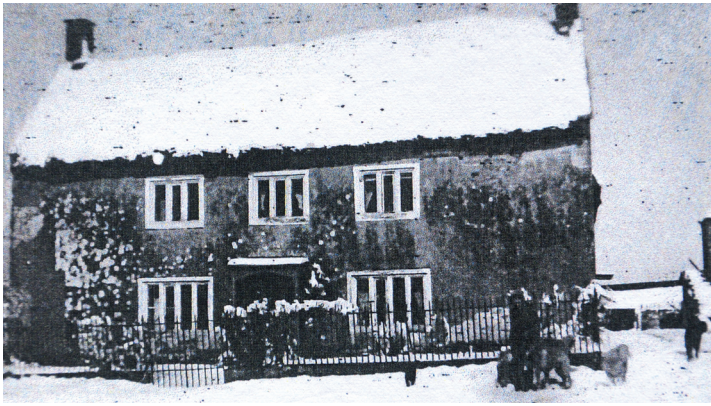


Ruth Anderson - Life in Australia - July 2015



Chaffleigh, Ruth's childhood home burned down on Boxing Day 1961 - it is still unsure if a spark from the Rayburn her mother had well stoked to cook Boxing Day lunch or a spark from the blow torch her father was using to defrost frozen water pipes caused the fire.

Continuing on from June 2015 SGC profile...

I came to Australia in my twenties, telling Mum and Dad that I would only be away for a couple of years.

I didn't imagine that I would fall in love with this country the way I did and never go back except for holidays, but of course various family members came to visit us here.

My Australian husband Ian and his son, (my stepson) and I first lived on a fat lamb and lucerne growing property at Meningie.

Here I tried to establish a garden in the sand, Ian and Matt would bring in loads of sheep and cow manure and we'd dig it in, we planted vegetables and strawberries and some flowers, but the wind most afternoons was savage and we were inundated with a beetle that came in swarms and ate everything in sight and came into the house under the doors and we had to sweep them up by the bucket full.

We moved to Cooyerdoo Station between Iron Knob and Kimba in 1985. Cooyerdoo was a 250,000 acre or about 900sq km sheep station that ran a maximum 8000 sheep and was nestled along the beautiful Middleback Ranges.

The station comprised of saltbush, bluebush, pearl bush, mallee trees and acacias, quite some difference from the lucerne and cereal crops at Meningie where we grew fat lambs.

The track into the homestead at Cooyerdoo was 6kms long and the track from the homestead to the woolshed was 26kms, a trip I was at first terrified of making on my own, fearing I would take a wrong turn around a dam and finish up lost in the bush.

I picked bright red Quandongs and they grew in such profusion that I packed the seeds with a little booklet on how to germinate them in a box with a picture of bright red Quandongs on the lid and Dick Smith marketed them at the rate of 200 boxes a month in the Australian Geographic.

It was a nice little bit of pocket money for me and I still love Dick Smith to this day!

He and his wife Pippa intended to visit Cooyerdoo to see the Quandongs growing and to explore the area but I think he had a helicopter crash or some other incident which prevented him from coming, but I kept the letter sent regarding the proposed trip and the things he wanted to see and do.

There was a neglected lawn around the house at Cooyerdoo with a couple of Myall trees and some native shrubs in one corner when we moved there and there was an area fenced off for a vegetable garden with a lonely grape vine growing in there.

We mulched and manured and watered all through those cold desert winters and blistering hot summers.

We grew tomatoes and spinach and onions and herbs and some strawberry plants which certainly attracted the lizards. The first morning I looked out of our bedroom window to see the Pan Tec truck had arrived with our furniture and a family of emus were pecking at the grey sides of it, I never saw them again so close to the house, did they think it was a great pool of water, or were they just curious I wondered?

In the boredom of those long hot summer days when after an early morning water run, Ian would lay under the kitchen table listening to the cricket and flies lay in thick black carpets along the outside walls of the house and all you could hear was the clock ticking.

I would collect the lizards I found in the garden, rad-dle them on their foreheads with red nail polish, put them in a box in the Toyota and take them out to the nearest dam and let them go.

This was an experiment to see if any of them every came back, but none seemed to.

Our little miniature fox terrier, Wally, wishing to help in this experiment often collected lizards carefully in his mouth and put them on the back door mat for me, rounding them up if they tried to escape.

Friends who came for lunch or for the weekend often brought cuttings or plants for me to plant in pots under the veranda and to creep up it and so a cool oasis was made for us to sit where we enjoyed a cold beer or glass of wine at the end of the day.

Barbara Lord from Kolendo Station brought me a small piece of Hoya one Easter and the gift tag said 'From the Kolendo Bilbies to the Cooyerdoo Bunnies.'

That little plant grew and grew and today it thrives on the wall at my front door and many friends, family members and neighbours have taken pieces of it too.

Isabel my neighbour currently has three pieces of it growing in pots that she intends to take to the garden club.

I made the decision at the age of 50 to study disabilities and immediately was able to get a job in Port Augusta, where we bought a small house.

Ian continued to be at the Station during the week, helping Matt (who was now married) but came into town for the weekends.

I continued my studies while working and ended up managing the Disability Centre for Alabricare in Port Augusta. Here we had a barbecue and raised vegetable and herb garden built at wheelchair height so that those with severe intellectual and physical disabilities could enjoy the sensation of sensory and tactile experiences, the feel and smell of mint or rosemary would bring a smile to their faces and those less disabled could plant, pick and help cook the vegetables on our Baking Day.

One day in 2007 while down here in Strathalbyn with my daughter Pip I saw a block of land advertised opposite Glyn Morris accountants and behind the old Bell's Emporium building.

We walked up the lane way and found a long narrow block running down to the river embankment and overlooking the park and bowling club.

It had a few huge boulders and some pepper trees on it. I sat on the boulder in the sun and I smiled and said to Pip. "This is mine, this is where I'm going to retire."

I was too terrified to tell Ian of my purchase for weeks and when I did he predictably roared like a bull.

I had worked hard and saved my money and had made a couple of good real estate deals and now the money from the sale of those and an inheritance from my parents enabled me to retire and build my little dream cottage on my block down here.

At about this time Ian was sadly diagnosed with heart and kidney failure, he also had diabetes, Paget's disease and COAD disease and had been in Intensive Care in the RAH very seriously ill.

It was decided that as he had to be near medical help and hospitals that he would after all come here and live. He was told by doctors that he only had three weeks to live and to put his affairs in order.

He proved them wrong and actually lived three and a half years and in that time he saw me establish a garden out of this block of land, he enjoyed sitting out the front in his recliner rocker with little Pixie dog on his lap watching me work and the people and dogs go past in the park below and he made friends with everyone who came to visit.

He particularly liked the company of David Dridan, the artist, who came to visit and they made each other laugh with their silly stories and Sarah Dridan gave me a tiny Echium plant that has grown huge and flowers with its massive blue spikes.

Everyone in Strathalbyn was so welcoming and helpful in every aspect of our new life, we have terrific neighbours, Nell and Isabel, who don't mind if I snip flowers from their gardens for Floral Art days.

The doctors at the Medical Centre and the hospital staff were just wonderful and it was easy for me to walk across the road to the hospital to visit when Ian was admitted on many occasions.

I found out that Ian's maternal ancestors, the Robinsons, pioneer farmers of Strathalbyn had lived and died here and then Ian found their graves in the cemetery and was happier to be here too.

The minister from the Church visited Ian when he was too unwell to get out and the church members were certainly very supportive after his death a fact that I really appreciated.

One day I heard Ian tell someone what a good idea it was to build a house here and I smiled thinking of all the grief he had given me over the purchase.

We called the Park below us our extended garden and how we loved to watch the Council gardeners tending it so beautifully for us to enjoy.

My son in law Jeff levelled the garden with a small bobcat to make areas and pathways that I then got paved or gravelled and a tiny lawn as well as an area filled with pebbles. My grandson, Joel, came with the firm he worked for and they built beautiful stone retaining walls and stone steps right down to the river. That little exercise cost me \$10,000, but it built the bones of the garden for me to work around.

I had a raised vegetable garden built from sleepers and a garden bed at the entrance that I filled with roses, salvias, poppies, foxgloves as well as bulbs from other people's gardens.

I joined the Garden Club and won things on the raffle or bought things from the trading table and neighbours and friends brought me cuttings. I also joined the Floral Art group and the ladies have given me succulents to plant down the impossible steep embankment towards the river where only a few natives have grown out of the dozens that were planted.

My eldest daughter Debbie pinches bits from my garden to plant in hers and I steal bits from Pip's garden - both my girls have inherited my love of gardening even though none of us profess to be too scientific about any of it - we dig, we plant, we fertilise we water and if it grows it grows, if it doesn't we dig it out and try something else.

I look out at my garden now though and smile - large flowering lavender bushes are beginning to form a hedge around the edge of the pebbles, daisy bushes are going to flower, jonquils are out and a few gladiolas are standing tall and that is appropriate as Dame

Edna is the Festival Director this year.

There are many ground covers and nasturtiums hanging down the retaining walls looking as though they have been there forever.

I have a Meyer lemon with huge lemons in an enormous pot where I can see it from the lounge room window, two coral coloured bougainvilleas thrive in large terracotta pots which I keep pruned and a pair of ficus stand at the front door in pots. I have just separated the Cliveas and planted them down under the wattle tree at the bottom of the garden.

I pick flowers and take to Ian's grave and remember all the pleasure that gardens have given me over the years and I read the Gardening Book he gave me in 1991 with the message 'To Ruth to assist you with your gardening skills' and oh boy did I need assistance!

Last year I travelled to Turkey with a group of 10 people and I was intrigued while up into the mountains to see flowers along farmyard walls growing innovatively out of hessian bags and we bought fruits and nuts from the farmers along the roadside.

I have a new friend now and recently I was lucky enough to escape the cold here and fly to Cairns with Donald for a week's holiday in the sun.

Here we visited the Cairns Botanic Gardens where there is an amazing collection of rare tropical plants and trees from all over the world, the enormous Cycads, Bromeliads, Bamboos and Melaleuca Wetlands.

We enjoyed mysterious walkways along streams, through lowland swamp forests and over bridges through rain forests. I have taken photographs so I can print them off to make greeting cards for my friends and family and for the Garden and Floral Art groups too if they'd like some.

We did a trip up to Kuranda Village by train through the World Heritage listed National Park of Tropical Rainforest. Dating back 120 million years these are said to be the oldest continually surviving rainforests on earth and home to rare and threatened plants as well as animals found nowhere else in the world.

After lunch at Kuranda we hopped on the Skyrail for the trip back down over the rainforest and it was breathtakingly beautiful. We saw huge elkhorn, stag horn and birds nest ferns growing naturally up the trunks of rainforest trees as we drifted over and tried to peer down into the depth of the forest and heard the call and whistle of rainforest birds.

I have come a long way from my childhood in Somerset to my little cottage on the banks of the River Angas in Strathalbyn but it has been an interesting and fulfilling journey and I love it when people come to visit for a cup of tea bearing something in a pot for my garden and they are welcome to take whatever they like from mine too. I must go now though for the sour sobs are taking over and weeding needs to be done.



A ginger from Ruth's recent trip to Queensland.