

THE FLORA NICHOLSONS

[by Lar Frost, ca. 1990, when living in East London]
[Master copies held by Anthea Mensing in 2010]

Herbert Nicholson **1884 – 1957**

Born and bred at Yarmouth, Isle of Wight. He was one of a family of 14 – 10 boys and 4 girls, of which he was one of the youngest. His father was Chairman of the Union Castle Co. for many years. Sailing and seamanship were very much part of their lives.

Three of the brothers, Alfred, Herbert and Fred were sent out to S. Africa to farm. Before coming out, Herbert did a course at Wye Agricultural College. He was about 19 when he arrived out and went to work at Witteboom, Constantia, with the van der Byls. His brother Alfred (Reg and Nola's father) was then managing the farm Schoongezicht for J.X. Merriman. On the next-door farm Rustenberg were the Barry family. So it was here that Herbert met Agnes Barry, and before long they were married at St. Mary's, Stellenbosch.

Herbert then got involved with the Transvaal Agricultural Dept. in Ermelo in 1906, and from there he moved to Mushroom Valley in the O.F.S. Agric. Dept.

In 1908 he bought Flora from the Schutte family (they trekked to Flora by ox-wagon when my Dad was 2 yrs old). It was a difficult time for an Englishman in this exclusively Afrikaans area, where feelings were still running high after the Boer War. But Herbert got to know his neighbours and soon became a respected member of the community. During the First World War there were rebellions in the district and Herbert had several brushes with rebels but managed to avoid being taken prisoner. He wanted to join up but the Magistrate in Winburg persuaded him to stay at home as he felt he was much needed in the district to help keep the peace.

In 1918 Herbert's family consisted of Hugh, Betty, Gordon, John and Charlotte.

One evening, when getting through a fence whilst out shooting jackals, he somehow set off his gun and shot himself through the ankle. Fortunately, some of the black staff heard his shouts for help and got him home. A horseman was immediately sent to Marquard, 14 miles away, for the doctor. When he came, he said it was essential for him to go to hospital. He returned to Marquard and organised a car and petrol and they set forth for Maseru, 60 miles away, by now a full 12 hours after the accident. The road was bad, there were many gates, and the young family were left behind with the rather raw servants. It was at the height of the 1918 'flu epidemic; on arrival, they were told the hospital was full and they must go on to Mafeteng, another 40 miles away. He was finally attended to but by then the foot had to be amputated. For one who had always been so active from "sunrise to sunset", this was a cruel blow. Before long he got an artificial wooden leg and once again became as active as he could, so that frequently people did not know of his disability. He suffered a lot, but this never stopped him doing a full day's work.

When he bought Flora it was completely underdeveloped. He fenced it, divided it into camps, and built 11 dams, a cow-byre, and a lovely big stone house for the family, complete with tiled roof. He planted many trees and developed the agricultural potential, had a large herd of Friesland dairy cows, selling the cream to Marquard Creamery.

The years at Flora were hard ones, with droughts and depressions to cope with, and no relief funds or subsidies were available in those days. The neighbours were often obstructive in the beginning but after years of hard work and self-sacrifice Herbert and Agnes soon won the love and respect

of the Afrikaans community and their black staff. Money was always a problem, but they managed to educate their 7 children at St. Andrew's and D.S.G. in Grahamstown.

They retired to East London in 1945 where Hugh was in the Navy at the time and where Herbert especially enjoyed living at the sea again. After Agnes died, he lived with Betty and her family until his death in 1957.

Agnes Gabrielle Nicholson (nee Barry)
1887 – 1955

Born in Grahamstown, daughter of Sir Jacob Barry (Chief Justice of the Eastern Cape Supreme Court), and of Charlotte, daughter of Bishop Merriman. She was the youngest daughter in a family of 9 - 5 boys and 4 girls. She was educated at D.S.G. and, later, when her family moved to Rustenberg farm in Stellebosch, she met Herbert Nicholson at Schoongezicht next door and married him in 1905.

After living in Ermelo, where Hugh was born, then in Mushroom Valley in the Free State, they moved to Flora in 1908, where they lived in the old homestead on the farm. It wasn't until after the First World War that they managed to complete their new house on top of the hill, made of stone cut on Flora.

Agnes was very much the core of the family, and they were all brought up with love, understanding and discipline. She taught them herself for as long as possible, and then they were sent off to boarding school. She was a very real Christian and tried her best to teach and convert the Blacks, most being completely ignorant. She was always very involved in the Anglican Church, and there were often priests, Fathers from the Modderpoort Mission Station, and Bishops staying at Flora. She had daily and evening prayers for her family and whenever possible attended a church service in Clocolan or Modderpoort. Once, after a "Retreat", Herbert was heard to say of her "Agga has just returned from Modderpoort, a saturated solution of holyness." It was a great joy to her when they moved to East London and she was able to take an active part in church affairs, and also in the building of the new St. Alban's Church in Vincent.

Although the family had all left home by the time they lived in E.L., they were never alone in their last few years. Hugh was there in the Navy for a short while, Betty and her family returned to settle from Nigeria, and Margie and Arthur followed, and Anne lived with them both to the end. Dr. Jammy looked after her following a breast removal and she suffered from cancer and was in much pain. She never complained and always thought of others first.

Hers had been a remarkable life: a true and active Christian, loving wife and mother, thoughts and help for anyone in need and loved and respected by all who knew her. Theirs had been a life of hard work and self-sacrifice, but they never lowered their standards. She never bought clothes for herself nor did they ever take a holiday. Once, when things were really tough, they sold their team of oxen and their small children remembered seeing the span plodding away down the road to Marquard, with much sadness.

Her two sisters, Pauline Holmes and Noelle Gordon, were a great source of comfort and often a financial support to her. She was indeed one of those who could "walk with kings, but never lose the common touch."

Lucy Beach

No account of the Flora Nicholsons would be complete without mention of Lucy Beach. Neither she nor anyone else knew much of her early life. She was born in England and first came into the family when Lady Barry found her at an East London boarding house being very ill treated, and she took pity on her. She took her into their home in Grahamstown where she spent some years, then went with the Gordons, first to Queenstown and then to Pretoria, until Uncle Julius (then Dean of Pretoria) could endure her no longer! Aunt Noelle persuaded Mother (Agnes) to have her, and from then on she was very much part of the life at Flora.

A quaint, squat little figure, always dressed in a long-sleeved full-length German print dress, with flat-heeled black shoes and black stockings peeping out at the bottom – she bullied and shouted at the servants who in turn teased her always. The boys of the family and their friends teased Lucy mercilessly, pretending to kill her cats, hiding her things from her, etc. Her love and loyalty for the family was quite unshakeable and she would have done anything for us. She loved animals, especially cats, was quite fearless with farm animals and once tried to separate two fighting bulls with much shouting and gesticulating. She was extraordinarily generous: before Christmas each year she would ride into town in the cart to do her shopping and come back laden with gifts for everyone, spending all her year's savings on this one occasion.

Mother's patience eventually began to wane, so it was decided to 'retire' Lucy: a small cottage was built for her below the cow-byre where she lived very happily with all her cats despite failing eyesight. Her walls were covered with pictures of the Royal Family and, whenever any member of the family returned home, a visit to Lucy was one of the first ports of call.

When Mother and Dad left Flora, they did not feel it fair on Gordon and Betty to have the responsibility of Lucy, so they arranged for her to move to Victoria Home in East London. To everyone's surprise and great relief, she settled down happily, but loved any day out with "The Mistress and the Master and our children." She became a well-known figure in East London, so much so that a letter addressed to "Lucy, East London" reached her!

HUGH 1906 –

Hugh Barry Nicholson was born in Ermelo. He went to nursery school in KingWilliamsTown when he was six, staying with Aunt Pauline Holmes. From there he went to W.P. Preparatory School in Cape Town where he was from one of the finest intakes of pupils at that school. He then went to St. Andrews in Grahamstown, where he became very involved in athletics and in his matric year won the prestigious cup for the mile race.

In 1924 he was sent to England to meet all the Nicholson relatives. His headquarters were with the eldest brother, George, who took Hugh in hand – fitting him with the correct clothes and even took him to meet the King (George V). He also paid an entertaining visit to Aunt Pauline and Uncle Bernard in Rome.

Returning to South Africa, he filled in for a short while as a teacher at his old school and taught amongst others his brother Gordon and De Villiers Graaff. By now he had decided on a career in forestry and first managed to get a job in the Forestry Department of the Transvaal Gold Mining Estates at Sabie. It was here that he met Joyce White who was out from England with her parents. Hugh was keen to further his studies in Forestry and after along struggle with many enquiries, interviews etc., he managed to get himself to the U.S.A. and was eventually accepted at Oregon

University. He paid his own way through university by washing dishes during the term and fire-watching up in the forests during the long summer vacs. He was a keen participant in athletics, running for his university as the mile champion and even reaching the Olympic Trials for Los Angeles in 1932.

In 1933, just before starting his final year at Oregon, he was summoned to England by the White family. His friend John Herbert helped him get across America. Hugh went to England and was with the White family for 6 weeks before announcing his engagement to Joyce. He agreed, with great regrets, to abandon his forestry training and aspirations of a career in Forestry in U.S.A. to go to a farm set up by Mr White in South Africa. A tremendous sacrifice as Hugh was not a keen farmer.

Hugh and Joyce were married at St. Mary's in Stellenbosch in 1934 and settled down to farming sheep and cattle at Allendale near Nottingham Road. After a few years, when Hugh could take this life no longer, they leased Allendale and lived in a small house in Mayfair Johannesburg. Hugh had a job with Rand Mining Timber Co. and went off daily on his bicycle. It was a hard life for Joyce, living in various houses and flats until 1938. Hugh had then set up Mine Props (Pty) Ltd, and they were able to buy their own house in Parkview.

Mine Props flourished, but then the war intervened and Hugh joined the navy. He was stationed at Cape Town and East London, and Joyce and the two girls had three happy years at Idas Valley near Stellenbosch.

Mine Props suffered badly during the war, but Hugh got it going again after his release. They now had two daughters, Anthea and Gillian, and a son, Piers. They bought *Krantzes* near Krugersdorp, a large, overgrown and neglected plot. They both worked hard – planted trees and proteas and had an apiary and even 2 jersey cows. When they left *Krantzes*, it was declared a nature reserve.

Hugh retired in 1960, and two years later they found *Skyline* at St. Michaels on the Natal S. Coast. Here his knowledge, enthusiasm and energy were given full scope on an undulating, 40-acre plot.

He made roads, planted hundreds of wind-break trees, built 2 dams and organised a rain water system reticulated over the whole area, and developed it as an arboretum. He was also a member of the Uvongo Town Council for a time.

Piers was killed in a car accident in 1969. At the time he was working for PACOFS and in his memory Hugh and Joyce bequeathed a substantial sum of money to PACOFS to be kept in trust to enable a young artist to travel overseas each year.

Hugh's great interest in the indigenous flora resulted in his exploration of the great Umtamvuna River gorges. It was here that for many years he and various botanical friends and interested people went for exploratory walks every Thursday morning. He has appeared on TV with some of his rare finds, but it is in his generosity in sharing his love and knowledge with others from far and wide for which he will be remembered. He worked for the Wildlife Society, many botanical societies, the Tree Society, and he gave of his time and knowledge at the Village of Happiness to where he moved after Joyce's death in 1982.

Skyline was given to the Natal Parks Board to ensure its survival as a nature reserve, and we hope it will be a permanent and fitting memorial of Hugh's endeavours for our natural environment.

BETTY

June 1908 – December 1964

Elizabeth Pauline's early schooling was at home with Mother, then at D.S.G., but she left before she matriculated.

After a year or two at home on Flora, Betty went to the Johannesburg General Hospital to train as a nurse. Betty had a quiet, gentle nature and she did not have a happy time at the General, as she was bullied by some of the sisters. However, she battled on and completed her training. She then went to England to do her midwifery. When she had completed her course, she went for a time to look after an old aunt, Katie Doxat (nee Merriman) who, like all Betty's patients, thought she was wonderful.

She then decided to join the British Overseas Nursing Assoc. and was sent to Nigeria. She had not been there long before she met Charles Atkinson, whom she married. They lived in Nigeria from 1937 to 1954 – a trying country as most of the stations were too hot and unhealthy for children. They got 6 months leave every 18 months, so the children were mostly left in East London with Betty's parents and she took extra time both before and after the leave to spend it with the children.

When Charles retired, they settled in East London. Betty joined the Nursing Services and did private nursing. She was very active too in various Anglican Church activities and Charles, who was very musical, played the organ.

Betty was killed in a car accident – she had been on night duty and, after going home to Wilsonia, she returned to town for church and fell asleep at the wheel.

Betty's life had always been one of service – to her family and to any association to which she belonged. She was quiet and unassuming but loved by all who knew her.

Charles and Betty had three children – Peta, Jill and Christopher.

GORDON

June 1911 – 1988

Gordon was born in Bloemfontein and started his schooling at Stansbury W.P.P.S. aged 9, and thereafter at St. Andrews in Grahamstown from where he matriculated in 1930. Farming was to be his career. He went to Potchefstroom Agricultural College and shortly thereafter, in 1932, he went on a Farmers' tour to Canada (*British National Union Empire Farmers tour 1932*). On that trip he managed to slip away for a few days to meet up with Hugh who was there on one of his summer holiday fire look-out jobs up in the mountains of Oregon. Gordon then settled down to farming with Dad at Flora.

In 1940 he started a Dried Milk Factory on the farm, using Flora milk and buying milk from all the surrounding farms. He longed to join up but was persuaded by friends and relatives that he was more useful to the country by keeping his factory and farm productive.

He had many traumatic times with the factory, but managed to keep it going until 1970, when he sold it to Senekal Co-Op Dairies.

He married Betty Edelsten in 1938 and they had 8 children – Anne, Ava, Janet, Caroline, Roland, John, Henrietta and Philippa. Before he died he had 24 grandchildren.

He was a keen Anglican and for 25 years was on the Diocesan Standing Committee as the Eastern Free State representative. Once, when representing O.F.S at the Provincial Synod, he and his cousin Reg Nicholson presented Bishop Merriman's Pastoral Cross to the first Black Bishop to be consecrated, Bishop Zulu, as had been requested in the Bishop's will – Reg and Gordon both being Bishop Merriman's grandsons.

In 1954 he was elected to represent the Dried Milk Group of S. Africa and, with 10 others he toured New Zealand and Australia for 3 months, ending the tour in Melbourne in time to enjoy a week of the Olympic Games.

For the last few years he was a sick man, but he managed to keep going and able to run the dairy. He eventually handed Flora over to John in 1974. He and Betty then settled in Bergville, near their youngest, Philippa, where he died on 5 September 1988.

JOHN

1914 – 1940

John Herbert was born in East London. He was educated first at W.P.P.S. and then at St. Andrew's, Grahamstown, where he matriculated in 1931. While at school he took an active part in athletics, winning the prestigious Cross Country Cup in his final year. He then went to work on the goldmines and was on the Sub Nigel Mine in Springs until 1937 when he decided to join the Commonwealth Wing of the R.A.F. He had a very happy and successful time there and when War broke out in 1939, he was already a qualified pilot.

In June 1940 he was reported 'missing' and as nothing further was heard of him, the R.A.F. wrote to his parents in December 1940 that he must now be presumed killed. It was only in 1949 that the R.A.F were able to send positive proof of his crash on 19 June 1940 and to tell them of the site of his grave.

It was therefore a great surprise when in September 1990 we received a letter from Germany from one Werner Obeltjetrun (?) to say he had been looking for lost German pilots and had come across a R.A.F. who told him the pilot of the plane was John. He then wrote to E.L. Municipality, John's birthplace, to ask if they knew of any relatives or friends. They tried several venues, schools, ex-service leagues etc., but it was not until they wrote a letter to the 'Daily Despatch' that they contacted Charlotte who was living in E.L. at the time. She then contacted Werner Obeltjetrun, who sent the photos of John's grave in Hanover, details of the crash which he had got from locals who remembered the crash 50 years before. He also sent a piece of the aircraft. All this correspondence from Germany was sent to St. Andrew's Old Boys' Museum.

LAR

Born 5 March 1912

Charlotte was born in East London and went first to St. Michaels School in Bloemfontein and then, aged 12, went to D.S.G. where she matriculated in 1934.

She then went to Bedford Physical Training College from 1935 to 1938, and here she trained to teach physical education and to practice massage and remedial exercises (now Physiotherapy). The day before she left England in 1938 she was bridesmaid at Gordon and Betty's wedding; John who was then in the R.A.F., was bestman.

Charlotte returned to S. Africa and first taught at her old school, D.S.G. in Grahamstown, then at G.H.S. in Queenstown, Wynberg High School, and Mowbray Training College. She gave up teaching in 1945 to be at home to help Mother look after Betty's children. While there, she was asked to help the Physiotherapy Dept. at Frere Hospital, and greatly enjoyed the experience.

In 1948 she married Cyril Frost. They lived first in E. London, then in Queenstown, and then farmed for a while in the O.F.S. They had 3 children – Anthony (born 1949), Peter (1951), and Jacky (1953).

Cyril died suddenly in 1964 and Charlotte then supported the family by running a hostel for girls at G.H.S., and later turned this into a hostel for young teachers. She continued with her Physiotherapy at the Frontier Hospital for many years. Eventually, when the children were all married and had left Queenstown, she decided to move to a cottage at Fairlands Retirement Village in E. London.

MARGIE

April 1922 – August 1990

Margart Marion was born at Flora. Her early schooling was with the Stockdales at Alma, Clocolan, where she shared a governess with their son John. She had a year of primary schooling in Umkomaas, where she stayed with Aunt Noel and Uncle Julius Gordon. All her high school education was at D.S.G., where she matriculated in 1939.

She then went to Groote Schuur Hospital where she trained as a nurse. She did her midwifery at the Frere in E. London and after that a course in District Nursing. During this time she stayed at home with Mother and Dad who were by then living in E. London.

She worked for a time at Kimberley Hospital and then in Johannesburg with the Midwifery Dept. of the Council. While there she met Arthur Lanham, a chartered accountant, whom she married in 1953. They went to England shortly after they were married, where Arthur worked for a year. During their time there Charles was born. They came back to S. Africa and settled in E. London, where Nicholas and Evan were born. Arthur's mother lived with them for a good part of the time. Arthur was plagued with asthma which eventually forced him to move to Queenstown. They lived there for some time, Margie working either at the Frontier Hospital or with the Municipality as District Nurse. Wherever she worked, Margie was loved by her patients and respected by her colleagues and doctors.

In 1958 breast cancer was diagnosed. She had a mastectomy in Queenstown, this was followed by radiotherapy in Johannesburg. She was very ill for some months, but then recovered and always managed to keep active and cheerful.

They left Queenstown eventually and went to Kimberley, where Arthur had a top job with the Perm. After some years there, they left Kimberley and went to Johannesburg, Arthur still with the Perm., and then it was to Grahamstown. Here Margie did a tremendous amount of church work, and Arthur was at Rhodes as Financial Adviser.

They eventually retired to Kenton-on-Sea. Again Margie soon became involved in church work and other community projects. She was much loved and respected by all. She had been plagued with emphysema for some years but she battled bravely on. It eventually got the better of her and she died in Grahamstown in 1990.

ANN

1926 – 1972

Ann was born on 27 July 1926 at Flora. Mother taught her at Flora, but she needed companionship and as Margie was there, she went off to DSG at an early age. She matriculated in 1943 – she then went to U.C.T and did a Librarian Diploma Course.

Ann got a job in East London and lived with Mother and Dad and was a great joy and comfort to them. When Mother died in 1955 the home was broken up and Ann went to Maseru, where she was secretary to the Chief Justice for several years. She met Derrick Warren in Maseru and they were married.

They went to Durban in 1962. They adopted Susan and, two years later, Stuart. Eleven months later their own daughter Tessa arrived. They later moved to Johannesburg where all the children went to the Bramley Primary School.

At this stage, when Tessa was 5 years old, Ann was diagnosed as having breast cancer. She had a mastectomy and recovered well for two years, going for regular checks. She later had a further severe occurrence and was subjected to all types of cancer treatment – cobalt bomb, chemotherapy, etc., which proved effective for about 5 years. When Tessa was 11 years old she succumbed.

All the years of her battle with cancer she was well looked after by Derrick and faithful maid, Minah. The children were then sent to boarding school, Susan to Queenstown, and Stuart to Dale, in King.
