



# Marge McCann

Now living at Majors Creek Marge, known as Bobby, has published a book about her long and colourful life.

She allowed *BWD* to publish a few excerpts ...

I WAS BORN ON THE 2ND February, 1928 at Lakemba, Sydney, delivered by Nurse Gee, a midwife and weighing 12lbs. My name is Marjorie Joan Berriman — but I later became known as Bobby after Bobby Breen, the young boy singer from the picture *Rainbow on the River*.

My arrival meant there were too many mouths to feed in our family so my maternal grandmother was put into the 'old people's home'. It was really an asylum and she died of a broken heart. Dad's decision to remove her affected my mother so much that she didn't want to care for me.

It was the beginning of the great depression and my father, who was a builder by trade, was out of work and decided to buy a taxi located at

Punchbowl Station that was going cheap.

I was six weeks old when my mother started driving the cab during the day while my father minded my two older sisters, Betty, aged four and Caroline, aged six, while he worked on small jobs at home.

Mum would breastfeed me while waiting for a fare. She would sit all day without taking a fare. Dad would sit all night, again no fares. They couldn't work out why nobody wanted to take their cab until a friendly fellow told my father why. He said the previous owner had a mistress as well as a wife. He got his mistress pregnant and when she drove the cab, she too had a baby on the front seat. But she was called

all sorts of things by the locals, and her child a bastard!

My father immediately put up a large sign that said 'UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT' as people thought that my mother was the mistress! Business then started to improve.

## Back to the city

At the end of 1931 my father decided to move us back to Sydney. My mother was eight months pregnant with my brother, Desmond Arthur.

Dad packed up his brother's lorry with the piano and bits of furniture tied on with rope and put us three kids on the back. It was a bitterly cold, dark night travelling on the back of the lorry and I was sitting on the outside to keep my two sisters warm. When I saw the city lights it was wonderful and I yelled, "I can see the lights of Syd-in-ee". I still feel the same when I see lights at night.

My dad rented a house at Lakemba. There were only gas street lights which were manually lit each night. The house had small gas lights in the main rooms. The stove was heated by fuel, wood, coke or coal. In the backyard

we had a huge pepper tree. I spent many hours climbing higher and higher in that tree. It was my world.

Our toilet was further up the yard with a wooden seat and a large pan under it with a hole. Once a week the 'nightman' would remove the full pan and leave an empty one. If the pan was too full, he would pour some out onto the grass, and then swing it onto his shoulder on a leather pad. He'd then run to the waiting truck, slide the full one in, pick up the empty then run to the next backyard dunny. I saw him as a bloke who knew what he was doing and would often stay awake on the nights he came so I could see how he performed his job. Later in life, working as a professional cleaning supervisor, I appreciated my 'nightman's' time and motion methods.

There was no toilet paper rolls in those days. We'd cut newspaper into piles of 6 by 4 inch squares. Punch a hole into the corner, thread a piece of string through it and hang it on a nail near the seat. On Christmas Eve, mum would wrap a piece of Christmas pudding in brown paper and leave it on the toilet seat for the nightman. He would eat it on the truck during his ride around the area. They called them the nightmen because we didn't see them during the day.

I would always go out and say good day to him. Nobody would be game to go to the toilet at night as it was usually pitch black and the toilet was up the back of the yard. The nightman might come if you were there in the dark. So we would use a jerry at night which was a porcelain bowl with a handle, or tin which made a noise and was in the kids' room. The jerry was also called a potty or a chamberlain.

## Work during the war years

It was 1942 and I had left school when it was no longer compulsory at 14 years and three months of age. My mother said we all had to start paying board when we turned 14. My first job was working in a milk bar at Punchbowl where I served customers behind the counter. I also did voluntary work as a seamstress making gaiters for the soldiers.

Volunteers worked for the War effort making up food parcels to be sent to servicemen on active services. The parcels contained fruitcakes, eggs covered with cold dripping in tin containers and canned fruit.

The war opened up new opportunities for women who were paid for men's work. I was 15 when I started in the grocery trade on male rates of pay with a nice lady boss who taught me the

## LIFE HOW IT ONCE WAS



BOBBY SITTING ON THE TABLE WITH SISTER HEATHER, DESMOND AND HER DAD AT COAL BURRA, NEAR NOWRA. "DAD ALWAYS TOOK THE FAMILY CAMPING AS HE LOVED THE OUTDOORS AND WANTED TO SHARE THE EXPERIENCE WITH US."

trade. I started work at 'Goodlands' in Lidcombe as a grocery assistant and I soon had a bank account to put every spare bit of money in.

It was expensive to travel there by train so I applied for and got an experienced grocery hand job with the Derrin Brothers in Enmore where the manager was a very active elderly lady who trained me in all aspects of running a Derrin's store. In those days groceries were supplied in bulk. Goods like salt, sugar, dates, sultanas etc all had to be weighed and put in thin brown paper bags. Imagine six pounds of sugar in a thin paper bag which would often split and then we would have to wrap it in newspaper, because we didn't have enough big bags to repackage it!

Every week we would weigh up the groceries and package them into thin brown paper bags. The clear honey came in a large drum which was fitted with a tap at the bottom. During the summer months the honey ran freely. I would wait for it to fill and then trim it off. During the winter months the runout was very slow so I would serve a customer or two while it filled. Sometimes I was lucky but most times it overflowed and I would softly tell myself how stupid I was while cleaning up the sticky mess.

The butter would come in a butter box in one pound packets which we would then cut up into half and quarter pound blocks. A side of bacon had to be boned and cut on a cutting machine turned by a handle. Cigarettes and tobacco were scarce and only kept for our 'special' customers who were those who placed weekly orders with

us. We sold wax matches as there were very few safety matches in those days.

During the war years tea and butter were rationed and we had to use coupons to reorder a box of butter or pack of tea for the store. Every family and single adult were given a sheet with food ration coupons that we would have to cut out before we gave them their tea or butter. We ended up with tiny slips of paper that we would then paste onto another sheet.

Trams were very popular for moving passengers to and from Sydney. The

BOBBY WITH SISTERS BETTY AND CAROL IN SYDNEY IN EARLY 1945.

