

Excerpts from

'WITH THE SUN ON MY BACK'

by John K Ewers

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By the 1950's the general interest in the Northern Territory had grown considerably with the attraction of tourism becoming a driving force. A part of that interest was the attraction the Northern Territory became for writers and book publishers. One such writer was John K Ewers who came from Western Australia. He had an interest in matters to do with Aboriginal people so it was logical that he sought out Father Percy Smith who by this time was Archdeacon of the Northern Territory and based in Alice Springs.

Ewers wanted to know about St Mary's Hostel, Alice Springs, how it functioned and its driving principles. St Mary's was founded by Father E K Leslie in 1946 while he was Rector of Alice Springs, with Father Smith being in Adelaide establishing St Francis' House, Semaphore South. St Marys' was established following similar principles set down by Father Smith when he established St John's Hostel, Alice Springs in 1941 as a place where bush children could reside while having a chance to go to school. Other than correspondence or going to boarding school in Adelaide there was no other way for outback children to receive an education. The School of the Air was not established at the Alice Springs Primary School until 1951. Sister Eileen Heath was appointed first caregiver at St Mary's late in 1946. It was a place where Aboriginal children from remote areas could reside while receiving an education. From 1949 to 1954 Father Smith was Superintendent of St Mary's Hostel.

Chapter 22 of Ewers' book is titled 'ST MARY'S'. On page 169 Ewers states:

"Not all the mixed-blood children at the Alice Springs school lived with their parents in the town. Fifty-three of them came from various parts of the Territory to stay at St Mary's Hostel....From there they travelled to and from school each day by bus. A Lady Gowrie Leave Home for servicewomen during the war, St Mary's was taken over by the Australian

Board of Missions in 1946. For many years P. McD. Smith, rector of Alice Springs, diocese of [Carpentaria], had advocated institutions such as this. "Father" Smith he is mostly called, and to these children he is, indeed, a father and a friend. When Sister Eileen became Principal of St Mary's, the success of his vision was assured.....

Most of the boys and girls are sent to St Mary's Hostel voluntarily by their parents. This in itself shows not only a degree of self-respect attained by mixed-bloods throughout the Territory, but also their recognition of the need for education. Many of them go home at vacations, just as white children do from boarding-schools in the south. A few of them found living under camp conditions have been committed to St Mary's by the Department of Native Affairs until they are eighteen years of age. Even these quickly adapt themselves to their new environment and some have shown remarkable ability at school.....The head teacher of the Alice Springs school told me the children from St Mary's compared more than favourably with some mixed-bloods who came from private homes. Scholastic success depended largely upon environment, he said."

St Mary's has been so successful that the Department of Native Affairs was anxious to enlarge it.

"Father Smith was opposed to this.....'Fifty is a convenient number,' he said. 'It enables us to maintain personal contact with those placed under our care. A hundred would be too many; two hundred unthinkable. Let's have more hostels like St Mary's, but not bigger ones.'.....

At St Mary's I was impressed by the relationship between the children and the staff. Sister Eileen's discipline was firm but kindly.....Their parents, who paid forty pounds a year boarding allowance, need have no fear for their children's welfare at St Mary's.....

On the grounds of behaviour and civilized habits, the children at St Mary's gave little cause for complaint. The boys had two dormitories, the girls one dormitory together with a portion of the staff-house. Boys and girls played happily together in the large grounds and dined together in a common mess-room. It was my privilege to share a meal with them.....

St Mary's remains a beacon in the north..."

Chapter 24 of Ewers' book is titled "UP THE ROAD". On Page 184 Ewers states:

"I was fortunate in travelling through this country with Archdeacon Smith. He was familiar with every detail of it, and at stopping places we would yarn in the bar of the hotel with whoever happened to be there. As we went along I told him my impressions of St Mary's, and he outlined his dream of a chain of such hostels throughout the Territory, with holiday homes in the south where the dark-skinned children of the north could gain a wider conception of their continent. Archdeacon Smith was obviously a man in love with his job. Not for him the dull routine of a suburban parish. He realized that the destiny of the north was bound up with that of its coloured population. It was their country. They were at home in it as few white men could be. Already they were responding enthusiastically to the responsibilities of citizenship imposed upon them by the Commonwealth legislation of 1949.....Every encouragement should be given, he felt, through the creation of further training hostels like St Mary's, to their assimilation into the community on terms of full equality."

Father Smith's vision of a series of hostels serving the interests of Aboriginal people ended up going further than the Northern Territory. Such hostels are now around Australia. In the 1970's the Commonwealth Government established 'Aboriginal Hostels Ltd' with the express purpose of providing hostels where Aboriginal children from remote areas could reside while furthering their education or enhancing their employment and vocational opportunities. One person who advocated such hostels in the 1970's was Charlie Perkins when he was working for the Department of Aboriginal Affairs in Canberra. He had experienced the opportunities that came his way having lived at St Francis' House, Semaphore South, which was started by Father Percy Smith in 1946. In the 1970's Aboriginal Hostels Ltd in South Australia was managed by another St Francis' House boy, Vincent Copley.