

AS IT WAS. AS IT ISN'T NOW. AND AS IT NEVER WILL BE AGAIN.

by JOAN DIGBY.

(This is the West Australian segment of the biography of Joan and her sister Beryl. Joan was born in Walthamstow, England at the close of the First World War and endured the bombings of the Second World War at Chingford and later, at Malden, where she was running a small drapery business. She heard the planes droning overhead as they massed for the Invasion of Europe on D-Day, June 6, 1944.

Joan's mother suffered a stroke when she was four, so fourteen-year-old Beryl (called Earna) cared for Joan. After their father and mother died when Joan was 28, and having no close relatives in England, the sisters left to make their home in Western Australia. They had heard of Australia often from their sea-faring father, who had jumped ship there and had exciting stories to tell of what Australia had to offer.

Having run a guest house in Malden back home, they had been encouraged by a friend in rural Darlington, outside Perth, to do the same in part of her house, but that didn't work out, despite all the bedding and crockery they had brought from England ready for that venture. Joan now takes up the story)

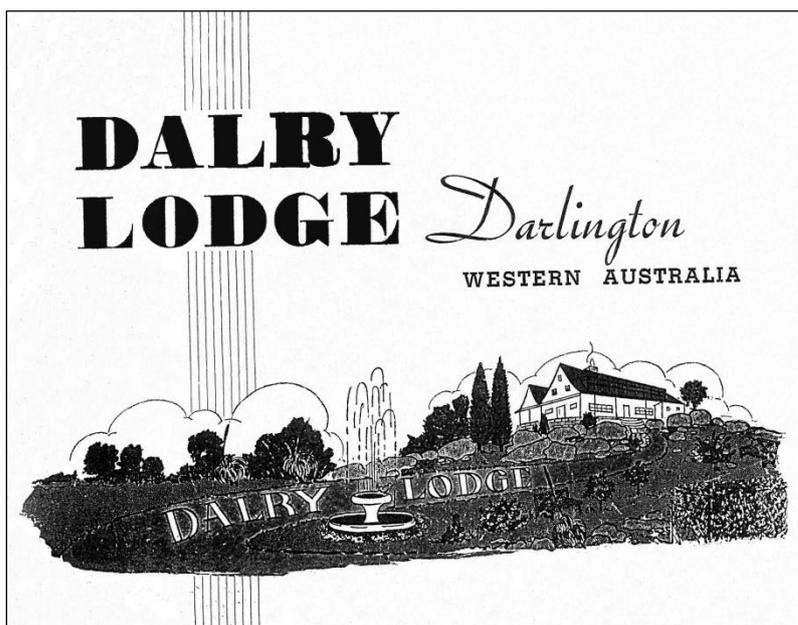
DALRY LODGE DARLINGTON

As soon as we realized that the guest house idea was out, we decided to get live-in jobs and save money, and not on any account use our capital. We had never worked very long or very successfully for other people (except for war-time jobs) and had always run our own businesses in our own unorthodox way, fighting most of the time, but never parting.

One of the local guest houses in Darlington (Dalry Lodge) was always understaffed or without staff at all, so Earna and I thought this was a good opportunity to prove our worth and show them what the Poms could do. We were to sleep in cabins outside the Lodge and to work without a hot water system, using wooden sinks and a huge hot-water urn atop the wood-burning stove.

The Hostess, a sweet soul, was not terribly well herself, but had a capacity for work and could make others work too. The cook, new like ourselves and a Pom too, was everything that Earna and I were not - and what's more she couldn't boil water.

The poor Hostess found herself doing all the cooking and wanted me to learn and take over - not a hope! The kitchen, to my London way of thinking, was completely archaic. It was my first introduction to a WOOD STOVE - this particular abomination was about ten feet long and seemed to burn whole trees at a time. Everything happened on the stove - it was the only method of heating water for all the kitchen use and hot water had to be carried around in various containers to sundry sinks, buckets and so on. It was one person's



Dalry Lodge Guest Booklet 1950s

job to keep the stove stoked, and I hated it.

The wood was always full of vicious splinters and always filthy dirty, covered in ants - and when it rained, God it seemed hopeless - more kerosene was poured on the wood than would have kept an oil stove burning.

Every Sunday the menu was roast chicken and apple pie, or roast beef and sherry trifle. Our dear cook being narrow minded would not make the trifle as we used real sherry, so Earna and I made the trifle each week, one spoonful of sherry for the trifle and two for us, just to cheer us up. Ever after, when making trifle, we always became very merry.

The cleaning of chooks fell to Cook and I on Friday nights. This job, which neither of us had done before almost turned into a circus. First catch your chook. In this case, two huge black roosters. The cook was delegated to decapitate same, this being the method in Australia. We then proceeded to pluck and clean them. This was all taking place in the troughs in the laundry while Earna was gamely trying to iron starched table linen (my laundry efforts - too much starch). As the evening wore on, the odour exuding from partly boiled feathers being flung hither and thither attracted the attention of all the cats in the neighbourhood, and the ensuing battle with the cats versus chooks' entrails and Earna ironing black feathers on to table napkins nearly caused hysterics, and in the case of the Cook, almost a stroke. As I have said, she had no sense of humour.

When at last the birds were ready for the oven, we were all thoroughly exhausted.

Sunday dinner was really the cream of Earna's performances as a waitress. Not only did she seem to purposely mix the orders, but managed to confuse the hostess who was trying to help.

At the last minute at the serving of the apple pie and cream a collision caused Earna to skillfully tip one serve right down the Hostess's bosom. Last straw!

One afternoon, our first 100 degrees in the shade, the mad Cook decided to burn rubbish; although we were so new to the country, we knew all about bush fires, but this stupid creature, however after two years here, thought she could get away with it.

The obvious thing happened. The bush caught fire and our hoses would not reach it. The owner of the Guest House was entertaining with the hostess the guests on the verandah where everyone was sipping tea and making polite conversation in an effort to keep cool. In the midst of all this quiet refinement I burst upon them with the dramatic announcement, "FIRE !" Earna meanwhile realizing that the hoses were useless, was preparing a bucket chain (shades of fire watch duties back home - but the only thing missing was a stirrup pump). The guests attired in summer dresses, nylons and white shoes,



Dalry Lodge, no date, *source: RHSWA*



Dalry Lodge, no date, *source: RHSWA*

dutifully took their places with a bucket or kerosene tins, only to discover too late they all leaked.

A sad disheveled crowd of women wandered back into the house. At the kitchen door through the wire door oozed more smoke, this time from the oven. Cook, in her frenzy to burn the rubbish had entirely forgotten the entree for the evening dinner, which was cooking slowly. As she entered the kitchen, her face took on the hue of one about to have an apoplectic fit, then in the melodramatic way of cooks, she threw her apron over her face and dissolved into hysterical weeping in the nearest chair. Earna and I beat a hasty retreat to the nearest shower room to wash off the grime of the afternoon's excitement. Even our sense of humour could not take much more!

I learned all there was to know about washing up under difficulties. Carrying water from stove to sink should have been quite a simple procedure providing the urn on the stove had water in it, but so many people helped themselves to hot water without refilling the urn that always by washing up time the perishing thing was empty. This problem of hot water was to plague me for years to come. The next small problem was keeping water in the sink, once one had transferred enough water the plug would by magic remove itself from its position. These frustrating incidents were beginning to turn me into a bad-tempered nervous wreck.

Other numerous little annoyances, too many to remember and most of them best forgotten, happened every day. Earna and I are not compatible, but we always remained together- but have always worked for ourselves and never on a household staff. Well, Earna in her usual dreamy manner still expected me to pick up after her, and now of course, I did not have the time. Her job was to keep the water carafes filled in the dining room; but in her usual way she would leave all her jugs around the kitchen table for me to dry and put away. Also, if she did the flowers, the same things happened. This was annoying Cook more than it annoyed me, as I was used to it.

Earna might be dreamy, but she organised things pretty well when it came to the bedrooms - and before the first week was out had talked the guests into making their own beds and dusting their rooms. She tactfully left a duster in each room and this left her time to sit and chat with them. This way she collected many invitations to visit them when they returned home. Often in the middle of the morning while Cook and I were up to our eyebrows preparing lunch, Earna would stroll into the kitchen with a guest and in the most casual way present me to them so as to be sure I should be included in the invitation. This obviously was not the usual practice at the Lodge and Cook took a very dim view of this. I too was getting fed up with the interruptions as I couldn't keep up with the soup veges, washing up, stoking the stove etc.

After lunch each day we were supposed to have two hours off duty. What a hope! We dashed down to our huts in the grounds and made our beds and generally cleaned up. Cook had everything in hers - I never realized so much could be crammed into so little space. The hut measured about nine feet by five feet with a single hanging wardrobe and miniature chest of drawers. Into this she had manage to cram numerous trunks and suitcases, radio, electric jug, her own bed linen including an eiderdown and several feather pillows. With the temperature over 100 degrees it was impossible to breathe. At night the dear soul asked us in to have a cup of tea with her and produced from under her bed cups, milk, tea caddy, biscuits and bags of fruit - then proceeded to fiddle about with the light switches to heat water in the jug. She also managed to have little vases of flowers, photos, pictures, clocks,

scent bottles, various patent medicines and sticky toffees. She was under the impression it made it more homelike!

Earna and I were only too glad to escape to our own hut, which was slightly larger, having two single beds, and looked spartan in comparison. We did not bring our luggage - only the barest necessities - and had stripped our beds in an effort to keep cool. We wouldn't have fruit and flowers in our hut, only the usual untidy display of cosmetics, cigarettes etc on the little chest between the beds. These huts were not wired against flies. All our lives Earna has been the lucky one regarding bites and itches. Mother and I were the unhappy pair who attracted anything that could bite or sting and raise a bump. As a child I was always the one to bring home the odd flea from the cinema, or eat something that would "bring me out" in a rash like a dread disease.

Now we were in Australia and everything bites, the flies stick and have teeth and the mosquitoes are small and fast and also noisy. But as I have been slightly deaf since 1940 I never heard them coming into attack until too late, many mornings I could not open my eyes and my face would be puffed up and I would be barely recognizable: Earna always became very cross when this happened to me and scolded me as if I did it on purpose. I wished the little blighters would bite her sometimes for a change, then perhaps I would get a little sympathy - but no, they hated her until one night.....

On the ships an Australian passenger had told us to anoint our faces with baby oil, as it was the best protection against the hot climate and we should then preserve our English complexions. Earna, who had always been faddy with her face (and now has a far better complexion than me) faithfully smothered her face with oil. But I hated anything sticky like warm oil on my face and only used Witch-hazel on my sunburn and bites. This particular night we were lying on our little beds and I could hear Earna damning and blasting the mosquitoes. At last they were biting her - the oil had attracted them. But they had not forgotten to send a squadron or two over to me.

I could feel the little jabs on my face and my eyelids beginning to swell. I reached over for my Witch-hazel and poured a liberal quantity over my inflamed face, only to realize too late it was the oil. Oh the agony of it! The warm oil cooked on my fevered brow and the uniformed attack of a regiment of mosquitoes continued. I felt stifled in this tiny hot oven of a hut.

If this was Australia and its beautiful climate, give me the Arctic, where the only thing that bites is the frost!

(Below) Dalry Lodge, 2016.

