

WHEATLEY BEACH TALES



ABRIDGED VERSION

BY KEN GRAY

The Wheatleys are among our district's most remarkable and generous early families. Don Wheatley, and his wife Nancy, who died in 2017 after a fabulous 65-year partnership with Don, have contributed immensely to the community of Mission Beach. Their story is created from memoirs written by Don and Peter Wheatley, Nancy Wheatley and her mother Rita Mitchell.

It starts in 1913 for Nancy's ancestors and in 1930 for Don's early life in Western Australia. Don tells us how the Wheatley's made their way to Mission Beach by 1940 and relates his childhood memories. Nancy tells of her childhood in Feluga, while Rita reaches well back to pre-Tully times at Banyan.

Alfred Henry Wheatley was born in Melbourne, Victoria in 1886 and married Florence Ruth Goudie who was born in Coolgardie, Western Australia in 1901. Florence's mother was English and her father Scottish. He was a Royal Mail Contractor for the City of Perth using horse drawn transport. Alfred's parents were both English, and his father died when Alfred was only 12 years old.

Alfred and Florence had four children. Deborah was born in Florida, USA while Alfred was studying there. Then came Peter (died as a child), Peter Douglas and Donald Crosbie, born in Albany. Don is the sole surviving child in 2022. The family lived on a dairy farm named *Happy Days* on the King River, near Albany. It is now a caravan park. They left WA in 1935 to look for greener pastures. Alfred was a Physiotherapist and Naturopath. Peter's wife, Therese is living in Cairns in 2022.

They went to Sydney on the SS *Westralia* and lived at Bondi Beach with Uncle Walter who had a gymnasium. Alfred thought Sydney was unsuitable, so they boarded the SS *Katoomba* for Cairns. When they reached the Whitsundays, Alfred wanted to buy an island. Florence took one look and said, No.

In Cairns, they had a house on nine acres at Edge Hill. Alfred opened his practice and was soon busy. He took further examinations in Australia to practice Medicine, but his passion was in natural healing and he didn't believe in drugs. There were many dirt roads and few shops, no high rise buildings and lots of swamps and mosquitoes. Don caught malaria twice and was bitten a few times by snakes.

Swimming was popular and the kids went to the "baths", a fenced-in area on the Esplanade where the Hilton Hotel is now. After looking at several properties in Cairns, Alfred heard of Mission Beach three days before World War II erupted. They found a 300 acre farm with coconuts, fruit trees, chooks and goats, and Alfred could not pass it up at £300. It was owned by pioneer, George Webb, and was everything he wanted. Half a mile of absolute beachfront and a beautiful view of Dunk Island. He signed up immediately without Florence's approval, but she fell in love with the place just as he had.

Alfred acquired a 4 Cylinder Chev Ute, but the roads were rough, so it took nearly a day to travel there from Cairns. On the 21st of May 1940, they all came with their dog 'Bonnie Blue Bell'. They arrived when a full moon was rising spectacularly above the calm ocean. The home was basic with no water or electricity, so they dug wells for water and carried buckets up the hill to the house. They added to the buildings and built huts for Alfred's patients, so progress was made. Tank water was used for drinking and cooking. Alfred was a good cook and baker and made fresh bread, scones, bread and butter puddings and roasts. They soon had a cow and planted veggies, caught fish in nets and were almost self-sufficient. The coconuts were put to many uses as food for the animals, oil for massage, fuel for the lamps and milk and butter for the family. They were friends with Feluga Aborigines Nellie and Toby, who visited often.

In mid-1942, having been evacuated to Brisbane, the Wheatley boys returned to Mission Beach and witnessed many events during the Pacific War. That story is told in more detail in the eBook, *War and*

Beach and available online at local libraries. There were few people living at Mission Beach in the early war years and Don Wheatley tells what it was like. They met Rear Admiral Victor Crutchley off the HMAS *Australia II*, who visited the Wheatley's house when the flagship anchored at Dunk Island several times late 1942 and early 1943.

Don and Peter did correspondence school during the war and found the distractions difficult to avoid. Their father had a Model A Ford then, but he struggled to keep it going with petrol rationing and no spare tyres available. By 1945, the Wheatley boys were making a living from farming and timber with all sorts of ventures. They grew every crop possible to make money and found markets as far south as Sydney then set up case-making business with a sawmill. Don also sold the tomatoes locally to the cane barracks, and in one record week the farm produced 960 cases. The Wheatleys had banana crops too, but the case mill was the main focus for a time. The government started closing access to timber, so Don worked at the Tully sugar mill for a period, when he was 18. and became a loco driver.

Nancy Wheatley's mother, Rita Mitchell, wrote of her pioneering family at Banyan with a strong focus on the life of her intrepid mother, Nellie Brett. Nellie was merely 23 years old when she left her family in Yorkshire, England, in 1913 and emigrated to Townsville. Soon after she went to Banyan and married to George Brett. George was originally from Wales and migrated to Canada first but moved to North Queensland in 1912 to start a cane farm. Rita's account outlines the incredible lives of early settlers in the Tully River valley. Nellie was no ordinary woman; she fought for everything she had in life, reared her family lovingly and worked the farm vigorously in tough conditions without a murmur of dissent. When George died at only 48 years old, Nellie chose to run the farm herself for the next 23 years, amazing everyone in the tiny settlement.

When Nell arrived, she was one of only two women living at 'The Banyan.' Their marriage was the first formal European marriage ceremony in the settlement. George became a Councillor later in life. The story told by her daughter provides unique insights into the way life was in NQ at the start of European settlement. We see the role of the Church, the struggles of a poor family and the immense pleasure in the smallest of things. Even in the earliest days, class was a factor, and Nell was quick to sniff out snobbery.

The way the land was cleared and goods were supplied, the shopping, school life, struggles to make ends meet in the Depression, impacts of the Sugar Mill and railway, the 1918 cyclone, how houses were built from nothing, chooks and cow stories, enduring loneliness, lucky stockings and Christmases, surviving with no water or power supplies, fabulous Chinese friends, exciting Innisfail trips, planting cane, the fast growing town, their first car, a Pontiac; school, picnics and sadness - it's all in Rita's memoir.

Similarly, Nancy Wheatley tells us of her Feluga family days. There were parallels as Nancy's life transitioned from the war to more modern times. These were times when a Coles Cafeteria or an escalator, department store catalogues or even a tin of peas and a Tully Show brought much excitement into the life of a young girl. The Mitchell's store at Feluga was quite a hub along with the pub.

In 1951, while working at Tully Mill, Don met Nancy Mitchell, and three years later they were married. He left the mill in 1952 and returned to farming with Peter. Peter married Nancy's school friend, Theresa Salleras, and Alfred and Florence Wheatley went to Cairns to live. While they still had the timber mill, they subdivided land to raise funds bringing power to the sawmill which led to the town having a power supply in 1961. In that year, Jack Romano built the Moonglow Motel; the first in north Queensland.

Don and Nancy moved to north Mission Beach onto lots they purchased from Alf Daveson and Jack and Roma Donkin. They were there for 42 years farming bananas mainly and had the Boral gas agency for 22 years. When they retired in 1976, they built the Hub Shopping Centre which helped to stimulate the town's growth. In 1989, after years of work, Nancy and Don saw the Uniting Church built by Geoff Davy on land they had donated. That was an important step for the community as well.

Don and Nancy's boys, Gregory and Neville, took over the farm in the early 1980s. The Mission Beach Lions Club was established in June 1980 with thirty two members with Nancy as Charter President of the Lioness Club. Don and Nancy volunteered for the Lions for many years and won several awards. Nancy formed a community group called Silver Threads in 1990, where ladies met monthly to play games and share conversation over cups of tea. That ran for 20 years and was highly popular.

Don had a heart attack in 1999 and was pronounced dead at the Medical Centre, but the local ambulance bearer at that time brought him back using a defibrillator. Don was flown to Townsville in a medivac helicopter and had a successful heart operation. Thanks to Dr. Rayner Dressler he has been healthy since. In 2002 the farm was sold, and Nancy and Don built a home in Conch Street. Nancy's Mum, Rita, died April 2003, and Nancy had several eye operations in 2004.

In the full version of this story, Don recalls some of the pioneers of the district that he met or was told about. He knew George Webb for a while and Rupert Fenby as well as 'Gunboat' Smith. Don said that *the luckiest thing I ever did was to meet and marry Nancy*. Few would argue with that. Late in life, Nancy developed atherosclerosis with a 70% blockage in three main arteries and died January 2017. Don will always have more stories to tell and will never take a backward step when anyone argues with him over details of the history of the district. Today, Don is 90 years old and still lives in the district and is fortunate to have his youngest daughter, Bronwyn, living next door and daughter, Margaret, also calls in regularly. Bronwyn provided much help in compiling the family history.

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Cover: Top left Nancy Wheatley, Silver Threads celebrations. Top right Don Wheatley with WWII artillery shell. Bottom photo Wheatley family, standing left to right: Joe Olsen, Debbie Olsen (nee Wheatley), Don, Florence, Alfred and Peter Wheatley. Sitting, Alfred's mother with baby Jan Olsen.



Images top to bottom, left to right: Paradise lost: 'Happy Days' home of the Wheatleys in Albany, WA; Paradise found: Wheatley farm, Mission Beach, from Facebook page of Wheatley Estate, 2013; Family friends and regular visitors, Nellie and Toby; WWII one gallon petrol ration ticket; 1952 Don Wheatley, 51 Infantry Battalion, Home Training Parades; Silver Threads, Class of 1995.