

Johanna Edwards

Although it is now many years, my memories of forty-six years ago are still very clear in my mind. Let me take you to the beginning.

My name is Johanna Jacoba Edwards and I was born on 12 April 1946. I am the second of six sisters. I was born in Zeist, Holland (Netherlands).

When I was nine years old, my parents told me we were migrating to Australia. I did not know what migrating meant and I did not know where Australia was (in fact I had never heard of it and so knew nothing about it). What I did soon find out was that we were going very far away and for a very long time.

I realised that I would not be able to play with my favourite cousin Rob and my girlfriend and neighbour Janny. I would also not be able to see my grandparents and so I did not want to go. When the day arrived, a bitterly cold day 13 December 1955, we had to leave very early in the morning, I hid at my auntie's house across the road. We left with a family of nine called Wagenveld. I cried my eyes out when I had to go.

We travelled to Rotterdam and from there, on the Hoek of Holland, our ship *Sibayak*, awaited. It was to be her second last voyage, before she was sold for scrap-metal. The journey took nearly six weeks. My mother, pregnant with her fifth child, and I were seasick for half the trip. As soon as we arrived, I was taken to the camp hospital with an ear infection.

All was not bad on the boat. The youngest of the four Wagenveld boys was a year older than I. Johnny (Jan) and I would run and hide all over the ship, terrorising the chef as we ducked into the kitchen, pinching handfuls of sugar-cubes. We loved it when we saw land and the locals would come in, their little boats filled with local foods, crafts and other paraphernalia. They would send up the goods baskets for us to inspect and if anyone wanted anything, the bartering would start. This was great fun for us.

Fremantle was our first Australian port of call. It was mid January, very hot. We were allowed off the boat and had

WACOL REMEMBERED

Country of Birth: **The Netherlands**

Date of Arrival in Australia: **20 January 1956**

our first swim in a "wavy" sea. We loved it and didn't want to come out. We were very sunburnt and sore but very happy that night. If this was Australia, then we had the good fortune to have arrived in Paradise!

We arrived in Port Melbourne on 18 January 1956 – Sydney the day after. We took the train to Brisbane that night. We had to sit up all night in the train and a bus from Wacol Hostel picked us up.

We were tired and hungry and the Hostel's kitchen was kept open especially for the new arrivals to have dinner. It was a strange dinner. What was that orange stuff (pumpkin)? But what had us most intrigued was the green square that wobbled all over the plate. We shook it all over the place and didn't know what to do with it. It was lime jelly of course – we soon learnt to love it.

We were put in the hut (old army huts) not far from the back entrance (of the camp) and next to the main road. There were the six of us – with mum about to make it seven – in one half of the hut, and the nine Wagenvelds in the other half. To say it was overcrowded is the ultimate understatement. There were only bedrooms, two for us and three for them, no kitchen or lounge but an "eating nook". The kitchen was about five hundred metres away and you had to go and get your meals on a tray. By the time you got home everything was cold. The men soon rigged up little metho stoves set up outside on the little wooden verandah and the women cooked on them. The toilets, showers and laundry were about five hundred metres the other way. We had to carry water from the laundry to our hut. We also had bedpans for the littlies at night which we older girls had to take to the toilets the next day (a very much hated job).

One of the things that had worried me about coming to Australia was that I had overheard the adults talking about there being a lot of snakes there. I had never seen a snake or even learnt about them, let alone think about them, until then. On the ship coming over, I had nightmares about snakes coming up the gangplank to meet me and being chased by snakes. The funniest thing was that within

a month of arriving at Wacol, I was running after the boys (real tomboy) chasing a tree-snake up the tree.

Mondays were washday. Mum would place the clothes and sheets and towels etc. into sugar sacks and put them outside the door and when we were all at school, she would put the washing in the pram and carry my baby sister Jacqueline and head off to the laundry. After we had been at the camp ten months, someone stole all the sacks and literally everything we had in the world. We all sat at the table and cried. It was the first time I had seen my father cry. It was the only time my father would have gone back to Holland if he'd had the means. It had taken Dad three months to find work as he spoke no English and had no papers. By this time, the very little we had, diminished even more.

There is, however, always a good side to the bad. The whole Dutch community got together and donated clothes, manchester and food parcels. It was wonderful and restored my parents' faith in humanity.

I experienced many, many moments of gladness, sadness, surprises and even disappointment and brutality. I will endeavour to tell you some of these.

We were at the Hostel for eighteen months and the first ten months we went to the Wacol Camp School to learn English, weights and money. It was pretty good there as everyone was doing the same thing. We spent weeks practising; th, the, this, that, there etc. To this day, neither of my parents can say the "th" sound.

Once a year there was a big outing for the "underprivileged kids". The RACQ put it on and there would be scores of taxis waiting to take us to Sandgate

for a picnic and games on the beach. We would get party hats, hooters and balloons and a bag of lollies given to us as our names were ticked off the list. We were taught a song to sing to thank the kind people who gave up their Saturday for us. It was sung to the tune of "I Love to Go a Wandering" and part of it went like this: *We will smile, for a while, thanks to you kind people of the RACQ, who on our day, take all our cares away.*

We were lucky enough to go on two of these outings and did not feel like "underprivileged kids" let me tell you.

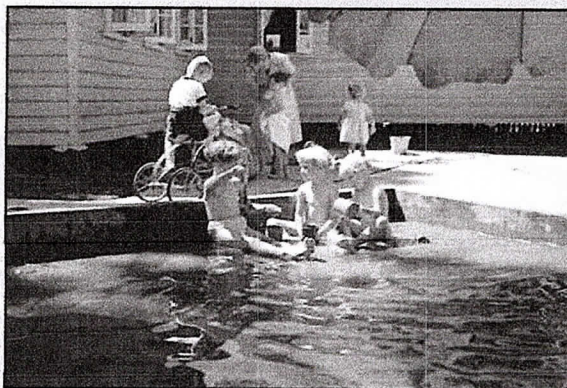
We had a ball and came home very happy kids.

There was one other outing that stands out in my mind, but sadly for the wrong reasons for me. My older sister Christina and I were friends with two other Dutch sisters that were the same ages as us. We spent all our spare time together and as we were walking in the camp one day we heard over the loudspeaker that today was the last day to sign up for summer camp. We decided to put our names down. I was

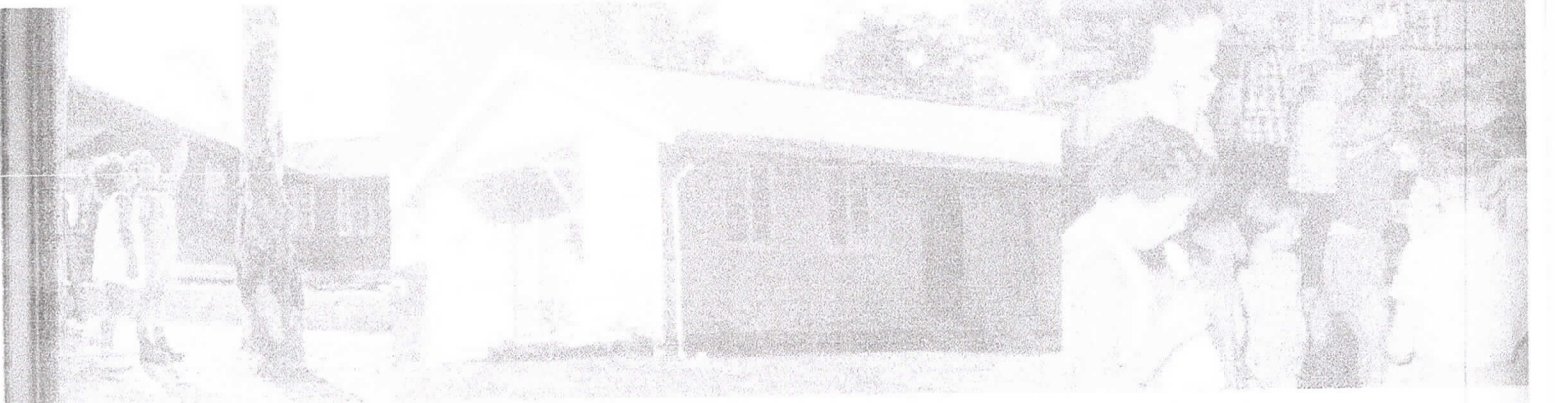
last to sign. When the notice was put up, we raced over to see whether we'd made it. Well, three of us did – you can guess who didn't. As I was last to sign – I missed out as the quota was full. No amount of crying, begging and pleading could get me on that list and not only did I go through the heartbreak of watching the other three and the rest of the lucky kids leave on the bus, I was also left alone for the next two weeks. They went to Tallebudgera camp by the sea. I moped and cried alone for two weeks. I can still feel the pain and envy I felt as a ten year old.

A funny episode is of one night when Chris and I went off to the shower. On the way back we heard a commotion and went to investigate. On the iron roof of one of the

From the archives



The wading pool – 1956



huts was a very irate man who was hitting a broom at something we could not see. It turned out to be a possum that was keeping him and his family awake at night. But we, who were raised as animal lovers, did not see it that way. We yelled and cursed at the man to stop and did not stop shouting until he started to come down the ladder and said he would tell our parents. We ran home as fast as we could and went straight to our bedroom and hoped it was an idle threat. No such luck! He knocked on our door and as we listened from our bedroom, we heard him tell our mum how rude we were and that we needed better discipline. Mum calmly told him that we had been taught to be kind to all animals and she did not think we had done anything wrong. Chris and I were smugly congratulating ourselves as he left until Mum came bursting in and said "Don't you ever do that again, to be so rude to an adult". But I think she secretly condoned our actions.

After ten months at camp school, I attended Sherwood State School for eight months. These were truly the worst months of my school life. The kids called me a wog (amongst other things) and would not let me play with them. They made fun of how I looked, dressed and talked.

I hated going to school there and I was so happy when the Dutch minister found us a house at Eight Mile Plains. It was an old chamferboard house but to us it was a palace after the camp. My Mum had my youngest sister (of six) there when I was fifteen and working already. I went to work at fourteen to help my parents out. They never did become well off, but are still happy together and to be here in Australia. They never wanted to live in Holland again. They are both eighty-three now.

I went on to marry just after my 18th birthday, which of course, was too young. I had a son at nineteen and a daughter at twenty-one. I was married to their father for twenty years but now live alone. I have three beautiful grandsons and a wonderful, caring partner.

Since moving to Australia, I myself have visited Holland six times the last being six months ago. My cousin Rob and his wife have been here twice and my little neighbour girlfriend Janny has been here as well. I stayed with her and we went on to Rhodes and stayed in their holiday apartment. More cousins are on their way to visit but no other family members have come to live here.