

Coorong National Park

Secrets



Personal Stories Series **E. Leta Padman**

What is your connection with the Coorong?

My earliest memories are of living with two of my father's single brothers in their house at Cape Jaffa. Dad was the youngest of seven boys in his family and two of them left their home, Wattle Park, a large property between Kingston and Robe in the South East. Another two went to live at Narrung when it was divided for closer settlement. As a seven-year-old my father had gone with his father along the Coorong to Meningie and thence around the Lake Albert with materials to build a hut, plus some implements to begin farming. From my earliest memories, I clearly recall hearing of Mr. Trevorrow's café at Salt Creek, where many men carrying their swags begged for food, and were told to "Git out to the woodheap, and earn some!"

What are you most passionate about related to the Coorong?

Passing on the history as I was told. My Grandmother beguiled us with stories about when she was a four-year-old with her parents who came from Scotland. Her father bought a wagon and horses in Port Adelaide and started off with his family to claim the land which he had bought, sight unseen, in the South East. When they reached Salt Creek there was a Chinese gentleman there who showed my then four-year-old grandmother a tiny set of scales. She thought they were for dolls, but her father told her that they were for weighing the gold dust which the Chinese gentleman hoped to find in Victoria.

What do you remember about earlier days at the Coorong?

I remember leaving Kingston by car, just as the sun was rising, to go to Adelaide. My maternal grandparents had bought one of the first hard-hooded cars in the district, and my mother was one of, if not THE, first female in the district to be granted a driver's licence. We travelled all day with a meal break at Murray Bridge, and arrived in Adelaide just as the Police were coming on duty to hand signal the traffic out of the city. It so happened that my mother's brother was the one on duty at Victoria Square.

What changes have you seen the Coorong go through?

My earliest memories are of basically dirt roads with odd patches of metal in places where rainwater might lay. For many years vast tracts of land, such as Cantara, belonged to one family. The properties were fenced and at first any travellers, whether horse drawn or later motor cars, had to open and close gates. When ramps were introduced there had to be a gate beside each one for travelling stock. I had an aunt who lived in a house close to these ramps and she had many callers during the

depression, begging for food. She told us that she would leave a pair of my uncle's shoes within sight of the door and would call as though asking him if she should give the swagman some food.

My paternal grandfather was, before his marriage, the driver of the mail/passenger coach between Meningie and Kingston. The mail was brought across Lake Albert by paddle steamer and transferred with any passengers to the coach. The story we urged our grandfather to tell over and over again was when he brought the two royal princes from Meningie to Kingston. He often told the story of how he was reprimanded by the tutor who was escorting them for "telling them off!" for throwing stones at a bottle while he was changing the horses at one of the stops.

What is your favourite place on the Coorong?

Wilderness Lodge near Magrath's Flat which was a stopping place for many travellers in pre-motorcar days. A few miles south, a short road towards the Coorong brought the traveller to a punt crossing to the narrow ridge of sandhills. It was an occasional meeting place for the South East members of our Smith families with other family members from Strathalbyn or Murray Bridge. The site had such happy memories for me that when my daughter asked what I wanted to do to celebrate my 80th birthday, I asked that all members of my immediate family should spend the weekend at the aboriginal tourist centre where there was a large building to accommodate my entire family. All but one member, a grand-daughter in Queensland, spent an unforgettable two days with care and guidance from the aboriginal caretaker who I had known since his childhood at Raukkan, Gordon Rigney. The diary for visitors' comments was most interesting in the building which had been brought from Sydney after the Commonwealth games. Visitors from many parts of the world had taken the time to record their feelings after a brief stay in this unique part of Australia.

What was it like living/working in the area?

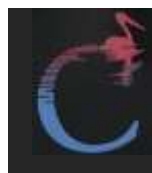
I particularly love the area south of Meningie where salt was harvested for many years. My mother and two of her four teenage sisters from Blackford, their home north of Kingston, went with their father to bring a load of salt back for their cattle. Their first and only holiday. Many years later I delighted in walking around that area with my father, and discovering a malleefowl nest. These birds build a mound with a great deal of vegetable matter mixed with the sand, lay their eggs and cover them well, then leave it for the warmth of the sun to hatch the babies. When I was first married and went to live at Narrung, my husband and I, then later our children, met my parents several times at the same spot before we returned to Narrung and they to Cape Jaffa. The last time I visited that area was for the unveiling of the memorial to the first patron of "Friends of the Coorong", Colin Thiele.

When people ask me about my love of the Coorong, my memory flies back to the picnics we had in the sandhills when many members of my father's family were "home" for Christmas. In those days there was an aboriginal lady who, with her partner, moved from one shearing shed to another – he to shear, and she to toss the fleeces on the table where any prickles or "dags" were removed. I won't name her in deference to her living relations, but it was well known that this couple moved from shed to shed, and were highly respected. At first they travelled in a car without a hood, but when the engine no longer functioned, this resourceful lady cut shafts from the roadside tea-trees and harnessed her horse to pull it. When I was showing a sketch of it done by Ainslie Roberts, a man at Raukkan said "I can tell you that mare's name Mrs. Pad! It was Brownette!"

Are there any other thoughts you would like to share?

I told most of my stories in the *Tales of the Coorong* and *More Tales of the Coorong*.

Leta Padmans books are available for purchase from The Chambers in Meningie and from the DEWNR Coorong National Park office at Noonameena.



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