

## ***THE PIONEER WOMEN OF AUSTRALIA.***

This is the story of ordinary Women who lived in the outback and the bush of Australia. There are those who lived in the small Country Towns in the 1800's and the 1900's.

We will take a look at how these Women and their families survived in the new land and raised large families despite the floods, bushfires and lack of services that we take for granted today.

We will talk about their food and how they prepared it. They made their own furniture and household goods such as candles, butter, cheese and soap.

They learned how to deal with common illnesses and how to cope with the death of their children.

Isolation and lack of contact with other Women would cause hardship and there were plagues of rats, mice and insects and the ever present clouds of mosquitoes and flies.

Women helped their husband with shearing, droving, dairying, fencing and other farm work as well as giving their children some form of education.

There were Women of Chinese, German, Indian, Pacific Islanders as well as Aboriginals and all would contribute to the growth of our New Continent, Australia.

In writing about these remarkable Women you will often hear the words;

***Make do,***

Our Pioneer Women certainly had to ***Make Do.***

In the first years of the Colony most of the Women were ex-convicts who had been sent to NSW for 7 years for committing the crime of stealing a loaf of bread to enable them to feed their starving family. To break into a home would see a 14 year term.

When they had served their term they could marry and be granted a small block of land in the bush where they had to clear the land, build a home and cultivate a garden where they would grow food to keep them and their families alive.

Most of their land was where Aborigine people had lived for generations and most Women watched these people and saw how they used local items for giving them shelter and treating illnesses. Some made friends with local Aborigine Women and learned from them.

The first thing that was needed was a home and as there were plenty of trees around, some homes were built of logs that had been split and bark was used for the roof and for making a chimney.

Other homes were built using softer timber such as wattle and the *Wattle and Daub* home was popular. Here, the thin wattle branches were used to make the walls and a mixture of clay/mud and straw was used to render these walls, Some houses were then white washed with lime to make the place waterproof.

The roof was usually made of bark which was sewn together using rawhide strips. If there was suitable timber then shingles would be cut and they made a good waterproof cover.

A big problem was that the timber was very hard and axes and tools were soon blunt and damaged.

As the timber aged it would shrink and there was a constant need to fill any gaps with mud and straw. The inside walls were usually covered in

canvas or even newspapers. Anything to keep out the draughts and the ever present spiders and insects. This task fell to the women and children.

Galvanized iron would not be available until the early 1900's and was a popular cover for roofs and walls.

The men would fell the trees and cut the slabs and it was the Women who would build the tables, seats and cupboards.

Closer to Sydney there was a good supply of sandstone and men would cut it into blocks and many houses were built using this material.

Large logs were hollowed out and used as wash tubs for washing clothes and children. Water was obtained from nearby creeks and springs. Most women would wash clothes and children in the creek rather than have to carry heavy buckets of water from creek to home.

Floors were often made using termites mounds mixed with bees wax and rammed and this gave a firm glossy finish.

Two of the biggest problems were Flies and Dust. In 1850 a woman wrote;

***The weather is very changeable and can be over 100 degrees and can drop to the 40 degree temperature. There is always the dust. We spend our lives getting rid of it. It gets into the clothes, the food and into every nook and cranny. Then there are the insects and the flies in swarms. However I still like living here.***

In the summer, there were Bushfires and when the men were away fighting them the Women had to keep the timber house damp and give wet blankets to cover the children. She also had to deal with small spot fires close to the house.

She was also needed to provide food and water to the men fighting the fires.

In the first homes, the fireplace was at the center. In winter it was kept going day and night as there was plenty of firewood with large logs to burn while you slept. In warmer weather it had to be cleaned out every day and a new fire would be set to prepare the evening meals.

The kitchen was where the woman of the house ruled.

Before stoves there was always a huge open fire place which could burn large logs and there was a chimney, often made of bark, which would sometimes catch alight. Some chimneys would be made of bricks or river stones.

On the cold mornings the family would gather around the fireplace and eat their breakfast there.

Bathing was done in a large tub before a nice warm fire. Water was heated in a large pot hanging over the fire and you all used the same water which was topped up with the hot water. When you had washed yourself, you reached for a warm towel and dried yourself before the fire.

Over the fire hung chains with large hooks which held the pots and pans which could be raised or lowered. These pots were very heavy and you had to take care as being scalded by boiling water was common.

Before going to bed at night the fire had to be banked up and several logs put on to burn for the rest of the night. In the morning someone had to see that the fire was still going and build it up for the family to gather around. There were always ashes to be swept up.

Women made mitts of bark and cloth to enable them to handle the heavy pots and pans which had long handles as they could be very hot. All the utensils had to be washed and scrubbed every day and they must be kept dry as, being iron, they would rust. Any scraps of food left in them attracted rats and mice which were always present in the houses.

In 1860 Colonial Ovens were now making Cast Iron ovens which sat in the fireplace and they sold over 2,000 each year.

By 1890, Simpson and Company were making and selling 15,000 of their new Cast Iron ovens with a flat hot-plate on top and a separate compartment to have the fire burning small pieces of timber. This stove could be kept going day and night and food could be prepared in smaller pots and pans on the top and heavy dishes were baking food in the separate oven.

The Fuel Stove had arrived.

You could now whip up a tray of scones while boiling water and cooking a meal on the hot plate on top of the stove.

Women now had time to cook cakes and other fine foods and recipes were passed from Mothers to Daughters. Newspapers and magazines had special pages devoted to cooking and providing new recipes.

The new stoves had to be kept bright and shiney by using black-lead. Soap was made using fat from slaughtered animals which was rendered down and mixed with caustic soda, resin and borax. It was cut into bars and kept in an old kerosene tin.

In 1900 we see *Pearsons Pumice Sand Soap* being used in every household.

As grains were kept in hessian and calico sacks and were kept in the pantry, the biggest problem was the ever present rats and mice and a visit to any museum will show how they were dealt with by using many different traps and baits.

Water was a major problem and the first homes were built close to creeks and springs so that water had to be carried on buckets or containers. If the water source was not close then the containers were on a cart which was pulled by a horse.

In the 1900's Galvanized Iron was used to make large tanks which stored water from the roof

Some of the early settlers dug deep wells and water was obtained by using a bucket on a long rope. As the wells were deep they were a good place to keep food cool by putting it into a container and lower it down on a rope. It was a good place for setting jellies.

Food was also kept in a *Coolgardie Safe* which was a wooden frame with hessian sides and a metal dish on the roof which contained water that dripped and kept the sides damp.

Washing days were days that most women feared as they would have to chop a pile of wood to keep a fire going to boil water in a large tub to which she would cut up a bar of soap and put it in with the clothes. She would keep the clothes moving around by using a *Potstick*.

The *Potstick* was then used to lift the clothes from the boiling water and place them into another tub of cold water where they were swirled around. Then the clothes were lifted out and wrung damp dry by hand. In later years a mangle was used and this would sometimes crush buttons.

In the 1900's a third tub of cold water was used and a small bundle of Blue was added to the water. This was used with white clothes. *Reckitts Blue* was used in every household.

Any stains were removed by scrubbing the garment on a washboard which was a board with a metal set of ridges set on it

Then the still wet washing was finally hung out on a wire or rope line or even on fences and bushes to dry in the hot sun. At the end of a tiring day the garments were taken down and some would be ironed using a metal container with a flat base and a compartment on the top where wood chips were burning.

A cold winter's day with no sun could mean a disaster for the poor woman.

Some clothing had to be starched before ironing and corn flour was used at first but in the 1900 *Silver Star Starch* was a boon to all women.

Until 1940 most new houses were built with a laundry down the backyard, often with a dunny (toilet) attached. Mondays were usually washdays and the many Babies Nappies were done separately as they took a lot of cleaning, scrubbing and rinsing. There were lots of them in the big families.

This washing was always considered to be Women's Work and sometimes the man of the household would chop the wood for the fire before leaving for work.

The exhausted women would still have to prepare the evening meal after a full day's hard work.

The first lighting was done with candles which had to be made by women. Clarified animal fat was mixed with Beeswax or Alum. This

was placed in Candle moulds and wicks were made of cotton strips soaked in water with lime and saltpeter. As there were no matches, a fire had to be kept going 24 hours each day. This task fell to the women and children. Many settlers learned from the local Aborigines how to light fires.

Kerosene was available in the 1850's and soon it was used to replace oil in the lamps.

Lighting the home was a woman's job.

Women made do with calico bags and newspapers for curtains. As all produce came in calico and hessian bags and sacks, they were used by women for every purpose. Clothes and Curtains were popular and sugar bags were good carry bags. The calico bags were made into all manner of clothing items. You could be wearing a pair of underpants with Colonial Sugar on the seat. Corn bags were used as raincoats in the wet weather. It took several corn bags to make a bed with a few saplings. Chaff bags sewn together and stuffed with fresh ferns and sweet smelling grasses made a nice mattress. Some flour bags were made of linen and a 50lb bag made a nice pillow when filled with sweet grass.

The linen bags made good items of clothing and you could have a shirt or frock with;

***Pike Bros. Rice*** or ***Riverina Pride Flour*** for all to see.

During the Great Depression, heavy Jute bags were a prize as you could sew them together and make a ***Wagga Rug***. It would keep you warm in Winter.

As you can see a Woman's work was never done and most of the early sewing jobs were done by Candle Light at night after the children had

gone to bed. It was a time for darning sox and repairing damaged clothing.

The first Sewing Machine was invented by Isaac Singer and an agency was opened in Sydney in 1865. A *Singer Machine Man* would call and demonstrate a Machine and give a few basic lessons. He would leave a Machine and call back in a week make a sale.

*The Singer Sewing Machine* was the greatest invention of its day and women found that making clothing and curtains was easy and fast. Newspapers and magazines all devoted pages to show how to use your *Singer* and soon patterns were available at very low prices.

*Women of all ages loved their Singers.*

For many people today, the smell of eucalyptus and blue smoke arising from a Campfire with Billy Tea and a hot damper with Golden Syrup brings back memories that will last forever.

However it was the only way that early settlers had their meals.

Dampers came about in the 1840's and were simply flour, salt and water with a bit of Bicarbonate of soda. Knead it into a dough and place it in the hot ashes of your fire, turn it once and poke it with a wet stick and it was taken out and the ashes knocked off. It was very nice with Golden Syrup(*Cockey's Joy*).

The *Camp Oven* was a heavy iron pot with three legs and a heavy lid. It could be suspended over an open fire or buried in the hot ashes. How hot the ashes were and how long that you left it in the ashes could mean that there were many mistakes made.

Early settlers always tried to raise chickens (chooks) as they liked the fresh eggs and they could kill a bird now and then and have a fine meal.

It was important that strong pens were built as there were many large birds and animals who liked to have a chook for its dinner.

The chooks and their pens were the responsibility of the woman and the children.

Most of the early settlers had carried with them small bags of seeds that they would try to grow in plots close to the house. Pumpkins and melons were popular as they did not require a lot of looking after.

Fruit trees were planted and when they began to bear fruit it was made into jams and chutneys. Melon and Lemon Jam was a favourite.

The men would shoot kangaroos and wallabies and the meat was popular. Kangaroo Tails were placed in the ashes of the fire and when the fur was burnt off it was sliced up and made good soup.

Koalas, possums and crayfish were also eaten by early settlers. They were hunted and killed by the men and given to the women to prepare.

It was children who would learn how to search for a Native Bee's Nest and bring it home for mother to place in a linen bag and let it filter through –a very sweet honey.

This is the story of one woman who was a true Australian pioneer.

Her name was Jane McAviney and she was born in 1863 and she married Peter O'Reilly in 1883.

They built their first home in the Kanimbla Valley in the Blue Mountains. It was built on a ridge on the Cullenbenbong Creek. The house was built with a north easterly aspect which meant that it got plenty of sun and kept out the cold westerly winds in winter.

The walls were made of wooden slabs, the roof was thatched and it had a large stone chimney. In this building she raised 11 children.

When Jane gave birth to twin girls they were delivered at home by a Midwife. Her women neighbors came and brought bread, eggs, chicken soup, fruit and cakes and they cared for the other children and prepared food for her husband.

When one of the twins became ill, Peter rode to Lithgow to get a Doctor but it was no use as the little girl died. Jane's 16 year old son took the ailing child to the nearby creek and christened her, Veronica Jane. The other twin was named Rose and she would manage to grow into a very capable woman.

Jane would plant a Rose bush on the baby's grave.

In 1917 the O'Reilly family moved from the Blue Mountains to the remote Lamington Plateau in Southern Queensland where the elder son had established a Selection there. It was starting all over again for Jane and Peter.

They had to climb up to the plateau by an 11 mile steep track carrying all their possessions by mules. Jane would walk that track many times in the following years.

The O'Reilly house was a two room humpy with beds made of poles and chaff bags. The mattress was also made of chaff bags, sewn together and stuffed with Kangaroo grass. The main room had a big open fireplace which was made of bush stones. The family lived there from 1917 to 1925 when they moved into a bigger house.

The hearth fire never went out in all that time and Jane cooked for the large family on it. Stews and vegetables were cooked in Billy Cans and joints of meat and jam roly-poly were cooked in kerosene tins. The daily dampers were cooked in a Camp Oven

The new home was called *Green Mountain* and everything had to be brought up the steep track by mule or horse. Jane kept ducks and chickens and they were brought up by mules in corn bags with their heads sticking out of a hole in the bag.

In 1920 Jane ordered a new Fuel Stove and it was very heavy so it had to be taken apart and reassembled in her kitchen.

Jane was now able to cook pies, tarts, cakes and bread. She became a legend on the Mountain and in the next 20 years six more stoves would be delivered to her kitchen.

The O'Reillys would open a Guest House in 1926 and it became famous for its fine food and Rainforest Walks.

O'Reilly's Guest House is there today and I am sure that Jane's cooking is no longer a feature.

You are always made very welcome and can go on many wonderful Rainforest Walks.

Jane O'Reilly a True Aussi Pioneer, died in 1944 and the O'Reilly name is well known on the Lamington Plateau today.

*(John Imrie, 27/11/2021)*