

Forty years in an unmarked grave: family of murdered woman Queenie Hart fight to bring her home

Family were for years denied justice by a legal system that viewed Aboriginal women as disposable and their deaths not worthy of grief



Debbie West, Queenie Hart's niece, holds a photo of her aunty, who was murdered aged 28 in 1975. Her family are raising money to finally bring her remains from Rockhampton to Cherbourg.

by Amy McQuire
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On a rainy day in the central Queensland town of Rockhampton, my father and I went looking for an unmarked grave. We found the details in the burial index and walked, slowly, until we finally found her.

There was nothing to suggest she was buried here – no flowers or memorabilia, no words to say she had died, or that she had lived. There was only freshly mown grass. On her grave, we placed artificial purple flowers in a tin vase with lavender.

We stood silently in tribute to her, on Darumbal country, so far away from her home, as the rain fell on our heads. My dad stared at that spot of earth and said “I feel like this is the second time I’m meeting her”.

Her name was Queenie Hart.



Flowers at the unmarked grave of Queenie Hart.

Queenie Hart died in April 1975 on the banks of Tunuba – or the Fitzroy River – the large waterway that runs through Rockhampton. The local newspaper, the Morning Bulletin, had reported on its front page that “the body of a murdered woman was found among river mangroves close to the city”. The story combined news of her death with the weekend’s road death toll. They listed graphic details of her injuries. The police believed she had been the victim of a “sadistic killer”. She was 28 years old.

A few months later, the suspected “sadistic killer” – a white man who was the last person to see Queenie alive – would have all charges of murder dropped against him. By the time the man fronted court, he was no longer a “sadist”. He was a “fettler”. The courts and newspaper labelled Queenie a “prostitute”, despite there being no evidence to suggest she was a sex worker. The man was described by his work, while Queenie was dehumanised.

The coverage of her case was based around the descriptions of her wounds – and she had been wounded and violated. But she was held responsible for her own death, not only because of her alleged occupation, but also because she was Aboriginal. The newspaper called her “coloured” or “dark”.



Cutouts from the Rockhampton Morning Bulletin reporting on the killing of Queenie Hart.

There was no mention that she was Wakka Wakka, that she was well-loved, that she was sorely missed. In her home community of the Cherbourg mission, her mother Janey Hart was given few details. When Janey tried to get her daughter home to be buried, she was denied permission by the superintendent in Cherbourg. Janey would never see her daughter returned to her. For 40 years, Queenie has been in that unmarked grave in Rockhampton, so far from home.

'A happy-go-lucky person'

Queenie Hart, like many residents of Cherbourg, wanted to be free. She had been born under the weight of the oppressive Aboriginal Protection Act, where the lives of residents were so tightly controlled that bureaucratic language referred to them as "inmates". Queenie found traces of freedom with her families and friends, in the songs they sang at night under the trees, and in the love of her mother, who birthed eight other children but took in far more as her own. When Queenie was old enough to leave she travelled – she would come and go with the changing of the wind, but always returned.

Queenie was quiet and never "cheeky", her childhood friend, Melita Orcher, remembers. Queenie's mother had instilled in her a love of fashion, and she was always well dressed. She would take the tracings of tar off the stove and make the beauty spot by her mouth more prominent; she would use it to blacken her eyebrows.



Queenie Hart's childhood friend Melita Orcher, now 72, says Queenie was 'a modest person'.

Her cousin Lewis Orcher, who had grown up in the family and was more like a younger brother, said that despite the deprivation on the mission, they had each other and that gave them strength.

“She was a modest person,” Lewis Orcher says. “She was honest, she didn’t show off or anything like that. She had the little education you would expect from the Cherbourg school. She was a happy-go-lucky person. She was fun to be around. And at night time we would all sit around the campfires and we would all tell stories. She was just my sister.”

As a teenager, Queenie was a member of the Murgon Impara’s marching team, which took her down to Melbourne and around Queensland. She was part of the team that won the Australian championships in 1960.

“We were very proud of that,” Melita Orcher says. “To see them girls win in Milton that day. When they said ‘Murgon Imparas they are the Australian champions’, everyone screamed. We all had tears in our eyes and Queenie was in that team.”



Queenie's cousin, Lewis Orcher 73, says descriptions of her as a prostitute were painful to the family.

When Queenie left the mission, she would hitchhike down to Sydney, and then to Toowoomba with Melita. When the Orchers moved to the Brisbane suburb of Wolloongabba, Queenie would turn up unannounced with lollies for the children. Melita remembers going to the shops and coming back to hear the kids say Queenie had come and gone. She loved children, but Queenie would never get the chance to have her own.

“We all got that itchy foot,” Melita Orcher says. “We couldn’t stay in that one spot. She could be here today and next thing she’d be gone the next morning.’

Melita learnt about Queenie’s death through the newspaper. Her sister, Estelle Sandow, came to her, crying, to tell her Queenie had died. Down in Brisbane, Melita had welcomed a detective into her home, who wanted her help to identify the body.

When the detective “asked me what I remembered, I said she had a beautiful tattoo on the left side of the ankle. It was a nice little chain with bells on her ankle,” she said.

She showed police a photo of Queenie. They said it was the woman who had died in the river.

The descriptions of Queenie as a prostitute were painful to her family and those who knew her.

“The way they described her, as a prostitute, could not be further from the truth,” Lewis Orcher says.

“I felt what they were doing to Queenie was victim blaming. That is one of the things that really hurt, even now when I think about it, it’s really a gross injustice. The final indignity of someone who has been grossly murdered. It’s like, ‘Well, you deserve it, you’re a prostitute’.”

Melita says “they didn’t really know her like we did”.

Queenie’s family wanted her remembered for who she was. They wanted justice but were cruelly denied by a legal system that viewed Aboriginal women as disposable and their deaths not worthy of grief.

When I first heard about Queenie, I wondered what justice would look like in the case of a strong Aboriginal woman who had been the victim of violence not only in death, but after it, through the courts and media portrayals. The white man who had the murder charges dropped against him has died and there is no prospect of “justice” through the legal system. But there was a reason this case was speaking to me, and signs that kept drawing me in.



Murgon Impara’s Marching Team at Cherbourg show 1961, Queenie is second from the right.

There were the memories of those who lived in Rockhampton by the river in which she died. My father is one of those people. Dad told me how, as a 19-year-old in 1975, he stopped near the place where Queenie died and felt an eerie presence in the back

of his car. He always remembered that feeling – that it was her. That was the first time he felt he had met her.

A few months later, out of the blue, I received a message from a non-Indigenous man on Facebook. He wanted to talk to me about Queenie. At that point, I hadn't told anyone about my interest in the story. We met in a local sporting club, and he told me why the case had stuck with him. He was the taxi driver who had dropped Queenie and the white man off at the river that night. He had been interviewed by police and was to give evidence on the day the charges were dropped. He couldn't believe what had happened, he told me. I asked him why he thought there had never been justice for Queenie. He said, without a pause: "I always assumed it was because she was black." I replied: "I think you're right."

I grew up in the place where Queenie died but there was another connection. A friend of the family, Aunty Estelle Sandow, told me that when Queenie was in Brisbane, she would visit Melita and Lewis at their house in Woolloongabba. I work at Woolloongabba, in a house converted into offices – the very same house Queenie visited all those years ago. Melita says she would show up and peer through the window, the same window I look through as I make my morning coffee. When I expressed my shock at this "coincidence", Aunty Estelle just said: "It's that instinct, aye."



Debbie West says Queenie's mother Janey Hart's final wish before she died was for Queenie to be sent back.

To Aboriginal people, these signs, these instincts, are not coincidences. They are the way our ancestors speak to us. If we listen, we begin to understand what justice looks

like, what black justice means. For Queenie's family, black justice means bringing her home to country to be with her family and her ancestors.

'A silent sorrow'

Debbie West is Queenie Hart's niece and grew up with Queenie's mum Janey – her grandmother – in Cherbourg. West was only 10 when Queenie died and she had never met her aunty. She didn't know a lot about her Aunty's death because it had been too hard for her grandmother to speak about it.

"Nan never spoke about her death at all," Debbie says. "She never mentioned anything. I've never seen her in real sorrow. It was ... a silent sorrow."

The injustices silenced her grandmother, including the cruel decision by the superintendent and bureaucrats in Cherbourg, who refused the family the right to bring Queenie home to be buried. West told me that her nan had always wanted Queenie to come back – a final wish before she died in the 1980s.

At the time, Cherbourg was still under the protection act. People's lives were tightly controlled. Their money was strictly controlled in a system that would later be known as "stolen wages", where pay and pensions were stolen and used to fund state infrastructure and amenities. Lewis Orcher knew this intimately: he had been forced off the mission because he refused to work for free. When he tried to return home to see Janey Hart, he would be escorted off the mission by police.

Janey wanted to use her pension to pay for Queenie's return. Lewis Orcher went to the bureaucrats in Cherbourg and asked for permission to access the fund. But they refused. Lewis had a good job in Brisbane and had offered to pay, but they still denied the request to have Queenie returned to Cherbourg for burial.

"I kept saying, 'Janey doesn't have any financial security or collateral to help bury her'. But [the man] looked me in the eye. I could see I had him but he was not going to concede at any point and it made me very mad.

"So we had to do the next best thing and that was to go to the funeral in Rockhampton ... and very few people were able to go to the funeral."

If it had been in Cherbourg, Lewis Orcher says, "three-quarters of the settlement would have turned out to the funeral".

Her family were robbed of the chance to remember Queenie, to tell stories of her, to tell the grandchildren, to continue expressing their love. There was so much that was stolen.

"That's where [Queenie's mum] really fell in silence and never spoke about it," West says. "She couldn't afford to bring her own child back home to Cherbourg. She's the only one buried away from home."

In the Cherbourg cemetery, there is a plot set aside for the Hart family. Queenie's eight siblings are buried there, as well as her mum and her dad, Duker.



Melita Orcher, 72 and husband Lewis Orcher 73, with Debbie West, 57.

Her family keep a spot for Queenie and are saving the funds required to bring her home. In life, she was never alone. But for 40 years, she has been among strangers, in an unmarked grave in Rockhampton.

The violence that killed Queenie is the same colonial violence that previously denied her family the right to bring her home. But her family will do it themselves, because that is justice – we remember and we bring our people home.

West did not know her aunty but hopes to have a place to go, on her own country, to grieve and mourn and remember.

“When I think of my aunty, I think of a butterfly. When I see a butterfly, they are skipping from one flower to another, going this way and that. And some of them are so pretty. She was always moving around, bringing happiness to everyone. A big piece of our heart lives in heaven and soon we will know that is where she is.”