

Mrs Sloss's House

37 Hulbert Street, South Fremantle WA



Once upon a time, (well actually in about 1896) 37 Hulbert Street was vacant land with no owner.

In fact Hulbert Street didn't even exist because it was called Jane Street, and the area south of Douro road was known as Chesterfield.

In 1897 William Bridgetown, a carpenter, built and lived in a three roomed 'iron house' at 67 Jane Street, Chesterfield. He also built and rented the house next door where the Martin family lived. In 1900 they swapped houses as the house at the end of the street had more potential for expansion (and the Martins had a bigger family!). In 1909 the street became known as Hulbert Street and 67 Jane Street became 37 Hulbert Street.

Margaret Mariah and John Henry Martin came to WA from Victoria in 1895 with three children (Lil b1891, Elsie b1895 and Ruby b1898). Over the years they had a total of 10 children (Alfred b1900, Margaret b1902, Ellen Elizabeth b1904, Edward b1906, Fred b1908, Ida b1911 and Hazel b1914) all of whom lived at 37 Hulbert Street. Members of the Martin family lived at this house for the next 93 years.

Their first daughter born in WA, Margaret (Mrs Sloss), was born in 1902 at the house and describes four children sleeping in a double bed, sitting on forms for meals and doing homework by lamp light. She had to wash all the socks for the family and pulled water from a back yard well with an iron hand pump. The family had chooks, ducks and grew vegetables, trading with their neighbours.

Margaret's father John worked firing boilers at the Power House on South Mole before becoming a tram driver. He stopped working at 79 years of age and died when he was 81 in 1949. Her mother died when she was 68.

Margaret went to Beaconsfield Primary School and attended church at St David's (which used to be on the corner of Douro Road and Walker Street). At fourteen years of age she went to work at the Mills and Ware biscuit factory. Margaret had learnt how to ice cakes from her mother and she became the forewoman responsible for mixing icing.

After working at Mills and Ware for 12 years Margaret left to marry Ronald Sloss in 1929. He worked in the country during the Depression and then got a job at Vacuum Oil, working there for 37 years.

Mr and Mrs Sloss lived initially with Ron's parents, then in several rented houses before moving back to Hulbert Street in 1945 to take care of Margaret's father after her mother's death. The family had three children, but one died sadly at five months of age. Lorna and Valerie were born at "Sanhedrin", Sister Bathgate's hospital.

Sadly Ron Sloss was involved as a pedestrian in an accident opposite the Seaview Hotel in 1966 and he was killed.

Many people in Hulbert Street remember Mrs Sloss fondly. One neighbour (from number 23) remembers visiting her for cups of tea and her making milky custard puddings on the wood stove. She said she only ever came into the front rooms, but she thinks Mrs Sloss slept in the 'loft room' because she once saw her pink chenille bedspread.

Mrs Sloss finally sold the house in 1993 to Bryn Davies and moved to a Salvation Army Home. She told the real estate agent who sold the house that she loved not having to cook her own meals. She told another neighbour that she had been poor all her life but after the sale of the house she was 'rich as creases'. She died at the Home shortly afterwards.

Mr Davies, local political activist, phantom tree planter and a renovator of great renown in the Fremantle area, hoped to renovate the house, but ill health slowed him down and he sold 'Mrs Sloss's house' to Tim Darby in 1994.

When Tim bought the house there was no hot water, one power point and the 'loft room' still had a dirt floor (and this is where we think Mrs Sloss had her bedroom!). White ants and 100 years of harsh coastal conditions had taken a toll on the 'old girl' so Tim set to work restoring it.

The basic layout of the house has not changed, although the roof line in the loft room has been adjusted and the kitchen and dining room used to have a wall between them. The back verandah had a set of stairs leading to the outdoor toilet (which is still there) The original house would have finished at the living room, and it was added to as more children were born.

Mrs Sloss was interviewed by the Fremantle City Library in December 1985. The original taped interview and a written summary is held at the library. She talks about working at Mills and Ware and describes many changes in the South Fremantle area over the time she lived there. If you are interested in seeing the interview summary talk to Shani and she will copy it for you.

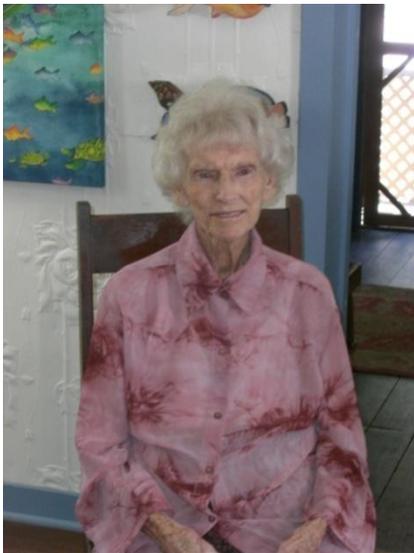
In 2007 while redoing the side verandah, Tim and Shani discovered some old newspapers folded up to fill in some cracks in the studwork. A page from the West Australian dated July 10th 1903 heralded the imminent death of Pope Leo XIII, told of France attempting to temper relations between Russia and Britain, and of Collingwood football team thrashing Fitzroy.

After removing some of the original tin, sections were discovered covered in wall paper, suggesting that the original house would have had no internal walls, and the Martins covered the internal tin with wall paper (in places there are three layers). Shani organised for the newspaper to be restored by materials conservator Kate Papierniak, and it is hoped that the other items can be similarly restored in the future.



In 2008 Shani and Tim were contacted by Margaret's younger sister Ida Curtis's family. Ida was 97 years old but was well enough to come for a visit to her old home with her children and some of her grandchildren. She was born in the house with the assistance of nurse 'Granny Lawson' in 1911. Ida enjoyed seeing the house and remembered each room. She commented on the pressed tin walls and noted that it used to be painted pink and came from a Brisbane company called Wunderlich.

Ida and her sister Hazel were the only girls in the house when she was young and they shared a double bed in the northern bedroom. She said the boys had the southern room and used to sleep out in the verandah, often making 'rude noises'



on the tin from outside. Her parents slept in the middle room, with a big velvet curtain creating a passageway out to the verandah.

Ida was very close to Hazel, who sounds like she was a bit of a tomboy. Ida can remember her getting into trouble for climbing the tree in the back yard, and said of the two of them Ida was the 'lady'. After going to school at Beaconsfield Primary and Princess May for a while, Ida joined her brothers working at Joyce Brothers, making pillow slips and white goods. Being the youngest, Hazel stayed home and helped her mother. Ida remembers Thursday

visits from the Chinese greengrocer and going to the butcher on the corner of Douro Road.

Ida also remembers the numerous horse stables nearby. Because her father worked on the trams, the tram drivers would often ring the bell and wait for her if she was late for work (the tram ran down Douro Road and into Fremantle in those days) and she would run down the road for the tram. If her father had just finished a shift he would comment, "they're not going to wait for you every day Ida". She remembers with some embarrassment the stable hands calling out "Run lolly legs run!!"

Ida met her husband Mick (Clarence Albert Curtis) while his family was holidaying at South Beach. Mick was one of 14 children and the family lived in Bedforddale, working at a timber mill. For 5-6 weeks over summer the family packed up a truck and came to stay at South Beach. Ida and Mick had four children (Barry b1938, Graeme b1940, Judith b1945 and Alan b1951) The boys can remember sleeping on the verandah at Hulbert Street and being scrubbed with sea sponges in the bath after playing in the sand dunes.

Ida remembers that there were sand dunes all around the house, and her dad having to build a retaining wall to save the side picket fence.

One day Shani would love to get in touch with other members of the extended Martin family, especially the daughters of Mrs Sloss - Valerie and Lorna. Apparently Lorna is now Lorna Chitty and lives in Toodjay and Valerie lives in South Lakes.

Over the years several people have dropped in to the house with memories of living nearby (including one man who used to visit with his grandparents for holidays across the road - he said Lorna was the first girl he ever kissed!)

We hope that as the years go on more and more information will be gained about the "cottage" at The Painted Fish. Let us know if you can help!

Shani Graham from The Painted Fish

Written May 2008.



Mrs Martin (front in black) with Hazel, Ida and Ella outside 37 Hulbert Street.

Mr John Martin with his grandchild Thelma (Ruby's child) at Hulbert Street



Ida (left) with her sister Ruby and Ruby's daughter Thelma.

Outside the side verandah at Hulbert Street

The original page from the West
(before restoration), dated July 10th 1903

