

THE LITTLE MOTHER OF MOUNT RIDDOCK.

(By Ernestine Hill)

From Artlunga, 70 miles east of Alice Springs, a Territory policeman has been called into the ultimate ranges to bury the body of a bush-woman who had died, apparently of heart failure, under a tree near her home. The woman was Mrs. Ben Webb, of Mount Riddock, and her story one of the most heroic in the history of outback Australia, where all women are heroines.

Twenty-five years ago, during the Winnecke gold rush Mrs. Webb came up with her husband and his brother to the wilds of Central Australia. She was then a bride and it was a quaint honeymoon. From Oodnadatta, the head of the line, they travelled in a dray, with other hopeful prospectors on foot and on pack-horses, some of them pushing all their worldly goods in wheelbarrows and perambulators through 400 miles of rocky scrub. Arrived at the scene of the rush, a rugged valley between high quartzite hills, Mrs. Webb found that she was one of two white women among 483 men. A cabin of loose stones was swiftly run up for her, and, young as she was, she became the little mother of the field, often called upon to bind up the wounds of an injured miner, or to smoothe over the pillow in the last hours of one fallen low in fever.

A year or so of mining life, and with no hope of the gold still hidden in those white-capped ranges, Ben Webb and his wife travelled further east in their dray, out through the hills inhabited then only by blacks, for another 100 miles. They took with them a few cattle and a couple of hundred sheep, leased grazing country in the lee of the Hart Ranges, and built a second home, this time of uncut logs.

Deep in a little gully it was, 125 miles from Alice Springs, which was then but a few scattered tin houses, and with nothing nearer to the east than Queensland. Two miles away

the blue hump of Mount Riddock cut into the pale skies at 3800 feet, and nearer towered the big schist hills of jagged rocks and light mulga, shining in the sunlight with glitter of mica and silver-lead and “colours” of gold, and with powdered grain of precious stones, the beryl and topazes and Central Australian rubies that the lubras and piccaninnies could find in the porcupine grass. This was the only scenery that Mrs. Ben Webb was to look upon for 23 years, and during that time those hills have known the secret of many a perish.

At the tiny homestead, three sons and two daughters came through the years to lighten a woman’s loneliness. At the birth of each of them she was attended only by her husband and Stella, an Allowera lubra, faithful for 18 years, who helped her with the housework and the rearing of the children.

But the patient trust and the hard work brought their reward. The stock, tended night and day, increased to 2000 sheep, 1600 cattle, 300 horses and 600 goats. A very rough road was cut out through the ranges, and a mail service ran to Larry Rosenbaun’s isolated little store at Claraville only 40 miles away – once a month the boys could ride over for mail. The railway was extended to Alice Springs. Mount Riddock began to be heard of for the first time. Mica-mining became an industry of the far ranges, and this year the mail-man’s run has been extended to take in the eastern stations for 130 miles, though, even today, of that road he is practically the only traveller.

Speaking the black language of the mountains far more fluently than their own, the Webb children grew to maturity without ever having seen a school. Stockmen and shearers and excellent young bushmen from babyhood, they knew every inch of the 1100 square miles of their own country, and nothing beyond it. Uneducated but bright-minded, this grieved the parents considerably, particularly the little mother, but through all the grim struggling it was impossible to part with them, or to leave their property.

Nearly three years ago, when the eldest son was 20 and the youngest girl 10, Providence stepped in in answer to her prayers.

Out of the ranges one day came a lean and dusty traveller, led by a blackfellow. He was Mr. H. W. Walpole, who, left without stores at a mica mine, had walked 60 miles for sustenance and enough “tucker” to take him in to the Alice. An educated man, once a wool-classer, he was destined to be the guiding spirit of the benighted little family.

The children fled at his approach like the wild little bush creatures they were, but came back, one by one, fascinated, to hear tales of the cities and the world that they had never known. It was next morning that Mrs. Webb put to him a proposition. He was an elderly man now, there was depression “down south [sic] Would he remain to help her children along the royal road – she could not do it herself. After a great drought, they could give him little more than food and lodging in return, but he would be one of them, share and share alike. Walpole stayed.

Immediately he wrote to Adelaide for correspondence papers, and, while he was waiting, pegged out a patch of garden and taught the family it’s A.B.C. and the first painful tracings of handwriting. He rode 40 miles each month for two years to take delivery of the lessons and now, in the third year, the children, all together, young and old, have reached the fifth standard. His activities have lately been extended to take a quarter-caste family living on the run 10 miles away to whom he rides over each alternative week with the papers.

But “Wally”, as he is affectionately known throughout the district, did more than that. It was due to his constant suggestions that Mrs. Webb and the children were taken for the first time on a visit to Alice Springs, and that the little mother, obviously in ill-health, was induced to make a journey to Adelaide.

In Adelaide, the specialists looked grave. It was too late. In her 25 years of unalloyed loneliness and unselfishness, Mrs. Webb had written her death-warrant. After a year in the

south, struggling hard for health, with her thoughts always on the children and the home, she had returned to Mount Riddock a few weeks ago – for the end. Throughout the whole country, one of the cruellest and hardest propositions in Australia, where all are still pioneers, for the unfailing kindness and sweetness of her nature, she will always be remembered as “a great little battler and one of the best.”

Than that, in the outback, there is no greater homage.

Constable Murray has buried Mrs. Ben Webb within sight of the log homestead at One Gum Well that was her only thought for so many years, and the dearest thing in the world to her.

-----oOo-----