

A Fortunate Life
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PORTRAIT OF ALBERT FACEY AGED 20

Starting Out

1894–1906

MANY PEOPLE HAD LITTLE FEELING OR
SYMPATHY FOR THOSE IN NEED



1. A prelude

I was born in the year 1894 at Maidstone in Victoria. My father left for Western Australia just after this, taking with him my two older brothers, Joseph and Vernon. The discovery of gold in the West had been booming and thousands believed that a fortune was to be made. At that time there were seven children in our family: I had four brothers – Joseph, Vernon, Eric and Roy – and two sisters – Laura and Myra. My mother stayed at Maidstone with the younger children and my father arranged to send money over to support us until he could find us a home.

In 1896 Mother got word that Father was very ill. Typhoid fever had broken out and hundreds were dying of this terrible disease. A few days later Mother received the sad news that Father had died. When Mother had got over this terrible shock, she decided to go over to the West, as Joseph and Vernon were still only teenagers. Mother left the rest of us with our grandparents at Barkers Creek. I was then nearly two years old.

Barkers Creek was situated sixty-three miles from Melbourne on the Bendigo road, three miles from the small town of Castlemaine. Grandpa and Grandma, whose surname was Carr, had a small property with a few acres of orchard and a five-roomed house. There were no aged pensions in those days, nor were there any free doctors, hospitals and medicine, nor baby bonuses or endowment payments. So my grandparents had to live, and keep us children, on their own resources. Our mother was to send money to support us, but

although she wrote many letters she always made excuses for not being able to send us anything.

At the age of seventy-seven, Grandpa was a big man, over six feet tall and weighing around two hundred pounds. Grandma was a small woman in her early sixties, about five feet tall, and between seven and a half and eight stone. They were very poor. Grandpa depended on odd jobs, such as ploughing orchards and pruning, to get a few pounds to keep us all. He, with my brothers, Eric and Roy, trapped rabbits, and the boys used to go out picking fruit on Saturday mornings during the fruit season.

Early in the year of 1898 Grandpa became very ill. A doctor came from Castlemaine twice a week to give him treatment, but his condition got worse and he died in October that year. I had turned four years old in August and remember Grandpa's illness and his funeral quite well.

After this tragedy Grandma became very worried as our only bread winner had been taken. She wrote to our mother telling her of our plight and asked for financial help. Although Mother wrote, she was unable to send any money. She said that she had married the man who had employed her as a housekeeper, as she was forced to find work when she found that Father had died not leaving enough money for her to live on. Our two older brothers found it hard to get jobs, as they were too young to go down the mines on the Goldfields. The surface gold had been worked out, leaving the mines and woodcutting in the bush as the only ways of obtaining work.

Grandma was shocked at hearing all this after the terrible ordeal she had just been through. She went out working – house-cleaning, washing and ironing. She was also an expert midwife. Nearly all the babies born in and around Barkers Creek were attended and helped by Grandma Carr and very few women needed a doctor. Grandma knew as much as any doctor on the subject.

My brother Eric, who was then twelve years old, had to leave

school and go to work. My eldest sister Laura went to help our uncle who had lost his wife in an accident. He was a hawker, carrying stores, drapery, medicines and anything he could sell. My sister was ten years old, and Uncle's place was about three miles from Castlemaine on the Ballarat railway line at a place called Campbells Creek. The accident had happened at a railway crossing. Our aunt was killed and Uncle's spine was hurt so badly that he lost the use of his legs and never walked again. He had three children, all very young.

Early in 1899 Grandma became very ill and was unable to work. In fact, she had to be seen by a doctor, who put her to bed. She had some internal complaint and the doctor came to see her twice a week for about three weeks. She was able to get up after that, but could only walk around for a short while. We were in terrible financial distress but at least Grandma could get around again. My brother Eric's wages were all we had and they amounted to twelve shillings and sixpence a week – not very much to feed five of us.

Grandma overcame the financial trouble temporarily by getting a forward payment on her apple crop. The apples were a good eating variety and were easy to sell when ripe. Grandma recovered from her sickness but found that the paid work she had been doing had been given to others. Many people had little feeling or sympathy for those in need.

Things got so bad that Grandma decided to try and sell her property and take us over to the West to our mother. She put it up for sale and many people came to see it but they all said the price was too high. She wanted three hundred pounds for the property, which consisted of twelve acres of land, a five-roomed house, eight acres of orchard in full profit and a nice vegetable garden – all good loam. The agent advised Grandma to reduce the price to two hundred pounds. This she did and finally sold it for one hundred and sixty pounds. Some overdue bills had to be paid out of this.

About the second week in August 1899, we left Barkers

Creek and went to Footscray, a suburb of Melbourne, where one of Grandma's daughters lived. We all stayed there until everything was arranged for our trip to Western Australia.

2. The journey begins

It was the first week in September, 1899, when we arrived at Port Melbourne to embark onto the old tramp steamer *Coolgardie*. Just before we went aboard I nearly lost my life. The wharf labourers were unloading bananas from the *Coolgardie* and this fascinated me as I hadn't seen so many bananas before – there were thousands of them scattered all about the place. They had come from Queensland. I went to pick one up and one of the men shouted, 'Hey, drop that!' I got such a shock that I jumped, and being so close to the wharf edge I overbalanced and fell between the wharf and the ship into the sea.

There were steps at intervals leading down under the wharf to the lavatory landings. People used to fish from these landings and, luckily for me, a man who happened to be trying his luck saw me fall into the water. He grabbed me and pulled me out, but not before I had swallowed plenty of dirty salt water. I couldn't swim. The man carried me up the steps to the wharf. I was sopping wet and feeling very sick. I'll never forget the look of anger on dear old Grandma's face. She lost control of herself and gave me a hiding with her umbrella, and to make things worse, she made me strip off all my clothes while she opened one of our travelling trunks and got me a change of clothes. I had only just turned five years old and Grandma had taught us to be modest so this hurt me more than the ducking and hiding I got.

Finally we boarded the *Coolgardie* and sailed for the West. I had never been to sea before and didn't know about seasickness. The trip to Port Adelaide was very calm and we

all enjoyed being at sea, but after we left there, bound for Albany in Western Australia, the sea was terribly rough and we all got very seasick.

Owing to Grandma not having much money we had to travel steerage. It was the cheapest way to travel and the passengers were packed together with very little room to move, especially in the cabins. The one that Grandma, my sister Myra, my brother Roy and I were in had twelve sleeping bunks. Grandma and Myra slept together in one bunk, and Roy and I slept in another. The other ten bunks were all taken by women. (Eric, being older, was in an all-male cabin.) Everyone was terribly seasick.

We arrived at Albany but didn't get off the ship. We went on to Fremantle and disembarked there. At last we had arrived in Western Australia. When our luggage was brought off the ship we didn't have much – two travelling trunks and a large travelling bag and three travelling rugs. Between us we carried these to the Fremantle Railway Station, about two hundred yards from the wharf.

There was no one to meet us. Grandma had expected our mother or at least our Aunt Alice to be at the wharf. Aunt Alice, who was Grandma's eldest daughter, had come over from Victoria with her husband, Archie McCall, and their family at the same time as our father. She had five daughters, Alice, Ada (Daisy), Mary and May, and one son, Archie, who was called Bill, and they lived three and a half miles out of Kalgoorlie on the goldfields.

At the railway station we put our belongings near a seat and Roy, Myra and I were told to stay there until Grandma came back. She took our older brother Eric with her and went into the town of Fremantle. They came back about an hour later and we all boarded a train for Perth.

It was only a short ride to Perth – about forty minutes. We arrived at about midday, and were again left at the railway station with our luggage. This time Grandma went out alone.

When she came back she brought us some sandwiches, cake and also some bottles of cool drink. We were very hungry and made short work of such luxuries.

After this Grandma had a long talk with the Station Master. There was still no one to meet us and Grandma looked very worried. We waited on the platform until about five o'clock that afternoon (the time went quickly because we were very interested watching the trains coming and going). The railway station at Perth looked very small after the Melbourne stations.

It was between five and six o'clock when we got on the Goldfields train. After a while the train moved out and we were on our way – to our mother, we thought. We were all very tired. I remember the train going through a long tunnel, and just after that darkness came and I went to sleep. I was awakened later, it was still dark, and Grandma said we had to get off the train as that was as far as her money would take us. She said the name of this place was Northam, a small country town – only a few houses, one hotel and the Post Office, which was also a store.

After getting off the train we again waited with our luggage while Grandma had a long talk with the Station Master. He came with her to us and then showed Grandma an unused railway carriage that we could sleep in for the rest of that night. We made ourselves at home in it. Grandma slept on one seat, my brothers on the other seat, and Myra and I on the floor.

Next morning Grandma and Myra went to the ladies waiting-room and changed their clothes and freshened up. We boys had a wash under a tap and changed our clothes in the railway carriage, then we joined Grandma and Myra on the platform where we had a breakfast of sandwiches and a glass of milk.

We then took all our luggage and went to the Northam Post Office. Grandma went into the building leaving us kids outside.

She was in there for quite a while. When she came out she said she had sent a letter to our mother and Aunt Alice, asking for money. Then she told us that we would have to find a place somewhere out of town to make a camp until she got a reply to her letters. So we set off all carrying something.

After we had gone a little way along the road leading out of the town a man came along. He had a spring-cart, and seeing us he stopped, thinking we were going to some place out of town, and asked if we would like a lift. He told us that he was a bachelor, his place was fifteen miles out of Northam and he would be glad to help if he could. Grandma spoke to him, explaining our plight, and he told us that there was a Government Reserve about a mile further on. There was plenty of water and we could make a camp there for a few days, as there was plenty of bush and scrub that we could use. He said that they didn't get much wet weather this time of year.

We got into the spring-cart with our luggage and were pleased at not having to carry the things. At the spot that the man pointed out to Grandma, we got off the cart, thanking the stranger for his help. We carried our things and put them under a beautiful shady tree, then Grandma sent Eric over to the farm-house, about half a mile away. We could see it from the spot where we intended to make camp. Eric was to try to borrow an axe and spade, and to do this Grandma said he was to tell the people why we wanted the tools.

When Eric came back a man came with him. The man told us that he had a cow and some fowls, and offered us milk and eggs, and said his wife would be glad to give us any bread we wanted. He helped Eric to cut poles out of the bushes and scrub. About an hour later we had somewhere to sleep and have our meals in.

The next day Eric cut more poles and we all carried and dragged them in and built another bush mia-mia. Grandma said the ground that we had slept on in our camp was very damp, so

before we built the new mia-mia we had to carry dry twigs and leaves and small sticks to build a fire on the ground to dry it out. When the fire burnt out we scraped all the hot ash and coals off, then built the mia-mia. We used this one to sleep in and had our meals in the other one. After about three days we got used to living like this.

The people living around where we camped were very good to us. I am sure that none of us will ever forget those wonderful people. They kept us supplied with fresh meat and eggs, bread, vegetables, milk and many other things. They would not hear of any kind of payment. Grandma offered to let the boys work to pay for the goods.

Each day Eric walked into the Post Office in Northam, hoping for a letter from our mother or Aunt Alice. We had to wait nearly three weeks before a letter came. Aunt Alice wrote, and in the envelope was a money order for the Northam Post Office sufficient to pay our fares to Kalgoorlie. Our mother didn't write.

Eric arrived back with the letter near midday; Grandma explained what was in it and said we would catch the train that night. So we packed our few things, returned all the things that the people had lent us, and the man that first helped us make camp came and drove us to Northam Railway Station. Grandma thanked him and all the other good people for their kindness.

Just before midday we arrived at Kalgoorlie and Aunt Alice was there to meet us. We had been unable to see what the country was like as we had travelled during darkness for most of the way and slept during daylight. Aunt Alice had her two older daughters with her. Grandma, Aunt Alice and Myra left the two girl cousins to help the rest of us take the luggage out to Aunt Alice's place. Grandma and Aunt Alice went to see our mother. We found out later that Mother wouldn't have us at her place but was glad to keep our sister Myra. Grandma said our mother was going to have another baby.