

The dictionary describes **Smallpox** as an infectious disease unique to humans, caused by either of two virus variants, Variola major or Variola minor, characterised by fever and an eruption developing into pustules, variola. Transmission of smallpox occurs through inhalation of airborne variola virus, usually droplets expressed from the oral or nasal infected person, and is transmitted from one person to another primarily through prolonged face-to-face contact with an infected person, usually within a distance of two metres. The public of Western Australia were told very little and were not made aware of the serious actions taken by the Department of Quarantine and the Public Health Department during 1943 to ensure not only the public's health, but to contain the spread of the deadly disease of Smallpox in not only Western Australia, but Australia itself during wartime.

The following is an account of a "Quarantine Lockdown" that took place at the Woodman Point Quarantine Station 73 years ago during WWII. This incident has been compiled and documented by Neil Wilson, and was described to him during an interview with Doris Alfirevich (nee Deane), who had firsthand knowledge of the incident, as she was then a fifteen year old volunteer helper at the quarantine station. Neil is the grandson of Roy McIntosh who was the resident Officer In Charge at Woodman Point between the years of 1939 - 1963, during this critical public health emergency in 1943.

**A Quarantine Lockdown,
written by Neil Wilson as told by Doris Alfirevich (nee Deane)**

The arrival at the port of Fremantle of a vessel suspected of harbouring a contagious and infectious disease triggered a well rehearsed and established routine for the staff at the Woodman Point Quarantine Station. Whilst the Station was always prepared for such an event, it brought considerable dislocation to the personal lives of the staff as, once a period of quarantine began, other than for exceptional reasons, they would remain confined to the Station for the duration of the quarantine period.

Doris Alfirevich of Bentley, then the 15 year old Doris Deane of Coogee, experienced a lengthy confinement at the Woodman Point Quarantine Station commencing in March 1943. The ship, SS Suva, a Pacific trading vessel, arrived in Gage Roads from Bombay India, with confirmed cases of small pox. One crew member had already died at sea and a further five were seriously ill with the disease. Over the ensuing ten weeks until June 1943, Doris was privy to the last major quarantine lock down at Woodman Point at a time when infected patients died and were cremated onsite at the Station's crematorium. These are her vivid and accurate recollections of the event some 66 years later in 2009 when she talked of this lockdown with Neil Wilson, grandson of the then Officer-in-Charge of the Quarantine Station, Roy McIntosh.

Doris was one of the six children of James (Jim) Deane and his wife Minnie née Holmes. Her father, trading as J Deane Shell Grit, had the contract to harvest shell grit from the ocean between Coogee and Naval Base. From this harvest came much of WA's brown glass as well as the grit used for poultry feed. The family lived in a house near the entrance to the Quarantine Station. The lack of private motor vehicle ownership and an absence of frequent public transport had helped develop an isolated, but close knit community in the area in and around the Quarantine Station.

The Deane family, as part of this so called "hidden community", knew and understood well the need for strict quarantine procedures. They had, after all, lived near the entrance to the Station for many years and had supported their friends from the Station during previous quarantine lock downs. When, in March 1943, Roy McIntosh knocked on Mrs Deane's door and asked if young Doris, who had recently finished school and was waiting the commencement of a hairdressing apprenticeship, would consider employment at the Station as a waitress for an imminent lockdown, it was not an issue. Doris would shift into the Station and the McIntosh's daughter, Mollie, would shift into the Deane's home as she would be unable to leave the Station to continue her studies in Fremantle once the lockdown commenced.

During this period, both girls would maintain contact with their parents by telephone and letters. Doris knew the Station well as she and Mollie were close friends spending much of their spare time at the Station along with Doris' sisters and other friends such as Pat Mayers. This was a major advantage to Roy McIntosh as it meant that Doris was well acquainted with the people with whom she would work and live so closely over the coming weeks. More importantly though, because of her close ties with the Station, Doris understood the quarantine process well and held little fear of it. Not that this should cause her worry anyway. Those patients seriously ill with a contagious disease were nursed in the Isolation Hospital with their own dedicated nursing and housekeeping staff. Doris would have nothing to do with these people. She would instead be working with those who had shared the ship with those seriously ill in the Isolation Hospital. These people, known in quarantine circles as "contacts", would have shown some potential signs of the disease and would anxiously be awaiting medical clearance at the completion of the incubation period for the disease. Others, who had shown no symptoms of the disease, perhaps because of previous vaccinations, would be temporarily removed to the Station whilst the ship was fumigated. There they would be bathed in a special washing solution called Lysol, checked medically as a precaution and, if fit, returned to the ship to wait until it was cleared to sail again Doris' role during the lockdown centered around the "contacts" and the Station dining room where she would be waiting on tables and preparing the dining room for each meal. She was also expected to help with some kitchen duties such as peeling vegetables.

The Woodman Point Quarantine Station had a permanent staff of three: the officer-in-charge, Roy McIntosh, Bertie Poore, a nurse and Jack Mayers, the Station's engineer. During periods of lockdown, the numbers of staff swelled in order to manage and care for the influx of people brought from the infected ship to the Station. For this lock down, a further five casual staff were to be employed to look after the "contacts": Doris as waitress, Pearl McIntosh, Roy's wife, and Edith Cook from Guildford as cooks, Jock McKinnon from Coogee as a kitchen help and Jack Tapper from Coogee as a patrol officer. Those people employed on a casual basis were recruited locally or by word of mouth as warning to engage staff and enter the lockdown period was always at short notice. And it was mandatory that all, of course, had current vaccinations against a myriad of infectious diseases as a precaution for their own safety. In addition, Commonwealth Department of Health medical staff would provide professional medical support and care, supported by army medical orderlies who would assist Bertie Poore with nursing duties in the isolation hospital and other general helpers in the hospital compound. There was always a close sense of camaraderie as everyone lent their hand and helped to do whatever jobs needed to be done.

To ensure isolation, entrance to the Woodman Point Quarantine Station was by one of two means. If the individual was a patient and under suspicion of illness, they were taken directly from their ship by the Station tender to the Station's jetty where they were off loaded to begin their period as a quarantined patient. All other civilian entrances were through the Change room, a wooden building at the Station gate, the only road entrance to the Station. The Change room was the only point of contact with the outside world during a quarantine lockdown and few people, other than medical staff, entered the Station during such times. Careful preparation and planning ensured that the Station was mostly self sufficient during lock down. If there was a shortage of food or other provisions or when fresh food supplies such as vegetables, bread and milk were needed, these were delivered by the supplier and placed into the Change room. Once the supplier had driven away, Station staff would enter the Change room and remove the delivered order.

When people were required to enter the Station, strict health procedures were enforced at this point of entry. All civilian clothing was removed, left in the Change room and a white quarantine gown was donned. When leaving, people entered the Change room in their quarantine gown, then bathed fully clothed in a Lysol bath. They then showered, again fully clothed, to wash off the Lysol and, at this point, removed their quarantine gown. They then moved through the Change room to put on their civilian clothes and left. Doctors, who came to the Station on a daily basis to check the progress of "contacts" and isolated patients, went through this procedure on each occasion.

During this particular lockdown, a security breach was noticed by Jack Tapper, employed as the Station patrol officer. With an acute sense of place, he was renowned for noticing any change to the bushes or beaches surrounding the Station. During his patrols on 31 March 1943, Jack came across four military personnel from the nearby army camp, who had been collecting wood and, unaware of what the yellow quarantine flags meant, had unknowingly entered the Station grounds. They too were quarantined for the remainder of the lockdown and were housed in the Second Class Quarters near the main administration block.

Doris entered the Station for the lock down through the Change room on 30 March 1943. Because she would wear a white quarantine gown the whole time, even during “leisure” time, she took none of her personal clothes except for underwear, footwear and a toothbrush. Despite regular smallpox vaccinations because of her family’s ongoing contact with the Station, on entry, Doris was given a booster vaccination to ensure her safety and she then made her way to the main administration block where she settled into the room which she was to share with Mrs Cook. This building was in the centre of the quarantine compound surrounded by the kitchens, dining room and the sleeping quarters used to house “contacts”. All quarantine staff stayed in quarters at the main administration block during the lock down including Roy and Pearl McIntosh who usually resided in house a short distance away. During the quarantine lock down, Doris was kept fairly busy with her work. She peeled vegetables, cleaned and tidied the dining room and of course served on the tables. She also assisted in the kitchen itself, helping to make cakes for morning and afternoon teas. In her spare time, she fished from the Station jetty, a long wooden structure that extended a fair way from the Station into Cockburn Sound.

The mood was fairly upbeat amongst the 14 “contacts” from the Suva divided into two clear groups: the officers, mostly English, who were housed in the First Class Quarters and ate in the dining room; and the Fijian crew members who were housed in the Asiatic Quarters to the south of the dining room and did their own cooking, eating and laundry there. Routine was the order of the day for the “contacts” who filled in their quarantined days with a variety of activities in between daily medical checks and observations by the Commonwealth doctors, Dr Murray and Dr McCann. The officers played tennis on the tennis courts, pool on the pool tables, fished and walked around the grounds. Their meals comprised of general baked foods such as stews, roasts, potato pie, chops and sausages. For dessert, there were rice custards, egg custards, steamed puddings and tinned fruit. Station staff were allowed to fraternize with the “contacts”. Doris and the other staff enjoyed the company of the officers in either the dining hall or in the Passenger Lounge, but were not allowed to enter their sleeping quarters. Doris became good friends in particular with the Suva’s wireless operator, an Englishman named Bernard Emerson, and wrote to him for many years after his release from quarantine.

The Fijian crew members kept to themselves and didn't mix with the officers as would have been the protocol on board the vessel. They were a happy lot however and Doris remembers that they would pass their evenings singing songs in their language to their own music accompaniment. The song You Are My Sunshine was a particular favourite of the group.

Whilst the mood amongst the "contacts" was generally positive, the situation in the Isolation Hospital was extremely serious. Smallpox had already taken the life of one person before the Suva had arrived in Fremantle and those quarantined expected further deaths may occur. Sadly, between 30 March and 11 April 1943, a further five members of the Suva's crew succumbed to the disease. They were

† Samuela WALEDAU, ordinary seaman from Fiji, died on 30th March 1943

† Arthur David WATERS, Chief Officer from England, died on 1st April 1943

† Broni BUILOTA, a cook from Fiji, died on 5th April 1943

† Rasaca CIGILAU, a steward from Fiji, died on 9th April 1943

† Osea TUQOVU, ordinary seaman from Fiji, died on 11th April 1943

Their deaths saddened and unsettled the quarantined community. In accordance with quarantine regulations and procedures, the bodies of the deceased seamen were cremated onsite at the Station's wood-fired crematorium by Roy McIntosh assisted by Jock McKinnon and Jack Mayers. It was a particularly upsetting experience for Roy, and Doris remembers this period as the only time that his usual resilience was taxed. Roy was particularly concerned that he could not cremate someone without a prayer of some sort being said from a bible and he ensured this happened before the start of each cremation.

The cremation process, using a wood fired cremator, was a long and harrowing one. The fire needed to be stoked for many hours prior to cremation to ensure the correct intensity of heat for the process to be carried out properly. Constant manual monitoring and stoking of the fires during the cremation process was very taxing too as it required someone to open the doors of the cremator and observe the burning body whilst stoking the fire. It was a task that Roy undertook with great sadness. During the 12 hour cremation process, the stench from the crematorium was very noticeable and a constant reminder of what had occurred to all confined to the Station. The ensuing weeks to the end of the lockdown were generally without incident. At one point, there was concern for male nurse Bertie Poore, who had developed some suspicious spots on his skin. These were duly reported and checked daily by Dr McCann, but amounted to nothing. For the other quarantine staff, there was no medical concern for their safety throughout the quarantine period.

When, however, it seemed that the quarantine period for the crew of the Suva would be over, another vessel, NZHS Maunganui, reached Fremantle from Colombo Ceylon carrying further confirmed cases of smallpox. Although there were no fatalities eventuated from this vessel, the quarantine period for Station staff was extended and Doris, who had been scheduled to return home on 2 May 1943, was asked to remain on staff for this new period of quarantine.

Quarantine was officially lifted at Woodman Point on 3rd June 1943. "Contacts" were discharged and went off into the world to continue with the rest of their lives. Doris did likewise after shedding her quarantine robes and having all her underwear fumigated through the Station's fumigation system. The smell of the chemicals lingered on though and they all required thoroughly washing on her return home. Doris returned that evening to her mum, dad, sisters and brothers and her home just outside the Quarantine Station boundary feeling quite wealthy though she can't remember how much she had actually been paid for her work. She recalls though it felt like plenty when she spent it on clothes in Fremantle's shops in the ensuing weeks.

Doris' lasting memory of this event is one of a strong sense of community, of an event that had its sad moments, but one that was filled with many laughs and happy times.

LOCKDOWN Article :-

Courtesy of Neil Wilson & Ms Doris Alfirevich