

Desmier

Family History Newsletter

August 1996

Issue No. 3

Editors Note

I'm afraid that this edition of the newsletter is a bit later than I suggested it would appear in the last issue. I've found it difficult to get on to my computer at home to put in the time necessary to put it all together. Anyway better late than never!

The next edition will just about clear out my backlog of articles to include in the newsletter so I do appeal to everyone to try and make the effort if you haven't already done so to put a few notes together about one of your ancestors. It doesn't matter if you don't feel confident in writing, just send me some notes and I will string it together to make it readable. Also I am getting together copies of old photos which I will include in the newsletter together with articles on those pictured. This way they can be shared quickly with other close descendants who may not have seen what their ancestors or relatives looked like. If you have any photos that you can share, particularly of those people mentioned on the "clan" box chart I sent out with the last newsletter please send me copies (which I can return to you) for scanning onto computer.

This edition of the newsletter includes a couple of very interesting contributions from Joe von Ruhland that he has sent to me over the years. Joe lives in Ruislip, Middlesex (UK) and is the grandson of Mable Maud Desmier of the northern clan. We start off with an extract from Joe's letter to me as it refers to the article in the last newsletter by Florence Desmier. Joe goes on to write a bit about what life was like for Anglo-Indians before independence. Joe also sent me the photographs and article about Mable Maude Desmier and her husband Joseph Kirby. You can see Mable Maud on the "Northern Clan" box chart that was included with Newsletter No 2.

Letter from Joe von Ruhland

..... I shall try to give some background descriptions of the unique Anglo-Indian lifestyle, attitudes, customs, social facilities, etc. I won't mention the word "culture" as any Anglo-Indian would laugh if you asked if we were cultured. But we were polite & well mannered & hospitable & unselfish & had a high educational standard, thanks largely to the many good schools the Catholics built. Church attendance was 80-90%. We loved, above all, good friends and good company. In the evenings people would sit



Joe Von Ruhland

outside in their gardens (it was cooler as the house retained the daytime heat) & passing friends would drop in & the circle of chairs would get larger and larger as we sat chatting in the dark. Most of the year we slept outside under the stars. We loved dancing and music & our dances went on till 5a.m then everyone went to the early

mass or service before breakfast & bed 'till lunch time. Social life was fantastic and the Railways had their own Clubs (i.e. Institutes) with sprung wooden dance floors and their own dance bands.

Every railwayman had to do 14 years military training with the AF(I) (Auxilliary Force India,) so every Anglo-Indian was proficient in the use of firearms and almost everyone had guns in the home. Yet we had a zero murder rate. We were law abiding and instinctively supported the Government. The number of Anglo-Indians in the Armed Forces in the last war was around 8%, the highest total of any country in the world & all voluntary.

Everyone had servants so Anglo-Indian wives led the "Life of Riley". They did absolutely nothing, not even bathe the baby. Most people lived in bungalows. India is a hot (120°F. Max) dry country. Even in January, midday temperatures were 75°F. The entire Indian Nursing Service was staffed by Anglo-Indian girls. A nurse was held in high regard. The vast majority of men were in Government Service of some sort or other. Railways, Customs, Police, Telegraph, Public Works Dept. (PWD). The standing joke was: anyone retiring from PWD would name his house

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"Dunrobbin" (Ouch). We played a vital part in the construction and running of the huge railway network in India (since commercial production of steel was a Western development & even today India is not really in the Iron Age and the engineering tradition is lacking).

The men were the bread-winners and a working wife was relatively unknown. Nevertheless there was no battle of the sexes" nor "Womens' Lib". A women did not need to struggle for equality. Their educational opportunities were as good and even better than the men. We were emotionally stable with fixed Victorian principles and marriage breakdown was almost unknown. Marriage between Anglo-Indians was affectionate & they would call each other endearment names. The youngest child was known as "Baby, even into old age. e.g. Robert & Alfred Gibbs' sister is still known as "Baby May" at 75 years old. We tended to live in small colonies dotted around India. and thought nothing of going a thousand miles to visit a friend. You never told him you were coming you just came. Funerals were held in around 24 hours so telegrams were sent as soon as the person died so that people could travel right away, hundreds of miles to be there. Everyone attended funerals.

There was a difference between Anglo-Indians from the North & the South. A slight, difference in accent due to Hindustani speaking Northerners & Tamil speaking Southerners but also "Southerners took 5 seconds to decide whether to accept you as a lifelong friend, we "Northerners" took 5 minutes. I found that with Anglo-Indians, the longer you knew them, the more the good qualities emerged.

There were the cities and there was "Up Country". JS Kirby (*see following article*) really was a man of the type my mother described as "Men of the Wide Open Spaces". Not a mean streak in them. Brave, kind and generous. I do hope all this detail may be of interest & is perhaps of use to you in conveying the atmosphere & lifestyle behind the

stories & happenings. It really was (and is) the Land of the Free & the home of the Brave.

I was very interested to read that Herbert Desmier married Florence Christenson in, Kirkee, a town & area I know extremely well. At least the Kirkee of those days. It was a straggling town of bungalows & was a military cantonment patrolled by both Civil & Military police. There was one cinema, the "Excelsior" where lizards appeared on the screen stalking moths attracted by the light. This cinema, was set in a garden. The major employer was the "Gun Carriage Factory". Pay was monthly on the 10th so there was a busy open-air bazaar on the large bare market square. There were 2 batteries of horse artillery, the 62nd & 75th 6 armoured cars with revolving machine-gun turrets and a battalion of British infantry. The last & decisive battle of the 3rd maratta War was fought here in 1818 and there is a neat, tiny cemetery, that overlooks the river, of those killed in the battle. There were maybe a dozen or so Anglo-Indian families living in Kirkee. so they knew each other. There was a research Botanical Gardens. Mable Maud Desmier's husband J.S.Kirby built the new railway bridge over the river between Kirkee & Poona (now Puné) before he went to East Africa in the first War. Climate is dry & not too hot at Deccan altitude over 600 metres. Like all Deccan rivers. the one here eventually comes out the other side of India via, the Bhima & Krishna. There was an excellent Boat Club. I remember most of -the Anglo-Indian families there, but don't know of any Christenson. Maybe she was sent there as member of WAC(I) Women's army Corps (India). Florence most know the Kirkee of those days very well. I liked her article in your "Newsletter.

Joe von Ruhland

Mable Maud Desmier (1876 - 1948)

Adapted from two letters by Joe Von Ruhland

I can of course tell you a lot about Mable Maud who took me over after my father died. You know how children love 100%. That's how I felt for Mable and her husband Joseph Samuel Kirby. She was intelligent, lively, imaginative, educated, refined, very brave and utterly self reliant. Like her husband, a true pioneering type. They were never happy in an urban environment. Quite at home in the space and utter silence of the Deccan with its vast star-lit sky which seems to breathe the warmth and nearness of the cosmic intelligence. never lonely, you can feel that something up there knows about you and cares. My grandmother never really became used to electric lights. She preferred the



hurricane lantern and the Petromax lamp, the vast up-country bungalows and the dogs. Most of the year people slept outdoors, the house bricks retaining the heat of the day. At one place she was the only white in a vast area where there were Dacoits (bandits), so she took to keeping chickens and shooting at the hawks that came after them, knowing that the whole area would come to know that she was a lady who was very handy with a rifle. No trouble with Dacoits. When her husband was in Africa in World War I she slept with a revolver under her pillow - and she would have used it too! People never locked up at night. Everything was wide open. When she was in Ahmednagar there was a German internment camp opposite her

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bungalow. One night she was writing a letter, it was late and dark outside and she heard a rustle. She called out “Kaun hai?” (Who is it?) and the reply was “Sshh!” So, knowing no Indian would ever say “Sshh” she said in English “Come into the light where I can see you”. It was a German internee who had escaped as his daughter who was in another camp (for women) far away was very ill. He could not get permission to visit her so he intended to make the journey somehow. What he wanted was some money for food and travel and having seen her with the children he knew that she would understand. She knew the Officers in charge of the camp and they used to call across (everything in India being “Open House”) so they told her next day “German escaped last night”. She expressed surprise. Sad to say they knew where he was going and caught him before he got there. Later, White Russian refugees who escaped over the mountains during the revolution were housed in that camp and she got to know some of them very well, they were returned to Vladivostok, something that shocked her deeply. She was never 100% pro-British after that. The Reds were waiting for them. It was known as repatriation.

She could be very kind and she could be very tough. No whingeing. Things were black or white, no greys. No blurring of standards. Hobbies: she loved cooking and gardening. her daughter Mary Hilda was the one always getting into trouble but I think was a bit of a favourite in spite of that. probably because you never knew what she was going to do next. When she was little, she was all dressed up for church and while her mother was getting herself ready “Loo” (her nickname) decided to cool off under the tap. All dressed up but dripping wet. I never knew if she was actually dragged off to church like that but it would not surprise me. Spare the Rod and Spoil the Child was a much used axiom. Once she was locked in the larder room, which had a grill door, to keep her out of mischief. This room was stocked with huge jars of preserves, jams and pickles which my grandmother used to make. But Loo could eat chillies like other people eat peanuts and here she was in this room full of hot pickles, mango, lime, etc. It



Mary Hilda (Loo) Large (nee Kirby) with daughter Mabelle. Photo taken c1936 on Bombay side of Kirkee near the railway bridge

went all quiet in there, then a small figure covered in pickle came to the door, “Can I come out now?”

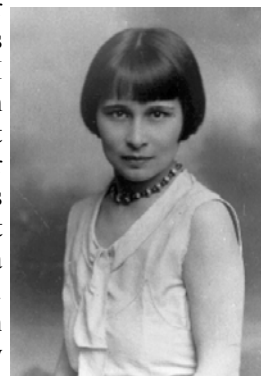
Mable Maud believed it was the duty of parents to help develop the gifts of the children. She took Loo to Italy for 2 years to train her voice for opera singing. Of course there was no opera in India. However, I remember Loo singing the High Mass in Ahmednagar Church, as it had never been sung there before or since. My mother Vera Beryl was sent to College in Bombay to get her M.D. and to Vienna to do a post-graduate course in Obstetrics. Considering that Mable was born in Kotri in 1876 this was pretty advanced thinking.

Mable met and married Joseph Samuel Kirby when he was a young engineer engaged on the construction of the Indus bridge at Hyderabad (Sind). He went on to become the Bridge Engineer for the Great Indian Peninsular Railway. Joseph was big, strong, gentle and quiet, loved children and commanded respect and affection. He gave an impression of true goodness and lived his Christianity as his way of life. he was known as “Burra Sahib” indicating someone of importance. He was innovative and ahead of his time. In fact he started dry ice refrigeration in Bombay when it was unheard of in India; owned a sand and gravel firm with two dredgers, 8 steel barges, 2 launches; built every bridge destroyed by the retreating Germans in Tanganyika in WWI from Dar es Salaam to Dodoma to enable the army to advance; rejoined the Engineers in WWII by putting back his age from 65 to 55 but his heart gave out and he died in Service with Bridge Training School for the Burma War. He was awarded the Oak Leaf for mentioned in Dispatches.

In all Mable and Joseph had seven children; Vera Beryl (my mother), Ellen (who drowned in the Bara Tawa River when only 19), Mary Hilda (Loo) who emigrated to New Zealand, only son Joseph Allen and three other girls who were either still born or died shortly after birth.



Joseph Samuel Kirby



Vera Beryl Kirby



Ellen Kirby c1926

Footnote

Dorothea Beatrice Kirby, widow of Joseph Allen Kirby died in Auckland, New Zealand on 1 January 1996. Dorothy was born on 21 August 1915 in Bangalore. Dorys emigrated to New Zealand in 1967 with husband Joe and two sons Joseph and Michael.

OBITUARIES

Sibyl Currie (Aquino) 14 December 1893 - 23 December 1995

I am sorry to announce that Sibyl Currie the 102 year old sister of Laura featured in the last newsletter died on 23 December 1995. Sibyl, the second of four daughters of Esther Desmier and Tomas Aquino, was born in 1893 in Bombay and attended school at the Woodhouse Rd Convent, Colaba and later Poona Convent. She married Antony Currie, a Scot, in Bombay in 1921 and in 1924 they left India for the UK. Sibyl and Tony had two children the first died soon after birth and the second, a son, was killed during a bombing raid in WWII. Sibyl worked as a secretary for a brewing company for more than 17 years. Sibyl is buried at Orpington, Kent where she lived for many years.



Sybil Currie (nee Aquino)

Douglas Kenneth Desmier 7 August 1930 - 17 June 1996

Doug died after a prolonged period of heart related illness. Doug was the second son of the second marriage of Joseph George (Frederick) Desmier. He was born in Trichonopoly in 1930 and at the advice of his uncle Frank emigrated to Melbourne Australia in 1950. In 1956 he married Marlene who he had known in India before emigrating. Doug worked in administrative positions for the railways both in India and in Melbourne. He is survived by Marlene, daughters Julie and Sandra and son Francis, son-in-law Gary (married to Julie) and grandchildren Adam and Michelle.

Doug was one of the first people that I contacted after becoming interested in the Desmier family history and provided with me with much information on the Southern Clan.



Douglas Kenneth Desmier

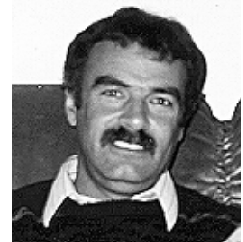
NEWS CLIPS

- ◆ Noel Desmier (youngest son of Joseph, southern clan and brother of Douglas) rang me from Perth, West Australia in February to thank me for the newsletter. Noel and his wife Theresa are retired and have a house at Tweed Heads on the north coast of New South Wales. For the last two and a half years they have been travelling around Australia in their motorhome. When Noel rang they were about to head north up to Geraldton to do a bit of fishing before coming back south again in the Australian spring to see the famous wildflowers of the West Australian Bush. Hopefully I may be able to catch up with them when they head back to the east coast.
- ◆ I have just received a short note from Robert Gibbs who I mentioned was off to Pondicherry and India in the last newsletter. He completed that jaunt successfully but before I could get much detail on his trip from him he has left on another journey. This time he has gone off for about two months to Africa travelling by local buses through Uganda, Kenya, Malawi, Zimbabwe and Botswana.

This newsletter is edited by Rick Desmier. I intend to produce a new edition every six months or so, depending upon contributions. If you have any articles, news or comments for future copies please send them to me at:

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If you have a relative who did not receive a copy of this newsletter and you think that they would like their own copy please let me know.