

PART 1 “MEMORIES OF DARLINGTON” By Barbara Curmi (nee Letch)

Some background about Barbara – she was born in November 1926 at South Perth to parents George and Gladys Letch. She trained in W.A. as a Preschool Teacher and in the 1940's travelled to Canada where she met and married Charles Curmi in Vancouver. When she retired she joined a Senior's Literary Group and had her recollections on Darlington published in the *Writer's Perceptions Magazine* in 1996. Aged In her 70's Barbara developed Parkinson's and in March 2010 died at Vancouver. Barbara frequently visited Perth to catch up with her friends and family there.

It must have been the year of 1933 when my family moved from South Perth, a suburb of Perth, the capital of Western Australia, to a small town 15 miles away, in the Darling hills, called Darlington. My parents made this decision in order to help my brother overcome asthma. Our family consisted of mother, father, four girls and one boy.

Our Darlington house was situated at the top of a steep hill, among tall gum trees, and large outcrops of grey rocks. My mother changed the existing aboriginal name to The House on the Hill, which seemed to me rather obvious, and lacking imagination. *(the house the Letch family rented was the Waltons originally called “Allestree”, Mrs Letch ran it as a guest House).*

Darlington held both happy and poignant memories for me. It was an ideal environment in which to spend our early childhood and teen years.

The house commanded a beautiful view over the valley and was like a large ship reaching into a sea of tall, scented eucalyptus trees which lined the



winding drive way up to the house. The back of the house was level with the ground. An

Photograph 1 - Walton's Darlington House rented to the Letch family

arbour of grape vines provided shade from the relentless sun in summer. Bunches of small, black seedless currant grapes hung down and if you were tall enough, you could eat them as you walked. They were such small, sweet grapes you could almost eat a bunch in one bite. Sometimes large, fat green caterpillars, with evil eyes, fell from the vines and sent us squealing and running for help! On summer days, when the temperature could reach between 90 and 113 degrees Fahrenheit, we were grateful for the shade these leafy green vines gave us.

The front of the house jutted out into the trees very high off the ground. The wide verandah curved to make the house look semi-circular. Around the verandah posts and railings small wild yellow and pale pink roses entwined themselves, and I loved

to smell them, especially on warm, still nights. We slept outside on the verandah in the summer, some of us slept outside all the year round.

The large space underneath this house was surrounded on all sides by trellis, which was covered in roses and honey suckle. The car was kept under the house, and the cow was milked there morning and evening. In the heat of summer, the evening breezes would flow through the trellis under the house and cool it down.

On the left hand side of the house were lemon trees under which grew rhubarb. Above this was a sunken garden where my mother grew annuals and perennials. There was a square of lawn which, because of the heat and lack of water, never looked very green. Enclosing the garden were retaining walls made from local rocks. In spring and summer brilliant rock plants, ice plants, lilac-coloured periwinkle, portulacca and bright orange and yellow nasturtiums cascaded down the rocks.

From the front gate the gravel drive way wound steeply to the right towards the orchard and swung sharply around under the shade of large gum trees and passed an outcrop of grey rocks, which also extended outside the property. We used to run, like mountain goats, often bare footed, very quickly and quietly down a narrow, winding rocky path - a short cut to the front gate, and off to school or the store. On sunny spring days my little sister and I would sit on the huge smooth grey boulders between our house and the public stone steps and our neighbours, the Huelins. There we would spend hours making moss gardens around the natural pools of water and decorate them with little white daisies and dandelions, sticks and pebbles - a make-believe fairy world!

Behind the house was another retaining wall above which was a drying ground for laundry. To the right was the terraced shrubbery. Even now I can remember where each shrub grew. Many of the shrubs were of English origin and had to be protected from the hot Australian summers. There was lilac, broome, daphne, rosemary, may, and frangipani.

At the back of the property, behind the drying ground, was the tennis court where my father taught me to play and my sisters held their tennis parties. These were always followed by delicious afternoon teas of my mother's thin,thin, sandwiches, hot scones, homemade jam and thick clotted or whipped cream, tea and cakes, delighting the "starving" tennis players.

After school, we would raid the orchard for whatever fruit was ripe at the time Purple mulberries stained our mouths and clothing, large shiny brown loquat stones popped out of our mouths as we ate the fleshy pale yellow fruit. Best of all, we loved to sit in the branches of the apricot trees, taste the fat succulent fruit, so orange and full of sunshine, and let the warm sticky juice trickle down our arms and onto our clothes.

The orchard extended the entire right hand side of the property. The soil was heavy reddish brown clay. I can remember exactly where the different fruit trees grew.

At the top of the hill, where it was sunnier, were almond trees, golden smooth skinned loquats, mulberry trees, which also provided leaves for our ravenous silk worms, apricots, peaches, and on the lower slopes, nectarines, juicy yellow Bartlett pears and apples.

It was a wonderful house and garden to grow up in, along with our many pets and a very tolerant mother and father!

We stayed there until 1940 when my two sisters joined the army and air force and my brother outgrew his asthma and went into the navy. When it became difficult to buy gas, my parents decided we should return to our home in South Perth.

It had been a wonderful life in Darlington and as I grow older, my mind returns to it again and again with thanks and love.

PART 2 – DESCRIPTION - INSIDE THE DARLINGTON HOUSE

Inside of the Darlington house was spacious and very suitable for a family of two adults and five children. There was a large kitchen at the back of the house. We entered from the grapevine-covered pergola to a small porch, where Alice, our cat, reigned supreme along with her many kittens. Invariably, our magpie, "Maggie", was there perched on the box. He would turn his head from side to side and peep in to examine them. He was often daring enough to tweek their tails and risk Alice's sharp claws!

The kitchen window, over the sink, looked out on my mother's garden of annuals, the rock garden and the square of lawn she so diligently tended.

There was a large rectangular kitchen table which was the scene of much activity. My brother did his homework there, helped by the aboriginal maid, Gertie. He often sat there with a bowl of steaming boiling water, smelly Vick's or Friar's Balsam, towel covering his head, to help improve his asthmatic condition

Blue and white Willow pattern china made a splash of colour on the dresser. There always seemed to be something cooking on, or in, the large black wood stove, even in the summer. Out of the oven came roast lamb and potatoes, roast pumpkin, fruit pies, hot scones and cakes. We loved our mother's creamy baked rice pudding, egg and bacon pies and many other culinary delights. There, on top of the stove, milk from our cow, Betsie, simmered in large bowls until skin slowly formed on top and crinkled into clotted cream. Some milk was set aside in order to skim off the fresh cream when it came to the surface.

We always had cream for our cereal or porridge, desserts and hot scones. There is nothing more delicious than hot scones, strawberry jam and clotted cream.

Fruit, from our sunny orchard was prepared for jam or preserving. Juicy peaches were dipped into hot water to make it easier to remove the skin and reveal the succulent peach ready to be preserved or made into jam.

Between the kitchen and the dining room was a short passage-way. Either side were two pantries with windows at the end of each pantry. The sun shone through those windows and through the jars of preserved fruit and jam which lined the shelves. The sun's rays brought to life again, yellow peaches, orange apricots, cream and pink pears, the deep, wine colour of Satsuma plums, golden marmalade, and various kinds of jam. This was the result of my mother's many hours of labour in the searing heat of summer. We all enjoyed the fruit of her labour throughout the year.

In the centre of the house was the dining room which was called the vestibule. There were no windows only a skylight window high above. On hot summer days the room was always cool and restful). The coolest place was on the brown polished linoleum floor.

As a child I used to have copious nose bleeds. My mother would instruct me to lie on the cool polished linoleum floor of the vestibule. Her remedy was to put a cold key behind my neck until the bleeding stopped.

The vestibule had a large brown oak table with chairs enough to accommodate Ave children and two parents plus guests. Many a time I found myself still at the table after the rest of the family had long gone. In front of me was my plate of cold unpalatable spinach, cabbage or Brussels sprouts. There was nowhere to hide it. Surprisingly, I have very few food dislikes as an adult - except Brussels sprouts!

On Saturdays my job was to cut flowers and fill the vases for the vestibule and sitting room. I loved this job and wandered about dreamily choosing flowers from among my favourites, may, forsythia, lilac, broom and many others.

To the left of the vestibule was the study, a small room which opened through French doors on to the verandah, where honeysuckle grew over lattice work. The study was cool in summer and a cosy fire was lit in the winter. Here our family sat to listen to the radio plays and the news, or to talk or read.

A wide passageway way from the vestibule led to the sitting room and four bedrooms. Each of these rooms opened on to the verandah through large telescopic windows or French doors. These would be kept closed during the heat of the day and opened wide at night to welcome any cool breeze from the Indian Ocean.

I loved the sitting room with its black table and chairs and sideboard, and its black lace curtains embroidered with pink flowers. This is where I practiced on the lovely rosewood piano every day. In between practicing scales and Czerny exercises I ate the almonds stored in the sideboard. My mother never complained about the loss, or the tell-tale evidence of empty shells pushed under the piano. As I sat there playing and eating almonds, I would look through the black lace curtains and see the shrubbery, the orchard and the bush. Often, I would see my little friends walking up, the steep footpath between the orchard and the bush, and wished I was with them.

One summer my mother employed a tutor to help my brother and me with our mathematics. Each morning we sat there at the black table, our hot legs stuck to the chairs and our hands to the pencil and paper. We longed to be free to play, ride horses or bikes, play tennis or walk to the river to swim. Our bodies were there but our minds were elsewhere.

We had a radio in the sitting room. TV was yet to come. Even the radio was a novelty. I loved to listen to the adventure stories and dramas on the Children's Hour just before dinner. Often, I would have to stand close to the radio because the reception was poor. I still remember the signature music which was Bizet's "L'Arlesienne" suite.

Sometimes my mother played the piano - Grieg, Schumann's "Scenes from Childhood Album for the young" and Mendelsohn's "Songs without words". She would sometimes accompany my father who had a good baritone voice. He sang "Indian Love Lyrics" "The Road to Mandalay" Stephen Foster songs, and songs from "The Merry Widow"

In winter the rain beat down noisily on the iron roof. It was always scary at this time to be in the front bedrooms high off the ground, when the wind and rain lashed the trees outside. The tall gum trees swayed to and fro as if they would snap. They cast ghostly shadows on the walls. The lightning would light up the white furniture eerily in my mother's bedroom. I didn't like going into the guest room because it was so dark, especially in winter.

I loved to hear the magpies warbling in the big gum trees outside the front bedroom. When the kookaburras laughed, one would begin with the "kook, kook, kook" ,part, and others would follow with the "ha, ha, ha", back and forth until they broke into a chorus.

My little sister and I shared a bedroom where we slept in two little beds with our dolls and books. We made a dolls' house in the cupboard or with boxes. Once we found a baby mouse and tried to keep it in a matchbox bed. Here my mother would read to us from the English and Australian classics - "Alice in Wonderland" "Wind in the Willows" "Dot and the Kangaroo" "Snugglepot and Cuddlepie" and others.

My two older sisters, who were in their teens, shared a big bedroom on the west side which overlooked the lemon trees and driveway. French doors opened on to the verandah and a flight of stairs led to the west driveway and rock garden.

There was a small bedroom off the kitchen which was my brother's room. He was an active outdoor boy despite his asthma and was seldom in his room except to sleep.

At the front of the house, where the winding driveway ended and the entrance to the garage under the house began, there was a large ornamental shell. A steep flight of stairs led to the front verandah and the front door. *(sister Joy fell off the verandah onto this shell which resulted in her losing an eye and having a false eye inserted. Sometime later in 1937 she died of Meningitis aged just 6 years.)*

People rarely used the front door - perhaps the minister, the doctor or special visitors. It was too much effort to climb those stairs, after having walked up the hill and the steep, winding driveway to the house.

I often think about Darlington, the house, the garden, the orchard and the people in it. It was a spacious, wonderful old house, very suited to accommodate our large family. We all loved it. I hope to see it again on my next visit to Australia.

Barbara Curmi.



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Photograph 2 - Barbara Curmi, left, in 2001