

FIRST WHITE WOMAN IN FINSCHHAFEN

by DOROTHY GROVER

She was 80 this month, but the pioneering spirit in Mrs. Melinda Morris, of Parkdale, still burns as brightly as in the early 80's, when she had the distinction of being the first white woman to land at Finschhafen and other place where our men have been fighting.

She believes, too, that she was the first white woman in the Northern territory and Barkly Tableland. It is not a distinction which any woman would choose, but, having won it, she would have something of which to be proud, especially if, like Mrs. Morris, she had a large family miles and miles from civilisation.

"I was born in Devonshire," she told me," and as a young girl I was sent to Australia for a holiday with relatives, because" - and here she gave a little chuckle - "I was the weakling of the family."

She married Mr. Richard Morris, and accompanied him to the Barkly Tableland when he went there to manage Barkly Downs cattle station, owned by Harold Finchatten, who represented North Queensland in Parliament, and was a brother of the Earl of Winchelsea, after whom the Victorian town of Winchelsea is named.

In these lonely parts Mrs. Morris had six children, with no doctor or mid-wife to help them into the world. When her third baby was coming she set out on a six weeks horseback ride to Cooktown, expecting to find another white woman there. She was accompanied on her long trek by her two children, an aboriginal woman, and black boy - the latter a most important member of the party, for he led the way when they had to ride across rivers in case there were any alligators!

LONELY HUT

But the white woman Mrs. Morris expected to find in Cooktown had left by the time she arrived, so during a week's confinement Mrs. Morris was cared for in a lonely hut by two bachelors, whose concern for her welfare she has never forgotten. Another time the wife of the owner of a cattle station, nearer civilisation than the Morrises, lent her the services of her husband as "mid-wife" saying, "He assisted me in my confinements, and has had enough experience to be a comfort to you."

It was when she was going to have another baby, and decided to go south, that Mrs. Morris was taken aboard the boat of the German explorer, Finsch. There was no means of learning when a Burns, Philip trading steamer was due, so she had to chance finding one in port. The only vessel there was Finch's, which had been chartered for a scientific expedition. He agreed to take her to Thursday Island, where a British India Line steamer would take her south.

"I was treated like a queen during that trip with Finsch," she said, "We called at lots of islands, and each the crew insisted that mine be the first foot ashore." Thus she became the first white woman on what was later called Finschhafen.

Although Mrs. Morris took other difficulties of the Far North in her stride, the long drought of the early 80's was too much even for her tough spirit. For weeks supplies had to be rationed, and they were completely exhausted when eventually some fresh stores arrived. (It cost 50 Pound a ton to transport goods by bullock wagon from the Gulf.) By that time, however, her children were so weak that she was picking blackberries - the only vegetation still living - and forcing them between their lips to keep them alive. There was not enough water to give the dogs, so one man kept spitting on the tongue of his favorite dog to try to save its life.

At one stage during the drought the Morrises tried to get through to Darwin, but had to turn back, and the spot is still known as "Morris's Turnback."

SPIRIT OF INDEPENDENCE

I said the pioneering spirit was still very much alive in Mrs. Morris, and this is why. That independence, which was so essential throughout her trials in the early days, she still clings to with a

tenacity that is as remarkable as her youthfulness at 80. So that she can retain that independence to the end, she prefers to live alone at her farm at Parkdale.

She milks her cow daily, and recently, when a heifer died, she skinned it and cut it up because it was too heavy for her to drag away and bury.

Plenty of fresh air and exercise is her recipe for good health. Till two years ago, when she had an accident, she had not had a doctor for 40 years. My story would not be complete if I failed to tell you of Mrs. Morris's passion for reading. Books line three walls of her sitting-room. "I would sooner buy books than clothes," she told me. "I've only had one new hat in three years. You see, I would sooner put something into my head than on it."

She pointed with pride to the cosy, well-fitting navy woollen stockings she was wearing. "That's how I solve the stocking problem," she said "They're made out of the sleeves of an old jumper." Neither does the shortage of corsets worry Mrs. Morris. She has never worn them, and many a younger woman would be proud of her straight back and comely figure.

Among Mrs. Morris's proudest possessions are carved thuranga sticks, given her by Boko, the one-eyed chief of a tribe in the Far North.

"These sticks would be my password among any of the tribes if I ever went north again," she said. And I fancied there was a nostalgic note in her voice.

Transcribed from a newspaper interview Melinda gave in about July 1944

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