**Marie Janet Hart (nee Benning)**

*January 2, 1930 – March 17, 2023*

**Founding President**

**Far North Coast Family History Group**

*forerunner of the*

**Richmond-Tweed Family History Society Inc. (RTFHS)**

**By Richard Goss – Past President of the RTFHS**

On 17 December 1983, four women joined Marie Hart at her home in East Ballina, northern New South Wales (NSW) to found the *Far North Coast Family History Group*. They were responding to an invitation placed by Marie in the Notebook section of *The* *Northern Star,* on 10 December 1983.

Their purpose was to form a group to promote the study of genealogy and associated subjects, to assist members and others in their individual family history research projects, and to collect and preserve material related to family, local and Australian History.

After three meetings around the table, and a growth in membership to eleven, they were given the use of the Ballina Library for monthly meetings at 2 p.m. on the first Saturday of each month. Forty years later, we continue to meet at 2 p.m. on the first Saturday of the month.

By March 1985, Ballina Council had arranged access to a room at the top of the Pilot’s Cottage on the northern bank of the Richmond River. This remained the Group’s Research Centre until late 1992 when it moved to 6 Regatta Avenue, Ballina. Bookshelves were installed before books were found and a microfiche reader acquired before any fiche were in hand. Fundraising and publicity were required.

The June issue of *Descent* informed Australian and International genealogical societies of the Group’s birth. A letter published in *The Australian* expressing concerns about the capacities of the Public Record Office in Victoria and the State Archives in Queensland caught attention. Visiting genealogists entertained and informed Group meetings. Locally, Raylene McLaren crocheted a double bedspread that was raffled with valuable success and Stalls in River Street gathered in more money to spend on the collection.

Marie, in any account of her contribution, would assert that she did nothing alone and demand that others be acknowledged for their contributions. In September 1984, the Committee was made up by Marie Hart, President; Betty Aberdeen, Secretary; Patricia Hughes, Vice President; Raylene McLaren, Treasurer; Dorothy Southwell, librarian; Jess Moore, Publicity; and Edna Tucker, Research Officer.

The Group’s second newsletter, dated December 1984, was the first to be named *The Cedar Log.* In December 2023, The Society will print the 158th edition of the quarterly journal. In the second newsletter, Marie noted, *“with assistance from Betty Aberdeen, Jess Moore and Shina Martin, Edna Tucker has supplied us with transcriptions from headstones of the following cemeteries: ALSTONVILLE, BALLINA, BEXHILL, BYRON BAY, DUNOON, EAST LISMORE, NIMBIN, ROUS and WOLLONGBAR. Entries will be checked for enquirers on receipt of $2 plus S.A.E.”* (Stamped Addressed Envelope)

That foundational collection has been expanded over the years and has been joined by transcriptions of Honour Rolls and Schools’ Admission Records for many towns in the Northern Rivers of NSW. In the Group’s third Newsletter, the names, addresses, and telephone numbers were listed for all 33 members of the Group. By late 2023, there are 111 current members and Fellows and more than 1,000 people have been members of the Society.

Marie retired as President in 1985, and Edna Tucker, her successor, wrote,

*“In the short time the F.N.C.F.H.G. has been functioning much has been achieved under the capable leadership of our foundation President, Marie Hart. Members in and around Ballina have given much assistance, but it is to our retiring Committee and other members living in that town that I wish to pay tribute.*

*Being "on the spot" as it were, they made sure of the availability of the meeting venue and the many arrangements associated with it. They formed a roster to enable our little room in the Pilot's Cottage to open on a regular basis. All members and others researching their family history are invited to inspect the splendid range of reference material, use the microfiche for material not available at the Richmond-Tweed Regional Library and read the many newsletters received from other groups both within Australia and overseas. Everything is shipshape, just as a room in a Pilot's Cottage should be, and all items are clearly labelled for easy reference.*

*Marie did not seek re-election as President but in her new role as Vice President she will be invaluable. Marie has been carrying the load of President, Secretary and Journal Editor.*

*All retiring Committee members who were willing to accept nomination were re-elected. Judy Scott has joined the Committee as Hon. Secretary, Myra Arrighi as Special Projects Officer and Marie Shepherd as Publicity Officer.*

*We move into our new financial year hoping to maintain past members and welcome new ones. As a member you will receive your quarterly Cedar Log edited by Marie Hart - yes, she has kindly consented to again fill that important position.”*

At the AGM held in 2011, Robyn Hilan, President, advised The Society’s members that “the Room” would now be called the Marie Hart Library.

Rose Martin, in her eulogy to her mother, began by remembering that, “Marie was a record keeper and communicator of the written word.” Within Marie’s legacy to The Society, a series of “scrapbooks” are greatly prized records of her love for genealogy and genealogists. Many current and former members confirmed Jackie Chalmers’ memory:

*“Marie recycled all her window envelopes – after reading all the overseas and local journals, she would record references to subjects she knew you were interested in, on a small square of paper, insert it into one of these envelopes, with directions to where you could locate this journal in the Marie Hart Library, write your name on the front of the envelope and leave it in the Library mail box.”*

Rose ended her eulogy with, *“… you have reflected on how capable, independent, and remarkable she was. Marie was indeed a living example of doing the right thing, and following through on her commitments.”*