

# Introducing Connie McDonald



Connie McDonald

Miss Constance McDonald was born thirty-seven years ago in Western Australia. She was born in the bush—delivered by her grandmother. Her mother was a fullblood Aboriginal woman who had married a Scotsman. When Connie was three weeks old, her mother died. Because her father was a drover who was always away, Connie was taken to an Anglican mission in north-west of Western Australia. Her mother's tribe—the Ubangi, Connie thinks—were still living a very tribal life at that time and they wouldn't have anything to do with Connie.

*"The colour bar wasn't only a case of whites rejecting blacks. Oh, no. The fullbloods too, the tribal ones, rejected the mixed bloods. I was rejected and felt it. I got used to it though. Even today, now, it doesn't worry me, because I can stand on my own feet, wherever I go. It doesn't worry me. I always speak first to anybody, no matter what their colour. I get talking to them because I'm interested in people. When I got older, I was so interested in my mother's people, that I wanted to get amongst them and learn more. They were more sympathetic later. At weekends they used to take me out to the bush and teach me things about their tribal life. I was lucky that I had this experience. The young people today don't know anything. But some of them want to know, and they ask questions. That is why I'm so glad that I've had the experience these Aboriginal people gave me."*

## At the Mission

Life at the mission was hard. The mission was very poor and the food that they supplied was appalling. Breakfast was a bowl of porridge and a hunk of bread. Lunch was some sort of a hot meal if they were lucky. Tea consisted of a hunk of

bread and syrup and a cup of tea. There were two issues of clothes per year. The girls only had two dresses, one for Sunday best and one for school.

The poor food and conditions explain why:

*"Physically I'm a weak, ill person. I've always been sick. In and out of hospital as a child, with broken bones. Had a lack of calcium."*

## Hospital

In the mid 1940's, when she was about 12, Connie was sent to a native hospital in Wyndham. It was run by a very efficient Aboriginal sister. There was a welfare officer in charge of the hospital. All the patients, except those who couldn't leave their beds, had to work. Connie and another girl had to do the boss' washing and ironing. Two young mothers at the hospital had the job of taking the pans out of the wards each day. One day, one of them felt ill and didn't do the job. The welfare officer came in and kicked her.

*"I wasn't supposed to talk back to a white person, but I thought 'Who does he think he is?' I sent a letter to the Superintendent of the mission where I had been living. He sent it to the native welfare department in Perth. As a result, that man was removed from the job. That was the first time that I realized that I could fight, and I could help myself and others."*

After this experience, she was sent back to the mission. She remembers:

*"It was very hard to leave the mission then. An Aboriginal person couldn't even go to Derby or Broome unless he had his citizenship right. That was a lot of rubbish!—citizenship right in your own country! Anyway, I got mine. I remember the magistrate congratulating me. He said, 'This entitles you to the rights and good*