

Memories of Agnes Dunn, Our Grandmother:

by Norma McCormack (McAllister)



This remarkable lady was born in 1873 and grew up in Murphy's Creek, a small village not far from Gatton, Queensland. Agnes was the fifth child born to James and Martha Dunn who had emigrated from Paisley, near Glasgow, Scotland. Although education was important, opportunity in the 19th century was limited to Primary School, but the Dunns made the best of it. Agnes fostered a love of reading and music in her children also. There was always an organ in the home as I remember it. It was the type that had to be pumped with the feet and it had stops that had to be pulled out (the right ones of course) to achieve the desired tone. My early memories (1930's) are of a very small woman, less than 5ft, in fact our children (1950's) knew her as Little Ma to distinguish their Grandmothers.

One of my memories was being at Grandma's farm in Durong with some of my cousins building cubby houses in the belah scrub. Although a busy woman herself Grandma must have arranged for us to holiday with her and somehow manage to find beds for us all.

I remember at the breakfast table when the meal was finished, always a cooked breakfast, there would be a Bible Reading and the round container full of tiny scrolls would be produced. We kids all wanted to be the one to choose a scroll which, when unwound revealed a prayer for the day. Then everyone went off to work for time was never wasted in Grandma's house.

Another time a few years later my Dad was collecting pigs to take to Wondai to the sale when after loading at Grandma's the tail board was left down by mistake and a number of pigs escaped. This was long before mobile phones so Grandma via the Party Line Phone alerted the neighbours to stop him while his younger brothers were despatched to catch the escapees. This fun activity was long a subject for get togethers. Large family gatherings with Grandma at the helm were standard and continued until she died aged 82. Decades before computers and E Mails, Grandma wrote letters and because she was such a prolific letter writer she received many in return and would read them to any family member who visited her thus sharing news of distant folk. Letters from Brazil were of great interest though I must confess in my case the main interest was the foreign stamps.

Grandma's kindness and willingness to provide for all comers was well known everywhere she lived. After WW1 her eldest son, Bob, was welcomed home with his Scottish bride, Annie. Sadly Annie died in childbirth so naturally the baby, Olive, came to live with Grandma until Bob married again some 6 years later. In Durong as soon as the prickly pear land had been cleared huge dairy farms were started based on the Rhodes grass that grew so well on the brigalow country. Since most farmers in those days had large families milking was mostly by hand, children milking before and after school. The cream was taken to Kingaroy, until my Dad started a Carrying service with trucks, by whatever means was possible. On occasions the farmer going to town would return home drunk and beat his wife and children. In the few instances where this occurred, the wives quickly learned that safety for them and their children lay in running to Grandma. She would hide the wife and children under her large kitchen table and cover same with a large cloth so when an angry husband arrived there was no one to be seen. He would go home to sleep it off, the family would return home and life went on.

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Durong was at least 50 miles (80km) from anywhere so until a Bush Nursing Station was established it was to Grandma that people in need of aid come. In 1921 my father owned the first car to the west of the Boyne River so as a young man he was often called on to take urgent medical cases to the hospital in either Wondai or Kingaroy.

From the time of her marriage to Lile in the 1890's Grandma's strength of character was evident Lile, who had a great love of animals, had bred race horses but after his marriage to Grandma, he bred clydesdales! When Lile and Agnes were married they bought a farm on Sandy Creek near Forest Hill where Grandad and his brother Joe, who lived on the next door farm, grew lucerne for hay. This suited them well and the children old enough for school attended the Forest Hill School however Grandad developed an allergy to hay so it was decided to move to the newly opened up area of the South Burnett.

The family duly arrived by train in Wondai expecting to be met by the Agent who would take them by dray to their new home. The Agent was not there so Lile took Grandma, who was expecting their eighth child, along with the seven others to Dingo Creek on the outskirts of the small village to wait while he went to find the Agent. Today it is impossible to think how it must have been for Grandma after a train trip from Forest Hill through Brisbane to Theebine and thence to Wondai in 1910 with seven children the oldest of whom would have been twelve!!! When the dray at length arrived the family was loaded up and taken to the farm where their situation was not much improved.

The farm had been bought, sight unseen, for travel to inspections was not normal in those days. Despite all the assurances of the Agent that the land was cleared and there was a house, they were confronted by paddocks of stumps and a slab hut. Poor Grandma, she told long after how she had cried and cried but true to form they got on with it. Grandma put paper over the cracks between the slabs inside while Grandad and the older boys planted corn by hand between the stumps. My Dad, who was 9 at the time, remembers how Grandma's sewing machine never seemed to stop as she made and remade clothes from worn garments using 5lb flour bags for underclothes. As was the norm for McAllister families arriving at a new place, an orchard was started to provide them with fruit.

When the corn was ripe and picked by hand, the family sat in the barn at night husking corn while Grandma read to them all by lantern light She read the Bible and Stories by Charles Dickens which any of her children were able to quote from memory all their lives. My Father was pleased the family was religious for that meant there was no husking on Sunday.

An early Christmas at "Oakley Park" as the property was called, was voted by all the children as the best ever. Bob, the eldest son, who was 16 at the time was sent to Wondai with 1/6d (15c) to buy Christmas presents for the family. I believe it was a stroke of genius on his part that he returned with a 5lb tin of plum jam. The children remembered all their lives how good that was as they picnicked in the orchard with bread and jam instead of the usual dripping or treacle! Eventually a house was built and the hut become what the Townson children and I called the Play room although our Aunt Agnes always called it 'The Mouse House.'

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In 1919 a large area of land at Durong was opened to closer settlement on the condition that the land was cleared of the prickly pear that had infested it. Lile, always looking further out, and Agnes took up 1280 acres of pear land. Two of the older sons together with one of their sisters were organized to go to the property — the boys to clear the pear and their sister to look after the camp and the meals. Once there was sufficient clearing for a house to be built it was Grandma who disposed the family members in whichever location was best Chelmsford or Durong. Grandad Lile died in 1927 so Grandma continued to manage both places. At the end of that year my parents married and took over the Chelmsford farm and two years later Oliver married and the Durong property was divided to become home for him and his family.

After Grandad died in 1927 Grandma continued to live in Durong but kept her finger very much on the management of property. In 1930 she, together with my Dad, organized for my parents to move to Tingoora to start the Durong Burrandowan Carrying Service while her eldest daughter Lil, and family moved to Chelmsford.

In the early 1930's this intrepid lady who had never been to Melbourne set off with her two younger daughters and youngest son to live there. Doug wanted to become a Missionary and to do that would need to study at the College in Melbourne. To keep them whilst there she ran a boarding house. When Doug finished his studies and left for Brazil, Grandma returned to Wondai and bought a Boarding House which she ran for many years with the help of my two Aunts. Here the boarders were treated just like family — I know that because lived there with Grandma for a time while my mother was in hospital in Brisbane. Always on the breakfast table was the bee hive jar of honey with a bee perched on the lid and the china house with a roof to lift off to reveal the jam. I remember Grandma having her 70th birthday at the boarding house attended by many of the family members and of course boarders past and present.

Some years later Grandma returned to Durong — Boondooma actually - to manage a farm for Norm, my dad, with the help of her daughters Martha and Agnes together with her son, Alf. They were there when Doug and his family come home on furlough from Brazil. While they were here Aunty Mary gave birth to their third child, Patricia. My cousins and I were delighted to have family visit from such an exotic location as Brazil. Fifty years later although Grandma was no longer alive, we were once again delighted when Pat and her family returned to see the country where she was born.

Most of my generation have memories of Grandma living in her home in Wondai where she built a house on the back of the Townson's allotment. Here she was very happy with the extended family often dropping in. Grandma was ever ready to read her correspondence, teach the younger ones (with varying degrees of success) to knit and crochet and provide a meal or at least tea and scones for anyone. Visiting and being visited by family, especially her eldest daughter Lil, and Townson family when they moved to Woombye, was a favourite activity. Grandma and the two girls, M and A, (Martha and Agnes - still called girls when they were 70) would head off in their Morris Minor. There was no worry about any mechanical problems along the way for Aunty Agnes could fix anything.

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This wonderful, tiny lady brought up 9 children of her own and 1 grandchild, lived through two World Wars and the depression of the 1930's, was never rich, knew nothing but hard work, nevertheless counted herself a lucky woman. Grandma left her family a great legacy. Each one of them in their own field has been an achiever. She was much loved by all her family even if some of them did not always enjoy being managed. Your large family thanks you Grandma.

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