

JOAN ANDREWS

Information provided by Gale Collins, 13 December 2017

Imagine the year is 1977; imagine yourself as a young vibrant 58 year old woman with everything to live for. Now imagine yourself being told to put your affairs in order, as in two days time you will be going into hospital and you will never be returning. This is the fate awaiting Joan and John Andrews. In two days time Joan underwent a double mastectomy. Then she truly began the fight for her very survival, for her very soul. Joan fought valiantly for two years before finally being declared the winner and one of the very few women in 1979 to be given a new chance at life.

When Joan returned home she told me she was at sixes and sevens and couldn't settle down. She told her husband John to please take her bush. That she needed to go back to nature if she was ever to recover. They ended up at the highest point in Lightning Ridge and pitched a tent. Joan told me she didn't know what got into her... (like a bee in a bonnet or a bee in her head that she couldn't get rid of). She wanted her husband John to build her a fireplace out of the local rocks and cement. Joan told me the more she asked him, the more he said no. And the stronger she asked him the stronger he said no. Finally out of sheer frustration Joan said, "John Andrews go get me a bag of cement and I will build it myself." John told her he was not going to mix the cement because he didn't like working with cement. Joan told him "she would mix it herself."

Since her condition was still weakened, Joan told me she would just mix little bowls of cement and would carefully mix it with a couple of rocks and let it set. Then when she had more energy she would mix a little more and add a few more rocks to the structure. In all, it took a week to build a little basic fireplace. Once finished, Joan stepped back and looked at her handiwork. She was amazed. Joan realised that she had never built anything in her whole entire life. Time had managed to slip by without her building a thing. She told me that once she started building she could not stop. It was empowering. It took Joan Andrews six months to build her fireplace plus the table and 5 stone seats. The reason she cooked outside for four years was simply because she had built this all by herself. Didn't you understand? She built this! Joan told me it was no effort at all for her to cook outside, underneath an umbrella, because she had built it.

By the time she had finished building her fireplace and seating it was starting to get really hot and time for Joan and John to go back to Sydney for the hot summer months. Joan told me she pined for this place and as soon as the weather started cooling off they were back. Joan said she had been well and truly bitten by the building bug and once she started... she couldn't stop.

Joan used a total of 14,000 bottles and cans to make these 34 beautiful feature walls. All of the bottles came from the club, pub and hotel. Daily she would make the rounds collecting the bottles and bring them back to the Black Queen to rinse and separate them by colour, shape and size.

Joan was the mason and John the carpenter. If you notice all of the carpentry in the first cottage, well that was John's handiwork. It took them 2 years to build the first cottage. Both were completely inexperienced and learned by trial and error. Nothing is square and nothing is level. Back when they started here you had to be seen to be mining, so time also had to be allocated to the mine and all of the hot summers were spent in Sydney.

In early 1982 John Andrews was diagnosed with a severe heart condition. Joan realised if she wanted to keep building, the lion's share would fall on her shoulders. John said he would help all he could when he was able. Joan spent the summer studying building at the library. So this is now the new and improved Joan Andrews. Joan told me "she had to keep building, didn't I realise, didn't I understand; she was rebuilding her body, inside and out, mentally, physically and spiritually."

To be 62-years old, to be able to read and comprehend to such an extent to make such huge structural changes is indicative of how intelligent I believe Joan Andrews is. But if you consider for a moment, Joan was born profoundly deaf. An aunt noticed Joan's interest in sewing and taught her how to sew. A profession that served her well.

We were so taken with Joan's ingenuity, her creativeness and her eccentricity that Roger (my husband) suggested we film Joan doing her last tour through the Black Queen. He felt this was a point in time that must be captured. We were fortunate to be able to borrow a movie camera from the daughter of the manager of the Wallangulla Motel and Roger was able to film Joan's last tour. We created a DVD from this film.

The last concrete structure Joan built at the age of seventy three, was a hollow cylinder, using some 1200 bottles which stands over 6 feet high. At the foot is seated a concrete plaque with the following inscription; In memory of Jenny (small dog) 16 years old, Died 20•6•93 L/Ridge.