

## THE FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE FROM THE BUSH

**Sister Rona Glynn**



**4 March 2019**

*Rona Glynn grew up at "The Bungalow," Mulgoa in NSW and St Mary's Hostel, Alice Springs. In 1952 she was the first Indigenous junior teacher at the Alice Springs Primary School. In 1962 she became the first Indigenous charge sister at the Alice Springs Hospital. The Rona Glynn Preschool in Alice Springs was named in her honour in 1965.*



***Rona Glynn training as a nurse in the 1950s***

Rona Glynn was born at Woodgreen Station in 1936. Her mother, Topsy Glynn was an Aboriginal woman who worked at the station. She had a younger sister, Freda. When Rona was three a directive came telling Topsy that her children had to go and live at the 'half-caste institution' in Alice Springs known as 'The Bungalow'. This forced removal of Aboriginal children of mixed descent was enacted under the 1911 Ordinance.

Topsy was deeply distressed. What could she do to remain near to her children? She was able to work at 'The Bungalow' as a laundress

and so remain with her children. That in itself was quite an amazing achievement given the general disdain that was accorded to Aboriginal people at this time.

After the bombing of Darwin in February, 1942 a military directive was issued requiring that children at 'The Bungalow' and the 'Kahlin Compound' in Darwin to be evacuated south. Topsy left with her two children finding work on a farming property in NSW. However, distressing circumstances developed causing Topsy to leave with her children and go to Sydney. She was quite destitute. The CMS, Church Missionary Society (Anglican) assisted Topsy having Rona placed at Mulgoa, an Anglican home west of Sydney. Topsy and Freda were taken in by Dr and Mrs Lindemann who lived at Vacluse where Topsy did domestic work. The Lindemann's were very supportive. From there Freda went to Mulgoa to be with Rona.

In late May 1942 a group of Anglican children from 'The Bungalow' arrived at Mulgoa having been escorted from Alice Springs to Adelaide by Father Percy Smith, and then from Adelaide to Mulgoa by CMS staff Miss Dove and Miss Anderson. Rona and Freda became part of what turned out to be a generally happy group.

This group of Indigenous children remained at Mulgoa until January 1949. All were wards of the state so NT Native Affairs Branch had ultimate responsibility as to where they should go. Given that they were Anglican children from the Northern Territory, the Director of the Native Affairs Branch, Mr Moy was happy for the boys to go to St Francis' House, Adelaide under the care of Father Smith, and for the girls to go to St Mary's Hostel, Alice Springs under the care of Sister Eileen Heath.

So it was that Topsy Glynn, Rona Glynn (12), Freda Glynn (8), Norma Vickers (12), Cecily Huddleston (13), Marie Burke, Wendy and Laurel Burke, Janice Roberts and Norma Nicker went to St Mary's accompanied by Sister Eileen. Joyce Herbert, Millie Glenn and Rose Foster remained in Sydney.



***Aboriginal children at Mulgoa circa 1948 - Rona Glynn is standing on the far right wearing a cardigan.***

It took some time for the girls and their mothers to adjust to life at St Mary's. They missed Mulgoa, which had been their home since 1942. Their positive adjustment to their new environment was due largely to the loving care they received from Sister Eileen. Her kind and gentle way with the children soon endeared her to them. St Mary's became a home.

In his 1953 book "With the Sun on my back", John K Ewers had this to say on page 170 about St Mary's:

"At St Mary's I was impressed by the relationship between the children and the staff. Sister Eileen's discipline was firm but kindly, and it was evident that she stood in loco parentis to her charges, not in any legal sense, but literally in the degree of affection with which they regarded her. 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 ground of behaviour.... the children at St Mary's gave little cause for complaint .... Boys and girls played happily together in the large grounds and dined together ..... It was my privilege to share a meal with them ... St Mary's Hostel remains a beacon in the north."

Rona Glynn adjusted positively and started going with the others to the Alice Springs Primary School. Her academic performance was very good, so much so that she gained her Intermediate Certificate in four subjects at the Alice Springs Higher Primary School. This was not only a very creditable achievement for her, but Rona was showing Aboriginal children what they could do given the right attitude and a conducive set of circumstances. In 1951 there were very few Aboriginal children anywhere in Australia who had gained the Intermediate Certificate. Other than her intellect, Rona's outgoing, ebullient personality was very much a contributing factor in her achievements.

Rona's achievements had so impressed the Education Department that in 1952 she was made a junior teacher in charge of a Grade 2 class at the Alice Springs Primary School. She was one of the first Indigenous people to gain such an appointment.

1954 brought a big change in Rona Glynn's life. She went to Melbourne to study nursing. To be able to be away from her family in a very different environment for a period of a year or more was challenging. She gained her triple nursing certificate in Melbourne giving her high standard qualifications. In 1962 Rona returned to Alice Springs taking up the roles of Tutor Sister and Sister-in-Charge of the maternity ward at the Alice Springs Hospital. She was the first Indigenous person to gain such distinctions. Before her arrival many white women went south to have their babies, but with the advent of Sister Glynn most were happy to have their babies in the Alice Springs Hospital. Her bright, friendly and embracing personality endeared Sister Glynn to many Alice Springs people not only those who encountered her at the hospital.



***Rona Glynn, far left, with her colleagues training as a nurse in the 1950s.***

She was popular with the staff, and said to have a good sense of humour, was sympathetic, kind, enthusiastic and capable. She was held in high regard by mothers in the community. It is believed that she delivered over 2000 babies and was loved throughout Alice as Sister Glynn.

Rona had a keen sense of humour. At times she took grapefruits from the garden of the matron's quarters to give to the new mothers on the ward. The matron was annoyed and one day stormed into the ward asking whether anyone knew who the thief was. Rona put her finger to her lips indicating "shhh" to the mothers and once the matron had gone, they started eating the grapefruits.

In 1964 Rona married pastoralist Bill Schaber. However, tragedy struck the very next year when Rona experienced complications in childbirth losing her baby and losing her own life. She died on 4 January 1965 with her mother, her sister and Sister Eileen at her bedside. She was only 29 years old. What a sad irony that a woman



who had brought so much new life into the world should die while bringing her own new life into the world.



*The school bus at St Mary's in Alice Springs circa 1950.*

The Alice Springs community was devastated so much so that 'The Rona Glynn Preschool' in Alice Springs was named in her honour in September, 1965.

Part of a tribute in The Centralian Advocate in 1965 described Rona Glynn as:

"The little girl from the bush who rose from nothing to give great honour and service to her country and to become one of the best loved and most respected women in Alice Springs .... She will long be remembered .... most particularly by the mothers and babies who have been in the skilled and loving hands of this Florence Nightingale from the bush."

### **John P McD Smith**

*John is the son of Father Percy Smith (1903-82), first resident Anglican priest in Alice Springs in 1933. John has written his father's biography, "The Flower in the Desert."*

## Comments

**Patricia Chisholm - Posted April 17, 2019 at 9:22 pm**

*What a fantastic bit of history. So sad that she died so young.*

**Steve - Posted March 5, 2019 at 2:59 pm**

*What a great story! People generally and Aboriginal people especially can be truly proud of the life and achievements of Rona Glynn.*

*Her life is an inspiration to anyone who wants to achieve and perhaps has the odds stacked against them.*

*Australia still has a long way to go if Aboriginal people are to enjoy that equality of opportunity that is the right of all.*

**Bob Beadman - Posted March 4, 2019 at 9:23 am**

*I greatly admire your work John. Not only have you honoured the amazing triumph over adversity of some Aboriginal people, but you have also honoured the missionaries into whose care children were placed.*

*The trend has been to vilify all those involved in the care of Stolen Generations. Freda Glynn, to her great credit, spoke with love and appreciation about Sister Eileen Heath at the launch of a biography on her in Alice Springs.*

**Alex Nelson - Posted March 4, 2019 at 8:26 am**

*Rona Glynn's achievements occurred in a time most often condemned as the "bad old days" of Commonwealth control in the NT.*

*She remains an outstanding example of what other people like her achieved in those times, and I'm hard-pressed to believe there has been much improvement for Indigenous people in our supposedly more enlightened and educated era of self-determination from the 1970s onwards – in particular, the collapse of education standards and achievements since I was a boy.*

*I'm one of those 2000 babies born at the Alice Springs Hospital when Rona Glynn was the Charge Sister of the Maternity Ward, during an emergency situation that threatened the survival of my mother and myself.*

*Dr John Hawkins, another remarkable personality who was then a fairly new surgeon at the hospital, saved both our lives. I'm mindful that not so long afterwards, Rona Glynn's life could not be saved in similar circumstances. Her untimely passing was a great loss to Alice Springs but, perhaps more significantly, as a shining example of achievement for Aboriginal people contending with an ever-changing world.*