opal to counteract the subversive and extensive propaganda program launched by Communist influence.

Some churches had delayed opening hostels for coloured people for many reasons. One is that they do not like to participate in segregation. They rightly say that there are church hostels and organisations opened to coloured people, this is true but newcomers to town frequently hover on the fringes, but it is them we want to attract before they develop the fringe dwellers way of life.

Opal however planned a Hostel which would serve as a staging area for all. Young people would come to the hostel to find their friends there, and meet new ones. They would be encouraged to join church and community organisations, sports clubs, etc in accordance with their varying inclinations. When they felt established, they would be helped to find another place to live. Families would be helped to live as other town dwellers.

It was the end of years of fighting but the beginning of better things to come for our coloured people and as Dr Noble stated, the government would build a bigger hostel in two years. Opal House was the pilot.

As again stated by the minister, Opal was completely free from any foreign influence<sup>41</sup> and was worthy of any support that could be given. This sign of colour bar in our midst is not worthy of a community which is established on the democratic rights and liberties of all citizens.

We cannot help ignorance, it will always be with us, but we do not have to ignore it. The attitude of certain people regarding Opal House is one of the most blatant examples of civic ignorance and selfishness. Many said it would become a refuge for drunken derelicts, prostitutes from Musgrave Park. But no, it would become a refuge for those who, because of civic ignorance and prejudice, have been forced into destitution. Those public-spirited far-seeing members of our society who maintain that the presence of this hostel in Russell Street would foster further racial prejudice, do

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<sup>41</sup> This is a reference to the Communist Party, which was seen as a "foreign influence", to which other Aboriginal organisations were associated, in the mind of the Queensland government.



not ever fail to give a subtle hint to an expected decrease in land values. This and the racial prejudice were real motives wishing the hostel harm.

If this remained the attitude of our citizens, what does the future hold for the state or this country and the Aborigines. But Opal shared this concern of the community in general that this social work should be conducted at the highest level. Every care would be taken that this standard was maintained. Our aim of the Hostel, to promote understanding and friendliness between dark and white Australians.

During the last three years in Melbourne Street I carried on alone. I housed both coloured and white, the blind, paraplegics, epileptics, deserted wives, prisoners on parole, prostitutes, murderers and the mentally ill. My work with these people revealed a severe gap in our social services. Opal, however, planned for this home to help fill this gap and to be a staging area for these people.

The local churches and organisations were alerted to make ready with friendship, help them make good contacts in a local setting. Workers lived in Opal House while a suitable job and homes were found. In due course, there was no doubt that they would regain their dignity. This, then, I thought was the work of Opal. This had been my way of life and now Opal could help me do a bigger and better job. I could not have carried the burden alone for much longer, without an organisation or someone to fully support all I was doing alone in Melbourne Street.

Equal opportunity and acceptance for all Australians, be they Australian by origin, Australian by birth, or Australian by adoption.

Opal = our aim to weld the coloured and white into One People. To this end, we said, we shall seek out all possible cooperation and assistance from each other.

Opal has helped thousands of Aborigines, and whites, of every description. Twelve years I worked in Opal House as Matron, sharing and caring with all the sin and sorrow that lives in this sick world.

Opal House since its establishment had proved a vital need in the community as a whole. Not only did the Hostel provide accommodation to people from various missions and settlements but it also filled a vital need in the field of social welfare.

The Hostel was available for the people coming to Brisbane looking for work, for medical treatment, visiting relations in hospital or any need required for accommodation. We often accommodated families who were evicted from their homes, until they could receive sufficient income to support themselves and their children. We had calls for assistance from families not living in the hostel, for food, clothing, advice on family problems, sometimes the problems turned into violence. All calls and help were given - not one was left unanswered. We did our best, not perhaps a qualified way of doing things but we did our best.

A close liaison with the Police Department, had resulted in them often bringing in young boys or girls who were found wandering the streets, or in unsavoury company or without means of support. I appeared in court on behalf of a young one many times, they were placed under my care. In 12 months I had appeared in 24 cases in Brisbane, two in Ipswich, one in Sydney and two in Melbourne. This proved the solid work the Opal Organisation was carrying out.

Meal times saw a variety of people from all walks of life. Discrimination was unknown, white sitting beside the dark, adults and children alike. They were all expected to help with the tidying up of the tables. Each took his share in washing up and the general work of the hostel. This was One People working together for a cause. A close liaison with Lifeline, The Salvation Army, St Vincent de Paul, each trying to help each other, with the same purpose in mind, to relieve the sufferings of mankind.

Many individuals, church groups, kindergartens and organisations assisted with tinned food, fruits and vegetables etc. Cake shops gave us all their cakes that were left after a day's trading instead of throwing them away. Clothing, bedding, furniture, and household items were sent regularly, to be redistributed to anyone in need. Without this assistance from all groups and firms it would have been very difficult to carry out the work that was done. To all, who did so much to help - there were so many – goes our deepest gratitude for their loyalty and support.

At every Christmas time individuals, firms, and organisations sent in toys and lollies for the children. Others provided parties, or took the children to their own homes for holidays. The people of Bribie Island, through our beloved friend Mr Joe Rickman<sup>42</sup>, now deceased, provided a home regularly for the children. They were some of our most loyal supporters.

It was as though the whole world put out their hands to welcome or do anything to help. This was indeed a great time to realise we were all working together as One People. With the car the government had given us, I was able to travel thousands of miles to help different families, for this I suffered severe criticism as it was felt that I should not have left Opal House to do these jobs.

#### I was doing my job.

I did not leave Opal House on such emergencies to defend itself. There were many Aborigines there who would look after it, being proud of the fact that it was their Hostel, and owing to so much criticism being shown, they themselves were going to prove they too could cope and look after things while I went away on different calls to different parts of the state. They were tremendous, and carried out their duties for me as well as I did, for this was part of their training to take over.

We travelled to Biloela, St George, Rockhampton<sup>43</sup> and many other country towns in answer to a plea for help.

Much has been said against the Aborigines because of some who were lazy and dirty, living on handouts or anything they could steal. Our Aboriginal friends in Opal House donated a small amount from their wages, after paying their board, to help build a small house for the poor in the villages in India. These houses cost £100 each, but through their generosity the Aborigines paid for one such house, not being made to pay, but realising that there were others in need besides themselves.

They paid for lino<sup>44</sup> squares to be put through the whole Hostel, a commercial polisher, and many other large items. This was their pride, their gifts not given by Hostel or Government funds, but by the people themselves.

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<sup>42</sup> For more information on Joe Rickman see page 67

<sup>43</sup> Each town listed is more than 500km from Brisbane

<sup>44</sup> Linoleum, a cheap floor covering made of a mixture of linseed oil, pine rosin and wood dust.

They too had pride and dignity in wanting to keep their Hostel nice, their rooms were their homes, with their own personal belongings. They belonged.

It was not always a good setup, as there were parents with their children in one room, sometimes as many as twelve in one room which definitely proved there should be hostels of every kind, for families, for young men and young ladies who were attending school, for many other needs.

The amount of people at one time in Opal House was 160-172 which showed the dire need for more to be done for these people.

The Hostel was spotless. One would never believe as you would walk through in the morning, with everything in apple pie order, that the night previously it had housed approximately 160 people.

We would have morning prayers each morning. There was no set denomination, but one people under one roof, with God as our Figurehead, we would pray as we felt.

We would have discussions on different current affairs, also discussions on paying accounts, keeping house, looking after the children, the paying back of accounts owing before they came into the Hostel. With this training and help given to these people, a small amount was paid back. This they did themselves, and several families were reinstated into their Commission homes<sup>45</sup> through this. I kept at one time as many as 40 bank books in my office. This was part of teaching and training them to live together in honesty and truth, training them in the little things that needed great care, love, and diplomacy, without condescension or paternalism. People say the Aborigines cannot live this way. They can. I have proved it, and I would challenge anyone to refute my statements. This was the work of Opal.

Some could not cope with different things, some would run away, not from dishonesty but in fear of what would happen to them. Soon they learnt that Opal was there to help and advise without fear or judgement in any way. This type of training was given to all those who sought our help and advice in Opal House. This was part of their returning and trying to find a place for themselves, to live a life in society with their white brothers and sisters as part of the structure of the human race. This was Opal's way of trying to help our Aborigines but did we do it the right way?

A big mistake we have made was by saying to them, "You do it this way. The white man's way," instead of saying, "How can we help you? You show us". But we tried only to help them identify themselves as a people, a race of people, a people whose culture and dignity was one of the highest in the world until the white man took that dignity away. The nothings of Australia, by airing the injustices, does nothing to cement relationships and understanding between two peoples, but now we have a basis to work on, to throw out this bitter hatred for each other, and to work together as One People.

Opal House was situated centrally near the South Brisbane railway station, and catered for the accommodation of whole families as well as single people. No matter what colour or creed they were, they were all in one position needing our help and understanding. Work at the hostel was performed voluntarily between those who were residents at the Hostel. Between 1500 and 2000 meals were supplied each week, cooked in the Hostel's kitchen on an ordinary domestic stove at

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<sup>45</sup> Subsidised state government housing, provided by the Housing Commission

first. The Hostel was not a handout establishment, those who could pay their board did so, towards the upkeep, but there was always some sad case which had to be materially helped. Whilst there were behaviour rules to be obeyed, the Hostel was run on the friendliest of terms, with both white and dark residents respecting each other's integrity.

It was quite common to see some dark little children being looked after by their white friends and vice versa. Despite the limited size of the playing area for the children, they were as one big family and although squabbles did occur, there was no animosity between the different colours who stayed in the Hostel. To see so many children of so many ages and races playing together so happily, was a lesson in understanding which seems to escape many grown-ups.

Gradually things fell into a pattern regarding Opal House, but it was soon to be found that we needed further Hostels. The need was great indeed. We had covered much ground in establishing church affiliations, there were many organisations ready to help, and finally people were aware that the Opal organisation was doing a job. All credit must go to Mrs Muriel Langford for her job as secretary. Through her office - the Opal office - the heart and blood of the organisation carried on its terrific work, without her, as I have said before, I am sure Opal would never have got off the ground, or achieved such heights but for the pen and brain of Muriel Langford.

Not only the Opal office, and Opal House, but branches had formed all over Queensland. Homes, and work, were found. Opal did its best to provide. Centres in Brisbane, Rockhampton, Townsville and Hervey Bay were opened, all fulfilling the demands made upon them. With the blessings and support from the Government, the progress of Opal was tremendous. During the years as we worked together trying to help this unfortunate people, I often wondered where in this world do you find truth, love, integrity / in this work for its Aboriginal people, but if you can keep these all around you by your own dealings for man you try not to see or participate in the happenings around you.

I was very happy in my work. It was severe to say the least, but I had a challenge, and I was going to do something which many people said could never, never be done. Our organisation worked well together at this time. We felt at last our Aborigines were getting a better deal. Education was a must, scholarships for those who felt they could go on and higher education were one of the main facets of our work for these people. There were so many different cases dealt with one cannot remember them all. This is a great pity so much has been lost in the first history of the workings of Opal House the first Aboriginal Hostel of its kind in Queensland covering every phase of the Aboriginal problems.

After a few years of doing things my way as Matron of the Hostel I was not trained to meet the cases perhaps in the right way. I did my best for every situation. Mr Jack Stoll<sup>46</sup>, an American, also a lecturer at the University in Social Studies, approached me regarding making Opal House an agency, to have students to study and advise us what to do under the direction of Mr Jack Stoll.

We had no trained staff in this particular field. It was a tremendous idea, and became a very strong part in the structure of Opal. This worked very well indeed, there began a liaison with the different departments and the Aborigines, not forgetting the tremendous load that was taken from my

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<sup>46</sup> Jack Stoll was a lecturer in the University of Queensland's ground-breaking social work degree course, the first in Australia.

shoulders, leaving me to do other things at the same time. Teaching me also a different approach to the things I did not understand. Through this agency the Aborigines were becoming aware of their rights and entitlements. Many refused to see them at first, distrusting any approach made by the students to them. Then gradually, very, very slowly, they began to ring to ask to come and see the students about their problems. Tremendous steps forward were gained for the Aborigines in working with the students. Our sincere thanks to all who worked so hard and made this step forward.

The decision by the Government to assist Aborigines in employment was a very wise one. This was not a form of charity it was indeed part of a practical resolve to right a wrong. And the people it would help me even the young ones gave them hope [*sic*].

The parents of those who were at school could look forward to the knowledge that their sons and daughters would be given a chance to gain employment when they left school. If such a service was coupled with an imaginative educational program, with a firm housing scheme and in full cooperation with a working organisation such as Opal, the progress and integration of Aboriginal Australians would soon become a reality, and the work of Opal with its different facets of the progress for our Aborigines should soon become Australia-wide.

Through the constant vigilant care and close cooperation with departments, such as Social Services, Children's Department, Housing, Police Department, hospitals and many other organisations, there was created not just Opal House or a Hostel, for the people passing through, or a home for the homeless, the unwanted, but what was virtually a public safeguard.

But none of the ransomed even knew,  
how deep were the waters crossed,  
nor how dark was the night that the Lord passed through,  
'ere he found the sheep that was lost.<sup>47</sup>  
(Our Aborigines)

At times in Opal House the need was very great. It was realised by everyone that in Australia we had an Aboriginal problem of adjustment. At times someone would say the problem is three parts white, and this may be so, but there is no need for it to remain so.

How much was being done about it? Certainly the Government was doing what it could at the time, and there was a growing number of people who were interested. There are those who were doing the bulk of the work, continually coming to grips with the work at every level and leaving most of the talking to other people.

There were those who sincerely wished to help but were not sure what to do. Then those who criticised our work, but did little else. And always there were the troublemakers, whether they work in the open with us, or behind a false front, they were always with us, and always busy, making false accusations against me, my family, and sometimes things I did. These are the people who disparagingly called us the do-gooders. Simply to do good is God's will, so they hate and fear the

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<sup>47</sup> Part of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century hymn entitled *The Ninety and Nine* by Elizabeth Cecilia Clephane

very word and seek to turn it into something undesirable. Charles Dickens pointed out that ignorance is more to beware of than poverty<sup>48</sup>.

The Aborigines' ignorance is something we can all work towards eliminating.

Almost every church at some time or another gave support to the Opal Hostel: Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian (notably their Youth Fellowship), Congregational, Baptist, Lutheran, Church of Christ, Salvation Army, Assembly of God, Seventh Day Adventists, Latter Day Saints, Dutch Reformed Church. With prayer and counsel, spiritual fellowship, words of comfort, teaching the children and outings for them. If there is one branch not listed here, it was surely listed somewhere in this book, for without this support, and that of many affiliated organisations, the Opal Hostel could never have survived those terrible years of grappling at root level with Australia's unique problem.

Could it be said that two wars involving their country have had no effect on the Aboriginal? Well, there were those who distinguished themselves as soldiers, though they were not even being counted as citizens. And many humble families have given a son here and there, in every conflict where Australians have served. A soldier with skin some few shades darker than his fellows is accepted. An Aboriginal boxer or footballer who distinguishes himself is lauded greatly. There is a tacit admission here that he has overcome.

But the general attitude has remained, "Let them live. Yes of course for Pete's sake, let them live but not near me". I have heard this said thousands of times, but the scene is changing as this story is written. Indulged youth wanting its own way. Uninitiated youth which is demanding the truth, educated youth that believe in a fair deal for all. These are changing the scene.

Only in desperate exuberance of youth it tears at every established law and level without wanting to see if it is good or bad. An awakening Aboriginal youth is right with it. The plight of the Aboriginal was not just a state of poverty and deprivation, it was also a plight of a people who had to change their ways.

The white man's ignorance, much more lethal, can only be remedied by himself. I did things for these people against the white man's law.

There were so many of them, who found shelter in Opal House. Often the Salvation Army would ring me to accommodate a few more, this happened many times, we wanted to work together, instead of allowing them to sleep in the cold and rain. We did the same with the St Vincent de Paul, and both organisations would help me with food to feed them.

At one time only, we had 176 people sleeping in Opal House, but no one was aware of such numbers. The average would be 70-80 nightly.

We were a good team working together to help these unfortunate people. Their sharing together was a wonderful thing making their burdens a little lighter. Quite often they would need a hot bath, fresh clothing, a shave, a smoke, just little things but sometimes these little things made all the difference in the world.

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<sup>48</sup> From *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens

Some were difficult and needed firm handling. No drink was allowed in Opal House. As they used to come in at night for a bed, they would have to be experts to pass me with a bottle. I did find some. As time passed they knew this was not allowed, they would freely state, "I haven't any drink on me, Matron" and they were allowed to go downstairs after giving me their names, which was not always that correct one.

We did take a few particulars from them, as sometimes they became ill, in the night, some died. When the police called late at night, they could look in the book to see who was there. The police often found men they were looking for.

Yes, we had some very strange and dangerous cases. The men who slept in the hall, as many as 40, would lie on mattresses on the floor, with blankets and a pillow. They would sit together and chat, and as I put the lights out at 10 o'clock, after I gave them all a smoke, they would lie down. I would go through the hostel every night to see they were all right, with a God bless to them all, asking them to cause me no worry, always asking God to put his loving arms around us so that no harm could be for us. I would go to bed, but not to sleep. During the night it was not unusual for me to be called by our nightwatchman, for someone to be taken to the hospital, to attend someone sick inside the hostel, to identify someone in the morgue, and very often to put up with the abuse of drunks who would come knocking at the door.

I did not always call the police. They were always ready to assist me in any difficulty. I tried to manage as much as I could handle on my own, and it often worked. Quite often the police would bring in the "quiet" drunks if it was cold or wet, instead of taking them to the watchhouse. I have seen both kindness and extreme cruelty in these matters, with both coloured and white.

Young women who had nowhere to go, children who were in danger, were brought to Opal House, not only by police, but by Aboriginal parents for their children's own protection against drunken parents. They would be put under my care, and looked after by the ladies living there. They also did a marvellous job in looking after these little ones.

We kept a nightwatchman in attendance, he was alert all through the night, as undesirables tried to get in. One evening he found such a man, a white man, who had climbed the fence, looking through the rooms for a girl. He was brought upstairs to my office after I had been called. He slowly opened his wallet, offering me 10 pounds, to get a young woman. I explained to him, this was a decent house run by the Opal organisation for people in distress. "All niggers I suppose, anyway what's the difference?" My nightwatchman grabbed him by the arm to take him downstairs and put him outside. He seemed to be a long time. I became quite worried until I saw him coming upstairs rubbing his knuckles on his hands. "He won't come here again, Matron", he said looking down at his hands. I heard. I did not ask him why. I knew. He had given him a good hiding.

There were many friends, just ordinary people who had for years quietly and unobtrusively helped in any way they could.

- The Virginia Kindergarten under Mrs Bonner (no relation to the president of Opal<sup>49</sup>).
- Mrs Lucy Steel<sup>50</sup> late of Bethany Home.

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<sup>49</sup> The president referred to was Neville Bonner (1922-1999), who was Australia's first Aboriginal senator. He was the president of Opal from 1968 to 1975.

- Miss Fleming of Buandah who gave the Hostel its first deep freezer and many other gifts, so much it is hard to remember it all.
- Hugh Curnow<sup>51</sup> a very good friend to the Hostel. He would never allow us to speak or tell of the things he had done for us, when he died so tragically we felt we had lost a friend. We shall never forget him or his kindness.
- Our sincere thanks to the local members, Mr Don Cameron<sup>52</sup>, Mr Colin Bennett<sup>53</sup> and many other aldermen who donated a bandsaw to the Opal House.
- Through this wonderful donation Pastor Brady<sup>54</sup> started a workshop, operating under a church in Red Hill, to help those unemployed. They made boomerangs and other Aboriginal artefacts and received many orders to help him.
- There were many tools donated to help the workshop on its way. The Knox PFA<sup>55</sup> donated £200 to the Hostel. This was obtained through a 20-mile walkathon. It came as a wonderful surprise: Mr and Mrs Ian Charles (Auntie Pearl to all the children) who worked so closely by my side and carried on my work when I went to India to see my daughter.
- Auntie Jane Arnold<sup>56</sup> an Aboriginal lady who stood by my husband and myself for so many years, she is now part of our life and our family.
- To the Lions Club of Southport and many other Lions Clubs, to Rotary, Apex, so many other clubs and people became part of the job which Opal was doing to help these people, and others too many to say, joined in carrying the burden with us. To those we have not mentioned we do not forget your wonderful efforts for us.

## Cases

### A difficult woman

A very nervous woman who had been in hospital came to Opal House for help. She was difficult at times and many mothers with their children kept out of her way.

One morning she had taken down her third bundle to burn in the Incinerator. I thought I had better go to see what was happening as one of the ladies was quite concerned. I knew she had very few belongings. She was standing by, poking with an iron bar, burning her clothing, until I saw what I knew to be, one of our new bedspreads purchased only two months ago. I was horrified.

“What in the world are you doing, Mrs X?” I asked.

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<sup>50</sup> Presumably Bethany Aged Christians’ Home

<sup>51</sup> Presumably Hugh Curnow of *The Bulletin*, who lived in Brisbane at the time

<sup>52</sup> Don Cameron (born 1940) is a Liberal party politician who held various seats in Federal parliament from 1966 until his defeat in 1990.

<sup>53</sup> Colin Bennett (1919-2002) was born in Townsville and was a barrister and lifelong member of the Australian Labor Party. He was an alderman on the Brisbane City Council (1949-1960) and then held the state seat of South Brisbane (1960-1972). He waged a long-standing campaign against corrupt Police Commissioner Frank Bischof, who was described as a “good friend” of Joyce Wilding on page 8 of these memoirs.

<sup>54</sup> Pastor Don Brady (1927-1984) was a Methodist pastor and Aboriginal leader, who worked to help Aboriginal people establish their distinct identity as Aboriginal people through culture.

<sup>55</sup> Presbyterian Fellowship of Australia

<sup>56</sup> Jane Arnold (1908-2002) was born in southwest Queensland of the Garlali (or Kullili) people. She devoted much of her life to improving the living conditions of Aboriginal people, particularly in Brisbane.



"I hate yellow things. I burn everything I hate!" she yelled at me, poking viciously at the offending article.

"Now if you had told me, I could have given you another colour", I explained to her and went upstairs.

A mother was watching her from the nearby landing as her little baby of 18 months was crawling on the cement and crying.

"Shut up!" yelled Mrs X. "I hate kids!"

I had just reached the top of the landing when her words registered in my mind. I jumped from the landing to the ground, about 6 ft, and just caught her as she picked up the baby to put her in the Incinerator. The young mother was numbed with shock and could not move. As I took both young mother and child into her room, where our deputy Matron took care of her, I quietly spoke to Mrs X who went to strike me with the iron bar with which she was poking the fire.

All efforts failed on my part to take her upstairs. Finally, I called the police, and it was with great difficulty that they persuaded her to go with them. She was finally admitted to Brisbane Special Hospital<sup>57</sup> for care and attention.

### Court cases

I was called to Sydney to hear the trial of a young woman who had shot a man. She had come to the Hostel on many occasions and I knew her well, and was quite prepared to help her in any way that I could. She had tried to get a job in Brisbane. She was spotlessly clean and a very good woman, so she thought she wanted to try another state. This was when the trouble began.

The judge had heard of the work of Opal and had asked me, through the Prosecutor, to represent her in court, because she came from Queensland. She was placed under my care for three years, when she came back to Brisbane. She continued to look for work and with the help of the Methodist Church she was found a job. She worked well and continue to do so under Opal's care.

There were several cases in which I became involved. The absolute terror of the courts for these people. The impressions of everlasting taunts and queries. I learned things I had never known but it was all part of the job I was doing. I realised the racial hatred, the heart-rending call for help from these people. They had no knowledge of court procedures. The coldness of such things made me realise that I was in a very hard school and I had hard lessons to learn if I would accomplish what I had set out to do.

To bring an Aborigine to a state where they would fully understand such things. Perhaps one day an Aboriginal solicitor to help defend them; perhaps the knowledge that they themselves could stand in any court to defend others in the right way. But most of all for them to take their place anywhere in this world - the Aborigines - as human beings.

### A Catholic boy

A mother arrived at Opal House early one morning with her six children hoping to make a new life for herself. She had been very unhappy and made a wise move for the sake of the children.

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<sup>57</sup> A psychiatric hospital. See footnote on page 22 for more information.

They were Catholics.

It soon became noticeable that her eldest boy, aged 12 years, was very religious. He went to mass each morning and every evening would gather as many as possible to say the Rosary. Ross was often made fun of because of his devotion, this did not deter him in any way and it became quite apparent that his purpose in life, also his great wish, was to become a Christian Brother - a teaching order.

Through the generosity of the St Veronica's Society, he was won a bursary which entitled him to enter the Christian Brother's College, St Laurence's in East Brisbane. Through the help of many people, through the St Veronicas Society, Ross was helped and cared for during his studies. He became the first Aboriginal (or part) to become a Christian Brother.

Today he is known as Brother Anthony and is living the life that was his heart's desire. A great many thanks go to Mrs Colin Bennett, founder of the St Veronica's Society who worked so hard to find any channel available to help Ross and any others who would like to do the same, on any other educational project. This is called the St Veronica's Bursary and is made available to any Aborigine who would care to ask.

To Brother Sheriff - one of the principals of the college - for his great wisdom in guiding and divesting Ross through a long hard road also for his love and great understanding of the Aborigines.

### The riverbank

One late evening, I went to the river bank at the back of Paul's Milk Factory<sup>58</sup>. I had been told by a telephone call that there were several men there and one of them was ill. The driver sat in the car, waiting for me as I went to the bank of the river. He did not want me to go alone, he was afraid for me, but I insisted and he remained in the car.

I found a partly built shed, down into the riverbank. As I looked inside, on the ground, I saw five men, beer and wine bottles were everywhere, they were so drunk they did not know I was there or that the tide was coming in, covering them over with water and then receding. It was a sight I shall never forget.

As the tide came in, I lost a shoe in the mud covering my feet and in trying to get it out I fell into the dirty slimy water and mud. I felt awful and looked it too, looking something like the men lying down. My one thought was to get them out before the tide came in any further, otherwise being too drunk to move they would have drowned.

It was a heartbreaking job, my driver went back to the hostel to bring help. We took them back into the hostel, bathed them and myself and put on clean clothing. They could not eat.

Two were taken to hospital where eventually they died. The others stayed for a while in Opal House, then finally moved on.

These were the unwanted, the unloved and by listening to their different stories, the sorrows of each one, the reasons for their predicaments, each had a story to tell. There were black and white together, each with a different problem, but all needing the one care which Opal was so desperately

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<sup>58</sup> This factory is now Parmalat and is situated on the banks of the Brisbane River, about 1km from Opal House in Russell Street.

providing filling this wide gap in our social welfare. I listened, and found, I did not always believe. Perhaps if someone had listened or cared just a little, or taken time to listen to share with these people perhaps the whole situation would be entirely different. But who wants to listen to other people's woes? Haven't we enough of our own? But if each person in this world cared just a little for someone else's sorrows and burdens we would have a better people in a wonderful world.

Not me Lord - but You to teach us the way

### A wedding

A couple with six children came into the Hostel. They could not find accommodation, it's hard enough for a white family with children but an Aboriginal family - it's hopeless. It was a de facto situation<sup>59</sup> and the couple were quite happy together. You felt this kind of oneness with each other.

I felt that I wanted to really do something for them. I discussed many things with them, including marriage. This they wanted to do before but did not know how to go about it. I made all arrangements with the minister, who was very happy to oblige, feeling as I did, let them start a new life together in the right way and go from there.

The great day came. We dressed them in their wedding clothes, all the relations came - for clothing, it was the 'wedding of the year'. The part that was so beautiful were all the little children peeping in now and again to see what was happening to Mum and Dad. Out came the bride, and bridegroom, all smiles, out came the minister to congratulate the happy pair. "Wot did they do to yer, Dad?" asked one fellow. They all gathered around their parents knowing full well that something had happened, something lovely, because of the smiling faces. Then the most beautiful quote ever spoken. The bridegroom turned to his wife of ten years, "Darling, you're really mine now. I've just paid that parsons two quid<sup>60</sup> for you."

They all came back to Opal House and enjoyed a feast. Lots of cakes, soft drinks, a lovely cake and lots and lots of well-wishers. As the bride and groom and their six children left the Hostel to go into a house we had found for them, I felt in my heart that perhaps we were doing, or giving, a little happiness somewhere.

### River trouble

At 11:30 one evening, the water police rang for my assistance. "Please would I be waiting at the gate of Opal House?". This I did, wondering what could be wrong. As I looked inside the car when it arrived I saw a writhing mass of humanity, naked and using such language that made the air turn blue. This young woman of such tender years had been found on a ship and had been entertaining the crew. There was a raid by the police. So that she would not be caught, she jumped into the Brisbane River and started to swim for shore. This of course worried the police in case she would drown. The water police picked her up and she was put into the car naked as she was born, till someone gave a sheet to cover her.

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<sup>59</sup> In the 1960s and 70s, "de facto" meant a couple who were living together as though they were married, but were not actually legally married.

<sup>60</sup> In the 1960s, a 'quid' was a pound. Two quid = £2

We drove about 20 miles to where her grandparents lived, but she fought us all the way, doing her best to jump out of the car. No, she would not wake her grandparents she said. Somehow her grandma appeared from nowhere. She looked at the girl, and I explained what had happened. Grandma moved toward the girl. All I could see, firstly a loud severe slap on a bare bottom and the next a lovely young girlie, naked, disappearing into the darkness.

### A man with a razor

One afternoon a man came to the front door as I was answering the telephone, my back was to the door. I knew someone was there and as I turned I saw an Aboriginal man with an open cut razor throwing his arms around telling to me to get off the bloody phone or he would cut my throat. His wife and family were already in the Hostel for their own protection against his violent outbreaks.

As he was shouting very loudly my friend at the other end of the phone knew something was wrong. "Are you in danger?"

"Oh yes"

"Do you need help?"

"Oh yes. As soon as possible."

"Keep up the conversation, Matron. I'll get help."

As I was speaking on the phone to no-one he was getting very angry. I felt that I did not have long to live. What it would be like having your throat cut? Many terrible things were going through my mind. My throat was dry wondering how it was all going to end.

"Please wait just one minute" I turned to him. "I won't be long"

The perspiration was running down my nose. As I watched him, he was watching me ready to spring I felt sure. He was unaware of some detectives who came so quietly up the stairs. One big pair of arms went around him and the razor dropped to the floor.

This man was taken to Wolston Park<sup>61</sup> where he was cared for. His great need for treatment was apparent. A long time in the hospital was the requirement he needed. I could never thank enough those detectives who did their job so well to avoid what could have been a tragedy.

### Ben

Ben - he kept me locked in my office so that no-one could get near me. No-one in the hostel had any idea what was going on inside my office. He would not allow me to use the phone which was on my desk or allow me near the door. I must listen to what he had to say.

I felt a little nervous at the way he was looking at me. I sat and listened. He loved me, had always loved me.

"But Ben, I have my own husband and I do not want anyone else."

He became very aggressive, asking me to take my frock off. He was muttering all sorts of silly things.

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<sup>61</sup> A psychiatric institution. See footnote on page 22 for more information.

“Ben, let us go into the spare room next door, shall we? No-one would disturb us there.”

This made him very happy.

“But Ben, first of all I must get my driver to do a pickup for me before 3. I'll write the address down” which I did - the address 000. As I went to the door to call the driver, Ben held me tightly only allowing my hand to go outside.

I waited while making all sorts of excuses. In short of three minutes, the door burst open and two detectives stood there.

“I only wanted to love her” said Ben as they took him away.

## Child neglect

### A boy, 2½ years old

A little boy aged two and a half years was found wandering in the park. He was very dirty and had been left in the care of an alcoholic. The police brought him to me. I took him to the hospital where it was found he had a broken jaw.

All he would say was, “I want bread”. He went through the Children's Court, causing such fun going up to the magistrate's table and looking up at him saying, “I want bread”. Evidently sitting at a table registered something in his little mind that table and bread went together.

He was returned to his foster parents, and they made quite sure that nothing like that would ever happen again.

### A boy, 3 weeks old

A lady rang to ask me to help with a little boy of three weeks whose young mother had run away, leaving the child in the care of an elderly white man who had been knocking this young girl around so badly she could not take it anymore.

I went to the house. It was in a side street, very dark and dingy. I knocked, but no one answered. I heard a faint cry as I quietly opened the door. Lying on a bed was a man about 30 to 40 years old, very drunk. At the foot of the bed lay a little baby boy clad only in a singlet and blue with the cold. Every time the baby cried the man would push his feet into the baby shouting at it to be quiet. The obscenities he shouted at it were appalling. The man was quite unaware of my presence there till I went to pick up the baby. I asked if I could take the baby as it needed care. He jumped out of the bed and hit me on the head before I realised what was happening. He suddenly realised he was clad only in his singlet. He pulled it down very quickly and jumped into bed threatening to kill me if I didn't leave.

I left and went straight to the police who assisted me to bring the little pet back to Opal House. This case was shown on TV which caused quite a lot of sympathy. The child was taken and cared for by a family, he has now grown into a good strong boy and is taking his place as a member of his adopted family.

### Attempted infanticide

We heard a terrific scream from a mother. We ran into the kitchen where the father had the baby on the table ready to kill it. We called the police and the father was taken away. This mother lived in fear that one day he would harm both herself and her baby.

Opal decided that she would be safer in the care of her parents. She went away and as the father was released from jail he came back to Opal House looking for his wife and child. We then explained to him that they both were living with her parents.

They tried again to live as a family with the guidance of a social worker to help them with their problems. So far they are doing fairly well together.

### A battered wife

I had received a call from the police to say a young mother and her four children were coming into the Hostel for protection. The husband had beaten his wife very badly leaving her with two bruised eyes and cheekbones. Her face had been severely battered. She was in a desperate state when she arrived and so afraid. Her husband drank heavily, but it was only during these periods that he would be cruel. When he was sober he was a good father and husband. He had threatened her with his gun several times. She feared for herself and the children.

During the night, after the family had settled in, he rang and warned me that he was coming to kill his wife and children and to blow my brains out for taking his wife away. I smartly replied that I would be waiting for him anytime he wished to come. He did not arrive.

The mother the next morning asked me to go with her to her house to pick up the children's clothes, while he was at work. It would be quite alright but she was terrified to go alone. I notified the police that we were going but they told me to wait while they came around to see if the car was in the yard. All was clear and away we went.

When we arrived, I went inside first to see that everything was alright. She ran from the car into the bedroom pushing as fast as she could her children's clothing and what-nots into a large suitcase. I stayed near the front door so that I could warn her should he arrive home.

As I was waiting, glancing everywhere, thinking all sorts of things, my eyes suddenly stopped still and I just stared and stared. Under the kitchen door, which I could see from where I was standing, was a pair of heavy boots, with legs inside of them. In between the legs was the butt of a rifle. I saw a slight movement. My heart nearly came out of my body, with my fright. As she called to me that she had everything, I called her. She came out, her eyes as large as saucers. I said to her quite calmly, "Now dear, we shall pray for Daddy". I was pointing to the barn-like kitchen door and to the boots and gun which we could see quite clearly. We both knelt down and prayed. I told a lot of lies and said a lot of things to God that I have no knowledge of but I knew if we ran we could have both been shot. The young mother was crying and shaking with the fear. As I prayed, the perspiration running down my nose and head, I asked God to look after Daddy wherever he may be (I knew jolly well where he was). I said that his children still loved him so much. Also that Mummy loved him too but was afraid of him when he was drunk. I had a pretty good idea how she must have felt. I myself was terrified.

The door moved slowly and out he came. He lay the gun on the floor beside me and knelt down with us. God did answer all our prayers. You cannot know until you face it, the terror this mother and children must have experienced. I am sure God must have understood and smiled as I tried to worm my way out of a sticky situation using His name and calling on Him for help.

They were reunited. He was given treatment and understanding, and I know, because I visited them for many years, that God still keep His hands on this little family.

### Child abduction

A young woman came to Opal House offering her assistance with the children. We were always in need of help and I was very grateful to her. She took a particular liking to a little boy whom she patted and loved all day.

All the children sat down to tea, we were laughing and chatting away. Then I missed little Georgie. I remembered that she had asked me if she could take him to the shop just a yard away and hadn't returned. I was sick with fright, I had done the wrong thing. I had allowed him to leave the hostel with a stranger. I had only met her that day, and she seemed such a lovely person who wanted to help.

I rang the police, absolutely sick with fear. I had not taken particulars about her. I could not imagine anyone doing anything wrong who loved little children like she did. There was a general TV broadcast about a young woman with a little coloured baby who had been taken from the Home. How I prayed that he would be returned safely.

The baby was found with the young woman many miles from Brisbane in a boarding house. I learnt a very hard lesson that day. I suffered mentally with the worry of not doing my job properly. As I have said before, I was always doing things the wrong way, making mistakes that sometimes could have ended tragically. But I was doing things my way, which wasn't always the right way.

### Suicide

A man became a nuisance at Opal House coming at night: drunk and abusive to see his children who were living in the Hostel with their mother for their own protection. His abuse to me and his language were terrible. I could not allow him in to see his wife and children in that condition but could do so in the morning when he was sober. This I explained to him many times. He at last went away.

I was awakened by my nightwatchman calling me to go out as [the man] was very drunk, he was carrying a rope and was going to hang himself. I was very angry with him and told the nightwatchman to tell him to go to the park.

I went to the office and called the police to tell them a man was intending to commit suicide. As I was giving his name and details, the nightwatchman ran in yelling, "He's done it! He's done it!" The police heard on the other end of the phone, "I'll be there Matron". Two boys ran to the tree. I followed still in my nightdress and slippers. The fire brigade was called and the ambulance.

He was taken into care. He did not die. He stayed in Wolston Park<sup>62</sup> for a long time, and the mother and children remained in Opal House under my care.

### A boy, 18 months old

A policeman called at the Hostel asking me to go to a room with him in South Brisbane. On a large bed in a room which looked as though a hurricane had passed through, lay a little boy about 18 months old. The policeman said, "Look at this, Matron". All over his little body were marks like the buckle end of a belt. He looked up in absolute terror, keeping his little hands perfectly still to shield his little face.

I picked him up, still in the same position as he was lying, he's weight was no more than a six month old child. We took him to the Mater Hospital where he was admitted. We found his mother, a young unmarried girl unable to cope with a baby, with no job or help. She was afraid to say anything about the man as he had threatened to kill her. With her consent, the little boy was placed with a private family, who gave him all the love to try and wipe out from his little mind a dreadful beginning in life.

### House of squalor

I was called to a house where I found one of the most shocking cases I had ever seen. A house unfit for even animals, but it was given to Aboriginals at a fair rent. Only Aboriginals would live in such a place, because they had nowhere else to go. It was at least type of shelter for the children. Beds, with no bedding, a dead cat on the floor, with maggots being taken away by the ants. Not one scrap of food was in the house. Six children, their parents and grandfather lived there.

As I looked around I saw a very sick baby lying in a box. We tried so hard to save it, the ambulance screamed all the way to the hospital. I was in the back trying to resuscitate it. Before we arrived at the hospital the baby died. I remember about three of the little children died within a few months. Nothing had been done to help in housing, or hygiene. I feel it's such a waste of life where the children were concerned.

Was it sheer neglect on the parents' part?

Was our government to blame?

Or people who couldn't care less what happens to a black fellow?

### A frightened little girl

A lady rang me to say a little coloured girl was hiding under her house and would not come out. I went and found a very frightened little girl. I asked her name and why she was hiding here.

"I'm frightened to go home", she said. When Mum was drinking her uncle did rude things to her. She then told me many things after I had gained her confidence. I asked her to come to the police station with me, to tell her story. It must have been very hard for her, poor little girl.

The police advised me to go and get the other children to take them back into Opal House. Eleven children lying in a shed. The conditions were indescribable. As I was thinking about how I would get them all in the car, a man then appeared from nowhere, with a large stick ready to bash my brains

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<sup>62</sup> A psychiatric institution. See footnote on page 22 for more information.



out. I ran. The car's engine was still running. I ran as fast as I could, but fell into a ruddy hole and by the smell of me, it must have been part toilet.

We drove as fast as we could back to Opal where I bathed and changed in ten minutes, using my full bottle of eau-de-toilette to help a little. The police returned with me, and the children came to live in Opal House.

Their mother arrived soon after. I examined her chest where she had several small stab wounds. She also had a broken nose. She remained in Opal House for many months with the family.

The story did not in there. These children had suffered as no little child should suffer. Oh the indignities of our society, its systems and the apathy towards our Aborigines. Do we have a problem with our Aborigines? Yes, perhaps one of our own making.

### Young unwilling mother

A young mother (white) who was married at the age of 16 years found she was pregnant. She came to the Hostel deeply concerned. Her marriage had broken up, and she just couldn't cope.

We kept her in the Hostel to look after her, but my concern was her repeated utterance of her hatred of babies. I discussed this with a social worker and told her of my fears. She told me she thought I was an alarmist, and perhaps exaggerating a little. The social worker visited her many times before the baby was born, and I felt quite relieved that I had expert attention for her.

After her baby was born, she asked me if she could go to Sydney. I wanted her to stay for a while till she grew a little stronger and have help with her baby. But as I had no power to keep her, she left the hostel. Three weeks later she strangled her little baby.

She could not cope. I can still see a pair of blue eyes in a little round face. The mother went into a special hospital where [she] remained. Only still a little baby herself.

### Six abandoned children

I went to a house in Mount Gravatt where I found a family of six children living in the house alone. Both parents had deserted their children. A friendly neighbour had rung to say that she thought something must be wrong, but did not want to be involved herself.

The children's condition was very bad. They were hungry and could not understand the situation at all. We removed them all to Opal House for a while, till we had tried to find their parents. These six children were taken into care by Children's Services, a department for children's needs. The whole six together did not weigh the normal weight of three children. All children went into a Home. We did not find the parents for a couple of years. Who suffers mostly in such cases? The children.

### Blue baby

A young family living in Opal House fought so much with each other, I thought that I would have to remove them from the House. As I discussed this with the wife, she told me while she was there, her husband was not game enough to be so cruel, because he knew I would do something about it.

Her screams and moaning sent me running down as fast as I could where I found her in a corner, hugging her baby and protecting it from the fierce blows. I noticed that the baby was blue. I looked at it and saw it was not breathing.

I grabbed the little mite and ran upstairs as fast as I could. I threw everything from the table and laid the baby down. I breathed and breathed into its little body. While the police were removing the father, the ambulance took the little pet to hospital. It survived and became quite well.

By the time father was released, mother and baby had disappeared into the unknown - if there is such a place to the Aborigines, for the smoke signals go out all over the place telling who's-who and where's-where.

### Worm infestation

We found many children suffering from the ascaris worm, a long white worm infesting the bowels and other parts of the body through the lack of hygiene, clean housing and transmission from one to another person. These often clogged the lung areas and children had died through not having early treatment. This has been very common among Aboriginal children.

One such little boy died, perhaps from other things too. No wonder, this family lived near a dump and were fed on excess vegetables that had been put on the dump. We fought hard to find a home for these people. Four families living in squalor, surrounded by filth and dirt. We found them a house in Inala<sup>63</sup> where they lived, enjoying a large house with people ready to help in any way possible. Opal kept checking to see if they could help and advise in any way, seeing that the rent was paid and the children being sent to school. Of course, they too had their problems which they tried to overcome.

### A little black orchid

A policeman called to ask me to go and see the most beautiful flower in the park by the railway. I did not know why he should ask me this but I guess there must be something. I went with him in the car.

I looked at the bed of flowers. "Look again, Matron" he said and there was a lovely little black head of curls and two beautiful brown eyes just appearing above the flowers. He had been left there while his parents had gone to the hotel. He was the loveliest little black orchid I had ever seen.

We took him home, till his parents arrived to pick him up. They have been given a stern warning, he would be taken away if they did such a thing again.

### A fishing basket

Another policeman bringing in a large fishing basket called me and asked if I would like some fish to which I replied, "Oh yes please".

"Well this is a beauty! I found it" [he said] as he lifted the lid for me to see his catch. I looked at a dear little baby boy of four months who had been left in a toilet in the fishing basket. We kept him for quite a while till the parents finally came to get him.

### Victorian runaways

Early one morning five Aboriginal boys called at Opal House. Their ages ranged from 13 years to 15 years. They were tired, hungry, stating they had come to Queensland looking for work. I knew that two must still be attending school, they all looked like children.

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<sup>63</sup> Inala is a suburb developed by the Queensland Housing Commission in the 1950s to provide low-cost housing to socially-disadvantaged Queenslanders. It is 18km from central Brisbane.

We fed them and put them to bed. In no time they were fast asleep, from utter exhaustion I thought. I made a few enquiries and found they had absconded from a boy's home in Victoria. This of course meant bringing the police in. The two youngest were put in the care of the Children's Department and finally sent back to Victoria.

The others stayed in my care at Opal House. They were happy and excited working with the other residents in keeping the hostel clean. I rang a friend who was quite willing to start both boys in a job. When I told them they were so happy and immediately asked to return to Victoria to pick up their clothing and return. I doubted whether they would come back but I had to give them their that chance.

They walked down the stairs, clean, neatly dressed, with a letter in their pockets showing they were staying at Opal House, Care of Matron Joyce Wilding and they were due to start employment on a certain date. In case they were picked up by the police, they would have some identification.

I gave them £10 for food on the way. I had already tried to get railway passes for them but was unsuccessful. Being young and very happy they decided to hitchhike.

On Monday evening the phone rang. As I answered a voice said, "Joyce Wilding?"

I said, "Yes".

"What kind of place do you run up there?"

I described the work carried out by Opal.

"May I ask who is speaking, please?"

"Yes I am Detective --- "

"Why?" I asked.

"We have two of your young boys down here. We found your letter in their pockets".

"Now what have they done?" My heart sank.

He said many things. I cannot remember all.

"They had stolen a car, Matron, and locked themselves in with the engine still running to make a quick getaway, we presume. We found their bodies. Only two".

I could not speak.

I shall never forget them waving me "Goodbye" as they went downstairs. "We won't be long" were the last words they spoke to me.

For a long time I felt I had failed in my duty in not providing proper facilities to see that they arrived in Victoria safely and to be brought back here. Where was the liaison? Perhaps I was to blame, I did things my way, or perhaps I did not try all avenues to keep these young boys. It nearly broke my heart, but what could I do? I had tried.

## A very young couple

The children went to play for a while in Musgrave Park. The sun was shining. It was a happy day for the little ones, they loved to play in Musgrave Park. With the three ladies from the Hostel taking care of them, they had a wonderful time.

When they arrived back for lunch, one little girl came to me.

“Please Matron, there is a young man and a young girl in the Park who has had nothing to eat for two days. We played with them. Can I take some sandwiches over to them?”

“Bring them over here to lunch”. I called to one of the ladies who went to fetch them. After they had eaten a good lunch, I quietly ask them if they were in some kind of trouble. They looked so young, I thought perhaps I could help in some way. They had arrived from Sydney in their little car, looking for work. They had no money and had slept in the car. Could they please leave the car at the back of the Hostel in the yard, as it was brand new it could easily have been stolen. I did not want to add to their troubles.

I still had a strange feeling that something was wrong. During the years of my work, and the hundreds of people that I came in contact with, you immediately feel when something is wrong. During the afternoon the hostel car was out picking up parcels, for the House, when I had an emergency call. I asked the young man could we use his car and I would pay for the petrol. He seemed very reluctant to take me, making all sorts of excuses. I became quite cross with him, till at last he consented. “A little child's life was in danger”, I explained to him.

As we were driving along he said many things. I was concerned for him, as he stated he was unemployed. How then could he repay his car? So many things did not add up.

When we arrived back into the Hostel I rang a friend of mine to see if he could help. Before anything could be done for him, he was picked up by the police. They had stolen the car. His wife was at the tender age of 14 years.

With help from different departments, the young girl was returned to her parents. The young man was put on probation and returned to Sydney. We probably avoided and helped what could have developed into a tragedy or unhappiness for two young people who were really only children.

## In the cemetery

One morning, a lady living near the South Brisbane Cemetery rang to tell me she was disturbed, as she often heard children cry in the night. Also there was drinking going on in the cemetery. She did not want to call the police and asked if I could do anything for the children's sake.

I went to the cemetery to look around in the daytime. Yes, I found a blanket caught in a tree, a few clothes, and definite evidence that people were living there. I went back to the Hostel and waited till the evening came. I was very pleased to see the moonlight appear. It was quite bright and I did not feel quite so nervous going through by myself.

I walked very slowly so that I could listen to hear children's voices. My uniform being white shone quite brightly in the moonlight. I heard laughing, as I approached this family. The man was about to put the bottle to his lips when he saw me coming towards him. “God – ghosts!” he dropped the

bottle and did a complete leapfrog over a headstone. He was gone into the park by the side in half a minute.

I walked to the others. "It's only me, Matron Wilding". Those little pets were asleep unaware of the fright I had given their parents. The family were all brought into Opal House, where finally they went back to Adelaide where they belonged. The children were put in care to be looked after by the state, till the parents could sort themselves out. I did hear much later the father had found employment, mother was helping too, trying to make a place once again and unite as a family.

### Responsibility

These are just a few of the countless cases of neglect of children. The housing, employment, were part of this horrible mess.

These cases have been recorded by Opal, the work of the Opal organisation and what it did to help in so many ways. It is unbelievable that these things have really happened in our so called advanced society. In my work with these people, their terrible problems which they try to overcome, but do not know how.

Are they really a people apart? Who is to blame? What can be done? Do we look into ourselves for the answer?

Our caring for each other. No, just a few people cannot change the whole wicked system but we can try a little. This is what Opal stands for.

## Funny things

### A clever drunk

An unwanted old drunk (white) came to the hostel looking for somewhere to sleep. It was very cold and there was still a small place where we could tuck him in for the night. Showing me a bottle of "medicine" that the doctor had given him to take every four hours. He croaked and groaned as we took him downstairs to sleep. I said to him, "Now I will take your medicine and put it in the surgery and I will give it to you every four hours during the night". No, he didn't want that, he wanted to keep it by his side though so that he could sip it when he felt like it. He was soon fast asleep.

I smelled the bottle, and my suspicions were confirmed. Doctor's "medicine" was pure metho<sup>64</sup>. I tipped it out washed the bottle and filled it up again with clean cold water. It looked just like the "doctor" ordered.

In the morning after breakfast the men who slept in the hall put away their mattresses and rolled their blankets, left the hall clean and tidy and then left the hostel to go - where?

The old gent came to me. "May I have my medicine please, Matron?". "Of course, my dear". I handed him his "medicine". I watched as he was going downstairs and I called "goodbye" as he reached the gate. Then he turned to me and shouted, "You're not as bloody smart as you think you

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<sup>64</sup> "Metho" is Australian slang for methylated spirits, a very cheap, and somewhat poisonous, form of alcohol.

are, yer know, Matron Wilding” producing another bottle of “medicine” from his other pocket. He slammed the gate and stood outside drinking his “medicine” then looked up at me and laughed.

### A misheard conversation

One morning three young Aboriginal boys were discussing jobs with me. We were all standing at the front door in Opal House along with Mr N who often came to see me to help in any way he could. We started discussing his work. Mr N was a field officer in agriculture.

I had the day previously received a letter from my son-in-law Dr Shah<sup>65</sup> in India who had sent me vast accounts of one of his projects. Both Mr N and myself were discussing different methods of artificial insemination in both countries of India and Australia, as both Mr N and Dr Shah had such vast experience with this matter. Mr N was very interested with the books my son-in-law had sent.

Mr N left us after a while and I know the boys were very interested in our conversation. “Matron, what is insemination or that long word that fellow was talking about?” One boy prodded him in the side. “Don't be so bloody stupid. That's what Mum's been trying to do for us for years,” he said. “It's mixing the black and white so they can live together”.

I could not speak for a while. I know the word he was looking for: ASSIMILIATION. I did propose to explain at a later date, but somehow I never got around to it.

### A letter to the Minister of Education

I wrote a letter to the Honourable Mr Pizzey<sup>66</sup> Minister of Education who had become a friend to the work which we were doing. He had given us permission to write at any time if we had any problems as far as the Aboriginals were concerned.

I wrote to the minister concerning a problem. But asked a friend of mine to see if he thought the letter was in order. He just laughed as he read and then looked very concerned.

“Matron, the Minister’ name is the Honourable Mr Pizzey. You have spelt his name with two s's instead of two z's: Pissey”.

I felt so ashamed but so thankful that my dreadful mistake had been found out before my letter was sent. I felt sure that this gracious and kind man would have understood my embarrassing mistake and would have probably had a good laugh. I could never have lived it down if I had posted that letter I am sure.

### Smoking in the toilets

I was asked to go quietly into the men's toilet at Opal House to see just what was going on. I asked the man if everything was alright. “No worry, Matron but don't let them hear you”. “Whatever could it be?” I thought as I opened the door very quietly then went inside. I stood and listened to two small voices. As I peeped over the top, I saw two little boys sitting on the floor. They were chatting away together quite unaware of my presence. There was part of a toilet roll being torn into little

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<sup>65</sup> Dr Madhukar Shah, an Indian national, married Joyce Wilding’s daughter Betty and the couple moved to India, where Joyce visited them several times.

<sup>66</sup> Jack Pizzey (1911-1968) was a former soldier and teacher who became Queensland Minister of Education in 1957 and remained in that position until 1968 when he became the Premier of Queensland for six months until his sudden death. He was also Minister of Aboriginal and Islander Affairs from 1962 to 1968.

pieces and in the hands of one of them, the butt end of a cigarette. He was rolling it between his hands like an expert. It could not have been the first time he had done this. It was too professional. A cigarette was made and out came the matches from a pocket. As they took turns with each having a puff I nearly laughed out loud. I could not take this from them after all their efforts but they just reminded me of two old men sitting enjoying their smoke together. I crept outside. They did not know I had been there. I then sent the man inside to "find" them and bring them out before Matron caught them smoking. How many little ones have done the same, a part of growing up in a little boy's life.

### A missing wallet

Father John came again to visit and play with the children. Later in the evening after he had gone home he rang me.

"Matron, I've mislaid my wallet somewhere". I went around to my little suspect and found him fast asleep hugging Father's wallet and perhaps dreaming of how many ice creams and lollies he could buy.

Father John came the next day loaded with lollies, also telling the children a wonderful story. The moral was a very simple one, not taking other people's things. Not an eyelid was batted so no one knew the guilty one except for Father & I - or was it perhaps not being guilty but just a thought - if only.

Next time Father came he said, "I've learnt my lesson, Matron" and spent most of the evening with his hands firmly in his pockets.

### A jolly priest

Father John came to a party at Opal House for the children. The young Catholic workers made a very lovely and happy evening for the little ones.

Father enjoyed himself so much. He was a fat jolly priest with a round fat face. Exhausted after playing so many games with the children he sat down, and immediately one little boy sat on his lap. He just sat and stared and stared at Father. At last I went over to him and quickly took him from Father's lap. "You must not stare like that all the time dear, it's rude." He looked at me, then at Father and said, "Matron, how does he get that small collar over his big head?"

### Eye drops

Young Gwen was 12 years of age, trying to make herself beautiful, although she was one of the most beautiful Aboriginal girls I had ever seen. To improve her looks and to be modern, Gwen decided her eyebrows were a little too thick. By using a razor she clipped away steadily, shaping the eyebrows as she went.

This nearly ended in tragedy, as a tiny piece of the blade broke off and went into Gwen's eye. We took her immediately to the hospital for attention. She was given eyedrops and her eye covered. We thought of course that young Gwen could manage to put eye drops into her eyes.

Two days following, I found her laying across the bed with her head hanging over the bed really reaching the floor and she was kicking her legs up and down. I immediately thought that she was doing some exercises. I called to her and said, "Gwen, what are you doing?" "Oh" she called up at

me from the floor, "I am working those drops into my eyes. I've taken the lot Mummy and they won't be long. I'm kicking hard."

Full marks against me for not showing her the correct way.

### Medical incident

A shy young man came to me one evening as I was in my small surgery, or doctors room, in the Hostel. He had not been to the toilet for nearly a week and was feeling quite sick.

"Well we will have to do something drastic won't we?" I explained to him about suppositories and was giving him a detailed account of procedure.

I myself was drinking some water when suddenly the door burst open and a terrified mother with her child taking a fit came in. I hastily gave the boy my glass of water and the suppositories telling him to wait outside when I would finish my explanation to him. When the child had settled down, I carried her back to her room and put both mother and child to bed. I then called the young man in again. "Don't worry Matron, I've fixed myself up", he said handing me the empty glass of water. "I took em both down".

### Little Tom

We were having alterations to Opal House and the Public Works Department were in and out for many weeks. We did our best to keep the children out of their way as children are always wanting to know and see how things are done. The men were beginning to get cross as their tools were disappearing. Somehow we always found them again but in different places.

Tom, our four-year-old disappeared. We looked everywhere for him and I grew so worried that I at last called in the police and told them of my fears. They immediately sent out a description of him. He couldn't have gone far, surely? But children travel so quickly.

The people from the Hostel soon joined in the search. I stayed in the Hostel waiting for news. Suddenly there was a shout downstairs. I ran down treading warily over all the wood and pieces being used by the men. "Here I is, Matron!" Where was Tom?

In the cement mixer having a wonderful time. I immediately rushed him into the bath then covered him with oil and believe me it was quite a long time before his skin was really healed. It could have been worse if the mixer had been turned on. Poor Tom.

### Kindergarten

Auntie Pearl Charles was my friend who came to assist me with the children, making a small kindergarten for them, and making a wonderful success of it. One morning she was called to morning tea, and left the children - 12 little tots - with their plasticine<sup>67</sup>. She had already made little things for them to copy from.

After her morning tea, she returned to the room. "Well" she said, "Where are they?" As she looked from one to another thinking they were going to play a game. One little boy with his beautiful big brown eyes, looked up at her, rubbed his tummy and said, "In here, Auntie Pearl." They had eaten

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<sup>67</sup> Plasticine is a putty-like modelling clay, a popular children's toy.



everything. There were no drastic results, except perhaps a lesson to be learnt. Let them have the first morning tea, then they would not be hungry.

### Poinciana Festival Brisbane Hospital

The residents of Opal House would make up little parcels to the value of 10 or 20 cents, sometimes buying little things to this value, or finding little things that came in to the home. We all shared in wrapping up, as many as 500 dips<sup>68</sup> we would wrap.

We had a stall in the grounds of the hospital, Opal stall, this we had been doing for three years to help the committee to procure funds to further advancements for the residents of the hospital. This stall was manned by two Aboriginal ladies and myself. We had great fun watching the children as they unwrapped their lucky dips.

A mother came with her three children to buy. Nothing is so lovely as to see the surprise in the faces of children when they open their dips. The biggest surprise came when I heard the mother exclaim, "Oh what a funny dip!" I looked across to her - to see if anything was wrong - for she too had shared in the fun of buying a dip but hers - well!

Matron's stockings with her garters still in them had been wrapped by mistake – perhaps.

What an embarrassment for the lady - also for me. I was worried all the afternoon in case our lucky dips should again reveal anything they should not. They didn't.

### Roses

I was taken to the hospital with a mild heart attack. I had many visitors including the drunks and my friends from nowhere. Their "Mummy", as I was often called. [They] were not always allowed to come in, as long as I was being looked after they were happy.

One afternoon, along came Kathy who had already a few more drinks ahead of time. With her she brought along the most beautiful bunch of roses you ever saw. "These are for my mother", she said to Sister.

"What beautiful roses dear", Sister said, "May I have one or two for the altar? I know Mrs Wilding wouldn't mind. She has so many. Do you grow them?" asked Sister.

"Oh no Sister. Nothin' like that. I pinched 'em from New Farm Park."

They were placed on the table by my bed. As I looked at them, with a guilty conscience. How could such beauty and thought be wrong? I am sure that God would have fully understood what Kathy was thinking. Better for Mum to see them there, because New Farm Park was a long way for me to go.

### Diabetes

An Aboriginal lady came to the Hostel suffering from diabetes. She was painfully thin and needed medical attention badly.

I took her to the hospital where I explained her case to the doctor.

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<sup>68</sup> In this context, a "dip" is a small package. People at fairs would pay a small amount for a "lucky dip" and they would receive whatever was in the package they chose, not knowing the contents.

“You are very thin, dear” the doctor said, trying hard to gain her confidence.

She looked nervously at him.

“Have you always been as thin as this?”

“No”, she replied, “I’ve been fat eight times”. She smiled at the doctor.

“Oh, when was that?” asked the doctor.

“When I was pregnant”, she replied.

### Nuisance caller

A man constantly annoyed me by banging on the front door of Opal House. He was very drunk and very offensive. I did not want to call the police if possible, I would manage in my own way. He banged so many times that in the end I warned him I must call the police. This didn't seem to worry him at all. His calling for a woman angered me very much.

I called one of the girls to fetch a bucket of cold water. “It will soon cool his ardour,” I thought. “If you knock once again I will cover you with water”, I warned him. Then he became quiet for a while but I still waited at the door.

I said to the girl, “When he knocks again, open the door and I'll let him have it”. Bang! Bang! I nodded to the girl. She opened the door and I threw the water, not over him but over a detective who had to come to see me on another matter. The other man he just laughed and laughed - and laughed for seven days in jail.

I apologised for my dreadful mistake.

I would have got a month if the detective had seen me I am sure. I went to my office and closed the door quickly because I just laughed and laughed too.

### Unusual baby bath

I went downstairs and found a young mother with her two month old baby, giving it a bath in the bowl of the toilet. The little pet was thoroughly enjoying it.

I picked it up, took it to the children's bathroom, soaped it well down, and bathed it. No after effects at all.

### First time in a bathroom

Another little boy came from the outback to the hostel. He was overwhelmed at the sight of different things he had never seen.

He went into the bathroom to have a bath. We had an old-fashioned geyser. As the steam from the hot water filled the bathroom, we saw a young boy running naked through the house, his arms everywhere. He was shouting and yelling: he was going to be blowed up! Poor little pet, he did not understand such things. It took quite a long time before he wanted to go back in the bathroom.

## A new baby

It was a day when Mummy came from the hospital with her new baby. As always, we collected from the guests in the hostel to buy a little present for the baby. We had prepared a very nice afternoon tea, all waiting to welcome Mummy and baby home.

Living in the hostel was a young ginger-haired boy brought by the police for me to look after for a couple of weeks till a job could be found for him. A terrible hatred had grown between this young man, and the father of the new baby. The father came to my office prior to the homecoming of his wife, and very loudly declared everyone else could come to the party, but not the ginger nut, he would knock him down if he did. I explained to the father that he was wrong to say such things as this young man had very willingly shared in helping towards the gift. The father said, "Matron, I hate ginger heads".

I explained to Blue it would be better if he did not come, in case of any unpleasantness. There was great excitement as Mummy and baby arrived, Father being a very proud man. The sun was shining brightly in the dining room, everyone was so happy and Father so proudly showing off his son. Then as mother was nursing it and everyone crowding around happily, the sun shone on Baby's head. One of the little boys shouted, "Ain't he lovely Matron, he's got ginger hair!" A loud shout and the father shot across the room to where Blue had been discreetly watching from a far off. He grabbed Blue. This young lad could not realise what was happening. I stopped the fight and sent mother and baby to their room.

He didn't have ginger hair. How could he have ginger hair? I explained to the irate father as the sun shines on to people's hair it brings out the beautiful shades and this man had only been in the hostel for two days. It took quite a long time for this and many other things I had said to sink in.

He apologised to Blue, but Blue still kept well out of his way.

The baby grew into a beautiful little boy with lovely black curls. He was a miniature of his father, who now so proudly said, "This is my son", and nothing was more lovely to see, than father and baby son cuddled in his arms.

## Sunday school

We held our Sunday school each Sunday in the downstairs hall, which could accommodate many children. As a rule, the teachers from the Methodist Sunday School came to teach. Each family attended his or her particular church and those who had no set church stayed to attend our Sunday school.

We were God's family, one family, and we lived and prayed as a family.

This Sunday there were no teachers as they had rung to say a conference was on. I became the Sunday school teacher. As I told them a story, they became very still, their lovely big brown eyes watching every word as it left my mouth. I continued, "A man was passing through the highways, when suddenly out jumped the robbers, they threw him to the ground, beat him up, and robbed him, leaving him half dead. Presently a man came along, looked at him then passed by on the other side. Another man came by, bent down and looked at him. He then picked him up and said to him, 'Don't worry I will take you to a house, where you will be fed, clothed, and your wounds attended to.'"

One little boy of seven jumped up very quickly shaking his hands. "Miss! Miss! I know where they took him. They took him to Opal House."

As I explained this was the story of The Good Samaritan. I told them also, this was the work of Opal, in what we were trying to do for all those who needed our help.

To me that little boy's remark was priceless. In his little mind he had identified that story with the things he had seen happen in Opal House. Out of the mouths of the little children come sometimes purity and truth.

Hatred's gains divide and sever What love obtains it keeps forever
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### Ignorance or fear

A young man came to see me, he was about 16 years of age, he was very frightened and shy.

"Matron, I have something wrong with me. What can I do?"

I explained to him that he must go to a Men's Clinic where he would be attended to. He was terrified. No, he would run away.

"If you do, things will get worse", and I told him what could happen if he went without medical attention.

"Matron, will you please come with me?" he asked.

"Of course, I will". I saw him as a child 'alone' and needing help. I put on my coat and away we went in the car. I took him inside, sat him down with the other men already waiting. I then went to see an officer to let him know, this was this boy's first visit and he was terrified. A man came quietly from nowhere, took my arm, and whispered quietly in my ear, "Madam, the Ladies Clinic is in George Street, this is for men only".

I told him who I was. It was a bad moment for him. Then we both laughed, thus saving an embarrassing situation.

### The Sound of Music

I went to the Sound of Music, a film that was a huge success, a film I loved so much.

My family kept giving me surprise tickets. It was not long before I learnt every scene and wording by heart. It was like reading a good book over and over again. To me it was a clean family film, of which we see so rarely these days.

When the year came for the film running, I was asked by the manager of the theatre to be with a guest to cut the cake. It's first year birthday. We had a wonderful afternoon, sharing with each other our different views. I had then seen it 84 times but to date now I have seen it 126 times and will continue to see it wherever it shows.

One morning I received a phone call from a lady who was very angry with me, calling me a hypocrite, a psycho. If I could spend all this money on pictures, instead of whinging all the time about not having enough for the Aborigines, she would see and let her friends stop any support for me. She would not listen for my reply. She put the phone down in my ear. What she did not know, I had been given a free pass by the manager to go at any time, providing it was not the weekend and my friends gave me tickets. I did not go anywhere else. I do hope that someday she perhaps will understand that seeing this film was like a tonic, helping me in the severe job that I was doing. I had so little pleasure that to me it was a lifeline.

# Opal Joyce Wilding Home

2371 Logan Rd, Eight Mile Plains

## Origins

Opal - the One People of Australia League - searched for a £100,000 house. The house would be paid with the funds promised by the Social Services Minister Mr Wentworth<sup>69</sup>. He would provide a home for Aboriginal orphans, deserted wives and unmarried mothers. This would not replace Opal House but would supplement it. It was to be called the Opal Joyce Wilding Home to honour me for the years of dedicated service I had given in Opal House, Russell Street.

This grant for this new home was the largest Commonwealth Grant to be made to any voluntary organisation in this state. It was to be used to relieve the ever-overcrowded hostel in Russell Street. This grant would fill a great need in Queensland. Opal was one organisation that was showing a very active interest in the welfare of Aborigines. The luxurious Brisbane Motel, Mt Gravatt was bought for £130,000, the money being used from a Government grant<sup>70</sup>. The hostel would be able to accommodate about 40 Aboriginal women and children.

The decision to convert the 10-year-old building sparked off a series of threats. This aroused protests from people living in the area. The vice president of a progress association<sup>69</sup> said people were angered because the hostel had not been publicised before the takeover. He had divorced himself as an individual and private citizen from this protest and felt strongly that it was a case of prosecution and conviction without being given a chance for defence.

The Hostel would only cater for women and children and the only man to live there would be my husband Frank. The hostel would provide adequate living conditions and an area where the children could play. They would no longer be in the company of those unfortunates who came to Russell Street for a bath, or a meal, or clothing. But the Opal Joyce Wilding Home would be a home for displaced mothers and their children until they were able to find new homes and go back to society. They would be helped to support the home by paying their board. The orphans would be maintained by the Children's Services.

There were many threats made over the new hostel - to myself, to Mrs Ryan<sup>71</sup>, the Secretary of Opal. Threats to burn the motel, or to shoot any nigger that came there. We had been through all this before. It was nothing new. Our President, Mr Bonner<sup>72</sup>, who was going to stay in the motel for a few days on his own, had us all concerned. We really feared that something could happen to him, as it was a very lonely place. We all prayed that he would be safe, and that no harm would come to him. Many strange stories had come to the ears of our President, who stated if only people would come to see him while he was staying there, he would explain anything they wished to know. He was an understanding man and would listen to all they had to say.

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<sup>69</sup> Bill Wentworth (1907-2003) was a Liberal politician who was Australian Minister for Social Services and Minister of Aboriginal Affairs (1968-1972). He was a prominent supporter of Aboriginal land rights, helped to drive the government to undertaking a referendum relating to Aborigines in 1967 and proposed the establishment the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS).

<sup>70</sup> This was in 1970.

<sup>71</sup> Heather Ray Ryan (nee Trotter) (1923-2004) was a political activist and strategist who campaigned for Aboriginal rights. In 1972 she married Neville Bonner, whom she met while he was President and she was Secretary of Opal.

<sup>72</sup> Neville Bonner (1922-1999) was the first Aboriginal person to sit in the Australian Parliament. He was a Senator for Queensland 1971-1983 and President of Opal. He believed that the best way to advance the Aboriginal cause was to work within the existing political systems.

It was the same story repeating itself when we moved into Opal House Russell Street, ten years previously.

What a fine tolerant community some of the whites are to our Aborigines!

We rightly condemned the American racism, the South African apartheid, or even our own White Australia Policy, and the tut-tut-tutting that goes on in our affluent society when some investigator reveals that our own Aboriginal children are living in deplorable shanties and dying from disease and malnutrition. Now the government has bought the motel to expand the hostel facilities for Aborigines in Brisbane the ugly head of hate and racism has risen again. We were not worried about our safety really, people often say things in anger they do not mean, and often through ignorance of what Opal was really doing. They did not know, but it hurts, because they condemned before they had given us a fair trial. We were more determined to prove to these people that they knew how to behave.

The federal minister was asked in Parliament about the Hostel - please explain - to allay the grave fears of some residents in that area. Some feared there would be drunken orgies and prostitution could develop unless there was adequate supervision. With the proper control there would be no reason why the Hostel should not function without any cause for alarm by local residents. There was not expected any real opposition by residents as my name was known Australia wide for my work among Aboriginal people. Some people, local residents, had called and left toys, clothing, swings, everything a child's heart could wish for.

We moved in on a Monday. Shall I ever forget it?

All the children, all they could think about, talk about, their little faces beaming with delight, at the thought of their new white home with lots of trees, with wide grounds where they could run and play. The world was a wonderful place and in the morning there was going to be a great and grand adventure of moving in.

During the few days we received many wonderful calls of encouragement although we had started apprehensively to start our new life together at the former Brisbane Motel. As we lived there, we found we had many friends indeed. We had an Open Day for people to call and meet our guests of the home, to be shown all through. It was really wonderful - people donated money, food, clothing, a washing machine, a dryer to make things brighter and easier for the people living there.

Some of our children went to the Rochedale school, catching the bus each morning, waving a cheery goodbye to the little ones who were left at home.

Rotary, Lions, Apex, Save the Children Fund, all churches in this area helped in every possible way. We had problems too, we all worked very hard together, I took my share of doing the laundry, the cleaning, and cooking with the other ladies. Many ladies from churches came to help with the work, we did not have a staff, only the ladies in the hostel were paid a small allowance for their services, my husband and I included.



Our grateful and sincere thanks always to Father Cleary<sup>73</sup> and his friends from the Church of the Queen of the Apostles at Stafford. Each week six ladies would come to help with the ironing, the washing, and cleaning or any job that was required to be done and hundreds of other little jobs I did not have time to do. When you have between 40 and 50 children and adults with many severe problems, beside the helping with problems outside, such as going to the courts, the hospital, the dentist, I had a full time job. These ladies never failed in doing their best for us at all times. They were members of the Christian family of Christ - as you do it unto the least - No, I shall never forget their loyalty to the work on Opal, and in the job I was trying to do.

Mrs Dawson (Auntie Mollie), of Slacks Creek, who used to come each morning to look after the little children, to wash their hair, to look after their sores, to prepare their lunch and play with them, this she did for many, many months. Auntie Mollie who will stay long in the memory of those little children, and to me, I shall never forget your kindness.

To Dr O'Loan who did so much and to the other doctors who gave their help and advice.

One can never forget a man who stood alone. My husband Frank the unsung hero, through his strength by me, I could carry on, he did so much with so little thanks. He worked hard, very hard for a man of 70 years of age. He was the gardener, the cleaner, the handyman, and anything that needed to be done, a man's job but he did four men's jobs in one. He was alert for 24 hours daily, all in the Hostel.

We all worked to show the people of Mount Gravatt or that area, what the President of Opal Mr Neville Bonner, had said: "There is no need to worry". We would not let him down. We would not let this beautiful motel go down in any way and it didn't. It was often said how beautifully it was kept and how well behaved the children were. I felt so proud, we had worked hard to show our friends that their faith in us and the residents we had not failed them. Again, it was the wonderful help and work by the ladies who lived in the house.

Mrs Fitzgerald (Beadie) who became my Deputy Matron in training - Mrs Kathy - Mrs West - all who worked by my side so faithfully, without them the peace would not have continued.

In a few months I was not feeling very happy. Many things disturbed me. I begin to feel it is time for someone else to continue. I did not have the freedom I wanted to carry on as I wished.

I resigned as Matron of Opal. It was with great regret I did so, but with a clear conscience that I was doing the right thing. My husband and I gave many years of our life to the Aboriginal cause, during that time seeing many changes.

The time has now come that our Aborigines will soon take their place in Australia. They will identify themselves as a race of people, which is their birthright, and perhaps the hates will merge together in love and understanding and finally disappear from this earth, and we shall be together as One People.

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<sup>73</sup> This was probably Father Patrick Cleary who, in 1998, pleaded guilty to three counts of indecent assault against two boys and was sentenced to 15 months jail. He was parish priest of St Finbarr's Church, Ashgrove for 21 years. There is no public record of a Father Cleary at the Church of the Queen of Apostles at Stafford.

## Funny Things

### Six-year-old runaway

The young parents of a six-year-old had some small problems with their young son. He would pack his little case, take a few toys, and would disappear. This happened several times causing a great worry to his parents.

They brought him to the Opal Joyce Wilding Home to see if anything could be done for him, or would I take him for a little while. I spoke to him, asking him if he would like to stay, just for a little while. "Oh yes", he just loved Matron's 'big house'. He stayed.

A few weeks had passed till an early morning we found his little bed empty. I rang the police who found him walking towards the Gold Coa

st, two miles from the home carrying his little case and toys wanting to find his father. The parents took him home again, feeling quite confident now that he was home with Daddy he would settle down once again.

A policeman who guards the Boggo Road Jail in his shed above the grounds, saw a little boy resting against the wall. He kept watching him, wondering what he wanted, or who could he be waiting for. An hour passed, then another, so the policeman sent down to find out what was wrong.

He looked up at the policeman and said, "Oh I'm waiting for Matron to open the door for me. I'm hungry, I want to come back here and live with her". The jail at this time had big white bricks very much like the Opal Joyce Wilding home. Poor little pet. He had run away again, this time he really had things mixed up. The police rang me, I received a big smile and a hug as I entered the police station at West End where they had taken him. I took home with me a happy smiling little boy - till next time.

### Visit from the Governor's wife

The Governor's wife came to see the House and the little children. She was a gracious lady and I had asked the children to be on their best behaviour, and of course got the usual, "Yes Matron". Little ones could do no wrong. Perhaps I was asking too much.

When she arrived, we were very happy and the children sat around her asking and answering questions. One little girl sat near her feet and was watching her feet and I felt nervous in case she suddenly had an idea.

"Oh you've got Matron's stockings on!" Our gracious lady smiled.

Of course our little pet was very bright in her thinking because our stockings were exactly the same shade.

### Cracking a nut

A little boy was swearing so loudly I went up to him to chastise him.

“What are you doing?” He was sitting in a large hole with big rock in his hands and a Queensland nut he was trying hard to break.

“Don't use words like that dear, let me try to help”.

“No, no, I'm trying to crack the budder and the budder won't crack”. He then stood up and very angrily he threw the nut with such force. Believe me he hit the jackpot and the nut broke into several pieces.

### Clem, a four-year-old

A little boy needed lots and lots of training when he was brought into the home. The little pet had no knowledge of cleanliness, his language for a little one of four years was appalling and we knew we had a job to do to keep this little pet. It was very unpleasant for all concerned, it didn't matter how much we tried to toilet train him we often missed out.

One morning a little boy came to me, he pulled at my uniform, and looked up at me with his big brown eyes.

“Matron, Clem has dirtied his pants again. Oh, he smells,” making a grimace and pinching his nose together.

I went along to where young Clem was sitting in the dirt.

“Now Clem, what have you done?” I asked.

Then he looked down at his pants, then up at me with a big smile and said, “Solly Matron I tit myself”.

# **Friends and allies**

## Father Basil Bergin

Father Basil Bergin<sup>74</sup> was the parish priest of St Elizabeth's Catholic Church Ekibin Brisbane. He came to see me in Melbourne Street stating that he had heard from different Aboriginals in Boggo Road Jail that I was helping them. He was the Roman Catholic chaplain of the Brisbane prisons.

We sat in our little dining room together discussing my work and many things. I felt quite strongly that he did not believe me and as he looked at me while I discussed different things that had happened, I knew he thought I was either a good actress or a good liar.

He questioned me often, "How did I support so many people? What did they do to help me?" and many questions were asked. I explained to him about my husband's wages, a few friends who believed in what I was doing and also my sincere faith in God. "Do unto others. If you feed the least of these, my brother, you do it unto me, my favourite verse" I told Father Basil.

He looked at me and smiled and as I stood to show him to the door, he told me to kneel. He gave me a blessing I shall never forget. "God beside you all the way, Mrs Wilding". My heart sang because I knew I had another recruit to help with my load.

In a little while Father started to bring things for us, food, clothing, furniture, and money. He supported me all the way. He made appointments to see the Department of Native Affairs to obtain a larger house for me and also asked for government support to help carry the load. They laughed and said to Father they would have to buy the mint to support me in what I wanted to do and it just couldn't be done. "No, definitely no".

Although Father Bergin tried so hard to help me, he asked me if I really knew what I had undertaken. He told me that some members had stated I was a nut and very peculiar and should stew on my own.

He still supported my work and often I would ring him in despair. I felt at times I could no longer continue but his guidance and spiritual uplift kept me going.

He then approached Archbishop Duhig<sup>75</sup> for help. One Sunday at Mass all churches were asked to help me. It was two days after this that Father began brought me a wonderful donation of £600. I just could not believe it. This I gave to St Vincent de Paul Society to manage for me to pay the rent, the electric lights and plenty of food for the cupboards. For two months I had no worries as regards to bills. I felt like a millionaire.

After this wonderful bequest Father Bergin told me that Archbishop Duhig was going to visit us. When he arrived, he was unable to leave his car because of sickness but we all went out to meet him. They all clamoured around him, very excited. They were asking him all sorts of questions and he asked me about my work and many other things. I was concerned when some of them started to go through his pockets, he just laughed, thinking it was a huge joke and he gave them all his money from his pockets.

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<sup>74</sup> Rev Basil Bergin was the parish priest of Tarragindi in southern Brisbane and helped to establish St Elizabeth's Catholic Primary School in 1958. He died in 1969.

<sup>75</sup> Sir James Duhig (1871-1965) was Roman Catholic Archbishop of Brisbane (1917-1965), making him both the youngest Roman Catholic bishop in the world when he was consecrated, and the longest in office.

As we all knelt around his car, he gave us all a blessing, a special one asking for God's help to overcome the racial hatred that was showing so clearly now. I did indeed feel the hand of God upon my work.

I had a problem, a mother with five children (a white mother) who came to the hostel in great distress. She lived in the home for a few months when unexpectedly we found her a house. I rang Father Bergin to ask him, please may we use his trailer and would he help us to move her belongings. We arrived at the house, the children were so happy and excited, they were really running wild. As it was so hot, Father Basil did not wear his clerical collar but an open neck shirt. He was perspiring so much with the heat and carrying the boxes.

We were unloading the trailer as the baker came along. Seeing a new family moving in with a bunch of kids – well, this meant more custom. He came over to Father Basil not knowing he was a priest. “Well mister, you got a fine bunch of healthy kids there. How much bread would you and your missus want?” Father looked at him and smiled then pointed to the mother and said, “Ask the missus over there”. Father looked at me and winked his eye.

St Vincent de Paul Society helped me in every possible way when I needed them through Father Bergin.

To me and to thousands of people Father Basil Bergin was a true ambassador of Christ. He tried to carry out the teachings of his Maker not caring for colour or creed who needed his help, because he had given his vows to in walk in his master’s footsteps. This was Father Basil Bergin. To you, Father Basil, I know that when the great day comes, words will be spoken to you like this: “Well done thou good and faithful servant. Enter into the Kingdom of God”.

### **Don Frazer**

Don Frazer worked for many years in Opal House helping wherever he could. He was a great favourite with the children, taking them on different holidays and places. He became an elder brother to the children.

His support of our work was tremendous, this was all done in a voluntary capacity. To you Don Frazer, a thousand thanks from myself and family and from hundreds of little children who loved you.

### **Russ Tyson**

Mr Russ Tyson<sup>76</sup>, an announcer on 4KG radio station, had been a strong supporter in my work. He had given many times, money to be used for a good cause. His sympathy and understanding to my work shall never be forgotten.

I do know because of this, he has thousands of his listeners to his program. This is what the world needs so badly.

<p><i>Where is the barrier that love cannot break?</i> Mahatma Gandhi</p>
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<sup>76</sup> Russ Tyson (1920-2014) was a radio presenter in Brisbane and was the first person to appear on ABC Television in Queensland.

## Tony Quartpot

Tony, an uneducated 17 year old boy saddened by the continuing prospect of a white Australia, penned the following, his first poem:

“Australia's love is far away  
Going further away each day  
It will never come back anymore  
Unless they open Australia's door

Unless they open Australia's door  
And pull them in like fish by the score  
But that we fear will never happen  
While our little hearts are tappy”

## Uncle Willie

One of the best known members of Australia's original race passed away July 1968. He was Mr William McKenzie<sup>77</sup>, the last of the Stanley River tribe of Aborigines.

Affectionately known by hundreds of people as Uncle Willie, nature's gentleman was a constant and welcome visitor to Opal House. A Christian in the largest sense of the word, Uncle Willie was well known and respected in the highest circles of anthropological learning in Australia.

## Laurie Allen

Laurie Allen was a white man who was brought to the Hostel for care. His problem was drink but he became a great favourite with all, especially the elderly. He used to tell them tales of so many countries which they all enjoyed.

I had been taken to hospital with a mild heart attack, he was very distressed. He became very drunk and wrote poems for me, sending them with a bunch of flowers.

Only when he was drunk did he write poetry or quote beautiful sayings. He had written many poems, I have the originals. When he died, all the guests in Opal House collected together to see that his funeral was one of the best.

## Joe Rickman

The death occurred on Friday August 2<sup>nd</sup> 1968 of Mr Joe Rickman, a much respected resident of Bribie Island. There has never been such an untiring selfless worker for the betterment of mankind and Bribie Island. Joe Rickman was always an ardent and sympathetic supporter of the Australian Aborigine and in Victoria donated land for the establishment of homes for these people.

In Queensland he was an active supporter of Opal and was responsible for bringing Opal children to Bribie for holidays. We especially feel very indebted to Councillor Rickman for the support and loyalty he gave to the Hostel. Through him, his wife Doreen, and their many friends many of our children were given the benefit of a happy healthy holiday on Bribie Island.

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<sup>77</sup> William McKenzie (1868-1968) was instrumental in recording Aboriginal culture of southeastern Queensland. His Aboriginal name was Gairabau and he was of the Darwarbada people of the Jinibura tribe.

His continued support in many ways, the untiring efforts of his wife Doreen over many years will never be forgotten. Our hearts could not express the feelings and thoughts over the loss of our friend.

## **Pastor Brady**

Pastor Brady came to the hostel many times seeking help and advice. He was the spiritual advisor to Brisbane's 3,000 Aboriginals<sup>78</sup>. His job, hopeless at times, in his home alone he would feed between 50 and 60 homeless ones. His house was their home and he did his best!

Pastor was awarded a trip overseas by the Churchill Fellowship. This was a great honour for the first Aboriginal to receive. He was not unduly excited about it really. Although he wanted to see how other countries operated.

"I'm a bit worried Matron," he said. "Have you any clothing I could have? Or an old suitcase?" We looked through the clothing. He was a very fat man and hard to find anything to fit. Why should Pastor Brady go overseas as a representative of our Australian Aborigines, looking like a beggar and feeling ashamed? The department to which I rang were sympathetic and money was sent for him to have a complete wardrobe of clothing. I feel so upset that at such a time little more care and thought could have been given to this matter for such an important occasion. He did not stay long but slipped back two weeks ahead of schedule and just thankful to be back.

In America he was made an honorary chief of the Sioux tribe and a citizen of Sioux City. Australia was the best country in the world, he stated. He came back with new ideas. His overseas trip reinforced his views on the treatment of the Aborigines. He was the spiritual advisor to Brisbane's 3,000 Aborigines, and he knew so much of their problems.

One immediate aim was to seek tribal councils for the Aborigines where help could be sought by the Aborigines to Aboriginal Councillors who would understand better than those people themselves.

We have a long hard struggle in front of us to get a better deal for Aborigines and we all know it won't be a short fracas.

Pastor continued in his fight for his beliefs and the beliefs of many people. Much strife and discussions continued, some with hatred, some with violence. To Pastor, for the betterment of his race. I do think Pastor Brady will continue to fight to the end of his days, to do what he feels must be the right thing. But is it always the right thing? Who can say? Each one to his own thinking.

## **Reverend Fred Buchholz**

Reverend Fred Buchholz<sup>79</sup> is a Methodist minister who lived at Mt Gravatt and Holland Park churches. He was pastor for both suburbs. His support and spiritual guidance became a byword in our home. He was much loved by all who knew him, this I am sure. At times when things became more than I could bear, his friendship became very dear, and I felt that I had a real friend.

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<sup>78</sup> This is not strictly correct. Pastor Don Brady (1927-1984) ran the Christian Community Centre in a Methodist Church, which provided spiritual guidance and welfare assistance to 3,000 people. He was of Kuku Yulanji descent. His tribal name was Kuanji.

<sup>79</sup> Reverend Fred Buchholz (1913-1989) was a Methodist Minister who was responsible for many parishes during his ministry spanning 1937 to 1978. He was Minister at Holland Park 1966-1971.



When things became mountains, his guidance for me they would become very small and I could again cope with my problems.

To your church members, to those, there were so many who did so much to help the Opal Joyce Wilding Home became a real part in its administration, with the children who became part of the family of Fred Buchholz.

### **Dr O'Loan**

Dr O'Loan visited the home regularly, he was concerned with a little fellow. Doctor called for a little pot on which the child sat and it was put outside. One little boy has never forgotten him, every time doctors can come into the driveway, he would call out to me, "Matron, here's Dr Pooh!" and this name always remained with him.

Dr O'Loan was a good friend to our house, far exceeding his duties as a doctor to the people. Those who needed food, clothing, advice or anything that he could do to help he would. He has travelled many miles to see different families, after his surgery hours.

To you Dr O'Loan many coloured families wish to thank you for your kindness. These are the people who do so much for the people but are unknown. To Dr O'Loan - not Dr Pooh - you gave a marvellous lesson in better relationships with one another.

### **Margorie Hutchison**

Marg, my friend in the days of our beginning. She came to the house - 135 Melbourne Street South Brisbane - to see me with her husband. Her donation to me, well in those days, it was my fortune. I felt like a millionaire. We had many days of good eating.

She became part of my work, helping wherever she could. As the years advanced, the problems with the Aboriginals and the whites, she was still there, as near as a telephone.

She would take abandoned little babies for a few days till we could do something for them. Anyone who needed a home for a few days, not forgetting the clothing, feeding, the money. This was all part of the contribution of her, sharing with me - our problem.

Words could never be written by my pen. My thanks for all that she did to make my burden light. This would be another story if I did.

### **Awards**

I had received the order of the British Empire at an investiture at Government House in 1964 from the Governor Sir Henry Abel Smith<sup>80</sup>. It was indeed an honour not only for me. It had at last recognised the Aboriginals and the work of Opal.

Our hostel phone rang continually all day. Many telegrams, beautiful flowers and many wonderful letters arrived. It was a day to remember.

Gracious Lady - another honour for me. This came with a wonderful holiday in Perth.

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<sup>80</sup> Colonel Sir Henry Abel Smith (1900-1993) was Governor of Queensland from 1958 to 1966.

Mother of the Year - this award given by the late Hugh Curnow. These and a few others were part of a reward given, for my work among the Aboriginals. I did not ask for any of these things but it was a most wonderful feeling that at least my work had been recognised and again the efforts of Opal had proved its worth. I sincerely thank all those, and those not mentioned here, who made these functions possible for me to remember and enjoy, such a break in my very severe and exacting job.

I had been named Woman of the Year by the Quota Club<sup>81</sup> of Brisbane. I was presented with my award at a Career Women's dinner at 'Coolden',<sup>82</sup> New Farm. I was thrilled and honoured at being chosen for such an award. The president of the Quota Club, Mrs Anna Smith, described the award:

"This is Quota's way of recognising the contribution of women to the community by honouring a woman who has worked publicly or privately in outstanding fashion during the preceding year. Mrs Wilding had been chosen for her aid to Aboriginals, her efforts to see them recognised and given the same opportunities as their white brothers and sisters. She was partly responsible for the formation of Opal and although she encountered much opposition, has won through because she has her heart and soul in her work. Mrs Wilding began her work with the coloured people in 1952. Since Opal was formed, 20,000 coloured people and their families have stayed in the Hostel while waiting for houses and employment."

To me it was a most wonderful [sic] evening I had spent for a long time.

## Visitors

Visitors and observers came to the hostel from all over the world. Two social workers from New Zealand; many prominent doctors; a Negro Sociologist from America; Dr Chow from China; a Tongan Prince, the nephew of Queen Salote<sup>83</sup>; Members of the Nazi Party<sup>84</sup>; Jimmie Little<sup>85</sup>, our famous Aboriginal guitar player; Harold Blair<sup>86</sup>, a famous Aboriginal singer; Dr V. Kurien<sup>87</sup>, the Chairman of the Milk Board for the whole of India; Bishop Strong<sup>88</sup>; Sue Lyon<sup>89</sup>, an American film star; a university student who pretended to be a down and out. A steady stream of people who wished to see for themselves the work of Opal and its activities.

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<sup>81</sup> The Quota Club is an organisation that provides support to women, children and deaf people.

<sup>82</sup> Coolden was a popular reception centre in the Brisbane suburb of New Farm.

<sup>83</sup> Queen of Tonga 1918-1965. It's not clear which nephew is mentioned.

<sup>84</sup> It's not possible to understand this reference to the Nazi Party in this context.

<sup>85</sup> Jimmy Little (1937-2012) was an Aboriginal vocalist and guitar player of the Yorta Yorta people, who was the most famous Aboriginal star on the Australian music scene during his day.

<sup>86</sup> Harold Blair (1924-1976) was an Aboriginal tenor and later an activist for Aboriginal welfare, particularly focusing on arts and recreation.

<sup>87</sup> Verghese Kurien (1921-2012) was an Indian social entrepreneur who developed dairy co-operatives that empowered poor farmers and dairy workers. His model of co-operation among dairy farmers was called the "Anand pattern", after his dairy in Ananda, Gujarat in western India. Joyce Wilding's daughter Betty lived at the Anand Dairy in India during the 1960s.

<sup>88</sup> Presumably Bishop Philip Strong (1899-1983), Anglican Bishop of Papua from 1937 to 1962, when he became Archbishop of Brisbane. He was an uncompromising church traditionalist and held conservative views on gambling, drinking and the re-marriage of divorcees.

<sup>89</sup> Sue Lyon was born in 1946 and is an American actor best known for her performance in *Lolita* (1962).

## Sue Lyon, American Film Star

We had Sue Lyon, and American film star, come to visit us<sup>90</sup>. There were many Aboriginals to meet her, it was her great wish to meet one. She was as shy as they were and much impressed.

Uncle Willie clicked his boomerangs and sang an Aboriginal lullaby. When she left, she was a little disappointed. She really wanted to see them as they lived in the bush in their natural state instead of this. She saw a real suburban house. She wanted to see the culture (or some) and bark paintings. She hoped to return to Australia one day, she said, to see and know more about the background of the Aboriginals of Australia. She gave us a happy smile and left. I am pleased she did not see them as some lived in Brisbane. Some in such appalling conditions. She may not have felt the same about her return, as her thoughts were very much for the better conditions for all coloured people of the world.

## King Peter of Yugoslavia

At the Gold Coast in Queensland, a very advanced, modern and wealthy town, people were waiting for the arrival of King Peter<sup>91</sup> of Yugoslavia. Many preparations for him were in full swing. Many notables were invited, also many people of different races who lived in this country except: the Australian Aborigine.

There was one person who cared: Aileen wife of Mr Colin Bennett MLA. She was so angry that no-one had been asked to go to represent them. She rang me to see if any were interested. It was quite a job, picking the ones to go, as we did have some very lovely girls there at that time. They were chosen, three boys and three girls. This I felt was another step forward for them for their recognition, their place in society. It didn't but one heard the faint rumblings of dissatisfied people, because they were going to attend.

Mrs Bennett spent several hours each day teaching them how to curtsy and bow, to show them protocol that was required in the presence of a king.

It was not the ball I remembered so much yet it really was lovely.

Our first problem was to get there. We had no car. There would be eight of us and we could not all squeeze into one car with our dresses. The second [problem], to clothe them, so they would do credit to themselves. The finance to get them clothes would be impossible to meet. I was fairly well known by then but not enough to expect anything as large as this. I plucked up my courage and I went to a hire firm. Yes, they knew about me, what my work entailed. I would pay them off through the instalment plan if they would trust me. How I prayed. Of course they would help, even the suits and necessities for the young men. We took them all for fittings it was so exciting.

Then I rang the Manager of the Ascot Cab Company<sup>92</sup> Mr Ron Dawes. Would he please allow us to use three cabs to go to Southport<sup>93</sup>? I would have to pay back each week I explained to him. Without

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<sup>90</sup> Sue Lyon (1946-2019) was the star of Stanley Kubrick's *Lolita*, which was released in 1962 when Lyon was 14 years old. It's not clear when she visited Australia but it was presumably while she was still a teenager.

<sup>91</sup> King Peter II of Yugoslavia (1923-1970) reigned briefly during World War II but was deposed in 1945 when Yugoslavia became a republic. He squandered his fortune by living beyond his means and pursuing futile plans to reclaim his throne. He visited Australia in 1960, long after he lost his throne.

<sup>92</sup> The Ascot Cab Company was the first taxi company in Brisbane and is now part of Black & White Cabs.

hesitation he promised we could do this. Taking such a big load from my mind. This cab company had often shown its kindness to us. If to go on small journeys, they would not take payments - just a courtesy ride, as one of their drivers said. I have many things to thank this company for.

It was the most gratifying scene I had witnessed. As they walked to get into the cars to go down the girls in the lovely dresses, the boys in their tuxedos. Not one person could be faulted. They looked like a million dollars.

Myself, I had borrowed a frock too with all accessories. I feel really grand, though not looking like a million dollars, I felt like it.

Ours<sup>94</sup> danced with King Peter. He came briefly afterwards to put a few questions to them. No shyness on their part, I watched with such great satisfaction and love as they took their parts as though this was an everyday occurrence. It was one of the loveliest nights of the year. They presented him with a boomerang.

We paid our obligations back to our friends who had made our evening possible. Never forgetting their kindness to us and our cause.

## The Police

### Unkindness by police

A man and his wife a sat in Musgrave Park, sitting in the sun feeling very sad and unhappy. I had told them to go and sit quietly in the park, because of the noise in the Hostel.

As they sat two policemen came to see them. I did not hear what was said, but a young woman came running as fast as she could to ask me to stop what was going on. From the Hostel I could see quite clearly a policeman grab the man, he kicked him several times in the legs, and kept on kicking him to make him move along.

I could hardly speak. As the man and his wife came towards the Hostel I decided to wait. I looked at his legs they were red and patches of skin were taken off. He begged me not to complain. It would only be worst next time he said.

He and his wife were sitting in the park at my request, waiting for me to go with them to the funeral parlour chapel to see their little daughter who was to be buried, that morning. Yes, I saw police brutality that morning in its ugliest form.

This is a true statement and a name supplied if required.

### Cheeky the Dog

We had received many complaints about our dog Cheeky. He used to bite, without a cause at times. He was a thoroughbred of all mongrels to me, and did his job faithfully guarding the house and us against anyone that would try to come in. If a stranger came to the door, we would have to run and hold him quickly, I do not like to see dogs chained all the time.

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<sup>93</sup> Southport is the Central Business District of the Gold Coast, Queensland.

<sup>94</sup> Word unclear

A young Aboriginal man called to see me. He had not been well, and had come for advice. He promptly fainted on the floor, at the same time a policeman had called to see me regarding an invitation. Seeing I needed help, the policeman bent down to pick the man up to put him on the bed. As he did so Cheeky rushed forward and bit him on the bottom. The policeman was very angry. He said that he had heard some terrible things about my dog, he would do something about it.

I could not bear it, I loved my dog. I rang my solicitor, a friend of mine. He said, "Well Joyce they cannot shoot a dog if he is not there." I was so relieved.

An Aboriginal boy who loved Cheeky too, took him to the railway station where he was transferred to Ipswich to a friend of his. I waited each day for the policeman to come. He didn't.

After four months of living in the country I decided to bring Cheeky home. When he returned, he knew he was back home, he ran from room to room, letting everyone know he was back. It could never have happened in a thousand years. The same policeman came to see me within an hour of Cheeky arriving home.

"Oh, so there he is". He had spotted Cheeky.

"Oh no you don't" I said, "He is from the same litter as poor old Cheeky".

"Well," said the policeman, "I could have sworn it was the same dog. Anyway, I didn't do anything about your other old fellow. He was a real good watchdog. I would have liked him myself. I need a good dog where I'm living."

John and I looked at each other, but not a word was spoken.

### Kindness by police in South Brisbane

As Matron I had many dealings with the police force, some good, some bad. I remember a policeman from Woolloongabba who just happened to call to see me on a matter about a registration. At the same time a mother with her three children sat in my office. The story - the same story I had heard hundreds of times - the tears fell fast from the mother's eyes.

The policeman stood outside of the door and called me, asked if this was a genuine case. I said, "Yes". He took £20 out of his pocket and gave it to the mother.

He came several times to see this mother, bringing with him clothing for the children. To me, as I listened to him as he spoke to her regarding her husband and family, he spoke with the wisdom of Solomon. This was not a handout as the children were left in the Hostel she went to his home where his wife and children were, and worked to pay back his kindness.

This kindness by this policeman shall never be forgotten, because he continued so strongly. He found the husband, got him a job and together we found a home for them. There are some wonderful men in the police force. History repeated itself so many times during my stay in Opal House as Matron. With some members of the police force we had a very good liaison in the work of Opal House.

## Kindness by police in Inala

Much has been said about the police force. There are good policemen and there are those who could be better.

A young policeman died in Inala doing his duty<sup>95</sup>. It was such a tragedy. I remember this so clearly.

A young Aboriginal mother calling to see me at the Hostel. She just sat and cried her heart out. "Matron, he did so much for me and my lads. Why did they do it?"

After tea that evening as we all sat around she explained to the people there, that there were always two sides to a story. This young policeman had helped her many times with her young wayward son. With tears streaming down her face, she said, "We shall do something for him, we shall help his wife". Together we collected £10 from all and sent to the police sergeant of the station. Prayers were said for the sorrowing wife by all.

Lord, this is a real understanding between black and white.  
I think so.

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<sup>95</sup> Presumably this refers to the shooting death of 26-year-old Constable Douglas George Gordon at Japonica Street, Inala on 27 March 1968.

# Advocacy

## Yes Vote

Gratifying indeed was the overwhelming 'Yes' vote which means that the indigenous inhabitants of Australia can now be recognised as being existent in the community. However the Yes vote is not enough. Every Australian must go further with their recognition of the rights and the problems of the Aborigines.

All coloured people of any community must be given encouragement to make houses for their families and to see that their children gain the maximum education possible.

This cannot be accomplished by the Aborigine alone. Every Australian has an obligation to see that jobs, homes, and education are as freely given, or made available, to the coloured person as to the European in Australia.

The success of the recent referendum extends citizenship<sup>96</sup> to all Aborigines and part Aborigines of Australia who were not recognised previously in the census of this country. We shall see if the Yes vote is carried to the utmost, if the promises stated are carried out.

We shall see.

## Education

Miss Margaret Valadian<sup>97</sup>, the first student of Aboriginal descent to obtain a degree at the University of Queensland. I have known Margaret for many years. I knew under what conditions she studied to get where she is today and it was very fitting when we both attended the opening of the new Opal centre in Rockhampton, a day I felt very proud and humble.

The tremendous work carried out by Father Hayes<sup>98</sup> no-one knows, he was lovingly called Mr Opal. It was with his perseverance with the Aborigines, their cooperation that this new centre came. Miss Margaret's words at the opening were something to remember. I quote her words:

"A recognition of racial identity for Aborigines, not amalgamation, was the solution to Australia's problem of integration. If the two races could bring about an 'orchestration' of different people it would be a quicker road to integration. The Aborigines have a culture rich in tradition and it should be preserved to retain their racial identity. The Aboriginal knowledge of medicine and botany also had not been fully realised and could possibly be of benefit to science.

With education being of primary importance in today's world, the Aboriginal or part Aboriginal parents must realise that to take their place in the community, children

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<sup>96</sup> A referendum was held on 27 May 1967 to amend the Australian Constitution so that Aboriginal people were counted as part of the population when calculating the number of seats for each state in the Federal Parliament. There is a widespread misconception amongst Australians, then and now, that this referendum conferred Australian citizenship on Aboriginal people and that it allowed Aboriginal people to be counted in the Australian Census for the first time. These are both incorrect. Aboriginal people, along with all other Australians, became Australian citizens in 1949 and Aborigines were always counted in the Australian Census, albeit separately from other Australians.

<sup>97</sup> For more information on Margaret Valladian, see footnote on page 13

<sup>98</sup> Father Michael Hayes (1926-2011), a Catholic priest of Rockhampton, was an advocate for Aboriginal people throughout his ministry. Since his death, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse has heard from multiple witnesses of his sexual abuse of Aboriginal girls in his care.



must be encouraged to further their educational status. Many parents do not realise the importance of a good scholastic grounding and in a good many cases the home environment is such that it does not lend itself to the encouragement of after-school studies.

There is not the slightest doubt the Aborigine or part Aborigine has the ability to reach any heights in the academic world. We know of cases where people of Aboriginal parentage have served their apprenticeship in various trades and who are considered to be among the best in their sphere. Both the parents and the child should be encouraged to further this viewpoint. It must be realised by both coloured and white members of the community that the process of assimilation has not yet reached perfection but education will be a great step forward to this achievement. With the broader concept of equality in education for all, it is up to all concerned with the welfare of the coloured people to encourage the Aboriginal parents to seek all means through which their children can take advantage of the educational facilities now available.

Some coloured people have set an example to their fellows by studying diligently to make a place for themselves in the world of art. Others have applied themselves successfully to the study of some chosen trade and having obtained their apprenticeship have not been content until they have emerged as fully-trained tradesmen. Having a cultural background extending over thousands of years it is not surprising that the Aborigine or part Aborigine can obtain a high degree of skill when he applies himself conscientiously to the study and practical side of his chosen field.”

### **A reply to a letter and faked photo**

From Joyce Wilding 1967

A man wrote to the papers and also to me regarding the Aborigines' behaviour in the park and other places to which I replied:

*For an article to be rewarding it needs to appreciate the sum total of the truth, and to be of valuable knowledge to effect any worthy progress in time. This necessitates experience, concerned with the knowing of the material, for the better, not the worse. To benefit, understanding is to live for and with improvements, not to seek out convenient weaknesses to become the strength of a circumstance.*

*A people in need whose inferiority has been imposed on them, and whose limited circumstances are distaining<sup>99</sup> enough require a little goodwill to develop a little strength to realise themselves to be better men and women.*

*An article such as he wrote creates unwholesome impressions riddled with destructive and negative views and undoubtably disqualifies the true perspective misguided readers are brunt of.*

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<sup>99</sup> Word unclear

*You have again raised the ugly head of hate, distrust and intolerance in the minds of people against our coloured people. You are trying to destroy something we are building up. All the Aborigines are not the same. Yes, some spend their money on drink, soliciting and all the things that are known to mankind. But does this only refer to the Aborigines? And only to South Brisbane?*

*You made a statement that you were afraid. Well you might be because you have hurt so many of these people in South Brisbane, and again created a little Harlem by implanting into people's minds things that make our coloured people distrust us, and give them the feeling of not being wanted. In reply to your findings collectively let me state from first-hand knowledge, I can assure you that any Aborigine can obtain any kind of assistance through the Department of Native Affairs, the police, or any charitable organisation. It is up to the individual whether or not he avails himself of these facilities.*

*I consider that the public would have been more interested in a photograph showing many coloured people enjoying a TV program at the Hostel rather than a photograph of one lonely "drunk" in a park and an empty room with bottles arranged.*

This gentleman paid an Aboriginal 8 shillings to lie down in the park, finding all the old bottles around him, to make a picture to show depravity, the drunkenness of the Aborigines. This caused a furore, not only with the papers but with the Aborigines themselves. Causing the Aboriginal concerned complete isolation from his own people. He went away into the country for his own safety's sake.

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