

BIRDSVILLE HOSPITAL NURSING STAFF 1923-1951

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Article Received on 10/02/2025

Article Revised on 02/03/2025

Article Accepted on 23/03/2025

INTRODUCTION

Birdsville is a very small remote Australian town in the Queensland Shire of Diamantina, eight hundred kilometres west of Charleville, sixteen hundred kilometres west of Brisbane and only eleven kilometres north of the Queensland - South Australia border. In the last census the resident population was one hundred and ten.



Birdsville in South West
Queensland

Birdsville adopted its name in reference to the profuse bird life of the district. Birdsville, is on the edge of the great cattle route to Central Australia. A century ago it was a tiny settlement of not more than thirty people, it is

the centre for a large area where whites and indigenous natives gathered, and any hospital filled an urgent need.

The Wangkangurru -Yarluyandi Indigenous people were the original colonists of the Diamantina area tens of

thousands of years previously. European explorers passed through the area in the 1840s and 1860s, but this semi-arid region was not occupied until the mid-1870s. A number of pastoral runs were established and the town of Birdsville commenced to service the newly taken-up pastoral holdings of the Diamantina in the early 1880s initially with a rough depot constructed by general merchant Matthew Flynn.

Birdsville developed as an administrative centre for police and border customs on the stock route from Boulia south to Adelaide.

Socially the town is nationally renowned as the home of the Birdsville Races and the Birdsville Big Bash music festival. It marks one end of the Simpson desert track and the initial driving challenge up Big Red. To the cognoscenti it is the home of the Green Lizard at the hotel and of the curried camel pie at the bakery.

The Hospital

The original Australian Inland Mission (AIM) bush nursing home or hostel was established at Birdsville in 1923 in the former Royal Hotel building erected in 1883, but then derelict. Sisters Grace Francis and Catherine Boyd, from St Andrew's, Brisbane, the first recorded bush nurses working in Birdsville, turned it into a hospital called Brisbane Home. This building had to suffice as the local hospital until a custom-designed building was opened in 1937.

They started the last leg of their journey from Charleville for Birdsville in a really vile dust storm and impressed the locals by arriving full of good cheer. They were considered to be the right girls in the right place. Francis was subsequently awarded the MBE for services to nursing.

1 Courier Mail 24/11/1923

The climatic conditions in midsummer and midwinter were appalling, but this pair of nurses and their successors were determined to provide the best possible medical service regardless of their personal sacrifices. From the outset they were kept busy dealing with medical emergencies and in the first fifteen months treated some two thousand Indigenous and other patients. Besides basic medical care, they undertook tasks from extracting teeth to giving sewing and Sunday school lessons

2 Daily Mail 26/4/1923 3 McHugh E. Birdsville Penguin Group (Australia) 2009

4 Uniting Church in Australia manuscript collection MS 5574/Box 229/Album

Prior to the arrival of Francis and Boyd, there had been 100% mortality of newborn European babies. They delivered and cared for Lyle Morton who was born to Mr. and Mrs. C. C. Morton, of Roseberth station, on the 21st May, 1924, described as the dearest little chap. He was the first surviving white child and at the end of their

term in Birdsville in 1925, all European children were thriving in spite an outbreak of bronchial pneumonia.

5 19/7/1924 The Queenslander 3 McHugh E. Birdsville Penguin Group (Australia) 2009

The AIM was headed by its founder Rev. Dr John Flynn, who was working toward establishing a flying doctor and air ambulance service for remote central Australia. (Flynn was awarded honorary doctorates of Divinity from Canadian Universities). Such a service could only operate efficiently if it could be contacted quickly, which became possible in 1929, with Alfred Traeger's invention of the pedal radio. In August 1929 Traeger installed at the AIM's Birdsville Hostel one of six experimental pedal radios, leading to the founding of the iconic Australian Facility, the Royal Flying Doctor Service.

6

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Australian_Inland_Mission_Hospital,_Birdsville

Grace Francis wrote about her work in Birdsville commenting on their busy schedule and the cool days. She complained of increasing weight but enjoyed the social life with two days racing and two dances. That night they admitted a patient, and so remained at home the next day.

Their pastoral duties involved some riding of which they were justly proud. They rode forty four miles to the Bluff station and back in one day resulting in some stiffness. The local river was in flood so they rowed across and allowed the horses to swim independently whereupon the horses took off for home and the nurses had to walk the last mile in the moon light.

After eight months they had seen eight hundred patients. The only one of a serious nature was a laceration of the hotel keeper's arm which required several stitches. He recovered well till returning with a sprained ankle following a fall from a racehorse! Francis noted that Blight, medically known as Trachoma, an infection caused by the bacterium *Chlamydia trachomatis* that can cause blindness, was prevalent amongst the children and some of their eyes were very bad indeed. While a single dose of Azithromycin or surgery for severe cases is curative today, no such therapy was available a century ago.

Nursing duties included visiting Indigenous people in their nearby communities. Francis wrote that they had great faith in any medication reporting one lady's bad back was cured by applying a bottle of hair restorer! Francis had by then extracted all the diseased teeth in town. She expressed her appreciation for donations of linen, magazines and fresh meat.

7 19/7/1924 The Queenslander

Francis wrote about a death in Birdsville. An old bushman, like many with a peculiar fear or dislike of women doing anything for them, had been ailing a long

time with his heart in a bad state. Francis diagnosed Beri-Beri but he was trying to treat and even to cure himself.

Beriberi is a disease caused by vitamin B1 deficiency, also known as thiamine deficiency. It occurs most often in people with a diet that consists mostly of white rice or highly refined carbohydrates, or bushmen living on meat and damper.

She was only able to give a little comfort in his last few hours and managed to get his will made and signed. The next day he was buried, the body being stitched up in cloth, there being no timber to make a coffin. Sisters Boyd and Francis rode in the front seat of the car with the body in the tray to the cemetery where the latter read the burial service and the poor fellow was buried in the sandhills he had known as home. Another duty for Francis was to write and inform his widow in Adelaide.
8 Brisbane Courier 7/5/1925

Two nursing sisters, Mercer and Mulvey left for Birdsville in September to relieve Sisters Francis and Boyd, who are retained on furlough after their two years' service there.
9 Daily Standard 25/7/1925

One of the Birdsville sisters was requested to see a man with a severe head injury one hundred and forty miles away in remote South Australia. Owing to the state of the roads the journey took four days. The clinical outcome was not published.
10 Morning Bulletin 21/9/1925

Sister Ida Grace Francis was interviewed by a "Courier" journalist about her two years of duty as a sister of the Australian Inland Mission Hospital in Birdsville. She said, "It is hard to imagine a township so isolated and neglected as Birdsville, it was 240 miles from the nearest telephone communication, and did not even receive the benefit of a visiting doctor".

When she and Sister Catherine Boyd arrived at Birdsville on September 23rd, 1923, they found that the furnishings and necessities for the hospital which had been despatched from Brisbane on August 17th had not reached their destination. The building, which had been purchased by the mission for the hospital had been previously occupied as a hotel, and the sisters were prepared for a rough and dilapidated shanty, in which to start their work. They were pleasantly surprised to find out the place had been thoroughly cleaned, and white-washed throughout, in honour of their coming.

Fortunately, the new comers travelled with camp stretchers, as when they arrived at the township, the picnic races were being held, and the scanty accommodation of the only remaining hotel was taxed to the utmost. Thus, with their own sleeping accommodation, the sisters were able to occupy their new home.

Their clinical work initially was mainly eye disease as repeated attacks of discharging eyes from blight from infancy gradually weakened the eyesight of schoolchildren. Before the arrival of the nurses the schoolmaster was vainly trying to remedy them with eye wash.

Dental treatment was also commonly required though this meant the extraction of diseased teeth. Brisbane dentists generously provided equipment and local anaesthetics.

Although several severe accidents were dealt with, the years were remarkably free of sickness and often in the case of indisposition among the women the Sisters found that a few days of companionship did much towards healing minor ills. One of the main points about the work of the Sisters in Birdsville was the social side of their work. They made a point of seeing everyone who came to the township and established a lending library in connection with the hospital. The companionship of two educated and virile young women must have meant a great deal to the women of Birdsville.

There was a stolid indifference to sickness or injury among the bushmen and many of them would refuse to seek medical help for sickness or injury as the previously noted man with Beri-Beri.

Other duties undertaken by the nurses included priest for Sunday services and funerals, librarian, piano lessons, driving the hearse and organising singsongs for children.

Supplies often were greatly delayed. After many makeshifts and months of waiting, the initial furniture and furnishing materials arrived on the night of December 23rd, when the sisters had arranged a Christmas tree for the children. A cot and clock for the hospital, which had been sent from Brisbane, took seventeen and twelve months respectively, to reach their destination. This was due to the fact that there are no carriers via Windorah, only an odd car which takes all its time to get over the sand hills and gullies without the extra weight of luggage.

Transport is more easily made through South Australia by camel pack, but the cost of freight is £18 per ton so only the bare necessities are conveyed to the inland town. Very little fruit is received. Sometimes a box of ten apples in the winter and for a long time the township was without either onions or potatoes, which are generally considered to be necessities.

"The furniture arrived by camel pack," said Sister Francis, and "it was the queerest sight to see chairs and other portions of furniture perched so high up in the air." The children were all at the house, and there was the greatest excitement. Then, with all the furniture dumped outside, and the excitement of the Christmas Tree, it

rained! A most uncommon event as they had had two inches of rain over two years.

Usually the only permanent male residents of the township were the schoolmaster, the policeman, and the hotel keeper. No fresh butter was available and tinned butter was used but even that was only available in the winter, for the extreme heat of the summer very soon turned the butter to rancid oil. Meat was supplied by the station people, who Sister Francis said, are very thoughtful, and every time they kill a beast they send along a supply to the township. Passing drovers always make a kill, which provides meat for the township, the housewives doing their own salting.

The town depended for its water supply on a waterhole, which was filled through a channel from the Diamantina when that river is in flood, and with rain water and soakage. After long droughts this water becomes unfit for use, and water has to be carted from the river. After five years of drought the water supply of the township was very low, and at one time carted water was being sold at about eight shillings for a hundred gallons. From the time of their arrival the Sister were never able to spare more than half a small milk bucket of water for their daily "bath". Sister Francis considered the towns two greatest needs were a wireless and a visiting doctor.

Birdsville put on a farewell party for the nurses and people travelled from miles around to express their extreme gratitude to Sisters Boyd and Francis for their two years, in which they shared and tried to lessen the hardships of the inhabitants of a large area. In that isolated township there could be no greater token of appreciation.

11 Brisbane Courier 15/10/1925

In thirty two months since the hospital opened in Birdsville the nurses had seen over five thousand out patients, some five every day of the week requiring the diagnostic and therapeutic skills of a doctor, as well as nursing skills, a stellar performance.

12 The Daily Standard 31/5/1926

Mr. C. W. Judd was admitted to the Birdsville Hospital with a red spot on one of his arms. The place became inflamed, and he was soon exceedingly ill, but he refused to remain in hospital. It was conjectured that he received a bite from either a scorpion or a red-backed spider.

13 The Observer 3/7/1926

Sisters Sherlock and Grimison left their homes last Friday for the Australian Inland Mission Hospital at Birdsville.

14 Adelaide News 14/1/1927

In 1928, Doctor K. Vincent was the first Flying Doctor. On 17th May he flew in the "Victory" to his first case, a man with serious injuries. During the year he flew

20,000 miles, saw two hundred and fifty patients and saved many lives.

15 Charleville Times 4/2/1944

Sister Grimison of the A. I. M. Birdsville drove by car to Betoota to nurse Mrs Rigney. wife of the Betoota police officer who was seriously ill, though no details of her diagnosis or progress were available.

16 Townsville Daily Bulletin 16/2/1928

The body of Alfred McRae, Shire Clerk to the Diamantina Shire Council was found outside the Birdsville Shire Hall on the morning of 28th December. It was assumed that McRae, during the early morning, had gone outside to the tank and had reached for a dipper which rested on a window sill and overbalanced, falling backwards, fracturing the back of his skull on a sandstone water drain, death being instantaneous. The nursing sisters were enlisted as undertakers and he was buried in the local cemetery.

17 Longreach Leader 25/1/1929 18 Townsville Daily Bulletin 31/1/1929

The two nursing sisters of the Birdsville Hospital had completed their two year scheduled time, but the proposed replacements did not appear, hence Sister Sherlock remained on in town four months over her time to ensure continued medical service while Sister Grimison returned to Brisbane. Sherlock finally returned to Brisbane on 17th May.

19 Townsville Daily Bulletin 27/3/1929

Sisters Maud Gilbert and Adelaide Pearson, two fully trained Queensland nurses left Brisbane by the Western mail train to take up their duties at the Brisbane Home, Birdsville. They arrived in Betoota and Mr. C. H. A. Garrett, who resides at this latter town, drove them in his motor car as there was only a pack horse mail from Betoota to Birdsville.

20 Brisbane Courier 20/4/1929 21 Brisbane Courier 26/4/1929 22 Brisbane Courier 18/5/1929 23 Townsville Daily Bulletin 22/5/1929

Mr. Duncan McKinnon, an old identity of the district was admitted to the Birdsville Hospital with memory loss caused by a stroke. He was to be transferred to Adelaide by the next mail accompanied by one of the sisters.

24 The Northern Miner 7/9/1929

The sisters transmitted a wireless message from Birdsville last month via Cloncurry to C.W.A., Bundaberg, reading: "First wireless greetings from Birdsville to sisters and district friends, deeply appreciate service rendered."

The hospital visitors reported on the work of the month and said that a word of thanks was due to the children who had sent a very nice collection of books. Gratitude was expressed at the donations which had been sent to the hostel.

25 Queensland Illustrated Weekly 12/9/1929

The Birdsville sisters arranged a school picnic aided by the ladies of the town and district, yet another diverse skill provided by the nurses. Sister Gilbert was regretfully unable to attend as she was escorting a patient to Maree, though she was up really early to return for the hospital committee meeting, more devotion to duty.

26 Townsville Daily Bulletin 1/10/1929

Dr. J. A. Spalding of the Aerial Medical Service and a wireless operator flew into Birdsville, the first visiting flying doctor, to attend to patients and to try out the recently installed wireless equipment.

27 The Longreach Leader 18/10/1929

Sister Janet Maud Gilbert of Birdsville tragically died in Cloncurry just after her 28th birthday. She was taken seriously ill at Birdsville about three weeks previously, but owing to adverse flying conditions of dust, haze, and cloud the flying doctor's plane could not proceed to the township to convey the young lady to Cloncurry. She was eventually brought in, and two weeks previously was operated upon for appendicitis, but too late. Presumably, her appendix had perforated and severe sepsis had set in in the pre-antibiotic era and she failed to improve.

Educated at the Presbyterian Girls' College, Toowoomba, the late Sister Gilbert received her early nursing training at the General Hospital, Ipswich, Women's Hospital Crown Street, Sydney; and at Tresillian, Petersham. On joining the Inland Mission she was stationed at Charleville, and afterwards at Cunnamulla, Gayndah, Cooktown, Goondiwindi, Dirranbandi and Birdsville. In effect she sacrificed her life to benefit the health of remote Queenslanders, a true hero of the nursing profession.

28 Townsville Bulletin 26/10/1929 29 Townsville Daily Bulletin 5/11/1929 30 Townsville Daily Bulletin 8/11/1929 31 Brisbane Courier 15/11/1929

Charles Corrie, a drover's assistant was admitted to the Birdsville Hospital with dehydration and difficulty walking having been lost in the bush for three days. He was recovering well. Police in Birdsville were alerted to his absence when his riderless horse arrived in town. A search had almost been given up when Corrie was found shading under a tree,

32 The Telegraph 18/12/1929

To understand what this district thinks of Sister Mulvey, ask the father of the baby whose life she could not save; ask the man whose skull was fractured and the doctor from Boulia who saw her work on it; ask the mother of the two babies whom she wrested from death; and know that the man who died recently as a result of malaria, died satisfied and happy.

4 Uniting Church in Australia manuscript collection MS 5574/Box 229/Album

Sisters B. Campbell, from Sydney and A. E. Fanshawe from New Zealand were travelling to Birdsville to continue the work and message of the Australian Inland Mission. The first and easiest stage of their long journey was completed by steamer to Port Adelaide. From there they travelled by rail to Marree, and then the last three hundred miles by car on dirt roads with an overnight camp.

Sister Pearson had worked single-handedly the previous six months owing to the tragic death of her colleague, Maud Gilbert, with no companion but a dog.

Sister Campbell stated that her principal purpose in taking up the work in such a remote area was her love of the country and distaste for city life. Sister Fanshawe, who is English by birth, is imbued with a desire to see the interior of Australia. Both had war experience with the Red Cross to their credit.

The nurses learnt on arrival at Birdsville how to transmit a wireless message, as the nearest doctor was at Cloncurry about four hundred miles away. He used an aeroplane to cover the thousands of square miles in his practice.

33 Adelaide News 25/4/1930 34 Adelaide Chronicle 1/5/1930 35 The Toowoomba Chronicle and Darling Downs Gazette 3/5/1930

Sisters Campbell and Fanshawe organised a party for the school children in the hospital and provided entertainment. They also organised another event at the edge of town where acceptable shade trees and verdant surroundings enhanced the beauty of the scene. Food, sporting competitions, and dancing entertained adults and children alike and about £75 was raised in raffles for the Hospital Committee.

36 Townsville Bulletin 18/6/1930 37 Townsville Bulletin 20/10/1930

David Devlin was admitted to the Birdsville Hospital having been taken ill in the bush. He had suffered considerable hardship and when admitted to the hospital, was in a very weak condition. The sisters summoned Dr. May, the Flying Doctor, who operated immediately for appendicitis. The operation was successfully performed, but though the patient received all possible attention he passed away, illustrating again that appendicitis is a severe disease in remote areas with limited medical care in the pre-antibiotic era. Presumably, Devlin also had a ruptured appendix and septicaemia.

Mr. Jack McCawley was admitted with rheumatic fever and under the unswerving attention of the Sisters, was progressing remarkably well and expected to be quite recovered in about a fortnight. Frank Dunne, the young son of Mr. and Mrs. Walter Dunne, was admitted with

tonsillitis requiring a tonsillectomy also performed by Dr. May and recovered well.
38 Townsville Bulletin 27/11/1930

Two patients were convalescing well under the care of the two sisters at the Birdsville Hospital in spite of potentially critical diseases, Jack McCanley with rheumatic fever and Mrs Nolan with whooping cough.
39 Townsville Bulletin 26/12/1930

No clinical details were published in 1931, though the two sisters as entertainment secretaries for Birdsville had thrown a Christmas celebration with gifts and dancing, a tea party with games and recitations for the children in June, and an evening party before Christmas with singing, dancing and refreshment
40 Townsville Bulletin 4/2/1931 41 Northern Miner 22/7/1931 42 Townsville Bulletin 10/12/1931

The tyranny of distance and problems with flooded roads was exposed in the case of Mr Gaitor, a station hand employed on "Glengyle" who broke his arm in an accident. Friends initially attempted to take the injured man by car to Birdsville, but owing to the recent heavy rains the roads were impassable, secondly they tried to reach Boulia with no more success. Finally after three days travelling they reached Bedourie. The flying doctor was contacted and was able to fly Gaitor from Bedourie to Boulia Hospital where his fracture was treated. A message had been dropped on the way that Dr Vickers would be back in Boulia shortly with a patient!
43 Charleville Times 29/1/1932

An unnamed man required the assistance of the Birdsville Hospital following a riding accident on a Monday in which his horse threw him and rolled on him at the Clifton Hills Station, South Australia, causing severe abdominal injuries.

An Indigenous youth rode one hundred and twenty miles through a night with one change of horse at the head station to Birdsville Hospital to seek help. Sister Fanshawe left Birdsville by car, accompanied by Constable Willis at 9 p.m. on Tuesday. Sister Campbell remained in the hospital. Great difficulty was experienced in following the road through the sand hills, as it had been practically obliterated by a dust-storm. Eventually a halt had to be made, and the journey was resumed at daylight.

The patient's camp was reached at 7 a.m., and the return trip to Birdsville Hospital was accomplished by 3p.m. The patient's condition was now serious, and the flying doctor was called by wireless.

Dr Vickers flew in the ambulance plane piloted by Mr E Donaldson and reached Birdsville on Thursday at 4 pm The patient improved somewhat under treatment, and Dr Vickers decided to take him back to Cloncurry, where he would be under constant medical supervision The return

trip was made on Saturday morning. The case provides an idea of the distances that have to be covered out-back in search of medical aid even today.

44 Sunday Mail 28/2/1932 45 Brisbane Courier 29/2/1932 46 The Cairns Post 1/3/1932
47 The Northern Herald 4/3/1932

A Mr. Idriess related his story of survival thanks to the nurses of the Birdsville Hospital, their wireless and the arrival of the flying doctors. He was taken ill with appendicitis and attempts to drive him to Boulia Hospital failed due to the state of the roads, but after two days travelling his driver reached Birdsville where urgent medical attention, presumably an appendicectomy, saved his life. Two days rather than the fatal week for Maud Gilbert.

48 Queensland Illustrated Weekly 21/4/1932

Sisters R. Suggate and B. Armour, of Sydney, were met by Rev. David Chapman as they passed through Adelaide, to commence their two years nursing duty at the Australian Inland Mission Hospital at Birdsville.
49 Adelaide News 22/4/1932

Sisters Campbell and Fanshawe left for Brisbane as their two year term of service at the Birdsville hospital had expired.

Their successors, Sisters Suggate and Armour, both young ladies had arrived,. According to the Northern Miner, judging by appearances on such acquaintance, likely to become popular acquisitions to Birdsville society, a comment probably deemed inappropriate today!

50 Northern Miner 21/5/1932

The perils of the arid remote Australian bush were demonstrated by the discovery of the remains of two men in April, 1930, by a man riding on Bluff Station in Coleeannia Creek, Bluff Station, Birdsville, Bones and scattered remains of clothing were found two miles from a waterhole The men had apparently perished from thirst.
51 Morning Bulletin 25/8/1932

Sisters Suggate and Armour, of the Australian Inland Mission, invited the residents of the town and district of Birdsville, to attend at the beautifully decorated Diamantina Shire Hall for the purpose of meeting Father Christmas and participating in a distribution of gifts to everyone. The children trained by the sisters, sang beautifully including some duets. Dancing and refreshments followed, again organised by the sisters as was afternoon tea at a cricket match the following day.
52 The Northern Miner 28/1/1933

A Mrs. Richards of Mt. Leonard was admitted to the Birdsville Hospital for a few weeks with an unspecified illness.

53 Charleville Times 22/9/1933

Lady Constance Angel Allardyce, widow of Sir William Allardyce, former Governor of Tasmania, wrote of her travels around 'outback' Queensland including a session on the Flying Doctor wireless in which she communicated with the two nursing sisters in Birdsville and with Alf Frazer, of Adelaide who was also in Birdsville at the time. Frazer was the inventor of a typewriter-like machine with morse code and alphabet keys that had greatly improved communication in remote areas to the Flying Doctor service.

54 The Cairns Post 30/12/1933

Sisters E. M. McLean, of Dayboro, and I. A. Bishop, of Chermerside, were appointed to relieve Sisters Suggate and Armour at the Birdsville nursing home of the mission and planned to take up their duties at about the middle of April. Both of these nurses had a comprehensive training in their profession, Sister E. M. McLean was trained at the Brisbane General Hospital, Lady Chelmsford Hospital (Bundaberg), and the Brisbane Baby Clinic, where she did a special child welfare course. Sister Bishop was trained at the Brisbane General Hospital and the Queen Alexandra Hospital, Hobart.

The Telegraph of ninety years ago considered their appearance was as important as their training and described them as follows. Sister A. R. Bishop, who is Titian haired, possesses a very bright and attractive smile, while her companion, Sister E. M. McLean, is tall and slender with dark hair waving softly over her brow!

The travel options were within Queensland by train to Quilpie then mail car to Birdsville, a distance of 1,100 miles, or by ship to Adelaide, then train to Maree and coach to Birdsville, a distance of 2,500. Initially it was considered that they would go via Adelaide as the Diamantina River was 'up,' but it abated sufficiently for the shorter route to be manageable. The Diamantina can vary today from a completely dry river bed in drought to eighty kilometres wide in severe floods!

55 The Cairns Post 26/2/1934 56 The Courier Mail 31/3/1934 57 Queensland Illustrated Weekly 5/4/1934 58 Courier Mail 5/4/1934 59 Courier Mail 9/4/1934 60 Queensland Illustrated Weekly 12/4/1934 61 The Northern Herald 14/4/1934 62 The Telegraph 27/4/1934

Sisters Belle Suggate and Florence Amour were interviewed on their return home about their two years in Birdsville. They found that the average Aboriginal woman does not care for invalid fare, even when ill in hospital. Suggate brewed some savoury beef tea and baked a delicious custard to be informed that the patient wanted some "decent tucker", evidently meaning corn beef and damper!

The hospital, originally destined for the white settlers had also proved an asylum on many occasions for suffering Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people. Sometimes an amusing contretemps occurred when, for

instance, 'a dusky brave' became greatly concerned regarding the condition of a sick boy. "Him a relation of mine," he explained. "My brother married his grandmother, that where the relation comes in."

They said they had been exceedingly fortunate. The hospital, which was really a hostel, had been converted from an old hotel, and formed a welcome centre for any person passing through. It also possessed a library and the literature, supplied by the A.I.M. headquarters, proved most popular with many of the settlers. Despite the fact that mails via Adelaide arrived only once a fortnight, and the weekly ones via Charleville were nothing if not uncertain, that there was no butcher or milkman calling, and they had to bake their own bread, the sisters enjoyed their stay in the far outback.

They did all the work of the hostel with the exception of wood chopping, which a Black boy undertook. A neighbour kept them supplied with goats' milk. As for meat, settlers or passers-by did the killing.

Sometimes it was necessary to go out and attend patients, the distances covered ranging as much as eighty miles. Transport was invariably undertaken by car. despite the rough nature of the roads, although Sister Suggate on one occasion at least sampled a camel! If a "crisis" arose the Flying Doctor could be sent for.

The country was known as gibber country owing to its stony nature. In the winter, climate was excellent The summers were hot and dry. Sometimes it became necessary to buy water, but recently there had been a flood. The first year, too, that the sisters went out the district had just received three inches and the Country for miles around was one sheet of white and gold with wild stock and yellow daisies, whose perfume was almost overpowering.

The little community at Birdsville was very happy in its own affairs, said Sister Suggate, There was a hotel, a police station, and a few residences, but no church. When any minister came a service was invariably conducted. Tennis and dancing formed the principal recreations. In fact, the only two functions which did not end with a dance were a funeral or a church service. The people, both adults and children, looked healthy, and at Christmas time greatly enjoyed the tree arranged by the sisters. This was attended by no fewer than ninety-five. Through the kindness of friends in the capital cities gifts were provided for all.

Sisters Suggate and Armour experienced varied methods of transport on the downward trip. They, travelled by car from Birdsville to Bedourie, a distance of one hundred and twenty miles, by motor truck from Bedourie to Dajarra, a stretch of two hundred and ten miles. Subsequently they joined the railway and travelled via Cloncurry to Townsville, where they transferred to the southern mail.

63 The Telegraph (Brisbane) 27/4/1934

Sister Grace Francis, representative of the Australian Inland Mission, raised funds for the purpose of presenting a refrigerator to the Birdsville Hospital. The temperature in the summer can rise to 120 to 122° C, hence the desire for a refrigerator. £45 being the required sum to buy the refrigerator and pay the freight from Adelaide.

64 Maryborough Chronicle Wide Bay and Burnett Advertiser 13/7/1934 65 Maryborough Chronicle Wide Bay and Burnett Advertiser 10/8/1934

A bushman related that his mate had recently died of delirium tremens in Birdsville.

66 Chronicle 20/12/1934

The radio service maintained by the Australian Inland Mission in the north of Australia from voluntary contributions is one of the most amazing in the world. The ingenuity displayed in the design, operation, and maintenance of the equipment is something for every radio-minded person to marvel at, for in what is considered to be some of the worst possible radio territory, with power generating facilities at a minimum, a daily service is carried on over distances up to seven hundred miles from the radio central at Cloncurry.

67 The Advertiser Adelaide 19/1/1935

Sister Bishop played her violin with a quartet raising funds for the hospital at a dance.

68 Townsville Daily Bulletin 22/1/1935

Sister Suggate married a short while previously and planned to relocate with her husband, Constable A. D. McPhail, whom she met while both were stationed in Birdsville, to Julia Creek. It was an era when marriage usually meant the end of a career for women!

69 The Telegraph 11/2/1935

Mrs. McCauley left Birdsville for Adelaide to undergo an unspecified operation in Wakefield Street hospital.

70 Chronicle 14/2/1935

In 1935, Birdsville had a population of between twenty five and thirty people, and Betoota, a township not many miles away, was even smaller, its regular population being limited to those who live in the hotel, which constitutes the entire town.

The Queensland Government has agreed to undertake the entire responsibility of the Birdsville Home, or hospital which is in rather a dilapidated condition, and it is hoped to either recondition it or to erect a new building. The help of members of the Presbyterian Church throughout the State will be sought, while no doubt some practical support will be forthcoming from the general public, since the A.L.M., though under the control of the Presbyterian Church, asks no questions as to the creed of

those in need of help, but spreads its sheltering wing over all alike.

71 Courier Mail 28/2/1935

One of the Sisters from Birdsville wrote, 'We are quite looking forward to the children's party; I don't think there is anything that can make one more happy than, trying to make others happy, especially children,'

72 Cairns Post 1/3/1935

The Sisters successfully treated Mr. Charlie Kunoth from Durrie Station with a poisoned hand as an outpatient of the Birdsville Hospital for about a week and Charlie was soon back on the station. Other recent patients were little Miss Regan from Clifton Hills and Miss Harvey of Birdsville, though their problems were not specified.

73 Townsville Daily Bulletin 2/4/1935

Sister Grace Francis held her annual afternoon tea in aid of the Christmas tree for the Birdsville Hospital. There was a large attendance at St. Stephen's Sunday School Hall and they raised £10 for the Birdsville Hospital.

74 Maryborough Chronicle, Wide Bay and Burnett Advertiser 3/10/1935

A race meeting in aid of the Birdsville Hospital at Betoota raised about £20 for the hospital funds. The winners of the various races were published and a dance was held at the conclusion of the meeting. Nurse Bishop from the Birdsville Hospital was amongst the guests.

Betoota is a very small town just under two hundred kilometres from Birdsville. Today it is almost a ghost town with a population of three who run the hotel for passing travellers.

Nurse Bishop of Birdsville attended the Betoota Race meeting

75 Longreach Leader 2/11/1935

Mr. McKay spoke highly of the work that had been done by the departing nursing sisters, Sisters Bishop and McLean, at the Birdsville Hospital. The people of the district were keenly appreciative of their work in visiting them in their homes, and in conducting services and Sunday schools, apparently a nursing duty in 1936. The nurses were both from Brisbane, and both were trained in the Brisbane General Hospital whence they will return in three weeks' time, travelling by mail truck, via Maree to Adelaide, and from there taking a ship to Brisbane. Their competence and experienced would have been immeasurably enhanced by two years 'further out.'

Two new nurses, Misses Anderson and Cooper, of the Royal Brisbane Hospital, were appointed to the Birdsville Hospital to relieve the current staff after two years' service. They were being trained in dental care and use of the wireless in Charleville. The utility truck in which the Rev. Fr J. McKay will convey them to Birdsville was prepared including being equipped with a

radio set, and a first-aid kit and other necessities for the forthcoming journey.

However the new nurses driven by the minister experienced great difficulty reaching Birdsville due to the condition of the roads around Betoota.

76 The Telegraph 22/2/1936 77 The Longreach Leader 25/4/1936 78 The Courier Mail 4/6/1936 79 The Longreach Leader 20/6/1936 80 The Central Queensland Herald 25/6/1936

81 Morning Bulletin 27/6/1936

Shortly after her arrival, Sister Cooper and Rev McKay went out to an outlying station in response to a wireless message to retrieve a child with burns and admit the child to Birdsville Hospital.

In the meantime, the retiring sisters of the Birdsville Hostel, Misses McLean and Bishop were still held up by bad roads. They planned their return to Brisbane through Adelaide, which was regarded as the most practicable route at present.

82 The Telegraph 11/7/1936

Frederick Hey, the shire clerk of Birdsville, was admitted to the Birdsville Hospital suffering serious lung trouble and internal injuries from thoracic trauma received in an accident at Birdsville a week previously. His injuries could not be repaired locally ago, hence Dr. Alberry, the Australian Inland Mission's flying doctor, conveyed him to Cloncurry and on to Brisbane.

He appears to have recovered uneventfully as he was posted a year later from Birdsville to be the new shire clerk at Capella

83 Maryborough Chronicle, Wide Bay and Burnett Advertiser 23/10/1936 84 Warwick Daily News 23/10/1936 85 Longreach Leader 24/10/1936 86 Morning Bulletin 4/8/1937

The wireless set donated to the Birdsville hospital was a great boon to the small community there. Many thousands of messages had been radioed from Birdsville. The Sisters at the A.I.M. Hostel have consulted the doctor time and again for advice concerning their patients. One patient is at present at the hospital with a shattered arm which he sustained near Birdsville. Immediately the Sisters saw the extent of the damage they radioed the flying doctor who proposed conveying the man to Cloncurry shortly for imaging and repairs to his arm.

87 Western Star and Roma Advertiser 27/11/1937

The furnishing of the nurse's quarters was finished at the expense of Mrs. Joseph Neild, on behalf of her late husband, who at one time had grazing interests in the Roma district, and during his lifetime was a keen and active supporter of the Australian Inland Mission. A commemorative tablet was affixed in the new A. I. M. buildings at Birdsville, signifying their contribution.

88 Charleville Times 10/12/1937

The Birdsville facility took years to eventuate but finally in 1936 land was purchased at the southern end of Adelaide Street, the main street. Flynn decided upon a prefabricated structure, 'adaptable ... like a bushman's pocket knife', to function as a community house and public hall as well as hospital. It was designed for arid conditions. The building was prefabricated in Sydney (where the AIM was based) by Sidney Williams & Co. Pty Ltd, a firm specialising in modular, angle iron structures for the Inland and already well known in Queensland as manufacturer of 'Comet' windmills.

The materials were shipped to Port Augusta, entrained to Marree, and then carted up the Birdsville Track by the local mail contractor. Transport costs almost equalled all other costs. Ben Hargreaves, a Sydney builder with previous outback experience, erected the building in Birdsville. The 'Meccano' building, as Flynn termed it, was of ripple iron on a steel frame, with concrete floors, a storage cellar, underground water tank, gauzed verandahs and a gabled hip roof. A feature of the design was a large central room, suitable for public gatherings, equipped at each end with hinged awnings that could be closed during dust storms. The new hospital opened on 6 December 1937

4 Uniting church in Australia manuscript collection MS 5574/Box 229/Album

The first purpose-built hospital in Birdsville with a separate Aboriginal ward was built by Ben Hargreaves and opened in December 1937 on land purchased by the Presbyterian Church. The plan incorporated an entrance into a large central room suitable for public gatherings. Little more information is available on the first hospital beyond stating that the second hospital had many similarities.

A large crowd, seventy in number, double the population, gathered in Birdsville to celebrate the opening of the new A.I.M. Hospital. Men and women known throughout the whole of Australia assembled at this little town in 'The Corner.' Rev. John Flynn dreamed of a line of hospitals that would spread a mantle of mercy over the great spaces of the outback and was there in person at the opening to see another unit of his dream come true. He had travelled more than two thousand miles to attend the function being one of a party who journeyed from Sydney by motor trucks.

Dr. Alberry, the Flying Doctor came in his plane so often used on flights of mercy and joined the assemblage.

The iron and steel for the building were supplied and cut out ready for erection by Sydney Williams. "It was just like putting a Meccano model together," said Dr Alberry, "The materials were sent by rail to Charleville and transported by motor truck to Birdsville."

The new nursing home will accommodate three patients normally and up to twelve in case of emergency.

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Australian_Inland_Mission_Hospital,_Birdsville

89 The Telegraph 17/7/1936 90 Longreach Leader 11/12/1937 91 Evening News 11/12/1937



Uniting Church in Australia manuscript collection MS 5574/Box 229/Album

On 27 August 1929 Flynn's radio expert, Alfred Traeger, installed a pedal transceiver in the hospital, one of six distributed to strategic centres in the initial year of operations. Tragically, the transceiver failed two months later when Sister Maud Gilbert suddenly became ill with appendicitis. She was motored 420 kilometres to Boulia. So thick was a dust haze over the district that it was not possible for the flying doctor to attempt a rescue flight, and the patient had to be rushed another 300 kilometres to Cloncurry. She died there after an emergency operation.

Birdsville became less isolated from 1943 with the opening of the flying doctor base at Charleville, though the sisters always did their best in the challenging circumstances.

4 Uniting Church in Australia manuscript collection MS 5574/Box 229/Album

Two present Birdsville sisters are due to be replaced in the middle of this year.

92 The Courier Mail 2/4/1938

Birdsville Hospital's two nurses, Sister Alice Anderson and Sister Lilian Cooper became engaged to local station workers and two nurses were required to replace them. To date, twenty four nurses of the Australian Inland Mission had married local bushmen.

93 Townsville Bulletin 29/4/1938

Nurse Marjory Henderson and Nurse Jean McKenzie were chosen by the local council of the Australian Inland Mission for the mission's Birdsville Hostel. The roads

and the crossings were severely affected by floods and the journey was challenging and prolonged requiring more than one night spent in bogs!

94 The Telegraph 28/5/1938 95 The Telegraph 19/7/1938

Sisters McKenzie and Henderson arrived at Charleville and departed by motor for the Inland Mission Station at Birdsville, via Windorah. 96 Longreach Leader 23/7/1938

Sister McKenzie was appointed to take thirty five bush children from remote homes to Glenelg in Adelaide for a prolonged Christmas holiday. Another nursing duty! On her return several months later the mailman travelling from Marree to Birdsville broke down four miles from Mulka and Sister McKenzie with two children had to walk to Mulka.

They were stranded there till Pilot C. Kleinig in the MacRobertson-Miller Cessna plane flew them from Mulka home to Birdsville

97 The Advertiser 20/12/1938 98 The Advertiser 1/3/1939 99 News Adelaide 4/3/1939

The Birdsville Nursing Sisters arranged a cricket match which was narrowly won by a team of visitors against a local team.

100 The Telegraph 11/7/1939

Mr Shanahan, an employee of the sheep drover, Mr. Vincent Markwell, was admitted to the Birdsville Hospital, under the care of the A.I.M. Sisters with beriberi.

101 Townsville Daily Bulletin 4/9/1939

The Aerial Medical Services flying doctor at Cloncurry made an urgent call eight hundred and ten miles to Birdsville last month, where he made a round of the town treating seven sufferers from various complaints. If a patient were seriously ill. he was put into the plane and taken to the nearest suitable hospital.

102 Courier Mail 3/1/1940 103 The Courier Mail 8/1/1940

This year new nurses also will be required for Birdsville

A story was related of a red-back spider bite victim, a Mr Judd on an overland tour to Darwin in about 1926, was hurriedly taken to Birdsville Hospital, where he recovered.

104 The Advertiser 7/3/1940

Another related anecdote about two nurses making their way to Birdsville Hospital was told by a David Scobie.

For a few years Dave drove the mail between Farina and Cordillo Downs over one of the worst tracks in South Australia, the Cobbler Sandhills. On one occasion while taking two nurses to Birdsville Hospital the battery went flat miles from anywhere, leaving them stranded in the sandhills for three days. While they had 'some tucker' (adequate food), they ran out of water. Scobie walked three miles to Box Flat bore with a yoke made out of a bit of mulga and wire hitched two kerosene tins on to it. He returned in the bright moonlight, and noted it was gradually getting darker. When he looked up he saw an eclipse of the moon.

On returning to the camp he found thousands of mice and the nurses were busy killing the pests. They were found by Jack Finn, the police trooper, out looking for them when they were twenty five miles from Innamincka in fiercely hot weather. On previous occasions Scobie had commandeered some camels, but this does not appear to have been one.

The article does not make it clear if they walked a distance or remained with the vehicle but these are the circumstances in which people die from dehydration in the bush.

105 Chronicle 8/8/1940

After two years in Birdsville as a Sister In the Australian Inland Mission Jean McKenzie has returned to Brisbane, and stayed with her mother, Mrs. I. McKenzie (Hill End), for a couple of months. Then Jean planned to leave for South Australia, to be married quietly about the middle of October to Mr. A. Blinman.

Her future home will be Birdsville, and as she expects to be living just over the way from the hospital she will be able to give the Sisters a hand any time if necessary. Jean is very keen on Birdsville and the people here. Although

she and the other Sister, Madge Henderson, usually had only one or two patients in bed in the ward, they had a fair number of outpatients, and quite often were called upon to fill or extract a tooth!

106 Sunday Mail 25/8/1940

Sister M. Henderson, who has been stationed at the Birdsville A.I.M. nursing outpost for more than two years, had a holiday in Brisbane. She would return to Birdsville until a successor was appointed.

107 Courier Mail 9/11/1940

Dr. Alberry of the Queensland section of the Australian Aerial Medical Services flew a seven hundred and fifty two mile trip to Birdsville and back to treat a man whose horse had thrown and rolled on him. Details of the injury are not given but presumably he was admitted to hospital.

108 The Telegraph 25/1/1941

Sister M. Gordon, who had previously served for two years in a hospital in the New Hebrides, left to take up duties at Birdsville Hospital. The journey was challenging with flooded roads, short distances achieved each day with overnight camping by the roadside, a difficult crossing of the flooded Coopers Creek, trucks getting bogged in sand and the final half mile on foot!

109 The Telegraph 21/6/1941 110 Courier Mail 6/8/1941

Sister M. Henderson, who had been in charge of the Australian Inland Mission Nursing Home at Birdsville, finally returned to Brisbane after three years' service there. She stressed the advantages of the flying doctor services and wireless communication to the people living in the far distant places in the Inland. "We not only send and receive messages, but have a session every day," she said.

111 Morning Bulletin 25/10/1941

Sister Gordon wrote from Birdsville that they recently had a boy in hospital with measles, but he made a rapid recovery. They also had an Aboriginal girl in for a couple of days with an unspecified problem who was discharged that day. The town often had sporting and social events providing quite a number of outpatients while the crowd was in town, but no serious cases. She also wrote about the drought and its effect on the flora and her newly acquired cattle dog.

112 Naracoorte Herald 26/1/1943

Doctor Vickers, the Flying Doctor, recently flew from Cloncurry to Birdsville in five and a half hours to treat an injured stockman, then flew him back to Cloncurry Hospital for further treatment. The return journey by road once recovered took three weeks!

113 Charleville Times 4/2/1944

The Queensland State Government announced a proposal to assume control of the seventeen Australian Inland Mission and other Voluntary Hospitals including Birdsville with effect from July 1st 1945. The Minister

for Health and Home Affairs, Mr. Foley, announcing the Government's policy, said it had been found that the co-ordination of the resources of several hospitals was mutually advantageous to patients, hospitals, and the department, administratively.

A new Queensland State Government proposal for the approximately hundred state hospitals including Birdsville Hospital was a district board to run the hospital which would be 75% funded by the State Government.

114 Queensland Country Life 25/1/1945 115 The Courier Mail 1/3/1945 116 The Telegraph 1/3/1945

The Australian Inland Mission announced an urgent need for qualified nurses. They have been compelled to close the Birdsville Hospital when Sister Beech returned to Adelaide.

117 Adelaide Advertiser 9/7/1948

Sister Dorothy Robertson, of Melbourne, and Miss Jean Auld, of Sydney, left Adelaide today on the first lap of a 650 mile journey to Birdsville, where they will reopen the Australian Inland Mission Hospital, closed for 18 months because no nurse has been available. As they left, the two girls were arguing jocularly who would pull the first tooth in Birdsville after they had done a special course of dentistry.

As previously reported, the nursing sisters performed a wide range of other duties including milking their own goats, learning to ride a camel, giving children's parties at Christmas time, baking their own bread and holding Sunday school classes and occasional church services.

Spare-time work was organising entertainment for the twenty white inhabitants of Birdsville and families from outlying cattle stations, including parties, singing dancing, cricket matches and horse races!. The papers of the time do not relate if the local Indigenous people were welcome!

118 Adelaide News 9/9/1948

Sister Robertson saved the life of Mr Charles Elliot, a sixty year old 'elderly' drover, stricken along the track with severe pneumonia. Called from her bed at 3.45a.m. by Elliot's son, who had ridden in from the sick man's camp, she set out in a truck with the local constable and a Mr. W. Brook as drivers and reached Elliot's lonely camp fifteen hours later. After night-long treatment of the patient, the party began the long journey back, a total distance of one hundred and forty miles of difficult roads.

Elliot was admitted to the Birdsville Hospital overnight and flown out the next morning to the Mt Isa Hospital.

119 Courier Mail 3/11/1948

Sister D. Robertson attempted in vain to contact the Flying Doctor base at Cloncurry and advise that a man

was desperately ill at the Birdsville Hospital but the wireless was malfunctioning. Fortunately, Donald Weir, attached to the Irrigation Commission, was making surveys in that area and happened to hear of their plight. After a quick check over the mission radio, he made certain adjustments and as no keyboard was available contacted Cloncurry base and tapped out an urgent message by means of the Morse code.

Flying Doctor Peter Robertson left Cloncurry at mid-day flying four hundred and eighty miles direct in a Dragon Rapide. On arrival at 4.40pm he attended the patient, gave treatment and waited two days for observation, then returned with his patient who was admitted then to Cloncurry Hospital with an internal complaint. The resourceful outback!

120 Townsville Daily Bulletin 25/5/1949

Dorothy Robertson said her life stationed at Birdsville Hospital for the last year was 'full of adventure.' One such adventure meant a gruelling thirty six hour two hundred mile truck trip with five men helpers to aid a sick drover

121 Maryborough chronicle 3/10/1949

Sisters Mona Henry and Lillian Whitehead were appointed by the Australian Presbyterian Church's Inland Mission to take charge of the medical hostel at Birdsville.

122 Courier Mail 18/3/1950

Miss Ida Grace Francis, one of the first two nursing sisters appointed to Birdsville Hospital, was made a Member of the Order of the British Empire.

123 Brisbane Telegraph 8/6/1950

The Presbyterian Women's Guild arranged for two parcels of goods to be sent by plane from Hetherington's to Sisters Lillian Whitehead and Mona Henry at the Australian Inland Mission at Birdsville. These two girls were very thrilled and reported that a few days before Christmas they gave a 'brave little party' to the tiny settlement. The pilot of a plane agreed to be Santa Claus and the Sisters saw that every person man, woman and child, received a gift. Tea and cakes followed and a dance at night was the happy finish to a day of joy.

124 Maryborough Chronicle 25/1/1951

A thirty year old Aboriginal girl at Birdsville owes her sight to the Flying Doctor. She was almost blind when she walked into the mission station at Birdsville. The nearest doctor was nearly four hundred miles away, but the mission sisters were able to call the Flying Doctor within a few minutes by wireless. On his instructions radioed each day from Charleville, they were able to give the child the correct food and treatment to restore her sight. This sounds like vitamin A deficiency, a condition found in today's era of multibillionaires in some 250 million children every year!

125 The Courier Mail 30/7/1951

Sister Lillian Whitehead, accompanied by her fiancé, Mr. Clyde Dixson, returned from a holiday with her parents by plane to Birdsville where she had nearly completed a two-year term as one of the two nurses in charge of the Birdsville Hospital.

They also attended a ball at Windorah that raised a cheque for £2200 which was handed to the Flying Doctor to help with their great work.

126 Maryborough Chronicle 16/10/1951



Sister Phyllis Beech bandaging the hand of an Indigenous girl

4 Uniting Church in Australia manuscript collection MS 5574/Box 229/Album

In the early hours of 10 November 1951 the six-bed Birdsville Hospital building including the hospital's own wireless transmitter was destroyed by fire possibly originating in a kerosene refrigerator. Whatever the cause, the flames spread rapidly through the caneite ceiling and within thirty minutes the roof collapsed. All was lost but the Aboriginal ward. There were no patients at the hospital, but an expectant mother was to have gone there on Saturday.

The two sisters, Mona Henry and Lillian Whitehead, barely escaped with only their night attire but refused to leave. They had volunteered to keep on, but the best that could be offered them was a temporary hospital in an area where summer temperatures went above 112 degrees in the shade. The hospital was opened in 1937 by Rev. Dr. John Flynn, cost £3000 to build and was insured for that sum but would probably cost £7000 or £8000 to rebuild. The Flying Doctor service contributed £500 to help the rebuild.

Within days of the disaster Dr Allan Vickers and radio operator Reg Orr of the Charleville Flying Doctor Base flew out with medical supplies and rigged an emergency transceiver and aerial to restore communications, while Rev Les McKay of the AIM Western Queensland Patrol drove from Burketown to begin salvage operations and to install his own pedal radio set in Birdsville to restore communications with the flying doctor service.

The local people started a subscription for a replacement hospital, declaring 'the place cannot live without it'. Others matched their generosity and the AIM resolved to rebuild. Ironically, this became a challenge for Fred McKay (Les' brother) soon after his appointment.

The Minister for Health and Home Affairs, Mr. W. Moore, announced in Parliament that the government would be pleased to grant a pound for pound subsidy to fund raising to rebuild the Birdsville Hospital.

4 Uniting church in Australia manuscript collection MS 5574/Box 229/Album

127 The Courier Mail 12/11/1951 128 Queensland Times 13/11/1951 129 Maryborough Chronicle 21/11/1951 130 Queensland Times 22/11/1951

A Brisbane clergyman, the Rev. J. F. McKay, Dr Flynn's successor, was inducted in St. Andrew's Presbyterian

Church as Australian Inland Mission superintendent with the first task of rebuilding the burnt out Birdsville Hospital in less than six month's
131 Warwick Daily News 22/11/1951

Sisters Henry and Whitehead continued their work in a timbered shed where they delivered a baby girl after consultation by pedal radio with the Flying Doctor, Dr. Vickers, in Charleville.

The baby was born to Mrs. Alexander Rabig. wife of the Birdsville mailman. Mother and daughter were reported to be both progressing well.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUMMARY

Nursing sisters

Date	Name	Name
1923-25	Grace Francis	Catherine Boyd
1925-27	Mercer	Mulvey
1927-1929	Sherlock	Grimison
1929-1930	Maud Gilbert	Adelaide Pearson
1930-32	B. Campbell	A. E. Fanshawe
1932-1934	Belle Suggate	Florence Amour
1934-1936	E. M. McLean	I. A. Bishop
1936-1938	Alice Anderson	Lilian Cooper
1938-1940/1	Marjory Henderson 1941	Jean McKenzie 1940
1941-1943	M Gordon	
1945-1948	Phyllis Beech	
1948-1950	Dorothy Robertson	Miss Jean Auld
1950-1951	Mona Henry	Lillian Whitehead

Diagnoses of patients

No diagnosis is given in the media for the vast majority of patients admitted to the Birdsville Hospital. For example according to the press the nurses had seen over five thousand out patients in the thirty two months since the hospital first opened in Birdsville, some five every day of the week requiring the diagnostic and therapeutic skills of a doctor and a nurse, a stellar performance. However, enough diagnoses are published to derive some insight into the spectrum of acute cases seen in Birdsville as listed below.

Infectious diseases

Two cases of pneumonia, frequent trachoma, one each of malaria, rheumatic fever, tonsillitis, whooping cough, poisoned hand, measles

Trauma

Lacerated arm, sprained ankle, three severe head injuries, one causing death, fractured arm, riding accident causing abdominal injury, burns, shattered arm, serious lung trouble and internal injuries from thoracic trauma, unspecified injury when a horse rolled on a man and an unspecified injured stockman. There was a redback spider bite and another case of a bite by either a scorpion or a redback spider.

Twenty three trained nursing sisters worked in Birdsville, mostly for two years or more if needed. They deserve the utmost admiration for thriving on the challenge of working as both doctor and nurse so competently in such a remote isolated community. The original hospital was an abandoned hotel and two of them worked on when the hospital and their possessions were destroyed by fire. 'Home visits' meant hours of travelling on non-existent roads by truck, horse, foot or camel!

They appear to have been the life and soul of Birdsville organising parties, dances, even playing in the dance band, a library and cricket matches. They organised church services, funerals and Sunday school and music lessons for children. As the priest said, 'they were also doctors of the soul!'

Dietary deficiencies

Four cases of Beri Beri(thiamine deficiency) and one of probable vitamin A(retinoids) deficiency

Dental issues

Many decaying teeth were extracted or filled

Obstetrics

Successful deliveries occurred including the first survival of a white child born in Birdsville and other sick newborn infants

General medicine

One memory loss attributed to a stroke, dehydration, delirium tremens and four cases of appendicitis, two of whom died.

Unlike today, there were no recorded cases of cancer or cardiovascular disease. Cirrhosis was not recorded as one may expect, though a case of death with delirium tremens is published.

Deaths

There were recorded deaths from malaria, a head injury and delirium tremens. The remains of two men were found in the bush who died presumably of dehydration. Two people died following appendicitis in whom surgery was delayed because of the remote environment and transport problems by which time presumably the

appendix had ruptured and septicaemia set in, one being Sister Janet Maud Gilbert.

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