

## THE UNDERDOWN FAMILY



Ly Underdown



Daisy Underdown

During the early 1900s the Underdown family owned and operated a cattle property, close to Oodnadatta, named "Wintinna".

The area experienced a severe drought in 1924 and Ly's father advised him that there could be no future for him in the cattle industry so he should look for something else. At the age of 20, Ly opened a store at Oodnadatta.

The extension of the railway line from Oodnadatta to Alice Springs commenced and Ly became one of the main suppliers to the line gangs. He recalls that it took 12 months to complete the first 21 miles by day labour. A contract was then let for the balance.

Ly met up with a chap by the name of H.J. Reynolds who followed the line gang with a cool drink tent. He asked if Ly would carry some of his supplies when Ly was making his delivery. Most of the supplies, however, were second rate alcohol, which kept the line gang drunk for 10 days with no work done. The use of the train for deliveries was then barred to Ly so he had to use an old rugby utility.

Ly then established a tin shed store at Rumbalara and continued to supply the line gangs from there. When the line reached Alice Springs the store was also moved to Alice and set up on

a block of land at the corner of Gregory Terrace and Hartley Street. The Underdown Brothers Store was opened on 28 August 1929 on Ly's 25th birthday. The birthday was celebrated on a camp sheet out in the middle of what is now Gregory Terrace. The party was attended by only two others and the spread consisted of three bottles of lemonade and three shillings (30 cents) worth of sandwiches purchased from Annie Meyers.

The store did considerable business with mostly Italian miners at Harts Range Mica Fields and the Wolfram Fields at Hatches Creek.

In 1930 Joe Kilgariff, who owned and operated the Stuart Arms Hotel, decided to build a cash and carry store in Todd Street opposite the Hotel. Ly came home in despair and advised his mother Daisy Underdown that a lot of their customers were trading with Joe and they could be put out of business. Mother's reply was "rubbish, we will build a hotel." Ly stated, "With what? We are broke." She continued, "You are young and strong, get out and build a lime kiln and make your own bricks." Ly had Mr. Johannsen Senior show him how to make lime, he built three kilns and commenced work on the original Alice Springs Hotel.



Alice Springs Hotel

His only assistant was his life-long friend, an Aboriginal man named "Noonie". Ly claimed the hotel would never have been built without the aid of "Noonie" or without the driving force of his mother, Daisy Underdown. Their first application for a licence was rejected, then, finally it was granted in 1932 after a licence previously granted to Annie Meyers was revoked.

They were able to secure an old boarding house from Oodnadatta, which had previously been a boarding house at Lightning Ridge. A Sam Burr demolished the old building and transported it in pieces to Alice by rail. Having been moved twice, the galvanized iron of the house had hundreds of holes that had to be soldered, although the timber was in excellent order.

The dividing walls of the hotel were timbers with wire netting tacked to each side, which was plastered by Peter Pizzinato. The cavities were filled with empty bottles. Years later, about

1946, when the hotel was demolished, the Lion Brewery at Port Augusta wired Ly and asked if Ly could send them some empty beer bottles. From the hotel Ly gave all the recovered bottles a wash and sent them off to the brewery. They totalled 60 tons. The brewery wired back and said please no more.

During the construction of the hotel in 1932, the Commonwealth Railways delivered sufficient material to erect two staff houses. One night the complete consignment disappeared. The railways were not impressed and sent a detective from Port Augusta to investigate. In those days the train journey was over three days so the culprits had ample warning about the detective's arrival. Prime suspect was Ly Underdown and his new hotel. Ly was quizzed at length and arranged for the policeman to call around and inspect his new building.

Ly had a look around prior to the official visit and noticed on a plank in the ceiling the initials C.R. He ran around to Phil Windles garage, got a sheet of emery paper, rubbed most of the writing off, then rubbed in some bacon fat covered with dirt to conceal the rest. Ly had not taken any of the housing consignment. It was another group who had actually stored the materials behind the centralian Government house, called "the Residency", that was then occupied by a Mr. Cawood who was father-in-law to Ly's sister Ethel. When they learned of the impending arrival of the detective, they got Tom Barrat to load all the building materials onto his truck and hide it out in the bush.

After the hue and cry was over, it was brought back to town and used to construct the first Catholic Church. There were also several drums of petrol in the stolen property, however, Tom claimed he could not find them. Most people believed Tom kept them as his share.

When the hotel, the second in Alice Springs, was built, the population was only 333 in a radius of 100 miles. Despite this, the Underdowns prospered and they were able to purchase the Botanic Hotel Adelaide, which was managed by Ly's sister Mary and her husband.

During World War II the population of Alice Springs was swollen by tens of thousands of soldiers, many on a semi-permanent basis and others on the way through to the war zones. Ly and his mother decided that with all the word of mouth publicity from these soldiers and the expected financial boom after the war, Alice Springs could expect a great influx of tourists who would require accommodation far better than that currently offered.

In 1946 Daisy went to Adelaide and employed an architect who designed a two-storey hotel with provisions for a third floor at a later date. There was provision for a large dining room, two large lounges and three bars, some 60 bedrooms, all with ensuite and six luxury suites with separate bedrooms and lounges. Preliminary plans were sent to Alice for suggestions, however, Ly, with the success of construction of several good bush buildings behind him, decided that he could build the hotel with these plans and so further services and costs of the architect could be dispensed with. He advised the architect that they had decided not to build the hotel and so he would not pay any further fees.

The architect sent a copy of the plans to local businessman, Don Thomas, with the request that if the Underdowns commenced to build along the lines of the plans to notify him. This resulted in a court case with the payment of fees directed plus a further condition that the architect's name is blacked out from all copies of the plans. The architect must have had an

inking that the Underdowns might try to trick him for the preliminary plans were very difficult to follow, and the measurements listed for each room, when added together, were sometimes up to 2 feet different to the overall measurement.

Ly also listened to all sorts of advice from drinkers in the bar. He often acted upon this advice but sometimes the advice was wrong or he misinterpreted it. A typical instance was the oiling of planks for formwork. All columns and floor slabs were of poured concrete and all formwork was of Oregon planks and five ply, steel decking was not available in those days. Ly was told that in order to preserve his planks for reuse many times, he should coat them with oil. The person omitted to say that the oil should be solvent, which is soluble in water. Ly, never a person to do things by halves, used about 100 gallons of sump oil to really give the planks a good soaking. The end result was that the plaster would not stick to the oily concrete. Labourers spent weeks with comb hammers trying to rough up the concrete to allow the plaster to hold. Even so, for many months, guests would often get the shock of their lives when, in the middle of the night, a square foot or so of plaster would crash down on their bed.

The building of the hotel commenced soon after World War II was over. The Territory was bulging with army surplus materials, which would all be sold at on-site auctions. This suited Ly, for as can be seen, he was a likeable rogue and not adverse to slightly illegal deals. His first purchase was a line of earthenware pipes, which cost him 7 pounds 10 shillings. The other bidders were not aware of this line which was 4 miles long so they stopped bidding when they reached the value of the hundred or so lengths exposed in the first paddock. He then went to Darwin for the sale of high quality reinforcement steel. He purchased 117 tons at a price of 11 pounds per ton. Kurt Johannsen had just put together the Territory's largest road train and he brought the steel to Alice for a total of 1700 pounds. This was one time Ly tricked himself. He wanted to buy a large amount of electrical cable, which was on offer at the next auction. Unfortunately, he asked two different men to bid for it and to get it at any cost. Only these two were bidding and when the bids reached almost retail price, one asked the other whom he was bidding for and the reply was Ly Underdown.

He also required a number of sheds for accommodation for the builders and for his farm, which he had recently set up outside Heavitree Gap. The army had a lot of buildings around Alice and they were auctioned on site and the purchaser had to remove them. Ly would always bid for one of the cheapest buildings.

Then the next morning at daybreak, with his building foreman Jean, a Frenchman, they would knock down the most expensive and have it back in town before 9am. Ly would hop off the truck and walk the last 2 miles so that if it was discovered that he had the stolen building he could say, "I told that silly damn Frenchman which one to get but he must have made a mistake." He was never pulled up.

The Underdowns also operated one of the town's two bakeries and at one auction Ly bought a nice marble bench 6ft x 3ft and brought it back for the baker to use as a pastry board. The baker took one look and resigned as it was, in fact, a second hand mortuary slab.

When I arrived in Alice Springs in 1947, the hotel was almost ready for the first concrete pour over the lounge, kitchen and dining room. All the building workers were located in two of

the long ex-army sheds and others were used for storage. The 117 tons of steel were also carefully laid out over a large block. Most of this steel was high tensil. Charlie Cusak, one of the most cantankerous of men, carried out the job of installation of this steel. However, he was brilliant at his work and all the tantrums he threw had to be overlooked. The value of his work became obvious when the hotel was demolished in the late 1980s, for it was only demolished with the utmost difficulty.

Ly believed that strength was most important and, in addition to the many tons of steel, the building blocks were constructed with extra cement and slowly cured under a sprinkler system. These bricks were much harder than most concrete. He installed a stone crusher and was the first person to use crushed aggregate in the manufacturing of concrete. This building, with so many firsts and with a lot of character, which could easily have stood for 100 years, was demolished after a fire partly destroyed the third story which had been added long after the original building was completed. The only damage to the first and second floors was by water and minimal, yet no person objected to this vital part of Alice Springs' heritage being destroyed.

Ly's mother Daisy never left the hotel. Her day began at midday in her office where she would remain until midnight when she would make her way back to her bedroom. She was strict with all her staff, including Ly and her other son John. The boys were not paid any salary, despite the fact they were both married. This left them with no other choice than to take cash from the bar till. John made the comment that as they "tickled" the till so much it should break into laughter whenever he or his brother was close to it.

Daisy had sole control of the chequebook and never paid suppliers or subcontractors until they visited her in the office after 7pm. My firm could not visit, of course, so seldom received payments on time. They eventually terminated their contract, which was passed onto me. This meant I had to visit the old lady once a month for my cheque. I would arrive at 7pm and after being questioned about my family, goings-on in the town and so forth, with a bit of luck, I would receive a cheque about 11pm.

She was also into various methods to minimise her taxation payments. The men working on the new building were paid their wages by cheque. These payments were considered as capital, being a new building, and so subject to income tax. Some 75% of the employees would cash their cheques over the bar. Daisy would then retrieve and destroy them so not only would she avoid income tax, but also group tax, as most of the workers were well away when time came to issue the group certificates. Cheque butts were easily "doctored" to allow for those destroyed.

Another time a new housemaid went to make the old lady's bed and decided to turn the mattress. She discovered, with some degree of shock, several thousand pounds in ten-pound notes between the mattress and the bed base.

Daisy died in 1963 so Ly lost the financial guidance of this grand old lady. He then borrowed heavily to build the third floor of the hotel. This included a large convention area, a bar and lounge, named the Jet Bar, and several luxury suites. This area was initially quite successful but unfortunately Ly began to drink too much and this, combined with his advancing age, led to the deterioration of his business and, in a short while, the hotel was in serious debt. The group who provided the loan could see that unless they made a move there would be little of the asset

remaining, so they reluctantly had to foreclose and take over the hotel. Les and Melva Hansen were installed as managers for the receivers until the hotel was eventually sold to the Telford Group.

Following the sale, Ly moved to the Old Timers Home but until his death remained very bitter over the loss of his lifetime project. Then, on a memorable Saturday, as the resident band was playing a song titled "The boys light up", the top floor caught fire. At about the same time, Ly slipped into a coma and died the following day. Some of us claimed he had a pact with the devil, "burn my hotel down and I will come quietly."

In many areas Ly was quite ahead of his time. The hotel was built for the expected tourist influx. The ex-army huts used to house the construction workers were taken to Ayers Rock and Ly's sister, Ethel, and husband Stan Cawood operated the first chalet at Ayers Rock. On the flat roof of the original two-storey building, Ly built the Centre's, and probably Australia's, first illuminated indoor cricket pitch.

## THE STUART ARMS HOTEL 1889 – 1989

In the early 1880s Billy Benstead drove a mob of cattle from South Australia to the Frew River area for station owner, A.B. Murray. He remained there until the station was sold in 1883. On 29 November 1888 the new Township of Stuart was proclaimed with the first blocks put to auction in January 1889. Billy Benstead purchased Lot No. 78 and built the original Stuart Arms Hotel in 1889.

It was a modest structure of stone and iron about the size of an average house with a post and rail-hitching fence around the verandah. Buggies and wagons would park outside amongst a forest of gums in what is now Todd Street. By 1889 the licensee was a Mr. Gunther who looked a real publican. Mr. Gunther was a portly, florid man with a scarlet cummerbund about his middle. There was only one white woman resident of Stuart, Mrs. Charlie Meyers, wife of the local saddlery business proprietor (grandparents of Murray Neck). There were other white women at the Alice Springs Telegraph Station, including the Bradshaw family. The Meyers property was on the corner of Todd Street and Gregory Terrace, now the Capricornia Building.

The main industry, which created the need for a Township of Stuart, was mining in the Eastern MacDonnells, commencing with a ruby rush, east of the Alice, followed by gold at Aritunga. However, by 1890, it was discovered that the rubies were in fact garnets so the bottom fell out of the precious stones speculation. The Bradshaws were at the Telegraph Station from 1899 until 1908. Doris Blackwell, in her book 'Alice on the Line', refers to one of the first sporting complexes, an earth tennis court located adjacent to the Stuart Arms, probably on the North side and fronting what is now Todd Mall.

I am unable to find any references to the Stuart Arms Hotel during the years of World War I, but in 1921 the Laver family arrived to take over the management of the hotel. They spent two weeks travelling from Oodnadatta to Stuart. Mother and Father by horse and buggy and son, Bob,