

# THE WESTS

THE STORY OF BOB WEST AND FAMILY



BY KEN GRAY

ABRIDGED VERSION

The West family came from Milla Milla on the Tablelands in 1955. George West set up as the first full time builder-carpenter in the district and they lived at Clump Point near Perrier Walk.

Some building was done here before George West arrived yet most was by builders from beyond the district. Early settlers like the Cuttens usually built their own homes, but the second of our early settlers, Willoughby and Alice Smith, used Rooney and Company from Townsville.

Bob was born 15 June 1946 so was eight when he came. His father, George Ernest West was born on 17 March 1917, St Patricks Day and married Jane Spowart Bob's younger sister, Valerie now lives in Townsville, while his older sister, Carol died at age 65.

George was an apprentice with a Milla Milla builder after the war. He was also the projectionist at the movie theatre and worked a bit as a butcher. In Mission Beach, he built and renovated houses and got his timber from Crisp's Timber, a mill at El Arish. They made structural timber, while the other mill owned by Charlie Myers made plywood. There was also a timber mill in Tully owned by John Day. When working at El Arish, George didn't drive home during the week as the roads were so bad.

In WW2, George did not enlist so was a little unpopular. He learned boxing and became the lightweight champion of North Queensland. After Jane met Bluey Dean from the Johnstone Boy Camp, she and George divorced. Jane then married Bluey. The camp was a humpy on the foreshore at Boat Bay where several workers from South Johnstone Sugar Mill stayed in the off season. It was always a great social gathering and Jane loved to go fishing with them. George was traveling often and was regarded by his family as being quite stubborn and a bit cranky.

Hope Austin had lost her husband and was living a few houses south of George when he started renovating her old Queenslander. They hooked up soon after and the Wests moved in with Hope.

When Hope came north from Victoria she loved the tropics and initially lived on Bedarra Island before buying a home on the beachfront near Clump Point. The remains there in a reduced state.

Life was very different for the West children living with Hope. Their mother, Jane was a typical laid back and Hope was formal. TV was banned and at mealtimes there were strict rules. Valerie West recalled that Hope was older than her father and always had a pile of library books in the school holidays for her when she was lonely. Valerie became an avid reader and learned many craft skills.

Hope purchased a 30 acre forest lot on the hillside split by Boyett Road, going from the Council camping ground back to the bamboos. When she died, she left it to State National Parks. Hope had subdivided a two acre lot at Perrier Walk and George built a house with a concrete roof. It may have been cyclone-proof, but the concrete trapped the heat in so it was very hot inside during summer.

Hope was interested in the environment and culture and left the housework to her cleaner, Rosa Perry, who was a German lady married to Owen Perry of Bingil Bay. She held dinner parties and regular guests included John and Alison Busst and Harold Holt with Dame Zara. Bob West worked for these people as an apprentice carpenter doing handy man tasks and they called him Robbie.

Bob went to school at Boyett Road with Valerie with 13 other students. He met and knew many of the people who came to Mission Beach in the 1950s who no longer live here such as the Hartens, Donkins, Wildsoets, Verheys, Ab Porter, Bill Pittentree and Tom Rungert. Jack Wildsoet had a couple of dairy cows to make a few shillings on the side and Bob remembers taking a billy can to him and he milked a cow straight into the can.

As a boy, Bob was always into boats. He built a catamaran with his father and had fun times on it with his dog, Dawson. Later in life, he built a trimaran in Adelaide, named *Destiny*. They often sailed around the near shore islands with the whole family.

The West children went to Herberton State High School and stayed at the Herberton Methodist Hostel. He went camping on the Walsh River at the army firing range. They found unexploded 25 pound bombs and did rather silly things with them for fun. When Bob left school he was 15 years old and started as an apprentice carpenter with George. He remembers his first romance at school.

On completion of his apprenticeship, Bob moved to see Brisbane's bright lights and pretty girls. Then off to Auckland before a move to Melbourne in 1971 working on building sites as a carpenter. There he met Julie Thomas, asked her for a dance and that was it. It was the end of the gallivanting for Bob who is now near to his 50<sup>th</sup> Wedding Anniversary. They met at a disco in the Waltzing Matilda Hotel then worked together overseas visiting several countries such as USA, Papua New Guinea, Thailand and then South Africa. Bob and Julie married in 1973 in Durban and returned to Australia soon after and stayed with the West family in Clump Point.

Bob always found work as a carpenter and built many homes and renovated many more. He recalls few of the buildings now as he suffers memory loss, yet his friends tell us of many projects he did.

Julie knew no one in Mission Beach and was lonely, but local women invited her to a group that had afternoon teas and that helped immensely. There were few people here and everyone was known. Few tourists came to the area, but the *Hideaway* van park was here and the *Moonglow Motel*.

Julie recalls that it was a big day going to Cairns. They didn't stay overnight or have air conditioned cars, and it was hot on the dusty roads.

Hope died of lung cancer in 1976 after returning to Melbourne. She was a chain smoker, coughed a lot and smoked top-of-the-range imported cigarettes in flash little tins. She came from a wealthy family on a farm called *Mt Noorat* near Melbourne, travelled often and painted landscapes.

After the death of Hope, George started wood turning in earnest. He became skilled and left many objects for the community (C4 display). George made his own tools, even miniature tools from sewing needles and won a Festival of Forests Award for wood turning in Ravenshoe.

After seven happy years at Clump Point, Julie wanted to return to Adelaide to be with family and friends. They remained there for nine years before returning to Mission Beach. Julie became a Christian in 1980 through friends from her school days which gave her new direction and purpose in life, and her Church has been her focus since.

The Wests now have a son, Lochlan George and a daughter, Alison Marie. They sold their property at Clump Point in 1980 and moved back to Adelaide where Julie came from and returned after nine years in 1989 to live in Bingil Bay thereafter.

In South Africa, Julie had worked in finance and wages work, and in Adelaide she trained for a year to be an enrolled nurse. She worked in the Tully nursing home for 13 years then for Tully Hospital for five years then was a carer at Innisfail before retiring.

Bob and a friend went to a building project on Bedarra Island in the early 1990s, and their boat sank on the way back in a storm. That was a near miss and seems funny now - a day to remember.

## **The Thomas Family**

After retiring from her career as a nurse and carer, Julie took on pastoral care work. She started doing religious instruction for the school and still enjoys that work. Her friends set up a women's support group named GLAM (Girls, Ladies and Mums). It now has up to 120 participants, which is the limit to keep it personal. They also attend market days.

Julie's mother, Mary Madeleine Thomas, was a nurse, and her father, Gordon James Thomas, was a butcher. She had an older stepsister from her father's previous marriage who died and has a brother and two younger sisters. Her education was at Morphettville Park Primary School, then Brighton High School in Adelaide, then a business college. After moving to Melbourne for adventure with friends at age 19, she met Bob.

Julie's parents enlisted in the Air Force in WWII. Gordon went to Gove and Mary was nursing in Sydney at a RAAF military hospital. Gordon enlisted in 1941 and first saw action in May 1944 in No. 13 Squadron as a wireless operator and gunner. He flew 68 operational hours before asking to be discharged after the war ended to help his ailing father in October 1945. Gough Whitlam also served with Squadron No 13 as a navigator. Gordon rose to the rank of Warrant Officer. Julie's parents did not march at Anzac parades and Gordon burned his uniform. They just wanted to forget the war.

Her father was 63 when he died of leukemia and her mother died after enduring multiple health problems. Both parents smoked and started during the war when the military gave them cigarettes.

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This is an abridged version of *The Wests*. The full story with references is available on our web page as H013, also named *The Wests*.



Images top to bottom, left to right: First catamaran launched with Bob and Dawson the dog aboard; Master and apprentice: Bob and his father, George West; George West's NQ Lightweight Champion Trophy; Wedding, Julie and Bob West, 1973, Durban; First home built by Bob: his own A line at Clump Point; Julie's mum and dad, Mary and Gordon Thomas in their RAAF uniforms during WW2; Bob and Tilly West – inseparable mates in 2021.