Jane Valerie Pons

I was born on October 16, 1933 at Roopacherra. My first memory is very clear and has been placed at about four years of age in Baghmari. I was on horseback, looking at a small creeper with red flowers when I heard the roar of a tiger. Tigers roamed around us in those days; they were a fairly common occurrence in my childhood.

My other memories of Baghmari are of walking under the house, which was built on stilts. I cannot remember the inside of the house but I can remember the dark cool underneath. Houses were built on stilts because it was earthquake country though I never remember being in one.

In early 1939 we moved to Ranicherra while Ann was at school in England, The house was a beautiful, double storey, colonial house with a wide verandah round three sides. The entrance was up steps so that the verandah was about 2 meters above the ground and it had large arches. The sitting room and dining room were in front, both large, gracious rooms. The pantry and scullery at the back and the kitchen in a separate building, as was the custom. Upstairs were three bedrooms. There was also the Go-down, a separate building, which was the store-room

RANICHERRA: 'Queen of Streams'

The house was cool and pleasant. We had gauze mosquito netting on some of the windows when it first came out. Dad spoke about it with pride, as he was very conscious of the danger of malaria. I can remember seeing him lying in bed under

the blankets shaking with rigors. We were given liquid quinine to drink every day.

I can clearly remember this red bitter liquid as it lay in the teaspoon I only got malaria once, Ann never did. I think this was a great achievement on the part of our parents.

We slept under mosquito netting, and were careful at suppertime to put citronella on our legs under the dining room table, as rather than windows it had open archways on to the verandah. The dining room was an important place as we did a lot of entertaining. We had a very good Bobbachie who came from a long line of cooks, famous for their skills. One of his dishes we loved was Hairy Mary - spun caramelized sugar on baked custard. I can remember hiding behind the long linen curtains in the dining room to see if it was worth coming out of my sulk to eat what was on the menu! I remember the tea factory had large drying sheds two or three stories high with racks for the tea leaves to dry; we used the ramps to roller skate down. There was a small room where small cups of black tea were placed for Dad to come and taste. He would take a sip, throwing the liquid up against his palate-quite an art- and then spit it into a bucket. I loved to watch this. Dad had an excellent palate and was able to choose the leaves of individual bushes that consistently produced good tea. These bushes he cultivated further by growing them from the leaf. A remarkable concept for the '40s though we take it for granted now. He also invented a tea-cutting machine for use on flat ground. I understand now that most tea on the Plains is plucked this way.

We would go for afternoon walks with Mum and Dad through the tea bushes, my Dad doing an inspection as we walked. I enjoyed those walks and they are most likely the reason that afternoon walks became a routine in my family later on.

Dad was a Polo player and we went every Wednesday to the Planters Club. It was great fun playing with the other children in and out of the parked cars. In the evening we watched films. Once they got the reel muddled and we saw the end of the story before the beginning to our delight. (Why do such little things become such a vivid memory?)

On the way home we might see a tiger or jackal in the headlights. There were plenty of tigers at Ranicherra; one even died in the tea bushes outside the house and I can picture

the Bearers, with their handkerchiefs over their noses, trying to find the carcass. Leopards, too, would prowl within the garden at night .so the dogs had to stay inside else they would be eaten. Jackals howled frequently and Dad would come out with his shotgun to silence them if he could.

JANE'S BIRTHDAY PARTY ON OUR ELEPHANT Karen, Jane, ? Ann, Mr. Deck and Derek

Then there were elephants. We had our own elephant, kept in a high, open sided shed near the river. To catch a ride we had to climb onto the back legs of the kneeling elephant and then, by the help of the tail, would be hoisted up by an adult onto the broad sloping back of the elephant.

On one occasion Mummy was taking me and another mother and daughter to a birthday party. We were driving through the jungle reservation on a road built high above the jungle floor with no verge. We met a man on a bicycle peddling frantically towards us. He warned us of a rogue elephant ahead.

Then we saw him! Trunk swaying, ears flying. He was in a bad temper. My poor mother had to turn the car on the narrow road with a steep bank on either side. Both our mothers were shaken, but we were upset at missing the party! It was in the same Jungle that we went to visit the Machan where they caught wild elephant. They used tame female elephants in an enclosure much like a South African Boma.

Ranicherra was situated at the base of the Himalayan foothills. We had a lot of fun in the rivers around us. The Chel river nearby was shallow most of the time and we would catch fish by directing them to channels and catch ponds. Most of the rivers were rushing, flowing rivers scattered with big boulders. It was here I learnt to boulder hop - a skill much used in our Berg.

We sometimes found garnets in the gravel that had been washed down from the high mountains. We swam in the clear waters and rode down them on inflatable air-sea rescue boats. This gave Ann the idea later for a big adventure we took down the river Wye in England.

ANN

Those early days before Ranicherra would have been my only remembrance of India if WWII had not intervened. In the summer of 1935 our parents took us Home (to England) to put me in school. We sailed on a P&O liner, POSH – Port Out, Starboard Home - to avoid the heat of the sun in the cabins.

Leaving children in England was very hard on the mothers, but they had little choice while India was still experiencing cholera and plagues; and malaria was a constant threat. My father had first-hand experience of a plague as his father had died of blackwater fever in China when he was only three years old.

Before going to school, we went all down to Grandmother’s house in Brixham, Devon. It stood on a cliff overlooking the sea. That was a magic time. Jane and I learnt to shrimp with a flat-fronted net, which we ran along the sand at the water’s edge. We prodded the rocks with a pointed net for prawns, catching the occasional lobster too. What a feast they made! Little did I know it was the last time we’d be together as a family for several years.

Then I was taken to Buckswood Grange, a school in Sussex, run by Miss Fairbains and Miss Haines, in the then-sleepy little town of Crawley. My mother said it broke her heart to leave me there, sobbing wildly. But when she called back later she learnt that I had stopped crying almost immediately and was happily playing with the other children.

Buckswood was a school that catered specially to Colonial children. It had been gracious private home at one time. The wide terrace swept down to perfect green lawns, which led to a beautiful garden with a fishpond. Down a terraced slope, hidden by a shrubbery were two grass tennis courts. This area was used to put on our summer Parent's Day performance. Off to the side of the house was a large glass conservatory, which functioned as our meeting hall and gym room. There was a big stage at the far end, probably a later addition.

I loved the school. We had ponies so I could continue to ride. My riding companion was Patricia Mountbatten, the younger daughter of Lord Mountbatten, later to be the last Viceroy of India. He was one of our favourite visiting fathers, as he gave us endless piggyback rides.

I loved the Christmas Holidays. About ten children spent this holiday at school. We had parties, went up to London to see the pantomime and were thoroughly spoiled. It was much harder on the parents so we got far too many presents ordered from Hamley's in London, 'the Largest Toy Shop in the World'.

In the summer holidays I went to stay on a farm in Essex. I have no idea what the arrangement was because the family was not related to us. Neither did they have any children of my age. There must have been some connection as Mummy had been born and raised in Essex.

That was a wonderful time. Why is it that all one's childhood summers seemed to have been filled with sunshine? I helped with the chickens and pigs, though I doubt I was very useful. Mostly, I remember wandering over the fields and watching the rabbits in the sandbank, which was filled with warrens. There were hundreds of rabbits in England in those days. Rabbit pie was a staple at the farm and like most country children I didn't have any scruples about eating them, even though Peter Rabbit was a favourite book.

My other great memory is of bowling my hoop alone down the country lanes, something no child would be allowed to do today. Cars were rare on the country roads.

There was not a cloud in the sky of my early days in England and I was unaware of the storm clouds gathering over Europe. In the spring of 1939 Mummy came home with my sister, Jane, intending to put her into school.

I remember being called into the Headmistress' study to be reunited with my

mother. But I didn't recognize her and burst into tears. It transpired that I expected her to be wearing the same clothes she had on in the photo that was by my bed.

JILL

In early 1939 Jane and I went home to see Ann and put Jane to school. I rented a house at Worth, near Buckswood Grange. So for the summer term both Ann and Jane went as day girls.

During the summer holidays of '39 we motored up to Scotland to stay with my sister, Hilda, and her family in their house, Torwood, in Forres, Invernesshire. While we were there England declared war. Buckswood wrote to tell me they were moving the school to Devon. I decided to go back to India.

In October we caught the night train to London. It was packed with soldiers who kindly gave up their seats to let us sleep. Everyone in London was carrying gas masks. There was a blackout at night. Already bombs had fallen and the hotels had set up shelters I tried for 3 days to get a visa from the French Consulate without success until a friend tipped a Gendarme to let us in. The arrangements were very complicated because the only neutral passenger ships going to India were those of the Italian Line of Lloyd-Triestino, which sailed out of Venice. To get there we had to cross overland.

First we had to cross the Channel by the Folkestone ferry for Le Havre. This was the only ferry crossing still running and it was only leaving at night, as there were already U-Boats in the Channel. We had to stand on deck for the three hours it took to cross, wearing stiff, uncomfortable life jackets. We were cold and wet with sea spray. I'm sure if we'd been sunk there would have been nobody to pick us up..

We stayed in an hotel in Paris for three days, which we all enjoyed. From Paris we caught the Simplon-Orient Express train to Venice. We had to wait there for 5 days to catch the ship so we had plenty of time to see the sights. I was relieved when we finally boarded the Conte Rosso for the seven-day crossing to Bombay. As Italy was still neutral we sailed with all our lights blazing.

When we disembarked in Bombay we still had to face the train ride across India to Calcutta. Jack had no idea where we were until he received a telegram telling him we were on our way to Calcutta. There were no telephones in the tea garden in those days. The trip took two nights and a day. We did have a carriage to ourselves but there was no corridor to the train. At certain stations along the way one would get out and walk to the dining car for meals, then back at another station.

The day was the worst part of the journey. We had to cross the Gobi desert and the heat was brutal. The coaches were kept cool by placing a large block of ice on sawdust in a galvanized tub. We kept the window shades down to stop the sun beating in. There was a leak in the tub so we had to keep our feet off the

floor, making life more unpleasant. Finally we arrived in Calcutta to be met by Jack. We put our gas masks on to show him before we got out of the train, so I suppose we arrived in good spirits. We stayed in Calcutta for a few days at the hotel where all the planters stayed. It gave us a chance to shop for supplies and Christmas presents as well enjoy ourselves shopping in Bow Bazaar, having tea at Firpos and stocking up on their delicious handmade chocolates. We also went to the Races and to as many events as possible, as we knew this would be the last visit to Calcutta for a very long time. Finally we caught the sleeper train back to Siliguri and were met next morning by our driver. I was glad to be home after such a tortuous journey.

ANN:

I had never seen Ranicherra. It was large even for a Bengal garden but it was in run-down condition. My father was sent there in early 1939 to bring it back into optimum production - what today we'd call instituting 'best practices'.

As usual we had inherited some of the furniture from the past Managers – it was just too complicated to move furniture across India. We also inherited their cocker spaniel, George. He was about 12 years old and wouldn't have adapted well to spending 6 months in quarantine in England. He was a dear dog and lived another 4

George on the verandah

And they left a talking mynah bird. The mynah used to say "Good Morning, Watson" any time somebody came into the house, so we assumed the last Assistant's name was Watson. It also could imitate perfectly a crying baby and when you rushed into the room to check it would laugh like a maniac. I think we dumped that bird on the Assistant.

The house was an unusually large and imposing for a plantation, with white arches enclosing a tiled veranda that ran along the front and both sides of the house. We learned that all four walls had collapsed outwards in the Quetta earthquake so I'm not sure how much of it was original.

All the rooms were large and airy. In those days malaria was still a scourge and precautions against mosquitoes were taken seriously. Every room except the dining room and bedroom Jane and I shared, which had been the Billiard Room, had screen doors and windows. Our room had a double mosquito net hung from a large frame in the ceiling and also still housed the full-size billiard table. Most houses only had one screened living room and nets for the bedrooms.
One corner of the verandah was screened off as a breakfast room with screen doors that sprang shut behind you. This is where we ate both chota hazri and tea.
remember, now with longing, the pumolo with which we started our conventional breakfast of bacon and eggs. Pumolo is an outsize pink grapefruit. It was served with the flesh was scooped out into a fruit cup. No pink grapefruit I've had since tastes half as sweet. Jane & I drank tea but I think Daddy drank coffee at breakfast. Certainly we had several coffee trees for our own supply.

Ranicherra was set in a beautiful garden with formal beds edged with a six inch maroon coloured hedge with leaves like Box. To one side was a professionally laid grass tennis court, which doubled as our croquet lawn. Sometimes Jane and I would get the younger gardeners and servants to play football with us on the court. This was not popular with our Mother, as she didn't like the tennis court to be scuffed up.

From the verandah a path cut through the garden and continued on to the factory and office. This path was flanked on one side by a beautiful blue plumbago tree and on the other by two tall trees completely obscured by a bougainvillea that had swung over both like a hammock. This was intertwined with a creeper of moonflowers, whose great shimmering, scented trumpets only opened at night.

It took several gardeners to keep the garden in immaculate shape and the tennis court rolled. Most of the gardeners were plantation workers who loved to be picked for the easy duty of tending the Memsahib's garden. The numbers of gardeners kept growing until Daddy counted ten one day and realized that people had put themselves on the payroll!

At the back of the house was a large kitchen garden where we grew all our own vegetables and fruit such as mangoes, papayas and bananas. We also had two big lichee trees in the main garden that gave us a huge crop of delicious lichees. We used to take a big plucking basket full of them up to school in Darjeeling.

Also at the back of the house was the cookhouse; basically a 25' x 15' shed with a wood-burning oven. It was ruled over by the Bobbachie who mostly shooed Jane and me away, only occasionally allowing us in. I remember standing at the door once when our mongoose crept into the kitchen unseen and waited under

the Bobbachie hand until he picked up an egg. Then, fast as lightening, the mongoose jumped up and knocked it out of his hand. The mongoose got most of the egg before he realized what had happened. We got out of the way while the Bobbachie futilely chased the mongoose.

Next to the cookhouse was a similar size storage shed, kept locked by Mummy, which was stocked like a mini-market. Household supplies were ordered from Calcutta and came up by goods train once a month, Mummy usually kept a three-month supply of non-perishable items in stock in the Go-down. To Jane and me, the place was a treasure trove and the choosing of a new toothbrush a lingered-over delight! There were no shops, except the little stalls in the local bazaar, which we did not go to alone.
Once Daddy had gone to work, Mummy conferred with the Bobbachie on the meals for the day. I remember Tuesday as steak-and-kidney pie day, which Jane and I hated. Finally Mummy gave up trying to get us to eat it and we had mince and mashed potatoes. After she had seen the cook, she would 'do the flowers'. The only arrangements I recollect were in the flat Waterford crystal bowl that was in the middle of the dining table. It was about 12" diameter and just under 3" deep. She would float the flowers in it. Only a few would survive till the next day.

The Bobbachie was a Muslim and always at loggerheads with Bijou, our head bearer, who was Hindu. I remember having to separate Bijou and the cook when they came to blows. I knew they would not hurt me so I had no fear of getting between them. If one wanted to eat beef it was necessary to have a Muslim cook, as the cow is worshipped not killed in Hindu culture. The rest of the staff was local Hindus.

Bijou was a handsome Indian whose father, Bikko, had been my father's original bearer in Assam. When the old man was pensioned off he asked Daddy to take on Bijou in his place. By the time we were at Ranicherra Bijou was the head Bearer and basically ruled the household - except for the kitchen.

Bijou waited on us at table, but a second bearer brought the food from the cookhouse. Bijou took care of my father's clothes, lying them out on the bed every day, but it was beneath him to touch Mummy's. I think Ayah took care of her clothes along with ours. This was not something we dictated. Work was decided by the caste system. The sweeper, I remember, was an Untouchable.

The Darzee, who sat on the verandah with the old treadle sewing machine, made Jane's and my clothes. We always wore dresses that were smocked in the front. He'd make two of a kind and, as we had several, wearing something different wasn't usually a problem. However, one day when we were going to the Club, I only had one clean dress. Jane decided that she wanted wear the identical dress. I didn't want to look like my little sister, so I grabbed her dress, ran outside and rolled it in the dirt. I assume I was punished for it but I still remember the satisfaction I got from Jane having to wear a different dress!

. Tea planter's families led a very self-sufficient life. The telephone was about 5 miles away at the local telegraph office. Our nearest neighbours, the Decks, were 8 miles away – I think their garden was Bagrakote. Occasionally we would get together for tea as they had two children about our age, Derek about the same age as Jane. His father was in the Northern Bengal Mounted Rifles with ours. But mostly we met other families at the Mal Planter's Club once a week.

We had arrived from England in the winter, often called the Dry Season to distinguish it from the Rains. In the winter the bushes were pruned and the ground beneath was hoed but the factory was idle. The day started for Daddy like most days, with an hour at the office with his two Assistant Managers and the Babus before breakfast. After breakfast my father would go out on 'comjaree' (rounds) in a rattly little Austin Seven that got 50 miles to a gallon, inspecting the areas. Sometimes we would go with him. But petrol was scarce, so for nearby trips he'd go on horseback and again we accompanied him.

We would go out riding on our own too but we didn't have our own ponies at the time. Often we would go over to the factory and learnt a lot about making tea by just wandering around. Today, I shudder at the thought of the tea that goes into tea bags because that is what we called Fannings. Tea is sorted by blowing it through a wind tunnel. The heavy tea leaves fell first and were called Orange Pekoe, the next Broken Orange Pekoe and so on. The Fannings blew out of the end and collected in piles. Jane and I would play in them, dogs rolled in them, and who knows what else, until they were swept up and taken away. The only thing they were ever used for was to make a brew added to whitewash to turn it cream-coloured. I never drank tea made with a tea bag until I went to America.

Apart from the business of making tea, there were many other aspects to running a garden. The Indians who worked on the Plantations lived on them in various villages. It was the responsibility of the Garden to provide housing, and schooling for the children.
Ranicherra also had its own Hospital staffed by an Indian doctor who could treat

most simple problems or accidents. Malaria was still the most common disease, though it was somewhat under control in the tea gardens as the workers were given a quinine pill every day and had to take it before they got paid.