



BRIDE of BANYAN

YORKSHIRE NELL: FIRST EUROPEAN BRIDE OF BANYAN



A MEMOIR by RITA MITCHELL

Published by

Mission Beach Historical Society Inc.

Document H041 Version 1.

Website: mbhs.com.au



This publication is copyright © Mission Beach Historical Society.

First published by MBHS Inc., in 2024.

Author: Rita Mitchell nee Brett.

Editors: Ken Gray, Diane Bull.

Apart from fair dealing for private study, research, criticism, or review, as permitted by the Copyright Act, no part of this work may be stored, reproduced, or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission. Inquiries should be addressed to the publisher.

A record of this title is held at the National Library of Australia (eBook) and the State Library of Queensland (Print and eBook).

The text and opinions expressed in this book are those of the author and of the people interviewed by the author and do not reflect the views of the Mission Beach Historical Society or its members.

Mission Beach Historical Society's logo is designed by Leonard Andy, copyright © Leonard Andy. The design depicts a Djiru shield with a cassowary which is the endangered, iconic flightless bird living in the north Queensland rainforests.

The histories published by the Mission Beach Historical Society are as accurate as we can make them. Few accounts of history are 100% correct and there are going to be more errors when we recall events of many years ago. We always welcome suggested edits and additions or deletions and where possible we will edit where we find we are in error. However, the oral histories we record are the words of the people we interview, and we can only alter those with the authorisations of the people we interviewed.

Acknowledgement: This memoir was kindly provided by Mission Beach resident Don Wheatley who married Nell's granddaughter, and Rita's daughter, the late Nancy Mitchell. The full text of Rita's memoir is found in Wheatley Beach Tales by Ken Gray.

Cover Image

Top: Brides of the era, not that Nell was able to afford these chic outfits at the time.

Bottom: Banyan Creek near to where Nell lived.

BRIDE of BANYAN: YORKSHIRE NELL

Yorkshire girl, Nell Batley, left the comforts of England in 1913 to live in the wild, remote town of Banyan in north Queensland. Banyan was later named Tully. Nell was the second European woman to live in Banyan and the first to be married there. Life was basic. A tin of peas was a luxury and a bath was a dip in the creek, yet the family always found some food for swaggies passing through in the Depression.

Nell, (Ellen Batley 1888 – 1958) married George Frederick Brett (1882 – 1931) and had two daughters, Rita (Margaret Emma) and Olive. Her family story was recorded by her daughter, Rita Mitchell. Rita's daughter, Nancy, married Don Wheatley of Mission Beach and the full text of the Nell Batley history is found in *Wheatley Beach Tales* by Ken Gray, online at mbhs.com.au.



Rita Mitchell's daughter, the late Nancy Wheatley, nee Mitchell, of Mission Beach.

Most of north Queensland's histories are written by male authors and their focus is often on the lives of males. Here we have a female author relaying what it was like for women living in the north in the early 1900s. Rita depicts the day to day life of Nell and her family as they struggled to make good with few resources or comforts. Rita wrote about everyday life and what people ate or did at work and in their limited leisure time. We are given a sense of what life was like back in the days when there were only four settler families living in Banyan.

Rita Mitchell: My parents were from England, Dad from Suffolk and Mum from Yorkshire. Dad migrated to Canada in 1911 but wasn't happy there, so came to Australia in 1912 because his brother, Alf had come to Western Australia. He arrived in Brisbane and heard that land was being opened in the north for sugar. He and Bert Harman from New Zealand selected adjoining blocks at Banyan.

My mother was merely 23 when she arrived in Townsville in 1913 aboard *Perthshire*. She was quiet and retiring, and I often marvelled at her courage in leaving home and her family and coming to a strange land. There were many times when she yearned to return home, but when they were all saying goodbye at the railway and her eldest sister was persuading her not to go, one sister said, *Don't bother Annie, she will soon come snivelling home.* That biting remark kept her from returning even though, when she left, she had the money for her return ticket. She kept that money until she was married in 1915.

There were four children in Dad's family; one died in infancy. His brother, Alf in Western Australia, was a tailor who married and had a daughter, Thirza. That family was much more affluent than we were. We received lovely

parcels from them; any parcel was lovely. Mum had a big cabin trunk that she had brought out from England. It was often brought out when friends called. It was Mum's memory book.

My father was a kindly, Baptist man brought up to attend chapel every Sunday, but when he came to Queensland there were no churches and eventually, when a Methodist church came to Tully, he went there. Mum was Church of England but not as devout as Dad.

Mum came from a big family of eleven children; she was the seventh. Her father was a stonemason and there is still quite a bit of his work decorating buildings in Darlington, especially over the entrance to the railway station. Her mother kept a market garden, I have often wondered how she found the time, but I suppose the elder children looked after the younger and in those days, they started work very young. When Mum was twelve, she worked in 'The Big Houses' scrubbing the front steps and washing up. She had big hands and said it was because of all the scrubbing. As she got older, she got work that was higher up in the social scale in as servants in 'The Big Houses' had a pecking order. When Mum left England, she was a parlour maid, which was pretty high up. It was knowing how to set the table, look after the silver, wait at tables and so on. She knew the etiquette and if the occasion had arisen for her to dine with society (whatever that means) she would know the order the cutlery and wine glasses were used.

When Mum left England, she came with a friend, Jessie Percy, who later married a Methodist minister and eventually lived in Fiji. The journey took six weeks and they had fun. The first port of call was Townsville where the two girls disembarked. They needed work, which they had been told was plentiful. Jessie met some people on the boat and was offered a job at Ayr. She went and that was the last my mother saw of her until 1956 when she came to see us on the boat as we were leaving for a holiday in England. They had kept in touch, writing at Christmas or on births or deaths.

Mum's first job was as a waitress at the Queen's Hotel in Townsville. It was Townsville's first-class hotel and is now the studios of Channel Seven and the exterior is part of Townsville's listed heritage. She stayed there a short time. Being a very shy person, she couldn't take the teasing and being called a 'new chum' with her 'pretty red cheeks', so she left to go into a private house, but what a disaster that was! How many nights must she have cried herself to sleep, and wished she were home, a lonely young girl knowing no one and in a strange country? In service in England, she was treated as a person, taking orders from and being trained by the housekeeper, but in this place, she was spoken to as if she wasn't a person. The food cupboard was locked every night so she couldn't have any extra and was even accused of taking food to her friends. Dr Brinal who visited, noticed how she was treated and offered her work in his home. His son became a well-known doctor in Townsville and only retired a few years ago. Mum was very happy working for the doctor's family and when she left, they said she would always be welcome back.

At this home, she met Mrs Dean who with her husband had land at *The Banyan*. She had baby twin boys and asked Mum if she would like to go north to see some of the country. She went and helped look after the babies for her board - this was a way of getting a cheap servant. The Deans had land where the Tully high school is today from the railway crossing and stretching back to the hills. They had a small house where the poultry farm used to be. They had the post office and the mail used to come up from Cardwell to the Hull landing - it was a busy river in those days. For quite a few years, our mail was addressed to 'P.O. Banyan' until the population grew and the town of Tully emerged.

The Deans always thought they were a couple of stations above us; the boys called Mum Nellie, even after she was married and, in those days, married women were always referred to as Mrs. At any function, such as Olive's wedding, they said, 'when Nellie was working for us' but always found it convenient not to mention that she was never paid for her work. When they left Townsville to come to *The Banyan*, they came by boat to Cardwell and then on a horse-drawn dray, which was a long, rough and tiring way to travel. On the way, they stopped at

a house called *Bellenden*, owned by Brice Henry. Mum said the Deans went in and had afternoon tea and she was left sitting out in the dray and wasn't offered a drink or a bite. She was seen as a servant. We thought Mrs Henry was a snob. Years later, Brice Henry, riding his horse from Innisfail called in at our house which was halfway and he was always drunk. He was given a cup of tea and a meal and helped back on his horse.

Meanwhile, Dad was gradually clearing his block preparing it for sugar planting. The vegetation was thick rainforest. Beautiful large trees were kept for the loggers; oak and bean to name a few. They were mostly cut by two men using a crosscut saw and were carted away by bullock wagon. Logging went on for years and one time, a bullock lying in the harness refused to work, so a small fire was lit under his nose - he soon got up and did his share of pulling!

Timber was cut by axe or crosscut saw, but it took two men to use one so, unless you could afford to pay a helper, you and a neighbour worked together. After the scrub was felled, they burned it. It took a few burnings before the paddock was cleared. Stumps were dug out or blown out with gelignite. It is surprising what was done with axes, a crowbar, a pick and shovel. The tools were well cared for because everything had to be sourced from Cardwell or Hull Heads by pack horse.

Besides Dad and Mr Harman, there were only two other 'settlers' at that time, both Germans. In three or four years, it was all settled. Packhorses carried goods, or a horse dragging a sled was used. The sleds were cut from a fork of a good size tree with both sides adzed flat and a chain attached so it could be drawn by a horse. You stood on the top of the fork to drive the horse. Drays carried roofing iron, stoves and beds, but there were no bridges so it was a rough trip. A large sack was used to make the pack, the middle of the sack was cut on one side then thrown over the horse and things were put evenly on both sides. Everyone had a riding horse and a packhorse.

When Mum and Mrs Dean arrived, they were the only two white women in *The Banyan*, and that was so for the next four years. The Deans had the post office, which was the meeting place for the few settlers from Feluga to the Hull and Tully Heads. It was there that Dad and Mum met. When they decided to get married and set the date, the minister from Ingham couldn't make it across flooded creeks. They were married on 7 January 1915. Mum's mother and sisters sent nice things for her wedding and glory box; crocheted doilies and tablecloths and a white voile wedding dress and lawn petticoat. It was many years before the gifts were used, but they were kept in that big cabin trunk. The wedding day was a jolly affair; the whole district was there. Mrs Dean and Mum were the only women there, with Dad and Mr Harman best man, and five other men. One of the men shot some wild ducks for the wedding breakfast. They left for their future home each on a horse, with plenty of rice being thrown and an old boot for good luck. This was the first white wedding performed at Banyan.

The house Dad built was a modest affair with an iron roof and hand-split shingles for the walls. The floor was also hand-split timber and there was a bed, a wood stove, a table and a couple of chairs and Mum's two cabin trunks. Cupboards were made of wooden boxes. It was built on the bank of the beautiful, fresh, clear creek. Clothes were boiled in kerosene tins and rinsed in the creek; washing was done in this way for many years before she got a copper boiler, but the clothes were always rinsed in the creek and she would have a tub of blue water to blue the clothes and everything was wrung by hand. All sheets, underclothing, tea towels and table liners were white, and the women were proud of their sparkling white wash. Mum said that soon after she was married, a goanna came into the kitchen and she got such a fright she threw her rolling pin (a wedding present) at it and broke one of the handles off. I am still using that rolling pin, minus two handles and promised it to my granddaughter, Bronwyn.

Mum chose not to have an engagement ring. She said her hands were too big and she didn't like attention being drawn to them, so Dad bought her a brooch. She was always known as Helen (called Nell) until she obtained

her birth certificate and found her real name was Ellen. When she left England, her sisters gave her a signet ring with H.B. engraved on it. My parents' home was humble yet Mum said, 'you can make it look like home with bright curtains and red cushions.'

To earn income, Dad was cane cutting at Mena Creek and worked our 'block' in the off season. Many months had to be spent on the block each year, or it was forfeited. They closed the door of their home and mounted their horses and away they went.

There were Aboriginals about and they were friendly; you wouldn't see them for weeks then one morning you woke up and there they were. They built their 'mia-mias' of palms and stayed a while, then one day they were gone. They were treated well at our place; Mum always had some bright pieces of material on hand to make frocks for the women and had plugs of tobacco for the men. The women liked tobacco too. They brought a handmade basket when they came. In later years, when there was only *King Billy* and his woman, he would ask for some money. I think they were Murray people, and twice a year or more they arrived just to see *missus*, then went to the Hoban's place. When they were rounding up the Aboriginals to send to Palm Island, the Hobans sent their blacks up the mountain so they wouldn't be caught. It was very sad for some of them, one woman came to tell us her little girl Rosa had been taken and every time she called, she would cry about her Rosa.

The Hobans had them working a little on their farm, and in the evening, they would come to the back steps and she would give them a big pot of food and a loaf of bread. They liked curry. We never had any of them working for us. We played with the piccaninnies, but they were shy. The women always seemed to be laughing. I don't remember much about the men; I suppose they were away looking for food. At the back of our house was a fruit tree and fruit was gathered and the shell peeled off and the nut part pounded up for flour by the women.

We still have some of the baskets made by the Aboriginals. They are far superior in weave and durability to baskets made overseas. They would sell well in the shops, but I suppose the art has died out now and, in any case, money comes too easily today. Once King Billy told my mother, *White man taste all the same Pig*. We were never afraid of them and had no trouble; they were always treated as people. Mum was pleased to have someone to talk to, and as the years passed, they were all friends and looked forward to seeing each other.

In 1916, Mum went to Townsville for my birth. She went by boat, embarking at Innisfail or Mourilyan Harbour. She was in Townsville for six weeks after I was born, staying with the Buntings. They were Phyllis Beatie's grandparents. I was christened in the Church of England and was told I wasn't a robust baby. Olive was born in the house prematurely at Mena Creek in 1919. Mr Harman, who was living with my parents, was sent off on the horse to fetch the doctor, but by the time he returned Olive was born. One of the neighbouring women came in to help, but Mum was back to her duties in two days.

My parents had difficulty rearing Olive until she was seven. The first anxiety was when she started teething and had convulsions. I remember Mum on her knees by a tub of water ducking the baby in and out; the home treatment in those days was into cold water then into hot. There was a time when she got *the spren*, it's similar to diarrhea. All home remedies failed, so it was off to Innisfail to the doctor who said it was caused by drinking creek water, so from then on, all drinking water was boiled. The railway line was not in, so Olive was taken from Feluga to Innisfail by a 'push and pull' trolley. The four men worked the trolley all the way to Innisfail.

1918 brought the terrible cyclone. Before it came, Mum went to Townsville with me to a dentist. We arrived back to Dunk Island aboard the *Lass Gowrie* two days after the cyclone passed. It wasn't until we got there that we knew of the cyclone. Mum was worried about Dad, so begged Chris Wildsoet to row us to Bingil Bay. Chris and an Aboriginal man rowed us across and when we got there, Mum was thankful to find Dad was alright, although he had been caught in a flood in Maria Creek and had to spend all night clinging to the top of a tree.

He couldn't swim so stayed there. His mate decided to swim but was swept away and drowned. [*Alf James.*] The roads were impassable with fallen trees, so we stayed at Bingil Bay. Dad was anxious to see how the property had fared, so he walked from Bingil Bay to Feluga. Luckily, the house was undamaged. After the cyclone, they went to South Johnstone for work. Dad was walking along the mill railway line over the bridge and was shot in the stomach by a man who was shooting ducks. He was in hospital for six weeks. Mum was fortunate to have friends in South Johnstone nearby; they were Chinese called Ah Shay and took Mum and I into their home until Dad came out of hospital.

In 1920, Mum and Dad rode from Mena Creek and from then on; Mum stayed on the block and Dad rode to work. Olive rode in front of Mum and I rode in front of Dad. When crossing Maria Creek near El Arish, there was only about a three-foot bridge and such a high drop. Mum went first on her horse, and when we got home Dad had built a new house. It was small home; one middle room on about three-foot blocks, a front verandah with the weather side boarded, and a back verandah which was the living quarters. The floor was of thick, hand-hewn bean, and the sides were split oak shingles with an iron roof. The shingles were made by cutting a log into 2' 6" lengths then the shingles were split out of these using wedges and an axe or a mallet if you were lucky enough to have one. It was time consuming, but they lasted for years. There was a *lean-to* out from the living quarters. This was where the stove was and a bench for washing up. Mum and Dad had the bedroom and the living area had Olive's and my bed, a table and four chairs, the safe for the food and a wooden box that the flour and sugar was kept in. It was a real bush home, but we always had clean white sheets, a tablecloth and curtains. The windows were push-out and held up with a stick. The 'lean-to' had a dirt floor, but with constant sweeping and dampening down the floor became as hard as cement. Corn sacks were put down as mats. It was about then that 'the block' started to be spoken of as 'the farm.'

We had a couple of cows which Dad milked; the calves were put in a pen overnight and after milking were allowed to run with their mother. When they were weaned, they had a muzzle with spikes over their nose; it would allow them to eat grass but not suckle. There was no ice, so when the milk was brought in, it would be put into a saucepan and scalded on the wood stove that burned all day. The cream we had on our porridge was lovely. Our jersey cow gave beautiful rich milk which was allowed to stand in a cool place. As the cream came to the top, it was skimmed off and put in a bottle and after three or four days collecting the cream, butter was made by shaking the bottle. I started shaking but soon tired, and Mum finished it. The bottle was shaken until the butter formed then it was washed and salted. We progressed to a butter churn which was a lot easier and later to a separator. If we had excess butter, Mum sold some or gave it to a friend.

Mum kept hens, so we had eggs. She raised her own chickens and the roosters were eaten. She sold eggs and settings of eggs were exchanged to ensure new blood among the flock. Every now and then, Olive and I had to look for nests of hens that were laying away. We were excited when we found one. We locked the hens up at night; twice I remember Dad with a shotgun for a carpet snake or a white tailed.

We had plenty of fruit with a nice patch of rough-leaf pineapples. We sliced the top off and ate them with a spoon. Banana bunches were hung up and we gathered wild black passionfruit by the bucket full and had paw-paws, oranges, pumeloes and huge puffy mandarins, and granadillas. Mum made granadilla pies. Everyone had a bush lemon tree; I haven't seen them in years. Cape gooseberries grew wild, and Olive and I went out with a big billy each to pick them and Mum made delicious gooseberry jam.

Dad brought wild plums home from the scrub. They were furry and deep red inside and too sour to eat, but they made lovely jam. We had onions, potatoes, dried green peas and lima and harfial beans, so although we were poor, we had plenty of food. There was a butcher at El Arish and if Dad was up that way, he brought a roast or corned beef and soup bones, otherwise it was tinned corned beef.

From late 1920, Dad worked on the farm during slack season and went to Mena Creek or South Johnstone to cut cane during the crushing season. He left home Sunday afternoon and arrived back Saturday night. Before going, he milked the cows, chopped wood for the stove. We carried it in and stacked it. We also gathered the chips to start the fire and admit we didn't do it with the best of grace.

It was very lonely for Mum. We got a blue cattle dog and he was savage. If a stranger came, he had to be held. We had him 14 years and he just went to sleep one day at Mum's feet and forgot to wake up. If we were on the road and met anyone, he bailed them up until we passed and called him.

Through the next few years, there were many 'swaggies'. It was after the 1914-18 war and they were going through looking for work. Many of them called in for tea and sugar or flour. Seeing that Dad had to carry it all down on horseback it puts quite a strain on him, but no-one was ever turned away. Only once did Mum have any trouble. The dog was tied up and a swaggie came and demanded food. He pushed his way in and said he would help himself. Mum said he was a big German; she sat on a chair with Olive on her lap and me standing beside her as we watched him scoop the flour into his bag. The dog was barking furiously and she told me to let him off, but I was too frightened to move. After that she had a gun, but one day she saw some wallabies and decided to shoot at them because they spoiled the young cane. The butt kicked and hit her in the chin, and there was blood everywhere. That was last time Mum used a gun.

Christmas was always a special time; birthdays hardly rated a mention; there were no cakes or presents for birthdays, but Christmas was wonderful. We looked forward to the great day, and Santa was very real. The cake and pudding were made weeks ahead. Christmas eve was all excitement - no trouble to get us to pick up the chips that day! We hung up our stockings and our beds were by the table. It was dark when I woke and felt on the table to see if Santa had been and then slept until daylight. There was always so much; a big lucky stocking and a doll and other toys, a box of table crackers and nuts - these were kept for the dinner table when the table was nicely decorated. Mr Harman always had Christmas with us.

We always had a tin of green peas for Christmas; that was a luxury. We never got presents during the year and when a tin of green peas was considered a luxury you will understand how simple our tastes were. When all food had to be carried 30 miles by horse, there was no room for extra tins like peas.

As the years went by, we received catalogues from the shops in Brisbane and what a lot of pleasure the women and children in the bush got from them. We kids picked out all sorts of things to write to Santa about. I think the lucky stockings used to give the most pleasure; I don't see lucky stockings in the shops these days like that. I also loved the dolls and tins of paints - we so enjoyed Christmas.

Easter was a day to remember but not with a big feast. We boiled eggs in onion skins to make them brown; it pleased us. One Easter, I got a small sugar Easter egg with a yellow chicken stuck to it. It was so lovely and I kept it for ages. That was the only Easter egg I received as a child. Another treat was a tin of *Jones' Favourite* plum jam. It was like a conserve, juicy with whole plums in it. Dad brought a pack of lollies as a treat for Mum. She liked licorice-all-sorts and bulls-eyes, which were put in a bottle and we got one now and then.

The railway line was making its way through. It was to meet at Tully in 1925. The line came through Feluga, and the carpenters built the Feluga station master's house. With the railway, the new settlers came. So many people wanted blocks that they had to ballot for them. The men came first and later their wives. Ten years after Mum first went there as a bride, she finally had female company. Mrs Borgna was a good friend, but I wondered how they understood each other. Mrs Borgna was Italian and her English was hard to understand and my mother was broad Yorkshire, but they were always pleased to see each other. Mrs Landau was married to a German, a good fellow but fond of the whiskey. She invited us for afternoon tea, and when it was served, we were allowed to come to the table. She had beautiful floral cups and cake dishes. I was fascinated by them

because we had only plain white china, if anything got broken, it was easy to replace white china. Mrs French was another friend. They were both English. Mrs Hoban was Mum's best friend. They shared up and downs and that was like a second home to us all.

We met War Kee, a Chinaman who opened a shop on the bank of a creek near the rail. With him came his old uncle, we kids called him *Uncle* but I was frightened of him because he walked into the shop carrying a carving knife. The shop had a peculiar smell, Mum said it was the opium. When we went to the shop, we were given a paper twist of boiled lollies. Butter was in bulk and if we wanted a pound of butter, it was scooped into a paper-thin wooden container shaped like a boat. I often wonder how it was kept fresh enough to serve because the weather was hot or wet - if it was hot the butter would melt, if it was wet the ants would get into everything.

Our food safe had its four legs standing in tins of water, it was terrible when the ants got into the sugar and food. When I think of our Christmases, I always remember War Kee because there was a big Christmas parcel for us kids. There were fireworks, like throw downs, sparklers, tom thumbs, ink wells and a couple of bangers, and for Mum there were crystalised ginger, lollies and dried lychees. The lychees were delicious and I have never had them since. He built another shop with iron bars on the windows. He was there for many years, then sold his shop and lived on Jack Beattie's farm where he grew vegetables. He died there, and everyone remembered War Kee with affection.

Another Chinaman had a market garden by the railway. He carried fresh vegetables on his shoulders in two baskets, hung each end of a pole and he trotted along. He was found dead sitting under a banana tree. The cemetery in those days was by where Cruipie's Panel Beating works are now. The story was told that he was put in a box and transported to the cemetery on the back of a truck and as the roads were so rough the box fell off a couple of times!

Before the railway, I only went to Innisfail once. I rode with Dad, and he left me in front of a shop and told me to stay there, as he wouldn't be long. After a short time, I thought he had left me and started to cry. A Chinaman came out to see what was wrong just as Dad turned up. That shop was where On Tai's are now, and I always feel sorry for children who have lost their mother or father while shopping. On the return journey, when we were coming over the range, it was dark and raining and there were so many fire flies and they looked so pretty; Dad said they carried a little lamp under them.

With the railway, it was quite a day out to go to Innisfail. We rose early to be at the station at 6.30am and heard it whistle as it left Tully. We knelt on the railway and put our ear to the line to hear if it was coming. The train was called *The Sweeper* and there were thirty-three stops between Innisfail and Tully and the carriage was full as we got closer to Innisfail. There were many Italians who were happy and we were intrigued by the languages, always wondering if they were talking about us. I remember one Christmas the Italian children all getting off with a big lucky stocking. I was so envious.

Olive and I liked the window seat. We looked at all the stops and got cinders in our eyes and Dad would dig them out with the corner of his handkerchief. When we got to Innisfail, we walked from the station, but sometimes we took a taxi. You don't see taxies these days like they had then. They were big DeSotos and Buicks. There was room in the front seat for the driver and two passengers and between the front and back seats were two 'dicky' seats that folded up into the floor that were pulled up for children to sit on. Most times we walked. There was no bitumen, and there was a big swampy paddock. When it rained, which was often, we walked in our bare feet in the mud and when we got there, we went to the ice works because we knew someone who worked there and we washed our feet. After Mum finished shopping, we walked to see a friend who lived by the cemetery, then walked back to Dad and were home by 7.30pm. It was a long day, but Mum looked forward to it. My parents wrote for grocery orders to *Wilson and Morgan* and they were sent on the train.

There were now twenty-four settlers from Feluga to Euramo planting cane to get it to a mill when the rail came. Planting was done by hand. Dad chopped it into 12-inch lengths. Mum held the sacks open, and Dad filled them then tied the sacks with wire. The filled sacks were dropped at intervals, and Mum, and sometimes us kids, carried them in our aprons to the holes Dad made. There were still stumps in the paddock, so we couldn't use a plough for drilling. The holes were opened up with a mattock and a plant put in and covered. The first crop was railed to a mill in Giru and some went to South Johnstone. Dad cut the cane, loaded it into a dray and took it to the Feluga railway station, transferred it to a *derrick* where it was loaded into trucks and then transported to the mill.



Harry Batley, Nell's brother, with workers at Brett's cane farm, Feluga. Image from Ray Langford.



Family at Brett's farm, probably Nell in the straw hat. Image from Ray Langford.

Dad was a mild tempered man, and the only time I ever saw him in a temper was one night storming in and grabbing his gun and saying he was going to shoot the horses that were eating his cane. The horses were pulling cane out of the trucks and eating it. He didn't shoot the horses but stayed there all night to keep them off. The *derrick* was worked by a horse that kept going around the same track raising cane off the dray into the rail wagon. I can imagine the joy and sense of achievement my parents felt when they received the first cane money. They received little as most went to pay bills.

The cane paddocks had to be kept free from weeds and Mum did all the chipping and liked working outdoors. One year the paddocks caught fire. They could only stand and watch it burn. That was a total loss. Burnt cane was almost a total loss because the mill paid so much more for green and if fires did break out, everyone close by hurried to help put it out.

More people moved in, so the farmers built barracks. Mum cooked for the cutters. It was a hard thankless job; no refrigeration, hot wood stoves, three big meals a day to cook and smokos. She also cooked for the schoolteacher. In three years, she saved enough money to go to *home* to England for a holiday. If anything was made in England, it was 'bound to be good'. When it came time to book her fare, she couldn't leave Dad to look after himself, so bought our first car, a Pontiac.

Tully was quite a town by then, and we did all our business and shopping there instead of Innisfail. Mum went 'home' in 1935 with Olive, three years after Dad died and 24 years after she emigrated. She went again in 1956 with Jimmy and me. Both times she was quite happy to return to her real home.

We now needed a school. I was doing correspondence lessons, which came by mail and were returned each week. The work came back with mistakes corrected and comments. Word got around that there was a meeting to be held to discuss a school. After writing to the education department, they were granted a school at Midgenoo in 1923. It was held at Beattie's residence about three miles from where we lived. When I started, I stayed with Mr and Mrs Hoban and went home on the weekend. When Olive started, we had a horse and sometimes there were four of us on the horse. We had to catch it after school and saddle it then it was led to a stump for Olive and me to climb on. I was last on and was worried I would be left behind.

We started walking to school. It was three miles but didn't bother us. Later they built a school by the Midgenoo railway. In 1927, the families at Feluga asked for a school and those of us who lived at Feluga left Midgenoo. Feluga school is still going, but the Midgenoo closed in 1933. My fondest memories of school days were breakup picnics. Everyone was there. There was plenty of food, soft drinks and boiled lollies and what fun the races were; sixpence for the winner, three pence for second and a penny for everyone else. The best part was the Christmas tree. It was decorated with a toy for all kids. After the clearing up, everyone went home, the end of a glorious day.

In 1922, the Premier of Queensland, Ted Theodore, came by buggy to meet the settlers and discuss a sugar mill. Everybody gathered at Beattie's home. The ladies spent hours preparing a feast. When they made the brandy sauce for the plum pudding, they couldn't find the brandy. Fred Landau, who was fond of the drink, had drunk it. Our family went in the sulky, three miles, taking cutlery and crockery. Mum tied coloured cotton on the handles of her cutlery.

The mill was in full swing for the 1926 crushing. Dad used horses for ploughing and all farm work. He built a good shed and each horse had its own stall, they were fed cane tops, chopped up with corn mixed in. We had a 'chop-chop' machine; you turned the wheel that had blades on it. We kids helped.

Farmers who didn't build barracks rented from the ones who had. Dad built barracks and we moved into them to live and for a few years Mum cooked for the gangs. The men stayed in Harman's barracks and walked to our barracks for meals. There were seven men in a gang and it was a six-month season. Mum also had our washing and ironing to do; flat irons; no modern ones. Dad became a Councillor in 1924. Meetings were held in Cardwell and he and Mr Hoban, who was also a Councillor, rode their horses to Cardwell meetings. It took three days for travel and the meeting and Dad's name is on the Council plaque on the old council building in Tully. He was a Councillor until his death in 1931.

Dad looked forward to having a proper home for Mum. He purchased quality presents for it and bought furniture. Dad didn't live long enough to know the comfort of a nice home, and he never had a holiday. He died aged only 48 years. After a bowel operation, the doctor told him not to work for several weeks. He went to work too soon, driving a tractor and died in three days. Mum was devastated. The hospital was a converted house and the matron was the anaesthetist.

In 1927, Mum's brother, Harry, and his wife Annie and baby Florence arrived from England. In England, he worked in the mines, but in 1926 there was a big strike. Dad needed help on the farm, so they nominated Harry and his family for migration. Harry failed the medical examination because of his hearing, but somehow my parents scraped up enough money to pay for their passage. They landed at Brisbane and came up by train, which was pretty slow. When they got to Townsville, there was a rail strike, so Dad had the expense of sending a taxi to Townsville to pick them up. Eventually, they moved into the little house that we used to live in.

After Dad died, Mum had to decide whether to run the farm or sell it. It was a traumatic time, she had lost her husband, had us two girls to consider and felt responsible for her brother and his family. The next-door neighbour offered to lease the farm with a guarantee of work for her brother. The lease was drawn up ready to be signed when Mum decided to run the farm herself. She ran the farm successfully for 23 years, often chipping every paddock by herself. If things on the farm weren't done properly, she certainly let Harry know who was boss. The farmers had a lot of respect for her as a farmer and a hard working woman. You saw her out with her hoe, wearing long sleeves, a high neck blouse and a hat. She had lovely smooth, fair skin all her life.

In 1933, she built a two-bedroom house, painted inside and out, with a desert scene 15 inches deep around the walls of the front room at ceiling edge. Radio came so she bought one, a piece of furniture! Radios were run on car batteries, and the butcher used to take them into Tully to be recharged and return them so you had two batteries. There was a bathroom with a vanity set and a deep plunge bath and all blue tiles. The bathroom was a real luxury, as prior to that, bathing was done in a large iron tub or in the creek in summer. She also had a flash kerosene stove.

She had the home she deserved. Mum didn't spend money, saying it was too hard to come by and always paid cash or went without. She supported both churches and the two ministers visited when they were near Feluga. There was morning tea and a discussion of events. They never discussed religion but had a prayer. She never went to church because the Church of England were, 'a lot of snobs' and the Methodists were, 'all hell fire'. She read her Church of England prayer book and bible.

Mum didn't like ladies' afternoon teas as she was no good at small talk, but she could discuss world events and politics and spent her spare time reading. By 1953, more than 20 years after Dad died, she was tired, so in 1954, after assuring herself that Harry had work, she sold to her friend, Joe Borgna, one of the first farmers in the district. I don't know what her thoughts were as she left the farm that she had gone to as a bride, when there was nothing but a horse track, scrub and a slab hut.

She died peacefully after a short illness in 1958 aged 70 years.

In another family memoir, Nancy Wheatley recalls her grandmother ('Granny', Nell Brett) *who would walk about the house talking to herself, her favourite saying was:*

Sad's my heart and good my reason, got a Chap but seldom sees him.