

that's awesome

I've lived underground for 62 YEARS

Jenny can't imagine ever leaving her beloved dugout **Jenny Gough, Coober Pedy, SA**

Working as a nurse in Bowen, Queensland, I couldn't wait to meet up with my boyfriend Ron, an opal miner, after my shift.

We'd met at a dance in 1959, when I was 18 and he was 26. Ron was on holiday, visiting family in Queensland. When he went back to Coober Pedy in South Australia to work in the opal mines, I missed him dearly.

Will you marry me? he wrote in a letter in 1960.

Thrilled, I said yes, and made the move over to SA in August 1961. We tied the knot the following year.

After I arrived in Coober Pedy, I learned that residents lived underground in dugout homes to escape the scorching summer

heat and blistering cold winter nights.

Living in a dugout, it was an exciting change for me.

Our one-bedroom home, formerly the first underground shop in Coober Pedy, was very dusty and had timber shelves built into the sandstone walls.

'I wouldn't have kids here,' my mum Mary chuckled when she visited.

But not long after, we welcomed two beautiful girls into the world - Cheryl in 1964 and Robyn in 1969.

The closest hospital with a maternity ward was in Adelaide.

So each time I was pregnant, we'd make the 850 kilometre journey over a month before I was due, and stayed with a friend. By the time Cheryl was born, Ron and I had transformed the old shop into a real home.

We turned wooden crates into

furniture, had a wood stove to cook our grub and heat up the house in winter, and used a 32-volt generator to give us light.

For a lovely touch, I decorated our abode with dried everlasting daisies I'd find in dried-up creek beds.

Now that we had two kids, we needed another bedroom.

So, using explosives, we blew through the wall of the passageway to the lounge.

Amazingly, we discovered an abandoned mine containing small parcels of opal worth \$10,000.

'This will keep us on our feet,' Ron said.

The dust was never-ending and water was rationed, so keeping cloth nappies and baby clothes clean was hard work.

And because of the red earth, the water turned all the washing bright pink!

As water was so hard to come by, we'd use a jug for a shower.

Washing my hair just once a week, I'd use the remaining drops to mop the floor.

But despite the weather above ground, our beautiful dugout always stayed a perfect 26 degrees due to the insulation of the sandstone.

While the kids went off each day to their school close by, I worked as a nurse at the local medical centre, which served as a hospital.

I was one of only two nurses in Coober Pedy, and miners rocked up to the clinic if they'd had an accident.

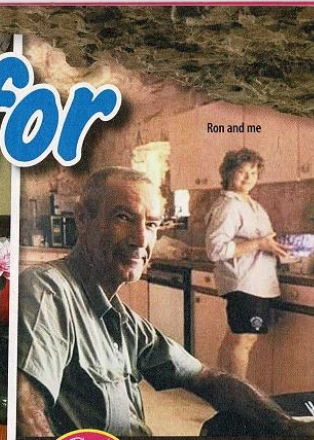
If it was a severe injury, we would fly the wounded person over to the bigger hospitals in Port Augusta and Adelaide.

As a nurse, I made roughly \$20 a week - enough to get us by in those days.

Using a kerosene-fuelled fridge, we mostly ate steak, eggs and porridge.



I love my home



Ron and me

The BEST AUSSIE real-life

The dust was never-ending and water was rationed

I had to keep the place spick and span

Fresh vegies were hard to come by, being near impossible to grow in the desert.

I'd often joke we'd need a second fridge for our beer, especially when we'd have mates over to celebrate a great day of mining opals.

Our family loved life in Coober Pedy - especially living underground - and we'd made so many friends. In the early '80s, we were over the moon when electricity became available in our town.

In 1986, we accidentally struck gold when we discovered \$50,000 worth of opal while digging in the

stairwell of the Old Timer's Mine below our dugout, which we'd begun developing in 1985.

The Old Timer's Mine had opened in 1916. And in 1987, Ron and I, with two other partners, re-opened it as a tourist attraction.

We'd even welcome travellers to take a peep at our underground home, so I always had to keep the place spick and span!

Sadly, a year later my wonderful hubby passed away from lung cancer, aged just 58.

By then, Cheryl and Robyn had both moved to Adelaide, Robyn with a family of her own.

A year before my husband passed away, we'd dug a larger dugout close by, with a storey

above ground and one below. Although I now live there alone, I always have beautiful friends stop by.

Handing over the keys of the Old Timer's Mine to new owners in 2018, I was keen to enjoy retirement. I have a garden that gets sunlight,

and love tending to it. All the plants are in pots since the ground is hard sandstone and full of clay.

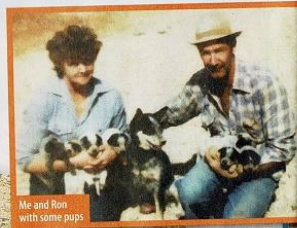
In winter, my mate Guy, 85, and I like to head north to King Ash Bay, Northern Territory, for a little getaway in my seven-metre fishing boat. In summer it lives in the garden, which must look odd in the desert!

But coming home is always so nice.

I'd never leave my underground home, I think.

I've lived underground for 62 years, but I always feel so on top of life! ●

As told to Claudia Siron



Me and Ron with some pups



Our kids with local friends