

KATHLEEN MARY SKIPSEY (nee TAPLIN) 1911- 1959

by Beth Berridge (nee Skipsey) and Sally Herzfeld (nee Gare)

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The lady climbed into the railway compartment hustling her two young daughters before her. The other occupants made room for the threesome by moving along the bench seats. The family settled themselves facing each other, mother on one side, the two daughters on the other. "May I have a sweetie, Mother?" asked Kath, the youngest child. "Only if you offer them to everyone else first, dear," came the reply.

I remember my mother telling me that as she offered them around, she was hoping that not everyone would take one. Often there was none left for her but it was an important lesson her mother Olive was teaching, that it was more blessed to give than to have.

I chose this incident to introduce my mother, Kathleen Mary Taplin because she was a woman who gave to make others happy, a person who would notice the needs of others. "I haven't noticed Mrs Brewer around lately", she would say, "I'll just pop in to see if she is alright." - Or perhaps it was the lonely Mr Turner who lived in a garage that she was concerned about, "I'll take him some fruit, he makes the most marvellous jam. That'll cheer him up". She was always making a casserole or a cake to drop in or inviting these lonely old people to have a meal with us. We thought they were boring but mother was always interested in people. Whether Catholic or Protestant (and in those days religion DID matter) she would discuss religion with them, trying to understand life better. She taught us that what denomination you were didn't really matter as long as you believed in God and followed the teachings of Christ.

Kathleen Mary Taplin was born on the 23rd of November 1911. She came from pioneering stock. Her great grandfather, Rev. George Taplin, a Congregational Minister, established the mission at Point McLeay, South Australia in 1856. Here his wife and he lived as the only white people with a tribe of aborigines. I remember my mother telling me that their children had no dolls and used to dress up goannas for their "babies". Innovation was encouraged in the family and stories of how our pioneer ancestors solved problems were often related to us by our mother.

Kathleen first came to Darlington in the year 1917 from South Australia on the second train to cross the Nullarbor. They had to make enough Vegemite sandwiches to last the five days as this was all that would last in the heat. On the last days the bread was dry and all curled up at the edges, but it was all there was to eat. Her father, Frederick Wiltshire Taplin hoped to join with his brother Hubert to run the bakery, later called Owen's Store. However, on



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arrival they found the brother had died of the 'flu whilst being put in a car to be transported to Midland Junction to the nearest doctor. They were told the business could not keep them all so leaving the brother's family under the care of the 14 year old son Keith, they left to take up residence in Peppermint Grove, a then outer suburb of Perth.

Kath attended Cottesloe Infant School and later, Princess May Girls' School in Fremantle. She would like to have been a writer but left after doing her Junior exam in Year 10 to do a commercial course where she became a shorthand typist. During these years she attended the Congregational Church in Cottesloe where she ran the Sunday School. A silver tray was given to her in appreciation of her work there.

In 1934 as a Ranger Guide, Kath attended the Centenary Jamboree in Frankston, Melbourne where 3,000 Girl Guides and Boy Scouts met with Lord and Lady Baden-Powell.

The Western Australians stood firm with faces black with dust, perspiration pouring from them but grinning cheerily. I've never felt so uncomfortable in my whole life but it is wonderful what one can endure. The Tasmanians and New Zealanders were dropping like flies. The Scouts had not finished their March Past when B.P. stopped it because, he said, "There will soon be no one left." How we loved him for that!
(Extract from Kath's Diary, 1934)

Kath ends her diary by saying:

Thus ended our Guide Camp at St Catherine, the happiest, most jolly holiday I have ever spent and one I shall never tire of thinking on, and it was the friendships I made that made it so very wonderful.

Kath never forgot this jamboree. The songs she learned there were sung around the home (she loved singing) and taught to her children. She shared them with the two Guide Companies she ran, the first opening in Cottesloe in 1936. A truly Christian woman, her leadership skills were remarkable and soon she had a flourishing company, much loved by her Guides. Some, themselves going on to form their own companies.

Marrying John Arthur Skipsey in 1940, she shifted to Daglish, relinquishing her leadership of the 1st Cottesloe Company to another. However, her skills were not to be left dormant for too long, for in 1946, after having a son, John and a daughter Lisbeth (me), the family shifted to Darlington. They swapped their Daglish house for Sister Ould's house, a colonial bungalow at the corner of Dalry and Darlington Roads, in the hope that the hills air would cure my bronchitis.

Darlington was then a hills retreat from the city, workers commuting by train, bus, or if privileged by car. Dad was an accountant working for Hunt's Canning Company and drove the 16 miles to Perth and back each day, leaving early and arriving home at 7pm for tea. So we saw little of him except for the weekends when we had a wonderful time together. Mum was the main influence on our lives. She invented wonderful things to do, building cubby houses out of old jarrah packing cases, cooking the most marvelous scones in a kerosene tin oven dug into the ground, raising pocket money by selling homemade lemon squash at the bus stop at the corner of our house (one problem was that the bus only came at more than hourly intervals, but a kind gentleman bought all our lemons so we were made!).

In Darlington, at this time, just after the war, there was not much organised for children and young people to do. The weekend movies, sport and Church groups were yet to come. One local mother, Elsie Gare, concerned about this, approached Kath to start a Guide Company for her daughter Sally and other girls over 11 years old.

At this point in the life of Kath Skipsey, Lisbeth said, "You probably know more about Mum than I do Sally, because I was still being a slightly rebellious teenager of 15 when she died. She was just my Mum and always there. Yes, in spite of doing all these things in the community, she WAS ALWAYS THERE for Dad, John and me. Who really gets to know their own Mum until they grow up, read diaries, look at photos and have their own children? "

I (Sally Herzfeld) am honoured to continue the story Beth, as your Mum was a very wonderful woman who had a strong effect on my life.

I think Kath held the first Guide meeting in the Darlington Hall during the latter half of 1947. I remember enjoying the games and hearing about the camps and activities we would have and from then on just lived through the week until the Saturday afternoon meetings. Somebody made a strong jarrah box which held all our equipment and was stored under the stage in the hall. For some reason we left the hall after only a few months and held the meetings near the railway station with that jarrah box being stored in the iron shed which was used for a Red Cross Shop once a week. Kath must have spent ages preparing for these meetings as I remember them being very exciting - always a good mix between games, skills, moral teaching and formality. To begin with Betty Walker was going to be Captain and Kath, the Lieutenant, but later these roles were reversed and that jarrah box moved once more, this time to "the big girls' shed" at the primary school. We called Kath, "Cap" and Betty, "Lefty". Cap was not a bossy or domineering leader, but a very gentle and dignified lady who was fun-loving and attracted respect without demanding it. She led by example, kindness and love and really loved people. She had so much experience with Guide companies and camps that there was always some interesting way for us to learn things like morse code, semaphore and first aid. The company grew very quickly and at one stage I remember that there were five patrols with seven Guides in each one.



Because she had a family which she couldn't neglect didn't mean that we Guides did not have

Brownie pack opening on 29th June, 1957

camps. We camped among the orange trees in Skipsey's back yard. Cap would join us for the evening campfire and we learned all those wonderful songs she had learned at jamborees. The theme was always international. I remember the warm, calm feeling of wellbeing after



standing in the circle next to Cap to sing "Taps" - "Day is done, Gone the sun, From the sea, From the hills, From the sky. All is well, Safety rest. God is Nigh." She shared her interest in religion with us so we had several Church Parades during the year, alternating between the local Churches. Learning and making the Guide Promise was a very serious business which impressed me greatly as I could see that Kath lived a life of "Duty to God and the King, Helping other people at all times and Obeying the Guide Law". One of the laws which she most obviously kept was "A

John & Kathleen Skipsey with the Pines shop behind,
1947

guide smiles and sings under all difficulties." She had the most shiny white teeth I had ever seen.

Before very long, Kath's husband, Jack, agreed to start a Scout Troop. This met in the railway station grounds and they then kept their equipment in the Red Cross Shop. It was usual for Guide companies and Scout troops to have their own individual parent organisations, but in Darlington, with a lovely couple like Jack and Kath to inspire cooperation, the parents defied the advice of state leaders and ran a very happy and successful Local Association for Guides and Scouts. Meetings were held in President Blazey's home and they very quickly began to raise funds for a hall. The Mundaring Road Board had some land set aside a little way down Glen Road. This included a block for a proposed kindergarten and as Guides we did busy bees to clear the fire break around this block as well as our own.

Apart from the time spent in preparing Saturday meetings, Local Association Meetings and



Preparing to pitch a tent

supporting the fund raising efforts, Kath was always welcoming to Guides like me who visited her often during the week to get help with some badge or to ask her to find a tester for another. One of the fund raising efforts could have been the forerunner of the Darlington Arts Festival as it was a modern art exhibition of the amazing works of potter Guy Grey Smith. With the help of the Local Association, Kath and Jack coordinated some amazing Fetes. I

remember Kath helping us run a pancake tossing competition and helping us to practice through the weeks for a tent pitching competition - Guides against the Scouts. During that fateful event, in front of all the crowd, we Guides started off doing very well and were getting loud cheers as we hammered in pegs and tied up guy ropes way ahead of the Scouts, until one of us in a burst of over-, unpracticed enthusiasm, tugged a corner peg too strongly and the whole thing came down. To add to our humiliation, the boys from the Rover Pipe Band who played at the official opening, reckoned that as they were wearing skirts, it was all right for them to help us re-erect it. In consoling us Kath gave me the impression that she was really saying that it was good that we were beaten as we were getting too "cocky". She had very nice ways of driving home character building points like that and I remember several times she pulled me (a bit of a bossy, smarty pants) back into line without actually embarrassing me.

One lesson that she taught, shines in my face at some time nearly every week. During company drill and inspection when shoes had to be polished, badges shiny, ties ironed, etc, very, very occasionally she would look at the BACK of our badges, because "If you polish the back of your badge it shows what sort of a person you REALLY are when no one is looking."

Cap sent some of us off to camp with a contingent of Guides who came here from Malaya and helped, and inspired me to pass all the tests and challenges to earn the Queen's Guide Award. Even now when faced with a daunting challenge, I can hear Kath say, "You can do it! You're a Queen's Guide!" I certainly wouldn't have been if it wasn't for her.

For 10 years, she was an untiring Captain of the First Darlington while also becoming a District Commissioner. She and Jack helped leaders to start Brownies and Cubs and with a

lot of hard work from them, the Guide and Scout Hall was finally built and officially opened by the Rt. Hon. Sir Charles Gairdner on 29th June 1957. The Committee had raised 500 pounds and taken out a bank loan for another 500. I was teaching in the Kimberley at that time but Kath wrote me a wonderful description of the day which showed how excited she and Jack were. What an achievement during those post war years for such a small community. The hall was smaller than originally planned but the four small rooms at one end, each with its own wooden logo painted gold, one each for the Brownies, Cubs, Guides and Scouts, on the door, showed the unity that Kath and Jack had inspired.

When I returned to Perth in 1958, Kath passed on the job of being Captain to me, but continued working very hard for the whole area as a Commissioner. As you can imagine, having lived and worked closely with such a vital and lively person, it came to us all as a devastating shock when she died suddenly of a cerebral haemorrhage on 9th March 1959. All the Scouts and Guides held very sad meetings for a while and then tried to carry on as we knew she would have wished, to make very good use of the firm foundations she had helped to lay for so many young people.

In October 1959 another ceremony was held to Dedicate the Hall and name it "The Kathleen Skipsey Memorial Hall". It is still used today by Guides and Scouts and the name stands out as an expression of our thankfulness for the life of devotion, energy and love which that wonderful lady shared with so many of us.



Unveiling of memorial hall October, 1959