

The life and times of Mrs Dorothy Ellis

By Detective Sergeant
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of Central Region

MRS Dorothy Ellis, born in Victoria, 3 December 1908, first came to the attention of the Australian Federal Police, Central Region, in 1983.

At this time Detective Sergeant Mike Curry, now in Eastern Region, and Marie Boxer, now at AFP Headquarters, Canberra, investigated Dorothy Ellis for receiving Department of Social Security benefit in four names. Overpayment amounted to \$134,000.

Mrs Ellis pleaded guilty in November 1984 and in January 1985 she was sentenced to 12 months hard labour but discharged on her entering a bond of \$500 to be of good behaviour for three years. During the time she was on benefits, Mrs Ellis bought a house in South Australia and another property in Cairns, Queensland. She sold her South Australian property and repaid the Department of Social Security \$83,500.

The Department of Social Security then took her to court in a civil action to regain the outstanding money. A hearing was set down for 4 July 1988 but Mrs Ellis declared herself bankrupt on 30 June 1988.

Between 1985 and 1988 no record could be found of Mrs Ellis having been on any Department of Social Security benefit and considerable interest was aroused within the Department as to how she was living. By cross referencing a large number of aged pension claims, the Department came up with a number of aged pensions they considered suspect and which could possibly be attributed to her.

Detective Vic Magoch of Central Region and I were then assigned to investigate whether any fraudulent claims had been made by her.

On 5 August 1988, with a search warrant we visited her room in an Adelaide boarding house. Among the things found were six bundles of documents, each of which contained plastic bank cards, Medicare cards, pension concession cards and post office box keys all in various names. She was arrested and lodged at the Adelaide City Watch House.

On her solicitor's advice, Mrs Ellis refused to take part in an interview.

Vic Magoch and I set out to prove she had obtained pensions in six names and



Mrs Dorothy Ellis- dubbed by the media as the 'Robin Hood' Granny.

discovered she had started one of her false claims in December 1984, in the period between when she had pleaded guilty to the previous charges and was awaiting sentencing.

Mrs Ellis treated the law with some contempt, probably in the belief that her age would save her from receiving a severe penalty, and this may have been an influence when she was sentenced in January 1985 and released on a good behaviour bond.

In the earlier offences she had used names related to her past but in this case none of the six names was connected to her. We found that Mrs Ellis had selected names at random from the death

notices of newspapers and then applied for birth and death certificates in these names. She then combined both male and female names from these certificates to create the identity from which she then applied for pensions.

When applying she gave the Department of Social Security false addresses which she changed to post office boxes before any correspondence was sent to her. She then transferred the post office boxes to Queensland. She arranged payment for the pensions by direct credit to Adelaide bank accounts and she then also transferred these to various Queensland locations.

Kim Dwyer, of Northern Region, co-

ordinated our inquiries in Queensland and with the help of officers there, we were able to trace her financial dealings between South Australia and Queensland.

With the weight of all the evidence, Mrs Dorothy Ellis pleaded guilty to defrauding the Commonwealth (Section 29D Crimes Act 1914) in March 1989. However, she was also charged with other offences and the judge reserved sentencing until all had been heard.

Apart from the offences relating to overpayment of pensions which gained Mrs Ellis an overpayment of \$107,000, it was also alleged she had committed bankruptcy and breach of bail offences. However, the charges relating to the bankruptcy offences were not proceeded with by the Director of Public Prosecutions after two aborted trials.

It is interesting to note the sequence of events leading to the civil hearing that was due to take place on 4 July 1988. In May 1988 she sold her property in Cairns for \$95,000. Early in June 1988 she bought one property in Cardwell, Queensland for \$45,000 and a second property in an Adelaide suburb for \$44,000.

On 30 June 1988 she declared herself bankrupt. The two properties she purchased were not in her own name and not in any of the six names under which she obtained pensions. (The two houses are now under the control of the Official Receiver.)

In relation to the breach of bail offence, it was a condition of her bail given to her on 5 August 1988, that she remain in South Australia. On 31 August 1988 Mrs Ellis travelled by bus to Melbourne using the name M. Young and returned the following day. She was convicted without penalty for this offence.

On her return from Melbourne she had in her possession an application for a birth certificate in yet another name.

Finally, on 9 March 1990, she appeared in the Central District Criminal Court for sentencing. It was argued that she had committed the offences to help others and reasons were given why the Court should show leniency to an octogenarian.

Unfortunately for her, the sentencing judge happened to be the same one she had appeared before in 1985 and he was not as sympathetic on this occasion. She was sentenced to eight years' imprisonment but to be released after six months on her entering into a good behaviour bond.

Her cases have attracted considerable media attention particularly when she

claimed she had taken from the Government to help the poor. The title of 'Robin Hood Granny' stuck with her during television interviews and magazine articles.

She has maintained her claim that she helped the poor and the media have promulgated this story by showing interviews with people alleged to have been helped by her.

What the media has not mentioned is that the people they interviewed met Ellis since her arrest in 1988, not while she was receiving six aged pensions. The media also made little of the houses she purchased with money derived from receiving numerous pensions.

One positive aspect arising from her notoriety is that on her release it will be extremely difficult for someone as well known as her to commit further offences.

The Department of Social Security has changed its procedures since Mrs Ellis' case, making it extremely difficult for others to commit similar offences.

In examining her background, we questioned whether she had begun her life of crime in her later years or there was something sinister we hadn't discovered. The only thing we found that suggested Mrs Ellis may have strayed on the wrong side of the law in the past was that she had obtained two passports in 1961. Each passport was in the name Dorothy Ellis and had the same photograph but with different maiden names and different dates of birth. We have not ascertained the purpose of the two passports.

It would appear that she was born Dorothy Crouch and was first married in Victoria to become Dorothy

Whitehead. She was later divorced. She then lived with a Mr Matheson mostly in the Northern Territory and then married a Mr John Ellis in Adelaide and they both spent some time in Papua New Guinea. He died sometime in the 1980s. She was childless. She used all of those names at different times to claim benefits.

Also, she worked at the ABC in Adelaide from 1975 to 1983 as a music clerk and as far as we could determine she hid her true age and once claimed she was 47 when in fact she was 74. While considered a little eccentric, she apparently worked well at the ABC.

From the time I met her she seemed resigned to her fate and not particularly concerned with the events happening around her. She was friendly to deal with but knew her rights and insisted on them. At different times when I asked her what she had done with the money, apart from saying she had given it away, she would either become very vague or refer my questions to her solicitor. She had no ostensible signs of wealth and apart from the properties, appeared to own very little. She lived in a single room in a boarding house with only the barest of essentials, hardly in keeping with a woman who has defrauded the Commonwealth of nearly a quarter of a million dollars. Yet this same woman had bank accounts and post office boxes in South Australia and Queensland and travelled often between the two States. Also when pressed for proof that she had donated any money to charity, she was unable to name specific amounts or specific charities. Therefore Dorothy Ellis continues to be an enigma insofar as her lifestyle and past income appear at odds with each other.



Detective Sergeant Bob Boonstoppel showing many of the identity documents used by Mrs Ellis.