

## Isabella McBride - Sand and Sawdust

100 years of Tuncurry history through the eyes of Isabella McBride

Imagine the announcement: Tuncurry's residential power supply will be turned off at midnight each night, so that a local industry can use all the power for its output until the early hours of the morning.

An outrageous proposal today, this was reality for Isabella McBride and all Tuncurry residents in the 1940s. Isabella McBride, who will celebrate her 100th birthday on 21 February 2019, has worked hard all of her life, and she grew up in a MidCoast we would find barely recognisable.

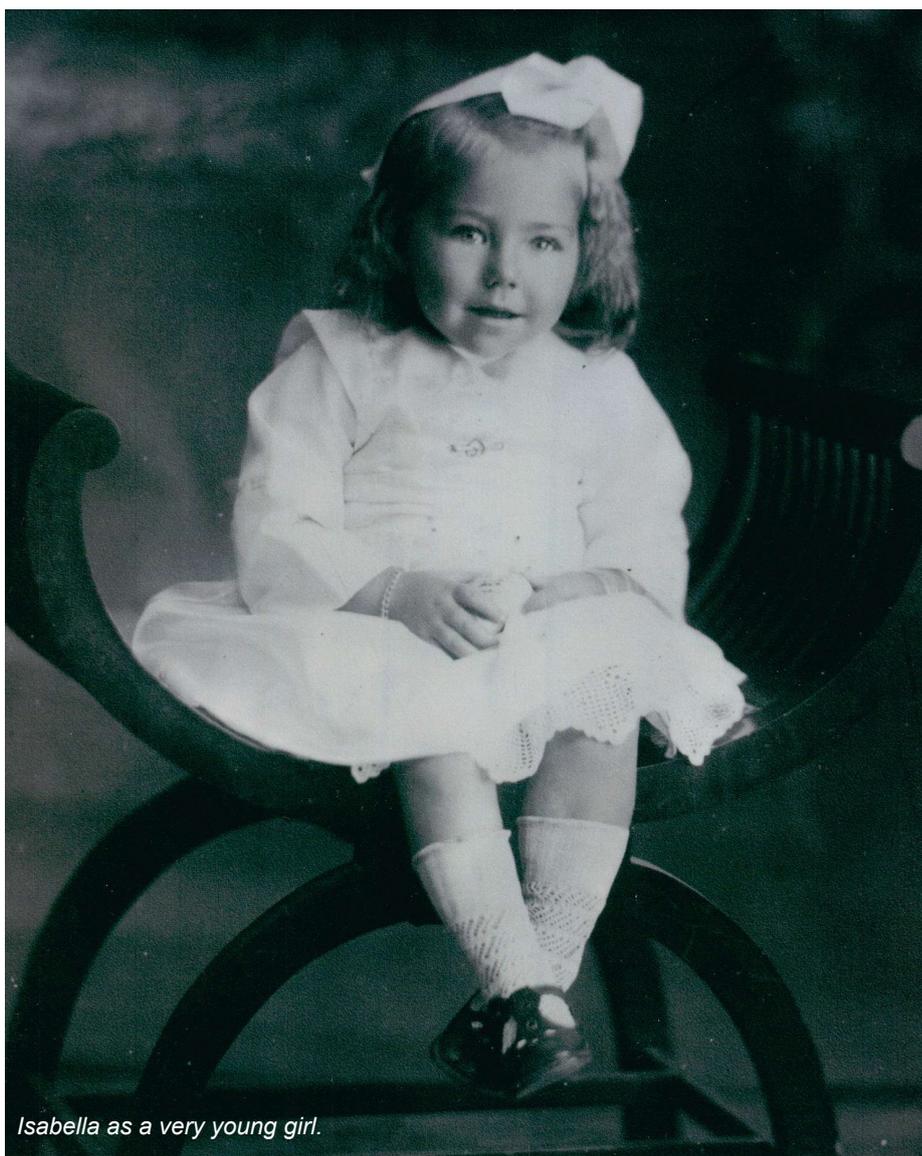
The youngest of ten children, Isabella was born at Tinonee at a hospital known as 'Matron Sawyers', a thoroughly modern event - the only one of her family to be born in hospital. Her oldest brother, William Frederick Hamlet Holden, had been killed on the World War One battlefields of Belgium before she was even born.

"My next brother Cecil fought in World War Two in New Guinea. He was an engineer, and thankfully returned to us and lived until he was 69" says Isabella. Only three of the ten children lived past 70.

When Isabella was one year old, her grandfather died, the family farm her father was working was sold and the large family moved to Blackhead. Her father began working on share farms. When it was time for Isabella to start school, she travelled with some older siblings and another family via horse and cart to school at Failford.

"Later, when there were only three of us going to school, Mum bought a sulky" says Isabella.

Her earliest memories of school at Failford include the teacher reading the entire Sydney newspaper out loud to the class on a Thursday, when it arrived on the mail coach.



*Isabella as a very young girl.*

When Isabella was 10, she went to live in Taree, with her married sister and her two boys, and she attended the convent school.

"I liked school, but art was my worst subject, I couldn't draw. I was good at maths, English, history and geography. When catechism was on, I got to do typing lessons."

When the Great Depression took hold, Isabella had to leave school. The nuns wrote to her Dad and offered to keep her at school without fees, but her father insisted she leave, saying he was worried the nuns would "turn her into a Catholic".

Isabella found work, housekeeping for a Taree solicitor Louis Martin and

his family. It certainly sounds like Isabella became one of the family, she was friends with Mr Martin's son and socialised with the family.

When she was staying with the Martins in their Forster holiday cottage, Isabella decided to go to the local dance, at the Casino, on her own. In her own words: "when I walked in, there's this fella in a black hat, sitting on the front steps with some others. I went inside, and talking to Lil, Leila and Coral and one said 'my brother will dance with you'". Abe McBride, in the impressive black hat, walked Isabella home.

Courtships in those days must have been difficult, without the conveniences of modern transport and with long working hours. Every second week on her one day off, Isabella would travel from Taree to Tuncurry on the bus and over to Forster on the ferry. Abe would walk her to the social and then she would travel back to Taree with the orchestra.

"One time Abe saw me back to the ferry and went home. Next morning we were still there, stuck on the sand spit, in the ferry. I just got time to get home, changed and straight to work - no sleep at all" says Isabella.

In 1939, Isabella married her Abe, at St John's Church in Taree, where she had been christened and confirmed. The Martin family paid for the wedding, despite the fact that as a married woman, Isabella would now leave their employment!

The wedding breakfast was at Rose's Cafe in Taree's main street. Isabella remembers that Mr Martin's son was her chauffeur in the family's car and the Martins walked to the service.

"Their son's fiancé, Sheila McMaster, helped me dress and loaned me her pearls to wear on my wedding day. I wore real pearls for the first time in my life!"

The next decade saw Isabella and Abe set up home, renting some rooms in Wharf Street Tuncurry. Isabella was kept very busy, with three children, Charles, Margaret and Richard born during those years.



*Isabella and Abe McBride on their wedding day, 1939*

Tuncurry was a town of 'sand and sawdust' - virtually unrecognisable from today, according to Isabella.

On the day Margaret turned one year old, they bought their first home, on the corner of Kent and Bent streets. "It was 400 pounds, we thought we would never pay it off" exclaims Isabella.

Through the years Abe worked day and night to support his family and help them get ahead. There was a shortage of men as many went off to War. Abe worked at the local butter factory, located next to the camping reserve, which doubled as the source of electricity for the township of Tuncurry.

Working a night shift from 4pm until 10pm or later, he ran the compressor for the ice maker (also to supply ice for the fishermen) and the electric light plant.

Electricity was turned off to Tuncurry at midnight each night, so that the butter factory could operate. Abe sent the butter to Newcastle twice a week.

During the war years, Abe was also the local meter-reader walking around town reading the meters and collecting money. This would take him three days. He would also assist a man from Wingham who came out to undertake work on the power lines occasionally.

Disaster struck when Abe had a bad fall from the power lines. He broke his back, pelvis and leg bones and spent six months in hospital, including one

month in Sydney. He came home in an ambulance on crutches and eventually had to have a shoe built up.

Isabella went straight to work, house cleaning cottages. "Abe didn't know about that, but we didn't owe any money when he came out of hospital - I kept all the bills paid" said Isabella.

The next move for the McBrides, in 1956, was to purchase a Tuncurry guest house in Taree Street - on the site where 'The Pines' units are today, which became their livelihood for the next 17 years.

Running the guest house was very hard work. Bank clerks, local teachers and other workers who were laying the sewerage and subdivisions for modern Tuncurry, used to board at the McBride's guest house.

Isabella cooked for all of them, making cut lunches each day, "guests couldn't have bought their lunches, there was nowhere to buy them".

A three course meal was provided each night. Cooking would have been a hot affair! "We had a big fuel stove at first, then I got a double oven" says Isabella.

Isabella cleaned, washed and ironed guests' clothing. Appliances were nowhere near as automated as they are today. Washing then was boiled in a copper and put

through a ringer. They raised their own poultry.

Meanwhile, the children had grown up, Charles worked with council, Margaret worked with Borthwick the solicitor and Richard was still at school.

When Abe's health was failing, the two took a break from the guest house and went on a cruise to Hong Kong. Sadly Abe passed away in 1974.

After the guest house was sold, you might have thought Isabella would have taken a well-earned rest. She became a very active volunteer in our community, working for Meals on Wheels amongst many other charities.

She travelled extensively with Richard and his family, visiting Ypres in Belgium, where her brother was killed, and also visiting France, Italy, Greece, Morocco, Thailand, Philippines and Bali.

She is very proud of her three children, eight grandchildren, 15 great grandchildren and her first great-great grandchild Rory, who is two.

Now Richard and his wife Edith help Isabella remain in her own home in Forster and she enjoys a new type of 'social' - at the Ageing to Perfection Over 90s luncheons at MidCoast Assist each month.

## Going places....

From travelling to school on horseback and then the luxury of making the trip from Blackhead to Failford via sulky, Isabella saw a lot of change in transport in the rural MidCoast region.

By the time she was a young working woman, she caught a bus from Taree to Tuncurry, and then a ferry over the Lake, to be able to attend a fortnightly dance with her sweetheart, Abe McBride.

It was not uncommon for the ferry to get grounded on the sandbar making the crossing, and passengers would simply have to wait until the tide turned and the ferry could move - often many hours!

Isabella spent one night on the stranded ferry on her return trip from a dance.

Gaining a drivers' licence and learning to drive was taken up enthusiastically by Australian women of Isabella's era, as more households managed to purchase cars.

She and Abe bought their first car - a Standard - in about 1952, for 200 pounds. Isabella could then drive to Taree for guest house provisions, and they took some family trips, including one family road trip to visit friends from Bathurst.

After retirement, Isabella travelled the world with her son Richard and his family.