

Croker Prize for Biography

Entry 1402

Wally the Black Sheep (Walter Ross, 1944)



Introduction

The blackest sheep in my family was my adoptive grandfather Walter (Wally) Ross. Born with an alias for a surname, he had a knockabout upbringing in Brisbane before finding his true calling in the cattle country of western Queensland. Returning after many years to Brisbane with my already-married grandmother, he led a life of increasingly desperate subterfuges to hide the real identities of their children. While he made a positive contribution to the urban landscape of his area, he got in trouble with the law and was a difficult man to live with.

Growing up in Brisbane

Wally Ross was born in Brisbane in 1884. His father had been living in Melbourne as John Le Gros before he moved to Brisbane in about 1883 and started using the alias Thomas Ross¹. He was born in St John, New Brunswick, Canada in about 1847. His mother was Margaret Tacey, born in London, England in about 1853. His parents claimed to have been married in Melbourne in 1873², but there is no evidence of this³.

Wally's family moved around the inner north of Brisbane in the 1880s and 1890s⁴. His eldest son Jack thinks he had hardly any schooling, as he wrote very slowly and laboriously, with no capitals and almost no grammar. Wally's first brush with the law was at age 17, when he was convicted of two counts of minor theft⁵.

Droving work

Despite his city upbringing, Wally really wanted to work with cattle, and by age 21 he was a drover based in Charters Towers. A legacy of this period was a long scar on his leg

after he had a tussle with an enraged bull and came off second best. In 1916, Wally gave up droving for a few years and moved back to his mother's house in the newly-subdivided Herston Estate⁶, working as a grader driver's assistant on road building projects.

In 1922 he returned to droving, based in Cloncurry⁷ and working for Sir Sidney Kidman. Kidman owned vast areas of rural land, and Wally would often drive 500 or more cattle through the Channel Country of western Queensland to the railhead at Maree in South Australia⁸. While on the cattle stations, he became an expert leather worker, and made saddles, reins, stirrups and other gear for use in his work.

By 1926 Wally was in Charleville, and there he met Nellie Bryan and they began a relationship. Nellie was working as a station cook, having given up nursing in Toowoomba for a stint in the bush. She married Henry Smithers in Charleville in early 1924⁹, but not long afterwards he walked out, leaving her with two very young children to support.

A new life in Brisbane

In 1926, Wally and Nellie moved to a rented house in Sandgate in Brisbane. Nellie was not divorced, so she was still named Smithers. As Jack was born while she was single in 1922, he was named Bryan after her, and Joyce (born just after the marriage) was named Smithers. Despite this, Wally told everyone in Brisbane they were Mr. and Mrs. Ross, and told their children they were named Ross as well. This deception would cause problems for both Jack and Joyce in later life.

In 1928, they bought an empty block of land in Banyo (now Virginia). Wally built a two-roomed shed at the back of the block using flattened kerosene tins, and the family lived in the shed until the house was built in the front of the block. Wally named the new house "Minuit", the French word for "Midnight". He once told Joyce that he decided on this name because he spent many nights after work clearing the land before the house was built, working until after midnight to get it done. So he thought of it as his "midnight house". Using a French name was a reference to his French Canadian heritage.

In November 1928, Wally found himself in trouble with the law again when he and a mate named Paul Beck were taken to court for assaulting a neighbour who lived across the road. This incident seemed to have its origin in the Waterside Workers Union strike in Brisbane earlier in the year, as Beck said to the plaintiff "I'll get you in the mug, you scab. You scabbed in the last big strike". The plaintiff was described in court as a "volunteer labourer on the wharves", which means he wasn't in the union¹⁰. It was not unusual in this era for resentment towards strike-breakers to simmer for years, and to boil over now and then.

If Wally was known by the friends he kept, he wasn't choosing them too well because his mate Paul Beck had been convicted of armed assault in 1924¹¹ and later for armed robbery in 1933¹². Wally was becoming bad tempered by this time, and his children say there was an ongoing feud with his younger brother Alexander, who lived in the same street. Whenever the two met, they argued and sometimes came to blows. Joyce also remembers that Wally argued constantly with his father when he stayed in the shed behind the house for a while.

During the Depression of the 1930s, Wally became a ganger (a foreman) in charge of a group of about twenty men working on road-building and maintenance. Part of his job was to fill out work cards every night for each man who had worked that day. He would do this on the dining table where Jack was doing his homework, and Wally would remark on the great variety of skills in his work gang: a doctor, a butcher, some bakers, a car mechanic and a few school teachers. Life was tough for everyone in those days. From about 1937, Wally started working for the Brisbane Council.

In 1938 when Jack was 15, he told Wally he needed a birth certificate to work at the PMG (Ref: Post Master General's Department, forerunner of Australia Post and Telstra). Jack was taken to a solicitor's office where, without any explanation, he was asked to sign a piece of paper. Jack did not realise until decades later that he had walked into the office as Jack Bryan and walked out as Jack Ross. Wally had adopted Jack to surreptitiously legalise the deception of his surname. But he never adopted Joyce, and this was to cause an even greater problem a few years later.

Wally builds a park

Joyce married in 1944 at age 19, partly to get away from Wally and his stormy moods. The newlyweds bought the vacant block next door and built a house there. But prior to Joyce's marriage, Wally performed a desperate act to carry on the deception of the family name. He secretly took her birth certificate, scratched out the surname Smithers, and carefully wrote Ross in its place. When Joyce discovered this years later, she feared that her daughter could not be legally married because she herself had been married under a false name.

By the 1940s, Wally had become a heavy drinker who sometimes flew into violent rages when he came home from the pub at night. When this happened, Nellie would take the children next door to Joyce's place. Wally wouldn't confront Joyce's husband, who was a strongly-built mechanic, so they were safe there.

During World War II, Wally supervised the dumping of household and surplus wartime supplies in a council landfill area in present day Nundah. This was filled to a depth of 12 metres, mostly with unused food and equipment dumped by the US military. This came from the large US Navy Stores Depot in nearby Northgate, and the American Army camps at Eagle Farm and Doomben racecourses.

Many useful things like preserved food, bottles and copper were dumped, and Wally saved whatever he could. One day, he was amazed when the six-furlong post from Doomben racecourse turned up to be dumped. He took it home and used it to support a radio antenna. Eventually, Wally's hut was almost filled with salvaged items, and there were many break-in attempts. He devised some sly methods of discouraging the burglars. One trick was to rig up a large dish of old sump oil over the door, and it made his day when he came to work one morning and saw a trail of black oil leading away from the hut!

Wally put up a sign on his hut declaring the dump to be "Ross Park". This was just a joke, but the name caught on, because his son Bryan remembers that the American Army maps had Ross Park marked on them. After the war, when the dump was turned into a public park, the council recognised Wally's efforts by keeping the name.

Conclusion

Wally lived through challenging times but probably did the best he could with limited opportunities. He died in 1950 of peritonitis after swallowing a chicken bone and was buried in Lutwyche Cemetery, but a long way from the rest of the family.

References

Unreferenced information is from conversations and correspondence with the family members mentioned.

1. Toowong Cemetery, Brisbane, grave of John Le Gros aka Thomas Ross, Portion 5, Section 106, Grave No 18.
2. Queensland Birth 1884/31800.
3. Births Deaths and Marriages Victoria, Index Search Historical, accessed 25 April 2014.
4. Electoral Rolls for Queensland, 1883-1900.
5. Brisbane Courier, 18/3/1901, p. 3.)
6. Electoral Rolls for Queensland, 1917-1921.
7. Electoral Roll for Queensland, 1922.
8. Jack Ross, Barcoo Wally and his Wireless, Cattle Country Magazine, Autumn 2006.
9. Queensland Marriage 1924/214.
10. Brisbane Courier, 22/11/1928, p. 6.
11. Brisbane Courier, 1/3/1924, p.11.
12. Brisbane Courier, 16/2/1933, p. 15.