

## RUTH HEGARTY

Ruth Hegarty was born in 1929, in a room at the back of the Mitchell Hospital. She is believed to have been the first Aboriginal baby born there. Her mother, Ruby, was young and single. When Ruth was still an infant the family moved to the Cherbourg Settlement because her grandfather was out of work, due to the depression, for the first time ever. At Cherbourg, Ruby and Ruth were separated from the rest of the family and confined to dormitory accommodation. When Ruth was only four, she was separated from Ruby who was sent away to work. Ruth was allowed only intermittent contact with her.

Ruth lived in the dormitory until she was 14. Every action, every thought was rigidly controlled and time-tabled. It did not prepare her well for her new life 'outside'. The children were sent to school, but not educated beyond the standard of the fourth grade, much to Ruth's sadness because she loved learning. Just before her fourteenth birthday, after she had finished 4<sup>th</sup> grade, Ruth worked as a teacher's aide for a short time, but was then sent out to work. It was 1943, at the height of the Second World War. She was given a lecture on how to conduct herself when she was at work and a very basic issue of clothing:

- 1 suitcase
- 1 cake of soap
- 1 towel
- 1 nightdress
- 1 dressing gown
- 1 pair of shoes
- 1 pair of slippers
- 1 pair of stockings
- 1 suspender belt
- 1 hat
- 2 panties
- 2 house dresses
- 1 good dress
- 1 cardigan
- 1 comb
- new issue of sanitary napkins and belt
- toothpaste and brush

Ruth put all her new possessions in the suitcase, but it was so big that its contents fell to one side when she picked it up.

Ruth was told she was going to a place she had never heard of and was 'really scared'. Until then, the furthest she had been on her own was a trip of 32 km on the rail motor. She later wrote, 'It was a sad little Ruthie getting on that train. I thought of the older women's advice, to be as though you weren't there, to fade into the background. I felt all alone, and afraid'<sup>1</sup>. It was a tiresome to Brisbane and then to Jandowae on the night train. All the other passengers were white:

I can still feel myself sitting in that railway carriage on a big black shiny seat, my feet barely touching the floor. I put my white picture hat on the port rail above the seat and settled down to wait. I tried to sleep, I was so tired and hungry and the trip seemed to take so long. I had been given a few shillings for food on the train, but that was long gone... As I thought about home and the other kids, the loneliness of that journey cannot be described. I had never been anywhere without being surrounded by dormitory girls. Our lives were so intertwined it was as though we could not exist without each other. After so many years of constant supervision, always under the watchful eye of some adult authority, not daring to

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<sup>1</sup> R Hegarty, *Is that you, Ruthie?* Brisbane, UQP, 1999, p.99

make a move without permission, we had adjusted to it all. We were used to acting as a group and supporting each other, we had been together all those years and weren't used to acting alone. Then we were torn apart and sent to places unknown, to people unknown<sup>2</sup>.

After years in domestic service, Ruth married Joe Hegarty, whom she had known from childhood. Many years later, supported by her mother and children, Ruth researched the file kept on her during the Cherbourg years. She was horrified that every little detail was recorded, every minor lapse in behaviour, as well as her progress at school. She was greatly saddened to find letters she had written to her friends in the dormitory had never been passed on. In the 1990s, sixty years after she arrived at Cherbourg, Ruth organized a reunion for the dormitory girls. They retain firm friendships and mourn those who have predeceased them.

In some jurisdictions, it was possible for children to remain with their mothers on Reserves.

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<sup>2</sup> Hegarty *Is that you Ruthie*, pp99-100