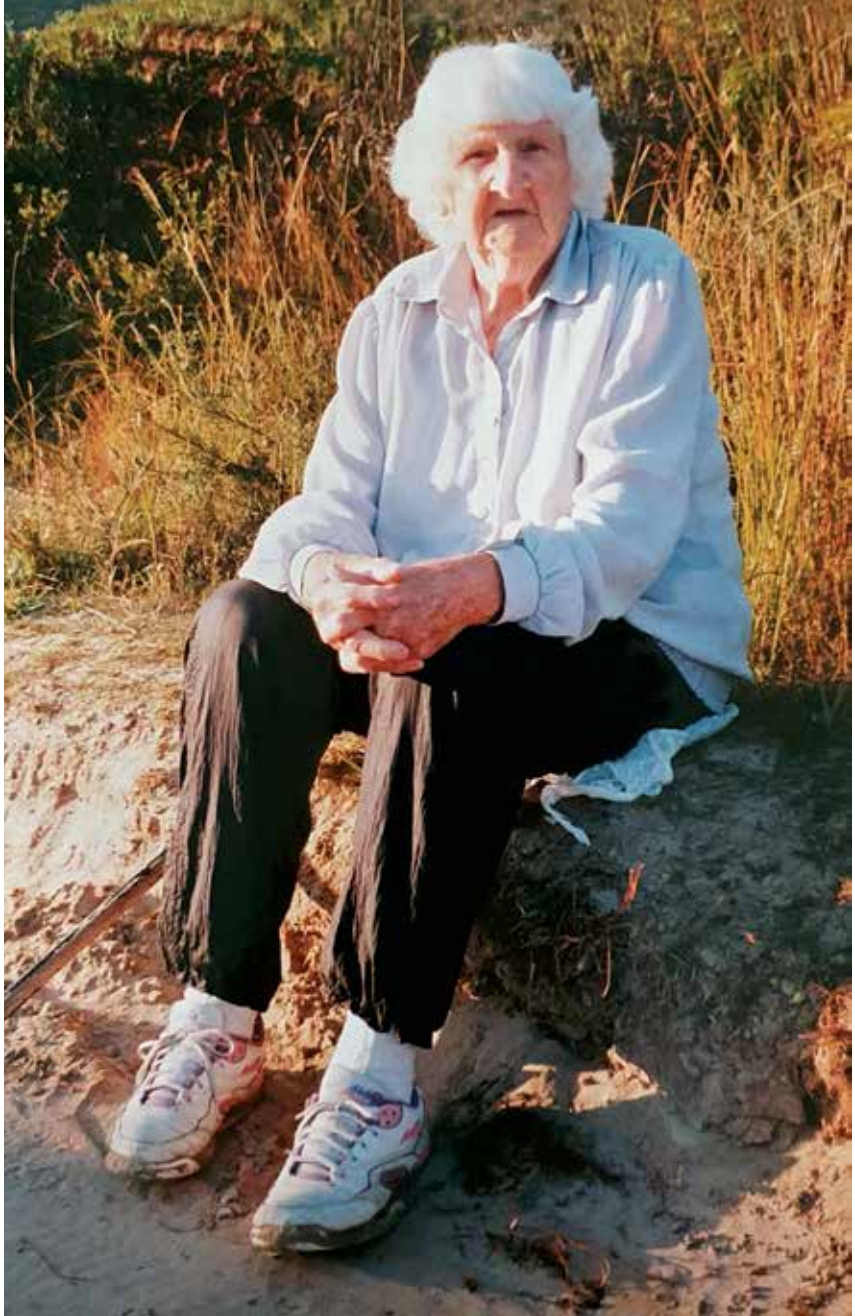




The queen of Cockle Creek

writer GRACE HEATHCOTE

photographs courtesy of the ADAMS FAMILY

If you drive south from Hobart, and keep following the twisty roads of the Huon Valley, the landscape gradually unravels into something wilder, quieter, more remote. Eventually you reach Cockle Creek, on the very edge of the Tasmanian Wilderness

World Heritage Area, where there are no shops, no fuel, no electricity. Just bush, sea, and sky.

Most visitors come for its natural beauty: camping on the white beaches or setting off on the gruelling South Coast Track. A century ago, the



Rose and Walter building the Western Star

area was a hive of activity. Timber cutters worked the surrounding forests, hauling thick logs down to sawmills that dotted the region. Coal miners laboured underground, bringing tonnes of rock to the surface and along a web of steel tramways that carried it out to the wharf. Settlements to support these workers and their families sprang up at Cockle Creek, Catamaran and Recherche Bay.

It was into this world that the remarkable Rose Adams arrived in 1931. With her husband Walter, Rose fished the wild southern Tasmanian coastline. But life on the ocean did not welcome her easily at first: she suffered terrible seasickness every time they went out. To combat it, she lived aboard their fishing boat for five years, reasoning that the less time she spent on land, the sooner her body would learn the rhythm of the water. It worked. She fell in love with the ocean and she and Walter spent their days moving between their southern fishing grounds and the wharves of Hobart where they sold their catch from the deck of their boat.

On those trips to Hobart, Rose and Walter would see their daughters. In the hardship years of the Depression, they had struggled to find steady work in Hobart, and eventually headed south to make a living from the sea. But life at sea is not

easy on children so the girls stayed in the city with Rose's parents, visiting Rose and Walter when they were in port.

At Cockle Creek, Rose and Walter were given an empty mill worker's cottage, a draughty blue cube looking directly onto the bay. On the sand in front of that cottage they built timber dinghies and sold them to earn extra income. And little by little, as they found the time and money, they built the 17-metre *Western Star*. With only hand tools to use, it took 13 years to shape and sand logs of Huon pine that they had salvaged and towed home from the west coast. But after the *Western Star* was launched in November 1953, they explored the most remote reaches of the Tasmanian coastline, including risking shipwreck to deliver the mail to the hardy lighthouse keepers on Maatsuyker Island.

...

Life at Cockle Creek demanded resourcefulness. Rose kept cows, pigs and chickens, tended a vegetable garden, and made their clothes by hand. With no electricity, she sewed on a treadle machine and ironed with a heavy flat iron heated on the woodstove. At night, kerosene lamps and candles flickered as she knitted or read to Walter. They had



Rose and Walter's house

no running water but instead used an old kerosene tin to cart water from a tank on the hill. Rose manned the post office at Catamaran and the shop at Cockle Creek, selling licorice and lollies to the town children and supplying other essential supplies to the fishermen who called into the bay. In bad weather she welcomed them ashore with homemade bread and a warm cup of tea. She never learned to drive but instead rode her horse along the rough dirt tracks or rowed a dinghy up the coast.

As the mills and mines closed one by one throughout the 1930s, '40s and '50s, Rose and Walter saw the townships slowly shrink and their neighbours move away – until they were the only permanent residents left in Cockle Creek. After Walter died in 1967, Rose stayed. She sold the *Western Star* but would take her small dinghy out onto the bay to fish and collect crayfish. Hikers came across her in the bush, carrying firewood on her back. Picking blackberries for the IXL Jam factory in Hobart helped to supplement her income. And she walked for miles collecting glass bottles, from which she earned enough of a refund to put towards her grandchildren's birthday and Christmas presents.

Those grandchildren remember her fondly. When I track them down, three of her grand-



Rose and her two granddaughters riding at Cockle Creek

daughters – Jill, Carolyn and Dianne – assemble at Jill's house to share their memories of the woman they call the Queen of Cockle Creek.

"When we were kids we would stay with her during the school holidays," Carolyn tells me. "We slept in the front of the house, the veranda part, which just had chicken wire over the front of it. Everything was stacked in that veranda. In a storm all the water came in and the salt from the sea covered everything, including us."

Jill chuckles when she recalls their youngest sister and brother going fishing with Rose. "Nan always told us not to stand up in the dinghy. Even if we caught a fish, we shouldn't stand up. But my sister forgot. She stood up and Nan went head over tail straight into the water. She had long waders on, the ones that go right up to your thighs and they filled up with water. Those two kids had to tow her back to shore behind the dinghy because she couldn't get back in the boat. They never forgot that. Nan never learnt how to swim and they thought they'd killed her. Nan laughed and laughed, telling everyone that they'd tried to drown her."

On their visits, the grandchildren played in the creek itself, swimming and catching flounder. There were so many of them they could just pick them up. They would gather cockles and mussels,

putting them in a tin on an outdoor fireplace to boil them until they opened before eating them with a dash of salt and vinegar. Rose made fried scones, jam tarts, abalone patties and rock cakes. She served crayfish and wallaby and then sent the girls home with fish and chips wrapped in newspaper.

The women tell me how much Rose loved her animals. At one stage she had 39 cats and five dogs. She kept a pet possum in the house and hauled fresh branches inside for it to eat. Currawongs hand-fed on the windowsill became so tame they would bring their offspring back season after season and tap on the window demanding food.

...

As she aged, Rose was witness to major change. She accepted the formation of the Southwest National Park, although it reclaimed much of the land she and Walter had owned and forced her to give up her animals. She accepted shack owners when they moved into the huts her friends and neighbours had once occupied. She accepted the salmon farms when they set up offshore. She even used to make rock cakes for the salmon workers and they would come and sit with her for hours in the evening when they had their time off.

But she drew the line when an 80-unit resort was proposed in 2004. Jill was at work one day when she saw a picture of Rose on the front page of the newspaper and a story detailing how upset she was about it. "Nan accepted a lot of other changes in her life," Jill says, "and she accepted them with grace and patience, but she was going to have nothing of a resort."

Over the years, Rose installed a generator and then a solar panel which allowed her some modern luxuries like lighting and hot running water. In her mid-90s, she was still living alone at Cockle Creek, as determined and independent as she had been in her youth. Visitors sought her out, keen to meet the woman who had lived in the southernmost reaches

of the continent for seven decades. Her story was featured in national newspapers, in *Woman's Day* magazine and on *60 Minutes*. Her granddaughters remember her sitting outside for hours at a time, talking to tourists and bushwalkers, park rangers and fishermen, one after the other. "When one person finished talking to her, someone else would come."

It was around this time that Rose had a fall. She was hanging washing outside when a gust of wind knocked her over, breaking her hip. She was unable to get up until the local ranger found her. Once her hip had healed she insisted on staying at Cockle Creek, but age was inevitably catching up to her. When she developed heart trouble, she moved into care in Hobart.

...

Just after her 100th birthday in 2008, her grandchildren took her back to Cockle Creek for a visit.

"She must have known she was failing because she was extremely content and serene on that visit, saying over and over again what a beautiful place it was," remembers Jill. "She was a remarkable woman. I admired her greatly. She could make anything out of nothing and she could make do with nothing. She could fix things, build, create. You know, she could build a dinghy one day and then knit a beautiful little set for a newborn baby the next."

Rose Adams died in September 2008, but her indomitable spirit, her love of Tasmania's wild coasts, and the way she lived entirely on her own terms continue to inspire those who knew her. ■

GRACE HEATHCOTE is a Tasmanian writer. With a background in ecology and conservation, she has worked throughout Australia but has a soft spot for all things Tasmanian. Her writing has been published nationally, including in The Guardian, and her academic publications can be found in peer-reviewed journals such as Conservation Biology and Wildlife Research.