

# Emma Withnell

## Mother of the North-West



WORDS AND PHOTOS BY LLYRUS WEIGHTMAN

Settlers in the north-west of Western Australia faced all the hardships of pioneers of other parts of Australia – and then some. Floods, droughts, wildfires and cyclones, familiar enough to settlers in many parts of Australia, are dealt out with particular ferocity along this isolated coastline, and those who took up the challenge in the mid-nineteenth century needed special reserves of courage. This is the story of Emma and John Withnell and their family who settled on land where the town of Roeburne now stands.

**F**OR NEARLY 20 YEARS after Western Australia was colonised in 1829, the north-west of the state remained largely unexplored. It was not until 1848 that the Gregory brothers, Augustus and Francis, made the first exploration, reaching as far as the Murchison River, and it was then nearly a further decade before Francis returned to explore the upper reaches of the Murchison and the Gascoyne Rivers in 1857 and 1858.

In 1860, the government and the Geographical Society were under pressure to fit out another expedition to the north-west, this time for very practical commercial reasons. The American Civil War had cut off supplies of cotton to the English textile industry, and it was hoped that an area suitable for cotton growing might be discovered.

The object was to explore and report on the country lying inland

from the north-west coast where it was proposed to establish a colony having for its special purpose the cultivation of cotton. The exploration party, led by Francis Gregory, arrived at Nickol Bay on the 11th of May,



1861 and returned to Fremantle in November of the same year. During this trip Gregory and his party covered over 2000 miles of country, exploring the whole of the area so unfavourably commented on by William Dampier in 1688. Far from agreeing with Dampier's opinions, Gregory found it capable of great development. The rivers Ashburton, DeGrey, Fortesque and Oakeover were fresh and abounded in fish and game for a long distance inland. Excellent land was discovered, of which he estimated three million acres were suitable for grazing, and about 250,000 acres for tropical agriculture. In addition, many pearl shells were secured in Nickol Bay.

Gregory's report of his expedition attracted a great deal of interest. The Swan River authorities were sufficiently impressed to establish special land regulations which in effect gave settlers four years to

establish themselves before cash payment to the government for the land was necessary.

At the time, farmers in the Swan Valley were struggling with drought, pests and poisonous weeds. Encouraged by Gregory's optimistic reports, his cousin, Emma Withnell (nee Hancock), and her husband, John, sold up their cottage and farm at West Dale, 100 km east of Perth and their pastoral lease on the Williams River, chartered a three-masted schooner, the *Searipple*, and set sail from Fremantle for Tien Tsin Harbour (later to be named Cossack), 1,500 km to the north, in March 1864.

The vessel carried 650 ewes, several rams, cows and draught mares, one Clydesdale stallion and a large supply of station requisites – stores, clothing tools, firearms and medicine. The Withnells, like other pioneers, had to take with them everything necessary for outfitting a property in an undeveloped and isolated area.

Aboard the *Searipple* were John Withnell and Emma, then pregnant with their third child; their two young sons, George and John; Emma's younger sister and brother Fanny and John Hancock; John's brother Robert; and three servants.

They had a good run until they were off the coast of Tien Tsin Harbour where the vessel was becalmed for 48 hours before a violent storm blew up and drove them towards Port Hedland, some 200 kilometres to the north-east. The vessel struck a reef, sprang a leak and on the ebb tide heeled over at an acute angle which put the stock in danger of being smothered. The crew immediately landed all the passengers and then the stock. After getting everything off the stricken ship they discovered a good quantity of copper sheathing was torn off and the vessel had taken on much water. Worse still, she was high and dry because the spring tides had passed. The crew patched up the leak with tar and canvas and had to wait until the next spring tide before they could move.

The passengers and crew found that they were on a small island surrounded by a tidal creek. They had lost a lot of sheep as it was impossible to stop them getting to the salt water. The women and children were miserable, there was no shade, they



Emma and John Withnell, courtesy Shire of Roebourne Local History Office.

were very short of drinking water, and they were tormented by flies, mosquitoes and sandflies.

Around twelve days later, when the next spring tide arrived, they floated off, having loaded what stock they could, and set sail back to Port Walcott. Reaching Cossack on April 14, they unloaded all their stock and goods on what they thought was high ground, and then pitched their camp on a sandy beach and sank wells for water for the stock and themselves. The water was brackish and not fit to drink.

William Shakespere Hall (known as Shaky), who had come to the North-West to manage John Wellard's Andover Station and stayed on at Cossack when Wellard pulled out, came to the Withnell's rescue. He provided water when they arrived and accommodation for the women and children for several weeks while John Withnell went out with the other men to set about establishing a homestead.

John Withnell travelled up the Harding River until he reached a place called Eramuckadoo pool, which is an Aboriginal word that refers to a wild fig that grew profusely along the Harding River. Here, he found land suitable for stock so he went back to Cossack to fetch his family. Each person carried all they could, while Emma, now in the final weeks of pregnancy, looked after her two children, carrying one and leading the other by the hand. After a long and weary walk they reached the pool and pitched their camp. So welcome was the fresh water and their journey's end that Emma called the hill nearby the pool 'Mount Welcome'.

It was on the 1 June, one week after arriving at Mount Welcome, that Emma gave birth to Robert Harding DeWitt Withnell in a tent on the banks of the Harding River, assisted only by her sister Fanny. Robert was the first white child born in the North-West.



The ruins of Mount Welcome Station, built after the first house was destroyed in the 1872 cyclone.

When the stock arrived at their camp, there were just 86 of the original 650 sheep, one horse and one cow. Returning to Cossack to get the remainder of their goods, the men found that the equinoctial tide had come in on a strong gale, sweeping sugar, clothing – including their spare shoes – and cases out to sea. Dray cart harness, ammunition and some tools were left with a fair supply of flour, tea and salt. Their footwear had worn thin from walking through the rough country and going barefoot was unbearable in the heat, so one of the men carved clogs from wood and lined them with sheep skin.

On their return to Mount Welcome the men set to and built huts of stone and mud, thatched with grass.

In October, John and Fanny Hancock returned to Perth, and succeeded in securing leases for the Withnells: 10,000 acres at Mount Welcome and 100,000 acres on the Sherlock River.

Fanny was very sad to leave the North-West. She loved the station life and the stillness and vastness of the countryside when she took long rides with her brother. She had made firm friends with the Aboriginal women, especially Nugerdie and Thoodo, who came to the homestead to help Emma. The women were equally sad that she was leaving and gave her a dilly-bag beautifully made from dried grasses and spinifex and filled with seeds, worms and witchetty grubs.

Fanny stayed with her parents for two years and then, on September 5 1866, she married George Fisher. When she was pregnant with their first child, George left Fanny with his family and set off for the North-West where he and his brother, James, took up a pastoral lease at Roebourne which they named Mount Fisher Station.

In 1869 Fanny and her young son, Herbert George, nicknamed Jewel and just two years old, travelled by sea to Roebourne to rejoin George. Fanny and George settled down to station life in the North-West, and she and Emma became known and much loved for their work nursing the sick, both Indigenous and European, through epidemics and other illnesses.



But life was to deal Fanny many bitter blows. None of the three children she had with George survived for very long. The second child, Ruth, was born on March 1 1870 at Roebourne and died six days later. Their third daughter was born on March 20 1872 in a storm which destroyed almost every building in Roebourne and Cossack. On that dreadful night, Fanny gave birth alone, and when Emma, herself in the advanced stages of pregnancy, struggled through the raging storm to reach her, she found Fanny unconscious with her dead child on the bed beside her. Four months later, Fanny's little Jewel died of diphtheria, aged four-and-a-half. At 23 years of age, Fanny had lost her three children. But Fanny's misfortunes were not yet over. Her husband, George, was a passenger on the ill-fated *Rosette* which sank *en route* from Fremantle in 1879 in a severe cyclone, with all on board lost. Fanny left the North-West, and went back to Beverley where she later married and had two children.

The early years of settlement were difficult for the settlers of the North-West. In 1865, the smallpox virus reached the area, killing Aboriginals in epidemic proportions and placing all the settlers at risk. Emma played a major role during the crisis, nursing many Aboriginals and two of her own children. The settlers were forced to face the problems of bad health



A chair made out of whale bones by John Withnell for Emma, Roebourne Museum.

without the aid of a hospital or doctors.

In 1867, the Withnell family suffered heavy losses when the vessel, *Emma* (a coastal trader named after Emma Withnell), left Cossack with 42 souls on board and was never heard from again. On board was the Withnell's wool clip and 148 sovereigns received from meat sales.

On another occasion the schooner, *Brothers*, left Fremantle with goods for the settlers, but foundered off Dirk Hartog Island. The North-West settlers then had to depend upon the small vessels trading up the coast for supplies. Through various causes, four of these were wrecked, leaving the

settlers on the verge of starvation. In desperation, they sent a team overland to try to get a rescue ship to bring supplies to them. The *Flying Foam* was dispatched immediately and arrived in time to save the situation.

From a commercial point of view, the settlers were also plagued by stock losses and the erratic fluctuations of the London wool markets. The Withnells responded by looking for ways to diversify and supplement their income. In 1868 John Withnell is reputed to have first discovered the diving ability of the Aboriginals, opening the possibility of gathering pearl shell in deeper water. The reef on which Withnell worked extended

Originally known as Tien Tsin Harbour, Cossack was once a busy harbour for the pearling industry (below). Nine of the original buildings have been restored, including the Court House (at left) which today houses the museum. At one stage Cossack was connected to Roebourne by horse-drawn tramway. Photo: Courtesy Tourism Western Australia.



for 60 miles, and the divers produced three or four pairs of shell each time they went down. Many of the early pastoralists supplemented their income by pearling.

The 1872 cyclone in which Fanny gave birth and lost her child and which practically destroyed the town of Roebourne also completely wrecked John and Emma's home, so John built a larger sturdier house.

The Withnells developed a strong friendship with the local Ngalama tribe and Emma came to rely on the help of the Aboriginal women. The depth of this relationship was demonstrated in the Withnell's admission into the tribe, and a rare honour was bestowed on John when he was allowed to witness an initiation ceremony.

In the remote North-West, necessity made inventors out of everyone, and the Withnells were no exception. John Withnell was the first person to make use of the canvas waterbag. He said he could not see why canvas would not hold water, so Emma sewed a canvas bag with a bottle neck and a strap to hang the bag so that it could swing in the breeze and keep the water cool.

The Harding River settlement, as it was then known, grew around the Withnell home and soon became the administrative and social centre of the Pilbara. On August 17, 1866, the settlement became the first gazetted town in the North-West and was named Roebourne after Western Australia's first Surveyor General, John Septimus Roe. Roebourne had a European population of 200 and an uncounted Aboriginal population, and by this time 49 pastoral leases had been taken up.

The Withnells made good use of the opportunities offered by the growing community. The arrival of government staff at Roebourne caused a meat shortage, so Emma decided to sell meat to them. The Mount Welcome station used their weathers and steers in this way and when they ran out they purchased more from their neighbours. John built a flat-bottomed boat for conveying settlers and stores up the creek from Cossack to Roebourne, and took cartage



The heritage-listed Old Roebourne Gaol is now the home of the Roebourne Visitor Centre, historical museum, local arts and crafts, and part of the Emma Withnell Heritage trail, a 52 km driving and walk route that starts at Roebourne and takes in Cossack, Wickham and Point Samson.

contracts with his team and also built a store for goods on the river landing place.

The town continued to expand and, in 1874, the first schoolmaster was appointed and the first school built.

## Heritage Touring

The Emma Withnell Heritage Trail offers visitors a 52 km self-guided tour of the historic places of Roebourne, Cossack, Wickham and Point Samson.

Roebourne, settled in 1864 and the oldest town in the North-West, has a number of heritage buildings including the Union Bank (1888), the Post Office (1887), the police station and the Holy Trinity Church (1894), most of which were designed by the colonial architect, George Temple-Poole, and constructed of local stone quarried by Aboriginal labour.

Cossack, an early port and pearling centre, has eight restored National Trust-listed buildings, including the Post and Telegraph Office, the Courthouse, the Customs House, the Bond Store, Galbraith Store and the Police Quarters and Gaol. Like the Roebourne buildings, these were constructed in the 1880s to 1890s and designed by George Temple-Poole.

For more information, contact the Roebourne Visitors Centre on (08) 9182 1060.

Emma was elected to the first district Board of Education for the North in 1874, winning the most votes out of the six people contesting the five-member board.

In 1879, the Mount Welcome Station was sold and the Withnell family moved out to their station on the Sherlock River.

After 24 years of pastoral achievements and having raised 11 children (eight sons and 3 daughters), John and Emma Withnell left the North-West in September 1888. They had established 11 stations which were taken

over by their sons and sons-in-law. On Mallina station in 1888, young Jimmy Withnell was credited with the discovery of gold in the Pilbara. When he picked up a stone to throw at a pesky crow he noticed yellow specks which turned out to be gold, and this started the Pilbara gold rush.

John and Emma settled in Guilford (now a suburb of Perth) where John died in 1898, aged 74. The following year, Emma, then 57, built a home in Northam on the Avon River about 100 km from Perth, but she often returned to the North-West to visit her children at their various stations. In 1920, at the age of 78, Emma was commissioned as one of the first women Justices of the Peace in Western Australia.

Emma Withnell earned her title, 'Mother of the North-West', through the determination with which she cared for her own family as well as Aboriginal people and other settlers in the district. She was known and relied upon for her nursing of the sick, and for her intelligent conversation and generous nature.

Emma died peacefully on May 16 1928 at the age of 87, and is buried in the old Guilford cemetery with her husband, John.

### The Author

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