SLUSH LAMPS AND FLANNEL FLOWERS

This was originally intended to be a simple profile of Marion Parsons nee Howard 1873-1943 written at the suggestion or Judith Hinch - my daughter and her granddaughter.

In the winter of 1990 I visited the ruin of the old "Kia Ora" (Bundarra) homestead which was by then owned by a Japanese group. I then decided that the scope of this should be broad enough to show something of the background of what is possibly a typical Australian family. Typical in the sense that they do not in any sense represent the wealthy or "successful" but the "battlers".

Probably this is neither a biography or a history.
Cane in his dissertation on the Tenterden-Ollera Station says of personal events:

> "Such things have no place in a 'sober
> historical record 'but are worth preserving
> as of local interest".

History is always influenced by the point of view of the person writing or telling the story. No better example can be given than that of the late Professor Manning Clark who has often been called Australia's premier historian.

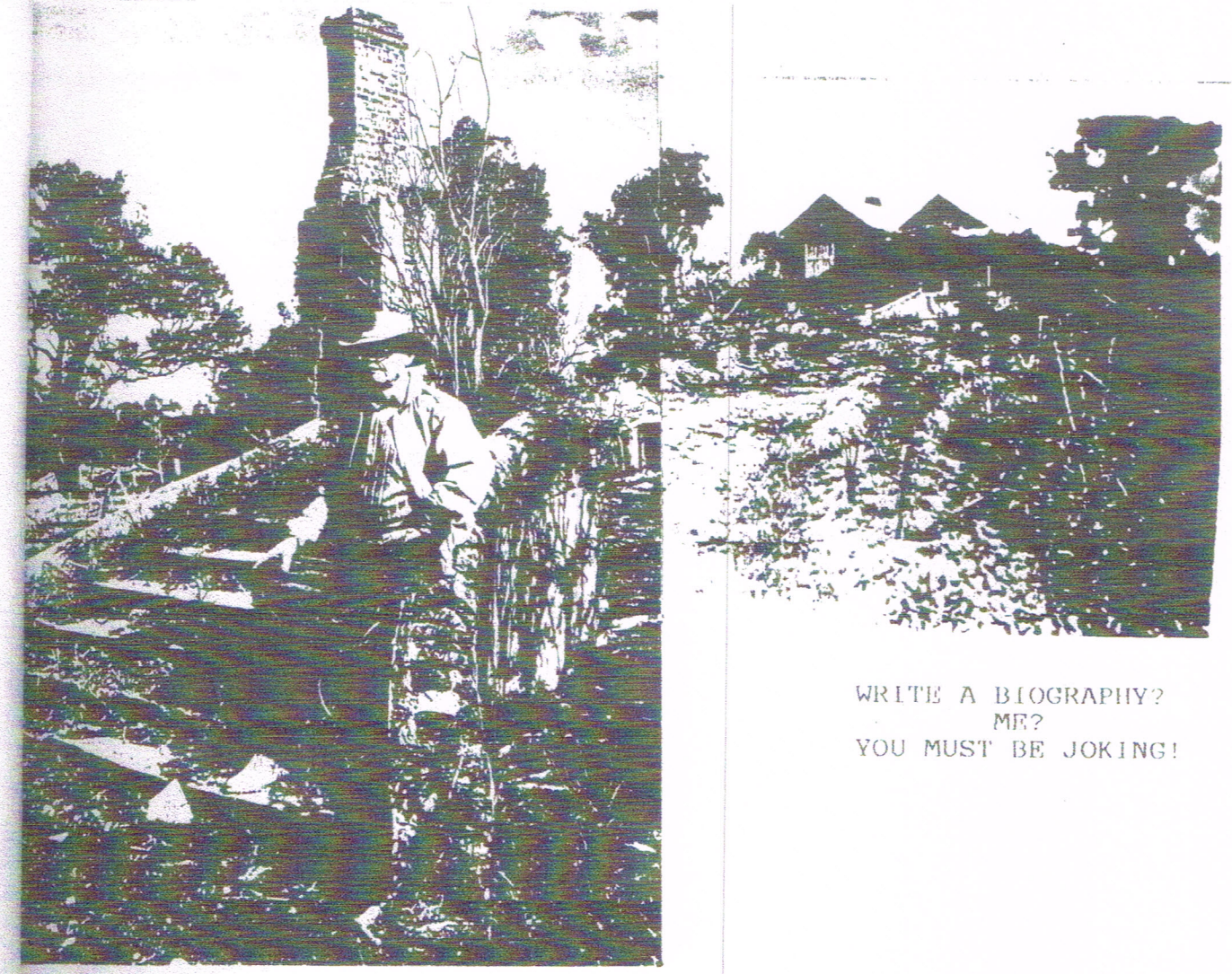
In a television interview on 25/3/91 shortly before his death, Clark, when commenting on Sir John Kerr's dismissal of the Whitlam Government and what history would say of him said "History is written by the victors and varies accordingly"

We could well replace the word "victors" with "survivors". There are of course those who deliberately distort the truth for their own purposes- personal, religous, political or economic. The history of many nations, countries and families has been rewritten with appropriate addition, omission, or downright lies.

Probably very few are entirely innocent in this regard. I have tried to be strictly honest with the very limited information available to me; much of it hearsay, some accounts of events appear to be contradictory. In the retelling of any event the difference may summed up by the statement. "It depends on who is telling the story".

With the exception of her final letter to Keith, who she calls "Dear old Son", the letters purported to be written by Marion are simply what I imagine she would have written had those letters been preserved. All the events recorded really occurred. Some names have been changed.

I have the original manuscript of most of her poems written in her own hand, only a few are included here. They are in another booklet, and they reveal much of her character. I believe that her parents had successfully hidden their convict ancestory and she really believed that that Henry Kable was a surveyor with The First Fleet. He was actually the convict who carried Governor Phillip ashore at Sydney Cove.



WRITE A BIOGRAPHY?
ME?
YOU MUST BE JOKING!

I sat and sadly pondered on the things that I could write,
My thoughts and recollections ran riot through the night,
Of things that should be mentioned and of others best untold,
Some of them plain rubbish and others purest gold.

I would want to paint a picture of times both good and bad,
Of a mother ever loving and a tough old bushman Dad.
Of a family in an era when things were black and white,
There was never any doubt as to what was wrong or right.

Should I write it as I see it after all these mixed up years?
Should I put in all the heartaches? All the joys and hopes and fears?
Should I make it cold and factual, the statistics and the facts?
Should I try to show the persons and the reasons for their acts?

Perhaps I shouldn't write it, for the characters are dead
And my personal recollections are but phantoms in my head.
The message from all history is that most things do not last
We should think upon the future and not dwell upon the past.

But future things are founded on what has gone before
And we oft forget the lessons left to us from days of yore.
So I'll let Mother tell the story and trust that she will understand
And pardon any errors not written in her hand.

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PART 1

HOME BY THE GWYDIR

On 26th February 1872 at the Windsor Congregational Church, John Thomas Howard (known as J.T.) married Caroline Emmiline Teal. Caroline's education was above average for the times. Her grandfather, Charles Sommers had been headmaster at St Matthews Church School at Windsor and her grandmother mistress of the infants school there.

Her grandfather Henry Kable had carried Governor Phillip ashore at Sydney Cove and had later become a prominent citizen of the new colony. J.T.'s father and grandfather had been stonemasons and his father worked in the now booming New England district.
Among other jobs he built and operated the "Able Native" inn in Inverell.

J.T.'s Mother had been murdered at "Auburn Vale" near Inverell in 1856, by a Chinese man named TILLY and J.T. is said to have taken the message to the Borthwicks, owners of the station. What happened that day is obscure; a brother and sister of J.T. may also have died. What happened to Tilly is also not documented.* see appendix

It is clear from his childhood that J.T. had a strong association with the New England, and that is where he took his bride - a honeymoon by dray to "Tenterden" station west of Guyra where he had a job with the Everetts, probably as a "musterer"; later designated as "boundary rider". Wages would have been one pound per week (a little better than the shepherds, who were paid 40 pounds per annum and who could be prosecuted if they left their job and also have the value of any sheep unaccounted for deducted from their wages).

Rations of 10,10,2,(1/4) were provided weekly - 10lb flour,10lbs meat 2lbs sugar brown, tacky and part molasses! ,1\4lb "green" tea. Other goods were available at the station store with prices suitably loaded to ensure that most of the wages paid returned to the owners. Quarters were slab and bark huts with camp ovens for cooking. Hours of work sunrise to sunset - six days a week (shepherds 7 days per week).

On 14th January 1873 Caroline gave birth to their first child, a blue eyed little girl simply christened "Marion" and it is around the life of Marion that this narrative is centered.

When she was quite small an epidemic of diphtheria, swept through the country, often with tragic results. Marion became infected and the membrane characteristic of the disease closed off her throat so that she was unable to breathe. Caroline sterilised a penknife and performed a tracheotemy using a hairpin to keep the cut in the childs windpipe (trachea) open while her throat cleared. Marion carried the scar from the operation which was about 1 inch long for the rest of his life.

The next we knew of the family J.T. was overseer on "Stoney Batter", working for the Hays family, on the Gwydir River upstream from Bundarra. The station had once been close to 140,000 acres with the head station at Kingstown, but by the early 70's with free selection and some sales it was reduced to 22,000 acres with a new homestead on the Gwydir River. About 20 permanent men were employed plus up to 40 casuals, ring barking, clearing,

shearing and fencing.

Fencing wire was coming into general use and shepherding in the old sense was on the way out. Some of the alluvial flats along the river had been cleared and fenced, mostly with split post and rail fencing; only small areas of crops were planted.

The Howards house was a little better than average as one of its four rooms had a wooden floor and not simply hard packed earth. The walls were of split slabs and the roof of bark. A wooden barrel held the water supply which had to be carried from a nearby gully in two buckets carried on either end of a yoke across the shoulders.

Like most of the settlers they had a small vegetable garden enclosed with closely fitted split palings to exclude unwanted animals, and another smaller pen for the fowls (chooks). Kangaroos were much more numerous then in the early days of settlement and such a pest that after 1880 a bonus of 6d per scalp was paid. J.T.'s only firearm was a cap and ball muzzle loader and the cost of ammunition such that they were seldom shot, however some old ones were run down with horses and dogs and a few shillings earned.

There were occasional big "drives" when long wings were built leading into the secure enclosure of timber poles. The wing fences were very flimsy to begin with and more substantial close to the yard. Thin strips of calico on stringy bark were enough to direct the 'roos at the start of the wings. Once within the yard the 'roos were killed with mattock handles to begin with and then the last few who evaded death in that manner were shot.

This was a method the Aborigines had used and the station managers had adapted. As it was done in "station time" no bonus was paid on scalps from the drives.

Dingoes were a prize at 10 shillings for the scalp.
Kangaroo rats, Bandicoots, native bears (Koalas) were common also tiger cats, native cats and two kinds of "bush rats". The bushy tailed "bush rat" was almost certainly a Phascogale and with the tiger cats, native cats, goannas and hawks made the keeping of poultry very difficult but when the time allowed J.T. would load up the muzzle loader with shot instead of ball and never fail to get some ducks along the river.

Marion told of fishing with her parents when the tastiest fish (Cod) were those under 8lb. The "wood and water" hand at the homestead was once asked by the boss to "Get a fish for dinner tonight". As he liked to share his good fortune he only took a quarter of the biggest fish he caught up to the homestead (that quarter weighed 12lbs!). The boss said "Go and get another quarter and I'll give you a nip of whiskey". Old Abe who stuttered replied " GG..Give mm..me one nnnow and a n n nother when I get back and I'll get back a bloody sight quicker!"

It was many years later that Marion wrote the poem.

HOME BY THE GWYDIR

My thoughts wander back to the days of my childhood,
To a dear little home by the Gwyder's cool stream,
Tho' many are there now, it was then but a wildwood,
And memories float past like the forms in a dream.
How the wild ducks rose high in u utter confusion.

When a shot told the tale that a foeman was near,
How the water hen ran to hide in the bushes,
And the codfish dived deep in the water so clear,
They may boast of their towers a and flourishing cities,
Naught built by man with the bush can compare.
Give me back, give me back the dear scenes of my childhood.
The wild kangaroos and the old native bear.
Though some seek for pleasure in far foreign countries,
Some make their home on the wild rolling sea,
Let those who desire live in cities of splendour
The heart of Australia, The Wild Bush for me.

The late 70's and early 80's were a time of great progress, with wire fencing gangs going at a great rate. The bridge over the Gwydir at Bundarra was under construction with many men employed there. Bullock and horse teams were busy carting the huge steel girders for the bridge plus the granite blocks used in the foundation. The granite blocks came from a quarry just west of Uralla but the steel was brought to Tamworth by the railroad; from there on up the Moonbies it was a job for the horse or bullock teams.

Many of the local citizens of the day had high hopes that the railway would come to Bundarra either by way of Bendemeer or via Manilla- Barraba and continue to Inverell. The railway and the bridges were political issues of the day.

The flooding of the Gwydir and other streams had a great influence on the flow of traffic to and from Bundarra. In dry times the direct route was used - in the wet one that avoided fording the river and passed through "Stony Batter". The Cobb and Co. Coach also varied its route sometimes going direct to the inn at King Johns swamp.

The inn was a pretty rowdy place and Marion or her mother never went there but J.T. brought home stories of tug of war competitions between horse teams and also individual horses and what would have been something to see, a tug of war between horse and bullock teams.

The teamsters who were carrying stores to Bundarra or Inverell were not good customers at the time for there was usually a keg or two of spirits among their load and a gimlet and hollow straw was standard teamster equipment. When he and his friends had taken their evening sip the hole in the keg was plugged with wood and almost undetectable.

Marion, usually with a couple of younger children in tow, loved to talk to the teamsters if they stopped nearby to boil their billys and give the team a rest.

The huge granite blocks for the northern foundations of the bridge especially interested her. In later years she could explain in detail how they were quarried just west of Uralla and split by drilling a series of holes in line and plugging these with dry soft wood. This would then be kept wet until its expansion split the rock. The fair haired blue eyed six year old would be a bright spot in any teamsters day.

The Chinese coming through to the tin mines added colour with their cone shaped straw hats and their possessions in hand carts or strung on poles; sometimes on shoulder yokes - more often carried between two people in tandem. As they shuffled past with their gait so different to the one Marion

usually saw their one question was "How far TING-GAH?"

The answer " Two days- " "Two suns" ,
"Two sleeps", or thirty miles.

There were a group of about thirty Aborigines who wandered around the district. They begged fishing hooks - lines and flour and were in no way aggressive. There was one lame fellow who wandered about alone and the settlers were afraid of him until finally one of the shepherds shot him.

Watermelons grew well among the corn on the alluvial flats along the river and there was an abundance of pumpkins, squash and melons in season. However J.T. had trouble with the blacks stealing the melons long before they were ripe.

To overcome this he met with the little tribe when the melons were forming on the vines and made an agreement with them that they were not to touch the melons for two moons and then if they would put on a corroboree. They could help themselves to the melons and he would kill a bullock for what we could call a barbecue today!

The agreement was made and kept while J.T. was at "Stony Batter".

[It is interesting to note that when Marion was living at "Kia Ora" at Bundarra in the 1920's-30's melons were also abundant and the family and friends usually had a "melon picnic" with tons of good food on the Saturday nearest to the first full moon in February.]

The corroboree was a purely social event having no connection with the ceremonial corroborees which were altogether different and not usually seen by whites. There were a lot more blacks at the melon corroboree than were generally seen. They just "came out of the scrub".

In addition to the promised bullock the blacks brought along at lot of local game. The smaller animals, possums koalas etc and birds were packed in wet clay and after baking the clay was broken off taking fur, skin and feathers with it and leaving the entrails well separated from the flesh. **Good Bush Tucker !**

Some of the senior male aborigines were known as "whistlers". Marion was hushed if she mentioned the word and it was many years before she found out that at the second initiation the urethra was slit and the incision kept open by plugging it with wet clay while it healed open. Hence the term "whistler.

The writer discussed this with an aboriginal he was guiding around some little known aboriginal sites in New England. The Aboriginal (best unnamed) said that as far as he knew at that time (mid 1970's) there were only seven "whistlers" in New South Wales and they were custodians of tribal secrets which they would not tell to anyone who would not go through the ceremony.

No volunteers were offering and it appeared likely that much folklore would be lost with the deaths of those seven. Marion recalled the "bones" players using bullock rib bones rather than those of the kangaroo (progress!). Two bones in each hand held between the fingers provided a percussion accompaniment to the didgereedoos.

J.T. had a reasonable set of carpenter tools and any packing case

boards or other sawn timber were converted into the only furniture the family possessed. Much of this was done in the evenings by the light of tallow candles or "slush lamps". The "slush lamps" were small tins or jam jars of mutton fat with a twist of cotton cloth for a wick. The bottom was usually filled with clay for stability.

Marion was very interested in Carolines' spinning, knitting and needlework but J T's tools fascinated her and she loved to hand them to her father as they were needed but not in the usual way for she had very early learned to pick up objects with her toes and it was by this means she loved to delight JT. This skill was developed to such a standard that she could set and drive a nail holding hammer and nail with her toes. As a child she could put both feet behind her head----modesty did not allow this as an adult, although when over 50 , and somewhat overweight Marion would sometimes show small children---never adults--- that she could put her big toe in her mouth.

By the spring of 1881 the Howard family had grown to six with the youngest, Emily, a babe in arms.

On Sundays they would walk in the bush and on rare occasions take the family in the dray for a picnic. There was a real fear of snakes especially death adders which did not slide away like the other sorts.

The death adders colour pattern was supposed to give a warning in Latin. Two small children had died from snake bite and unexplained death of animals were often attributed to snakes. The "snake bite" kit included a sharp three cornered lancet, some "Condys Crystals" Permanganate of Potash and a cord for a tourniquet. This was the accepted treatment of the day.

The patches of flannel daisies were special places of beauty in the bush and grew over extensive areas of gravelly hillsides. Back home Caroline would read from the old family Bible which was covered in sheepskin with short wool still attached and peeping through the worn patches.

Marion accepted the Scriptures and the message they brought without reservation and this solid faith continued throughout her life and is in evidence in her last letter.

There was no opportunity for school and she was expected to spend most of her working time caring for the younger children. The few papers and magazines that arrived in the house were difficult reading for her.

One of the close family friends was a Mr. Robinson who drove the Cobb & Co coach between Bendemeer, Retreat and Bundarra. Mr Robinson gave Marion an old dictionary--it had a few maps and information on astronomy, tides etc. This was Marion's greatest treasure, she claimed this book had "all the words in the world" in it and she proceeded to learn them. Some pronunciations bothered her to the end of her days and nurse remained "nuss" and creek "crick" but such errors were unnoticed in the community where they were regarded as normal speech.

Even in her latter days Marion retained the "Old Dictionary", patched and tattered and tied up with string. Her youngest daughter,Agnes, claims that she knew the meaning of every word in that dictionary.

The official opening of the Bridge over the Gwydir in October 1881 was a highlight of Marion's childhood. Caroline stayed home with the smaller

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children but J.T. harnessed up the horse long before daylight and Marion was allowed to go with him. Dressed in her best, she even had shoes! and a hat! and of course Jack and Ettie cried because they were left behind.The smaller ones were asleep.

The speeches of the Police Magistrate who did the official opening and others were boring but the stores were not.They had so many things that were not in the station where the Howards usually bought their supplies. Although only 15 miles it was a slow rough trip in the springless dray and coming home that night she slept rolled up in a possum skin rug on the floor of the dray among the stores. Crossing the flooded river was often a considerable risk, some horses could swim well others could not swim at all. The son of one of the local settlers was lost and years after Marion wrote the following poem.

When the Riderless Horse came Home

He had left his home in the morning,
A stalwart fearless boy,
His fathers right arm on the station
And his mothers pride and joy.
But there's no one to tell the story
How he sank in the river foam.
The only sign of disaster
A riderless horse came home.
Water fell from its drenched mane,
The saddle was wet and askew,
And the steed stood disconsolate
As a thoroughbred horse will do
When he knows the rider he loves so well
No more o'er the plains shall roam
For more than human hearts are broke
When a riderless horse comes home.
For days and weeks they sought him
In the rivers swirling tide
But never a sign did the water give
To show how the young man died.
Now two heartbroken parents
Will stray 'neath earths wide dome
For how could they live on the station
Since the riderless horse came home.

When Marion was about 12 years old there was a lot of trouble with stock thieves. There had been no known bushrangers in the district since Thunderbolt was shot three years before Marion was born, but "duffing" had been a thriving business for years. The right to free selection under the Robinson Land Act of 1861 did not have a major effect on the area for some years but when it did the free selectors were a real thorn in the side of the established lease holders, for they "selected" blocks in key areas which were important to the leaseholders. However the leaseholders had the authority to "impound" straying stock. Many holdings were unfenced or not securely so, and a lot of stock "strayed" to be "impounded"" in hidden yards by the leaseholders, who then put the required notice in the Armidale Newspaper. The news seldom reached the owner of the stock before the required date for their release so the leaseholder bought the stock at his price. It was little better than

legal "duffing".

In the 80's the picture had changed and most of the stock stealing was from the larger holdings and the leaseholders of the stations were offering rewards for the conviction of the stock thieves.

Visitors were always welcome at the Howards place and Marion told the story of the plain clothes visitor who J.T. promptly identified as a "trap" (Policeman)the moment he saw the man's horse which was wearing an old saddle and rough bridle, the usual bushmans gear. When Marion asked her father how he knew that it was a police horse, J.T. replied "He looked at me out of 'tother eye!".

It was not long before Marion came to realise the subtle difference between the grooming and shoeing of the Police horses distinguished them from the usual bush nags. J.T. was paid every three months and every second pay day he and Caroline would go to Uralla - a three day trip - two days travelling - one day and two nights in Uralla.

When Marion was twelve she and Jack, who was a year younger, were left alone for the time - Jack with the loaded gun to ward off "bushrangers". We can only speculate how Caroline and J.T. coped with the other five children in the dray. Jack was hoping for a bit of action but their only visitor left at the gallop when the 11 year old confronted him with a loaded gun.

The house school started soon after, and some of the younger Howard children had some formal education but Marion had no opportunity to attend classes. There were however sports days and an occasional dance in the local woolshed to raise money for the school and of course the "cut out " days when shearing finished. They were strictly chaperoned with music provided with fiddle and accordion. Outside the building excessive drinking was normal behaviour; fights were commonplace.

Jack(Marions' eldest brother) was involved at an early age and Marion developed a strong disapproval of "Woolshed dances".

When Jack was fourteen he had saved enough money to buy a repeating rifle and the gear to reload the cartridges, an accomplished horseman by this age he was employed by the station and carried the rifle wherever he went.

Late one afternoon the sound of a galloping horse brought Caroline and the rest of the family out of the house in time to see Jack on horseback standing up in the stirrups at full gallop, in full pursuit of several kangaroos. He raised his rifle and fired just as his horse threw up his head and the bullet took the horse between the ears. The horse died instantly, somersaulting and throwing Jack yards away.

Virtually unhurt Jack's main concern was for his rifle. However he had other problems, for the horse belonged to his boss!

Eighteen eighty eight (1888) was a year of extreme drought with an acute shortage of fresh vegetables and fruit. Crops failed and livestock were dying. J.T. had a bad time with Barcoo Rot on his hands where even small cuts and abrasions did not heal. Most of the men and some of the women had this trouble which persisted until fresh vegetables were available..

There had always been a few emus about but that year they arrived in

hundreds apparently following the river upstream. Where the Armidale Bundarra road forded the river a large mob settled down and made it their home until drought breaking rain came. Hence it has been known as the Emu crossing ever since.

Just before Marion was seventeen it was decided that she should go to work outside the family and, a live in job was found for her in one of the larger homesteads near Walcha. It was a long way from home but Ettie could now do the work that Marion had been doing and her wages would help Marion to get together the "Glory Box" in preparation for marriage. It was taken for granted that she would marry soon.

The "Box" was an oblong wicker basket about three feet by eighteen inches square. It was in two halves one half fitting over the other.

With her few possessions - items of clothing and simple toilet requirements, her papers and books - including the precious "dictionary", her "Hussif" (Housewife) (Sewing kit) plus a few items already acquired for her "Box". Marion arrived at Walcha some time late in 1889.