

ONE

I was born in 1894 at Maidstone, Victoria. My father left for Western Australia just after this, taking with him my two older brothers, Joseph and Vernon. Gold had been discovered in the West and thousands believed that a fortune was to be made. At that time there were seven children in our family: I had four brothers and two sisters. 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 received the sad news that Father had died of typhoid fever. When Mother had got over this, she decided to go over to the West still, as Joseph and Vernon were only teenagers. She left the rest of us — Eric, Laura, Roy, Myra and myself — with our grandparents at their small orchard at Barkers Creek, sixty-three miles from Melbourne.

At seventy-seven, Grandpa was a big man, over six feet tall. Grandma was a small woman in her early sixties. They were very poor. Grandpa depended on odd jobs, such as ploughing and pruning, to get a few pounds to keep us all. He

trapped rabbits and my brothers used to go out picking during the fruit season.

Early in 1898 Grandpa became very ill and he died in October that year. After this tragedy Grandma became very worried. She wrote to my mother telling her of our plight and asked for financial help. 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. Forced to find work when Father died, she had married a man who had first employed her as a housekeeper, and our two older brothers were finding it hard to get jobs. Grandma was shocked at hearing all this after the ordeal she had just been through. She went out 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.

My brother Eric, then twelve, had to leave school and go to work. My ten-year-old sister Laura went to help our uncle at his place at Campbells Creek near Castlemaine. Uncle had three children, all very young, but had lost his wife in an accident at a railway crossing. He was a hawker, carrying stores, drapery, medicines, anything he could sell. Early in 1899 Grandma became very ill and was unable to work. She had some internal complaint and the doctor came to see her twice a week. She was able to get up after about three weeks. We were in terrible financial distress but at least Grandma could get around again.

My brother Eric's wages were now all we had and they

amounted to twelve shillings and sixpence a week — not very much to feed five of us. Things got so bad that Grandma decided to sell her property and take us over to the West to our mother. She wanted three hundred pounds for the place, which consisted of twelve acres of land, a five-roomed house, eight acres of orchard and a vegetable garden. The agent advised Grandma to reduce the price to two hundred pounds, and it finally sold for one hundred and sixty pounds. Some overdue bills had to be paid out of this.

The first week in September 1899, we arrived at Port Melbourne to embark on the old tramp steamer *Coolgardie* and sail for the West. The trip to Port Adelaide was very calm and we all enjoyed being at sea, but after we left there, bound for Western Australia, the sea was terribly rough and we all got very seasick.

We had to travel steerage and the passengers were packed together. The cabin 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.

At last we arrived in Western Australia. We disembarked at Fremantle. When our luggage was brought off the ship we didn't have much — two trunks and a large bag and three rugs. Grandma had expected our mother or at least our Aunt Alice to be at the wharf but there was no one to meet us. Aunt Alice, Grandma's eldest daughter, had come over from Victoria with her husband and their family at the same time as

our father. She had five daughters and one son, and they lived three and a half miles out of Kalgoorlie on the goldfields.

We all boarded a train for Perth and arrived about midday. Grandma bought us some sandwiches, cake and bottles of cool drink. We were very hungry and made short work of such luxuries.

There was still no one to meet us and Grandma looked very worried. We waited on the platform until about five o'clock, then we got on the Goldfields train. We were on our way — to our mother, we thought. We were all very tired and I went to sleep. It was dark when I was awakened later by Grandma saying we had to get off the train as that was as far as her money would take us. We were at Northam, a small country town — only a few houses, one hotel and the Post Office, which was also a store.

Grandma had a long talk with the Station Master and he showed us an unused railway carriage that we could stay in for the rest of that night. 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 freshened up. We boys had a wash under a tap, then we joined Grandma and Myra for a breakfast of sandwiches and milk.

Grandma went to the Northam Post Office and sent a letter to our mother and Aunt Alice, asking for money. 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 a man came along in a spring-cart. He stopped and asked if we would like a lift, and told us there was a Government Reserve about a mile farther on. There was plenty of water and we could make a camp there for a few days.

We got into the spring-cart with our luggage. At the spot the man pointed out to Grandma, we got off the cart, thanking the stranger for his help. We put our things under a shady tree, then Grandma sent Eric over to a farmhouse about half a mile away to try to borrow an axe and spade, and to tell the people that we wanted to make camp nearby. A man came back with Eric and told us that he had a cow and some fowls, and offered us milk and eggs and bread. He helped Eric to cut poles out of the bushes and scrub and about an hour later we had somewhere to sleep. The next day Eric cut more poles and we built another bush mia-mia. Grandma said the ground was very damp, so before we built the new mia-mia we had to carry dry twigs and leaves to build a fire on the ground to dry it out. We used this mia-mia to sleep in and had our meals in the other one.

The people living around where we camped were very good to us. 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, so Grandma offered to let the boys work to pay for the goods.

Each day Eric walked into the Post Office in Northam. We had to wait nearly three weeks before a letter came from Aunt Alice, with a money order for the Northam Post Office

sufficient to pay our fares to Kalgoorlie. So we packed our few things, returned everything that the people had lent us, and the man that first helped us make camp came and drove us to Northam Railway Station.

Just before midday the next day we arrived at Kalgoorlie and Aunt Alice was there to meet us with her two older daughters. 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, and went straight away to see our mother.

Aunt Alice's place was only a hut and consisted of hessian pulled tight around poles, making an enclosed space subdivided into three big bedrooms. The outside walls were white-washed with a solution of chalky clay mixed with water which stiffened the hessian and made the inside private. The roof was bush timber and galvanised iron. A few feet away from the hut was another structure, the kitchen; this had a fireplace at one end and a large table with a long bench along one wall. We were to have all our meals in this room.

We had been there about an hour when Aunt Alice and Grandma arrived. They had left Myra with Mother. We were told that our older brothers, Joseph and Vernon, were no longer living with Mother — Joseph had left Kalgoorlie to work with a surveyor and Vernon had joined the Australian Navy.

Grandma had had a long talk with Mother about our situation. Mother was going to have another baby and would see us when she was well enough, and until then we were to

make Aunt Alice's place our home.

Aunt Alice's husband, Archie, was away chopping wood for the mines at Boulder, and for the many water condensers for all the Goldfields people. In those days there was no fresh water, and it was too costly to have water carted. There was plenty of salt water underground so this was pumped up from wells and bores and converted to drinking water by the condensers. There was a large condenser about a mile from Aunt's place and the water had to be carried home in buckets. It cost two shillings a gallon if you carted it yourself, or two shillings and sixpence a gallon if you had it delivered. The condenser people wouldn't deliver less than fifty gallons at a time and as Aunt Alice couldn't afford to buy that much at one time we had to go and get it.

We had been there for about a week when Uncle Archie came home. That was the first time I saw him. He would come home on Saturday and go away again on Sunday afternoon. This time he took Eric and Roy with him. Eric was nearly fourteen and Roy nearly eleven. Uncle said Eric could help with the wood stacking and Roy would be useful around the camp doing little jobs. So my brothers could not go to school. Aunt's three older girls — Alice, Daisy and Mary — went to school in Kalgoorlie. They had to walk nearly eight miles each school day.

We used to have fun when rain made the ground very wet. We would all go out into the diggings looking for gold that had had the earth washed off it, and between us we found quite a few pieces. It was worth twenty shillings an ounce.

Aunt Alice found another way to make a few shillings — she took in washing and ironing. She made her youngest daughter, May, and son, Archie (who was called Bill), and myself go to the camps and pick up the washing, and take it back later and collect the money.

Also, we would hunt miles around for places where prospectors had camped. The prospectors lived on tinned foods and when the tins were emptied they were just thrown into heaps near the camps. We would gather bushes and sticks, spread them on the ground, pile the tins on top and set it all alight. The heat from the fire would melt the solder that was in the tins and it would fall down on to the ground. Then, when the fire finished burning and had cooled off, we used to sieve the ashes to get the solder that had melted into small lumps. We put these into a bag and took them home. When we had enough Aunt Alice would melt them in an iron pot, then she would make impressions in some damp soil to the size of a stick of solder and pour the melted solder into them. When it cooled she used to wash it and take it into Kalgoorlie, where she got five shillings a pound for it. All this used to help and, as Aunt Alice said, it gave us something to do.

TWO

In August 1901, just before my seventh birthday, Uncle came home one weekend and didn't go back on the Sunday afternoon. On Monday he dressed himself up in his best suit and I heard him tell Grandma that he was going to Perth to see about the land the State Government was offering to encourage people to settle as farmers. The Government was giving a homestead block to any approved person over the age of twenty-one for twenty shillings, and that land, one hundred and sixty acres, became the freehold property of the person concerned. Conditional purchase land could be obtained at twenty shillings per acre for the first-class land, and some of the poorer land could be purchased for as low as two shillings and sixpence per acre. The conditions of purchase were that the settler paid nothing for the first five years then completed the purchase over the next twenty years. The Government wouldn't sell land straight out as a cash sale.

When Uncle returned two weeks later he had selected one thousand acres of first-class land under the Government's conditional purchase scheme, and a homestead block

for himself, Aunt Alice and Grandma.

Then Uncle got a new job working as a plate-layer on the railway the Government was building from Kalgoorlie to another gold find. Eric also got a job, on the same gang as Uncle. His job was one of messenger, and bringing tools to the men and so on — they called him a ‘nipper’. Wages were good on this job. Then Roy got a job in Kalgoorlie with a grocer, helping to deliver groceries and doing odd jobs around the shop.

The new jobs meant we were all home at night, and we had Christmas 1901 together. After Christmas Uncle and Eric had to camp out, as their work was getting too far away to travel to and from each day. So Uncle arranged for Aunt Alice and Grandma to leave Kalgoorlie and take all the kids except Roy (he stayed with the grocer and was paid six shillings a week and keep) to York. Uncle’s land was twenty-six miles east of a town named Narrogin, and York was about one hundred miles north from Narrogin.

We left Kalgoorlie in February, late in the evening, and arrived at York the afternoon of the next day. We kids had to wait at the railway station while Aunt and Grandma found a place for us. They finally rented an old mud house about four miles out of York on the banks of the Avon River. It cost five shillings a week to rent, all Aunt could afford. It had one big living room with a large fireplace, and three bedrooms. There hadn’t been anyone living there for some years.

I’ll never forget the first night we spent there. We got

settled for the night, beds fixed and made, and a nice fire going in the big fireplace. Aunt Alice got out the lamps, filled them with kerosene and lit them. Then Aunt and Grandma fixed a meal, mostly bread and jam. We were all sitting at the table when suddenly there was a terrible scream. Two of the girls jumped on to the table pointing to the floor where a big black snake, over six feet long, raised its head about eight inches from the ground. Grandma said, ‘Don’t move! Stay still!’ She walked backwards through the door, saying, ‘Leave it to me.’ Then she appeared again with a long-handled shovel in her hands. She walked across the floor as if she was going to pass the snake, then suddenly turned quickly and cut the snake’s head off with the blade of the shovel.

We kids were very happy living there. It was so different to Kalgoorlie. There was plenty of water and wood; we only had to fetch the wood out of the bush. We lived there until the end of August, and one day, just after my eighth birthday, Uncle and my brothers came. They had finished the railway work and Uncle had come to make arrangements to start farming his land.

So early one morning in the first week of September 1902, we packed all our belongings onto a cart Uncle had purchased and left the old mud house for Uncle’s ‘dream land’. The land was about one hundred and forty miles by road from York, so we could do it in short stages.

But the trip was hard. Only one person was allowed to ride on the cart and that was the driver. Uncle, Aunt and Grandma did all the driving while the rest of us walked. We averaged

about ten miles a day while travelling, but there were about five days when it rained and we camped on those days, so the trip took us nearly three weeks. We kids went without boots — it was Grandma's idea, as we couldn't afford to buy new ones when the ones we had were worn out.

Uncle didn't have much money but he said there were ways of making some until we got the farm going. He explained that there were thousands of possums in the bush, their skins worth a shilling each. Also, there were hundreds of kangaroos and their meat was good to eat. He intended to buy a kangaroo dog. All these possibilities we discussed at meal times along the way.

The night before we expected to arrive at Uncle's land, Uncle, Aunt, Grandma and Eric made two hundred possum snares out of string and wire under Uncle's directions. We were camped at a place called Gillimanning — an Aboriginal name. We had spent the rest of the money we had in the last town, Pingelly, purchasing stores such as flour, baking powder, golden syrup and jam.

We were up early the next morning, very excited. We were soon to see this wonderful land that Uncle Archie spoke about so much. About two hours later we arrived, and Aunt Alice, Uncle and Grandma left us sitting under a shady tree while they found a suitable place to camp. About an hour later they came back and we moved to the place. Uncle and my brothers set about putting up the tents and making a fireplace for the women to do the cooking. Towards evening they set

some snares for possums. We were all very tired and went to bed early that night. But just when everything seemed quiet, there was a terrible howl; long, sharp and very clear. I could feel a shiver go up my spine. Then a few minutes later another one farther away, and another closer. The howling was made by dingoes and went on all night.

We spent the next few days setting snares and the first morning Uncle and the boys caught twenty-two possums. They skinned them and pegged the skins out on big trees. Uncle would go into town every month and sell the skins to buy food. This was our only way of existing. There wasn't any other income. They had to be nailed at least six feet off the ground to stop the dingoes pulling them off. They came around a lot for the first few weeks. We kids always stuck together, for we were all scared stiff of the dingoes.

Uncle had bought a kangaroo dog while we were in Pingelly. Uncle and Eric went out hunting with the dog early the second morning and, sure enough, the dog caught two 'roos — one fairly big, the other about three parts grown. The smaller ones, we found out, were the best for eating. The meat tasted very nice. Up to this part of my life I hadn't been given much meat because Grandma couldn't afford it.

Uncle Archie and my brothers were busy building a house. They cut hundreds of poles and carted them to where they intended to build. Then they dug two trenches and put in the poles side by side. They formed two walls fifty feet long. Then Uncle and the boys dug a trench at each end and put poles in them in the same way, joining the two fifty-

foot walls together. They put up two dividing walls, making a twelve by twelve room at each end of the structure and leaving a living and dining room in the centre, twenty-six feet by twelve. They then put a timbered roof over the three rooms and thatched it with grass tree spines.

Uncle Archie and Aunt Alice had one of the twelve-foot rooms for their bedroom and Grandma and the girls the other. We boys slept in tents outside. Uncle made a door frame for the big room out of bush timber, and sewed kangaroo skins on to it to keep out the cold weather and water. When the building and thatching were finished, Uncle and the boys dug out clay from the creek which ran through the property, and pushed it into the cracks of the walls to make the place nice and weather-proof.

After making the house, Uncle and my brothers carted home some large granite rocks. They built a big fireplace in the main room, then they built a large table out of bush timber and made two long benches for us to sit on. That was our home.

Then Uncle and my brothers started to work on the land, chopping small trees down and ring-barking the big ones, ready for burning down the next year. Bushfires were a menace and we had to take great care. On the first of March 1903, Uncle put a fire through the areas that they had chopped down and we all had to pitch in and help with the clearing. Our boots were worn out and we got used to going without them; we got our feet burnt badly at times.

The women used to carry all their washing down to the

government well a mile from our home and do it there. The well was sixty feet deep and we had to haul the water up with a rope attached to a bucket and a winder. It was beautiful water.