RUTH'S STORY

She had chosen this historic town in the beautiful Illawarra district because she had remembered her time there as a young woman of 18, while working at the old AM Hospital, and knew at least two of the doctors who still worked in Wollongong. She had good health, determination, two small children, and five pounds in her purse.

[Arriving in Wollongong by train, Ruth called first on Frank Bevan & Son, Estate Agents, from whom she rented a room and use of kitchen for a rental of ten shillings per week with Mrs Ring in Atchison Street. Although the only bed in the room was a double one, Ruth paid two pounds for four weeks rent before calling on one of her mother’s friends, Mrs Adams, who had a small shop selling baby clothes. Mrs Adams agreed to buy from Ruth any baby clothes she had for sale.]

Leaving the little shop, Ruth went further down the block to a large store calling itself Walter Lance and Co. Here she invested in one pound of fine wool. From now until she found work in her profession, she would keep herself and the girls by crocheting babies bonnets and matinee jackets.

[Next morning, having enrolled the girls at the Catholic school “down near the sea” and promising to collect them after school] she then went to see the doctors with whom her mother [also a midwife] had worked years before. From these she received mixed
receptions. Dr Harry Lee told her “I cannot promise you anything. Mrs Cumbellick usually does my work”. Feeling rebuffed, Ruth continued on to the Kerr brothers, Dr John, the elder, and Dr Willie, two Scotsmen who had never married. They listened to her very kindly and promised to put work in her way. She was what was known as a district nurse. At that time women mostly had their babies at home, attended by a midwife, but not always by a doctor. The midwife would, after the birth, attend morning and evening for the first three days and then mornings only for the next week. She would bathe the baby and attend to the mother’s needs, show the mother how to handle the baby at the breast and on the tenth day help the mother up from bed. Mostly when the birth was imminent the husband would come and collect the nurse in a vehicle if he had one. The following days the nurse would walk to her patient.

Fortune was beginning to smile on Ruth. After the first day at school, the children reported that a “big” girl named Lucy and her little sister Dulcie Larkin, who was in Daphne’s class, went to their school and that they lived only a few doors from Mrs Ring. They could come and go to school with them also. This gave Ruth more time to make her bonnets and Jackets, which Mrs Adams bought and resold quickly. It could be said that for the first few weeks in Wollongong, Ruth fed her children with her crochet hook. As most intending mothers had already made arrangements while in the early stages of pregnancy, Ruth did not expect to attend confinements for some time. However, the Drs Kerr would ask her to do other work such as attending the needs of the elderly and bedridden or of people recovering from operations, where kindness, cleanliness, commonsense and a comforting manner were often more help than a certificate of general nursing. She would also attend the laying out of those who had died at home.

Ultimately, she was engaged to attend a confinement, on the recommendation of Drs Kerr. More work followed, and before long Ruth began to think of looking for other accommodation. Mrs Ring was the utmost in frugality. She would boil an egg in the kettle and then use that water to make tea to save water [or gas?]. She also had other annoying habits of remarking on the mount of gas Ruth used for cooking. She was rather impatient with the children, whom she thought too noisy. She did not know that they, perhaps unwittingly, were enjoying their first real freedom for many months [after living in an orphanage in Sydney while Ruth did her training]. Ruth considered she was now earning enough to move into a place of her own, so early in 1922 she moved into a
furnished flat building in Lower Crown Street. This was called “Ozone Flats” and the newcomers were on the ground floor. This site was very handy to school, but after a short time Ruth found the much larger weekly rent difficult to sustain. Then Dr Willie Kerr asked her if she would contemplate taking a live-in position with a Mrs Moore, a widow. The old lady was bedridden and needed constant attention, which she was not having despite the fact that she had an unmarried daughter living with her. Ruth would live in and draw quite a generous weekly salary. She thought this was an opportunity to build a reserve - but what to do with the children? There was only one place: into the orphanage again. This time it was a large old boarding convent close to the beach, run by the order of Good Samaritans - the same as had operated the orphanage. Much as it distressed her and much as the children hated the idea, it had to be. So in 1922 the girls were again separated from their mother. They were very unhappy, as most of the girls were daughters of well-to-do parents, some of whom lived as far away as Nowra. They had better clothing, and as children so often can be, were very cruel to the two obviously poor children. However there was one consolation: the convent was so close to the sea, it was only a short walk to the “Ladies Baths” sheltering on a rocky ledge below flagstaff hill. They descended to the swimming pool by steps cut in the rock face. There were two pools, one for those who could swim, and one very shallow one for babies. The pools had been cut from the rocky ledge bordering the sea and were cleared out twice a day by the ebb and flow of the tide, which sometimes came running in over their lips to the steps. In the summer days after school, two nuns would take the children in a “crocodile line” to the baths. Of course the nuns did not enter the water, but directed from the edge. Ruth made the children bathers of black satin. These consisted of bloomers reaching to the knees and sleeveless tunics reaching below the waist. They were piped around the necks, armholes and hems with white. The girls loved the walk over the cliff and down the steps, and jumping very bravely in. Before long they could dog-paddle and before they left the convent they could swim.

[This arrangement lasted about a year before old Mrs Moore died and Ruth stayed on as a tenant pending settlement of the estate.] Meanwhile she had bought a little sulky and a quiet pony. The pony’s name was Tess and the children loved her and soon learned to harness her to the sulky. This form of transport enabled Ruth to work in surrounding villages. It soon became a common sight to see Nurse Seymour driving out to Figtree or Unanderra or north to Fairy Meadow. Many babies were born with her attendance at
Mount Keira or even Mount Kembla. Many times the children would wake in the morning and find their mother gone. They would get their breakfast, cut the usual jam sandwiches and go off to school. Their mother would usually be home when they returned.

Tess grazed in the paddock at the back of the house and if called at any hour, day or night, would come for a crust of bread. She would be harnessed to the sulky and off they would go. Coming home sometimes at night along a lonely road, Ruth would sing the old songs she had known as a girl and if she stopped Tess would toss her head and whinney.

Came the day of the auction to finalise the estate. Ruth bid on all the pieces of furniture she needed. The auctioneer was the son of Frank Bevan & Co. whom she had first contacted, was exceedingly quick to knock them down to her. She also bought for forty pounds the block of land (beside the house) where the old fruit trees grew. She continued to rent the house from the daughter Jessie, who wanted to keep her piano in the house until she was ready to move or sell it.

By the end of 1925 Ruth had paid off the block of land and had started to think about her dream of building what was called a lying-in hospital, in reality a little hospital solely for the birth of babies. The old fruit trees mostly were cut down, but a fig tree, a gum tree and an old grape vine were retained. These were to prove very useful in later years for the making of jams.

Every Saturday afternoon, the girls were able to go to the pictures in the large Crown Theatre. It was threepence to go in and they had a penny to spend. The silent serials just could not be missed and Mr Platt played galloping music as Tom Mix raced across the prairie, or love music as Rudolph Valentino made eyes at Gloria Swanson.

Every day in summer they went to the ladies baths after school and did not mind the long walk home carrying books and wet costumes in towels and suitcases.

In 1926, the little hospital was built. It was of brick with double walls, had room for mothers, a labour ward, a parlour which served as an office, a long hall between these leading to a dining room, kitchen and private bedrooms. The girls slept on the back
verandah and listened to the roar of the surf on the beach at night. Ruth named her little hospital “Weerona” which she said meant “resting place” in aboriginal.

Whatever it meant, it soon became well known as a place of tenderness and comfort, skilled nursing and above all, good food. Ruth often said “Not all people know if they are receiving good nursing, but they all know if they are receiving good food.” The old stone house had a succession of renters once Ruth moved into the new building with new beds, tables, etc.

Daphne attended secondary school and Mildred helped at home and was soon responsible enough to leave while Ruth continued district nursing to the outlying places. Tess had now been sold, much to the girls’ sorrow, but Ruth in 1927 bought a car. This was a Chevrolet tourer with windows which had to be put up in case it rained. It cost her 206 pounds. Now she could travel far and wide. Also in the new building a telephone had been installed, all of which made for more convenience. After many enquiries, it was found that Tess had been sold to an ice-cream vendor, whose pace was so slow the girls were satisfied she would not have too hard a life. With the transfer of Hoskins’ steel works to Port Kembla in 1928, Wollongong grew apace, and so did Ruth’s nursing practice, so much so that she was obliged to employ extra help. She still did district nursing, so needed a second person to be with Mildred when she was away. This was easily solved as a young girl Irene McAlister who was 18 years old was eager to fill the position, and as she lived next door, there was no problem with her accommodation. At 17 years Mildred obtained her driving licence and so was able to drive to Sydney occasionally with a friend to see her sister at boarding school.

In 1933, Mildred now 21, was able to enter Crown Street Women’s Hospital to train as a midwife, and after completing a teaching certificate, Daphne could take Mildred’s place until a teaching position became available.

Daphne came home in 1933 knowing that she would have to wait until notified of an appointment to a school. Ruth was delighted to have her, as now at 18 years she could take over the work which Mildred had done. It was a very busy year, but Daphne proved a great help and Ruth still did some obstetric work. The depression had hit Wollongong heavily, but babies still seemed to be an ongoing crop. At this period unmarried moth-
ers started to arrive, from outlying places mostly, sometimes from as far away as Appin. This state was then looked upon as a disgrace, and mothers always went home leaving the baby behind for adoption. Some babies remained at Weerona for many weeks until adoption could be arranged and Ruth treated them lovingly and sometimes hated to see a baby go.

Irene, the girl from next door who had helped for a time, had now left to be married so Ruth and Daphne managed by themselves. It was constant work and many a day Daphne would bathe five babies before breakfast. Weerona had become known for its good meals and particularly for its home-made jams, from the old fig tree and grape vine which ran along the trellis at the back verandah. The Kerr brothers had retired by now, except for consultation for special cases by Dr John. They had working for them a Dr Finlayson who was a charming down-to-earth doctor whose dedication and patience Ruth often praised. While waiting for the right moment to assist the mother he would come and sit in the dining room and have a quiet doze. A little later on a young Dr Wiseman - son of the local chemist - came to the practice. He was an excellent doctor for childbirth and he became a lifelong friend of Ruth’s.

In 1934, Mildred was home again having completed her training. This took some of the load from Ruth and for a short time they both did district work. In March Daphne received her appointment to a school in Sydney, and had to leave once again. She still continued to come home each weekend as the bond between Ruth and her two girls was very strong.

The year 1934 held more grief for Ruth. She received word that Alec [her brother] was not well. He had been operated on for varicose veins and had not seemed to have recovered. Ruth went to Sydney to see him and found out that he had inoperable cancer of the spine. He died soon after, at the age of 46.

So passed 1937, 1938, 1939 and by then Ruth was experiencing grave fears about her health. The hard toil of the earlier years had taken its toll, and the many sleepless nights had all contributed to make her feel tired and in need of the holiday which she had never enjoyed. Her medical condition required her to give up her work, so a buyer had to be found for the hospital, its contents and its goodwill. This did not take long and in
early 1940, negotiations were arranged whereby the goodwill and contents were sold and the building rented. Mildred was to be kept on as a trained nurse, but to work daily and live at home. Ruth bought a home in another part of Wollongong and was able to travel to work each day.

In February 1940, Ruth underwent an operation in Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, and that night Mildred and Daphne were at her bedside. Ruth recovered quickly and was soon home in the house she had bought. She was free of the discomfort and almost unendurable headaches she had suffered for years, and looked ten years younger than before her operation. Soon she was full of energy again and was beginning to miss the babies at Weerona, so much that she was very sorry she had sold her little hospital. She was 55 years of age and wanted something to do. She found time dragged on and so spent some time in the garden of her new home. She also kept house for herself, Daphne and Brian (Mildred's son) who was now a sturdy 3 1/2 years old. Mildred had found that she needed to sleep in at Weerona because somehow babies seemed to arrive often at night. So Nanna and Daphne had Brian most of the time.

This was wartime but no impact seemed to have been felt in Wollongong as yet—although Daphne and a few friends were taken on a tour of the steelworks which now lit up the night sky to the south of Wollongong. [Here followed a description of the steel-making process which is omitted for economy of space].

When asked what the present output of steel was being used for they were told it was being sent overseas to make "Anderson Shelters" to protect against air raids. This brought home the war even to this peaceful country. Of course by this time the Australian 6th Division was in England and the 7th Division in the Middle East, or soon to go there. One of Daphne's school friends who had often stayed with her in Wollongong had married after a two weeks romance and he had sailed to the Middle East. One physical sign of the times was the cutting of the new road down the mountain side. Bulli Pass or the coast road, sometimes damaged by slide, was the only access to Illawarra by road, and so a new road was built in quick time called Mount Ousley Road. Daphne used to stand in the playground at Balgownie [school] and look up the mountain just above and see a white scar with little beetles moving along it. These were the workers and machinery supplying a second route from the industrial centre which
Illawarra had now become. Soon the blackout came into force and no longer was there a glow from the many industries a few miles further south.

Wollongong had become an industrial target as Japan entered the war. Coupon books were the order of the day and fairyland lights once seen from Bulli Pass were now a thing of the past. Air-raid wardens were on the watch for any person not using blinds and screens. Rumour had it that guns had been installed on Mount Drummond and certainly a long tank trap had been built for protection of the vital steel works. The road up Mount Ousley was completed thus giving another access to the high country. It was thought had there been an invasion, all the prize dairy stock of Illawarra would be drawn up to the highlands. In January 1942, each day the practice siren went off to acquaint people of the sound. A few minutes later the all clear would sound and so everybody became rather complacent. One night at the usual hour the siren went off, but the all clear did not sound. Mildred said “This is the real thing - what will we do?” Daphne said “First thing you must do is pull down your blackout curtains and dim all the lights.” The people next door with a precious baby rushed down to the air-raid shelter two streets away where the tired, uncomfortable baby cried all night. Ruth was affected with stomach pain, but Mildred and Daphne just stayed in the house and nothing happened. Daphne’s husband in the country had been listening to the wireless that night when suddenly all broadcasting ceased. He was aware that something was wrong but could not ring, as in those days there was no telephone service to the place after 6pm. Later on it was said that an unidentified plane had been observed over the coast. Hence the air-raid alarm.

However it was decided that Wollongong was a dangerous place to be with the Japanese army seemingly unstoppable all over the South Pacific and threatening New Guinea. Ruth remembered W.W.I and often gave thanks that she had no sons to sacrifice in this war. Ruth spent her later years travelling and visiting friends in rural New South Wales.

[During these years, Ruth accepted a number of brief live-in engagements caring for children and households for couples away on holidays or else with illness in the home]

There were more people wanting Ruth than she could attend. Mostly they wanted a responsible elder person who would be able to mind small children if the parents had a
social engagement. Some wanted a household manager if they went away, others wanted a companionable baby-minder. One interesting position which Ruth took was to manage a small maternity hospital in Camden. This time brought back many memories for her, some of which she would rather forget.

So as the years slipped by and it became increasingly clear to Ruth that she could not live happily with Mildred and her second husband. For some reason, never fully explained, the nurse renting Weerona decided after twelve years to close up and retire. This left a gap in Ruth’s income, but ever resilient, she decided to convert the building into three flats and live in one herself. This she did and so returned to the place she had known so many years before. She still continued to accept her managerial positions.

But the years were catching up, and at 70 years Ruth decided it was time to rest. Her last position was in the home of a man who was of managerial status in a firm of jewellers. He had two small children and a wife recovering from an operation. The little boy won Ruth’s heart. He would climb on her knee and cuddle her saying “I do love fat ladies.” This was not a compliment but it found favour with her. When she left she informed her employer it was her last job, so no more recommendations to friends. Before she left, he presented her with a complete dinner set of English bone china. This is now a treasured keepsake of her grand-daughters.

[Settling back into her flat at the former hospital, Ruth lived on for another ten years, occupying her time crocheting as she listened to radio, but battling against glaucoma which eventually caused her to abandon fine crochet work and resort to using wool with a coarse needle. She joined a civilian widows group, at which she met many old friends and made new ones. For her 80th birthday on July 21, 1965, Paddy Healy arranged a birthday party at the soldiers club. Only a fortnight later she became very ill but refused to go to hospital, preferring to go to Mildred’s place, but insisting on walking to the ambulance. The combined efforts of Mildred, Daphne and Dr Wiseman could not save her.]

On 26th August 1965, with Mildred and Daphne on either side, she passed away peacefully. Dr Wiseman came and his remark was “she was a grand old lady.”