



# THE PICK OF THE GREAT NORTH ROAD

## Pick Volume 3.1

### They Came From Sawyer's Gully

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In 1901 Alice Betteridge was born at Sawyer's Gully, "a straggling line of stores and pubs". Aged two she lost her sight and hearing due to illness. Alice's parents were George and Emily Betteridge. They were educated at little bush schools in the Hunter Valley and married at Lockinvar. George was a by trade a saddler, later finding employment at Sawyer's Gully, on a farm then as a wineseller – Betteridges are listed on Portions 127 and 128, both located on Native Dog Hill Road. These Portions are only metres from the original convict built road. Alice was third of their fifteen children. When Alice was two, she contracted meningitis and although she recovered, she could no longer see or hear.

In early 1905 Alice and her mother arrived, without warning, for an interview with a view to admission to the NSW Institution for the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind, in Sydney. She was four years old. Records read...

*A very interesting child names Alice Mary Betteridge, who is deaf and dumb and blind, was admitted early in the year and kept for almost three months, but on account of her tender years it was considered inadvisable to tax her mental faculties by systematic instruction. It is the intention of the board, however to re-admit the child when old enough to receive instruction and endeavour to educate her... In view of (Alice's) intelligence and the excellent results obtained above the Directors consider it their duty to do all possible to develop her latent faculties.*

In February 1908, Alice was again brought down to Sydney. The child had changed from a bright happy to-year-old toddler to what, Alice herself would say in later years, "a completely wild little animal". She had just turned seven when she entered the school, returning home each holiday. On her trips home her family met her at Maitland. Her mother and other family members learnt the Braille alphabet. A former resident, born 1908 recalls...

*I knew Alice very well, although i was much younger than she was. She often used visit*



*George Mears and family (she was related to them) on her yearly trip home. George's sister Elizabeth was my Aunt Lizzy – Uncle Bert Hawkins' wife. I can remember Alice sitting there knitting; she was a*

*wonderful knitter. I think she use to knit quite a lot. I remember she has a wonderful sense of humour. Once, mum, dad and us kiddies had all gone to Mears' place to see her. My cousin Dick Bridge was also there and was teasing Alice. They were just joking with each other. Her sister, who was sitting beside her, was talking into Alice's hand what Dick was saying then relaying Alice's answer back to Dick. Later Alice and her sister went to get a drink and when they came back Alice had a cup of water. As she walked she poured it over Dick as she passed him. I can still see him sitting there, the water running down his bald head.*

A NSW Institution for the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind Annual Report stated...

*Perhaps the most interesting child admitted during the year is little Alice Betteridge, who is blind as well as deaf and dumb. This is the first case of the kind admitted into this institution, and the developments in connection with her education will, no doubt, e watched with considerable and sympathetic interest.... The cost of education will be a considerable item, because, as in the well- known case of Helen Keller, she must be taught entirely through the sense of touch, and therefore requires, practically, the whole of one teacher's time and attention.*

The teacher was Roberta Reid who brought her “out of the shadows”. She made the essential breakthrough to Alice's mind and continued her education. Alice was the best-educated girl in the school. Alice's progress was phenomenal. In the period of a few months she had learnt two hundred nouns and several verbs, the contrast with the progress of those in the school who were only deaf was little short of amazing. She was often mischievous and would be punished in the same way as other children. A classmate had an unforgettable picture of a furious Alice being sent to stand in the corner with fingers flying signalling: “*Naughty teacher! Naughty teacher!*”

Although blind girls were generally not taught fancywork, Alice's dexterity was such that she was included in classes. Alice met DR Alexander Graham Bell when he visited the school on 27 July 1910. Alice's education surpassed any similar achievement in Europe.

*In 1920 she graduated from the Blind School as Dux. The Gold Medal she received is still in the possession of her family. Her happy, bright presence was so much appreciated and her influence on the younger students so positive that she was asked to continue in residence at Darlington, which she did for another nine years.*

During that time, her range of interests steadily widened to include history, biographies and philosophy. Alice contributed to her own support with her gifted hands. The “incredibly fine tuning of her touch” saw her enter open knitting competitions winning first prizes year after year, first in local shows in the Hunter Valley and later in the prestigious Royal Easter Shows. Alice began to take some control of her life. In 1930 she made the decision to leave and at last came home to her



parents, whom were then living at Denman, where George was share farming. The institution, reluctant to lose her, suggested she return from time to time.

In 1939 Alice's life became headlines. She married Will Chapman. Will lived in Melbourne and they had been writing to each other for fourteen months. As a result of an accident at twenty-one he had become deaf and blind. He earned his own living and a home was made for them in the Blackburn Institute for the Deaf, Melbourne. Alice continued her handiwork and contributed to the couple's growing bank balance towards their own home. She was happy with her life, except concern for four of her brothers who enlisted in World War II. When Helen Keller visited Australia in 1948, the two women greeted each other, at the Blind School at Wahroonga.

*...no one watching the scene could forget it. To observe these two women, who had overcome formidable obstacles, meet and talk together was a unique experience... To talk to each other brought instant rapport. Only those two themselves could know the courage, the heartbreaking setbacks, the unremitting determination each had needed to gain an education and achieve a near normal lifestyle.*

Three weeks after Alice flew back to Melbourne, Will Chapman died. For several months she stayed with her parents, who were now living in Rose Street, Maitland. She realised that she must make arrangements for herself and applied for admission to the new hostel for blind women at Woollahra – Helen Keller House (Helen had laid the foundation stone while in Sydney). Alice had the luxury of being provided with her own room, all other accommodation was in double rooms. Knitting continued to be useful means of extra income. Days were surprisingly full and in 1953 she travelled to New Zealand. An interview, which was an account of that trip, appeared in the *Australian Woman* on 29 March 1954.

From time to time Alice went back to her family for a holiday. Her father had died in 1954 and her mother was now in her early seventies when Alice travelled by train to Maitland in 1955. It proved to be a holiday that she would not forget. In the home at Rose Street, Alice, her mother, sister and brother went to bed on the Thursday night knowing only that the rain was pouring down. At breakfast time the next morning there was a strange knocking noise followed by unfamiliar shouts. A boat, floating a metre above street level and crewed by two rescue workers was bumping the verandah. The family was evacuated and lost all possessions. The three women were deposited, among hundreds of other displaced residents, on the platform of Maitland Railway Station. For four days and three nights the platform was home. Alice did not appear to suffer any ill effects from the experience.

Alice died of cancer on 1 September 1966. Although she never became a public figure "*she realised much of her full potential, but by no means did she achieve all of which she was capable*". Alice's education, apart from Helen Keller, Alice achieved "*the greatest progress of any similar person worldwide.*" In 1990 the Special School for Multi-Handicapped Blind Children was officially renamed the Alice Betteridge School.





*Image: Alice meets Helen Keller*

**References:**

Viv Chappell, for the initial information about Alice Betteridge.

“A GIRL LIKE ALICE” by Valerie Thompson.

Lorna Craig (nee Hawkins) for her recollection of Alice’s visits home.

Abermain Heritage Preservation Society’s resources.