

# The Sandy Hollow Line

## *Episode 4.*

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Most of the men came home for lunch as our tents were pitched as close to the line as possible. This was so that the gangers, or bosses, could check on the men if they stayed at home sick.

If a man was away sick, the gangers would barge into their tent, without warning, to check on them.

Gastro-enteritis swept through the camp that first summer and many of the men were unable to report for work. The gangers went from tent to tent with threats of the sack if a man was off work for more than one day.

My Frank was a strong young man and was never known to have backed down to any man but it hurt me to see him dejected and beaten by the threat of the sack.

As my Dad used to say;

***The bosses had the power behind them and we daren't risk the sack.***

Hygiene in the camp had improved slightly with most of us cleaning in and around our tents. There were still several families who remained filthy and with the open cess-pit the flies were everywhere.

The men working, were not given time off to use the toilet and were forced to do their business on the ground where they were working.

The men were very happy when the head-ganger went down with gastro and was away from work for four days. My Dad and baby were among the only ones who would escape this disease.

I led several deputations to the bosses to do something about the conditions and we soon had some 50 gallon drums placed in the camp for the garbage and they were collected every now and again.

After these deputations the head boss told my husband to make me be quiet or he may be sacked.

We had to accept the conditions as they were and it was hard on the women and children. The men also suffered as they worked in the tunnels with the dust choking them and the flies were everywhere.

The tents were so close together that there was no privacy and when it rained the floors became a sea of mud. It was impossible to light a fire on the floor when it rained.

Many a meal I tried to cook for my men with water around my ankles and with the tent full of smoke from the burning of the wet wood. They never complained as they sat down to a badly cooked meal. They were wet and tired and they ate in silence, keeping their thoughts to themselves.

In the winter we bathed in our galvanized tub in our tent and in summer we washed in the river. We would hang our meat-safes in the willow trees by the river and it kept the meat eatable. I made a meat-safe The bottom was wood and the top was a piece of tin with holes in it and the edges turned up. The sides were hessian and you hung it in the shade and kept the hessian wet by filling the top with water so that it dripped through the holes and ran down the sides.

A butcher came three times a week with the meat on the back of a truck covered up with a piece of canvas. There were always plenty of flies around.

We received our pay every fortnight and on pay-day the butcher always had bottles of wine to sell. There were many drunken brawls in the camp on that night.

I tried to run classes to teach the children to read and to write but they and most of the parents were not interested.

Reading was the one thing that kept me sane. I read every book that I could lay my hands on. Most of the other women had never read a book and could not read or write so it was difficult to have conversations with them.

For eighteen months I lived in this camp on the Sandy Hollow line. If anyone asked me what do I remember most about that time, what could I say?

Dirt, smells, flies, mud, tired men, harsh gangers, broken women, neglected children. I well remember them all. I have tried to forget this period of my life, when as a 19 year old mother and a wife, I was forced to live in appalling conditions. I can never forget.

Perhaps by remembering, I can show others how bad things were in those grim days and it may help avoid the same thing happening again.

People will say that things like this can't happen in this country.

It can happen. It did happen and it could happen again.

Dad always said that a War was coming. Few believed him.

Sixty five of the men who worked on the Line would enlist when War came in 1939 . Nine never came home.

His son and four of his sons in law would all enlist. Dad tried to go but at fifty five was turned down.

Frank joined the Army and was away until 1945 and he served in Egypt, Greece and New Guinea.

I was a bus conductress in the War years and loved the freedom of it all. I was a human being once again working for good wages and meeting new friends.

The luxury of a hot bath with clean, soft towels and sweet scented soap.

How did we survive those black Depression years?

I'd say; *With courage, a strong will and a great family love. If you have good parents, nice food, good comfortable clothes, plenty of beautiful flowers and a nice home, then your life will be just great.*

I have a good family and sure we have a few problems but we are always there for each other when there is a problem.

There is love in my family.

My Dad died in 1965 and he was a writer and a poet who numbered Dame Mary Gilmore among his friends. He lectured at the Sydney University on Australian Folk lore and music. He was the President of The Australian Bush Music Club.

The Sydney Morning Herald devoted a full page to his epitaph.

He wrote;

*I am an Australian, I speak Australian and I'm bloody proud to be an Australian*

*This story was mostly written by Linda McLean and I had much pleasure reading her words and I hope that I have given you some pleasure. Thank you Linda.*

*(John Imrie 12/4/2020)*