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Reminiscences of Irene Arrowsmith

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Reminiscences of Irene Arrowsmith

I. Arrowsmith

Abstract

The following reminiscences were written around 1994 by Irene for her grand-niece Christine Howe. They were requested for a school project. Irene's husband Neville also provided a set of reminiscences at the same time. Some years later Irene returned to the material and wrote additional paragraphs concerning her mother. These were sent off in a letter to another grand-niece, Crystal Howe.

To Christine and Crystal...

Reminiscences of Irene Arrowsmith

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To Christine Howe

I was born in Portland (NSW) in 1931 – one of the worst years of the Great Depression – although our family lived in Cullen Bullen, a little mining town. The town was based on a mine called Renown Colliery which had closed. Everyone there was unemployed and lived in very poor conditions, so our family set off for the South Coast when I was three months old. My father William had a Harley Davidson motor bike and he and the two older children – Evylin and William – went on the bike and sidecar, and Mother and three children – your Gran Olive, our brother Donald and myself – went in the train, via Sydney. It must have been a nightmare journey for my poor mother.

Happy Valley, East Corrimal. We came to a place called Happy Valley. All unemployed “camps” were called Happy Valley I think. How gross! Probably some petty bureaucrat's idea of making things look better than they were. The site was in East Corrimal, only a few hundred meters from where we have lived these last 36 years. Although my father was a carpenter and an excellent cabinet maker with many skills, he could get no work and mother was given the “dole” which at that time was in the form of food coupons which could be taken to the Co-op store. There was no money for personal items or clothing or shoes, etc.

My sister, Evylin (we called her Emmy) seemed to be the mainstay of the family. Evylin was already 17 when I was born and Mother was over 40 so my main memories were always of my dear sister. When I was about 18 months old I was badly scalded (still have scars) and I was taken to Wollongong Hospital seriously ill. By that time we had moved to a house in Corrimal and Mother and Evylin used to walk to Wollongong Hospital every day to visit me because I was fretting for the family. They had no money for bus or train fare.

When we lived in that house we had a man come round every few days in a lovely horse and fancy cart selling butter, eggs, bacon and cheese. His name was Billy Behan – of course, everyone called him Billy Bean. My father was a bit of an anarchist and Mother said that one day he had an argument with Mr. Behan over “red Russia” because Mr. Behan said in Russia they made women work whether they wanted to or not. My father shouted at him “How many kids have you got, Billy?” and when he replied “eleven” father just said “What a mug you are Bill.” Mr. Behan was a bit sheepish about that and afterwards he used to let father indoctrinate him about politics. I don’t think he converted him though. I can still remember the thrill of going out to the cart and mother picking out things to buy. Things were still pretty tough then and we had lots of bread and dripping to eat but as anyone our age will tell you, the dripping was lovely and brown and salty and beat any other spread they eat now. I think this is probably fantasy because none of us would eat it now. Everyone seemed to have a choko vine growing then and Mother used to make choko pickles, “apple” pies using chokos flavoured with lemon juice and sugar and melon and lemon jam using chokos instead of melon. When mother made cakes she used beef dripping as shortening. I think everyone did then.

Around that time my Mother bought a block of ground in East Corrimal for ten pounds with one shilling (10 cents) per week repayments. Sadly she did not have enough money to pay the shilling so had to give up the land. This could have been a turning point for us, but it was not to be and of course we were only one family of many thousands in the same circumstances. I started school at Corrimal (so did Neville) but was only there for a short time as we moved to Wollongong before the Second World War sometime.

Campbell Street, Wollongong. I went to Wollongong Primary School and the teacher was a Miss Dean, who died about four years ago aged 97. At that time all women school teachers were unmarried – if they married they were sacked.

That changed after the war started because there were not enough men teachers left. The Post Office and Public Telephone Exchanges (now Telecom) and even the Commonwealth Bank had the same regulations about married women working, so of course a lot of women used to tell fibbers and pretend they were not married.

My first class was in a room, not long since demolished, with a thatched roof – truly! One day I had one penny to spend (about one cent) and it was such a lovely feeling I didn't want to spend it. I just wanted to savour having that penny. I showed off with it of course and I put it on the seat in the playground beside me so that everyone would notice and somebody stole it! I have never forgotten that. I was sure I knew who took it. She had on a green machine-knitted suit trimmed with yellow. That was enough to convince anyone that she didn't need to pinch my penny which meant so much to me. That was about 55 years ago I suppose, yet I can still see that girl in that green suit. I have never forgiven her.

One penny was a great thing to have then. A few doors up from school was a shop, now the Court House Tavern Restaurant, which sold toffees in patty papers with hundreds and thousands sprinkled on top and occasionally one would have a halfpenny in the bottom of the paper under the toffee – oh joy! Across the road from school there was a shop which sold frozen oranges for a halfpenny. This was sheer delight because of course no ordinary person had a refrigerator in those days. Some people had ice chests and a man used to come around and deliver blocks of ice door to door. Of course, we only had a meat safe.

We lived in an old fashioned terrace house which was old even then. It is still there by the way – I think it is “heritage” now. We moved to a place in south Wollongong then and we were there when the Second World War broke out. I would have been 8 years old then. Evelylin was working and had bought a little H.M.V. radio which we regarded with great awe. Because my family was always interested in politics and hated war I can still remember us all standing around looking up at that little wireless – dad had built a little shelf for it – and listening to Prime Minister Menzies telling us it was his “melancholy duty” to inform us that as England was at war now so were we.

Our whole family was distressed at this news because they – Mother in particular – had worked in early peace organisations trying to stop the madness. It was about that time that I met up with my dear friend, Beryl. She was very tall, later grew to about 5 ft 11 inches (1.8 metres), and had long white hair which her

mother used to curl in rags at night. The curls, with spaces in between, used to hang down like sausages. I thought she was lovely. My mother always had more important things on her mind than hair so I had short brown hair with a fringe as that didn't need "doing." How I would have loved a ribbon bow!

A girl I was friends with then – I still remember her name too – used to have Adora Cream Wafers for her lunch and devon sandwiches. How I lusted after those Adora Cream Wafers. Mother used to give me brown bread with marmite and walnuts on it and fresh fruit. Boy, was I deprived! At that time there were only two breads – brown and white. It wasn't until we had the influx of migrants here that those things changed.

We – all children round about I suppose – used to ask the corner shop keeper for broken biscuits (free) and what we called "specs" – pieces of fruit which were too bad to sell. Most kids – especially boys – used to steal fruit from neighbourhood trees in those days. It was a common past time. Sometime the boys used to go home with saltpetre pellets in their bottoms where some irate man had shot at them to teach them a lesson. That only added to the adventure of course. Backyard fruit trees used to be loaded with fruit in those days – plums, apricots, peaches etc., etc. Fruit fly must have been almost unknown then. I suppose if children did those things now they would be taken into custody and put into remand homes, but it seemed to be O.K. then. Even the men with the guns didn't really mind – it was probably exciting for them too.

Cliff Road, Wollongong. The house is still there – one of the few that is left because that elite area is full of home units now – but it was advertised for sale about a month ago and they expected about \$400,000 for it. A developer probably bought it and will pull it down now. My brother William came home while we were living there. He was a carpenter and had gone to New Zealand before the war to work at a big home building project in the North Island. He brought home a New Zealand wife.

When the war started there was more work of course and things were a little easier for my Mother. We had a penny in the slot gas meter for the stove and the flame never used to really go out so Mother used to cook soup, corned beef etc. on what was left of the penny because the flame stayed there all night. We were always scratching for a penny. Later, when things got better we moved to a house which had a shilling gas meter – how's that for luxury! Being the youngest I was the one who always had to go to the shop. I remember I used to get 14 lbs of potatoes for one shilling (about 10 cents) and I was so awful I used to get the shop lady – her name was Joyce – to give me only

eleven pence halfpenny's worth of potatoes and [I would spend the other halfpenny on] a licorice strap wound round a little coloured lolly. This deceit has haunted me over all the years and I tell everyone about it so as to try and ease my burden of guilt, but I never, ever told Mother. After being a mother myself for a long time now I believe she probably knew anyway.

Surf Clubs were very big time during the years there and my brother Donald was a very good surfer. He used to go on patrol at the beach every weekend and won a number of big races including a State Championship. He was very handsome and surf life savers were seen as heroes then. Times have changed now because they have so much technology they don't risk their lives so much any more.

Harbour Street, Wollongong. We moved in to a nice modern flat – would be called a unit now – and we only paid 30 shillings (\$3) a week rent. Mother thought she was in heaven. Evelylin had a job working on munitions – mainly the famous Owen Gun – and was, as usual, the mainstay of the family. Dad had left home (we were pushing) so he wasn't at that place much. We were able to get such accommodation because all the rich people who would normally have lived in such a nice area had moved away to places like Bowral in the Southern Highlands etc. They thought Wollongong and Port Kembla would be bombed by the Japanese because of the steelworks, munitions and mines and waterfront, so the poor people had much better places to rest their heads. Of course, they couldn't afford to escape the threat.

While we were there we had blackouts every night and we had our windows taped with brown paper in case they were shattered and we had awful sisal paper blackout curtains. In the yard of the flats we had a rather classy air raid shelter to which we hurried when sirens went off. On the night that Japanese submarines came in to Sydney Harbour [31 May 1942] we had an alarm and we all crouched in the shelter. I remember finding it quite exciting but Mother had had so many awful things happen to her in her life she would just as soon have stayed indoors having some peace and quiet.

At that time there were no street lights at night and at railway stations the names were taken off the platforms and if you were travelling at night no lights were allowed in the trains and in pitch dark with no station names it was a bit dodgy. People were safe though – as it happened they were safe from the enemy too! There were volunteer people – often very bossy men – who were called air raid wardens. They had arm bands with ARP (Air Raid Precautions) printed on them and they used

to go about in the dark with a helmet and torch protecting us all.

While living there we were under what the Government called “austerity”. There was a Minister in Federal Parliament – I think his name was Dedman – who was responsible for making sure no one enjoyed themselves and he brought in legislation banning the use of pink icing! That haunted the rest of his career. [John Dedman was appointed to the War Cabinet in 1941. Regarded as the minister for “austerity”, he was in control of the diversion of production and industry to the war effort.]

We couldn't get things like combs, crockery, blankets, chocolate or anything much. We were issued with coupons for clothing, tea, butter, sugar and meat. You could only buy those things if you had enough coupons. Mother was never interested in fashion and didn't have enough money to buy us many clothes so she used to swap clothing coupons with other people for tea and butter. I think everyone got 2 ounces of butter and tea and about 8 ounces of meat per week but I'm not sure now. The butcher Mother went to didn't seem to worry about coupons much so we usually had plenty of meat anyway. Mother's main worry was that she had enough tea to make a pot for early morning and supper. I used to be sent to the butcher shop for interminable cutlets. I believe Mother used them so much because they were easy and didn't take any preparation. They were twopence (about 2 cents each) and at that time bread was threepence (about 3 cents) per half loaf. People used to buy half loaves a lot then because no one had a freezer to help keep bread fresh. Over long weekends everyone used to have lovely home made scones because there would be no fresh bread. Bakers weren't allowed to bake after Friday and over Easter weekend the bread would be as hard as a rock by the Monday. My brother Donald was always on the look out for spending money and like Neville he was a lolly boy at the pictures and he also used to work at Carnivals, where they had sideshows, rides, etc., etc. every Christmas. He never used to get called back by the same proprietor though because he used to let his friends and relatives win the prizes that no one is ever supposed to actually win – they were only there for show, and had been there for years probably.

Most of my friends were mad on comics at that time – they were big time. There were heaps of shops which did nothing but swap comics. I was deprived again because my Mother wouldn't let me have comics but I spent most of my waking hours reading books, without censorship, and to this day I never read comics – I don't even glance at comics in the newspaper because they

are boring. However, I think that for a while I mulled over the idea of committing suicide just to teach my family a lesson – I knew they would miss me and live lives of guilt and regret for the way they had blighted my childhood by not letting me have my own way. Actually, I think I was a terrible child and was totally spoilt. Do you know, I was called “the baby” when I was ten or eleven years old. I suppose that’s because my sister was seventeen and the others sixteen, ten and five when I was born. Also, my poor Mother was tired out and had given up on discipline. She always wanted “peace and quiet” but she never did get much of it.

When the war ended I was in second form at high school and we were playing basketball (now netball) when the news came through – we just all left and ran up to Crown Street where crowds were gathering. Because I was a well brought up girl I went home to Mother – there was only the two of us by then – and she let me go back in the evening in the company of your Granny, Olive. The whole of the main street was filled with people dancing, singing, laughing, crying, going mad. Your Granny was heavily pregnant with your Dad then so she wasn’t doing much dancing.

My dearest friend in the world Monica, and my other friend Beryl and others used to play tennis after school for a while. The woman [owner] was a Seventh Day Adventist so she wouldn’t take money on her Sabbath, Saturday, so we used to put the money for hiring the court in her meter box on the porch and she would collect it after sunset. Everyone seemed to play tennis a lot then. We used to have really heavy wooden racquets with thick (I think it was cat gut) strings. Wow! – how times change. We used to go for lots of hikes then and from my very early years until I was quite old we all went to the pictures on Saturday afternoons. Our childhood and girlhood seemed much safer then – or is that just my perception? We could go and play all day and only nip home for meals even when we were quite small and we all came home safe in the evening. Twilight was a wonderful time and kids used to play all sorts of games in the evening and dark then sit and frighten each other with ghost stories and wild, improbable tales which we swore were true.

We used to go mushrooming a lot on peoples’ farms around Dapto, and we used to go picking blackberries which Mother made into luscious jam and pies and jelly. Donald used to pick blackberries with other kids and send them by train to Victoria to IXL Jams. IXL used to pay so much per kerosene tin full – everything went in to the tin of course, old mouldy ones (they would give a nice, fruity flavour to the jam) as much water

as they could get away with and sundry spiders, grubs and other interesting wildlife.

When we lived in Cliff Road, Evylin, your granny Olive and myself all slept in the same bed. Evylin would have been in her mid twenties and your Granny would have been in her late teens. I don't think I minded much but they must have hated it. It was very common then and of course it saved on sheets and blankets. While we lived there Evylin had a big vegetable garden which took up nearly the whole yard and I had two sheep – Patty and Paddy. The sheep used to attack everyone except me. One day they weren't there any more and I was fobbed off with some story, but I found out later they were taken to the butcher. It is a good job I wasn't told at the time – I'd have committed suicide again to teach them all a lesson.

Evylin had a handsome and charming boy friend at that time. He originally brought the sheep from Yass and he had a car. It was an Essex and it had canvas curtains instead of glass for windows. It had a running board to step up on to get in and had wheels with spokes. To start it you had to insert some metal gadget into the front under the radiator and start it up, with great effort. When he took me for a ride I was so proud and hoped someone I knew would see me in it. It was a bit terrifying too though. That was only in 1940, Christine! Evylin later married this boy friend, Mac, and he is now eighty eight years old and still handsome and charming and suave. He was born on the day of the San Francisco Earthquake – the big one – in 1906. My beloved Evylin will be 80 this year and that makes me feel so old although she still treats me like a little girl.

Writing things like this remind me of all sorts of other things of course. My dear old Mum used to have a saying to suit every occasion and even most crises and I have passed them on to my children. Now they are passing them on to their children so perhaps that is a good way to remember Violet Taylor – our Mum and your great grandmother. She used to say to me when I was bewailing being ugly or fat – “Beauty is as beauty does my girl.” Even though she was poor all her life she used to tell me “Don't spoil the ship for a ha'porth of tar” and I have always followed that and I believe my children do too. If a big political leader seemed to get out of hand she used to say “I forgot t'was the torch I carried and I fancied they followed me” – very apt in this modern world too. If she thought she should get to work instead of having what she called “a spell” she used to say “This won't buy the child a frock or pay for the one she wears”. Mother was always telling me to “Mind your Ps and Qs my lady”. So, you can see why I was a good, well brought up girl can't you? I

was never smacked, but Mother could fix me with her beady eye and bring me into line. Mother was five foot and half an inch and usually weighed in at between six and a half and seven stone! She needed a beady eye.

I hope this is not too personal as I realise you really wanted something general about those times but I feel you will be interested because all those events helped to shape you, Christine. We were a bit different to a lot of families in that we always fought for good causes and a just society while others may have “got on” because they looked after themselves, but those people were good in their own way too and were all part of forming history and giving us our Aussie character. Lots of love to all your mob down there.

To Crystal Howe

My Mother – Violet Taylor

Mother was a feisty little woman and was interested in politics from an early age when her father used to take her to political rallies in Leichhardt where they lived and people were trying to get a Labor Member elected into Parliament – the first such in Australia I think. Her parents, Evelylin and William Hendry had seven daughters and one son. Her father was a carpenter employed by the Sydney Harbour Trust and earned two guineas per week – tradesmen were better paid than labourers. Two guineas would be \$4.20. He was a strong “Union man” and always attended his monthly union meetings. On meeting night he had threepence for a pint of beer. He must have looked forward to that monthly meeting eh?

Grandfather was badly injured at work when a piece of machinery or something fell on him. For more than two years he was almost bedridden and could not work. There was no Workers’ Compensation then so our Granny took in boarders to try and get enough money to feed the family. Fancy boarders, plus her own eight children in a little terrace house in Leichhardt! Granny always got bad press in our family – I don’t think my mother got on very well with her – and she looked like a cranky Queen Victoria in photos but although I don’t remember her I have a soft spot for her somehow because although everyone seemed to adore Grandfather I think it might have been Granny’s strength which kept everything together. Later, Grandfather was able to get work at the old Castlereagh Street fire station (long gone). In those days the fire “engines” were huge carts drawn by splendid white Clydesdale horses with plumes on their heads.

Grandfather died in 1913 (born 1862). Mother must have been devastated because she idolised her dad.

When mother was thirteen years old she “went into service” in mansions belonging to various wealthy people around Leichhardt. First she worked at Broughton Hall, later a Psychiatric hospital of dubious history, which was a private home belonging to a Mr. Rennie who was an academic and had his own telescope on the roof. Pillar of the community. Mother, I remember, worked from about 5 a.m. until the “dishes” were done at night. Mother suffered badly from chilblains all her life – your granny used to too when she was young – so one can imagine her misery, cleaning and setting those monstrous fuel ranges and fireplaces in the dark mornings. She worked seven days a week but was given half a day off once a MONTH on a Sunday but had to be back in time to wash the Sunday dishes. For this, she was paid seven and sixpence per week (75c). On her half day off she went home in the tram to see her family and gave her mother the seven and sixpence (minus the tram fare each way – probably one penny) to help with family finances.

Mr. Rennie had two unmarried sisters who lived in the mansion as well and they used to have the cream taken off the milk which they used on their porridge and then because they were benevolent they sent some of the skimmed milk to the undernourished children at the orphanage down the hill. That orphanage building is still there (three of my kin were in there in the 1800s) and Leichhardt Council can't make up their collective minds what to do with it. It should be enshrined as a monument to wickedness, evil, poverty, cruelty and misery perpetuated in the name of charity, godliness and discipline over the ages. Sorry ...SorrySorry – didn't mean to editorialise – blame it on my mother. Strangely, one of the most bitter memories mother had of this time was when she worked for a wealthy family called McCreadie. “Pillars of the community” as usual, although mother thought Mrs. McCreadie was an UPSTART. This “lady” used to put what mother called her “monthly cloths” out to be washed. That seemed to stay in her mind through all the years and no wonder – a thirteen year old girl washing them by hand. Most washing was done by hand then except for things which could be boiled in huge, steaming, bubbling coppers.

I have a postcard Grandfather sent to Mum in Bowral about 1905 or so where she had gone with the McCreadies to their southern highlands holiday mansion for a week or two. Most wealthy Sydney people had homes up there then and they used to take their servants with them of course. Mother later used to refer to them as the BUNYIP ARISTOCRACY. She didn't

have much esteem for “silver tails” – she had seen their antics up close.

During the traumatic years of bringing up a family in the Depression mother was always active in community affairs. She was on anti-eviction committees. If unemployed people couldn't pay their rent (they had NO money) landlords used to get the police to evict them and they used to throw the families out onto the footpath with their pitiful bits and pieces of possessions. The committees used to stand guard and as soon as the “wallopers” had gone they used to break into the houses and move the families back in until some sort of shelter could be arranged. We used to be evicted fairly regularly and mother was known for having chased a much hated and many propertied landlord off the premises with a straw broom – telling him she knew her rights as a tenant and he could not come on the property while she was the tenant. She wasn't paying rent of course – she had no money. My father would not accept the fact that his family who had nothing (we had a box for a table once) should be put on the street by someone who owned seven houses. I remember one AWFUL landlady forcing her way in (mother must have been out) and my big, handsome father saying to her, “Listen Missus, you can't tell me you got seven houses through honest toil.”

Mother was in anti-war organisations in the 1930s and unemployed organisations during the Depression. Evylin was born in Leichhardt, William in Thirroul, Jean in Goulburn, your Granny, Olive, in Orange, Donald in Blackheath and I was born in Portland but we lived in Cullen Bullen in an unemployed camp and Dad had built us a bag and iron humpy. When mother lived in Bathurst she was so poor she used to keep all her little children in bed during the day to keep them warm. She was deeply ashamed that her sisters visited her there and found her broom was a bundle of rags on a stick. It was there in Bathurst that her little girl Jean died but she kept all her sorrow to herself always.

During the war years Mother was active in all sorts of community organisations – campaigning to get a public maternity hospital for this area, sitting on committees to get healthy lunches provided in schools, and collecting “sheepskins for Russia.” Very diverse things. From the 1930s right up till her death she was active in radical womens' organisations and in the late forties, although she was very prim and totally respectable, her house was the distribution point for illegal literature when the Menzies Government banned some political parties and organisations. Mother had protested strongly against Menzies sending pig iron to Japan, which made armaments to kill our

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Australian soldiers in the Pacific war. Being “the baby” I was always there with her. Thank you Mum!

Mother was born before electric light, radio, motor cars, modern medicine etc. and I believe that one of the proudest moments of her life was when we went out into our backyard at Bellambi – she lived with us then – and saw Yuri Gagarin in the Soviet Union’s sputnik trundling across our sky [12 April 1961]. Her joy was incalculable. She couldn’t sleep that night because of excitement and felt that all her work over the years had contributed to that sputnik. I feel I owe her this homage.