

Cunnamulla postie

For two decades, Ruby Gamble has brought south-western Queensland the mail and a shoulder on which to lean.

STORY + PHOTO NATHAN DYER

At the back door of the Cunnamulla Post Office, Ruby Gamble is collecting her mailbags for tomorrow's bush run. By the end of the week, she'll have clocked up almost 1700 kilometres. "You definitely need a beer by Friday," laughs the veteran bush postie, as she loads the canvas bags into the back of her ute.

For the past two decades Ruby has been friend, confidante and news source for the families on her Cunnamulla mail runs. "Sometimes I'm the only contact between them and civilisation from one week to the next," the 66 year old says. "I see them at their best and I see them at their worst, and I don't find any of them that haven't got a heart of gold. They're all special – the whole lot."

From Tuesday to Friday, Ruby is on the road covering the mail runs west to Eulo, north to Wyandra, east to the Nebine River and everywhere in between. Along with the mail, she delivers medicines, newspapers, groceries and general station supplies.

And although she loves a chat, Ruby says there's one golden rule. "What happens on the mail run stays there," she says. "They share a lot of personal things, and I share a lot of my personal things with them, too, but you learn that what you hear at one house you forget by the next place." And it goes both ways. "Six years ago, when I lost my husband – he had a heart attack on the Paroo River out fishing – it was the people on my mail run who got me through. I've watched their tragedies and they've helped me through mine."

Born in Charleville, one of seven children, Ruby spent her early years on Tinnenburra station, 100km south of Cunnamulla, where her father Eric King spent the best part of a decade fencing the famous property. Later, the family moved between stations and droving routes. "There were no school holidays. I'd come into town, go to school for a week, then Dad would get a droving trip and of course Mum always went, too, and we'd be away four or five weeks on the road droving, then I'd be back at school for a fortnight, just catch up, and then we'd be gone again," Ruby recalls. "When we'd come to town, we'd all get new clothes."

When she was 16, Ruby moved to Cunnamulla to take up her first job, as a waitress at the Children's Hostel for the Paroo Shire. Soon after she met Colin Gamble, the son of a drover, and two years later they were married. After a stint droving and another spell managing Belmore

station for Pat Hegarty, Ruby decided it was time to settle in town. "We never had a lot of schooling, so when it came time for the kids to go I said to Col, 'This is no good for me. If you want to stay out bush you can, but the kids have got to have proper schooling'," Ruby says. "So we moved into town, I sold my three horses, which paid for the house, and the kids got a proper education."

Over the next 20 years the Gambles raised five children, while Col worked on the railways and Ruby worked at the RSL club. Then, in the mid-1990s, a chat with Col's uncle, local postie Eddie Fischer, changed their careers. "We were at a barbecue one night and Uncle Eddie said, 'Col I don't want to do the mails anymore. How about you take them on for me.'"

"We had four runs in those days; Col did two and I did two, and we'd do the eight mail runs in five days," Ruby says. When their son Colin returned from Townsville with wife Renee and a newborn son, the Gambles also took on the remaining two bush mail runs from Cunnamulla. But after Colin senior passed away in 2010 and their son Colin moved east in 2011, Ruby decided to drop back to two.

Ruby says she's been bogged in bulldust, cut off by flooding rivers and left stranded by wildlife. "I ran over a billy goat one day and his horns got stuck under my car and I couldn't get him out and he was bellowing," she says. "So I had to get on the UHF and call up another property and wait for them to come along with a hydraulic jack to lift up my car to get him out. But they're the things that happen."

"The kids tell me to retire, but I say, 'Where will I get the money for my smokes and VB?' Besides, I don't know if I'd ever want to leave Cunnamulla and I like doing what I do. I get in the car, I put Slim Dusty on, I sing along and I've got no-one there to tell me to turn him off, and I just cruise. I love it."

Although there have always been ups and downs, Ruby says the past year has been particularly grim for those on the land. "At the moment they are doing it really, really tough," she says. "They're leaving the house at daylight to feed stock, especially east of Cunnamulla, and I'm seeing trees die that have been there for hundreds of years. There's not a blade of grass to be found." As always, however, Ruby does her bit to share the burden, taking freight for nothing and lending an ear wherever she can. "I'm a bugger to talk, and I'll have 10 cups of tea if they'll let me, but that's what it's all about – they're not just customers, they're my friends."

Cunnamulla bush postie Ruby Gamble.

