JOHN BAKER

From: "Benedicta van Minnen" <bvm@vvmlaw.co.za>
To: "'JOHN BAKER'" <roger_baker@btopenworld.com>
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Dear Roger

I did enjoy getting your quick answer back yesterday ! As you say, Hurrah for E-mail! And it is very pleasant to meet and come to know my cousins and family.Being brought up here in S.A., in a way Michael and I have been isolated from family and relations. My mother's sister, Aunty Judy came out here in 1938 and was caught by the War, so that was here until 1945 and we knew her well, and my grandmother ('Sis', as you say!) came out for a 3-month holiday over Christmas 1948 and into 1949. I remember her well – I was given a Monopoly set for Christmas, and on Christmas Day she patiently sat for a couple of hours playing Monopoly with a ten year old...

I am now so glad that before her death I asked my mother to tell me exactly which Uncle went by which nickname. Have I these right?
John – no change, a name not to be tampered with! Henry – Harry Mary Ann – Sis your grandfather George – Dick (what a handsome photo of him in Henry's book), Ellen – Tom or Nell, Edward – Ted, Martha – Tut (Why on earth ?) Sydney – Tinny (his childhood pronunciation, I believe. It was he whom I met at the 1964 dance) Stanley – Jim, Arthur – Bob, and Thomas – Paddy. My own mother's family also used nicknames ... my mother herself was Betty (my father was the first ever to use her real name of Mary, and always did so, but my Alexander cousins here in South Africa still call her 'Aunty Betty') Ellen was Judy,
Joan – sacrosanct, like John, and, of course, George was called Jim.

I have a rather pretty snapshot of Oakwood as it was – you probably have many, but I shall send it anyway when I send several others (give me a few days to rout them out!)(In 1964 the Watsons took me to see it – it was being run as an orphanage – rather sad, but I gather it has now been demolished entirely for the hospital.

In my mother's descriptions, I particularly remember the entrance porch. There was an outer door and an inner door, and in the summer, when the outer door was left standing open, the small porch, which had shelves on either side, was kept filled with the most beautiful feathery green ferns. These were carefully tended by the head gardener, known as 'Wardy" (a shortening of his surname) and spent the rest of the year in the warm greenhouse. Also in the greenhouse(es) were great juicy peaches, which the children were strictly forbidden to touch or pick. When my mother had been particularly good, and was perhaps sent on a message to someone, Grandma Baker would say 'You may come back through the raspberry canes' – carte blanche to eat as many as she wished.

Inside Oakwood I gather there was a long, wide passage, where a large cupboard stood which was kept filled with 'good things to eat' – cakes, tarts, pasties etc. and the children were allowed to help themselves. Grandma Baker was often congratulated on having brought ip a large family of eleven, all of whom reached adulthood in an age when so many children did not. This was always attributed to the cupboard in the passage and good eating...

Pigs were also kept, and upon one occasion, at the dinner table just as Grandpa Baker was about to start carving the magnificent roast leg of pork in front of him, one of the Uncles remarked 'Poor old Percy!' – this was too much for Grandpa Baker, who had been fond of Percy, and he simply put down the knife and fork and left the dining room...

Grandma Baker, as I sure you know, was particularly interested and knowledgeable about old china, glass, silver, etc.. Grandpa Baker formed the delightful habit of bringing her some small present every Friday when he came home – a cup and saucer, a small jug, or whatever. She would look at it this way, and look at it that way., and turn it round and look at the bootom etc.. and eventually she would say 'Yes John, I like that – it's *good*! And Grandpa Baker would say nothing but he would beam all over his face...

In the stables were several horses., among them Stella, who drew a small trap or phaeton in which Grandpa Baker would be driven by the groom to the station each day and fetched in the evening. Stella had an unusual habit of swaying her hindquarters sideways, left and right, as she trotted One evening, when Sis was still quite young, she went with the groom to fetch her father. No-one had realised that over the years, Stella's movement had imposed quite a strain on the narrow-waisted phaeton. Sis sat up in front with the groom, and, incredibly they heard nothing! But when they drew up in the stableyard and turned round – horrors! - there was no back to the phaeton and no Grandpa Baker! The thing had broken in half along the road !!! The groom rushed back at once and a couple of miles off found a very irate Grandpa Bakeer trudging along ...

When, as a small child, my mother was staying with Granny Baker, the Uncles would carry her along seated on their shoulders. When they came to a doorway, they never bent their heads at all, but simply called 'Duck!' and if she didn't do so pretty fast she would be bumped quite severely on the lintel. Her earliest memory is of being taken to see Grandpa Baker shortly before his death, though of course she did not know that. She was barely two years old, but could just remember being carried into a bedroom where there was an old man (as it seemed to her) in a large white bed lying back on the pillows...

Today, with antibiotica, he could have been saved. My other great grandfather, Christopher Alexander, died at 57 in 1891 of

pneumonia – how fortunate we are, and what a pity they both died so young.

An other story is of the time the family were on holiday in Switzerland, and were standing on the platform at Basel (? Some huge railway centre, anyway). Grandpa Baker suddenly stepped down off the platform. What was this crazy Englishman *doing* for heaven's sake??? Whistles blew, men shouted, flags waved. These had no effect whatever on Grandpa Baker, who inspected the train and walked calmy back. The officials descended upon him demanding an explanation. 'Oh', he said, 'I just noticed some of our wheels over there and I wanted to see how they were standing up to this heavy continental traffic!' (And apparently they were...)

My very favourite story of Granny and Grandpa Baker concerns Mons. Junelius. Sis was old enough to be present on the occasion and the story came from her. Mons. Junelius came from an Eastern European country, I think either Romania or Bulgaria. He had come to Rotherham to visit the Works and see whether the wheels and axles would be suitable for his counry's state railway. They were indeed suitable, and he left a very large order.

Mons. Junelius was charming, and he and Grandpa Baker got on very well together, so he was invited to dinner at Oakwood. On the appointed evening, Granny Baker was wearing a very beautiful black silk dress. Mons Junelius admired it immensely. 'Ah', he said, 'if only Madame Junelius could have such a dress! But to buy such silk in my country is impossible, and if I buy some here in England it would be confiscated at the border!'

(Obviously the Iron Curtain existed long before the Russian Revolution!)

Grandpa Baker said nothing. The subject dropped. Now when the axles and wheels were exported, they were covered with a very dense, thick, black oil and laid in straw in large crates, which were then sent off. Grandpa Baker gave orders that one of these axles was to be cleaned absolutely free of oil – spotlessly clean. Meanwhile, Granny Baker wnt shopping and bought a dress length of the self-same silk. This was then wrapped very tightly round the clean axle, and laid in the straw; to the casual glance it exactly resembled the other oiled axles. Grandpa Baker wrote a letter to Mons. Junelius asking him that when the crates arrived at the railyard, would he please *personally* oversee their opening and *carefully inspect every single item* to make sure that the contents were satisfactory.

A couple of months later he received a letter from Mons. Junelius with his most grateful thanks for the goods sent, which gave every satisfaction – and Madame Junelius particularly sent her very kind wishes and thanks and compliments to Mr and Mrs Baker who had so very kindly entertained her husband while he was in England! So from this they knew that Madame had received her silk....

I still have a couple more stories, but Benedicta needs her machine now, so I will send them to probably on Friday - tomorrow afternoon.

I am so pleased to be in touch with you ! Love, Pauline.