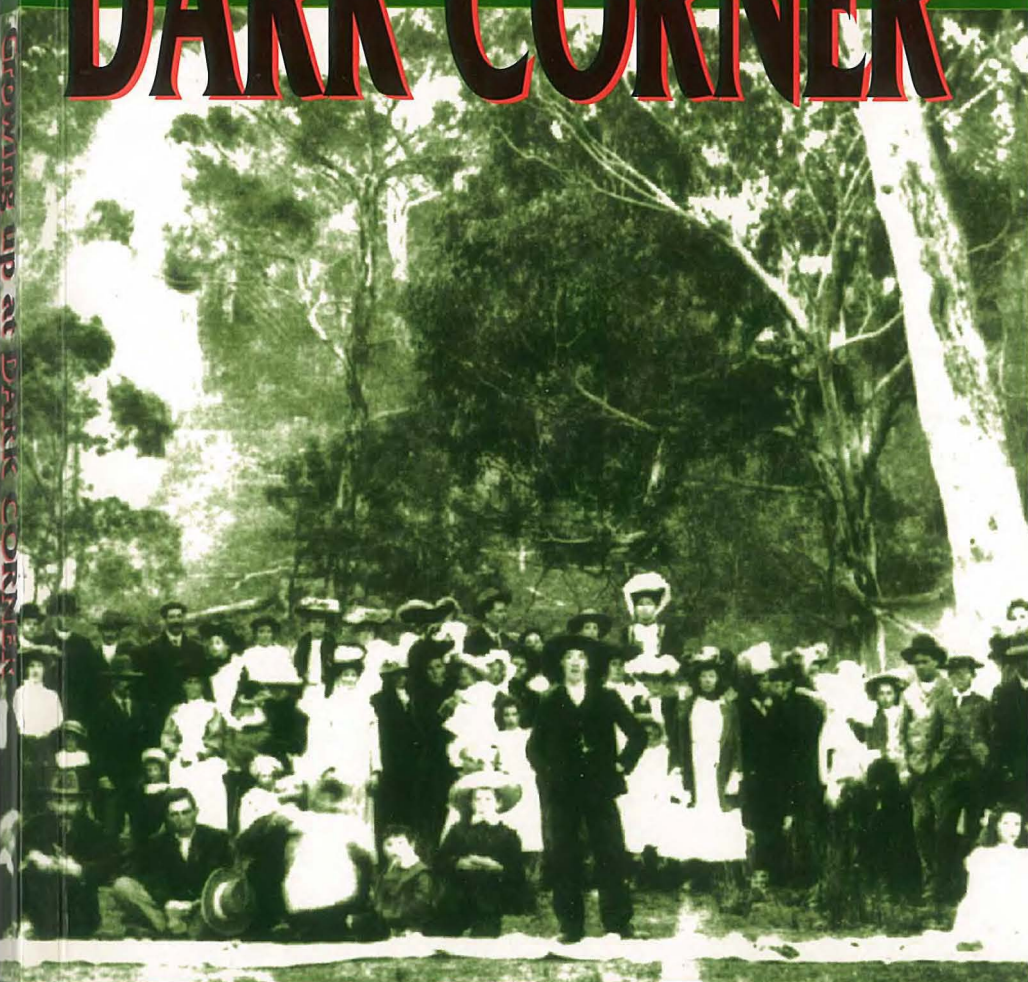


Growing up at

# DARK CORNER



stories from the childhood of Mary Byers  
as retold by

Vicki Powys

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Stories from the Childhood of Mary Byers  
as retold by  
Vicki Powys

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Published by:

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# Foreword

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These delightful memoirs of Mrs Churches throw light upon a phase of our Australian history which is often neglected. When the hectic and turbulent days of the gold rushes were over, many of the miners took up life in settled communities and began the transition from mining to pastoral and agricultural activities. A few of these settlements developed into country towns and cities, but many of them became ghost towns and then disappeared altogether.

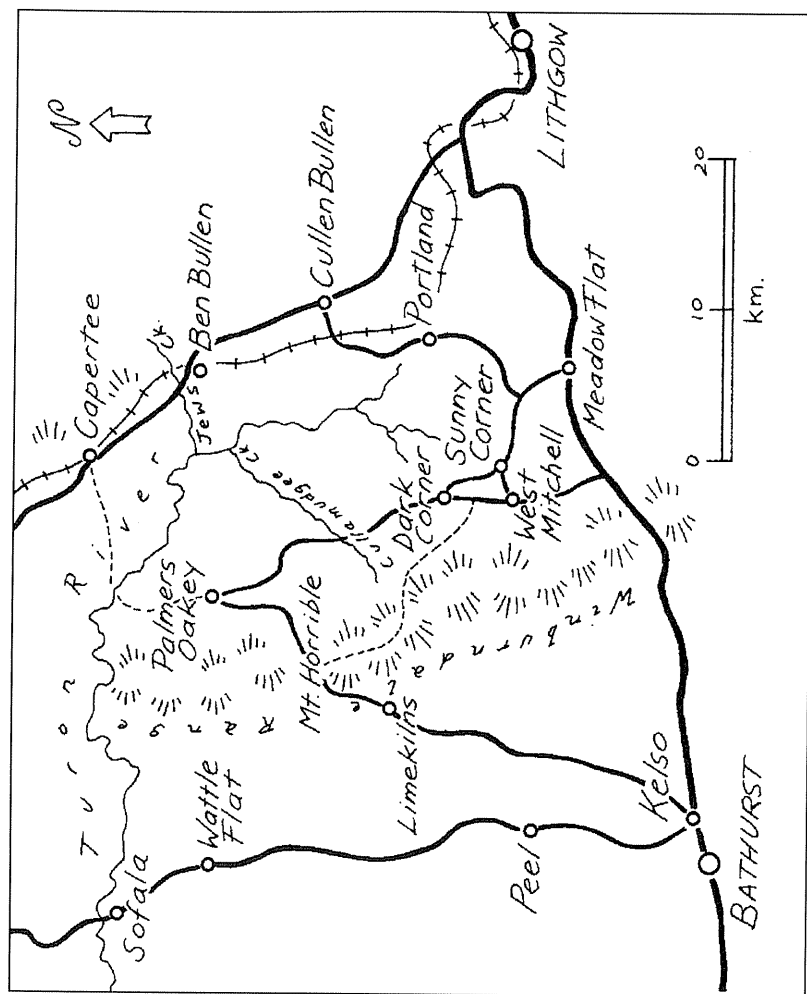
My father was born and raised in Victoria in one of those gold-field settlements at Mt Egerton, which has long since become extinct. Life there was very similar to what Mrs Churches recalls of the Dark Corner community, high up on the Great Dividing Range of New South Wales.

These were close-knit communities where nobody had very much money and people learned to care for their neighbours and bear one another's burdens. Living conditions seem primitive to us, but there was much satisfaction in hard work, home-making and simple pleasures.

When I came to Bathurst as bishop in 1959, I inherited Mrs Churches' daughter Carol as my secretary. Her sister Isobel had also been secretary to my predecessor, and their elder sister Meba and their cousin Margaret Trevor-Jones (nee Byers) later joined the staff; so I have known Mrs Churches for many years and have had some share in the joys and sorrows of her family. It is good now to be able to read her reminiscences of those years of nearly a century ago.

Kenneth Leslie  
(sometime Anglican Bishop of Bathurst,  
1959-81)





District Map, 1993

# Introduction

These stories came to be written quite by chance, after I had received a letter from Carol Churches in February 1992. Carol was enquiring about an unrelated family history matter, but she happened to mention that her mother, Mrs Mary Churches, had been born at Dark Corner in 1895 and was still living, and perhaps just might have a few stories to tell that would be new to me.

I had already spent several years researching and writing a book on the history of Sunny Corner\* which was published in 1989, but I hadn't met Mrs Churches then, and none of her stories were included in that book.

March 1992 saw the first of many meetings with Mrs Churches at her unit in Bathurst, where she is being cared for by her daughter Carol. There were so many wonderful stories told to me, and my original short essay continued to expand to the point where Carol and I decided that a book of the stories would be worthwhile.

Mrs Churches is certainly a delightful lady, and in her 98th year her memory is still acute and her stories vivid. Her eyesight and hearing are excellent too, which made for easy conversation. Also, Mrs Churches has personally read all the various drafts of these stories and pointed out the necessary corrections to be made.

I regard it as a privilege to have been able to enter into that wonderful storehouse of Mrs Churches' early memories, and I hope I have been able to re-tell her stories with the same clarity, insight and humour that Mrs Churches would have used, had she written the stories herself.

Vicki Powys

Sunny Corner NSW, March 1993

\**Sunny Corner, a Silver Town of the 1880's*, by Vicki Powys, ISBN 1863330046, published by Crawford House Press 1989.



without much that we now take for granted—electricity, cars, phones, and radios; an age when £1 was worth about \$200 of spending power in today's money. In places like Dark Corner, it was a pioneer style of life, with few amenities and many hardships. Families were often large and it was not uncommon for a woman to have twelve children. Illnesses were feared and cures uncertain.

The stories that follow give a remarkable insight into the daily lives of one local family from that era. They are made all the more vivid because the events described have been seen through the eyes of an intelligent and inquisitive child.

Mary Byers has lived in the local district all her life, firstly at Dark Corner, then Limekilns, then Kelso near Bathurst, where she married and raised her own family. As Mrs Mary Churches, she is now a resident of Bathurst.



Mary Byers, aged 4

# The Stories

## 1. Beginnings

I was born Mary Byers at Dark Corner in 1895, and that makes me nearly ninety-eight years old now. I was one of four children born to John Byers and Margaret Wilson. Dad's brother, Tom Byers, married Mum's sister, Elizabeth Wilson—two brothers married two sisters you see. (Mum and Dad had been married at Dark Corner in 1892, and Auntie Liz and Uncle Tom were married at Dark Corner too, just the year before in 1891.) Auntie and Uncle had three children who were my 'double cousins'. We two families lived close together at Dark Corner and we all got on well and helped each other out.

Grandfather Byers had for a time been a gold miner on Jew's Creek in the Ben Bullen area. My father and uncle had then carried on that gold mining tradition, and that's why they came to Dark Corner. They were both able to make a living prospecting for gold, and there was quite a bit of gold found at Dark Corner in those days. Dad never worked underground though, he knew the dangers and was aware that many miners got "dusted", that is, they died from lung disease, often at an early age.

Dad had taken up two acres as a miner's right, on a tributary of Dark Corner Creek known as West Creek. This is where we lived. Our house was three miles from Sunny Corner, on the left hand side of the Dark Corner road heading towards Palmer's Oakey.

Before my parents were married, Dad had built our house out of wattle-and-daub, with a corrugated iron roof. It was a pretty little cottage surrounded by natural bushland, with whitewashed

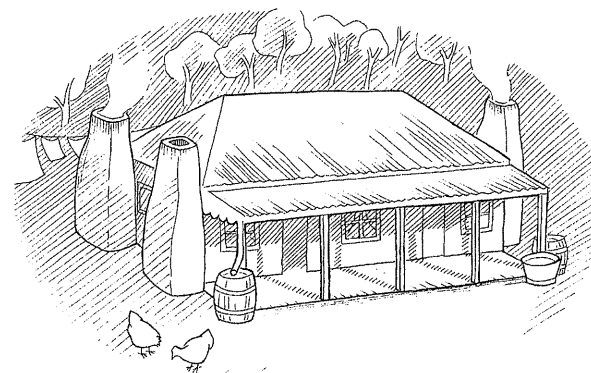
outer walls, a front verandah, and three chimneys. Mum grew chrysanthemums out the front. When Auntie Liz and Uncle Tom moved back to Dark Corner to live (that was about the time I was born), Dad and Uncle extended our house with two extra rooms to accommodate the second family, so that both families lived in different sections of the one big house. Our section had two bedrooms, a parlour, a kitchen with an open fire for cooking, an outdoor wash-house, and a pit toilet way up the back. There's nothing left of our old house now; it's all under pine plantation.

Just next door to us lived the Wilsons (Mum's father and her brothers and sisters), and between our house and the Wilson's there was an orchard, with cherries, plums, apples, peaches and gooseberries. The Wilsons kept bees, so we had plenty of honey. We grew vegetables, including 'White Elephant' potatoes that were a foot long and five inches in diameter. We kept chooks for eggs and had a milking cow. It was Mum's job to milk the cow and make the butter.

Our house was built about 200 yards up from the creek, so that we wouldn't get flooded. That meant we had to carry water from the creek in buckets up to the house for our cooking and washing. It was quite a chore. We didn't have a copper for washing, so our clothes were boiled up in four-gallon kerosene-tins over a fire outside. Our clothesline was strung across from a big black-wattle tree. The men and boys all sat under that tree for Dad to do their haircuts, all of our family and the neighbours too!

Dad and Uncle Tom made a reasonable living from alluvial gold mining. They put in much of their time fossicking for gold around the Dark Corner area and also further afield. I will tell you more about the gold a bit later, but first of all it might be as well to try and describe to you some of the domestic details of our life, which largely centred around our home. This was Mum's domain, and she looked after her family capably and lovingly. She cooked tasty meals, she kept the kitchen fire burning, she washed and swept and ironed and polished. Mum took great pride in her household, and against the odds she kept us children, and the house, as clean and as tidy as she possibly could. Our house might have been built

out of mud, but the interior had an orderliness about it. There was always a right way of doing things, whether it was our manners at the table or the arrangement of the polished tin canisters on the mantel-shelf. Life took on a certain secure order under Mum's rule, and we loved her for it.



## 2. Through a plain wooden door

Come with me now and let me show you the inside of our house at Dark Corner, as it used to be in about 1900.

We would enter the house through a plain wooden door. The interior was rather dark because each room only had one small window. There were starched lace curtains at all the windows, and heavier drapes that could be pulled across at night. In those days there was no electricity, so our house was lit in the evenings with kerosene lamps and candles. Some people made their own candles from beeswax, but Mum always preferred the whiteness of the store-bought ones, so we used those. Every day the lamps would be refilled with kerosene and the wicks trimmed. There was one lamp for each room.

To make the inside of the house brighter, the interior walls

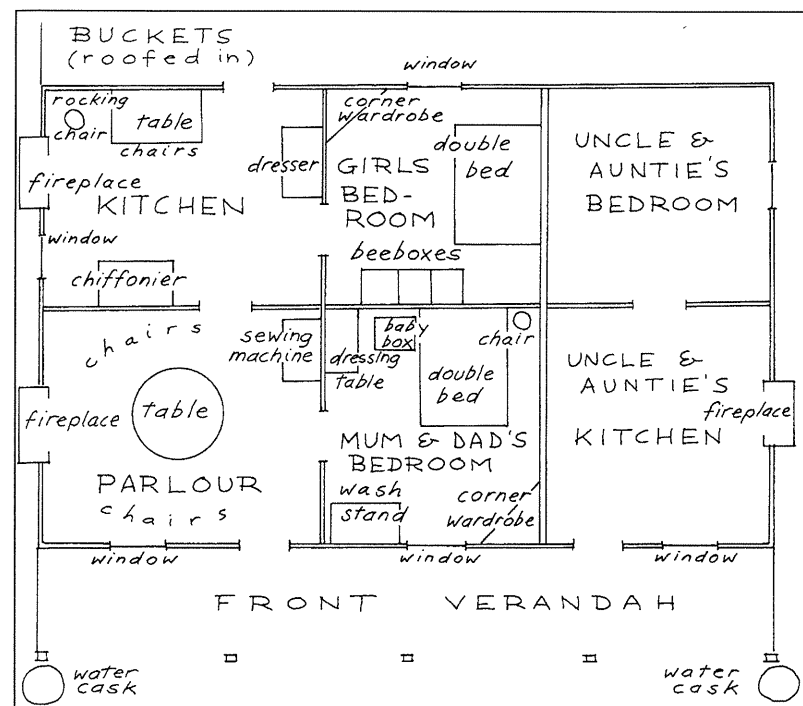
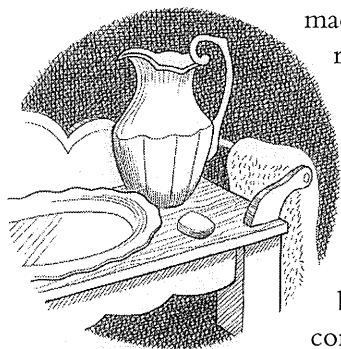
were regularly painted with white kalsomine. The ceilings were made of striped mattress ticking stretched across the rafters, and the floor was made of proper wooden floorboards that were kept scrubbed white. Some houses only had dirt floors. To cover our floorboards and make the house warmer in winter, the women and girls were kept busy making rag rugs. We took pride in the patterns we could produce and we used to swap pieces of different coloured rags with our friends to get the right shades for our pattern. The best rugs would be tufted, with inch-wide strips of rag hooked through a piece of hessian. When completed, the backs of the rugs were stitched and lined. It was an adult's job to neatly trim the tufted surface of the rug. We saved up used sugar-bags for these rugs, since sugar-bag hessian was finely woven and of good quality.

### Bedrooms

Most of our furniture was store-bought. In Mum and Dad's bedroom was a big double bedstead made of wrought iron. It had been a wedding present from Uncle Tom and Auntie Liz. The bed was of a type known as a 'half-tester'—that is, it had a high back to it, plus a semi-circular iron hoop high above the bed from which hung a lace netting curtain. All the bed posts had brass knobs on top of them.

The mattress was tightly packed with straw, and the bed was made up with white cotton sheets and woollen blankets. Covering the bed was a white Marsella bedspread, made of plain heavyweight cotton with a raised pattern of roses in the weave.

The pillows went on top of the bedspread, and they in turn were covered with decorative pillow-shams, that is, embroidered cloths of cotton or lace. In winter, the bed would be warmed with a hot-water bottle made of thick glass with a corked top.



Mum had a proper dressing table with a mirror, as well as a simple corner wardrobe, hung with a cretonne curtain. There was also a wash-stand in Mum and Dad's bedroom, with towel rails at each side of it. The stand had a wooden top with a round hole in it, and that was where a big porcelain wash-dish would fit. A matching jug was used to fill the basin with warm water for the morning wash. Under the bed went the 'push-under', a porcelain chamber-pot, to use at night. Hanging on the wall in Mum's room was a framed picture of the Rose, Thistle and Shamrock, symbols of England, Scotland and Ireland.

My sister Jessie and I had our own bedroom, and we slept together in a big double bed. Our quilt was plain coloured with a honeycomb pattern. We had a corner wardrobe too, hung with a pretty curtain. Our dressing table was home-made out of stacked bee boxes, with a curtain in front and mirror propped on top of it.

### Baths

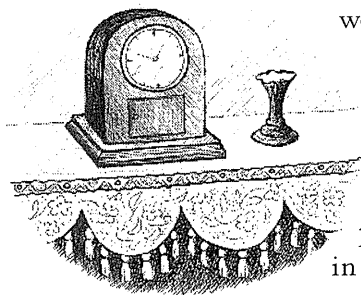
For our bath at night, we used a galvanised-iron tub in front of the kitchen fire. The tub was filled with hot water from the kitchen fountain. In the mornings before school, Jess and I had a wash at Mum's wash-stand. For personal washing we always used store-bought soap. Dad often had his morning wash and shave just outside the back door, where we had a sort of laundry under a skillion roof. This was where Mum kept the various tubs and buckets used for washing clothes and carting water. Dad used a cut-throat razor for shaving, and he sharpened it on a long razor strop. We cleaned our teeth with bristle brushes. The bristles were set into a xylonite handle, and we used toothpowder instead of toothpaste.

### Laundry

Monday was usually the day for washing clothes, and it was back-breaking work for Mum. It involved carting water, chopping wood, soaking and scrubbing the clothes, boiling them, rinsing and starching them, wringing them out by hand and pegging them to the clothesline, and all of that was followed by the ironing. Mum even made the laundry soap, from fat, resin and caustic soda. That had to be boiled up too, and left to set in a wooden tray, then cut into blocks with a wire cutter, and sliced again into smaller pieces for the washing routine. When Jess and I were big enough, we would help Mum wring out the sheets and towels. We made a game of it, and with Jess and I at each end of a wet sheet, we would twist and twist in opposite directions until the first kink in the tightly twisted sheet would appear. That was the 'knot', and who-

ever got the knot at her end, we decided, would be the first one to marry.

Mum did all the ironing with a set of four flat-irons, which would be heated up in turn in front of the kitchen fire. The ironing was done on the kitchen table over a blanket pad. Nearly everything was starched in those days too—the tablecloths,



aprons and pinafores; even the pillowslips were lightly starched.

### Parlour

We used the parlour in the evenings and on wet days and always, of course, when we had guests. It was quite a big room, bigger than the kitchen, and was always kept tidy and ready for entertaining. Visitors to the house were either 'kitchen visitors' or 'parlour visitors'. The parlour visitors would be treated to a cup of tea served in the best china cups, and scones or cake served on a properly set traymobile or table covered with a hand-embroidered tea-cloth and with the best tea-cosy on the tea-pot.

The fire was always set ready in the parlour fire-place, which had a decorative fender at the front and a fire-screen. In the middle of the parlour was a big round cedar table on which were kept a few specially chosen books, carefully arranged. Those books included the Bible, the dictionary, the family album with embossed leather cover, copies of Dad's books *Plutarch's Lives* and *Poetry by Pope*, and some Dickens books as well.

The best chairs were kept in the parlour. They were made of cedar with plain rounded backs and upholstered in black leather with a braid trim. Over the backs of the chairs were white knitted antimacassars. Those chairs weren't especially comfortable, but they looked good. On the parlour wall was a framed picture of a lion. An original crayon drawing, it had been given to Mum and Dad as a wedding present.

The mantel-piece over the parlour fire-place was made pretty with the addition of an ornamental drape of burgundy-coloured velvet. The drape was attached to the front and side edges of the mantel-piece with decorative gold upholstery pins and a half-inch width of gold braid. The drape itself had a scalloped edge hung with silken burgundy tassels, and the velvet was beautifully hand-embroidered with flowers sewn in gold and green thread. On top of the mantel-piece was a plain cedar clock and a few other ornaments.

### ***Sewing***

Mum's treadle sewing machine was kept in the parlour too. Mum made clothes for herself and us children, but Dad preferred to buy his clothes from the store. My button-up boots and black stockings came from Bulkeley's Store in Sunny Corner, but Mum made everything else: underwear, petticoats, dresses and pinafores. I learned to read my first words on Mum's sewing machine—the brand name was written on the side: 'The Singer Sewing Machine Manufacturing Company Ltd'.

Mum used to darn our socks and stockings over the base of a round-bottomed lemonade bottle, and my first sewing lesson was darning. Mum also did a lot of crochet work, but never any knitting.

### ***Kitchen***

The most lived-in room in the house was the kitchen, and nearly all daytime activities were centred there. The preparation of meals was another one of Mum's never-ending jobs, and she spent hours each day cooking and baking. We always ate our meals at the big wooden table in the kitchen. That table would undergo a transformation from a humble work bench where dishes were washed and vegetables chopped, to a grand dining table, properly set in the traditional manner. Ten people could be seated at that table, if the occasion demanded. The white pine kitchen chairs had wooden seats, turned legs and spindle backs. The dinner plates were plain white, edged with a blue line.

There was a chiffonier and a dresser in the kitchen, and these were used to store Mum's good serving bowls, the china, the glassware and cutlery. I think we had storage bins for the flour and sugar, since the flour was delivered from Bulkeley's Store in fifty-pound bags, and the sugar in seventy-pound bags. Rice and sago both came in seven-pound bags. We used a lot of flour with all the bread that Mum baked, and jam-making required large amounts of sugar.

We had no refrigerator, so perishables like meat, milk and butter were kept in a cool-safe that was draped with damp hess-

ian. And we were always wary of blowflies and used a fly-proof safe or wire-mesh dish-covers to protect the food. Beaded nets were placed over the milk-jug and the sugar-bowl.

On top of the kitchen mantel-piece, over the fire-place, were arranged the various food canisters, for tea, salt, rice, sago, flour, sugar and so on. These canisters were recycled seven-pound treacle and golden syrup tins. We polished them with salt and vinegar until they shone like silver, and they had pasted-on labels to describe the contents. One of the children's jobs was to help cut out the decorative edge on the newspaper covers which were placed on top of the kitchen mantel-piece and on the kitchen dresser and other shelves (but never in the parlour!). The newspaper would be folded up like a concertina, and with Mum's scissors we'd snip out the pattern, always trying to invent new designs. Dad, of course, would have read the newspaper first. His favourite spot was to sit in the big rocking chair in front of the kitchen fire, and given the chance he would read his copy of *The Lithgow Mercury*.

At meal times, a cloth would always be put on the table (clean and starched), and the table would be properly set with the silver-plated cutlery that Mum and Dad had been given for a wedding present. My parents had also been given a silver cruet-stand, and that always went on the table as well. Mum liked to keep up a certain standard, even though we were not well off. I was always anxious to help Mum, so I was given the job of polishing all the silver, every week. We used a special brown powder mixed with a little water as a cleaning paste for the silver spoons and forks. The knives had steel blades and they had to be burnished by rubbing them up and down on a special leather-covered board, with a different sort of cleaning powder. The knife blades were set into handles made of horn, using decorative brass rivets.

The fire in the kitchen was kept burning nearly all the time, but even so the fire-place was whitewashed daily. There was a big iron rail above the fire on which hung various cooking pots, plus a water fountain that held several gallons of hot water and



had a tap at the bottom. Mum did all our cooking over the open fire, usually in a camp oven. She baked all our bread in that camp oven, and could turn out a good roast dinner in it too. I have never tasted a baked dinner that was as good as the ones Mum cooked. Cooking over that open fire was a constant job, and so hot in summer too, but I never heard Mum complain. She had her cooking down to a fine art and kept a shovel next to the fire-place for instant adjustment of cooking temperatures. The round camp oven was about twenty inches in diameter and made of heavy cast iron. It was suspended over the fire and had a special 'S' hook to remove the lid and check progress of the contents. Mum preferred to use what we called baking bark—one inch thick chunks of bark that would turn into red hot coals that were put under the camp oven and on top of it as well. Mum was a cooking wizard, and she managed to bake scones and biscuits in the camp oven too.

We had another oven outside, a homemade one built from a steel drum set into an earthen bank near our back door. A fire would be lit both under and over the drum. I remember Mum cooked sandwich-sponge cakes in this, but she always baked the bread in the camp oven inside.

Mum used to make jam too, but we never did any bottling of fruit apart from that. We did dry some fruit though, and in the autumn we would peel, core and slice up apples into rings. These were then threaded onto a long string to be dried in the sun. Sometimes we dried quinces too. The dried fruit would then be stored in calico bags, and used later for stewing.

Jack Fitzgerald from Sunny Corner delivered our meat twice a week. He came on horseback and carried the meat in a big cane basket. We never ate rabbits, since there were only a few of them around in those days.

### 3. A feast from the past

With Mum so busy in the kitchen all the time, you may be wondering just what sort of meals we ate. Let me try to remember.

For breakfast we usually ate hot oatmeal porridge with milk and sugar. (The oatmeal came from Mr Bulkeley's store, delivered in seven-pound calico bags.) Then we might have some tea and toast. The toast was made with homemade bread (cooked on a long fork in front of the kitchen fire), then buttered with homemade butter and spread with homemade jam. We children always drank weak, milky tea with plenty of sugar, and we drank out of the mugs that our Auntie Annie had given us.

School lunches were invariably sandwiches, fruit, and biscuits or a piece of cake. My favourite sandwiches were egg. Sometimes at school I'd swap my biscuits for someone else's egg sandwich, I liked them so much. After school Mum would usually give us some homemade ginger biscuits and a glass of fresh milk. Mum made the biscuits in the camp oven; they were delicious, thin and crisp. On cold wet days after school, if Mum had a stew simmering on the fire, we were allowed to dip a fresh crust of bread into the juices of the stew. I loved bread and dripping too, and I think I preferred dripping to butter.

Our evening meal (which was always called 'tea') varied in its content depending on whether Dad was at home or not. If Dad was away camped out for the week, we would mostly have cold meat and vegetables. Mum was always making tasty meat loaves, brawn and pressed tongues, and we often had corned beef or a corned leg of lamb, which would keep well. The vegetables came from our own garden: peas, beans, cabbages, potatoes, pumpkins, carrots, tomatoes, all sorts of things. We'd have soup too. Our favourite was ox-tail soup, but since nothing was ever wasted, often the soup was made from chicken bones or other leftovers.

When Dad was home at weekends or during the week, we would have hot meat meals, usually with a roast for our main mid-day dinner on Sunday. At meal times, Mum would 'dish up' the meal in proper style, with vegetables in big serving dishes on the

table, and Dad carving the meat. There would always be a round loaf of homemade bread on the table, and a dish of butter. The butter would be marked with a decorative criss-cross pattern, stamped onto it with the base of the heavy glass salt-cellar.

For desserts we might have stewed fruit such as apples flavoured with cloves, or quinces, or cherries served with real custard made from milk and eggs. And then there were those lovely rich winter puddings, such as golden syrup dumplings. The dumplings would be made from flour, water, and grated suet, rolled into balls and dropped into boiling water. When cooked they were split open and served with golden syrup. Other winter favourites were bread and butter custard, rice pudding and treacle tart. Summer desserts might be jelly and cream, or vanilla blancmange flavoured with a peach leaf. The jellies and blancmanges would be left to set in a special patterned mould-dish placed in the cool-safe, and when set would be turned out onto a dish. Blancmange was made with boiled milk and arrowroot.

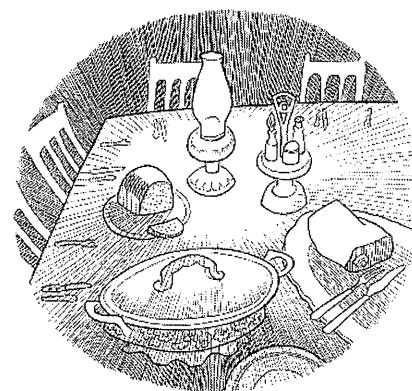
Mum baked the bread two or three times a week. She could fit three round loaves into the big camp oven. Two of the loaves would be plain and the third would be a fruit loaf, with some sugar, currants and sultanas added to the plain bread dough. The yeast used in breadmaking was homemade too. To start a batch of yeast, a sachet of yeast powder would be bought from the store, and this was added to a soupy mixture of boiled potatoes and water. The potato and yeast mix was then poured into glass bottles and tightly corked for a week or two until the growing yeast started to fizz, and then it was ready for use in breadmaking.

If Dad was going to be away during the week, Mum would pack up a tucker bag for him, with enough home cooking to last him through the week. He would take bread, cake, and cooked meat (usually corned meat). The bread and cake would be carried in one calico bag, with the meat in another, and everything would then go into a hessian sugar-bag, tied at the top. In camp, the bag would be tied to the limb of a tree in the shade, a sort of portable cool-safe. Dad also took glass jars of pickles, jams and butter. The jars we used were round pickle jars, stoppered with corks. Plates

and cutlery would have been left in the tent at Dad's camp during the week, and were never touched by thieves. A tied tent flap was as good as a locked door in those days! I suppose Dad's tucker bag must have been quite heavy, he carried it slung over his shoulder when he walked back to his camp.

Although we weren't really very well off, our family never seemed to go hungry and there was always plenty of food on our table. There were other local families much worse off than us.

I remember one particular family who lived near us. They had a lot of children to feed and there was not much to feed them with. One evening I happened to be visiting them just on dinner time. The family were all seated around a big, bare, wooden table. Each person had a bowl and a fork in front of them. There was a four-gallon kerosene-tin full of hot boiled potatoes, just taken off the fire. The mother, a big fresh-faced woman, just took the potatoes out of the tin, one at a time, and rolled a hot potato across the bare table to each waiting child, saying as she went, "Here y'ar Jessie, here y'ar Bob, here y'ar Don". Each child would then peel and mash their potato, and add milk and butter that was already on the table. That was their main meal—just potatoes! I was shocked at their table manners. Our family wouldn't have dreamt of eating like that! I suppose though, with enough milk and butter, that potato diet would have been an adequate one, if rather monotonous.



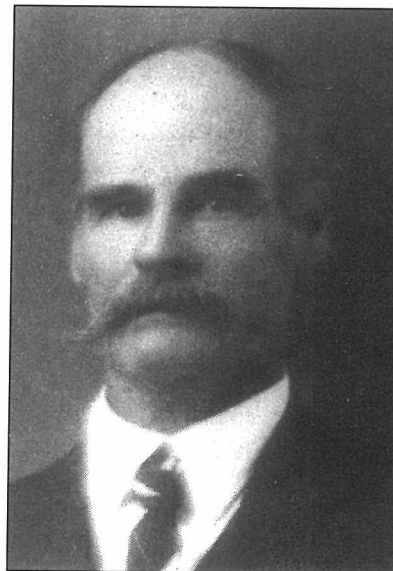
## 4. The red and the black

While a good deal of visiting went on between local families, my best friends were really my own family members. My sister Jessie was twenty-one months older than me, so we were close enough in age to be good friends. And our two cousins Tom and Jim were around the same age as Jessie and me, so we often all played together. Those two boys were forever egging me on, and daring me to do reckless things, and I was a bit of a tom-boy then, despite my long dress and petticoat!

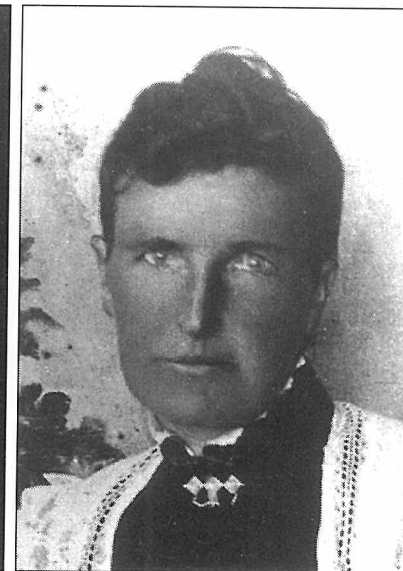
And what did we all look like? Well, Dad's parents, Hannah and Robert Byers, had had unusual and contrasting colouring, which was then passed on down through the family. Hannah had very red hair, while Robert had hair so black that he was known as 'Black Douglas'. My Dad ended up with red hair, and my Uncle Tom had very black hair, and he never did go grey even in old age. My sister Jessie had beautiful hair, chestnut brown, long and thick. I was very envious because my hair wouldn't grow like hers, and it was a sort of mousey-brown colour, and even my eyes were an uninteresting blue-grey. Of my cousins, Tom had red hair, Jim had black hair, and Bob had light-brown hair like me. My younger brothers Jack and Bill both had dark hair and brown eyes.

Dad and Uncle were rather short and strongly-built men. I remember that they were both clean shaven, except for their big moustaches. Mum and Auntie wore their long hair tied up neatly, in the fashion of the day. Women of course, were always expected to wear their hair long, and men and boys invariably had their hair cut short, not like today! Mum had fair hair and pale eyes, while Auntie had black hair and rather piercing blue eyes. I thought my Mum was pretty, and I was very fond of her, and Dad too.

Dad was a natural gentleman, and could fit in anywhere from a digger's hut to a mayor's table. He had a beautiful singing voice and could also play several musical instruments. He was well read and knew a lot about geology and surveying. Dad never swore and he had strong moral principles. Although Dad was strict, he never needed to hit us—just one look from him was enough to keep us



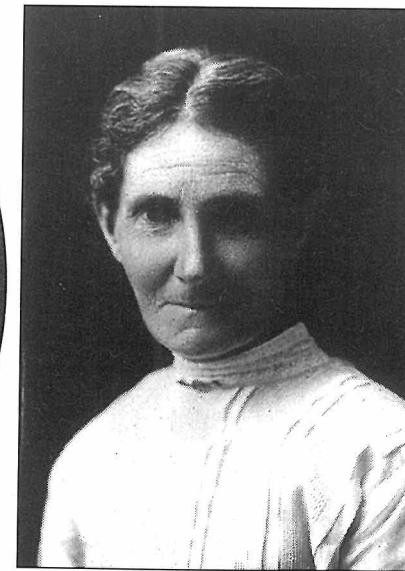
My father, John Byers, as I remember him, aged about 48 in 1908



My mother, Margaret Byers (nee Wilson), at about age 30, around 1900.



Uncle Tom Byers as a young man, about 1881.



Aunt Liz Byers (nee Wilson), about 1920.

The double cousins, about 1899. This photo was taken by Sibert the travelling photographer, at his outdoor studio in Sunny Corner. From left to right are my cousins Tom Byers (age 8) and Jim Byers (age 6), my sister Jessie (age 6) and me in front (age 4).



My two brothers, Jack aged 4 and Bill as a baby, about 1904.

in order. If ever we were deliberately naughty, Mum kept a small switch for occasional use, but she would always first reassure us that it wouldn't hurt too much! My mother was a gentle and kind person, and more tolerant of my mischief than Auntie Liz was. Auntie had me bluffed, and I tried to keep out of her way.

Mum and Dad had first met at Limekilns, when Mum's family, the Wilsons, were living there. Dad and Uncle had gone to Limekilns to look for gold, and there they had met the Wilson sisters: Mum and Auntie Liz. Tom persuaded Auntie Liz to go out with him, but Mum was shy and more reluctant about going out with Dad! The Wilsons all moved to Dark Corner in the late 1880s, and Mum and Auntie were eventually both married from the Wilsons' home at Dark Corner. When my parents were married in 1892, Dad was aged thirty-five and Mum was just twenty-three. They spent their honeymoon at Ben Bullen with Dad's friends, the Corlis family.

## 5. Bloomers and petticoats

The elaborate layers of clothing that we wore in those days were always such a bother, now that I come to think of it. But we just accepted that style of dress as a fact of life, and didn't question its purpose. Take Mum and Auntie, for instance. Getting dressed in the morning for the household chores involved putting on a full-length lace-up whalebone corset (albeit the second best, more comfortable pair), long bloomers, at least three petticoats, an ankle length dress with a high collar and long sleeves, plus black stockings and neat leather boots. Over the dress went a full length apron, and depending on the job being done, the apron might be a pretty frilly embroidered one, or one made from a sugar bag, or anything in between. Certainly trousers and gumboots would never be worn by a woman, even if she was milking the cow.

Dad liked to wear white moleskin trousers when he was working. He had four pairs, and it took Mum ages to get them properly

clean. For best, he wore a good woollen suit, plus a high-collared white shirt, a waistcoat and a gold watchchain.

The boys always wore knee-length breeches, extra-long socks, leather boots, and a long-sleeved shirt and jacket. Sailor suits for boys were popular then too.

When Jess and I got dressed each morning we would first put on our long frilly knee-length bloomers with drawstring waist, then a cotton singlet, plus a flannel singlet in winter. That flannel was beautiful and soft, a sort of cashmere flannel, and very warm. Then over that we would put on a petticoat, and then a dress that came well below our knees, but at least not down to our ankles! Dresses always had long sleeves and high collars. Sometimes we wore a decorative lace collar with the dress, but always we would wear a frilly white pinafore over our dress. But that wasn't the end of it either. We wore thick black stockings in both winter and summer, those stockings were held up by elastic garters worn above the knee. And we always wore neat black boots, either button-up or lace-up or elastic-sided. I preferred the elastic-sided boots, since I could easily kick them off.

For inclement weather Mum had a good cloak with an astrakhan collar. I don't remember that we wore overcoats to school in winter; we just wore more layers underneath and carried an umbrella, or else stayed home if it was snowing. We didn't wear garments like cardigans then—nobody did—and I didn't own a cardigan until the 1920s.

Going to school, Mum insisted that we wear our hats, so when I set off each morning I would be wearing my big straw hat tied under the chin with ribbons, but as soon as I was out of sight of home I'd take my hat off and carry it, twirling it in the air by the rim, all the way to school and all the way home again. I'd put it back on just before we reached home.

Our dress style for both home and school was the same, since there was no school uniform then. Girls of course were always expected to wear a dress and a petticoat. Anything else was unthinkable!

## 6. Gold!

Dad and Uncle Tom were alluvial gold miners. That meant they mostly worked above the ground, rather than below it. They sifted dirt and panned for gold with tin dishes, and they dug with picks and shovels along possible gold seams, and sometimes they even dug mine shafts.

Although our home block was held by miner's right, Dad and Uncle never found any gold on that block; it was just kept for our house, orchard and vegetable garden. Dad and Uncle always worked together, and they were often away from home during the week, camped out at some likely spot, perhaps as far away as Palmer's Oakey on the Turon River. Then they would walk home again at the weekend. Sometimes they would work along Cullamudgee Creek at Dark Corner, or closer to home down along West Creek below where we lived.\*

Collecting specks of gold was rather a precarious way of balancing the household budget, but we always seemed to manage, and I suppose we must have found quite a lot of gold really. All the little bits of gold would be saved up and kept in a glass bottle. We used junket-tablet bottles, actually a glass tube with a corked top, and we knew that when one bottle was filled with gold pieces it would weigh about three ounces. These bottles of gold were then traded in at Bulkeley's Store in Sunny Corner, to balance up with our account there. A lot of the gold mining families lived like that. Gold was worth £3 7s 6d an ounce in those days (approximately \$700 in modern currency).

We children used to fossick around the mullock heaps and headings too, looking for gold. One day we were down along West Creek and my cousin Jim picked something up off the ground and just popped it straight into his mouth. He didn't say anything, but took off running for home. Jessie and I chased after him. We saw Jim suddenly disappear down in the long grass and we thought he'd fallen down a mine shaft. But no, he'd just fallen into a deep patch

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\* Cullamudgee was an early name for what is now known as Coolamigal Creek.

of thistles, and he was up again and off before we could catch up with him. When he reached home, he spat out something into his mother's hand. Oh my goodness! It was a gold nugget, shaped like an 'S', and as big as the top of my finger. It might have weighed about an ounce. That was very exciting!

With all that digging, Dad used to put his back out every now and again, and he'd have to spend days or even weeks in bed, and then have to walk around with a walking stick. He couldn't bend over. He'd go and look around the diggings along West Creek after a shower of rain, and I'd go with him, since I was closer to the ground than he was. Dad had such sharp eyes and would usually spot a bit of gold before I did. Since he couldn't bend over, he would point to the bit of gold with his walking stick until I saw it; then I'd pick it up for him. Even tiny specks of gold would be picked up with a moistened finger-tip and put into the bottle.

Our usual route when we were specking for gold like this was to head down West Creek and then move in a big circle, past Aiden Shumack's, across the road to Bloomfield's Flat, and back towards home past the Homeward Bound mine and Grabhams'. If there wasn't a claim already pegged out, we were entitled to collect any bits of gold that we could find. On those walks, Dad would take the opportunity to look in on some of the old miners who lived in makeshift huts on the diggings. Often we would manage to fill a third of a bottle on that route, which took us the best part of a day, with searching and socializing combined.

Dad considered that if you could find a speck of gold for each dish washed, that would be good going, and a gold digger could make £1 a day at that rate. One of the old diggers had moved on from his claim because he was "only getting one speck per dish", and Dad thought he was being too greedy in his expectations! (A labourer's wage in 1900 was £2 a week, so £1 a day was a wage well above the average.)

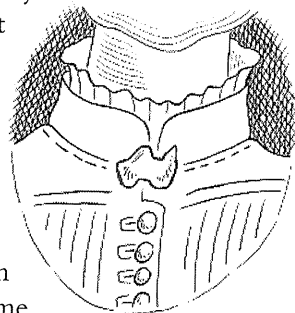
Dad once found a gold nugget that was shaped like a small map of Australia. He was so taken with it that he had a pin put onto the back of it, and gave it to Mum to wear as a brooch. He said that the brooch was never to be sold, unless it was a dire emer-

gency. Mum was very fond of her pretty brooch and took great care of it, but one time she very nearly lost it. We used to get all our drinking water from a well at the creek. The well was about six or eight feet deep and spring fed. One day Mum was bending over the well to get a billy-full of water to make tea for a picnic when the brooch came unpinned and dropped straight down into the well! Next day, Dad had to drain the well by bucketing out all the water in it, but we found Mum's brooch, and Dad straight away had a safety catch added to it.

Dad had found that Australia-shaped nugget at Bloomfield's Flat, between the Homeward Bound mine and the Paddy Lackey mine, in 1895. After many years, the pointy bit at the top of the map (Cape York!) fell off, and we added that bit to one of our gold-filled bottles. The whole nugget had been about an inch or so across, in size, and perhaps weighed between half an ounce and an ounce.

There's another gold story too, and this one has some mystery attached to it. It's a story about a gold-quartz nugget that was hidden in our parlour clock.

Even from an early age, I always seemed to be able to get into some sort of minor mischief. We had a big cedar clock that stood on the mantel-piece in the parlour. That clock had been a wedding present to Mum and Dad, but for most of the time the clock wasn't working and it just sat on the shelf as a useless decoration. Jessie had already started school, and I was still at home with Mum, so I would have been about five. I was fascinated by that clock. If ever I got the opportunity of being in the house by myself for a short while, I would pull a chair across and climb up to look at it. The clock had a door on the front of it, and inside was the pendulum chamber. I'd open the clock-door and push the pendulum back and forth to make the clock tick. I was always very quick at climbing down off the chair again, so Mum never caught me.



But one day when I looked inside the clock, there was this big piece of gold-quartz hidden there, inside the pendulum chamber. That quartz piece was about the size of a large grapefruit, and it was just studded with gold, with more gold in it than quartz. I stared in wonderment at the beautiful nugget, and touched it, and then quickly closed the clock-door again and climbed down off the chair. I was quite convinced that Dad must have struck it rich and was keeping it a secret. I just gloated over that idea; I was so excited! Mum was quite sure I'd been up to some mischief, such was the look on my face. But she gave no hint of knowing anything about a lucky strike.

I was really puzzled. Over the next few days, I carefully scrutinized my parents' faces, but I could find no trace of excitement in them. But surely, we were rich? Every day I checked the clock, and the quartz nugget was still there.

Before long, Dad took a trip into Bathurst, and I imagined that he would be coming home laden with parcels for us all. But he brought back just the usual bag of oranges and nothing more. Soon after, when I checked the clock, the quartz was gone.

Since I didn't want to admit to my misbehaviour in playing with the clock in the first place, I lived with that mystery for many years before finally asking my father about it. He genuinely knew nothing about the nugget, but he suggested a solution to the puzzle. Some of the old local gold diggers often used to come and visit us, and one of them must have indeed struck it rich. Since we never bothered much about locking our house, that old digger must have come into the house when we were absent, and unknown to Mum or Dad, put the gold-quartz nugget inside our cedar clock for safe keeping, until he next had the opportunity to go into Bathurst and sell it. Since all the locals trusted our Dad, whoever it was must have considered that our parlour clock was as good as a bank-safe, and that even if Mum or Dad had found it, the nugget would still have been safe. Obviously the digger had wanted to keep his find a secret from the other gold diggers, but he hadn't reckoned on me. He probably never knew of the brush that nugget had with a small inquisitive child.

## 7. Lolly shops and general stores

We didn't have any horses, and of course there weren't any cars in those days. So we walked everywhere: to school, visiting, to the shops. We liked going shopping with Mum even though it was over three miles into Sunny Corner. It depended on who Mum was going to visit as to which route we took—sometimes we would take the 'low road' along the West Mitchell road and do our shopping at Mitchell's Creek, and other times we would take the 'high road', along the main Dark Corner road to Sunny Corner township, where Mum would place an order at Bulkeley's Store.



Bulkeleys would then deliver the order out to our place at Dark Corner by horse and cart.

There were quite a few other shops at Sunny Corner, but we always placed our main order at Richard Bulkeley's General Store. He sold everything from groceries and hardware to haberdashery. Bulkeley's delivered groceries to Dark Corner only once a month, so we would always have a fairly big order, with sacks of flour, sugar, oatmeal, sago, rice, tins of treacle and so on.

The two shops that I remember the best were the lolly shops. There was one at Mitchell's Creek: Miss Edith Lord's. It had a



wooden front to it. Then there was Miss Jones' tiny shop in Sunny Corner, next to Bulkeley's. Her shop was smaller than Miss Lord's. We children would be given a penny or a ha'penny to spend. There'd be the four of us, Jessie and me, and our cousins Tom and Jim, all around the same age. Miss Jones was a kind hearted soul. She knew we only had enough money to buy a few lollies, but we always asked to be shown all the toys in her shop, and she was happy to show them to us. There was a row of dolls on a high shelf near the ceiling. Miss Jones would proceed to hook the dolls down, one by one, with a long cane, for us to examine closely. I can't remember what the two boys looked at, perhaps toy trains or spinning tops or something. Anyway, after all that, we always ended up buying a ha'penny envelope of sherbert. Of all the lollies, that seemed to be the best value for money, because in the envelope with the sherbert powder was always a little trinket like a ring or a brooch.

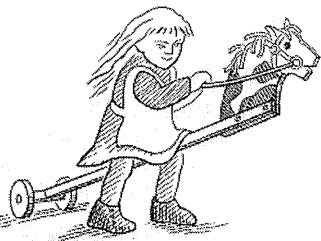
The only shop at Dark Corner was a small general store near the Paddy Lackey mine, owned by Mrs McCartney. Occasionally Jess and I would be sent to buy one or two items for Mum on our way home from school.

Apart from the local shops at Sunny Corner, we sometimes purchased items from Wynne's Catalogue. Wynne's was a big general store in Sydney, and items could be sent up to us by mail order.

When Jess and I were quite small, Mum often had to carry us some of the way home from the Sunny Corner shops. She would have one of us balanced on each hip, which made a fair load for her. So one time when we were in Bulkeley's

Store, Mum spied some hobby-horses for sale, and she bought one each for Jess and me. The horses were realistically painted, with flowing manes, leather reins and wooden wheels.

It was a smart move on Mum's part because not only did Jess and I walk all the way home again, we fairly galloped!



## 8. A gift from Galam Gooch

The local Dark Corner folk also used to do some of their shopping from an Indian hawkker. About every three months Galam Gooch would turn up, always wearing his turban, and always with his two horses and round-topped covered wagon. Indian hawkkers in those days sold just about everything, from pots and pans to curry powder.

Galam Gooch would always set up his camp under a row of pine trees along our driveway. I think he slept in a hammock under the wagon. By day, the wagon was turned into his shop, and the locals would come and buy from him. Just after one of his visits, we were looking around where his camp had been, and I found a threepenny piece. I was so happy, since we never had much pocket money to spend, just a ha'penny or a penny if we were really lucky. And now I had a whole threepence to spend at Miss Jones's! I rushed home to tell Dad.

But Dad was very serious about it. "Now", he said, "what do you do when you find something that you know belongs to somebody else?". I knew the answer of course. "And if you found the threepence where Galam Gooch was camped, who do you think might own that threepence?" Dad continued, "If you keep that money, knowing that it belongs to someone else, well in the eyes of God that is the same as stealing". I could see the clear logic of that argument, and I'd known it all along, in my heart, since Dad had brought us up to be honest, and he gave us lessons from the Bible on Sundays too.

So I hung onto that threepence for another three months, until Galam Gooch came around again and set up his camp. And I gave him back the threepence. He was very happy about that, so pleased in fact that he gave me a beautiful dolly that was worth much more than threepence! The lesson that I learned then has lasted me all my life.

Another traveller that used to come around selling things was the Syrian lady. Or perhaps she was the Assyrian lady, I'm not sure. Anyway, she sold haberdashery items, and these she carried in a big

wicker basket on her head. She always wore a long black dress, and we'd see her, about every three months, walking along the road from the Palmer's Oakey direction. She spoke just enough English to get by, with the help of some sign language too. I suppose she didn't have a husband and children to look after; if she did we never saw any sign of them. Mum always asked her in, and the Syrian lady would spread out a tablecloth on the floor of the front verandah, and then proceed to set out all the items she had for sale, cottons, elastic, hairpins and hatpins, needles and pins, ribbons, buttons and lace, all those sorts of things. Mum used to save up so that she could buy from the Syrian lady, since she was cheaper than the shops. I never knew where she had come from or where she was going to, but she passed by our door on a regular basis.



## 9. Bush tucker

I was always a great one for sampling 'bush tucker'; most of the children did. We chewed on bits of gum from the gum trees, and gum leaves, and we collected bits of sweet white manna into our handkerchiefs to eat later. We'd just pick the manna up off the ground as small white lumps. It had fallen from the leaves of the manna-gums. And there were blackberries around in those days too. We used to collect a handful of the hard green berries and make a 'pudding' by putting them in our hanky and then tying the top with a knot. We'd then eat them in school while we did our lessons.

Mum didn't know about the green blackberries of course, and she was always very particular that all the fruit we ate should be properly ripe. She used to make us wait and wait before we could sample the cherries from our orchard. Finally she would say, "You can eat one today and two tomorrow and three the next day", and

so on, and by the time we had got to about six, we could eat as many cherries as we liked. The green blackberries never gave us tummy-ache; we must have had strong constitutions then. We ate various other berries and plants that we found in the bush. Perhaps I was more foolish than the others. The children from school used to dare me. If any particular berries were in doubt, they'd say, "Get Mary to try it first"!

Another berry that I ate was the wild cherry. I ate as many as I could pick. They were red and tasted sweet, but they were very small, smaller than a pea, and they had a big stone inside, so there wasn't much flesh. They were supposed to send you blind and the other children were usually too scared to eat them. But not me! And my eyesight is still excellent!

We children used to eat yams too. These were the fleshy roots of a mauve coloured lily. The lily had three fringed petals and grew only a few inches high. We used to pull up those plants by the dozen and eat the crunchy root raw, after first shaking off all the dirt. They had a nice taste, but it's rather hard to describe the flavour. No one had told us that the roots were edible—we used to just experiment with all plants, nibbling at the various parts of them to see what tasted good.<sup>#</sup>

A less unusual wild food were the field mushrooms which we gathered in by the bucketful whenever they appeared. These would be fried in a pan, or added to stews for flavouring. We were careful to use only the fungi that could be peeled, and as a rule we didn't experiment with any other fungi species. There was, however, one occasion when my brother Jack and cousin Bob, both aged two, were lucky to escape fatal poisoning. Unknown to Mum or Auntie, they had picked and eaten a number of toadstools. Both of them hallucinated and were violently ill.

\* Wild or native cherry would be *Exocarpus* species, quite edible and non-poisonous, probably with a high vitamin content.)

# The yam would be the root of the Fringed Lily, *Thysanotus* species, once used as a food plant by aborigines.

## 10. The school at Dark Corner

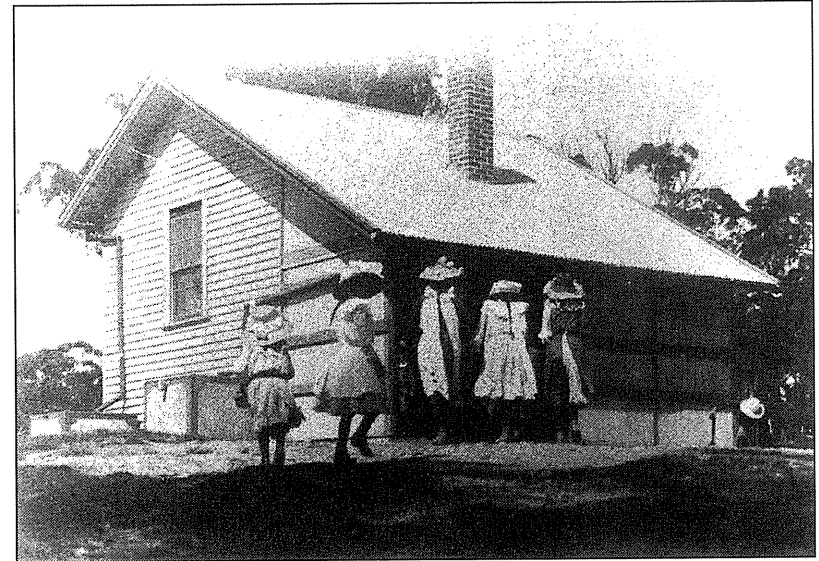
We went to school at Dark Corner, since it was a bit closer than the one at Sunny Corner. It was about two miles away but it seemed further as there were two big hills to go over. We always walked of course. In my earliest school days we had to pay for our lessons. Every Monday morning we took to school a threepenny bit tied in the corner of our hanky. It seemed such a waste to me, when we children only ever had a penny or a ha'penny to spend, every week or so. After a few years, however, I think the school fees were abolished.

My first teacher was Mr Kennedy. He was lame and walked with a walking stick. We liked Mr Kennedy, and he was a good teacher. Eventually, so I believe, Mr Kennedy was asked to leave Dark Corner school because some people thought he was drinking alcohol at school. I'm sure he wasn't. He was in the habit of bringing a bottle of cold tea to drink with his sandwiches at lunch time and perhaps some of the children thought it was whisky and told their parents.\*

Mr Kennedy used to board with the Scott family, who lived in a slab-built cottage about half a mile from the school, along the road to the Paddy Lackey mine. There were three different routes that Mr Kennedy could take on his way home from school, and one of them was along our road. We could never predict which route Mr Kennedy would take.

We were always supposed to walk straight home from school, but one afternoon some of us decided to stop and collect some gum from a gum-tree, to chew on while we walked home. And I was the one who had to climb a tree and keep a watch out for Mr Kennedy. That particular day we were out of luck. "Here comes Mr Kennedy!" I shouted. All the other children just took off, leaving me on my own to scramble down that tree as best I could. I landed face down in a huge rose-briar bush at the bottom of the

\* Mr John Kennedy taught at Dark Corner school from July 1901 until July 1905, and was followed by Mr Charles Stewart who taught from August 1905 until July 1912.

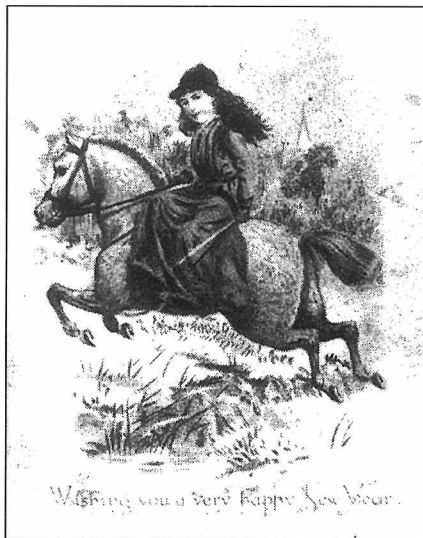


The school building at Dark Corner, and some of our group just going inside. From l. to. r. are: (unkown), Alice Shumack, Jessie Byers, Joan Shumack and me. At the corner of the building on the far right is my cousin Jim Byers, and just inside the doorway, looking out, is my brother Jack Byers. Photo taken 1908.

tree and I was quite unable to free myself. Mr Kennedy had seen me by then of course, and it took him ages to help me out of that briar bush. He used his walking stick to flatten the briars and then he hooked me out. Mr Kennedy proceeded to give me a long lecture about how unladylike it was to climb trees and fall into briar bushes. Didn't I know it!

Mr Kennedy couldn't have thought I was too wicked, however, since on one occasion I won the certificate of merit for good schoolwork and good behaviour. That certificate was a card with a picture of a white horse on it, and there was a woman in a blue dress riding the horse. I was so proud of that certificate, and I've still got it too.

When Mr Stewart took over from Mr Kennedy, we all liked him well enough. But sometimes if we were a bit cross with him about something, four of us girls would sit underneath the classroom at lunchtime and talk about him, and discuss what we'd do if



WE were the teacher. We knew Mr Stewart could hear us, since he was sitting at his desk eating his lunch, and he knew that we knew, and he would shuffle his feet loudly as if in reply!

We didn't have those grievance sessions very often though, and mostly our group of four would spend lunchtime in our cubby-house, which was a big, hollow burnt-out tree next to the school. Our group consisted of me and my sister

Jessie, and two of the Shumack girls, Alice and Joan, who were Aiden Shumack's daughters. In our tree, we kept a worn out old broom and an old shovel, and we were quite house-proud, and even swept the walls as well as the floor. It must have been a big tree, because the four of us could fit in.

One year, over the Christmas holidays, that tree got struck by lightning. It must have been a direct hit because the tree was smashed to pieces. Imagine if we had been sheltering in it! The wooden fence posts were all scorched too; where the fence wire ran through the bored holes it was all blackened. But there was nothing left of our beloved tree, except little pieces on the ground.

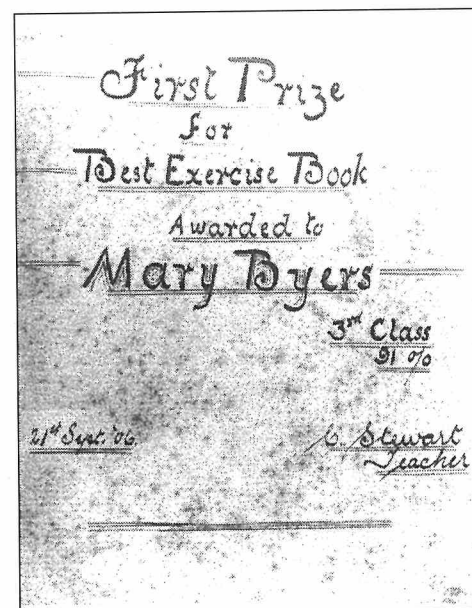
When I first started at school, we used slates with a slate pencil to practice drawing our letters and numbers. We'd wipe the slate clean with a little round piece of sponge, and we would dip the sponge into a white china container of water, set into our desks. Those sponges stank after a while. Later the same china container was used to hold ink. When we were more proficient at writing, we graduated to using exercise books (provided by the school), and lead pencils, then pens dipped into ink. There were between twenty and forty pupils at Dark Corner school and we all sat at

long desks. There was a fireplace in the classroom where a fire would be lit in cold weather.

By the time I was about eleven, I was doing well at school, and I won quite a few book-prizes for coming first in my schoolwork. I treasured those books, and have read each one of them several times. My book-prizes included *The Old Curiosity Shop* by Charles Dickens, *Beulah* by Evans Wilson, and *Opening of a Chestnut Burr* by E. P. Roe. There were quite a few others as well. I think Mr Stewart used to buy the school book-prizes with his own money. He always wrote an inscription on the fly-leaf, in decorative handwriting using red and blue inks. It got to the point where I had so many of those inscribed books that I felt guilty, since poor Jessie always came second and missed out on the prize. I decided then and there to tear out the inscribed fly-leaf from many of my books, to make things more equal. But I kept those books, and I've still got most of them.

My favourite subjects were to do with English, such as reading, spelling and composition. I didn't like history much, and I wasn't too fond of arithmetic either. We did a subject called Euclid—I suppose that was geometry. I was hopeless at drawing, but I loved singing. Mr Stewart taught us the names of the notes in the musical scale, and our class sang the various songs of the era, including *Swannee River*, and of course we sang the National Anthem too, in those days when 'our gracious Queen' was Her Majesty Queen Victoria.

We stood in straight rows in front of the



school to do physical culture exercises, touching our toes and stretching our arms, all in unison.

For sewing we had Carrie Cooper and later, Mrs Raven. I was very slap-dash at sewing, and not good at it. Once Carrie Cooper was giving me a lesson on how to sew up the selvages on a pillowslip. I worked hard on that seam, but for all my joins in the thread I just tied knots. Miss Cooper said, "You'll have to undo it and get rid of all those knots". I took the piece back to my desk and considered the task. It seemed such a waste of time to unpick all those stitches, so I just bit off the knots. Carrie Cooper was horrified!

I always loved reading and when I was going to Dark Corner school there was a big cabinet full of books on all sorts of subjects, and we were allowed to borrow them and take them home to read. I don't think the authorities provided those books; they were probably donated to the school.\*

We used to carry a cloth drawstring bag to school, hung over our shoulder. In this was our lunch—sandwiches wrapped in a cloth serviette and an apple—as well as whatever else we needed for school, plus our jacks and marbles and school books. On our way home one day, one of the other girls hit me. My sister Jessie, who was always a well-behaved girl, lashed out at the other girl, whose name happened to be Jessie also. And there were the two Jessies, swinging their cloth school-bags at each other, having a real old battle.

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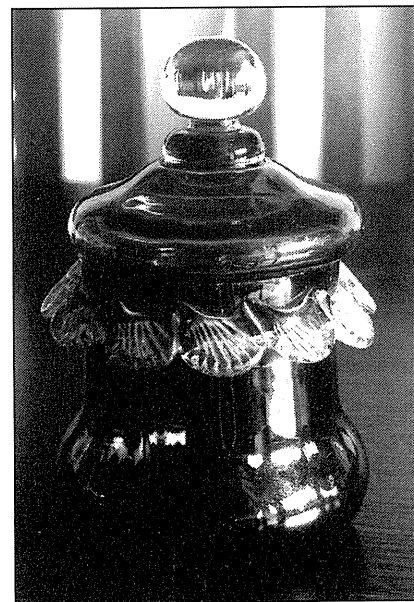
\* Education Department records state that these books had been purchased after a fund-raising concert in August 1898. This had been organised by a previous teacher, Miss Constance McManus, and was held at the Victoria Hall in Sunny Corner, with performances given by pupils of Dark Corner school, the Sunny Corner Band, and other talented locals. The Education Department then refused a request to provide a cabinet for the books thus obtained, so perhaps another fund raising event was held later. The 1898 concert may have been the one mentioned further on in these stories.

## 11. Fun and games

At school and at home we played hopscotch, ring-a-rosie, oranges and lemons, and jacks. We played jacks with real knucklebones from a sheep. These would be boiled down to remove all the meat and gristle, and later dyed with vegetable dye or whatever else Mum had. Our jacks were prized possessions. We also played marbles, and since I was rather a good shot, I always had a bag full. We played with iron hoops too, bowling them along with a stick.

Every year we had several school picnic-days, and all the local families came along as well. There were various games and sports events held. I was good at running and I enjoyed winning too! I still have a trophy prize that I won at one of those sports days. After my win I was allowed to choose my prize; I picked out a pair of rose-coloured glass bowls.

We played tennis at the court near the school, using rackets and balls provided by the school. There was another local court near the Homeward Bound mine, but it was privately owned so we didn't use it.



One of our games at home was to play football with 'punk'. Punk was a sort of fungus which we found on old gum-trees. It was pure white and quite corky in texture; you could cut it with a knife. We'd get a decent sized piece and shape it like a football, and then soak it in kerosene. Then at night we'd set it alight, and kick it around, and there would be a shower of sparks when we kicked it. Dad thought this was a good game to play at night since he reckoned that the snakes

would be scared right off!

At home in the evenings, our entertainment was just to sit around the fire and tell stories. Often we would make up 'progressive stories' when each person in turn would have to invent successive chapters of a make-believe story. Sometimes the adults played card games like euchre and crib, or draughts. And we had fairly regular 'surprise parties' when neighbours called in on one another, always bringing a plate of supper.

Sometimes we had square dancing at the Wilsons' house; my auntie there had a room big enough for dancing. Dad and my various Wilson uncles could play musical instruments like the concertina, the accordion and the violin. Dad could play the tin whistle really well. I've still got that whistle—it's actually made of brass. My father also had a wooden transverse flute and a piccolo. The piccolo was made of mahogany with silver ornamentation; it had been a gift to Dad from a Frenchman whom Dad had once helped.

I really loved those dancing sessions at the Wilsons'. Our neighbours would often come along as well, and their children. Women always seemed to have babies with them in those days, and the babies just came too, and would be put to sleep on the floor



School Picnic at Dark Corner, 9-10-1908. This photo gives some idea of the size of the Dark Corner community in 1908.

under the long benches where everyone sat. When I was a small child sitting on the sidelines at those dances, watching the bigger girls glide past me on the dance floor, I would amuse myself by pulling at the flowing ribbons of the pretty bows those girls wore around their waists. After a few twirls away from me, the ribbons would come undone!

## 12. Adult fun and games

In the days before motor cars and easy travel, people often tended to marry within their own community group. The local folk of Dark Corner were no exception, and there were quite a few marriages between couples who had been childhood sweethearts. Often a boy would marry the girl who lived next door, or at least a girl who lived not too far down the road.

The social circumstances of the day encouraged budding romances to be made public, perhaps at one of the local dances or the school picnic-day. There were several school picnics during the year, on Empire Day and other holidays, and the whole community came along too. At the end of the children's sporting events, after the prizes had been given out, we children would then become the fascinated bystanders while the adults had their official fun and games. There were games like drop the hanky, an innocent game when played by children, but full of meaning when played between young adults. The hanky would be dropped behind the person one most admired, but making quite sure that the person had seen you!

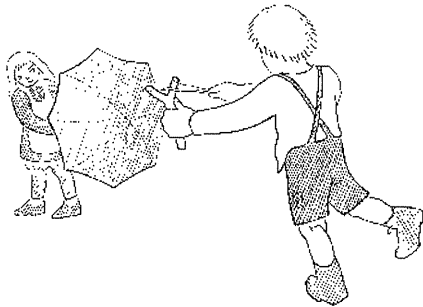
At the close of the sports day the adults would all join hands and dance in a circle, singing the song,

Come all you young men in your youthful days,  
Get married and give up your childish ways,  
That you may be happy, that you may be happy,  
When you grow old.



The day's fast spent and the night's coming on,  
 So give us an arm and we'll jog along,  
 That we may live happy, that we may live happy,  
 When we grow old.

Young couples would then link arms in a public show of friendship, and walk home together. It was the time when courting couples could make public their intentions to one another in a well-mannered and respectable way. A lot of romances started that way, and it was at a school picnic that I first noticed Wed Grabham's interest in my Auntie Eleanor Wilson. Of course all that courting was strictly for the adults, and we schoolchildren never for a moment entertained such romantic notions!



### 13. The battle of the sexes

It is a strange thing, isn't it, how boys and girls in their younger years seem to have a natural enmity for one another! At least they did in my day. But we girls nevertheless harboured a secret admiration for the boys, and they did for us too. That admiration was, however, expressed in some rather obscure ways, which sometimes led to a fierce rivalry between the sexes.

Our two boy cousins, Tom and Jim, could be perfect gentle-

men at home, but at school they became part of the boys' mob and completely dissociated themselves from Jessie and me and all the other girls. We could never rely on them for protection. Jess and I always carried our umbrellas to school, even on sunny days. "It might rain", we told our puzzled Mum. We needed those umbrellas as shields against the incessant bombardment of small pellets aimed at us by the boys as we walked to school. Those awful boys would collect a pocketful of green briar-pips and then fire them at us with their catapults. They never used stones and only sought to annoy us. We girls displayed our obvious disapproval for such ungentlemanly behaviour, but all the same we really felt secretly proud that the boys had taken some notice of us. We rather enjoyed that association through enmity that we had with the boys.

I was a lot more angry, though, the time I destroyed the boys' cubby at school. They had already ruined our girls' cubby in the hollow tree and had messed it all up. We girls were furious and I was bent on revenge. After much thought I decided on a plan. I raised my hand in class and asked to be excused; the school's pit toilets were some little distance from the school building. As soon as I was outside the classroom I ran just as fast as I could, all the way to the boys' cubby. It was some way off, and was built of sticks, and full of boys' secrets. I tore at the walls and the roof and scattered the inside contents, then I ran really fast back to the classroom again. I washed my hands at the tank outside while I tried to catch my breath, then as casual as you like, I sauntered back inside to continue with my lessons. That mission was a complete success, and the boys never did work out that I was the culprit!

The girls and boys liked to have secrets from one another too. The boys generally walked home from school along their own secret route through the bush and I don't really know what they got up to. But we girls always walked home along the road—for one thing we were forbidden to follow the boys into the bush. So we had our own secret places along the road. One of these was under the wooden bridge at Dark Corner Creek, where we kept a small supply of fruit, carefully hidden in a niche in the woodwork of the bridge. We could then retrieve those pieces of fruit at our



leisure, to eat as we walked home from school.

There was one local boy at Dark Corner who always used to chase me. He was a year older than me and I think he must have rather liked me. "You wait till I catch you!" he'd say, but he never got the chance, since I was a fast runner. What would he have done if he HAD caught me? Well, let me tell you!

One evening there was a surprise party going on at the Wilsons', next door to us. I was supposed to be in bed asleep, but I decided to sneak outside for a quick look through the Wilsons' window. It was dark, and I was quite sure that no one would see me. I was dressed only in a long nightie. As I stood on tiptoes and looked in through the window, someone grabbed me around the waist and said, "Got you at last!". It was that boy who was always chasing me! I was eleven at the time and he was twelve. I don't think he had realised I was dressed only in my nightie. At any rate, he instantly released me and took off at a great speed. We were both very embarrassed about the incident, so much so that we didn't speak for several months. We couldn't even look at one another, and he gave up chasing me!

## 14. The facts of life

As Jessie and I grew a bit older, Mum kept us fairly well informed about the facts of life, although we still weren't quite sure about all the details. She said to us, "Now that you're old enough to have babies, you mustn't let any boys touch you". We took her quite literally and kept well out of the reach of any boys for quite some time.

One local Dark Corner girl had not been so well-informed as us, perhaps. We heard that she had been taken to see Dr Brooke Moore about a rather bad swelling of her stomach. The doctor's comment had been that she should go home and marry the boy who had given her the swelling! That really had me puzzled for a long time. For many years I understood only that babies must have

had something to do with boys, but I really had no proper notion about where babies came from or how they got there. So to be on the safe side, I just avoided all boys like the plague.

## 15. The miracle of birth

In those bygone days, women always gave birth to their babies at home, assisted only by neighbouring midwives. Doctors were rarely consulted. But there was one occasion when we had to get Dr Brooke Moore out from Bathurst to attend my Auntie Liz who was in labour.

Mum and Auntie had both been expecting their third babies at about the same time; that was in 1900. Mum had already had my sister Jessie in 1893, and me in 1895, with a five year gap before my brother Jack arrived in 1900. Auntie Liz had had Tom in 1892, Jim in 1894, and then a gap until Bob arrived (late) in 1900. Mum had her third baby without any trouble, but Auntie's pregnancy went on and on into the eleventh month. She was too far gone by then to walk to the doctor at Sunny Corner, and anyway she wasn't too concerned about it.

When Auntie finally went into labour she had a hard time. The local midwives attending her decided they could do no more for her and advised that Dr Brooke Moore from Bathurst should be sent for urgently. So on that icy September night in 1900, Uncle Tom ran all the way from Dark Corner to the Sunny Corner post office to call for the doctor.\*

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\* For some reason, Dr Brooke Moore was the chosen doctor, rather than the local man at Sunny Corner, who was probably not fully qualified, or who may have been absent. From Sunny Corner, Lewis Tomkinson the postmaster would then have sent a message by morse code on the telegraph line to Bathurst post office; that message would have then been delivered as a telegram in Bathurst to Dr Brooke Moore. The distance from Bathurst to Dark Corner was nearly thirty miles, mostly uphill, on dirt roads. There were no cars then, and it would have taken the doctor up to four hours travelling in his buggy pulled by two horses, and that distance was at the upper limit of endurance for the horses, without a spell.

When the two horses arrived steaming hot after their long journey, the doctor refused to attend to Auntie until the horses were put into shelter. Since we had no stables, we had to put the two horses into the Wilsons' outdoor kitchen, which at least had a dirt floor. The doctor later said that in another hour, both mother and baby would have been lost.

I was only five at the time, and thought babies were found under cabbages. I had no idea what was going on, but I could hear poor Auntie screaming in the next room, and I was very distressed. I remember I was sitting on my father's knee. He was trying to put me to sleep, but I thumped his chest and shouted, "They're trying to kill Auntie. Let me go to her!" I must have fallen asleep at some stage of the proceedings though, because by the next morning, all was well and I had a new baby cousin, Bob. Bob had been six weeks late in arriving. He had shoulder-length black hair and weighed fourteen pounds at birth! He was in fact a sickly baby, but he survived.

Bob's failure to thrive caused much concern, and I remember the strange system that Auntie Liz had for feeding him. Bob survived on a sort of arrowroot biscuit mash, made with the biscuits, boiling water and milk. This mix was put into a curved glass feeding bottle, which was then placed on a mantel-piece or high cupboard, and from the bottle the mash was gravity-fed down through a long black India-rubber tube, with a feeding teat at the other end for Bob to chew on.

Auntie had to be careful to keep the tube clean. She washed it out in a big dish of hot water, and had a small cleaning brush that she pushed all the way through the tube, just like the way you would thread elastic with a safety pin.

Just eleven days before my cousin Bob had been born, my brother Jack was born, also in September of 1900. I had not been told anything about his impending arrival. All I can remember about Jack's birth was that a midwife had visited our house one evening. Dad was home and I was probably asleep when Jack arrived at 9 pm, apparently with an easy delivery. The next morning I was surprised but delighted to find out that we had a new

baby in the family. Jack then slept in a cradle in Mum's bedroom.

I was nine when my brother Bill was born at Limekilns in 1904. We used to spend the winter months at Limekilns but I will tell you more about that later. By the age of nine, I understood that Mum was carrying a baby inside her, but I was not altogether sure how it got there, or how it would be born. When Mum announced one Sunday afternoon that the baby was coming, Dad left Mum in the care of the midwife and took the rest of the family on a picnic. Bill was born at 2 pm, another uncomplicated arrival, and a welcome addition to our family. I adored Bill and thought of him as 'my' baby. I couldn't do enough for him and I even used to change his nappies and wash them out. I'm sure Mum was delighted.

I seem to have given Mum the most trouble with my birth, in August 1895. Everything was wrong from the start. Dad was away working, Auntie was still living in Sydney, there were no adult females at the Wilson household next door, nor any other female neighbours close by to help out. Mum went into labour in the early hours of the morning.

Mrs Griffin was the local midwife at Sunny Corner, and someone must have eventually summoned her that morning. Mrs Griffin ran all the way from Sunny Corner to our place. Such was the difficulty of Mum's labour that she was temporarily almost blind for some days after my birth. Immediately after my arrival at 8 am, Mrs Griffin departed, and since she did not summon any outside help for Mum, it is a wonder that both Mum and I did not die. Some months later when Mum was in Sunny Corner with me in her arms, she bumped into Mrs Griffin. Mrs Griffin said to Mum that she was quite surprised to see her, and that she hadn't expected to see either Mum or me alive again!

I was rather sickly as a very young baby, and my navel would not heal. Someone told Mum a sure remedy for that, and a split raisin was bound in place over my navel, with a strip of linen. And do you know, it worked, and my navel healed within a week!

Babies wore such a lot of clothing in those days, most of it beautifully hand-embroidered. Apart from a nappy, they wore a

layer of linen and a layer of flannel wrapped around their waist as a binder, then a linen petticoat and a flannel petticoat, and over all that, a long embroidered dress down to their feet, and then booties and a bonnet, all topped with a woollen shawl. It was just the accepted practice in those days, winter or summer, to wear all those layers.

Usually each family would have a collection of babies' garments to make up the layette, and these outfits would become family heirlooms, to be passed down to the daughters of the family, or sometimes to be loaned out to a neighbour, but only for the first six weeks of a baby's life. After six weeks, the baby was expected to wear a shorter dress, and the longer garments would be washed and returned, to be carefully stored away until the next time they were needed.

Granny Byers had brought out some beautiful baby clothes from England, all of them hand-made. Some garments were made of cambric, a cloth so finely woven that you could easily pull a baby's dress through your half-closed hand. The cambric was always pin-tucked, smocked, embroidered, and edged with hand-made lace. Some babies' dresses were made from nuns' veiling which was the finest and softest woollen cloth available.

One time when Mum loaned out Granny's baby clothes, we didn't get them back! By that time we were living at Limekilns, and the clothes were fairly well-worn by then I suppose. Fortunately Mum and Auntie didn't have any more babies themselves after that, and the outfits were not needed, so we didn't worry too much then about getting them back.

A less desirable item that would be loaned out from time to time was the linen winding sheet used to wrap the dead. After use, it was simply washed and returned to its owner. Mum always kept a winding sheet stored away, and sometimes she would be called upon to help lay out a person who had just died.

## 16. The shadow of death

For many of my childhood years I had the odd notion that when a person died, they would vanish into thin air without a trace. Each night we said the prayer, "If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take", but as far as I was concerned, the body and the soul were one. On the occasions when I saw a coffin and a person who had died, I thought that they were either just sleeping, or else that they would very soon become invisible, when the Lord took them away.

I was fearful that perhaps one afternoon when I came home from school, Mum would have vanished too, and I was always especially pleased to see that she was still there, just her usual self, and that she hadn't died and disappeared while I was away at school. I don't know how I came by that strange idea about dying and disappearing, since death had not been hidden from me, and a number of people had died in our neighbourhood when I was a child.

If someone in the family died, all the family members were expected to wear black armbands. When Grandma Byers died in 1907, Mum had the black armbands ready for Jess and me to wear to school, but then she thought better of it and spared us from that public display of mourning. After all, we had only met Grandma Byers once and had hardly known her at all.

In those days, it wasn't only older people who died. Many babies died too, as there were no immunizations against disease, and few cures for babies' illnesses. Babies had to be fairly strong to survive at all. But perhaps not all the babies that died had succumbed to an illness. One family we knew lost several babies. I doubt if the births and deaths of those babies were ever registered. The authorities finally paid that family a visit, and they said if another baby died they would have to investigate. There was some suspicion that the babies had been smothered or something, with the family too desperately poor to have cared for extra children.

One family that lost a baby through illness was the Eves. Their baby girl died, just a few months old. I was at school then, and I remember our shock and sadness when we watched the baby's cof-

fin being carried through the school grounds on the way to the cemetery at Dark Corner, with just the family members in attendance. The Eves family lived up near the Paddy Lackey mine, and the shortest route to the cemetery was to go through the school grounds.\*

Another day at school, some years later, I remember that all of us were deeply shocked to hear that a miner, Andrew Burke, had fallen three hundred feet down into a mine shaft at the Paddy Lackey mine and had been killed. No one spoke at school all day, we were so upset. I suppose we were all well-aware of the dangers of mine shafts, and three hundred feet seemed like a horrifying depth to fall.

No-one ever knew what happened to the little Guihot girl. She just disappeared without a trace. I was about five when that happened, and the little Guihot girl was three and a half. Her mother had just gone off a short distance to milk the cow early in the morning, and had turned her back for such a short time. The little girl vanished. She had only been wearing a nightie and her feet were quite bare. There was a big search for her, but she was never found and to this day no-one really knows what happened.

I know of another case where a little girl disappeared at Sofala—she had fallen into a pit toilet and died. No-one thought to look in the pit toilet for the Guihot girl; I think that's what might have happened. Those pits were really quite dangerous for tiny children. There was an aboriginal man who lived nearby, quite harmless, but one theory was that he had kidnapped and eaten the little Guihot girl. Mum was very protective of us after that and wouldn't let us out of her sight for a while!

One really early memory I have was the death of Mrs Cooper's mother (Mrs Evans). I know now that she died in December of 1898 aged sixty-nine (buried at Sunny Corner cemetery), so I would have been just over three years old. Before I started school I just went everywhere that Mum went, visiting neigh-

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\* Lillian Catherine Eves died 4-11-1901 aged 4 months, daughter of Edward Eves, a miner, and Catherine Northen. She was buried at Dark Corner cemetery with no headstone.

bours, helping them out. Sometimes Mum would act as midwife and sometimes she would lay out the dead. Anyhow, after Mrs Evans died, we went to the Coopers' house where Mrs Evans was laid out in a coffin. I saw that everyone was looking into the coffin, and being a child full of curiosity, I wanted to have a look too. This was allowed, and to this day I still remember vividly what I saw, and I was quite unafraid. The coffin was beautifully lined and padded with white silk and Mrs Evans was dressed in white too. It was quite an impressive sight for me.

## 17. Distant memories

I can remember things that happened so long ago that I was still being carried in the crook of my mother's arm. I was being carried like that when we all said goodbye to the Morton family who were leaving the district. They lived across the road from us. Mrs Morton had given us a four-poster iron bedstead, and we gave them gifts in return. Little Maudie Morton was my age, about three perhaps, and Mum said to me, "Now what would you like to give Maudie for a present?". My reply (so my family were to remind me for years to come) was, "I would like to give the dear little sing a pound of baking powder". Baking powder, of course, was a prized item, used daily in all mothers' kitchens. I must have thought that would be a grand gift!

And I remember too, when I was about two and a half, sitting on my mother's knee at a night concert at the Sunny Corner hall. I was feeling very proud of myself, as I was wearing an embroidered combination suit made of the softest cashmere flannel. I think it was a variety concert, and there were some comedians wearing suits that had huge silvery buttons. "Oooh look Mum, those men are wearing milk-tin lids for buttons!" Everyone laughed.

We went to quite a few concerts in Sunny Corner, and to lantern-slide shows too. On those occasions we would often get a ride into town on a cart. And then we would spend the night at

our Auntie Annie Jackson's (nee Byers). She lived down where Reg Campbell's place was later built, at the horseshoe bend on the road to the Sunny Corner mine. The Jacksons left there when I was about three, so our concert-going must have started before that. I remember that Auntie Annie had four china dogs—two big ones next to the fire-place and two smaller ones on the mantel-shelf. I was allowed to give the dogs on the floor a big hug when we visited, and I did love them! I suppose Auntie took them with her to Lithgow when she left Sunny Corner. For a parting present she gave Jessie and me a china mug each—mine had 'Remember Me' written on it and Jessie's had 'Forget-Me-Not'.

I was very young, too, when Grandmother Byers visited us and stayed for a while. I didn't really enjoy that visit. It meant Jessie and I had to give up our bedroom and sleep on the floor in Mum and Dad's bedroom. And grandmother used to wear some distinctive smelling perfume which I thought smelt dreadful!

I was almost five when we had the big snowfall of 1900. It was in about July I think, and I remember how Dad had to dig trenches through the deep snow, with one track leading to the toilet, one to the woodheap and another to the clothesline. The snow was so deep that I couldn't see over the top of those trenches, and it took about six weeks for all the snow to melt.

## 18. Cod-liver oil and Ipecacuana Wine

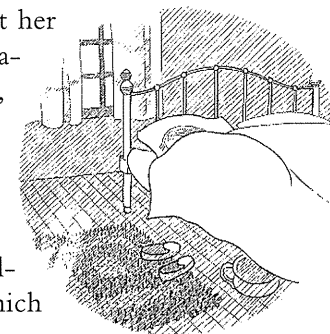
In those days, so long ago, there was a lot of fear about illnesses. There were none of the vaccinations and antibiotics of today. Many children died of various illnesses—diphtheria was always very much feared, and we were a long way from a doctor too. My mother was forever in fear of us children succumbing to some illness, and if we did get sick, it seemed to us that she was angry with us; in fact, she was just fearful for our well-being. We got into the way of not telling her if we felt sick; she did seem to worry so.

The children in our family all survived childhood with not too many dramas, a combination of luck perhaps, as well as Mum's home remedies.

While I used to avoid telling Mum that I felt sick, there were times when it was unavoidable, since I used to suffer from bronchitis; and sometimes we'd all come down with croup, as well as the usual coughs and colds. Mum always had her remedies at the ready. For bronchitis and chest complaints she would use a linseed poultice or a mustard plaster. Linseed would be bought in cakes, the compressed husks of the seeds after they'd been pressed for oil. When the cake was broken up and soaked you could smell the linseed fumes. A cloth bag of hot linseed mash would be placed on the chest. The mustard plasters used to burn my skin. These were prepared by spreading a mustard paste over a piece of flannel, and that was placed on the chest. It made me feel like I was being cooked.

On one occasion when Mum had me laid out in bed, cooking under one of her mustard plasters, I could feel my skin burning so hot that I just had to do something about it. I got out of bed, still with the plaster on, and opened the bedroom window. A delicious cold draft of air was blowing in on me when Mum came in. She was horrified! "Don't you ever do that again!" she said.

We also got dosed with castor oil out of a blue glass bottle, probably about every fortnight, with doses of sulphur and treacle (brimstone) on alternate weeks. The castor oil, of course, was to keep us regular, and the sulphur and treacle, mixed in a paste and given by the spoonful, was supposed to 'clear the blood'. Mum was never without her bottle of Ipecacuana Wine—half a tea-spoon of it would make you vomit, and it was supposed to be a sure remedy for croup, to get rid of the phlegm from the stomach. We never went to dentists then, and the remedy for toothache was to put oil-of-cloves on the decayed tooth, which



would eventually fall out.

Mum's remedies were fairly standard ones for the era, but one of our neighbours, Mrs Bennett, had some very strange home remedies. Mrs Bennett used to dance the Irish jig, so perhaps her remedies were of Irish origin too. One time when I was twelve I became dreadfully ill with whooping cough, and I was coughing and vomiting all the time and I got very weak. The fact that I could keep no food down was certainly nothing to do with Ipecacuana Wine, but it must have just been part of the illness that I had. Mrs Bennett suggested two recipes for my weakness, and thought that some of it might stick to my insides. One recipe was sago gruel and brandy (and I've never touched brandy since!) and the other was to put a whole unbroken egg into vinegar until the shell was dissolved, then beat that mixture up with milk, and drink it. Despite those awful remedies, I did recover, mainly because I was a strong child.

I had been sick with whooping cough for six weeks and had not been able to eat anything substantial for all of that time. One day, when I was at last feeling a little better, the family decided it was safe to leave me at home on my own one Sunday afternoon, while they all went off for a walk. I was sitting comfortably in the rocking chair in front of the kitchen fire. Mum had baked a new loaf of bread that day, and had cut one slice off the loaf for Dad to have with his Sunday dinner. That bread smelt so good and I thought I could perhaps manage to eat a piece of toast, so I cut off a slice of bread and toasted it, and ate it. It was so delicious that I decided to toast a second slice. I ate that too and I did so enjoy it. I fancied that perhaps I could manage a third slice, and I continued on toasting and eating slice after slice of bread. I had just finished eating the last toasted crust when the family came home. Mum went to get out the bread for tea, only to find that there was none left! I admitted that I had eaten it all, and Mum began to get into rather a panic. "You'll die", she said, "you'll surely die!" Dad was fairly calm about it all and didn't seem to share Mum's view. And neither did I. I was still hungry, and I sat up with the family at the table and ate a meal with them. After that, I never looked back and

I made a full recovery from my severe illness.

Fortunately young Jack didn't get whooping cough—I think it would have killed him. Jack suffered from bronchitis a lot, and Mrs Bennett's remedy for that was to apply the skin of a black rabbit, fur side down, against the chest. It took Dad ages to find a black rabbit to shoot, but find one he did, and we tried Mrs Bennett's remedy. The skin probably kept Jack warm, but it certainly didn't cure him!\*

Mum didn't go in for many patent remedies as a rule, but she did like to keep us well-dosed with cod-liver oil, which was supposed to be a preventative for bronchitis and chest complaints. Since Jack was affected by bronchitis worse than I was, Mum insisted that he take a teaspoonful, morning and evening, of the very best brand of cod-liver oil that was available. It was 'Peter Mollers' brand, twice as expensive as all the other brands, and sold in a round clear-glass bottle about eight inches high. So far as I know Jack always swallowed his dose and it probably did him good. I was given a big spoonful of Scott's Emulsion each morning. It cost 4s 6d per bottle and Mum scrimped and saved to buy it. She thought it was so good for me, but it used to make me feel sick in the stomach. Unknown to Mum I would accept my mouthful, then go outside and spit it out into a hollow stump near the house. It was a waste of money but I couldn't see any other way around it.

Another patent remedy I remember was the hair restoring tonic, Tricopherous, sold by the bottleful and used by three of my Wilson uncles who were quite handsome, but nonetheless balding, and still bachelors! Perhaps they thought they needed to improve their image, but it didn't seem to do them any good since they were to remain bachelors and were always very bald. My Dad, himself rather thin on top, scorned such miracle cures, but then of course he was already married!

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\* Jack Martin as a young lad shot the first local rabbit at Dark Corner in 1897, while the above story took place about 1902.

## 19. The Limekilns walk

After my brother Jack was born in September 1900, our family used to spend the winter months at Limekilns. This was because Jack was a delicate baby, and the winters were not as severe at Limekilns as they were at Dark Corner. Jack, by the way, lived to be eighty-eight and he enjoyed good health, so this treatment must have suited him! We shared a property at Limekilns with some of our Wilson relatives, and we had a small cottage there.

When it came time each year to move house, we'd pack up all Mum's pots and pans, some furniture, our clothes and possessions. Our mattress covers would be emptied of their chaff filling and folded up, and all these things were put into a hired dray belonging to Jack Bowers, a Maori, who lived at Palmer's Oakey. The distance to Limekilns was about twelve miles. I used to go to school at Limekilns during the winter months, and then Dark Corner school for the rest of the year, until we moved permanently to Limekilns in 1908 when I was thirteen.

We always used to walk part of the way to Limekilns, but Mum and the children would be allowed to ride in Jack Bowers' dray for some of the distance. Our walking route involved some steep short cuts, while the dray had to go a longer way around.

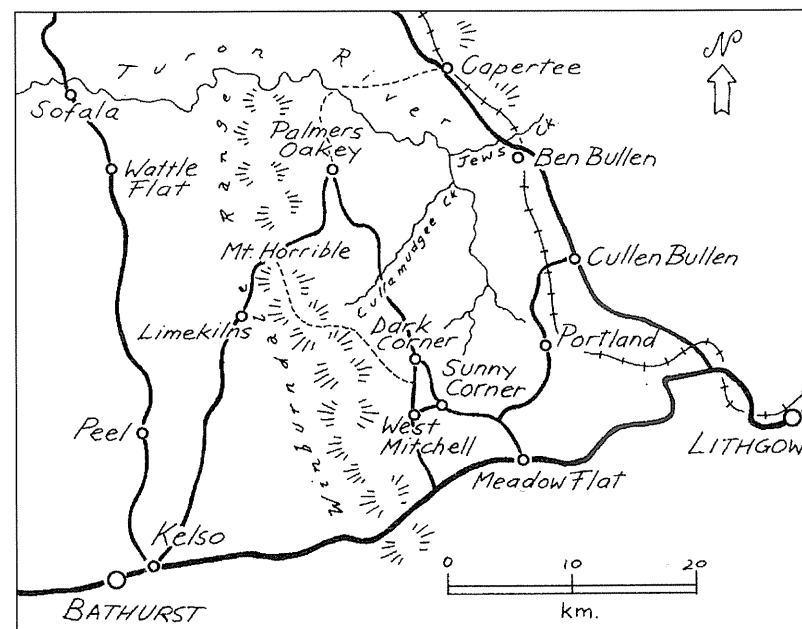
The route we took to Limekilns was along what is now known as the Eskdale Road, over the Winburndale Range towards Mt Horrible. Smiths lived out that way, and we used to go past heaps of stones that had been put there by aborigines. We never knew the significance of those stone heaps, and we fancied that perhaps aborigines were buried underneath, but I don't think they were. By the time we packed up and left, it used to take us most of the day to travel from Dark Corner to Limekilns.

Sometimes we would take some half-ripe pieces of fruit with us—pears, apples and quinces—to hide in the hollow of a tree that was about half-way along the route. We always used the same tree, and after placing the fruit we would then carefully seal the hollow entrance with stones. Those pieces of fruit kept perfectly in the cold weather, and we would then devour them on our return jour-

ney several months later.

I have an awful memory of one of those long journeys. I was about six or seven (1902), and the day before our journey I had been playing with my boy cousins who were in the habit of daring me to do reckless things. I'd climbed up a tree and was perched on a high branch. The boys said, "I wonder if Mary is game enough to jump down from THAT height!". I've always regretted my decision. I jumped. I heard a crack and doubled up in pain. I must have hurt my hip or pelvis. I didn't tell Mum though, and it was the very next day that we were expected to walk some of that long distance to Limekilns. I certainly wasn't looking forward to that walk.

The next day we set off. I could walk all right, so I suppose nothing was actually broken, but I was still in pain. Jack Bowers was loading the dray, and we walked on ahead of him. Dad was already out at Limekilns, working at the Last Chance gold mine at Clear Creek. He was to meet us when we got to Limekilns later that afternoon.





We walked and walked. Mum was carrying baby Jack who was wrapped in a new blanket. We were expecting the dray to catch up with us before too long, and to give us a ride. Unknown to us, the dray had broken a pole a long way back, and Jack Bowers was trying to mend it. We couldn't imagine what had happened to Jack Bowers and his dray, but there was nothing we could do then, except to keep walking.

Dad must have been worried about us, because after he knocked off work that evening, he walked to the turnoff where the short cut left the main Palmer's Oakey road, and when it got dark he lit a fire there while he waited for us. I suppose Dad thought that we were safe with Jack Bowers, and had probably had a minor breakdown, but we weren't safe with Jack Bowers at all! Mum was exhausted from carrying the baby in her arms all that way, and we hadn't carried food or water with us. In the approaching darkness a fog had come down on us, and how well I remember struggling along behind Mum. I would walk along for a few steps and then I would double up in pain, and then straighten up again for a few more steps to keep Mum and Jess in sight.

When we finally saw Dad's fire in the distance, it was a welcome sight. Before long, Jack Bowers arrived with the dray, and on the dray were our tea-making things and some food, so we had a meal and a rest before moving on. Jack Bowers thought it unsafe to take the dray any further in the dark, so he unhitched the two horses and left the dray by the side of the road and walked with us down the short cut to Limekilns. It was about two more miles, on a rough narrow track. We took a lantern from the dray, and Dad carried that and led the way, striding ahead. I was right at the end of the line, except for Jack Bowers' horse that kept nudging me. I was afraid of falling, and that the horse might step on me. I will never forget my feelings that night—the dark, the cold, the fog, the pain, and that horse nudging at me.

When we finally arrived at the house of our Limekilns relatives, I just fell onto their cedar lounge and must have fallen instantly asleep, as I was still there the next morning. It took me months and months to get over that injury, and I never did tell

Mum or Dad. And even many years later, when I gave birth to my children, that old injury gave me trouble.

In the winter of 1904, my youngest brother Bill was born at Limekilns. That made four of us: Jessie and me, and Jack and Bill. Eventually when we moved to Limekilns permanently, we lived on 200 acres at 'Willow Dale', farming and bee-keeping. Our cousins never spent the winters at Limekilns, nor did they move to Limekilns when we did; they just stayed at Dark Corner. When my two older cousins Tom and Jim left home to find work at Ben Bullen, young Bob got so lonely that he walked the twelve miles from Dark Corner to our place at Limekilns and he stayed on with us permanently then.

## 20. Shanks's pony

I was eight or nine when Mr Lean's motor car appeared at Dark Corner, the first motor car we'd ever seen. Mr Lean had built it himself and he would drive the car out along the Dark Corner road. I had absolutely no wish to ride in that car—it was so noisy. I didn't even like getting onto a horse, and I always much preferred to walk.

Quite a few of the locals rode push-bikes, and the miners all used to ride past our place on their way to work at the Paddy Lackey mine. The miners started work early and there might have been perhaps a hundred or more men riding their push-bikes from Sunny Corner out to the mine at Dark Corner. They would call out to one another as they rode by and they made quite a commotion. When our big clock in the parlour broke down, we always knew it was time to get up in the morning when we heard the miners cycling to work.

Other local means of transport, apart from walking, were horsedrawn sulkies, drays and wagons, or some people would just ride a saddled horse. Large loads were mostly carried on big wagons pulled by a team of bullocks.

When we lived at Dark Corner, our family didn't have horses or push-bikes, but we always found walking to be a safe and reliable method of getting from place to place.

## 21. Going to town

We had several coach-trips into Bathurst from Dark Corner, all because of young Jack. Mostly the trips were to see the doctor because of Jack's bronchitis, but the first time we went was in 1901 when Jack was only one year old.

One evening Jack had managed to dislocate his arm when he fell over a round cane-chair in the kitchen. Mum bound up his arm to support it, and the next morning we got a ride to Sunny Corner and boarded the coach for Bathurst. I was six at the time, and it was my first coach ride. The women and the children all sat inside; perhaps there were about eight or ten passengers. The coach might have been Cobb and Co., or else one of the other local coach companies. We were already half-way in to Bathurst when the lady sitting next to Mum declared that Jack's arm could be easily fixed, and that she herself would fix it! She did too—just a quick twist and a pull, and Jack's arm was back in place again.

By the time we got to Kelso, I was fascinated to see a blacksmith working at his anvil with showers of sparks flying. But I was standing up when I shouldn't have been, so that I fell forward and cut my lip when the coach jerked forward. Perhaps I was a bit accident prone. In any case my Auntie Liz could never be prevailed upon to mind me, so Mum was always stuck with me. I got to go on some interesting trips to Bathurst, while my sister Jessie, who was a good girl, stayed home to be minded by Auntie!

The site of that blacksmith's shop at Kelso was the very same place where my husband and I built our home some thirty years later. I was to live in that house at Kelso for fifty-seven years before moving in 1989 into the unit in Bathurst where I now live.

But going back to those early visits to Bathurst, sometimes

Dad would come with us in the coach, when young Jack had to visit Dr Brooke Moore for treatment for his bronchitis. One time when Jack was three (and I was eight), I remember that Dad was carrying Jack in his arms and it was night-time. Jack was fascinated by the lights, since Bathurst streets and shops were lit with gaslight, much brighter than our lamps and candles at home. Jack pointed to the light in the shop and asked Dad what it was. "That's a shop", said Dad. Then a coach went by, and it had bright lights on it too. "Oh look", said Jack, "there goes another shop!"

On our Bathurst trips, we mostly stayed at O'Leary's Boarding House in George Street. On those occasions when Dad did not accompany Mum and Jack and me, I was supposed to eat my meals in the main dining room at the boarding house with all the grown-ups, while Mum and Jack were given a meal in their room. I hated that, especially at breakfast time, when everyone was served a huge and unmanageable piece of steak. I couldn't handle mine, and in trying to cut it, the plate and the steak landed on the floor. There were mostly men at the breakfast table, and they all laughed. I rushed away in tears.

## 22. Accidents and disgraces

Dropping that steak wasn't the only time I disgraced myself when I was very young. Another time, when I was about five, we were seated at the table at home, just finishing our Sunday tea with some of Mum's plum tart. I insisted that Dad cut a slice for me, since his slices were always bigger than Mum's. Mum was nursing baby Jack, and suddenly I got up and started crawling down the middle of the dining table. I had choked on the plum tart, perhaps it was a plum stone, and I couldn't breathe. I don't remember any more then, until I was outside in the fresh air, lying back in Mum's arms, aware of the brilliant starry night. It was after that episode, I think, that Auntie Liz refused to mind me.

Another disgrace was when I insisted on having a drink from

Dad's glass of beer when we were in a hotel in Bathurst. The beer did look so delicious with all the lovely froth on top. I had some enormous mouthfuls out of Dad's glass, then rushed outside to spit it out in the gutter. That was my one and only drink of beer ever; it tasted awful!

I was always a bit prone to breaking things as well. Mum had been given some lovely wedding presents, but somehow during my childhood I managed to systematically break most of them, one by one. It makes me ashamed just to think about it now. I did so love all those things, and didn't really mean to break them. At intervals, I broke a pair of beautiful slender blue-glass vases, a two-tiered cake-plate, a fancy-glass fruit-bowl, various china dishes plus a china jelly-mould, and also a lovely coloured-glass powder-bowl that was set in a silver mounting. I even broke the family photo album. How could I have been so clumsy? I loved those beautiful things so much and always wanted to look at them and to hold them. They just seemed to slip through my fingers.

Mum was amazingly tolerant. With each breakage she would chide me for my carelessness, and I would cry, but soon afterwards I would go to her and say, "Kiss me because I was bad". She always would, and she'd give me a big hug too, and sometimes if she could afford it, Mum would give me a ha'penny, just because she loved me so much.

To make up for my carelessness, I was always eager and anxious to help Mum in any way that I could. But it often made more work for Mum rather than less, like the time that I 'helped' with the washing-up. I must have been about four or five, not yet started school. Jessie had already left for school, Dad was away working, and Mum was milking the cow early that morning. The breakfast dishes were still on the kitchen table, unwashed.

Dad always had his morning wash and shave just outside the kitchen door, and he had left behind a big dish of warm soapy water. "Well", I thought, "I'll do the washing-up for Mum". I wasn't allowed to touch the kettle on the kitchen fire, but I didn't need to. I carried dipperfuls of Dad's hot soapy wash-water inside, and filled the washing-up dish. Then I carefully washed all the

plates, and I wiped them all dry with a tea-towel, and I didn't break anything. I put all those plates and the cutlery away in the kitchen dresser, and I felt so proud that I could help Mum.

When Mum came in with the bucket of milk, she knew I had been up to something, and when she discovered my good deed, she had to re-wash every single thing in that dresser, since she didn't know which plates had been dunked in Dad's bathwater, and which hadn't. But anyway, she gave me a really big hug, and a whole penny! Wasn't she a lovely Mum?

The biggest amount of money that I was ever given as a child was a whole sixpence, a gift from Mum's brother, Uncle Alex Wilson. And almost straight away, I lost it! That day, Mum had visitors in the parlour, and I went in and proudly announced to the guests, "I've got some money in the bank!". I'd heard people talking about having money in the bank, but I had failed to comprehend just what a bank was. We had an earthen bank at our back door, where the outdoor oven was. I had pushed Uncle Alex's precious sixpence into that 'bank' and do you know, even though I searched and searched, I never did find the money again.

I was always rather frightened of Grandfather Wilson, who lived next door to us. He was crippled with arthritis and walked with a stick. He had a long white beard and spoke with such a broad Scottish brogue that I couldn't understand what he was saying. But the Wilsons' blue cattle dog had just had pups, and although I had been warned not to go anywhere near the mother, of course I could not resist picking up one of the fluffy little pups. The mother dog, a savage type, gripped my leg hard with her teeth. On hearing the disturbance, Grandfather Wilson came outside. "Put that pup down!" he ordered. I refused, even though the mother was attacking me. I wanted that little pup so much and I clung onto it.



Grandfather unceremoniously wrenched the pup from me and dropped it back near its mother. And I never did get one of those pups to keep.

Perhaps because I was a bit accident prone (but I did so want to be good!) that when I twice dislocated my shoulder I never said anything about it. It was at the same time that both Dad and Aiden Shumack had dislocated their shoulders, and I remember that they discussed the special exercises they had to do. Anyway, this time we were out at Fergy Smith's place, and I was picking cherries in their cherry tree. I fell out of the tree and landed on my shoulder. My daughter disbelieves me when I say that I broke it, so it must have been a dislocation. It took a long while to get better, and shortly after it had healed, I fell off the kitchen dresser at home, and hurt it again! On both occasions I said nothing to my parents, but for a long while I could not do the arm exercises in physical culture at school.

I was not the only one in our family who was accident prone. Jack was a bit that way too. He had dislocated his arm as a baby, and when he was seven he fell and broke his arm. Since Dad didn't have a horse, he had to piggy-back Jack all the way into Sunny Corner where Dr Magill set Jack's arm.

I remember a time, too, when Bill drank half a cup of kerosene by accident. Kerosene was clear in those days, not coloured blue, and it looked just like water. Bill was still recovering from whooping cough. He had seen the cup of clear liquid on the table when he came into the house, and being thirsty he drank it, thinking that it was water! He'd swallowed half a cupful before he realised his awful mistake. Fortunately though, he recovered fairly quickly.

Even Jess, who was always so good, once managed to get a wooden cotton-reel stuck inside her mouth. It got jammed somehow against the roof of her mouth and Mum had quite some difficulty in removing it. After that, we were never allowed to play with cotton-reels. Mum threw them straight into the fire when all the thread had been used up.

## 23. Superstitions and strange happenings

Like so many folk of that era, Mum was superstitious and she fervently believed in ghosts. Dad was generally more hard-headed, but he too had his moments. He told us that there had once been a convict settlement close by, and at the back of our house our whole family used to periodically hear the sound of the clanking of leg-irons, as if twenty chained convicts were marching by. We really did believe they were ghosts.

There were occasions too, when we would be lying out on the bit of front lawn that we had, in the evenings, and we would then begin to hear horses approaching, and the sound of galloping hoofbeats would get louder and louder until they sounded almost upon us, and we would all scatter in panic and run inside the house. But then always, there would be no horses. Perhaps what we heard were the ground echoes of galloping hoofs from some miles distant. It was always a mystery to us.

In those dim, candle-lit evenings, when the shadows flickered and the darkness closed in around us, it was not too difficult for our imaginations to get the better of us. I always thought I could be brave in the dark, until the night of the electrified beast. I'd gone outside onto the verandah to get something for Mum, and around the corner, against the wall, I could see a black shape, like a goat. I put my hand out to touch it and received an electric shock! I ran inside panic-stricken and was always afraid of the dark after that.

Another evening when Dad was away working, Mum and we children were sitting inside, and we began to hear the sound of stones hitting the back door of our house. We were all too frightened to go outside and investigate. The next morning Mum collected up a potato-bag full of round stones that had landed at the back of the house. When Dad came home and saw them, he said that there were no rocks like that within fifty miles of our place, and Dad knew his geology pretty well. So who threw those rocks, and why? And where had the rocks come from?

## 24. The Lagoon Gold Mine

There were several local gold mines that I remember: the Paddy Lackey mine, the Homeward Bound mine, and the Lagoon mine.

The Lagoon gold mine was about three miles or so from where we lived at Dark Corner. There was always a lot of talk about that mine, since much money had been spent on it. It became a favourite picnic spot for locals, who would all go to inspect the expensive new machinery that had been installed there.

I can remember walking down through the bush to the Lagoon mine with my father and sister, and perhaps our uncle and cousins came too. I must have been at least seven years old (1902). By that time, the Lagoon mine appeared to have been only recently abandoned. All of the new machinery and work tools were just left unguarded, and there was no one there to look after the place. I am sorry to say that quite a lot of pilfering went on. I remember that there were tools lying around, such as picks and shovels, and there were boxes full of brand new hammers, and wooden boxes full of shiny new nails of all sizes. I was fascinated by the nails and I thought they would be ever so useful for my Dad. I would scoop up a glittering handful of nails just to look at them, they were so pretty. But Dad would not let me take any, and nor would he take any himself. He was a very moral man, my father.

One time we met some other locals down there, and the little girl who was with them said, "Ooh, there's a lot of the hammers gone!" and then she added guiltily, "Well it wasn't my Uncle Freddy who took them!". We knew just by the way she said it that her Uncle Freddy was indeed the culprit, and I've called him Uncle Freddy here because that wasn't his real name!

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\* Records show that by 1897 the Lagoon Creek Gold Mining Co. had invested over \$3 million in today's money-value on machinery and treatment plants, but that the gold reef had proved to be patchy and the gold had run out. The last time this mine was mentioned in Mines Department returns was in 1900. The company went broke, the mine was abandoned, and presumably much of the machinery was later sold. At the site today in 1992 are only the remains of brick walls, stone walls, mining tunnels and an old boiler, all mostly overgrown with blackberries.

Another gold mine that I can remember was the Last Chance gold mine on Clear Creek. It was jointly owned by Mum's Sinclair uncles and her brother Alex. Very occasionally, Dad would go and work there for a while, although he hated to work for anyone else. Dad would walk the twelve miles from home to Clear Creek and camp on the job during the week, then walk home again at the weekends.

## 25. At home among the wildlife

Dad was interested in birds and he knew all their names and the sorts of nests they had. The birds I remember best were the curlews. You could hear them wailing at night, and the plovers too used to call at night.

There were quite a lot of snakes about, but none of us ever got bitten. I remember tiger snakes, brown snakes and black snakes, and there was also a blue coloured snake. We were always told to be very wary of all snakes, and especially in March, since that was coupling month. Coupling? I had no idea what that meant!

Our closest shave with a snake was one time when we were walking to Bennett's place at Dark Corner. Tom was scuffling his feet through the candle-bark and leaf litter, and in so doing he kicked out a big tiger snake. Auntie Liz killed it. My own close shave came when I was stepping over a log and saw a blue snake on the other side. We must have frightened each other and we both beat a hasty retreat. It was a long snake as it took a long time to wriggle away.\*

The local boys were such daredevils, and I remember that they used to grab hold of a snake by the end of its tail, and then quickly crack it like a whip to break its back. That was a very dangerous

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\* This is probably the Grey Snake, a swamp dweller, not believed to be dangerous, once often seen at Dark Corner, now locally very rare.



stunt as those snakes were highly venomous. One time when a snake was cracked like that, I saw a lizard fall out of the snake's mouth and run off! The kookaburras had their own method of killing snakes. They would pick up a smallish snake and fly up to a high perch, then drop the snake, time and time again. When the snake had ceased to struggle, the kookaburra would eat it.

Perhaps the snakes often dined on frogs. They would have had a real feast if they did, because at the creek and other swampy places there were always lots of frogs, forever croaking, and of all shapes and sizes.

Wasps used to build their nests in the mud walls of our house. We used to break open those multi-chambered mud nests to examine the paralysed spiders inside. They were to be the food for the wasp larvae. The spiders were all different, yellow ones and even green ones.

There were other sorts of spiders that lived in holes in the ground. The entrance to the hole would be covered with a trap-door lid. The spiders inside were big brown ones, and we used to probe the hole with a long dry grass-stem until the agitated occupant would grab hold of it. Then we'd carefully tease the spider out of its home.

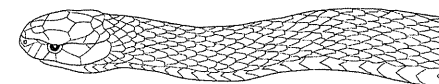
Quite a few creatures used to enter our house by way of the big wooden logs used on the kitchen fire. The worst of these was the centipede, which was several inches long and a greenish colour with a red and yellow belly. Sometimes the centipedes would crawl around upside down on the cloth ceiling, making a prickling noise as their feet hooked into the fabric. There were also 'forty-legged-creatures', and were like centipedes but with extra long legs that looked like long eyelashes.

The outdoor creatures that we sought to avoid were the red bulldog ants (their bite was said to last for three months), the black bulldog ants (their bite only lasted a week), and the unpredictable stinging jumper ants that lived in a nest of three foot diameter and

would come raging out from their nest with the slightest disturbance. Another creature we were wary of was the 'bluebottle'; it was iridescent blue and looked like a huge ant.\*

In the bush we saw bandicoots, bush rats, kangaroo rats, possums, porcupines and wombats, in addition to the several different species of kangaroos and wallabies. I had a pet wallaby once, and he still slept on my lap even when he was quite big. He came to Limekilns with us on a couple of occasions, riding in the dray, but he eventually disappeared into the bush at Dark Corner. I called my wallaby 'Darling', he was a dark reddish-black colour and Dad reckoned he was a Swamp Wallaby. Dad used to sometimes shoot kangaroos and wallabies and sell their skins, and my pet was a joey rescued from its mother's pouch.

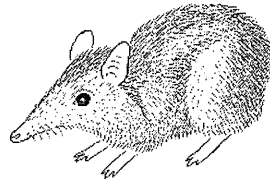
There were quite a few wild goats about, and sometimes we would purchase a kid that had already been killed and dressed, and we would eat goat-meat for a change. We kept a big black Berkshire pig once, and he was eventually turned into hams and bacon for Christmas, to share with neighbours. Our cats prowled about outside and were useful mouse catchers. As well as the cats we used 'Figure 4' mousetraps, but mice did not seem to be unduly troublesome.



I suppose the early settlers had quite an impact on the local wildlife, but we were quite unaware of that impact at the time. Apart from letting loose various feral species like foxes, rabbits, goats, pigs and cats, we also hunted the local native animals for their skins, since there was no law against it. There seemed to be such an abundance of furry native animals.

\* Actually a wingless female wasp, capable of stinging.

Some of the gold mining processes were not without their pollution hazards either. One time there was a major spill of cyanide from the Paddy Lackey mine into the nearby creek. Several cows died after drinking the water, and I suppose some wildlife must have died too. People were fairly casual about toxic chemicals in those days, and no sign was put up near the creek to warn people of the danger. That creek ran near the Dark Corner school, and one day at lunchtime, some of us children noticed that a swaggie was boiling his billy at the poisoned creek. My cousin Jim ran down towards the swaggie and hurled a rock at his billy on the fire, before warning him of the danger. Jim probably saved that swaggie's life.



## 26. A bush Christmas

Each year, around Christmas time, our house would receive a fresh coat of whitewash on the outer walls, and Dad would then decorate the front verandah with eucalypt branches to make it shady and cool for the Christmas period.

On Christmas morning we children would each receive a stocking full of gifts. Those stockings were usually bought from Bulkeley's Store; they were made from stiffened red netting and were about fifteen inches long. There would always be lollies in the toe of the stocking, and all sorts of other little gifts, noisy whistles and so on.

Our cousins would join us for Christmas dinner, with roast chicken, ham, and new peas, carrots and potatoes from our veg-

etable garden. For dessert we would have vanilla blancmange and stewed cherries from our orchard. And we would always have a plum pudding too, boiled-up over the kitchen fire. With his beautiful voice Dad would lead the carol singing, and all of us would join in.

Christmas visitors were always given a glass of port and a piece of fruit cake. We had just the one bottle of port over Christmas, and we children were allowed a taste too.

One Christmas, my sister and I were supposed to pretend that we still believed in Santa Claus, for the sake of our two little brothers who were quite a bit younger. But on opening up our Christmas stockings, I blurted out, "Oh, this is the doll that I saw at Miss Jones' shop!". So that did away with Santa!

We had some wealthy relatives, the Keys, who lived at Waverley in Sydney. Each year about Christmas time they would send us up a big boxful of their used clothes and toys. Some of the clothes weren't all that suitable for us, but we wore them happily anyway, and we really cherished the toys. We did look forward to the arrival of that box! There was only a horseback mail delivery service to Dark Corner post office, so the box would be sent to Sunny Corner post office by mail coach. On receiving word of its arrival, Dad would walk into Sunny Corner and carry the box home on his shoulder.

## 27. Neighbours

Our community at Dark Corner was quite a close-knit one, and in those days before cars and televisions, we relied upon our neighbours for mutual support and company. With no telephone either, it was just the accepted practice to call in on one another for a chat, or to help out in cases of illness, or births, or deaths.

I have a photo that shows all the children at Dark Corner school. There are 35 children and I can still remember nearly all of their names. Most of those families at Dark Corner made a living





Pupils at Dark Corner School, 1908. Left to right are:

**Back row (boys):** John McLachlan, Bob Grabham, Bert Shumack, John Grabham, Tom Grabham, Jack Scott, John Shumack, Aiden Shumack, Les Grabham, Jim Byers, Charles Stewart (Teacher).

**Second row standing (girls):** Eulalie Wilson, Elvie Eves, Ethel McLachlan, Eliza McLachlan (the two McLachlan girls were known as 'the two chickens'; I'm not sure why!), Ada Smith, Clara Shumack, Alice Shumack, (unknown), Mabel Grabham, Sylvia Grabham, Ruby Shumack.

**Third row seated (girls):** May Scott, Jessie Byers, Joan Shumack, Mary Byers, Elizabeth Smith, Kit Shumack, Janet McLachlan, Mary Titus.

**Front row (boys):** Jack Byers, Bob Byers, Colin McLachlan, Arthur Grabham, Tommy (Gordon) Smith, Eric Smith.

Note that Mary Byers is in the third row, fourth from the left. All names given are as identified by Mary Byers.

from gold mining and farming. When the gold became more scarce, many families moved on, and perhaps I'm the only one left who can still remember some of the local names of that era.

Living near us, across the road, were the Buckletons, the Mortons and the Rosses. Heading towards school, we passed Newports on the right and Coopers on the left, before walking up Rennies' hill. Rennies had already left before we came to Dark Corner, but the hill where they'd lived was still known as Rennies'

hill. Then we would go past Aiden Shumack's post office on the right. Aiden was married to Mary Grabham, and his two older daughters Alice and Joan were our best friends at school. Up behind our house, within shouting distance, lived the Grabhams, and beyond their place was the Homeward Bound mine, the Paddy Lackey mine, the McCartneys, Eves and Scotts. McLachlans, Bennetts and Martins lived further along the Dark Corner road, and there was another branch of the Shumack family living at 'Springvale' next to the school. And there were other folk too, that we would call on when we walked into Sunny Corner to do the shopping.

### *The old digger*

Dad used to go visiting some of the poorer folk. There were no welfare workers in those days and no pensions for old people. Many old miners lived in poor huts on the diggings. There was one old man who seemed to have been left on his own with no family close by. He was almost bedridden and he lived in a rather impoverished little hut with a dirt floor. He'd sit on the edge of his bed and shuffle his feet before he could get moving. There was quite a hollow worn down next to the bed, and in wet weather this hole filled up with water, and the poor man's feet would get covered in mud every time he got out of bed. I think he was past caring though. There were a lot of people like that in those days, living in such poor conditions.

### *The turnip man*

Along the West Mitchell road lived a man who grew turnips. He was very proud of those turnips and they were really huge ones too. Someone once ordered a quarter of a hundredweight of turnips from him, and he said, "I'm not going to cut one of my turnips for anyone!". It was his favourite joke.

### *Stricklands*

George and Maria Strickland lived in a cottage midway between

the West Mitchell road and the Dark Corner road. Mum sometimes called in on them, and Mrs Strickland seemed to be forever having babies. She already had five girls and was hoping very much for a boy. One time when we visited, Mrs Strickland was heavily pregnant and she told Mum that she had a great craving for salmon, but that she couldn't afford any. So Mum bought her a big tin of red salmon as a present, and do you know, she sat and ate it all at one sitting without sharing any of it with her children!

The next baby Maria Strickland had was a boy: George. Sadly George died as a baby, and I remember his tiny coffin at their house, encircled by red roses. (Note: George Sinclair Strickland died 5.3.1901 aged 8 months, son of George Strickland and Maria Ossington. He was buried at Sunny Corner cemetery without a headstone.)

The eldest Strickland girl was Hannah, and she was later engaged to Harold Grabham, but Harold died at the front at the start of World War I, killed by a stray bullet.

### **Ossingtons**

The Ossingtons lived next to the Stricklands, and the Ossington and Strickland children were cousins. They were the people from whom we would buy a dressed goat-kid from time to time. I remember the little Ossington girl. She had a mane of beautiful, long, curly red hair. One day we were visiting and I was admiring that mane of hair, and the little girl's mother said to her, "Put your head into a bucket of water and show Mary how your hair goes really curly". Her wet hair then went into the tightest and prettiest little curls, and I was so envious!

### **Grabhams**

When my sister Jessie was born in 1893, a midwife could not be found quickly, so old Mrs Grabham was sent for, to help out. I remember seeing her in later years. Her name was Joan and she always used to wear a bonnet. She lived on West Mitchell Road, just past the Dark Corner road junction.



Chips, the hero dog.

The younger Grabham family lived closer to our place, near the Homeward Bound mine. There was Abraham and Wilmott and all their children. I remember that there were seven boys, who were all a bit wild, and two girls. Near their house was a deep mine shaft, about eight foot square. You could see water in the bottom of the shaft about twenty feet down. Those boys would run across a plank above that shaft—they were real daredevils! Their dog was a St Bernard named Nelson, and he would bark at their antics. I was never game to run across that plank, and I don't think the boys' parents were aware of this dangerous game being played by their sons.

### **Martins**

The Homeward Bound mine was always out of bounds to us, since the area was riddled with mine shafts. The Martin boys were quite a few years older than us, and when Jack and Jim Martin were about fourteen or fifteen, they had been exploring up around the

back of our place near Grabhams, when Jim tripped into a digger's hole. I don't know how he saved himself from falling right down it, but quick thinking Jack made a grab for Jim's leg and hauled him out. When they later told us what had happened, their main concern was not that Jim was nearly killed, but that he had lost his new hat down the mine shaft!

### ***Chips***

Jim Grabham lived out at Dark Corner, and Jim had a dog that became something of a local hero. I've got a snapshot of that dog. He was a black kelpie called Chips, and in a bushfire he had rounded up 300 sheep all by himself and herded them to safety, and in so doing had burnt the pads off his feet. In the photo Chips is sitting on a Persian rug, being treated like the hero that he was. Jim Grabham had four soft shoes made for him at the bootmakers. Chips promptly chewed at them until he got them all off. "No sissy boots for me", I suppose he thought.

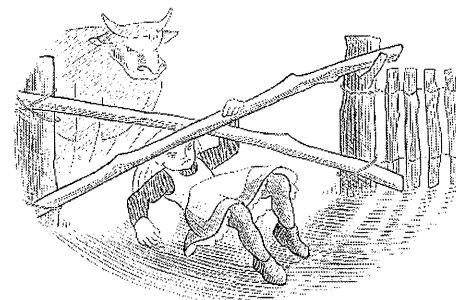
### ***The mad bullock***

Another time the Grabhams had recently bought some cattle from somewhere up country—it might have been from Cobar. Amongst the herd of bullocks was one brute that the Grabhams found out had already killed two men back at Cobar.

Once that bullock arrived at Dark Corner, it went clean mad with rage, and took off along the Dark Corner road. I happened to be playing alone in the paddock between our place and the Wilsons', and that paddock was unfenced at the time. I heard a commotion with the sound of galloping hoofs and whips cracking. Two youths on horseback soon appeared—they were Jim and Will Grabham, I think—and one of them was carrying a revolver.

The runaway bullock was heading towards me and I ran like mad to get through our garden gateway. I slid under the gate on my bottom just as fast as you can imagine, and I was only just ahead of that mad bullock! The gate was a rather flimsy affair, just two crossed saplings, with the fence built of stringybark palings.

Fortunately though, the gateway acted as a momentary deterrent to the bullock, and the Grabham boys cracked their whips and hunted the bullock off in another direction. They were finally able to shoot the animal just before it reached Sunny Corner. Imagine the havoc if the mad bullock had gone rampaging down the main street of the township!



### ***Bullockies***

Bullocks were usually quiet animals and it was a delight to see the bullockies with their bullock teams, so well trained. Sometimes we would catch a ride on the empty bullock wagons, and I never once heard a bullocky swear when we children were on the wagon. Dad always reckoned that one particular bullocky he knew would have been able to stand on a stump and swear for fifteen minutes before he repeated himself! Our Dad never swore. His worst word was 'cussed', and he didn't say that very often. The local bullockies that I remember were Dry and Tom Scott, and the Smiths, but there were lots of others.

### ***Mrs McCartney***

Along from the Homeward Bound mine was the Paddy Lackey mine, another place that was out of bounds for us. But there was a small shop near the Paddy Lackey mine and sometimes Jess and I were allowed to walk home from school via the shop so that we could buy a few items for Mum. Mrs McCartney owned the shop,

and usually Jess would do the buying while I looked around.

One time I noticed that Mrs McCartney had some lovely chrysanthemums growing in her garden, and there was one especially pretty variety with yellow and maroon petals. My mother had twenty-two different varieties of chrysanthemums growing in her garden at home, but she didn't have this particular one. So I helped myself to the best bloom to show Mum, and I picked a few other flowers as well before Mrs McCartney came running out of the shop and chased me down the road. Lucky for me she didn't know who I was!

### ***Buckletons***

The Buckletons lived across the road from us, but we didn't see much of them. I think they left when the Mortons did, and might have been related to them. But I do remember Ernie Buckleton as a lad. He was always so beautifully dressed, and he wore a Norfolk jacket and felt hat. The family must have been well off; perhaps his dad had found a lot of gold!

### ***Coopers***

The Coopers lived just near us too. They left Dark Corner in about 1907. The eldest girl, Carrie, taught us sewing at school. There was also Frances, Edith and Emily, Bob, Len, and George who was the youngest. Mr Cooper was working at Cobar and used to send the family £20 every month, so the Cooper children were always very well dressed in those days.

### ***McLachlans***

The McLachlans were somewhat poorer, but nice people and well respected. There were two McLachlan families and both very different to each other. Mrs John McLachlan was a happy, hale and hearty sort of person, while Mrs Donald McLachlan was much more of a refined type, and her children were always so well mannered.

I remember young John McLachlan as a schoolboy—or at least

I remember his hobnail boots. All the McLachlan boys wore hobnail boots. When I was twelve there was a group of us playing around with a ball at school. Just as I grabbed hold of the ball, John McLachlan accidentally trod on my hand with his hobnail boot! My hand was bruised quite badly.

### ***Ned Smith***

Ned Smith was the youngest of Fergy Smith's boys, and a bit older than me. Ned always used to sharpen my pencils for me at school, using his pocket knife. One of the girls at school said to me, "Ned must be your boyfriend". I'd never thought of it like that, so I asked Ned straight out, "Are you my boyfriend?". His indignant reply was, "No I am not!". He didn't sharpen my pencils after that.

### ***Shumacks***

Aiden Shumack ran the post office at Dark Corner. His son was called Aiden too. And there was yet another Aiden Shumack at Dark Corner, the son of John and Kate Shumack of 'Springvale'. I have already mentioned that Aiden's daughters Alice and Joan were our best friends. I also remember the daughters of John and Kate Shumack—there was Clara, Agnes, Ruby, and Olive, who was a good bit younger. Agnes was very good at sewing (and I was not!), and she was a lovely person too; she called me 'Polly'. I liked all that family. All of the Shumack children were good scholars at school.

### ***Martin Dunn***

Martin Dunn was somehow related to Mrs Aiden Shumack. I worked that out because I noticed they were on first-name terms. Proper etiquette in those days demanded that adults always address one another as Mr, Mrs or Miss So-and-So. Christian names were only ever used for children and for adults who were related. Many of our neighbours I knew only as Mr and Mrs, and I never found out what their Christian names were.

But I knew Martin Dunn must have been related to Mrs

Shumack, because one time when I was visiting the Shumacks, Mrs Shumack was serving Martin Dunn a cup of tea in the kitchen. "Will you have a second cup of tea, Martin?" she asked. "I think I will thank you, Mary", was the reply.\*

### ***Ben Lewis***

We often used to see old Ben Lewis working in one of the paddocks along the road on Aiden's hill. Ben was Kate Shumack's father. To us he looked frail and old, but he worked hard with an axe and an adze. Sometimes on our way home from school he would tell us a story. He would begin, "If all the men in the world were combined into one, wouldn't that make a big man! And if all the axes in the world were combined into one, wouldn't that make a big axe!" He'd continue along on that theme, referring to big trees, and big ponds, and then finish by saying, "And if that big man chopped down that big tree with that big axe, and if that big tree fell into that big pond, wouldn't that make a big splash!" He was a pleasant and kindly old fellow, and we enjoyed his efforts to entertain us.

### ***Will Titus***

I remember Will Titus when he was a handsome teenager. He was so kind and good-natured and he used to push the swings for us at the school picnics. Will had two younger sisters that I knew of, and their mother had died some years before. I think that Will lived with a relative in Sunny Corner; his sister Mary lived with their auntie, Mrs Fergy Smith, at Dark Corner. Another sister, Emmaline, lived at West Mitchell with their grandmother, Mrs Montgomery. I liked Mary; she went to our school at Dark Corner. I became good friends with Emmaline too, shortly before our family moved away from Dark Corner.

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\* Martin Dunn was the cousin of Mary Shumack's husband, Aiden.

### ***Alec Grey***

Alec Grey was a well respected local citizen who always came to the school picnics. I don't think he was married, but at one time he was minding a little girl whose surname was also Grey. She was a dainty and well-dressed little girl and she attended Dark Corner school for a short time, and then left again. I've always wondered who she was.

### ***The Chinese greengrocer***

There was a Chinese greengrocer who had a shop in Sunny Corner township and he used to make deliveries by horse and cart. He was the only local Chinaman that I remember, and for some reason I was absolutely terrified of him! I must have overheard some gossip, perhaps when I was very small, about the Yellow Peril that was going to take over Australia. Mum and Dad were not prejudiced like that against the Chinese, so I must have got my fear from another source. Whenever I saw that Chinaman approaching in his horse and cart, I would dive for the nearest ditch and hide myself as best I could. That irrational fear of Chinese stayed with me for many years.

### ***Aborigines***

By the time our family came to be living at Dark Corner, there were no aborigines left; the white settlers had displaced them all. There was one time though, when a family of seven aborigines was passing through Dark Corner on their way elsewhere. They camped the night next to the Stricklands' house, between the two chimneys for warmth.

### ***Travelling clergy***

There were no churches at Dark Corner, so clergymen would pass through from time to time to perform the various religious ceremonies at people's homes—weddings, baptisms and so on. It was accepted practice to 'save up' various items for the clergymen to attend to. And so it was that my young brother Bill had to wait

until he was two years old before being baptised.

The main event of the day was to be the wedding at Dark Corner of my Auntie Janet Wilson and Jim Taylor. This wedding was held at the Wilsons' house. After the wedding ceremony had been performed, it was time for Bill's baptism. The **clergyman** marked Bill's head with water, but Bill thought that the splash was accidental. He wiped the water away with his sleeve and said woe-fully, "Look what he did to me, Daddy!". The clergyman was quite taken aback; he hadn't bargained on such comments from a two-year-old.

### ***Mrs Raven***

Our teacher Mr Stewart had a sister, Mrs Raven, who used to teach us sewing at school. Mrs Raven rode a push-bike, and she gave me a lesson on riding it one day. Then Mum asked her in for a cup of tea, but since the golden plums were ripe in our orchard, Mrs Raven chose to eat some plums instead. As she picked them off the tree, she kept eating one after the other. Finally someone asked her how many she thought she'd eaten. "Oh, only about three dozen", she said. Bet she had a tummy ache later!

### ***Mrs Bennett***

Another one of our neighbours was Mrs Bennett. She lived about four miles from us, further along the Dark Corner road. I've already told you of some of her home remedies, but there's another story about her too. She used to go shopping in a sulky pulled by a white pony. One time on her way home from shopping in Sunny Corner, she stopped off at our place to have a cuppa with Mum. I happened to be home from school that day, sick in bed. Mrs Bennett had unhitched the pony, and had left the sulky under a tree in the shade. After a while, I noticed through my bedroom window that the sun had moved around further, so that the sulky was now partly in the sun, and I thought of all Mrs Bennett's shopping getting spoiled and the butter melting. So, unknown to Mum or Mrs Bennett, I went outside to move the sulky.

I hadn't noticed that the sulky had been left on a bit of a slope, and when I lifted up the sulky shafts the sulky started moving forward and I couldn't stop it! There was a big log a bit further down the slope and we crashed into it—the sulky coming to a sudden halt and me tumbling over the log into the deep ferns where Dad had told us never to go because of snakes. But I was more frightened about what had happened to the sulky, and I ran back home and hid under my bed. Eventually Mum went outside to see Mrs Bennett off, and they were both so surprised and wondered how on earth the sulky could have rolled down the slope all by itself! Lucky for me, it didn't seem to occur to them that I might have been the culprit, since I was supposed to be ill and safely tucked up in my bed!

Mrs Bennett was quite a character and we always found her highly entertaining. She had a large family to look after, and she didn't always appear to be properly organised. One time she was going past Aiden Shumack's post office, and Aiden asked her in for a cup of tea. "I can't come in", said Mrs Bennett, "I've got odd boots on!". But the funny part about it was not so much the boots, which you'd hardly notice, but the red blouse, green skirt and pink bonnet that she was wearing—a startling combination of colours for that era!

### ***Maggie***

One of Mrs Bennett's older daughters was Maggie (Margaret). Maggie died when I was very young, but I do remember her. She used to ride side-saddle, past our place to the shops. She had dark hair and was quite pretty, and she always wore a proper black riding skirt. Maggie had diabetes, a very serious illness in those days. One time Maggie stopped at our front gate on her way home from the shops, and she showed us children what she was carrying in her saddle-bags. I remember she had a two-pound tin of golden syrup. "Don't tell my Mum", she said, "I'm not supposed to have it!" We didn't tell of course, since we had our own secrets from our mother too.

Maggie was just a young woman when she died, and after she

had gone, Mrs Bennett never altered Maggie's room. Despite the large family, Maggie's bedroom was left untouched and unused. I remember Mrs Bennett showed it to us one time when we were visiting. Bennetts had a small house and you would wonder how they could spare the space, but obviously Maggie had meant a lot to poor Mrs Bennett.\*

Many years later, after our family had moved away, Mrs Bennett had a new little girl, Ella. "This is my daughter", she said, but Mrs Bennett was quite old by then and we knew that wasn't possible. Perhaps Ella was an adopted grand-daughter, we never did find out.

## 28. Leaving Dark Corner

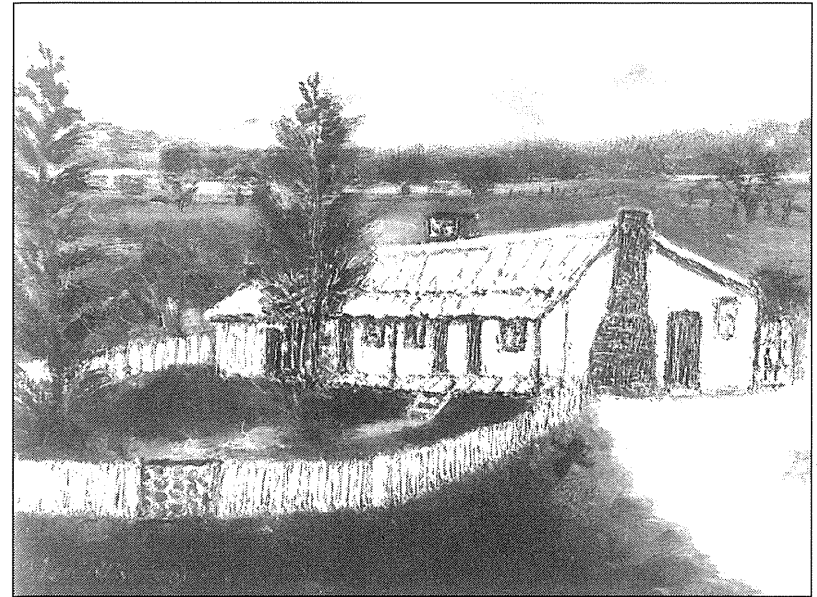
Finally our family decided to leave Dark Corner and move permanently to Limekilns in 1908. I was thirteen then, and I continued my schooling at Limekilns until I was fifteen. Our family lived at Limekilns, farming on 200 acres at "Willow Dale" until 1926. My brothers Jack and Bill went into bee-farming, and Dad helped them. They were known, in fact, as migratory apiarists, and the Byers brothers became renowned for their bees and their honey. They travelled all over NSW looking for stands of yellow-box, and they seemed to have a sixth sense about when the trees were ready to flower.

In 1926 we all moved to 'Kelsoville' at Kelso, and the four of us,—Jessie, Jack, Bill and me—were all married from there.

I didn't marry until I was thirty-four, in 1929. Up until then I had always lived at home, helping Mum to look after the household, which by then included various Wilson and Byers relatives, some of them elderly or ill. But although I did not go out to work

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\* Maggie died aged 23, 1-2-1900, and is buried at Dark Corner cemetery with a headstone. Mrs Bennett had 13 children. Her husband, William, had died in 1897, leaving her to cope with that large family on her own.



'Willow Dale', our house at Limekilns, as depicted in a painting by Elsie U'Brien. Our family moved to this house after leaving Dark Corner in 1908.



'Kelsoville' at Kelso, the grand old house where our family lived after 1927.

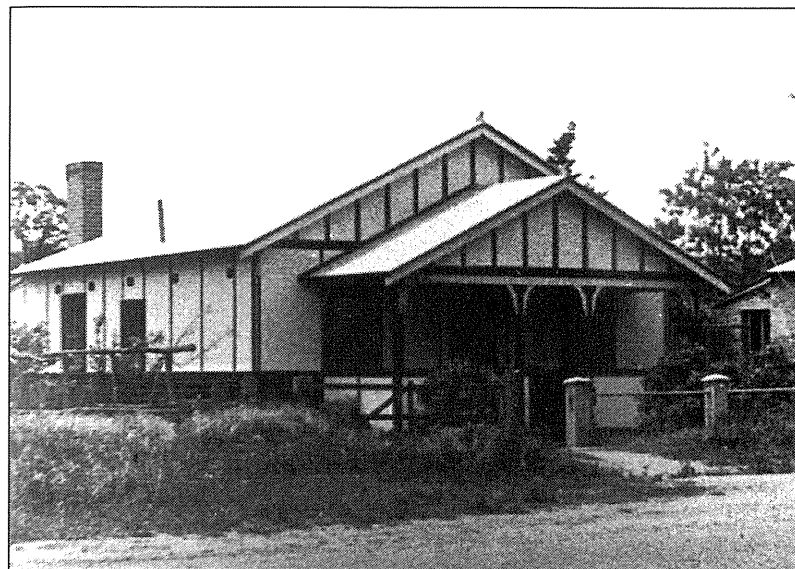


away from home, I enjoyed my life in those years, and had plenty of opportunity for socializing, with tennis and dancing. I had met my future husband Eric, locally, and he was a farmer. Eric Churches and I were married on Boxing Day 1929. We went on a camping trip in NSW for our honeymoon, and then built our own cottage within the grounds of 'Kelsoville'.

Eric and I had four children, Alex, Meba, Isobel and Carol, who all grew up at Kelso. My husband died in 1974, but I continued to live at Kelso until I was ninety-three years old. Then in



Myself (Mary) and husband Eric Churches, pictured on our wedding day, Bathurst, 26-12-1929. We were both aged 34.



Eric and I built this house in the grounds of 'Kelsoville', and here we raised our family.



Eric and I in 1960.

1989 my youngest daughter Carol and I moved to a unit in Bathurst where we now live in 1993.

I look back with nostalgia to my early years growing up at Dark Corner, and I still have fond memories of our many friends and neighbours, and of a way of life that was relatively simple and uncomplicated. Nothing stays the same though, does it? Some changes have definitely been for the better, but perhaps there are still some lessons to be learned from those good old days.



My children and myself, taken at Meba's graduation in 1986 at Mitchell College in Bathurst. From left to right are: Carol, Isobel, Meba, myself and Alex.

## Epilogue

Very little now remains in 1993 of the district described by Mary Byers in these turn-of-the-century stories, and there are few if any people left who might still remember Dark Corner as it once was.

Almost all of the original settlers' cottages at Dark Corner have disappeared under the pine plantations that were established in the 1950s, 60s and 70s.

The Byers' and the Wilsons' wattle-and-daub homes, and the orchard between, have all gone now. Some of the ruined walls were still standing in the 1950s, but today only a few fragments of broken china mark the spot.

Neighbouring cottages such as Mortons', Coopers', Scotts' and Grabhams', and also Aiden Shumack's Dark Corner post office, have all been obliterated by pines, as have the remains of the old gold mines, such as the Paddy Lackey, Homeward Bound and Bloomfield's Flat, with most of the old workings now levelled by bulldozers.

West Creek is today a nameless watercourse running through the pine forest. Some of the old diggings along the creek can still be seen, but it seems that all of the gold has been extracted long ago. Those miners made a very thorough job of it!

The Dark Corner school was closed in 1951 and the building removed. The vacant site is now a small public reserve, while the tennis court is unused and overgrown. The two cemeteries at Dark Corner and Sunny Corner are still in existence.

At Dark Corner itself, few native animals have survived. Curlews disappeared when the foxes came. Koalas died out because of habitat removal and sickness, as did most of the other native animal species at Dark Corner.

The original Dark Corner road has now been sealed, and it still follows fairly closely the old route, with a few minor changes. West Mitchell Road is unsealed but still in use. The main Sunny Corner road and the highway to Bathurst are sealed, and it takes about half an hour to drive by car from Dark Corner to Bathurst, where once it used to take half a day by horse and cart.

Almost all of the original township at Sunny Corner has been dismantled. Many of the weatherboard cottages built in the 1880s were taken to Portland after 1900. However, the brick chimney from Miss Jones's lolly shop still stands, as does the front step of Richard Bulkeley's general store, just next door. No local residents remember Miss Lord's shop at West Mitchell, and it certainly no longer stands. The population of Sunny Corner in 1993 is about 150 persons, with perhaps another 15 persons living at Dark Corner.

To the west of Dark Corner, in the natural bushland of the Winburndale Range, the ruins of the old Lagoon mine can still be found. The Byers' route to Limekilns follows what is now known as the Eskdale Road, and the aboriginal stone arrangements (about 12 large heaps of rounded boulders), can still be seen along the Eskdale Road. They are now within the Winburndale Nature Reserve.

The world of Mary Byers in the era around 1900 is now only a memory, with few clues remaining from the lives of those former Dark Corner inhabitants. The present-day visitor to Dark Corner could hardly even begin to imagine that world of neat whitewashed cottages with smoke drifting from their chimneys, the friendly neighbours, the gentle pace of life in the horse and buggy era, and the excitement of finding small nuggets of gold from time to time. There was once so little traffic on the Dark Corner road that Mary could walk home from school along the middle of the road, reading a book as she went.

These valuable stories that have now been told will thus give the reader a link with that past way of life at Dark Corner. It is to be hoped that this small slice of Australian social history will both entertain the reader and perhaps inspire them to reflect back upon

our past, for it is only by looking back that we can more accurately make a measure of our progress. This in turn might help us in the decisions we make about our future.

# Appendix I: Family details

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## Family members mentioned in these stories

### *Grandparents*

Grandfather Robert Byers died before I was born. He was a landscape gardener and a gold miner (b. 1823 Scotland; m.1849 England; d.1875 Jews Creek NSW).

Grandmother Hannah Byers (nee Dodd) died when I was 12. She had lived in Sydney, so I saw little of her (b.1820 England; m.1849 England; d.1907 Sydney).

Grandfather Alexander Wilson lived next door to us at Dark Corner, but I kept out of his way. He was a farmer/publican (b.1835 Scotland; m.1860 Bathurst; d.1923 Bathurst).

Grandmother Jessie Wilson (nee Sinclair) died before I was born, while having her 12th child (b.1843 Bathurst; m.1860 Bathurst; d.1888 Limekilns).

### *Parents*

My father, John Byers, was at different times a surveyor, an alluvial gold miner, a farmer and a bee-keeper (b.1859

Sydney; m.1892 Dark Corner; d.1929 Bathurst).

My mother, Margaret Wilson, was a wonderful mother to us all (b.1871 Bathurst; m.1892 Dark Corner; d.1952 Bathurst).

### ***Aunts and uncles***

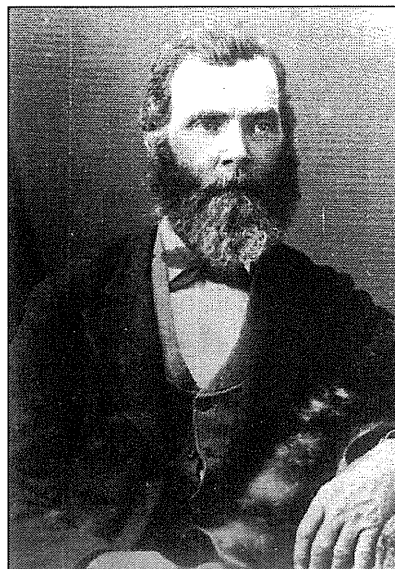
Uncle Tom Byers was Dad's brother and he lived with us at Dark Corner. He was an alluvial gold miner and farmer (b.1857 Sydney; m.1891 Dark Corner; d.1936 Bathurst).

Auntie Liz Byers (nee Wilson) was Mum's sister, and her full name was Jessie Elizabeth. She married Dad's brother, and lived with us at Dark Corner (b.1865 Bathurst; m.1891 Dark Corner; d.1923 Bathurst).

Auntie Annie Jackson (nee Byers) lived in Sunny Corner before moving to Lithgow. She was born in England in 1845 and was Dad's sister.

**Byers aunts and uncles.** There were a total of eight in the Byers family. As well as Dad and Uncle Tom and Auntie Annie, there were James (died at sea); Janet (1850-1904 and unmarried); Hannah born 1853 and married Alfred Brodie; Mary (1860-1933) who married John Kirby; and Isabelle (1862-1925) who married Edward Keys and lived at Waverley.

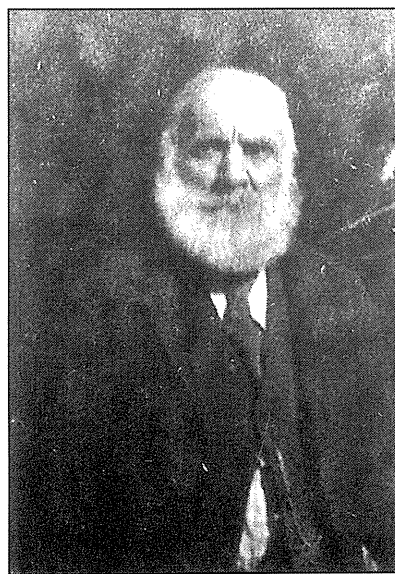
**Wilson aunts and uncles.** There were 11 children in the Wilson family. As well as Mum and Auntie Liz, there were Jack born 1863 and unmarried; Annie who died in childhood; Alex (1865-1939) unmarried; Bob (1869-1915) who married Mary Tobin; Ada (1873-1874) who died as a baby; Bill born 1875 and unmarried; Janet born 1878 who married James Taylor; George (1880-1943) who married Ellen Gorman; and Eleanor (1882-1966) who married local Dark Corner man Edward (Wed) Grabham. My Wilson uncles made their living at either gold mining, farming or



My grandfather Robert Byers, aged in his early 40s in 1865.



My red-headed grandmother, Hannah Byers (nee Dodd).



My grandfather, Alexander Wilson, aged in his 70s in about 1908.



My grandmother Jessie Wilson (nee Sinclair) as a young woman in 1870.

bee-keeping, and they lived either at Dark Corner or at Limekilns.

### ***Brothers and sisters***

My sister Jessie was born at Dark Corner 26-11-1893 and she married Jack Tooby on 9th July, 1932 at Bathurst and had one child, Leslie. Jessie died 3-5-1982 in Bathurst.

My brother Jack was born at Dark Corner 19-9-1900. He was married in Bathurst to Nina Scanes and had no children. Jack was an apiarist. He died 6-8-1988 in Bathurst.

My brother Bill was born 17-7-1904 at Limekilns, and was married 8-12-1934 in Bathurst to Jean Foran. They had four children, Margaret, Helen, Heather (died 1980) and John. Bill was an apiarist, and he died at Sofala 15-6-1977 while out fox shooting.

### ***Cousins***

Cousin Tom Byers was born 1892 in Sydney. He worked as a farm hand in the Ben Bullen area and later had a property at Napoleon Reefs. He didn't marry, and died 23-12-1980 in Bathurst.

Cousin Jim Byers was born 1894 at Dark Corner. He also worked in the Ben Bullen area. Jim never married, and he died 13-4-1982 in Bathurst.

Cousin Bob Byers was born 1900 at Dark Corner. Bob became a bee-keeper and farmer. He married Jessie Tobin in Bathurst in 1930 and they had five children: Elaine, Stanley, Peter, Vincent, Mervyn and Mary. Bob died 31-5-1972 in Bathurst.

### ***Husband and children***

Eric ('Ec') Churches was my husband. He was born at



My brother Jack as a young man,  
about 1930



My brother Bill as a young man,  
about 1930.



My sister Jessie as a young woman,  
about 1930.



Cousin Bob Byers aged 29, on his  
wedding day in 1930.



Raglan 14-8-1895. We were married 26-12-1929 in Bathurst. Eric was a farmer and he also worked on the Shire Council. He died 22-5-1974. We had four children.

My children were Alexander born 1930; Meba born 1932 (died 1988); Isobel born 1933; and Carol born 1937.

## Family history

Robert Byers (paternal grandfather of Mary Byers), was born in Annan, Dumfries, Scotland, on 27th July 1823. He married Hannah Dodd in Liverpool, England in 1849. Robert and Hannah set sail for Australia on the 'Fortune'. One of their four children, James, died on the voyage. The family arrived in Sydney on 28th April, 1853. Robert was a landscape gardener.

The Byers then settled at Blues Point, Sydney, where four more children were born, including John (Mary Byers' father) in 1859, and Thomas in 1857. Robert Byers later dug for gold at Jew's Creek near Ben Bullen NSW and he died there in 1875 aged 52. Hannah Byers died in Sydney in 1907.

The brothers John and Thomas Byers came to the Ben Bullen and Limekilns areas seeking gold. John Byers also worked for a time as a surveyor on the Mudgee railway line. At Limekilns the two Byers brothers met the Wilson sisters, Margaret and Elizabeth, who were the daughters of Alexander and Jessie Wilson.

Alexander Wilson (maternal grandfather of Mary Byers), was also a Scotsman and was born at Pool of Muckart, Perthshire, Scotland on 24th August, 1835. He emigrated to Australia as a single man and arrived in Sydney on the 'Edward Oliver' on 22nd November, 1856. Alexander was a



Cousin Tom Byers as a young man,  
photographed at Ben Bullen about  
1930.



Cousin Jim Byers as a young man,  
photographed at Ben Bullen about  
1930.

horse dealer, a farmer and a publican. He met Australian-born Jessie Sinclair at Bathurst and married her in 1860. They were to have 11 children. Alexander and Jessie and their children moved around the goldfields of the Bathurst district and then settled at Limekilns for about 10 years, where Alexander was a publican. Jessie died at Limekilns in 1888 while having her 12th child. The Wilson family then moved to Dark Corner, farming and gold seeking.

Eventually the two older Wilson sisters, Margaret and Elizabeth, married the two Byers brothers, John and Tom, at Dark Corner. John and Margaret Byers (Mary's parents) then lived at Dark Corner where John had already built a wattle-and-daub cottage near the residence of the Wilson family. Thomas and Elizabeth Byers returned to Sydney to live for a short while, and their son Tom was born there. But they soon moved back to live at Dark Corner. Another section



was then built onto John and Margaret's cottage, and here the two families lived. While living at Dark Corner, the brothers John and Thomas Byers made their living at goldmining.

Thomas and Elizabeth Byers were to have three children, Tom, Jim and Bob. John and Margaret Byers had four children, Jessie, Mary, Jack and Bill. Mary Byers, our storyteller, was born at Dark Corner in 1895.



Myself (Mary), about 1930.

## Appendix II: Census of 1891

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A census was taken on 5th April 1891, and the following list of Dark Corner residents may be of interest. The names listed are given in order as they appeared on the collector's sheets, and geographically the collector seems to have been travelling south along the Dark Corner road. Numbers in brackets show persons in household, male then female. Name given is head of household.

Note that Coolamigal Creek was once often referred to as Cullamudgee Creek.

### *Coolamigal Creek*

Robert SMITH (4, 3)

Edward PRICE (2, 2)

### *Dark Corner*

Robert SCOTT (7, 2)

William BENNETT (5, 5)

Richard SHUMACK (3, 5)

John McLACHLAN (2, 1)

Alexander McLACHLAN (2, 0)

John SHUMACK (3, 3)  
 William GRAY (2, 0)  
 Henry HYDE (5, 3)  
 James McCARTNEY (1, 1)  
 John SMITH (2, 0)  
 Edward GRABHAM (7, 3)  
 Abraham GRABHAM (2, 1)  
 Godfrey UPTON (1, 0)  
 Thomas T. SMITH (1, 0)  
 Edward HUNT (1, 0)  
 Valentine LOTH (1, 0)  
 Alexander WILSON (6, 4)

*Additional names not in sequence*

Ben LEWIS (1, 0)  
 John FARLIE (1, 0)  
 Duncan F. SMITH (3, 2)

*Dark Corner Road*

William CLARKE (2, 1)  
 Martin DUNNE (3, 3)  
 George SHUMACK (1, 3)  
 John ANGUS (1, 1)  
 James ATTUELL (3, 6)  
 Ann SMITH (2, 3)  
 Frederick EDWARDS (3, 0)  
 Eliza OSSINGTON (2, 5)  
 James LAWSON (1, 0)  
 Alexander PETRIE (2, 3)  
 William HUTCHASON (1, 0) camped out

# Appendix III: Conversion tables

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## Imperial to decimal

The decimal system of money, weights and measures came into general use in February 1966. These stories are set in the pre-decimal era and thus retain the old imperial system of currency and measures. The following short conversion table may be useful.

£1 (20 shillings) = \$2 (however, see money values below for approximate current values)

1 mile = 1.6 kilometres  
 1 yard = 0.9 metres  
 1 foot (12 inches) = 30.48 centimetres  
 1 inch = 2.5 centimetres  
 1 acre = 0.4 hectares  
 1 gallon = 4.5 litres  
 1 hundredweight (112 pounds) = 50.80 kilograms  
 1 pound weight = 0.45 kilograms  
 1 ounce = 28.35 grams

## Money values

To give the reader some idea of the equivalent 1993 values of various amounts of money mentioned in these stories, the following comparison may be useful. Note that it is a rough guide only. The values have been worked out by a comparison of wages and commodity prices. For example, in 1900 a working man's wage was £2 a week, in 1993 a labourer's wage is about \$400. In 1900, four pairs of working boots cost £1. In 1993 four pairs of boots would cost around \$200. Therefore, £1 in 1900 equals about \$200 in spending power in 1993. The farthing, ha'penny and penny were all copper coins, while the threepence, sixpence, one shilling and two shilling pieces (florins) were silver coins. There were also two gold coins: the sovereign (worth £1) and the half-sovereign. In banknotes, there were ten shillings, £1, £5, plus higher amounts.

### 1900 values

one pound (£1) = (20 shillings)  
 one shilling (1s) = (12 pence)  
 sixpence (6d)  
 threepence (3d)  
 one penny (1d)  
 half-penny (1/2d)  
 farthing (1/4d)  
 £3 7s 6d

### Approx. 1992 value

\$200  
 \$10  
 \$5  
 \$2.40  
 80 cents  
 40 cents  
 20 cents  
 \$675



This collection of stories and memories from Mary Byers, a goldminer's daughter, gives a fascinating glimpse into the lives of the Byers family who lived at Dark Corner NSW at the turn of the century. Mary Byers (now Mrs Churches of Bathurst) was born at Dark Corner in 1895 and is still living in 1993, being in her 98th year. She has retained vivid memories of her early life at Dark Corner.

Mrs Churches recently related her stories to Vicki Powys, who has compiled these memoirs on Mrs Churches' behalf, assisted by Carol Churches.



Mrs Mary Churches  
(nee Byers)

